

Hridoy delivers, so does middle-order

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI from Chattogram

When the target is 180 plus and Bangladesh require 106 from the last 10 overs, optimism is usually in short supply. But in Chattogram yesterday, Tawhid Hridoy turned the tide with a composed and calculated innings, stitching together crucial partnerships with Parvez Hossain Emon and Shamim Hossain Patwari to guide Bangladesh to their highest successful T20I chase at home against New Zealand in the first match of the three-match series.

Hridoy walked in under pressure after Litton Das had fallen and the required rate had climbed above 10. The situation worsened when Tanzid Tamim departed in the following over. However, Hridoy immediately seized the initiative, launching Ish Sodhi over midwicket -- a shot that has become his signature against spin -- to shift momentum.



In earlier chases, Hridoy's efforts often came in vain. His career-best 83 against Ireland last November, for instance, ended in a 39-run defeat while chasing 181. This time, however, he found the support he needed as Bangladesh completed the chase with two overs to spare.

The partnership with Emon proved pivotal. The duo added 57 runs from just 28 deliveries at a run rate of 12.21 -- Bangladesh's fastest fourth-wicket scoring rate in successful chases over the past three years. Emon's brisk 28 helped steady the innings and allowed Hridoy to build with greater freedom.

"The middle order is a position where you have to hit boundaries while also building the innings," Hridoy said at the post-match press conference following his unbeaten 51 off 27 deliveries.

"What I felt was that when Emon started attacking, it made things much easier for me. I felt the game was firmly in our hands, so I didn't need to take as many risks. Definitely, credit goes to both Emon and Patwari (Shamim) as they finished the game really well," he added.

If Emon helped regain control, Shamim ensured there was no slip thereafter. The fifth-wicket stand between Hridoy and Shamim came at a blistering rate of 15.47 -- the highest for Bangladesh in successful chases in the last three years. Shamim hammered 31 off just 13 balls, including a remarkable six struck straight over the wicketkeeper's head.

"Number five or six is such a position that you would get fifty just one or two days. If anyone is scoring fifty from number six, that means the team was on the back foot that day. I think what Shamim did today, his impact was bigger than a fifty," Hridoy said on contributions of the middle order.

"He plays shots that very few batsmen in our team can execute. At number six, you need a player who can hit the ball anywhere at any time. The six he hit, very few of us can hit a shot like that. So definitely, I pray that he continues to deliver good performances consistently," Hridoy said as he shone with a fifty, finding solid partners in crime.

TEARS OF RESOLVE and an unlikely success

RAMIN TALUKDAR

Wearing red and green, standing tall, listening to the national anthem at the GBK Hockey Field in Jakarta, the moment suddenly feels heavier than ever before. For one member of the Bangladesh women's hockey team, it is almost surreal.

Not long ago, hockey was not even part of their vocabulary, and even in their wildest dreams, they could not have imagined that one day they would stand on an international stage wearing the national jersey; let alone thinking of taking part in Women's Asian Games qualifying tournament.

In a sport they barely knew before stepping into BKSP, this was their first senior international tournament, and they made it unforgettable. Holding off Chinese Taipei and defeating Uzbekistan and Hong Kong, they secured a place in the semifinals and sealed their Asian Games ticket.

It marks the beginning of a story that, until recently, barely conceivable. Yet the backstory behind this achievement is even more extraordinary.

In a country where women's hockey has no active league and limited structure, a group of young girls has rewritten possibility through sheer will and determination.

Fourteen of the 16 squad members are from BKSP. They joined in 2020 as seventh-grade students and now stand at the threshold of their HSC exams. For six years, they have lived under one roof, trained on the same field, and



grown with one shared dream.

Their roots lie mainly in northern Bangladesh -- Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, Rajshahi -- while others come from Habiganj, Kishoreganj, and Netrokona. Most arrived at BKSP dreaming of football or cricket; hockey was something entirely off the radar.

Coach Zahid Hossain Raju says many of them were guided toward hockey due to limited opportunities in the sport nationwide. The residential setup at BKSP became their biggest strength, shaping them over six relentless years.

Take Sharika Safa Rimon. She came for football trials but found hockey instead. The choice was practical at first -- less

competition, more opportunity. But what began as convenience slowly turned into passion.

The youngest of five siblings, Sharika was encouraged by her elder sister,

Mamoni Akter. "I had never even seen hockey before," she said. "But now when I step onto the field, it feels like I was born for this game."

Riya from Jhenaidah carries a different struggle. Poverty once pushed her toward leaving sport behind for marriage. But she stayed, and went on to become player of the match, proving her place when her family wanted her to return home.

Riya aside, Tanni Khatun -- still in ninth grade -- also earned player-of-the-match honours, as did captain Orpita Pal. The coach has set one clear direction for them: no marriage for the next four to five years -- only education and the national jersey.

In a country where cricket and football dominate fame and fortune, why choose hockey? Rimon's answer is simple: "When you truly love something, success follows."

Coach Raju noted that improved financial incentives for national players from new government have begun changing perceptions, encouraging families to support their daughters.

Since 2020, Raju has led both boys' and girls' teams at BKSP single-handedly. But it is the girls who, he says, leave the deepest impression with their resilience and fight.

Ironically, this team was never meant to be here. A postponed U-21 tournament opened the door, and financial support from the National Sports Council (NSC) made participation possible. From that unexpected chance, they earned their Asian Games ticket.

After reaching the semifinals, Sharika called her father -- only to find he already knew. Her laughter carried the joy of something far bigger than victory.

Still, challenges remain. Many such success stories in other sports have faded into obscurity due to neglect.

Bangladesh has no regular women's hockey league. Competitive exposure is limited, and opportunities are rare. As they prepare for the Asian Games, both coach and players share a single hope: a domestic league. Coach Raju, dares to dream of having a franchise-based league like India or Malaysia.

These girls carry an unbreakable courage, and when tears well up during the national anthem, they are not of weakness but of resolve, one that now must be matched by the authorities.

Paris set for fireworks as PSG host Bayern

STAR SPORTS DESK

A mouthwatering showdown awaits in Paris tonight as reigning champions PSG host Bayern Munich in the first leg of their Champions League semifinal, with two of Europe's most potent attacks set to collide.

● PSG and Bayern are no strangers, having met 15 times in the competition, including in each of the last nine seasons.

● Bayern have dominated the fixture, winning the last five meetings -- the longest winning streak by any team against PSG in major European competition. They also won 2-1 in Paris in this season's league phase, with Luis Diaz scoring twice before being sent off.

● PSG's nine defeats to Bayern are their most against any opponent in the competition.

● Goals are almost guaranteed. PSG and Bayern are joint top scorers this season with 38 goals each, while Bayern average 3.2 goals per game -- the highest followed by PSG's 2.7.

● Harry Kane leads Bayern's charge, with 12 goals -- the most



by an English player in a single European Cup/Champions League campaign. He has scored in each of his last four knockout matches.

● For PSG, Vitinha could dictate play if fit. His 1,370 completed passes are the most in a single Champions League season since 2003-04, and he has registered 100+ passes in eight games, second only to Xavi's nine for Barcelona in 2010-11.

● With six goals and three assists, a goal or assist would make Diaz the third Bayern player to reach 10+ goal involvements this season, alongside Kane (13) and Michael

Olise (10) -- a first for the club in a single campaign.

● On the touchline, PSG boss Luis Enrique is one win away from becoming the fastest manager to 50 Champions League victories (currently 49 in 76 games), with Pep Guardiola holding the record (50 in 80).

● Bayern coach Vincent Kompany has won both of his meetings with Enrique's PSG (1-0 in November 2024 and 2-1 in November 2025), and another victory would give him the most wins by any manager against the Spaniard in the competition (3).

44 DAYS TO GO



Italy's 44-year wait for glory

Italy hold the record for the longest gap between two World Cup titles. After winning their second crown in 1938, the Azzurri had to wait 44 years before lifting the trophy again in 1982. Argentina rank second on this list, with a 36-year gap between their 1986 and 2022 triumphs.

****Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Argentina's 2002 early exit and Beckham's redemption'**



'I always prefer batting at three'

After a run of 13 innings without a fifty, Bangladesh batter **Najmul Hossain Shanto** looked in his element in the recently concluded ODI series against New Zealand, breaking the drought with a half-century in the second ODI in Mirpur before following it up with a commanding fourth ODI ton in the decider in Chattogram. Across those two innings, he first showed patience under pressure and then took control with a more assertive approach. Shanto spoke about navigating that lean phase, whether stepping away from captaincy influenced his batting and more, in an exclusive interview with **The Daily Star's Abdullah Al Mehdi**. The excerpts follow:

The Daily Star (DS): Reflecting on the New Zealand ODIs overall, how uplifting was the team's performance and your own?

Najmul Hossain Shanto (NHS): As a team, we did well, and that's a positive. We've been playing good cricket for the last three series, so it's crucial to keep this momentum going. I think the team bonding is great right now, and everyone is trying to contribute together. On a personal level, I desperately needed these two

innings. I hadn't scored big runs in a while. So, from that perspective, I'd say it was a good series for me.

DS: Who did you turn to for guidance during that lean phase?

NHS: Actually, I had been working on my game for the last few months. I always work on my batting with Sohail [Islam] sir. I spent the last few months working with him, focusing on both technical and mental aspects. After putting in that work, I felt a bit more confident.

DS: What specific adjustments were you working through at the time?

NHS: No, it wasn't anything major. Like I said, I was focusing more on technique. I was dealing with a technical issue -- well, I wouldn't call it a problem, just something I was struggling with. Mentally, I am generally a positive person. Even when I wasn't scoring runs, I feel my approach and mindset remained positive. But of course, when the runs aren't coming, a bit of nervousness or a different feeling creeps in. However, I believe I held up well in that regard. My main focus over the last few months was really on resolving that technical aspect.

DS: Has stepping down from the captaincy affected your batting in any way?

NHS: Honestly, whether I am captain or not doesn't matter to me at all. As long as I am scoring runs, that is what matters.

DS: You also had a few sessions with Tamim Iqbal. How did that shape your game?

NHS: Before the BPL (Bangladesh Premier League), I was working on a specific shot. I felt Tamim bhai would be the best person to consult because he played that shot very successfully throughout his career. I wanted to learn from his real-life experience and understand how he executed it. I invited him, and he beautifully explained the whole process to me. He also spent two days with me indoors, generously giving his time. I benefited a lot from that, and I'm still working on it.

DS: How disappointing was it to be retired hurt for cramps in the second ODI?

NHS: It was absolutely disappointing because I should have finished the game, which would have ensured a comfortable win. As a professional cricketer, we shouldn't complain too much about things beyond our control. The heat was what it was. Before

the series started, we had a very good fitness camp... But due to my running restrictions, I had to adapt.

DS: How mature does the pace unit look to you now?

NHS: Every single pace bowler... to operate the way they did in this heat and in these conditions shows they deserve all the credit. They played a massive role in us winning the series.

DS: You batted at number four in the last two ODIs. Looking ahead, where do you see your batting role, particularly with the World Cup approaching?

NHS: That's a call for the coach, management, and captain to make. Personally, I always prefer batting at number three, and I've had success there in the past. But ultimately, I will be prepared to play wherever the team management, coach, and captain ask me to.

****Read the full interview on The Daily Star website, where Shanto also elaborates on his shot selection and tempo in the decider, adapting to challenging Chattogram conditions, and his approach to adjusting against different bowlers.**