

CAN CRICKET ESCAPE POLITICS?

When India captain Suryakumar Yadav and his Pakistan counterpart Salman Agha step out for toss in a Super Four fixture of the Asia Cup on September 21, eyes will be on their hands as much as on the coin. Last Sunday, India's refusal to shake hands post-match after convincingly beating Pakistan sparked a storm that still rumbles louder than the cricket itself. Since then, Pakistan nearly boycotted the tournament, boardrooms traded barbs, and a match referee's "miscommunication" became front-page news. As the rivalry returns to Dubai, fans wonder who will triumph, and whether cricket can truly step out of the shadow of politics. In the Asia Cup so far, the headlines have been written off the field. The rematch between India and Pakistan promises to be no different.

‘We don’t play on T20 friendly wickets’

Former Bangladesh skipper Mominul Haque remained tight-lipped on whether he worked on his game in Australia during a recent visit but divulged on the continued frustrations over poor wickets in T20s, sub-standard domestic four-day cricket and the need for players to find their own ways to improve in an exclusive interview with The Daily Star's Abdullah Al Mehdi. The excerpts are as follows.



The Daily Star (DS): The Bangladesh team is now in the UAE for the Asia Cup. So far, they have failed to post big scores in any of their matches with problems in strike rotation, and inability to hit big shots consistently in T20s becoming apparent. How do you view these issues?

Mominul Haque (MH): Power-hitting depends on the wicket. We don't play on T20-friendly wickets in our country. T20 wickets need to offer consistent pace, and bounce that can be trusted. You can then anticipate and hit the ball.

In Bangladesh, you have to judge the nature of the wicket before playing shots. The ball stops on you when you are trying to play a shot and that slows down the hand. That is why power-hitting traits go missing in our players. The issue of too many dot balls is also caused by that. When you try to attack, sometimes you end up with dots and also can't hit deliveries which are there to be hit.

DS: What do you think is the remedy?

MH: From press conferences to elsewhere, the players are always talking about wickets. Without good wickets in T20s, power-hitting or scoring big runs is difficult. Many have raised this subject but nothing materialised. At the end of the day, you have to find your way out as a player. In high level tournaments, for instance the ongoing Asia Cup, if a player

doesn't perform, they will be dropped. When they do not improve, they will feel bad about it. Since the board isn't taking initiatives, we have to find alternative routes.

For instance, I don't have access to any practice facilities with pitches that guarantee good bounce and where the ball comes on nicely. I have to use concrete or granite slabs to increase my range of shots.

Wickets in Bangladesh are all same, whether it's indoors or outdoors. There is no carry or bounce like in other countries. I don't know why indoor turfs are also same but the one in Mirpur is slow since it's made of rubber. The indoor is also very enclosed and sunlight barely reaches inside so not much air to facilitate swing. The wickets in Bogura and Rajshahi, from what I have seen previously, would be the best options for the Bangladesh team batters.

DS: NCL T20 is postponed for now due to inclement weather. How do you view the tournament?

MH: In our country there are not many white ball tournaments. Many players do not get the opportunity they deserve in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) and that's why a smaller number of players get exposure. NCL T20 creates that platform and gives such players an opportunity.

U-17s make flying start

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh launched their SAFF U-17 Championship campaign in style, thrashing Nepal 4-0 in their Group A opener in Colombo yesterday.

The men in red and green, two-time champions, now need only a point against hosts Sri Lanka on Sunday to reach semifinals.

After several early missed chances, Sabbir Islam broke the deadlock in the 30th minute at Racecourse International Stadium, capitalising on a weak clearance by Nepal goalkeeper Ram Bahadur. Opu Rahman and Md Arif struck shortly after the break, before Bangladesh sealed the rout in the 65th minute through a Mohammad Manik strike.



PHOTO: X

Think big to hit big!

EKUSH TAPADER from Abu Dhabi

Six-hitting remains Bangladesh's Achilles heel in T20s -- at least that's what any avid watcher would conclude.

Yet insights from Julian Wood, who was brought in by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) for a power-hitting camp ahead of the ongoing Asia Cup, may reveal the underlying reasons behind the Tigers' struggle to clear the ropes consistently.

Among Test-playing nations, Bangladesh rank 10th in six-hitting rate. Between 2006 and 2023, they averaged only 3.8 sixes per innings -- the lowest among Test teams. From 2023 to 2025, there was some progress, with the average rising to 6.1 sixes per innings.

But in the Asia Cup group stage, Bangladesh showed little sign of improvement. Instead, new concerns surfaced. The Tigers managed just eight sixes across their three games -- an average of 2.67 per match -- despite having undergone dedicated work on power-hitting.

Wood identified the Tigers' timid mentality as the root of the issue, pointing to a regressive mindset shaped by the team environment.

"If you're chasing 100, win it in 10 overs," urged Wood, who had returned to England after his short stint with the side. "If you're chasing a low score, like we did against the Netherlands, you should aim to win it in 10 overs. You should sit down halfway

through the game and say, 'Right, that's what England would do.' You need to challenge yourself to do that. My only concern is that this doesn't really happen."

The lack of aggression was most evident against Sri Lanka. Bangladesh hit only one six in that game -- their only defeat in

Tigers' performance still raised questions. "I thought Sri Lanka bowled really well. They had two wicket maidens in the first two overs of the Powerplay. The grounds are big, and it is the Powerplay where you need to target big," he explained.

But large grounds and tricky

Even in Bangladesh's eventual win over Afghanistan, their finishing exposed glaring flaws. During the penultimate over, Jaker Ali failed to connect with three consecutive deliveries from pacer Azmatullah Omarzai, and his struggle carried into the final over.

Wood recalled speaking with Jaker afterward, telling him he had "tried to hit too hard and lost shape" -- something probably Wood had not expected from Jaker, whom he had termed the 'ice-man' during that short power-hitting camp.

But Jaker was not the only concern. After scoring briskly at over 10 runs an over in the Powerplay, Bangladesh could add just 35 runs in the final five overs -- without a single six in the last 47 deliveries.

According to Wood, the Tigers "hit the panic button" against Afghanistan. More importantly, he highlighted their limiting mindset of seeing themselves as a "160-170 side."

"They need to change that mindset to one where they aim for 200," Wood emphasised. "If you set yourself up for 200, depending on the surface and game situation, you might get 180."

For Bangladesh, the challenge extends beyond this Asia Cup. They must shed their mental shackles to truly compete in T20Is -- a format where totals north of 300 have already been reached.



the tournament, which hurt their net run rate and forced them to depend on other results to qualify for the Super Four.

Wood admitted that the "dry and slow UAE pitches" could have been a factor, but the

wickets are the same for everyone, where the Tigers' Group B opponents thrived. In their first two matches, Sri Lanka cleared the boundary nine times, while Afghanistan smashed 19 in two games so far.

KANE DOUBLE SINKS CHELSEA

Van Dijk snatches late Liverpool win, PSG off to flying start

STAR SPORTS DESK

Liverpool captain Virgil van Dijk headed a stoppage-time winner as Arne Slot's side edged Atletico Madrid 3-2 in their Champions League opener at Anfield on Wednesday. Mohamed Salah struck early and set up Andy Robertson as Liverpool raced to a 2-0 lead inside six minutes, but Marcos Llorente's brace pulled Atletico level. Van Dijk's 92nd-minute header sealed the win before Diego Simeone was sent off for dissent. With Liverpool 2-0 up within that timeframe, it was the earliest the Reds have ever scored two goals in a major European match. Virgil van Dijk's winner was the fourth goal Liverpool have scored in the 90th minute (or later) across all competitions this season, at least twice as many as any other Premier League team. Six of their eight second half goals in 2025-26 have now been scored

from the 88th minute onwards.

In Munich, Harry Kane struck twice in Bayern's 3-1 victory over Chelsea. Trevoh Chalobah's own goal put Bayern ahead, before Kane converted a penalty after being fouled by Moises Caicedo. Cole Palmer pulled one back, but Malo Gusto's wayward back pass gifted Kane his second, sealing the German champions' win. Kane, now with 21 Champions League goals for Bayern and 21 for Spurs, became only the third player to score 20+ for two different clubs after Cristiano Ronaldo (105 for Real Madrid, 21 for Man Utd) and Neymar (22 for PSG, 21 for Barcelona).

Defending champions PSG cruised past Atalanta 4-0 in Paris. Marquinhos opened the scoring inside three minutes, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia doubled the lead before halftime, Nuno Mendes added a third, and substitute Goncalo Ramos completed the rout.

OTHER RESULTS

Olympiacos
0-0
Pafos
Slavia Praha
2-2
Bodo/Glimt
Ajax 0-2 Inter