

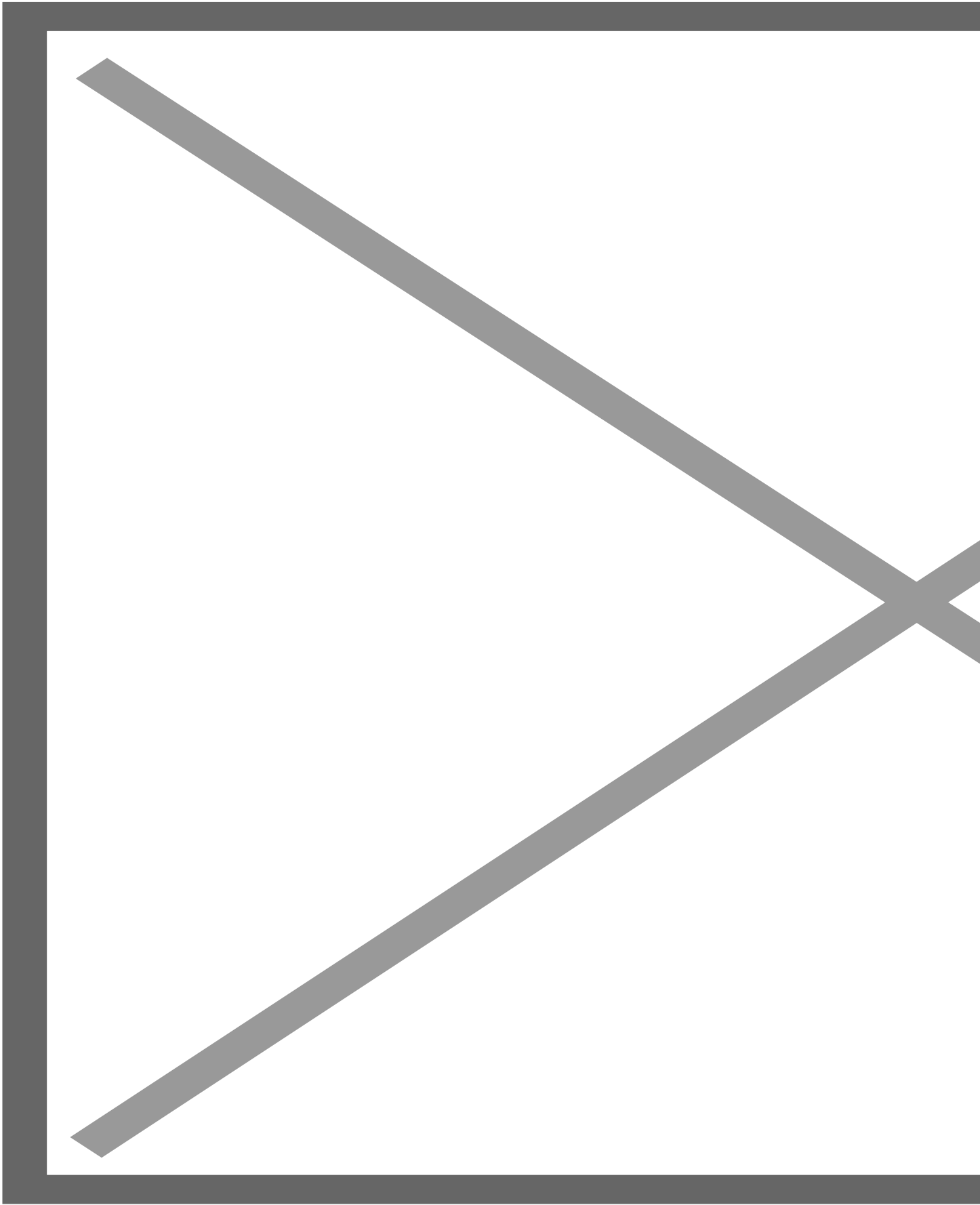
Mashrafe still going strong in BPL, After six matches he is the top of the wicket-takers list in BPL

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The Daily Morning Voice Online Desk: On Tuesday night at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium, Bangladesh's star wicketkeeper batsman Liton Das was at his sublime best. Comilla Victorians opener Liton looked unfazed by whatever the bowlers from Sylhet Strikers had to offer, as he kept stroking the ball all around the ground and eased into his first half-century of the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). The right-hander then basically killed off the game in the 14th over bowled by off-spinner Sharifullah as he cleared the boundary ropes thrice in that over, over long-on, deep mid-wicket and square leg, and topped it off with a four from the last ball.

Liton's belligerence yielded 24 runs for Comilla and brought the equation down to 24 runs from 36 balls. In the next over, Sylhet skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza brought himself on the attack. At 39 years of age, Mashrafe has long lost his once lethal pace and now almost hobbles during his run-up before bowling at a speed which can be described as 'slow-medium' at best. Mashrafe, who is currently a part-time cricketer and full-time politician, should not have been any match for Liton, who was batting on 70 off 41 balls. But the first ball Liton faced in the 15th over, he ended up mistiming his shot and getting caught at mid-off.

Mashrafe didn't just end there as the wily pacer conceded just two runs from that over, giving his side a sliver of a chance to make a dramatic comeback in the contest. He then came to bowl his final over of the match in the 17th over. This time, the veteran pacer outfoxed Pakistan's Khushdil Shah with another slower delivery. Losing a couple of quick wickets infused panic in the Comilla chase, as in the very next ball Jaker Ali got himself run out while attempting a single that wasn't there to take. That over also cost just two runs and Mashrafe finished with remarkable figures of 2-19 in his four overs.



In the end, Mashrafe's late spell wasn't enough as Comilla went onto win the match by five wickets with an over to spare. But Mashrafe's spell showed everyone that somehow, someway, an aging Mashrafe is still a more than effective bowler in shorter formats at home conditions. Mashrafe's spell on Wednesday was in no way a one-time fluke. The pacer has been consistently picking up wickets while keeping the runs in check in

BPL9 so far. After six matches, Mashrafe is currently at the top of the wicket-takers list in the tournament, with nine wickets in the bag. Mashrafe's economy rate of 6.75 is also exemplary, as he has been bowling during the powerplay in every match. Mashrafe, not surprisingly, has also been brilliant as Sylhet's captain.

Franchises from Sylhet have always found life difficult at the BPL. But this time, under the leadership of Mashrafe, the Strikers have been dominating the tournament from the very beginning. Before the defeat against defending champions Comilla, Sylhet won all five of their previous matches in the league and are currently at the top of the points-table. At the halfway stage of their group phase campaign, Sylhet already have one foot in the knockout stage, and need just two more wins in their remaining six games to book a spot in the qualifiers. The Sylhet team has been in unison from the start with everyone from the management to the overseas recruits singing praises of Mashrafe as a captain. Mashrafe, who is yet to retire from One-Day Internationals (ODI), was almost forced into quitting Twenty20 internationals in 2017. Nearly six years after playing his last T20 for the Tigers, Mashrafe is still proving himself as a more than handy bowler in the format. Now, is that just an example of how good Mashrafe is as a bowler or is it a reflection of the falling standards of BPL, that is up for debate.