



Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) groundstaff were seen covering themselves in an attempt to avoid injury after opener Liton Das played an on-side slog shot during practice at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. The Tigers are preparing for the upcoming tour of Sri Lanka.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Kings' AFC Cup run ends in cancellation

STAR SPORT DESK



Three of Bashundhara Kings' latest signings in Brazilians Robson Azevedo da Silva, Jonathan da Silveira Fernandes Reis and Argentine Hernan Barcos, arrived yesterday. The trio were brought in for the AFC Cup but the tournament has now been cancelled due to Covid-19.

Bangladesh champions Bashundhara Kings' journey in their debut AFC Cup campaign thus ended after just a single match. Kings took pole position in Group E with a 5-1 thrashing of TC Sports of Maldives in their opening fixture on March 11, but the Bangladesh giants' campaign stalled when coronavirus spread throughout the continent, forcing the AFC to reschedule the remaining group matches at centralised venues before yesterday's cancellation.

The Kings trio will now await the management's decision with local football in the country also in standstill due to the pandemic.

"In view of the logistics in coordinating the five zones of the AFC Cup and completing the Inter Zone matches, the Executive Committee agreed that the pandemic created complexities which constituted a Force Majeure event and led to the cancellation of the 2020 competition," the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said in a statement.

The AFC Champions League, the continent's showpiece competition, has also been suspended since March but will resume in West Asia hub Qatar on Sept. 14.

## 'Still missing fans'

REUTERS, New York

With five matches down at the US Open, Dominic Thiem still finds it difficult to maintain intensity in the absence of fans but even without them the second seed expects his next outing against last year's finalist Daniil Medvedev to be a blockbuster.

Thiem made history on Wednesday



### MEN'S SEMIFINALS, SEPTEMBER 12

Pablo Carreno Busta vs Alex Zverev  
Daniil Medvedev v Dominic Thiem

night in Arthur Ashe Stadium, which would in previous years be bustling with a crowd of close to 24,000, defeating 21st seed Alex de Minaur, 6-1, 6-2, 6-4, to become the first Austrian ever to reach the semifinals of the US Open.

But no fans are allowed at this year's Grand Slam due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's not easy mentally to keep all the time the 100% energy," Thiem told reporters on video conference. "Everything else I (have) got used to."

"But there are some situations in every match basically where it would be nice to have the crowd just to keep the energy up, just to celebrate great points, that it doesn't feel that bad if you (are) going through a tough period."

"That was not easy to get used to. But it's a unique situation. Now I'm in the semis, it was my fifth match today so I got used to it. (But) there's still situations where it's difficult or where the energy of the crowd would help."

Thiem had three chances to become a major champion while Medvedev had a two-set lead over Nadal before he lost in last year's U.S. Open final, which according to Thiem was one of the "better Slam finals ever."

"I would say that he comes very close to the big three players in terms that he can play his top level, for doesn't matter how long," said Thiem, who lost two French Open finals to Nadal and this year's Australian Open title clash to Djokovic.

"That's going to be really, really difficult. But I'm looking forward to that one. I think it's going to be a big stage, even if it's without fans. It's going to be a great semi-final."

## Challenges add to excitement of 20/21

SAMAMA RAHMAN

Just weeks after the conclusion of the Champions League, European football is set to be back on the menu of sports lovers across the globe. After a three-month disruption due to the coronavirus pandemic earlier this year, leagues around the world have found ways to operate.

Whether it be putting all your participants into a bio-secure bubble, akin to what we have seen in international cricket series and in the NBA, or having precautionary measures and regular testing in place, the results have been positive.

However, one of the shortest pre-seasons has followed one of the most grueling stretches of football, one that saw teams play up to four times per week as they rushed to finish the last season. The recent international break did not help matters, with players such as Neymar and Kylian Mbappe testing positive for Covid-19 shortly after

travelling.

That will perhaps lead to a slow start to proceedings, as teams will ostensibly test the waters and ensuring that their fitness levels do not dwindle. However, there will be no escaping the fixture crunch.

In the Premier League, clubs that will play in Europe could have a match every 3.7 days on average over the rest of the season, at the end of which they will have to join their national team for the 2021 Euros -- delayed to the end of this season by the pandemic. Those numbers are not too different for



Spain, France or even Germany.

Of course, managers do have the option of resting their players, but that is not a luxury most have at the end of the season, when every game has the potential to be the most important of the season. To ease that strain, some bodies have decided to reduce ties in domestic competition, such as FA Cup replays being scrapped completely.

Some leagues, such as La Liga and Serie A, will continue to allow clubs to benefit from having five substitutes available. But that is a rule that has been viewed as

being more favourable to richer teams, who can potentially bring on hundreds of millions worth of talent from their bench, and the Premier League has notably refused to continue with the regulation.

As we witnessed towards the end of last season, most teams appeared to be gassed by the time their domestic leagues had ended. Those that participated in the Champions League, held at the end of the season, made it a point to rotate their squads heavily beforehand.

Europe's elite competition will be held as usual this time, meaning teams will need to come up with time for midweek fixtures. Teams that make the quarterfinals and semifinals will have to rest players for those crucial matches near the tail-end of the season.

The biggest change, and there is growing popularity among stakeholders that the change be enforced sooner rather than later, could be the reintroduction of fans to stadiums, even if in limited

numbers, in some countries.

England Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the BBC today that plans for spectators to attend sporting events in the country from 1 October are to be reviewed.

Meanwhile, FIFA president Gianni Infantino met with Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte today to discuss bringing back fans to stadiums. At the same time, Tottenham were waiting to find out whether they would be allowed about 4,000 fans into the corporate areas of their new stadium for Sunday's opening fixture against Everton.

That will present new challenges, but despite all the gloom and doom, it also presents exciting new opportunities. New names will be expected to light up unfamiliar stadiums, new contenders will emerge for individual and collective awards and that same old magic of football will bring joy and despair to fans across the world. For now, all we can hope is that it all goes without a hitch.

## An inexplicable exile

MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Before winning the Under-19 World Cup this year, the young Tigers went to the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogura in December 2019 to prepare for the global showpiece event in South Africa. U-19 captain Akbar Ali, their manager and coach told this correspondent that Bogura has grassy wickets and boast the best bounce wickets in the country.

On August 25 this year, Mushfiqur Rahim practised at his hometown stadium and uploaded a video on his Facebook page, saying that the Bogura wickets were the best in the country.

Interest in cricket, and indeed the sport itself, has been growing in leaps and bounds across the country over the last two decades. Young fans now not only watch Tests and ODIs, they watch the IPL and BPL and are passionately engaged in these events. Fans of Dhaka, Chattogram and more recently Sylhet get to watch their heroes in the flesh. That is true to a lesser extent of the faithful in Khulna, Narayanganj and Cox's Bazar.

But when it comes to the north of the country, fans could be forgiven for thinking that there is no international venue to visit, at least not since 2006.

The Shaheed Chandu Stadium has seen no international cricket match since the end of that year. People of the northern districts do not know of any obvious reason for this neglect.

In 2004, three matches of the ICC under-19 World Cup were held in this stadium. Since then, under-19 teams from different countries, A-teams, high-performance teams have kept coming



here. Among the domestic leagues, matches of the Corporate Cricket League, National Cricket League, and the Dhaka Premier League have taken place in this ground.

On January 30, 2006, the ICC declared the stadium an international cricket venue. Later that year, the stadium was also recognised as an international Test venue by the ICC.

Between February and December 2006, Bogura hosted five ODIs -- four of which were won by Bangladesh -- and one Test, against Sri Lanka, which the hosts lost by 10 wickets. On February 22, 2006, Bangladesh notched their first ODI win over Sri Lanka at this venue.

The stats say that Bogura has been a happy hunting ground for the Tigers, yet the floodlights of the Shaheed Chandu Stadium have not been lit since the end of 2006.

**NO REASON FOR NEGLECT**  
There are no obvious reasons behind Bogura being ignored by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

Apart from Mushfiqur Rahim -- arguably the best batsman Bangladesh has produced -- at least 10 boys and girls from Bogura are playing regular cricket in the Bangladesh national (men's and women's), Under-19, and Under-16 and high-performance teams. With this tradition, it is only logical that more international attention will unearth a richer pool of talent.

For people of 16 northern districts, this venue offers the only hope of watching international cricket matches without them having to disrupt their daily plans.

Geographically, Bogura's location is such that people from these districts can visit in the morning to watch the game and return home by bus or train in the evening. They do not have to stay in a hotel to spend the night.

Even on the accommodation and hospitality front -- a prerequisite to hosting international teams -- the facilities are not wanting. Quality hotels like Momo Inn, Hotel Naz Garden and others have sprung up.

Bogura is only 192 kilometres away from Dhaka. After Dhaka and Chattogram, Bogura currently has the best communication facilities. Work on the four-lane roads on the Dhaka-Rangpur highway is in progress.

There is a perception among people of the northern districts that politics have played a part in Bogura being ignored. The stadium, which used to be the Bogura District Stadium, was established as an international venue under BNP rule and since an England A side visited during the caretaker government in 2007, there has been no international cricket in the region under incumbent Awami League rule.

Sagar Kumar Roy, vice-president of Bogura District Sports Association and joint secretary of Bogura District Awami League, said, "We are constantly appealing to the sports minister and the BCB to bring back international matches but they have not responded positively yet. A BCB official told us that there is no opportunity to go to Bogura by air."

Wishing anonymity, a top leader of the Bogura District Awami League, said, "It is wrong to say that foreign teams cannot visit Bogura by air. There is an airport where training aircraft of the Air Force land and the runway expansion work was also done in last year."

Shubhashish Poddar, president of Bogura District Jubo League and vice-president of the district sports association, said, "The deputy commissioner is the ex-officio president of the district sports association. When we talk to him about this issue, he does not take it seriously." Liton said that he would



try to talk about this with central AL leaders very soon.

### COST-EFFECTIVE TOO

In the 2003-4 fiscal year, the National Sports Council converted the Bogura District Stadium to an international cricket venue at a cost of Tk 21 crore. There are already 5 good wickets and two more new wickets should not cost much. The outfield, gallery, hospitality boxes, medical centre and dressing rooms are still in good shape. What is left is an electronic scoreboard.

In the Bangladesh Premier League, Rangpur Rangers do not have a home ground yet. If the Shaheed Chandu Stadium became Rangpur's home,

it is conceivable that much of the aforementioned renovation expenses could be borne by the franchise.

The government has established international cricket stadiums in Cox's Bazar, Sylhet and Khulna since Bogura has apparently been shunned. In 2011, the renovation work of Shaheed Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium in Khulna cost more than Tk 80 crore. The proposed cost of the Sheikh Hasina International Cricket Stadium in Purbachal has been estimated at more than Tk 1,100 crore.

As it currently exists, the stadium has become a liability for the BCB when it could be an asset. Preferring to remain unnamed, BCB officials said although floodlights have rarely been lit since 2006, the board pays more than Tk 90,000 per month for the electricity connection. Around Tk 2.5 lakh is also spent each month on the stadium staff's salaries and nominal maintenance work.

The stadium is also becoming a monument to wasted public money as it wastes away with no refurbishing done in the last 14 years. In the first decade of this millennium, the NSC took money out of the government treasury to rebuild the venue.

Above all, if Akbar Ali's words and Mushfiqur words hold any value, the stadium is a valuable asset for the national team. The sporting wickets played a crucial part in the young Tigers winning the U-19 World Cup, and the national team can be similarly benefited, especially as their inability to compete on sporting tracks abroad has been a long-standing weakness.

And considering the need to spread cricket to all parts and widen the talent pool, Bogura's continuing exile is an inexplicable one.