

BanglaCricket Article

"The secret of being able to bowl fast comes from two things only." - An Interview with Ian Pont

by Dr. Zunaid Kazi

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Arriving just a few weeks before the New Zealand tour, Bangladesh's new bowling coach Ian Pont has brought about much anticipation and excitement in the fan universe. On the back of two huge series wins against New Zealand and Zimbabwe, the fans are eager to see what Coach Pont's charges will deliver during the upcoming World Cup. He graciously spent some virtual time with BanglaCricket's Zunaid Kazi, answering some of the most pressing fan questions.

BanglaCricket (BC): You have now been with the Bangladesh team for two successful series wins, a whitewash of the Kiwis and a 3-1 drubbing of Zimbabwe. How did you find the state of our bowling when you first came on board? Where is it now? What should we expect for the upcoming World Cup and beyond?



Ian Pont

Ian Pont (IP): I have been watching a good deal of cricket on TV and saw how the Bangladesh bowlers have performed prior to my arrival. The biggest thing the fast bowling department lacked is consistency. At the highest level you simply have to be able to control what you are doing and land the ball where you need it to go, unless you have absolute express pace that can worry a batsman. So my job has been very focused. To get the bowlers to ensure they can take early wickets, make some inroads into the opposition batsmen, and then throw the ball to our spinners. And then of course be able to bowl well at the end.

What we are seeing is the beginnings of some excellent results. All the four quicks (Mashrafe, Shafiul, Rubel and Nazmul) in the squad have really responded well. The control is far improved. The thought processes are far better, which means they are thinking clearer. They know what deliveries they should be bowling and when. They have worked on slower balls and yorkers and they have been bowling at my orange targets that sit on top

of off stump. If you hit that spot, it is very tough for the batsman to hit you for many runs against a new ball.

It just takes time for people to have the confidence to go out in front of excited fans and the TV cameras and do what they do so well in training. But I am seeing a really positive uplift in skill levels and belief here.

I haven't had a huge amount of time to do much development work with the bowlers as we have been solely preparing for the NZ and Zimbabwe series, and now we lose the players to clubs for 6

weeks pretty much. When they get back we only have 3 weeks to the World Cup itself. This means we are working with what the bowlers already have and trying to make it better. To have them doing NEW things by the world cup is unlikely (maybe a new slower ball) but it is a longer term development that we should look towards after the World Cup.

BC: Are you getting enough support to help you succeed?

IP: Apart from not having as much time as I would like, the support has been excellent. As mentioned, developing players takes time. The players have taken me in and made me feel welcome and the coaching staff too. The board has been fully supportive. Success comes over a medium to long term but we can have "little wins", which I feel we are doing in the short term.

BC: Our pace arsenal seems to be shaping out quite well. Mashrafe seems to be returning very well after his surgery and Shafiul has had a great year. Unfortunately, you haven't had a chance to play Rubel in the last series and Nazmul hadn't got a call up. For each of these pacers, can you speak to us about where they are today, what areas they are working on to and what do we expect to see from them in the WC?

I would LOVE to see the day, admittedly likely to be on non-Bangladesh pitches, when we select FOUR fast bowlers and can rely on them to deliver a match-winning performance in their own right.

IP: If I had to categorize each bowler I would say this: Mash gives you smart bowling, Shafiul gives you swing bowling, Rubel gives you pace bowling and Nazmul gives you controlled bowling. In my mind, this is a simple way to view our bowling make up, but of course they offer more than that. Both Rubel and Nazmul have been unlucky to not get a game in the Zimbabwe series because I am sure we could have used any two of the four bowlers in combination and still won. However, Mashrafe and Shafiul are our number one and two right now and it was great to see them work as a partnership.

Due to inconsistencies and injuries in the past we have had to play musical chairs with the fast bowlers - the combination of the partnership continually changing. Plus of course our spin department on our pitches is so strong that we are likely to only have two pacers at any one time. If we are overseas, of course we would possibly be looking at three quicks.

I would LOVE to see the day, admittedly likely to be on non-Bangladesh pitches, when we select FOUR fast bowlers and can rely on them to deliver a match-winning performance in their own right. If you look at the last ODI against Zimbabwe, the quick bowlers were the most economical, yet they didn't bowl all their overs. This is how much we have become reliant on our spinners. So I hope we can see the pacers stepping up like this to give the captain other options if he needs them.

With regard to skills, Nazmul's slower balls are some of the best I have seen. He has the ability to produce two different ones and then it is simply about landing them correctly so the batsman swishes at thin air, as happened against Kyle Mills in the first ODI against New Zealand. Rubel can bowl searing reverse swing yorkers, again as we saw to Mills in the final ODI. That was a world-class leg stump block hole delivery that started outside off stump. Shafiul can swing the ball bowl ways and reverse it as well. He got wickets in the Zimbabwe series with slower balls and has been targeting the Yorker length well. I would rather bowlers bowl a low full toss than a good length ball at the death. Death bowling is all about how many yorkers you can bowl mixed in with off pace deliveries. And Mash is just a quality operator full stop. He's seen it all and done most of it even though his knee operations have had an impact on his raw speed. But he is still the main guy when he bowls like he can.



Ilan Pont meeting Mashrafe Mortaza for the first time

BC: What would be a good combination to take to the WC? Given that sub continental pitches are slow and low, should we load up with our eminently successful SLAs?

IP: We are blessed with 3 left arm spinners who make up what I feel is the best left arm spin team in world cricket. That is our strength on our pitches and this is why we have been strangling the life out of opposition teams in a run chase. I do not expect that to change sometime soon! However, spinners still have to hit their lengths and we cannot expect every single game to go to plan that way. We have off spin options as well, which means we can select the bowlers dependent upon the left hand/right hand batting combination of the opposition. It's far more dangerous to have the ball turning away from the batsman for example.

With all of our games in WC being in Dhaka or Chittagong, we know what the pitches will be like better than any other side. And our spinners have been the most successful. However the swing and seam bowlers have a HUGE part to play. As I said in another answer if the quicks can crack open the opposition top order batsmen and throw the ball to our spinners, I am sure this is our best option to do well. When they come back at the end they can also finish off the end of the innings. So I am quite excited about things as they are.

BC: Do you miss a particular kind of player in the liner-up? If so why? If not, why do you think we are reasonably "complete"?

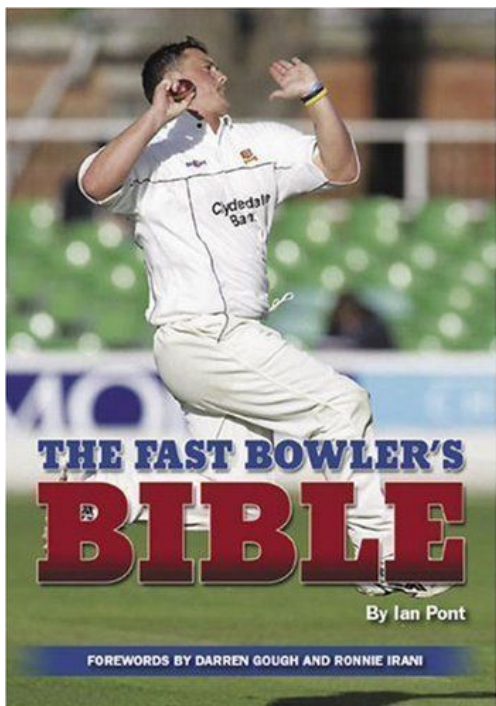
IP: It would be good to have the option of a medium pace bowling all-rounder. A "Paul Collingwood: type player who can give you 4-5 overs in the middle and keep it tight with cutters and mixed up deliveries. We don't have one though, which is why our spinners become so important. We have been looking at Imrose (Junaed Siddiqi) and Omi (Jahurul Islam) as potential batting/medium paced all-rounders and they have turned their arms over in the nets a few times. I think it would be good to revisit this in the build up to the world cup, but their primary skill is in batting and we must not forget that.

BC: Can you tell us about your current training regime for the fast bowlers?

IP: The training regime is covered by our excellent strength & conditioning coach, Grant Luden. He works on advice from the head coach and also discussions with each of the coaches to ensure each player is fit for their purpose. I think we have seen far fitter players since September. In terms of the skills training, we spend much of our time focusing on bowling swing, slower balls, yorkers and stock deliveries that hit the top of off stump.

BC: You are quite well known as a fast bowling coach and have worked in the past with Steyn and others, what do you bring to the table for our slower bowlers?

IP: Some of the grips for slower balls can be adapted and adopted for slow bowlers. I spoke to Abdur Razzak about the grip for his arm ball and as far as I know he is using it to great effect. The new "butterfly ball", which the seamers are working with, can also be used by the spin bowlers. So some of the ideas I have for grips I can share with the spinners. I used to bowl spin as a young lad, and bowl it at club level when I play.



The Fast Bowler's BIBLE by Ian Pont

Back in the UK I run a highly successful academy (MCI) and in that we have spin bowlers. I do coach spin and had the privilege of spending 3 years alongside Danish Kaneria when I was bowling coach at Essex and Monty Panesar and Nicky Boje while bowling coach at Northants.

Spin is all about rotation and flight, things that start with the grip and are enhanced by the action. I understand how to get both of these factors working well.

My focus has been with the pace bowlers but I am more than happy to assist the spinners.

BC: Who outside the current national pool has impressed you the most and why? (Have you been doing any scouting?)

IP: I have seen 6-8 fast bowlers outside of our squad who have talent. I don't wish to select individuals here as I am sure there are others I just haven't had the

opportunity to see. What I will be doing is asking to see a few bowlers and perhaps have them come to more national training as we prepare for the world cup. I cannot do much with them because we are not in the development phase of coaching, but rather preparation for competition, however I can still make suggestions and see how they respond.

BC: There's been a lot of talk amongst the fans as to why we have not developed world class fast bowlers while the other three sub-continental teams do or have had them in the past? Is it the physique? What can we do to rectify?

The secret of being able to

IP: Firstly, I do NOT believe it is anything to do with physique or genetics. This is an excuse. Just because you are not 2m tall and built like a barn, doesn't mean you can't bowl fast. The secret of being able to bowl fast comes from two things only: being taught by coaches HOW to bowl fast and having the DESIRE to bowl fast. If you do not have it in your heart it doesn't matter what's in your head. A fast bowler has to know what they do to create pace and not be afraid to go out in a match and bowl fast. The biggest issue is that as soon as any quick bowler bowls without control coaches all over the world tend to say slow down and bowl accurately. But you can be fast *and* straight if you know how to coach it into people. And this is where coaching knowledge as well as backing bowlers to have no fear when it comes to pace.

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It is a tough job bowling quick in the sub-continent. You have to have the heart of a lion and also the mind of a wise owl.

For me, I would rather see a young lad trying to bowl with express pace first, to have it in his heart. We can teach him line and length later. And for anyone who says you cannot have both I worked with Dale Steyn and he has both.

BC: We tend to have more seamers than swing bowlers? Why do you think we have not had genuine swing bowlers in the past?

IP: The problem for bowlers is that unless they release the ball correctly out of the hand the ball will simply not swing. I have spent a great deal of time talking to our bowlers about their wrist position. If you get that wrong the ball will not swing. The biggest success is undoubtedly Shafiul. Before I arrived he bowled in swing mostly and his wrist position and grip was not good. Today he has an excellent grip and position and he swings the ball away, which is way more dangerous to a right hand batsman. Jamie Siddons started him off thinking this way and I have carried it on for 3 months now. We are seeing some high quality bowling from him at the moment.

The ball does not swing for long in BD as the pitches are so abrasive. So we are looking at 5-8 overs maybe before the cutters become more effective. This is why you see more seamers than swing bowlers I believe. Mash and Nazmul are great seamers of the ball. Rubel can reverse swing the ball quite early (middle overs onwards) so it also dangerous with his extra pace. So I think it is down to the ball condition and also the release of it from the hand (wrist) that's important.



Coach Ian with Shakib al Hasan(l) and Tamin Uqbal (r)

BC: Would you be interested in extending your contract past the WC? If yes, what would be your short- and long-term goals and how would

you go about achieving them?

IP: I have no plans at this stage since my contract only covers me up to the end of the world cup and it is entirely up to the board whether they wish to re-engage my services. The difficulty always is that other jobs come up and people get approached a few months ahead. I have a highly successful academy in the UK, too. So it's impossible to discuss any plans long term. I am only focused on the world cup now and delivering as best I can to the squad.

BC: Going longer term, are you interested in becoming a Head Coach one day, be it Bangladesh or elsewhere?

IP: I have previously said in an interview that I felt my destiny was to become a Head Coach of an international team at some stage. I was assistant Head Coach to the Netherlands and my name was in the hat for the Scotland position at one stage and the Netherlands main job. Having played the game at first-class level and been involved in strategic coaching roles at first-class counties too, I fully understand how cricket works and the mindset needed to bring a squad of players together. I think you have to have played the game professional to truly understand that.

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Being Head Coach is way more than organizing nets, or writing plans for practice. It is understanding the team dynamics and how to develop players. And of course it's man management skills. Plus I have the UKCC Head Coach Level 3 certificate, which is the updated version of the old Level 3.

For now I am enjoying my specialist coaching in pace bowling, even though I coach batting to a good standard as well.

BC: Where do you see Bangladesh in 5 years?

IP: I was speaking to someone from one of the opposition teams who said: "if Bangladesh could somehow sort out the way they mentally approach their cricket, they could be a top 4 team." The feeling is the talent is around in ODI cricket for Bangladesh to start the climb up the rankings. But as mentioned it is all about the mindset. If players can get access to high level coaching, work hard on fitness, develop their skills further and carry on believing they can win, and then they will rise and rise. The most important thing for any professional sportsman is to take responsibility for their own career. This means accepting criticism and doing something about it. It means correcting faults. And it means doing the right things and not leaving it to someone else. If the players do these things we can look forward to an improving ODI and Test team for Bangladesh. These are the things that the best teams do.

BC: On a personal note, how do you find Bangladesh?

IP: I have spent time in India so had an idea of what to expect somewhat. But Bangladesh is not quite the same as India of course. I love the food (in the UK curry is our number one dish) and enjoy the flavours and spices. The driving is interesting to say the least! And the traffic is something else.

The biggest thing I feel is the warmth of the people in Bangladesh though. Everyone has been great. It's hard not to like this country.

BC: What would you want to say to the fans?

IP: There is massive passion for cricket in BD from the fans. They offer amazing support at games and the whole country gets behind its team. I would also though like to see some patience if a player doesn't perform or the team takes a loss. I don't like to hear abuse from fans for the players if they fail. True fans do not do that. The coaches are working really hard to change the thinking of the team and make them even more professional. This will require them to accept defeat when it comes as part of the journey to be even better. From my personal viewpoint, I am learning there is a different culture towards cricket in BD compared to that of England, South Africa or Australia -even India. We are starting to shift the thinking of the squad slowly and we are seeing the results on the field. Sri Lanka did this too, when they were at the same stage of their international cricket development. We don't always have to win matches by hitting sixes. And we don't always have to have batsmen with 100 runs per balls strike rates to be effective. Sometimes, it is professional to be clinical and cruise to a win. Pushing the ball around to victory (as Junaed did in the last Zimbabwe ODI and not get out so we could bat around him) was what the Top 4 sides have learned to do. These are good habits and certain players offer different things in a team. Not everyone can be Tamim Iqbal.

So I would say to the fans to please understand that getting the team to play well and be professional is the most important thing of all.

So I would say to the fans to please understand that getting the team to play well and be professional is the most important thing of all. Wins will come (7 ODI wins in 8 is fantastic) as we have seen. The squad is LEARNING to win close matches when before they might choke. It isn't perfect but we have made massive progress since September.

Long may it continue.

About the author(s): Zunaid Kazi is an almost fanatical Bangladesh cricket supporter with almost non-existent cricket playing skills. He compensates for this deficiency by spending an inordinate amount of time following all things cricket. Zunaid is also an administrator at BanglaCricket and goes by the nick "Zunaid".