

Sports

Prince of spin: Mujeeb Ur Rahman, Afghanistan's cricket rising star

Twenty-year-old leads team to 130-run rout of Scotland

DUBAI: Rashid Khan remains Afghanistan's original spin king, but Mujeeb Ur Rahman has emerged from his shadow as a rising star to make an instant impact at the Twenty20 World Cup. The 20-year-old bamboozled the opposition batsmen with his mystery spin on Monday to return T20 best figures of 5-20 in Afghanistan's 130-run rout of Scotland in Sharjah. Mujeeb bowls off spin, leg spin and the googly with equal guile and has bagged 30 wickets in 20 matches in the shortest format since his debut as a 16-year-old in February 2018.

tournament if the women's game was discontinued by the Taliban. The players though have set aside the turmoil to focus on the T20 World Cup with skipper Mohammad Nabi saying we are well "prepared". Mujeeb, who hails from a humble family in the Khost city of the war-torn region, rattled Scotland's top and middle order, taking three wickets in his first over including two in successive deliveries.

'Magician'

By the time senior spinner Rashid came into the attack in the seventh over of the Scotland chase, Mujeeb's heroics — 4-14 in three overs — had already reduced the Scots to 37-5. He bowled three googlies — a leg spinner that pitches and spins in to a right-hand batsman — to send Scotland skipper Kyle Coetzer, Calum MacLeod and Richie Berrington trudging back to the pavilion.

Rashid took four wickets as the spin duo got nine between them and Nabi said, "The world knows we have some good spinners in the form of Rashid and Mujeeb." Former Afghanistan coach Andy Moles had termed Mujeeb a "complete package" and the youngster justified the compliment with sterling performances at the Under-19 stage.

Mujeeb claimed a five-wicket haul in Afghanistan's historic triumph at the Under-19 Asia Cup where they beat Pakistan in the final. He finished the tournament with 20 wickets in five matches. Mujeeb got his big break in the lucrative Indian Premier League when Kings XI Punjab — now Punjab Kings — bought him for \$630,000 in the 2018 edition.

He played in Afghanistan's first ever Test match, against India, in June 2018. The match was also his



SHARJAH: Afghanistan's Mujeeb Ur Rahman (right) celebrates after taking the wicket of Scotland's Calum MacLeod (not pictured) during the ICC men's Twenty20 World Cup cricket match between Afghanistan and Scotland at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium in Sharjah on Monday. — AFP

first-class debut. The same year Hampshire signed Mujeeb for the T20 Blast alongside Colin Munro of New Zealand. "Mujeeb, he is a magician. He has got all the tricks in the trade. Very very remarkable young lad. He has every ball you can come across," said a Hampshire teammate.

Mujeeb recently played in the Hundred for Northern Superchargers. Mujeeb once said that India skipper Virat Kohli "was his biggest wicket", but with his career just beginning, Afghanistan will be expecting many more memorable scalps from the prince of spin. — AFP



Thirty wickets in 20 matches since 2018 debut

"Congratulations to our nation and it's my first player of the match in a World Cup," Mujeeb, who played his first ever match in the T20 World Cup, said to his countrymen who have been cheering their team under the new Taliban regime. "The people supporting us here gave me a lot of positive energy. Fans have been supporting us and that's one reason we've played well."

Afghanistan cricket has overcome tough odds including the possibility of being banned from the

Afghan fans forget crisis as T20 World Cup team plays

KABUL: None of the cricket fans captivated by the T20 World Cup have more reason than the Afghans to want to lose themselves in a moment of sporting joy. Afghanistan's opening match on Monday against Scotland came just ten weeks after Taliban fighters ousted the country's former US-backed government and won a 20-year war.

"The war made us so exhausted, so tired. We want a moment of joy," said Nasir Khan Naseri, a floridly bearded 50-year-old who marched for peace in the years before the Taliban takeover. The former social worker now helps out at the Sole Restaurant, a popular hang out in east Kabul, where men gather to sip tea and watch televised cricket while sheep carcasses are butchered and grilled.

"We want to be like other parts of the world, to enjoy the match and put aside the current situation," Naseri told AFP as Afghanistan's openers started clocking up the runs against Scotland's bowlers. The Sole could be a kebab joint anywhere in the cricket-loving world — aside from the security guard armed with an M4 assault rifle equipped with a telescopic sight, its black paint worn through to gunmetal grey with age.

Two Taliban fighters watched the game alongside the other clients, wearing the grey digital camo pattern shalwar kameez uniform of the city's new police force, formed since their movement seized Kabul in August. There are no women to be seen, but the mood among the men was relaxed and cheerful. When a local mosque loudspeaker broadcast a prayer the cashier turned off the English-language television commentary out of respect, just as Afghanistan's impressive batsmen hit 93 for two.

Before the tournament, Afghanistan's team captain Mohammad Nabi admitted that "the only happiness in Afghanistan is cricket" and said the team hopes to put a "lot of smiles on faces". But as winter arrives the country is on the brink of an acute food shortage that threatens thousands of lives.

And Afghans are nervous that the new Islamist gov-

ernment, led by conservative clerics, will crack down on freedoms and seek to stamp out fun like music and sport, particularly for women. So far, however, the fans agree that the Taliban — which did not ban men's cricket when they were last in power before 2001 — have not cracked down on the daily life of men in any organized way.

Ban on women?

"Until now, their action and their words are not so clear," said Mohammed Qader Zorawar, the 38-year-old proprietor of the restaurant, a cricket fan and a founder of Afghanistan's archery federation. "The Taliban are not against cricket, it was founded in the Taliban time," he said, describing an era when Afghan



KABUL: Supporters watch on a screen the ICC men's Twenty20 World Cup cricket match between Afghanistan and Scotland happening in Sharjah, in Kabul on Monday. — AFP

refugees in neighboring Pakistan picked up a love for the sport and brought it home.

The debut of the men's team in the T20 World Cup was a resounding success, thrashing a sorry Scotland by 130 runs, but the team as a whole has an uncertain future in international cricket. If Afghanistan fails to field a women's team it could find itself barred from

international competition.

The Taliban have yet to formally ban women's sport, as they did when last they ruled from Kabul, but fear of persecution has driven many sportswomen into exile or hiding. The same regular refugee flight to Qatar that the men's team used to travel to the Gulf for the competition in the UAE has also carried away many terrified sportswomen.

According to Zorawar, most Afghan fans have no problem with female competitors, "but now most of them have fled the country, or are just in their homes, and now they live very hidden." For now though, fans are just looking forward to the next match, on Friday, when Afghanistan takes on its cricket powerhouse neighbor: Pakistan.

Everyone in the restaurant agrees. Just taking part in a World Cup is great for Afghanistan, win or lose, but it would be sweet to beat Pakistan. "It will be the most important match," declared Zorawar. "Some say the match between Pakistan and India was very important, but I say Afghanistan Pakistan is the most important." — AFP

Major warm-up for Australian Open tennis cancelled again over virus

MELBOURNE: A major warm-up tournament for the Australian Open was cancelled yesterday, with organizers blaming uncertainty over COVID-19 rules players will face in Melbourne. It is the second year the Kooyong Classic, normally played in the weeks leading up to the season-opening Grand Slam, has been scrapped because of the coronavirus pandemic. Kooyong president Adam Cossar said he was disappointed the event could not take place in January 2022 but hopes it will return in 2023. "With the great deal of uncertainty over recent months about the arrangements that would be in place in January, it has not been possible to make the best plans to deliver the best and safest sporting (event)," he said in a statement.

Players are still awaiting clarification on whether they need to be fully vaccinated to participate at the Australian Open, also in Melbourne, and other tennis tournaments in the country. Such a requirement would cast doubt on nine-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic's ability to defend his title — he is one of many players who have refused to share their vaccination status.

A leaked WTA email this week suggested unvaccinated players could take part provided they completed 14 days in hotel quarantine. Double-jabbed players would though enjoy "complete freedom of movement". However, the Premier of Victoria — the state where the Grand Slam is held — said he wanted all players to be fully vaccinated. "All the people who are watching the tennis at the Australian Open, they're going to be double-vaxxed, all the people that work there are going to be double-vaxxed," Dan Andrews told public radio. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

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Amiri Hospital	22450005	Shamiya	24848913
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shuwaikh	24814507
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Chest Hospital	24849400	Nuzha	22526804
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Adan Hospital	23940620	Qadsiya	22515088
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300		Dasmah
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	22532265	
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I, PROCARIUS MARIANESAN, holder of Indian Passport No. T2417987 declare to change my name from PROCARIUS MARIANESAN to PROCARIUS MARIA NESON. Given Name: PROCARIUS, Surname: MARIA NESON, Father Name: MARIA NESON. (C 0964) 21-10-2021

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