

"Indian cricket is at top now because look at the number of matches they are playing at home and they are also getting better on overseas tours. In comparison Pakistan hardly plays regular Test series."

MUSHTAQ MUHAMMAD, FORMER PAK SKIPPER

Pakistan bank on good old formula, their fast bowlers

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
RAWALPINDI, FEBRUARY 6

SKIPPER AZHAR Ali hopes Pakistan will strengthen their credentials — both as a team and as hosts — when they face a depleted Bangladesh side in the first Test in Rawalpindi starting Friday. The match will further Pakistan's efforts to host Test cricket, which returned to the country just two months ago after a 10-year gap with a series against Sri Lanka.

International cricket was suspended in Pakistan after a militant attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore in March 2009, forcing them to play home fixtures in the United Arab Emirates. With improved security, Pakistan hosted limited-overs internationals between 2015-19 before security confidence improved. Bangladesh, initially reluctant to make a lengthy stay in Pakistan, only agreed to tour in three phases, having played Twenty20s last month. After this Test they head home, before returning to play a one-day international (April 3) and second Test (April 5-9) — both in Karachi.

Azhar said the split series will give Pakistan further opportunity to establish itself as a Test host nation. "Credit to the two Boards for making this series possible," Azhar told reporters. "Would have been good if the series was not split but we are focused as this is a World Test Championship match."

Pakistan are currently fourth in the championship, which features the top nine Test nations and is currently led by world number one India (360 points) followed by Australia (296) and England (146). The top two teams will play the final in June 2021.

"Hosting matches in Pakistan will send a strong message that we are a safe country," said Azhar.

Bangladesh will be without Shakib Al Hasan, who is banned for one year in a spot-fixing case, and Mushfiqur Rahim, who opted not to tour Pakistan over security fears. Bangladesh skipper Mominul Haque admitted Rahim will be missed.

"It's difficult to play without your best players, but it gives an opportunity to younger players and we look forward to playing good cricket," said Haque, who lost his first series as skipper in India 2-0 last year.

Also hurting Bangladesh will be the fact they have not won any of 10 Tests against Pakistan (nine defeats with one draw), and lost all five Tests they played last year.

Seasoned opener Tamim Iqbal — fresh from a triple hundred in a domestic match in Bangladesh — along with Haque and Mahmudullah will be Bangladesh's main hopes against a strong Pakistan bowling attack which includes sensational 16-year-old pacer Naseem Shah.

Pakistan opener Abid Ali, meanwhile, will target another hundred in this Test to equal Indian maestro Mohammad Azharuddin's record of three consecutive centuries in his first three Tests. Azharuddin achieved the feat against England in 1984-85 in his first three Tests. Pakistan's confidence is boosted by Bangladesh appearing vulnerable without Mushfiqur Rahim and Shakib Al Hasan for the first test starting on Friday. Mushfiqur withdrew from the test because of security concerns, while allrounder Shakib is suspended.

Pakistan captain Azhar Ali said on Thursday they must reap the advantage at Pindi Cricket Stadium. "Test matches are always played on your strength and at the moment we feel our fast bowling is our strength," Azhar said. "They are missing a couple of key players and on current form we can say we have an upper hand. You take advantage in your home conditions."

TO PLAY INDIA IN UNDER-19 WC FINAL ON SUNDAY

Bangladesh's pride and Joy

No.3 Mahmudul Joy scores a mature century to help team beat New Zealand and enter maiden ICC final



Bangladesh players celebrate their six-wicket win in the semifinal against New Zealand at the Under-19 World Cup in Potchefstroom. ICC

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
FEBRUARY 6

IN BANGLADESH'S domestic youth circuit, Mahmudul Hasan Joy is renowned for pulling off the big games. For, he could go anonymous in those games his team is comfortably winning, but the slightest hint of a crisis, Joy emphatically announces his presence. Like he did against New Zealand in the U-19 World Cup semifinal, where his 100 off 127 balls guided Bangladesh to their maiden final appearance in any ICC tournament.

Typically, he was enduring a lean patch in the tournament. In five innings before the semifinal, he tallied only 76 runs, including two ducks. But coach Naveed Nawad knew his ward quite well. So in the pre-match press conference, he defended him: "He's a class player. We need to back him. I'm sure he will get the runs when it matters the most for us."

His conviction was based on strong evidence. Last year, he scored a second-innings hundred on a wearing fourth-day surface against England U19 to fashion a series-sealing win. Bangladesh were chasing 333 and kept losing wickets in a heap, but Joy kept his cool as Bangladesh sneaked in by three wickets. A few months before that, Kiria Shikha Protishtan (the equivalent of National Cricket Academy) product racked up 126 in a deciding youth ODI against New Zealand U19s.

The context, this time around, was bigger. Bangladesh had never gone beyond the semifinals of the Youth World Cup. Besides, all Bangladesh sides travelled the world with their blinking-in-big-moments reputation. Time and time again, they've lost high-pressure games because they couldn't handle the accompanying pressure, not for want of skills. His senior counterparts Mushfiqur Rahim himself would testify. But Joy ensured



Mahmudul Hasan Joy was the glue that held the Bangladesh innings together. ICC

that the enormity of the situation didn't overwhelm him. He went about the chase, as if he's playing a club game in Dhaka. It seemed history repeating when Bangladesh lost two quick wickets in their chase of 212. But Joy soaked the pressure. He kept his aggressive streak on hold and staved off the new-ball threat.

Risk-free batting

He meticulously left anything outside the off-stump, and waited for the full balls. An instinctive cutter off the ball, he didn't attempt the stroke until he progressed into his 30s. A firm straight-driven four and a flurry of singles kept him going initially. Only when New Zealand resorted to leg-spinner Aditya Ashok that he started searching for the boundaries. Even then, he was looking to execute risk-free shots, like the sweeps, flicks and glides, per-

fectly placed with lots of power and precision.

The combination of power and precision was the standout feature of his game. It's a rare mix for Bangladesh batsmen, who are either power-players or touch players. Seldom both.

Joy blended both the worlds. He would unfurl silken drives—there was a gorgeous cover-drive off medium-pacer David Hankoff later in the innings—as well as the powerful cuts, a bit like Mushfiqur in his penchant cut in front of square.

Like most Bangladesh batsmen, he was ruthless on spinners. Ashok and Jesse Tashkoff fully bore on the brunt (they conceded 102 off their 20 overs). Whenever they erred on the shorter or fuller side, he would latch onto it. But at point he seemed in a tearing hurry—often Bangladesh batsmen convey the impression that they want to wrap

up the innings as early as possible. He would calmly ride the storm, pile on the dot balls (he didn't score off 63 deliveries) without feeling the pressure, and when a loose ball beckoned, he knew the gap and which stroke to play. Invariably, he completed his hundred with a thunderous sweep off Tashkoff.

Around his assurance blossomed stroke-makers Towhid Hriday (40 off 47) and Shahadat Hossain (40 off 51), who kept the run-rate within their grasp. "The way they (Joy and Hriday) batted was exceptional. They work really hard, and it's commendable. But it was our three spinners who put us in that situation," observed captain Akbar Ali.

Their left-arm spin pair of Rakibul Hasan and Hasan Murad conceded only 69 runs for three wickets in 20 overs. Both, unsurprisingly, have leaked 3.10 and 3.15 runs an over in this campaign. New Zealand batsmen simply didn't have the skill to manoeuvre them, and the pressure just kept mounting on them. Throw off-spinner Shamim Hossain (who is comparatively more expensive at 3.75) into the mix, and Bangladesh have perhaps the thriest bowling unit in the World Cup. On them would hinge their dreams of landing the first-ever U-19 World Cup in the frenzied streets of Dhaka.

For that, though, they have to beat India, easily the strongest side in the tournament. But Ali asserts his team is not fazed by the situation. "We will play it as a normal game. We can't take the pressure of thinking that this is our first final. India is a very good side, and we have to play our 'A' game. We have to do the best in all three departments," he says.

And an even bigger stage awaits Hasan Joy.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand Under-19: 211 for 8 (Wheeler-Greenall 75, Lidstone 44, Islam 3-45, Shamim 2-31) lost to Bangladesh Under-19: 215 for 4 (Joy 100, Shahadat 40*) by six wickets

Pitch under scrutiny after 2-day finish in Patiala

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 6

The BCCI has asked for an explanation from its neutral curator on the Patiala pitch that hosted the Ranji Trophy match between Punjab and Andhra. Ishtyaque Khan was the neutral curator at the venue from the BCCI's Emerging Panel, while Talwinder Singh was the local curator. As per the BCCI rules, neutral curators supervise pitch preparations for the Ranji Trophy matches.

The match between Punjab and Andhra, played on February 4 and 5, finished inside two days, with Punjab winning by four wickets. Spinners from both sides accounted for 31 wickets in the game. It is learnt that BCCI general manager (cricket operations) Saba Karim has written to the head of the cricket board's panel of curators Ashish Bhowmick, asking for a report from the neutral curator on the pitch. The BCCI does this when it feels the pitch is not conducive (to good cricket). Apart from the neutral curator, match referee Prakash Bhatt, too, will have to submit a report to the BCCI.

The Patiala District Cricket Association secretary RP Pandove informed that the neutral curator took charge of the ground on January 29. "He came here on 29th. After that our local ground staff/curator worked under his direction," Pandove told The Indian Express. He, however, defended the pitch, saying: "I didn't see any problem with the pitch. Rather, what I felt was that the batsmen tried to play too many shots. Fast bowlers got purchase from the surface as well. Siddharth Kaul took five wickets in the first innings."

With five teams qualifying for the knock-outs from the Elite, Group A and B combined, six points against Andhra took Punjab to the fourth position — 24 points from seven matches — with one game remaining. "It's a big issue. It could be seen as an abuse of the points system," a state association office-bearer told this paper.

Archer out of IPL, Sri Lanka tour

London: Fast bowler Jofra Archer was ruled out of England's two-Test tour of Sri Lanka and the Indian Premier League next month because of a right elbow injury. The England and Wales Cricket Board made the announcement on Thursday after a scan revealed a low grade stress fracture.

Archer missed the three recent Tests in South Africa, and came home when he was ruled out of the three Twenty20s next week.

The 24-year-old Archer was one of several of England's Cricket World Cup winners rested from the One-Day International series but he was expected to return alongside Ben Stokes, Jos Buttler and Mark Wood for the three T20s.

After Sri Lanka, Archer was scheduled to feature in the IPL, where he, Buttler, Stokes and Tom Curran are registered with Rajasthan Royals. Archer will begin rehabilitation at home and undergo another scan in four weeks. The ECB hope for him to be available for England's home Test schedule from June, when a three-Test series against the West Indies begins.

PTI

RANJI ROUND-UP

BENGAL BOUNCE BACK

An improved batting effort in the second innings has given Bengal a whiff of hope against Rajasthan. After bowling out Rajasthan for 201 in the second innings, their batsmen put on a steady shift in pursuit of 320 runs. Powered by half-centuries from openers Koushik Das and Abhimanyu Eeswaran, who put on 115, they were 185 for four at stumps on the third day. Though they post Abhishek Raman and Manoj Tiwari, they look poised to wrap up the match.

Brief Scores (in Jaipur): Rajasthan 241 and 201 (Nilkantha Das 4/26) lead Bengal 123 and (target 320) 185/4 (Abhimanyu Eeswaran 62, Koushik Ghosh 64) by 135 runs.

VIGNESH RUNS THROUGH BARODA Baroda's knockout hopes suffered a crushing blow as Tamil Nadu beat them by an innings and 57 runs. Medium-pacer K Vignesh was the wrecker in chief as he picked five wickets for 52 runs to help Tamil Nadu, who are out of knockout contention, post a face-saving win. Among Baroda's batsmen, only Krunal Pandya and No. 9 Atit Sheth showed some resistance with 74 and 70 respectively.

Brief Scores (in Vadodara): Baroda 174 and 259 (Krunal Pandya 74; A Sheth 70; K Vignesh 5-62) lost to Nadu 490/7 declared by an innings and 57 runs. Tamil Nadu: 7 points, Baroda: 0 points.

RASOOL'S 12 WRECKS TRIPURA



PARVEZ RASOOL

Jammu and Kashmir all-rounder Parvez Rasool snared 5 for 28 runs to help his side beat Tripura by a massive 329 runs. Set a target of 449, Tripura were bowled out for 119 runs. Rasool had picked 7/45 in the first besides scoring 56 in the second innings. Jammu and Kashmir now

sit atop the group with 39 points.

Brief Scores: J&K 329 & 306 for 9 declared beat Tripura 187 & 119 (MB Mura Singh 58; Parvez Rasool 5/28) by 329 runs. Points: J&K: 6, Tripura: 0.

MP FIGHT BACK VIA ADITYA'S TON

Madhya Pradesh middle-order batsman Aditya Shrivastava struck a fighting unbeaten century to keep Karnataka at bay. Madhya Pradesh were reeling at 123/4, after Karnataka piled 426 in the first innings, before Shrivastava and Venkatesh Iyer combined an unbroken 198 runs. With the match likely to end in a stalemate, both teams will be looking for precious first-innings lead points on the final day.

Brief Scores (in Shimoga): Karnataka 426 lead Madhya Pradesh 311/4 (Aditya Shrivastava 109 not out, Venkatesh Iyer 80) by 115 runs.

DOUBLE HUNDRED FOR ARINDAM

Railways' Arindam Ghosh struck an unbeaten 204 to help Railways post a 545/7 declared in response to Himachal Pradesh's 283. Railways were in a spot of bother, at 88/3, when he walked out to bat. Though he kept losing partners, he kept an end up and guided Railways to a massive total. The 398-ball knock was laden with 11 fours and five sixes.

Brief Scores (in Delhi): Himachal Pradesh 283 and 24/0 trail Railways 545 for 7 declared (Arindam Ghosh 204 not out, Kam Sharma 82, Mahesh Rawat 60; AP Vashisht 3/110, M J Dagar 3/114) by 238 runs.

Rawat gives Delhi an opening

VISHAL MENON

NEW DELHI, FEBRUARY 6

DELHI WICKETKEEPER Anuj Rawat made his first-class debut in October 2017. In the subsequent two seasons, spanning 18 matches, the team management has shuffled him up and down the order — from an opener to a lower middle-order batsman. And whenever the incumbent Rishabh Pant returns to the fray, Rawat is included in the team as a batsman. This constant chopping and changing has played a part in his below-par career numbers — 877 runs at an average of just over 30.

These numbers suggest that the youngster is yet to realise his full potential in this format. On Thursday, he showed what he is capable of when he walked out to bat as an opener. Against Gujarat at the Feroz Shah Kotla, Rawat brought up his second first-class century and gave his team a chance of going for a win. His brilliant counter-attacking knock of 133 was laced with 15 boundaries and two sixes. The circumstances under which he showcased this knock makes it more special. Delhi had conceded a crucial 42-run first-innings lead after Gujarat were bowled out for 335. Support came in the form of Jonty Sidhu's unbeaten 96-ball 44. Together, their 106-run fourth-wicket alliance took them to a fairly comfortable 228/4 at stumps on Day Three — their overall lead swelling to 186 runs.

However, he admits that playing in the opening slot gives him utmost satisfaction. "That's the slot where I love to bat. It frees me



Anuj Rawat made 133 off 194 balls against Gujarat. Amit Mehra

from the pressures of batting down the order," he quips.

In this season, he has featured in seven matches. But it's as an opener that he's orchestrated highly impactful knocks. Before Thursday, he produced a well-compiled 87 in the opening fixture against Kerala. That match may have meandered into a draw but Rawat's was a standout innings. Rawat's all-round efforts are highly commendable. He led his team's charge on Thursday after keeping for over 86 overs, and then batted for 63 overs. It just shows the kind of stamina the youngster possesses. When asked about his efforts today, the 20-year-old had only this to say: "The results are there for everyone to see."

The former India U-19 captain will now be hoping that this innings is a catalyst of change. For that to happen, he would do well to become more consistent. "This is a team of youngsters. Barring Dhruv Shorey and Nitish Rana, the rest of our order is very fluid.

But I would love to bat in one particular slot for a sustained period," he says.

Going forward, Rawat would like to become a lot more consistent in this format — something that could earn him call-ups to India A tours in the future. The good news is that even Rahul Dravid, the National Cricket Academy director has earmarked him as the player for the future. On Thursday, he may have survived two dropped catches early in his innings. But there's little denying that it was an innings that has given Delhi hope of going for a win on the final day. "We will assess the conditions in the morning. The truth is that we don't have a target in our minds. The morning session tomorrow will be crucial," he says.

Rawat is not off the mark. With the winter in full bloom, pacers from both teams have held sway in these three days' play. On Day 1, Gujarat's bowlers picked up three wickets in the opening session. The second day accounted for five scalps, while the third day saw as many as six wickets. Such was the scenario that even Rana bowled military medium seam-ups today, and picked up two wickets.

The match is still tantalisingly poised. If Delhi's batsmen hold fort in the first session, it will give the home team a realistic chance of going for a win. Rawat, though, remains optimistic. "The wicket is good for batting but it is slightly up and down at times. But yes, bowlers need to bend their backs for getting rewards," he concludes.

BRIEF SCORES: Delhi 293 and 228/4 (Anuj Rawat 133, Jonty Sidhu 48) lead Gujarat 335 (Manprit Juneja 124, Dhruv Raval 94) by 186 runs.