

Mirpur track in the spotlight

SPORTS REPORTER

"We weren't expecting such a spinning track, so definitely it was a bit unexpected." A member of the Bangladesh team management told The Daily Star on Sunday when asked about the pitch for the first ODI against New Zealand, which the hosts lost by 26 runs.

Ahead of the second match, ad hoc committee president, Tamim Iqbal, inspected the surface. The pitch has remained under scrutiny since the series opener.

For Monday's match, the surface appeared slightly greener and harder than the one used in the first game. In that match, deliveries tended to hold up, while there was sharp turn in the second innings -- something the Bangladesh team management had not anticipated.

New Zealand's pace-bowling all-rounder Nathan Smith found assistance from the wicket in the first match, but noted similarities with pitches from Bangladesh's recent series against Pakistan.

"I'd be surprised [if there is chest-high bounce], yeah. But I think that wicket out there, looks similar to what those Pakistan wickets looked like from what I could see on the footage. So I'd say there might be a little bit more pace in it," he said.



PHOTO: STAR

Shoriful Islam, Bangladesh's most successful bowler in that match, also admitted the conditions were tricky.

"When we play in Mirpur, a lot of the times we are proven wrong. It acted a little differently to what we expected but hoping we will do better," he said.

Mirpur has long baffled both hosts and visitors. The heat further complicates matters, with cracks opening up and making conditions harder to read. Bangladesh will need to adapt quickly to whatever the surface offers in Monday's second ODI.

Is hope enough to fix batting crisis?

SPORTS REPORTER

As it stands, Bangladesh cricketers and their fans seem to share one defining trait -- an almost stubborn tendency to cling to hope.

On the eve of the second ODI against New Zealand, pacer Shoriful Islam laid it bare. His words, intended as reassurance, instead underlined a worrying reality -- that hope, rather than performance, has become this side's fallback.

"Of course, they are working on it, and maybe most of the time they are failing. But even when you fail, you can always hold on to hope. In life, you don't always fail -- sometimes success comes. And with that hope, everyone is trying," Shoriful said.

But international cricket rarely rewards hope alone. Bangladesh's 26-run defeat in Friday's opener at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium exposed a batting unit that is not just out of form, but alarmingly short on conviction.

That has prompted a possible rethink. Soumya Sarkar, who had been on the fringes, is now likely to be drafted into the eleven as Bangladesh search for answers to their batting woes. Initially overlooked after head coach Phil Simmons backed the Saif Hassan-Tanzid Hasan Tamim opening pair, Soumya now appears set for a recall, potentially at number three. Sources suggest Najmul Hossain Shanto could be pushed down to number four as the order is reshuffled.

For now, though, the spotlight remains on those who have failed to deliver. Shanto continues to occupy a crucial role without results -- 13 innings without a fifty,



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

six of those producing single-digit scores, and just one effort beyond 40. His dismissal in the first ODI, beaten comprehensively by Nathan Smith's incoming delivery, only reinforced concerns about his form.

Liton Das's decline is even more pronounced. Once among Bangladesh's most reliable batters, he has now gone 18 innings without a fifty -- his last dating back to the 2023 World Cup. Even a shift down to number four has failed to arrest the slide, with four ducks in his last 10 innings. Brief starts have come, with 40-plus scores in his last three innings, but the inability to convert remains his main issue. However, one positive is that it took an impressive turner from Dean Foxcroft to outfox him in the first ODI, showing that the batter might just be able to turn it around with a

little more luck and grit.

Afif Hossain remains caught between roles. A batter who usually bats at number four in the domestic circuit, Afif continues to be used at six without showing the intent or finishing ability required. His laboured 49-ball innings at a strike rate of 55.10 in the first ODI typified that struggle.

Opener Saif Hassan also failed to capitalise after getting in, while captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz has yet to make a meaningful impact with the bat down the order.

There is nothing inherently wrong with hope. But when it becomes the central theme -- even within the dressing room -- it begins to sound less like belief and more like an admission of inadequacy. Soumya's likely return may offer a fresh variable, but it is hardly a guaranteed fix.

52 DAYS TO GO



Fastest red in World Cup history

Uruguay defender Jose Batista holds the record for the fastest red card in World Cup history -- against Scotland in the group stage of the 1986 edition. He was shown a straight red card by referee Joel Quiniou just 52 seconds after kickoff for a dangerous tackle.

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Bangladesh captain Nigar Sultana Joty and her Sri Lanka counterpart, Chamari Athapaththu, pose with the trophy at Shahid Kamruzzaman Stadium in Rajshahi on Sunday, ahead of their three-match WODI series which begins today. The second and third matches will be played on April 22 and 25.

PHOTO: BCB



A TALE OF TWO COACHES

Real Sociedad coach Pellegrino Matarazzo hugs one of his charges as La Real players celebrate their thrilling shootout victory against Atletico Madrid in the final of the Copa del Rey at the La Cartuja stadium in Seville on Saturday. In doing so, Matarazzo created a piece of history by becoming the first American coach to win a silverware in one of Europe's top five leagues. (L) Meanwhile, Bundesliga outfit Union Berlin's coach Marie-Louise Eta, too, became part of history as she became the first woman to guide any men's team in one of the top five European leagues.

PHOTO: REUTERS/AFP

'Target is to qualify for Asian Games'

Bangladesh women's hockey team left for Jakarta in the early hours of Monday for the Women's Asian Games Qualifiers from April 23 to 29. Orpita Pal is leading the youthful team in their debut appearance at international stage. The Grade-12 student from BSKP spoke to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the team's preparation, goals and challenges in the eight-team competition, from where four top teams will qualify for the tournament proper. Following are the excerpts:



The Daily Star (DS): You previously captained the U-21 team. Now you are leading the senior team in their debut tournament. What is the team's primary objective and how prepared are you?

Orpita Pal (OP): Our preparation has been quite good. Our team bonding is strong as we are training under a disciplined routine for a long period at BSKP. It would be premature to talk about winning the championship because we don't have much prior experience at this

level. Our target is to secure a place for the Asian Games by advancing to the semifinals.

DS: Bangladesh have been grouped with Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong and Uzbekistan. Do you think you can progress?

OP: Nothing is impossible. If there is willpower, anything can be achieved. Chinese Taipei are a strong side but we have to overcome Hong Kong and Uzbekistan to realise our dream.

DS: How does this team compare to the 2024 U-21 side?

OP: Back in 2024, we were not as matured as we are now because the sense of 'team feelings' was slightly lower.

Now, our collective mindset has improved, and everyone has a better sense of what is required to represent the country. In terms of technical performance, we previously lacked a clear understanding of skills like slices or overheads, which we have now mastered. Furthermore, we have changed our tactical approach; instead of running individually with the ball, we are learning to let the ball travel. This allows us to organise

our play more effectively without exhausting the players.

DS: Where has the team improved most?
OP: I would say our greatest strength is the penalty corner. We have trained PCs extensively, and our scoring ability in this area is high. In 2024, we secured most of our goals through PCs, which boosted our confidence. We have three to four PC specialists.

DS: Your personal goal?

OP: I am not focusing on personal goals rather my primary objective is to lead the team to get good results.

DS: Will lack of exposure hurt?
OP: We will certainly struggle a bit due to the lack of international exposure. If we could play regularly against international sides, we would understand our strengths and weaknesses better and compete with more confidence in AHF-sanctioned tournaments.

DS: Tell us about the Barua twins -- Niladri and Himadri.

OP: Our bonding with them is excellent. As a goalkeeper, Himadri is the backbone of our team. Niladri plays in defence and I feel confident when she is behind me.

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