

SPORT



Young world champions bide their time

NABID YEASIN

"It is just boring spending time at home. How much longer can one sit idle at home?" Under-19 World Cup-winning captain Akbar Ali chuckled as he wondered when he could return to the field and hone his batting and wicketkeeping skills. "Now I am counting days till resumption. There is nothing you can do," Akbar's U-19 teammate Rakibul Hasan said.

Since the enforced break brought on by the coronavirus, the U-19 squad, like other cricketers, have had to stay put at home -- knocking tennis balls on a terrace or doing some catching practice by bouncing balls off walls being the closest thing to cricket for them.

But it seems their days of frustration will soon be over as the BCB plans to bring cricket back gathered steam.

Although still dependant on the improvement of the situation, the BCB's announcement of putting all major international and first-class venues -- eight in total, including different training facilities -- under maintenance for an imminent return of cricket provided a ray of hope for the young Tigers. The board is eyeing a return to shorter-version cricket with resumption of training being the first step.

The Bangladesh team conquered age-level cricket in February this year by winning the U-19 World Cup so it was more frustrating to sit at home during a time when they could have stepped up their preparation for senior level cricket.

Akbar, whose services were secured by Gazi Group in the Dhaka Premier League -- which was halted after the completion of the first round -- said he was looking to make a successful transition to the next level.



The likes of Akbar Ali and Shoriful Islam have been forced to knock tennis balls inside their rooms or do fitness work at home during the pandemic, counting days before they can get back on the field.

"Personally I was really excited to play senior-level cricket. I was excited about the DPL. It would have been a massive boost if we could have played the DPL. Till now we only played age-level cricket and the ones we played with all have similar level of skill. But when you play in the DPL, you play with more experienced players and that would have been a huge plus for us," Akbar told The Daily Star.

Akbar believed the coronavirus had slightly set him back in his development process. "I think it has been set back slightly but I hope that when this pandemic is over, the BCB will restart everything step-by-step.

Obviously it is frustrating. Had I been in the field now, I would have been working on the flaws that I noted down. It would have helped my career," said the 18-year-old.

While Akbar is ruing the missed opportunity, U-19 pacer Shoriful Islam is just hoping to get his rhythm back as soon as the pandemic is over.

"It is difficult for a fast bowler to be away for such a long time. But I hope that I will be able to return to my previous form after practicing for a few weeks and get my rhythm back," said Shoriful.

The BCB had plans to send the U-19 team to foreign camps this year, but the pandemic has forced

those plans to be put on hold.

"It would have benefitted us immensely. If we could go to a foreign country and stay there, we could have gotten used to conditions there. It would have developed our game. Maybe it has been delayed but I hope that we can go to such camps in the future and give our best," left-arm spinner Rakibul hopped.

Even though the young Tigers are staying positive and hoping for cricket to resume soon, their urge to return to the green field that has a 22-yard pitch in the middle is very clear, especially from how Akbar mentioned the first thing he would do after the resumption is "a lot of batting", the thing he misses most.

Smalley's extension raises eyebrows

ANISUR RAHMAN



Most of the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF's) activities, apart from some official work, have remained halted since the government directed all national sports federations, associations and concerned authorities to suspend all events in light of the Covid-19 pandemic in mid-March. During this pandemic, the only excitement came along with allegations that the BFF secretariat was trying to buy delegates for its upcoming elections.

Recently, another issue has emerged and has raised questions over the reappointment of 53-year-old Paul Smalley as the BFF technical director on a two-year term.

BFF president Kazi Salahuddin heaped praise on Smalley, adding: "Paul is an experienced and modern technical director and enjoyed a successful time previously with us. Paul will again support Jamie Day with the senior national team."

But the question is: Was Smalley's first tenure a success? Did the Englishman have any impact on the national team?

We can re-examine what Smalley did during his first tenure from 2016 to 2019 and then we can compare his work with that done by the All Indian Football Federation's (AIFF) former technical director Robert Baan.

Smalley had prepared a four-year plan for the BFF within three months of

rose from 126 to 400.

But he could not make the BFF understand that it was necessary to keep all the lower-division leagues and district football leagues rolling to give those educated coaches room to practically apply their knowledge.

There may have been some strong arguments from the BFF members over the justification to reappoint Smalley, but the argument is how wise it was to ensure a service from someone who received more than Tk 4 crore in salary in three years for simply guiding the women's football teams and conducting coaching courses.

If we look into what happened at the All Indian Football Federation (AIFF) in this regards we will get a different picture. Dutchman Baan presented India with a 127-page masterplan titled "Lakshya: One Vision. One Goal," in August 2012, one year after his appointment.

The masterplan featured 10 chapters with elaborate explanations of the things India needed to increase their footballing standards. Although India has been unable to implement all of his suggestions, they have already reaped the rewards by building the National Centre of Excellence as well as regional football academies.

The Indian Super League was also believed to be Baan's brainchild. He emphasised on the need to restructure domestic competition by providing the concept for the Super I-League. He also



WHAT TO WATCH

LA LIGA (FACEBOOK)

Athletic Club v Real Madrid
Live from 6:00pm
Espanyol v Leganes
Live from 9:00pm
Osasuna v Getafe
Live from 11:30pm
Villarreal v Barcelona
Live from 2:00am (Monday)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE

STAR SPORTS SELECT 1

Burnley v Sheffield Utd
Live from 5:00pm
Newcastle v West Ham
Live from 7:15pm
Liverpool v Aston Villa
Live from 9:30pm
Southampton v Man City
Live from 12:00am (Monday)

SERIE A (TEN 2)

Inter Milan v Bologna
Live from 9:00pm
Cagliari v Atalanta
Live from 11:30pm
Napoli v AS Roma
Live from 1:45am (Monday)



ALL SMILES IN WOMEN'S CAMP

Kate Cross was seen in jovial mood during practice at the Chester Boughton Hall Cricket Club on Friday. The England women's cricket team returned to training last month after a long break due to Covid-19. They are currently preparing for a proposed international tri-series later this summer, also featuring India and South Africa, in September.

PHOTO: ECB

his joining, which has proven to be an unrealistic mission and vision.

FIFA senior development manager Mike Pfister, at a press conference on November 3, 2016, termed Smalley's draft plans under the new FIFA Forward programme an ambitious one.

"Our advice is to be realistic and concrete. Our plan is not for four years, it is for two years. We will see the first two years and, based on the success of these projects, we will start afresh for the next two years pending approval," he said.

There was logic behind Pfister's opinion. Smalley prepared the plan without consulting with stakeholders or gaining any practical knowledge of the grassroots situation. But the BFF stuck to the plan and revealed it on December 10, 2016, with each year featuring more than two dozen competitions and programmes.

In the first year, the BFF could implement only 50 to 60 per cent of the yearly calendar and in the following years, the BFF did not follow that four-year plan at all, with Paul Smalley spending more time with the women's age-group teams and later in coaching courses.

Nevertheless, the women's age-group teams scaled new heights in term of stamina under Smalley's guidance and the number of educated coaches [AFC A, B, C]

planned to develop national clubs and introduce elite domestic competitions to increase standards.

India is still not progressing fast with that masterplan, but their FIFA ranking -- always hovering around 100th -- shows they are on the right path. They were 168th when Baan had placed his plan.

Some decision-makers in the BFF opine that it was an obligation to FIFA/AFC to have a technical director at the helm, but some BFF members were unclear about why the higher-ups hurried to reappoint Smalley without taking the time to analyse other candidates.

"It's a very difficult time now. Look at Bangladesh's performance on the international scene. Of course, performances at the international level are a reflection of what is done here. That is an alarming wake-up call. We believe that Bangladesh needs a turning point. It's always time to close a chapter and begin a new one," FIFA senior development manager Mike Pfister thusly evaluated the BFF's activities.

Bangladesh football is now sorely seeing its worst days and only wise decisions from higher-ups can turn the tide, but was the BFF wise enough and did they evaluate everything thoroughly before picking the person for such an important position?

Bess named in England squad

REUTERS, London

Spinner Dom Bess was named in England's 13-man squad for the first Test against West Indies and there was no place for Moeen Ali among nine reserves, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said on Saturday.

All-rounder Ben Stokes will lead England in the match, which will begin at the Ageas Bowl Southampton on Wednesday in a bio-secure environment amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moeen announced in September he was taking a break from Test cricket but he was included in a 30-man training group. But the ECB opted to go with off-spinner Bess, who grabbed his first five-wicket Test haul against South Africa in January. Regular skipper Joe Root will miss the first Test to be at the birth of his second child.



Messi must be wondering what he did wrong

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI



Lionel Messi trudged off alone down the tunnel as the game against Atletico Madrid ended 2-2, the result extinguishing any realistic chance for Barcelona to win the title. His shoulders never looked heavier and, in a match where he amassed his 700th career goal, Messi might have had other things in mind which went behind results, staring into the eerie darkness focusing on what direction the Catalan Club was heading to.

It had been a long time coming, but perhaps is dawning upon him now more than ever.

Barcelona had been the league leaders before coronavirus halted proceedings; even before that they had sacked coach Ernesto Valverde, who Messi had seemingly backed to continue. Quique Setien, known for his adoration of club symbol Johan Cruyff, was brought in to replace Valverde in January. The appointment was part of a long process, the Barcelona management had said. "I got the call yesterday," Setien had said on the day of his presentation as Barcelona coach.

The faultlines had appeared much earlier though, and Messi has perhaps never felt more alone. At 33, he is at the twilight end of his career with perhaps one or two more seasons of absolute brilliance left in him. The management at Barcelona



now can best be described as comical at this point; things have never been this bad even if it was bad for the last couple of years.

Lies and deceptions appeared in many forms over the years, always from the same source. There have been bits and pieces of information circulating in the media, 'leaks' that made the Argentine uncomfortable at the very least. This season he hit out more than ever. He called out sporting director Eric Abidal and demanded him to 'take responsibility for his own decision' in the

sacking of Valverde.

Then came the players' wage cuts in order to help the club pay non-footballing staff. Messi said the players were convinced that was the only way to go. Information 'divulged' in the media suggested the players were unhappy and had to be convinced to take the wage cut. Information regarding his contract was out there too, that he was free to leave in June 2020.

"I've said throughout my career that this is my home. But I also don't want

to have a long-term contract and only be here because of it," Messi had said. The knives have been sharpened for a long time and the club was paying social media accounts to campaign against players like Messi, Gerard Pique and former player Xavi Hernandez along with political oppositions.

Messi, now more than ever, is more alone on the pitch. That is where his problems have begun however. It is not what is happening to him, but what is happening around him.

Andres Iniesta was gone, so was Xavi Hernandez -- the two cornerstones of Barca's style. Paris, Turin, Rome and Liverpool had come too; embarrassing team defeats that Messi had to shoulder, often alone. Neymar had gone too and his best strike partner Luis Suarez, by all counts was in steep decline. The squad aging and a sporting plan non-existent as was evidenced by the club's pursuit and eventual signing of Antoine Griezmann, a player who is good but not what was needed. What does Messi do in this situation?

On Friday, news arrived that the Barcelona captain has discarded all contract negotiations with the club. Only time will tell if this is his final battle to change the course of the club, forcing early elections or whether the grass is now really looking greener elsewhere.