

Cold on field, warm off it

EKUSH TAPADAR from Dubai

At the toss ahead of the Asia Cup final between India and Pakistan in Dubai on Sunday, a rare scene unfolded. For the first time on a cricket field, the two captains spoke to two different commentators – naturally, each one from their own country.

Before the match, only Pakistan captain Salman Ali Agha joined the trophy photoshoot amidst a highly charged atmosphere which could be noticed in all three India-Pakistan contests in the ongoing edition of the tournament. Yet what was happening off the field was the opposite of the tense scenes inside the stadium. It was a mix of excitement, friendship, and even affection among the fans.

Former Indian star Ravi Shastri and former Pakistani pacer Waqar Younis came down by elevator to conduct the toss. They were seen in a warm and cordial mood, even though they were about to oversee a moment symbolic of division.

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In the stands, an Indian fan in his team's jersey and a Pakistani woman in hers were chatting happily as they entered together. They said their friendship goes back many years, and they are not much interested in political disputes. They had simply come to watch cricket.

For the first time in the 41-year history of the Asia Cup, India and Pakistan met in the final. It was their third encounter in the tournament, with India winning the previous two in one-sided fashion.

On September 14, after their first meeting, India left the field without shaking hands in a gesture of protest, and Pakistan responded by boycotting the presentation ceremony as well as two consecutive press conferences.

In the September 21 rematch, Pakistan opener Sahibzada Farhan scored a fifty and celebrated with a rifle-pointing gesture, which was deemed inappropriate. Pakistan pacer Haris Rauf was also seen making offensive gestures. India's Suryakumar Yadav showed his aggression in the press conference. While the Asian Cricket Council remained silent, the ICC issued them warnings.

The tension on the field, spurred by politics and off-field chaos, expectedly carried on till the last day of the tournament. But what could be a sign of relief is that it has, somewhat, still yet to spill over to the gallery – at least that was the case in Dubai on Sunday.



An India-Pakistan final for the first time in the 41-year history of the Asia Cup, and two contrasting scenes could be noticed during the toss at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium yesterday. India skipper Suryakumar Yadav and his Pakistan counterpart, Salman Ali Agha, stuck to the no-handshake policy, just as they had in their previous two meetings in the tournament. They were even seen speaking to two different commentators at the toss -- an unusual sight. While the cold vibe between the captains was evident, a glance at the gallery revealed a different picture -- with fans of both sides enjoying side by side and waiting in anticipation for a title clash they had craved for years.

PHOTO: AFP

Lack of effective solutions laid bare again

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has announced the squad for the upcoming T20I series against Afghanistan, starting on October 2, with Soumya Sarkar replacing the injured captain Litton Das. However, the persistent problem of a fragile middle order, as exposed in the Super Four match against Pakistan during the Asia Cup, remains a cause for concern in the lead-up to next year's T20 World Cup.

Veterans such as Shakib Al Hasan and Mahmudullah Riyad have traditionally filled middle-order roles and their

BANGLADESH SQUAD

Jaker Ali (c), Tanzid Tamim, Parvez Hossain Emon, Saif Hassan, Tawhid Hridoy, Shamim Hossain, Nurul Hasan Sohan, Rishad Hossain, Mahedi Hasan, Nasum Ahmed, Taskin Ahmed, Tanzim Sakib, Mustafizur Rahman, Shariful Islam, Mohammad Saifuddin, Soumya Sarkar

experience often proved decisive in crucial moments. With an expected reshuffle after the T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies, the team is in search of stability in the middle order, yet the solutions management hopes to find remain elusive.

Soumya, who has predominantly played as an opener or top-order batsman throughout his career, will now join Tanzid Tamim, Parvez Hossain Emon and Saif Hassan in competing for top-order positions. Soumya's style of play tends to be more effective during the Powerplay overs rather than later stages of an innings, meaning his inclusion is unlikely to resolve the ongoing crisis in the middle order.

Consequently, the responsibility falls once again on the same players who struggled during the Asia Cup. Jaker Ali will lead the side in the Afghanistan series. Jaker's form issues were evident, while Tawhid Hridoy has been inconsistent.

Mahedi Hasan's perplexing role at number four continues to raise eyebrows. He has yet to demonstrate the temperament

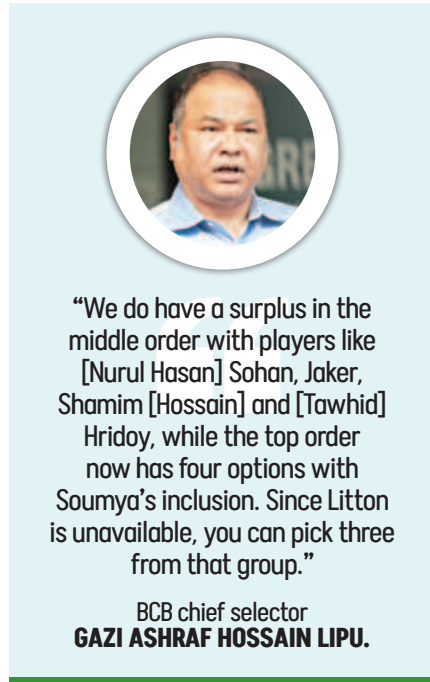
to counter high-quality pace bowling or the footwork necessary to score runs in the middle overs against spin.

Rishad Hossain, who possesses the ability to play big shots, has not been utilised effectively in crucial phases of the innings as a pinch-hitter. Confined to the lower order, he has been unable to provide the kind of impetus needed to shape innings, such as in the modest chase against Pakistan.

"We do have a surplus in the middle order with players like [Nurul Hasan] Sohan, Jaker, Shamim [Hossain] and [Tawhid] Hridoy, while the top order now has four options with Soumya's inclusion. Since Litton is unavailable, you can pick three from that group," BCB chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu explained regarding the middle-order profiles.

Shamim's skill set makes him a good candidate for the lower-middle order, but he has yet to establish himself as an effective middle-order batsman. Players like Afif Hossain and Yasir Ali have also been tried in middle-order roles, but their international performances have lacked consistency. Lipu believes that the players selected for the Afghanistan series must adapt to the demands of modern cricket and embrace versatility.

"Maybe Shamim is not a traditional middle-order batsman, but he is capable of batting at number six. Players need to get accustomed to multiple positions, as seen with Tilak Varma or Abhishek Sharma. For the Asia Cup, we had replacements for most positions, but we currently lack anyone who can guarantee that if selected, they will immediately adapt and score runs," Lipu added.



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BCB chief selector
GAZI ASHRAF HOSSAIN LIPU.

MSC to release players 72 hours before Hong Kong tie

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending league champions Mohammedan have followed the example set by Bashundhara Kings by deciding to release five of their players for the national team 72 hours before Bangladesh's Asian Cup Qualifier against Hong Kong on October 9.

Javier Cabrera announced a 28-member preliminary squad yesterday, which includes five players from Mohammedan: goalkeeper Sujon Hossain, defenders Mehedi Hasan, Shakil Ahad Topu and Rahmat Mia, and forward Sumon Reza. The squad also features a new face, USA-based Zayyan Ahmed, who recently represented Bangladesh in the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qualifiers.

Zayyan, a 21-year-old left-back, has been under consideration by the coaching staff since joining the U-23 preparation camp.

The players will report to manager Amer Khan on Monday, although overseas players Hamza Choudhury and Shamit Shome are expected to join on September 6 and 7, respectively.

"We will release our five players 72 hours before the Asian Cup qualifying match in accordance with international regulations, as we need to continue

BANGLADESH PRELIMINARY SQUAD

Mitul Marma, Sujon Hossain, Mehedi Hasan Srabon, Topu Barman, Saad Uddin, Tariq Kazi, Mehedi Hasan, Rahmat Mia, Shakil Ahad Topu, Taj Uddin, Zayyan Ahmed, Abdullah Omar, Mohammad Ridoy, Syed Quazem Kirmane, Jamal Bhuiyan, Sohel Rana, Mohammad Sohel Rana, Hamza Choudhury, Shamit Shome, Sheikh Morsalin, Fahamedul Islam, Mohammad Ibrahim, Al Amin, Shahriar Emon, Faisal Ahmed Fahim, Rakib Hossain, Arman Fayсал Akash, Sumon Reza.

working with them on fitness, team combination, and other aspects," Mohammedan manager Intiaz Ahmed Nakib told the Daily Star on Sunday.

Nakib expressed concern over the club's difficulties during matches after releasing 10 players to the national team

and U-23 squad over the past month. "Our national players sometimes end up sitting on the reserve bench and are unable to perform properly. Why should the club suffer after investing so much money in them?" he questioned.

When asked if a formal letter had been submitted to the federation, Nakib replied, "I have spoken to a Bangladesh Football Federation official to inform him of our decision. If they have further enquiries, we will respond accordingly."

Mentionable here that Bashundhara Kings had released their players approximately 15 days after Cabrera called up the preparation camp for two FIFA friendly matches against Nepal last month. However, according to media reports, Bashundhara Kings will now release their players on time, as per BFF requirements.

Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu stated that they are prepared to release their players for the national camp but warned that they would reconsider if any club fails to release their players. "Our players will join the national camp tomorrow [Monday], as we have called off club training during the league break," Rupu said. "However, we will reassess whether to bring the players back to their clubs if some teams do not release their players for the camp."

SHORT CORNER

Mithun Manhas elected new BCCI chief

Former domestic player and administrator Mithun Manhas was unanimously elected on Sunday as president of India's cricket board.

19k tickets snapped up for Bangladesh-Hong Kong clash

A total of 19,000 tickets -- 18,000 gallery tickets and 1000 clubhouse tickets -- for Bangladesh's forthcoming home tie against Hong Kong in the Asian Cup Qualifiers were sold out within 24 minutes of it being released online on Sunday.

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PHOTO: PSG

PSG flaunt dominance

PSG's Ousmane Dembele, coach Luis Enrique and captain Marquinhos pose with the Ballon d'Or, Coach of the Year and Men's Club of the Year awards after their Ligue 1 win at home over AJ Auxerre yesterday. Goals from Illia Zabarnyi and Lucas Beraldo sealed a 2-0 victory for the Parisians, just five days after their first league defeat of the season against Marseille. Enrique's side enjoyed a stellar 2024-25 campaign, winning every competition they played in except the FIFA Club World Cup, where they fell to Chelsea in the final. PSG now turn their focus to a mouth-watering Champions League clash against Barcelona on Wednesday.