

Cabrera at a crossroads

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera finds himself at a defining crossroads, blessed with a momentous opportunity to shape the very future of the country's football.

The Spaniard has been entrusted with the golden chance to manage the national team at a juncture standing on the rebirth of Bangladeshi football, fuelled by the arrival of Hamza Choudhury, Shamit Shome, and several other high-quality expats. Now, buoyed by all the attention and support from fans, time is ticking for Cabrera to deliver the goods: harness the positivity and upliftment around football to create a legacy, or become the main character to fluff the opportunity to cash in on the serious quality boost and kill this incredible buzz.

As things stand, Bangladesh are yet to find a victory since the arrival of Hamza in March and are on the brink of failure after losing both their home matches and drawing the other, away from home, in the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers, with the latest 4-3 defeat coming at home against Hong Kong on Thursday. A win has indeed eluded Bangladesh, but the major concern has also been the fact that the team's performances have largely paid tribute to the stagnant phase of Bangladeshi football -- or the pre-Hamza era. There are numerous instances when Bangladesh went toe-to-toe with much higher-ranked opponents and came back with losses; there are notable instances where the men in red and green could've nicked games. And that was when the team did not have players like Hamza or Shamit and relied on local talents groomed in the dilapidated domestic structure. So, after being presented with such supreme talent, one would rightly expect a major boost in how the team would play. This brings forth the burning



Javier Cabrera looking relaxed at the airport lounge on Friday as Bangladesh left for the return fixture against Hong Kong, but he surely knows his job is hanging by a thread.

PHOTO: BFF

question: Why has nothing changed? Why are Bangladesh still paying odes to past performances despite having superior talents in key positions?

Ideally in such cases, when on-field displays are questionable and tactics make heads scratch, the head coach is held responsible. And in line with that convention, Cabrera must take the lion's share of the responsibility.

The Spaniard has persistently welcomed scrutiny with his questionable player choices -- adamantly relying on underperforming regulars and being

hesitant to promote promising players. His immovable trust in error-prone right-forward-turned-left-back Saad Uddin in defence has consistently backfired, with the latest instance of his defensive shortcomings costing Bangladesh big time against Hong Kong. Moreover, forwards like Faisal Ahmed Fahim have constantly failed to justify the coach's unwavering faith.

The squad suffers from a major deficiency, as it has no out-and-out striker; however, Cabrera has persistently opted to overlook this vacuum and

instead tried to make up for it with wingers -- an attempt that has almost always proved futile. Even if new talents are called into preliminary squads, they are almost destined never to see any playing time, as Cabrera has his favoured players, with no amount of exciting form ever forcing its way through to the coach's plans. It's almost always the regulars who will get a seat at Cabrera's table. Even the women's team coach Peter Butler, who had coached the BFF Elite Academy, voiced his frustration about players not being roped through the ranks to the senior side.

Cabrera's ultra-conservative approach has also been under the microscope, and another sampling of that was laid bare against Hong Kong. Having named a conservative eleven with questionable starters, it was only after going down 2-1 that he opted for a proactive role -- one that paid off. Off went Sohel Rana Senior and Junior and Fahim, and in came captain Jamal Bhuyan, Fahmedul Islam, and Shamit Shome. All three had an impact and left their mark on the game with key offensive contributions. Jamal's delivery was involved in two of the goals, Shamit found the net, Fahmedul looked menacing, and it went on as left-back Zayan Ahmed became a serious attacking outlet in the dying moments of the game. So why not go with a positive mindset from the get-go? Why bind your team with a straitjacket from the onset and set them free only after the damage has been done?

With so many of his choices in how this Bangladeshi team operates, Cabrera's decisions continue to bewilder. But, given the unpromising performances, time has come to ask whether he is the right man to take Bangladesh forward. It's now or never as Bangladesh face Hong Kong in the reverse fixture on Thursday.

Zarif makes history

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's promising youngster Zarif Abrar has become the first tennis player from the country to clinch a title in ITF World Tennis Tour Juniors J30 group by winning the single's event in the Rajshahi World Tennis Tour Juniors J30 competition at the Rajshahi Complex on Friday.



In the final of the boy's single's event, Zarif beat top seed Napat Pattanalertphan of Thailand by straight sets, 7-6 (3) and 6-4.

In the boy's doubles final, the Thai pair of Napat and Ariyaphol Leekul beat the Indian pair of Gowtham and Shanmugasundaran, 7-6 and 6-0, to lift the title.

In the girls' section, Chinese players reigned supreme. Zijie Yang beat Aaraa Aasaal Azim of Maldives 7-5, 3-6 and 6-3 in the girls' single's final. It was an all Chinese final in the double's event, where Zijie paired up with Hanyu Wang and beat Tianran Dong and Zican Yang 6-4, 4-6 and 10-5.

Akbar fires Rangpur into NCL final

SPORTS REPORTER

Skipper Akbar Ali smashed a blistering 21-ball 40 as Rangpur Division booked their place in the National Cricket League T20 final with a thrilling four-wicket win over Chattogram Division in the second qualifier at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

Rangpur will now face Khulna Division in the final on Sunday, also at the same venue.

Chasing 168, Rangpur got off to a steady start, thanks to a 41-ball 54 from Veteran Nasir Hossain. He fell in the 15th over after which Akbar then took charge, smashing three sixes and a four, injecting much-needed momentum into the chase.

Mominul Haque's twin strikes in the penultimate over -- dismissing Akbar and Nasim Ahmed -- set up a nervy finish. With three runs required off the final over, Naeem Islam held his nerve, dispatching Ashraful Hosan for a boundary off the last ball to seal the win.



India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates his century on the opening day of the second Test against West Indies at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi yesterday. The left-handed batter remained unbeaten on 173 -- his innings laced with 22 boundaries -- as the home side, 1-0 up in the two-match series, took the driving seat with a score of 318 for two at stumps.

PHOTO: BCCI

Taming Rashid key to keeping series alive

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will face Afghanistan in a do-or-die second ODI today in Abu Dhabi, where a defeat would hand them their third successive series defeat in the format against the Afghans.

The Tigers lost the first match by five wickets on Wednesday, which exposed many of their frailties in the batting department.

Ahead of the do-or-die tie, Bangladesh would be hoping to sort out their slow middle-over batting, underconfident top order and most importantly find an answer to Afghan spin wizard Rashid Khan.

Skipper Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Bangladesh's highest run-getter against Afghanistan in ODIs with 471 runs in 12 innings, has usually been the answer to the riddles that the Afghans serve.

However, he has often been guilty of slowing down the run-scoring through the middle-overs as his strike rate against the opponents is a measly 67.38.

His sluggish scoring rate emerged as a problem in the first ODI as well, when Miraz and Tawhid Hridoy put on a 101-run partnership off 142 deliveries.

Still, their fourth wicket stand had provided some sort of a platform, taking the side from 53-3 to 154-4. But Bangladesh



could not capitalise on it because of Rashid, in particular his googlies.

Two googlies and a straighter one later, Rashid had swept through Bangladesh's middle-order resistance, accounting for Miraz, Jaker Ali and Nurul Hasan, all three right-handers out leg before.

Even in the T20I series which Tigers

swept 3-0, Rashid's effect was visible.

Rashid bagged four for 18 in the first, two for 29 in the second and went wicketless for 13 in the third T20I. Jaker in particular found it tough to counter him, twice getting trapped leg-before by him in

the T20I series.

It remains to be seen whether the Tigers effect a personnel change in the middle-order -- they have the option of bringing in the left-hander Shamim Hossain -- or shuffle the batting order to keep Rashid at bay.

Bangladesh were all out 221 in the last game. Since this year's ICC Champions Trophy, Bangladesh's highest score with the bat has been 248 against Sri Lanka in the second ODI in Colombo, giving an idea of the batting struggles in the format.

The top-order too has not been clicking. Opener Tanzid Hasan Tamim has got starts in five of his last six innings and yet has just one fifty to show for his troubles.

Saif Hassan, who made his ODI debut in the last game, has to sink his teeth into the format quickly while former skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto needs to snap out of his timid mindset in ODIs and get the top order back into some shape.

Partnerships are important but Tigers must ensure they have impact too. Afghanistan found contributions and meaningful partnerships from likes of Rahmat Shah and Mohammad Nabi. Tigers need to effect the right changes to keep the series interesting or risk falling prey to Rashid again.

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Eighteen-year-old Chelsea winger Estevao scored twice as an impressive Brazil thrashed fellow World Cup qualifiers South Korea 5-0 away in a friendly on Friday. Real Madrid winger Rodrygo, too, scored twice while another Real Madrid forward, Vinicius Jr, wrapped up the victory as Carlo Ancelotti's side put on a perfect performance in Seoul.

PHOTO: REUTERS



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