

Butterfingers let visitors off the hook

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI from Sylhet

Bangladesh spinner Hasan Murad provided the brightest moment yesterday with a gem of a delivery, drawing Ireland batter Curtis Campher forward before finding the edge as captain Najmul Hossain Shanto took the catch at slip. While it was an auspicious moment for the debutant, Shanto's reaction was telling as he proceeded to throw the ball into the ground in anger.

Shanto's frustration was understandable, given that he had earlier dropped one at slip to hand Lorcan Tucker a reprieve in the 49th over -- a missed opportunity that would have given Murad his first-ever wicket earlier in the innings on the opening day of the first Test in Sylhet.

Despite the spinners roaring back in the third session with four wickets, Bangladesh's day was defined by a string of missed chances, as the hosts allowed the visitors to wrest back the initiative.

The morning started brightly when Hasan Mahmud's in-dipper trapped Irish skipper Andy Balbirnie leg-before with just the fourth delivery of the day. Even as the stands were mostly empty, both Hasan and Nahid Rana were urged by the fans to go for the kill.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

The movement of the new ball subsided soon after, but Rana, in particular, was able to generate some extra bounce from the surface. He soon induced Paul Stirling into poking one to second slip, only for Shadman Islam to spill it. The next over, Taijul Islam failed to hang on to another

regulation catch, as Irish debutant Cade Carmichael was given a reprieve. Rana's frustration deepened when Stirling was dropped again, this time by Mehidy Hasan Miraz at gully.

Within the first half-hour of the Test, the Tigers had already dropped three.

The Stirling-Carmichael duo made the most of the reprieves. Stirling hit a swashbuckling fifty off 61 deliveries, and Ireland seized the momentum completely in that first session, reaching 94 for one in 26 overs.

The pair put on 96 for the third wicket before Rana finally had his man, Shadman holding on to Stirling's catch after a 76-ball 60. Carmichael went on to score his maiden fifty, but Miraz's two wickets in the second session saw Ireland reach 184 for four at lunch. Tucker added 41 after being dropped on 11, adding to the Tigers' woes, while Mashfiqur Rahim later graced a tough chance to allow Jordan Neill to survive.

Hasan Mahmud reflected on the day, saying catches are part of the game, though "it doesn't feel good when a catch is missed."

Eventually, the spinners staged a partial recovery. Miraz bagged three, Murad two, and Taijul Islam struck with the final delivery as Ireland closed on 270 for eight.

The Sylhet International Cricket Stadium has hosted four Tests, and in three, the side surpassing 200 in the first innings have won. After a butterfingers day, Bangladesh will have their work cut out to drive home the advantage.

Rakib aims to end the year on a high

SPORTS REPORTER

Forward Rakib Hossain remains optimistic about delivering a victory for the nation when Bangladesh face India in their final match of the year. The striker believes the team's recent home performances give them confidence ahead of the clash.

The Bangladeshi international shared his thoughts yesterday at the Bashundhara Kings Arena training ground, as the team continued preparations for two upcoming international fixtures -- against Nepal on November 13 and India five days later at the National Stadium.

Bangladesh have already been eliminated from the race for the AFC Asian Cup, following two home defeats and two away draws. However, Rakib dismissed the notion that the team performs better on foreign soil.

"If you look back, we've played really well at home," said Rakib. "In our last home match against Hong Kong, we had a strong first half. We also scored four goals in two matches -- one against Singapore and three against Hong Kong."

Determined to finish the year on a positive note, he added, "We still have two matches left -- one at home and one away -- and we'll try to give the country's people a good result by winning against India in our last home match of the year."

The Bashundhara Kings forward also praised the growing excitement surrounding the national team since the inclusion of Hamza Choudhury and Shamit Shome, crediting their presence for lifting both the squad's spirit and public enthusiasm.

"You can see how football's popularity has grown -- tickets for home matches are selling out in just a few minutes," Rakib said. "The craze has definitely increased since Hamza and Shamit joined. We've improved a lot as a team, but sometimes the results just don't go our way -- that's our bad luck."



'Cherish the love I receive'

SPORTS REPORTER

Leicester City midfielder Hamza Choudhury said representing Bangladesh remains a deeply personal chapter in his career, as he was unveiled as the new brand ambassador of private telecom operator Robi at their corporate office in Dhaka yesterday.

Currently in Bangladesh for the upcoming international fixtures against Nepal and India, Hamza attended the signing ceremony in the morning, where he spoke about his motivation for choosing Bangladesh and the emotions tied to that decision.

"It [debut for Bangladesh] still feels surreal, to be honest," Hamza said. "I just want to

be proud of being part of this country and to represent it in any way possible, especially for my parents. My father was born and raised here, so seeing that smile on their faces means everything to me. Every child wants to make their parents proud, and I feel blessed that I have the chance to make an entire nation proud."

Since his arrival, the midfielder has drawn large crowds wherever he has gone, from public appearances to training sessions. The reception, he said, has strengthened his bond with the country.

"The love I receive here is something I truly cherish. I try to share that love and support with everyone. It even makes my

family want to come back. Every time I leave Bangladesh, my kids say they want to return. So, Inshallah, they'll be back again in March."

He added that his commitment goes beyond footballing ambition: "I don't really think about money separately. What matters most to me is my love for the country and how I can help improve its situation. Contributing to that progress in whatever way I can is one of the main reasons I chose to play for Bangladesh. I have many childhood memories connected to this country, and I truly enjoy being here -- especially to inspire the younger generation to play football," Hamza added.

Starc wants spicy Perth pitch; Botham concerned

AGENCIES

Australia paceman Mitchell Starc has urged curators to prepare bowler-friendly surfaces, cautioning against "flattening surfaces to maximise five-day revenue", while former England captain Ian Botham has voiced concern about the team's lean Ashes preparations.

Botham noted that the full England squad did not arrive in Perth until Sunday, playing only one internal match before the series opener on November 21, while most of Australia's players are gaining match fitness in domestic Sheffield Shield games.

"It's not the way I would prepare," Botham told reporters in Melbourne. Highlighting the traditional need for touring teams to acclimatize, he stressed the mental challenge: "You've got to remember there's 24 million people down here, not 11. And you have to take that on board."

Despite his concerns over preparation, Botham expects a better series for Ben Stokes's team than the 4-0 loss in 2021-22, provided they can avoid injuries, calling it "one of those big ifs."

Botham suggested England could "consider unleashing a four-prong pace attack," favouring an aggressive approach: "You want to be aggressive, come through and players, if they're not playing very well, don't like it in the ribs."



However, England assistant coach Marcus Trescothick countered the idea that Australian conditions would curb the 'Bazball' style, arguing that the pace and bounce will be welcomed.

"Playing on bouncy pitches, where the

ball comes onto the bat nicely, is something we always talk about trying to get back at home. It suits our style of play, which we're happy with,"

Trescothick also backed star batter Joe Root to finally score a Test century in Australia, noting that under the current regime, "His game has gone to the next level and hence the reason where he is in the rankings."

On the Australian side, paceman Mitchell Starc has weighed in on the pitch debate, urging curators to prepare bowler-friendly surfaces. Starc warned that docile wickets, like the one he recently played on in the Sheffield Shield, would play "right into the England batters' hands".

Starc, who is building his rhythm after a layoff, believes his bowling is coming good, saying, "I think I've sorted it out and now it's just getting the engine going again."



RONALDO confirms 2026 WC will be his last

AGENCIES

Cristiano Ronaldo confirmed that the 2026 World Cup will mark the end of his legendary international journey. At 40, with over 950 career goals and 143 for Portugal, the five-time Ballon d'Or winner said the tournament in USA, Canada, and Mexico would be his "last dance." Now starring for Al Nassr in Saudi Arabia, Ronaldo admitted he plans to retire from football "in one or two years." Portugal, still fighting for qualification, hopes to give their captain one final shot at glory -- something that eluded him since the 2006 semifinal loss to France. Reflecting on his career, the world's first football billionaire said farewell won't be easy: "It will be very, very difficult. Probably, yes -- I will cry."