

England's short Pakistan tour confirmed

England will visit Pakistan for the first time in 16 years when they play two T20 Internationals in October 2021, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) announced on Wednesday. The short tour will serve as a build-up to the Twenty20 World Cup in India that is scheduled to start the same month, and comes as international cricket returns to Pakistan following a deadly terrorist attack on the Sri Lanka team bus in 2009 that killed six policemen and two civilians. The matches are scheduled for Oct. 14 and 15, both in Karachi. "This will be the first time since 2005 that an England team has toured Pakistan and as such it represents a significant moment for both nations," ECB Chief Executive Officer Tom Harrison said.

--- REUTERS



Bangladesh Army's Abdul Malek tries to manoeuvre the ball past a BHF Red XI player during the opening match of the President's Cup at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday as competitive hockey returned to the country after ten months' break due to the coronavirus pandemic. Army won the match 1-0.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

More than just a dynamic duo

With the Bangabandhu T20 Cup starting from November 24, cricket enthusiasts in Bangladesh are eager to watch local stars battle it out against each. In the lead-up to the tournament, The Daily Star tries to assess and analyse each of the five teams. Today, we present the second part, an overview of Gemcon Khulna.

SPORTS REPORTER



Background: In terms of spending, Gemcon Khulna topped the charts in the players' draft and have become one of the most talked-about teams in the tournament. The reason is the inclusion of star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who will make his comeback to cricket through the tournament after serving a one-year ban for not reporting corrupt approaches he had received from a bookie. Apart from Shakib, Khulna picked another grade A cricketer from the draft - Bangladesh's T20 captain Mahmudullah Riyad, who has been tasked with leading the side.

National Stars: Apart from Shakib and Mahmudullah, Khulna banked on loads of experience. Imrul Kayes has always been a prolific performer in the domestic circuit and his decade-long experience of international cricket will definitely add strength to the side. Like the batting department, the pace bowling department also consists of experience in the form of Al Amin Hossain and Shafiqul Islam, who have shown their ability to perform in the T20 format over the years. In the spin department, apart from Shakib and Mahmudullah, Khulna also have left-arm spinner Nazmul Islam Apu.

Local performers: Aside from their stars, Khulna can also count on local performers

to play vital roles.

There are few national discards such as Anamul Haque, Jahurul Islam, Shuvagata Hom, all-rounder Ariful Haque, and wicketkeeper-batsman Zakir Hasan to add depth. Khulna also has a nice blend of youth as well, most promising among them leg-spinner Rishad Hossain, who impressed many during the BCB President's Cup last month along with young pacer Hasan Mahmud. Shamim Patowary, who was a member of the Bangladesh U-19 World Cup-winning side adds variety.

What sets Khulna apart: According to head coach Mizanur Rahman Babul, having two world-class T20 players in the form of Shakib and Mahmudullah distinguishes the side from others. However, he is also confident that the variety in both the spin and pace bowling departments will play a key role. "Obviously we are lucky to have the world's top all-rounder, Shakib, along with Bangladesh's T20 captain Mahmudullah in the side. Their experience will be a goldmine for us. Apart from that, I think we have a wide range of variety in our bowling department both in pace and spin and I think we are a well-balanced side," Babul said.

Key Player: Undoubtedly, it is Shakib who will be the main strength for Khulna both with bat and ball. The top all-rounder will surely look to make a mark in the Bangabandhu T20 Cup after all the recent controversies that have kept him in the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

Booters leave with tall task ahead of Qatar tie

SPORTS REPORTER



With some happy memories from the two FIFA-sanctioned

friendlies against Nepal, the Bangladesh national football team are set to leave for Qatar this morning to play their away World Cup and Asian Cup Qualifying match on December 4.

When this report was filed, the number in Bangladesh's contingent was yet to be finalised as players and officials took a Covid-19 test on Tuesday night after the second match against Nepal. Bangladesh head coach Jamie Day, who tested positive for a second time on Monday, has to stay in isolation in Dhaka and can only join the team in Qatar if he tests negative for coronavirus.

The booters may have come out on top at home against Nepal,

but they know well that playing against Asian champions Qatar in Doha will be an altogether steeper challenge, especially as there is a cloud over their physical fitness after a long break from the game due to the coronavirus outbreak in Bangladesh in March.

"I think we are at about 80 percent fitness and we have two warm-up games for match fitness as well but we are still 20 percent away from the required fitness and need more friendly matches," Jamie told The Daily Star yesterday. "They have not played for the last eight months and had only 25 days' training, so they will be short of match fitness... that's why we played friendlies against Nepal."

Jamie praised his charges for their good performance against Nepal despite a short preparation and urged his charges to do their best within the available time for the Qatar tie.

"It is a fantastic achievement to go unbeaten in two games with two clean sheets and win a trophy with 25 days' training, so credit to all staff and players," Jamie said. "It is the time frame we have been given so we have to do our best in that time." However, Jamie won't be available to prepare his charges until he is cleared on medical grounds.

"Jamie will be in touch with the team through other coaching staff and oversee the programme of the national team in Qatar and give inputs from Dhaka," the national teams committee chairman and BFF Vice-president Kazi Nabil Ahmed told The Daily Star.

"The players have to quarantine for three days after undergoing Covid-19 tests in Qatar and then will get the opportunity to practice outdoors. I think they also need some rest after playing two matches in five days and staying at a hotel for three days won't be a big deal

for them because they can avail gym and swimming pool facilities at the hotel during that time," said Nabil, who also thought the players are short on fitness.

Assistant coach Stuart Watkiss also emphasised on improving the players' fitness in the next two weeks before facing Qatar.

"In Europe, the pre-season preparation is normally six to eight weeks and it takes at least six weeks to be match-fit, whereas we only had three weeks' preparation at home. We can't hope for dramatic improvement of the players' fitness in the next two weeks but I am happy with their attitude and commitment, which shows that we are on the right track but far away from the target."

Watkiss also thought that playing Qatar would be a massive challenge and the quality of the players' preparation is very important for the boys in red and green over the next two weeks.



Ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who will play for Gemcon Khulna under the leadership of Mahmudullah Riyad in the upcoming Bangabandhu T20 Cup, had a security person alongside him during training in Mirpur yesterday as precautionary measure following a threat on his life on Facebook a couple of days ago.

PHOTO: STAR

An all-time Löw

SAMAMA RAHMAN

The extent of Germany's helplessness as they capitulated to a 6-0 loss against Spain in Seville on Wednesday night was unexpected, even for those who had long banished any hopes they had once harbored about the current side.

It was Germany's worst loss in competitive football and the first time they had conceded six since a 6-3 loss to France in the 1958 World Cup. In terms of losses in all competitions, it matched a 6-0 defeat to Austria in 1931.

Die Mannschaft, now six years removed from their World Cup triumph, were outplayed to such an extent that even a cursory glance at the statistics paints a turbulent picture. They managed a total of zero shots on target and two shots overall, compared to Spain who had 10 and 22 respectively.

Bastian Schweinsteiger's summation offered interesting insight into the psyche of the team. "What bothered me is that they didn't fight back. It didn't feel like a team. No commands. You only heard the Spanish speak."

As much of a cliché as it may be at this point, everything we know suggests football is cyclical. Spain, after conquering the globe between 2008 and 2012, suffered a 5-1 defeat to the Netherlands in the 2014 World Cup, exiting in the group stages.

That famous curse of the champions -- which has seen World Cup holders regularly exit in the group stages as they launch their title defence -- goes a long way towards illustrating this point.

In winning the 2010 World Cup, Spain scored 8 goals, the fewest-ever by a winning team. By 2014, Germany raised the stakes to 18 goals.

That, again, can be indicative of the direction the sport had moved. Spain's possession-based style was countered by a low-block, counter-attacking style. That led to managers like Jurgen Klopp and Hansi Flick determining that possession was not the be-all and end-all, with Klopp going so far as to

saying "pressing is the best playmaker".

Most damning perhaps, given that Joachim Low has chosen to stick to a slower style of the game, often experimenting with a five-at-the-back, is that Germany had only 30% of possession, despite boasting midfield generals like Toni Kroos and Leon Goretzka. The front three of Leroy Sane, Serge Gnabry and Timo Werner would also be better suited to a much faster style of play.

Another major deficiency has been the 60-year-old's inability to select the right players. After the debacle in 2018, Low dropped Thomas Mueller, Jerome Boateng and Mats Hummels. It was widely regarded as the correct decision at the time, but despite those players, especially Muller, staging a resurgence, they have been denied a chance at reintegration. That has also led to reports of ill-will within in the team, reflected perhaps in the lack of fight on display.

Even German legend Lothar Matthaus was left screaming for those players to return, hoping Hummels and Boateng could shore up a defence that featured the likes of Robin Koch and Phillip Max.

Regardless, Low will continue at Germany as national team director Oliver Bierhoff confirmed, saying: "This game changes nothing. We still trust Joachim Loew, no doubt about that."

Low's legacy has been tainted to such an extent that Flick's influence on Germany has also become a raging issue. He was the national team assistant from 2006 to the end of the 2014 World Cup and now some wonder whether he was the true mastermind behind it all. After all, he guided Bayern Munich to the most impressive Champions League run in history backed with a clear, ultra-modern style of play, unaffected by Germany's dismal run.

At best, Low is a manager who has simply failed to adapt. At worst, he is the man that has alienated his team by refusing to play to their strengths and with the right players. And despite his past exploits, he now risks leaving behind a legacy of a man who wore out his welcome like none other.



Brazil, Argentina march on

AGENCIES



Brazil continued their perfect start to the qualifiers for the 2022 World Cup with a 2-0 win over Uruguay while rivals Argentina stayed in touch with an easy win in Peru.

First-half goals from Arthur and Richarlison helped Brazil to a 2-0 win over Uruguay, who had Manchester United striker Edinson Cavani sent off.

Argentina, with Lionel Messi pulling the strings, brushed aside a limited Peru 2-0 in Lima, with goals from Inter Milan's Lautaro Martinez and Nicolas Gonzalez in a game in which they were never troubled.

Ecuador, playing on their home turf in high-altitude Quito, hammered Colombia 6-1. Paraguay and Bolivia fought out a 2-2 draw while Venezuela -- the only South

American team never to qualify for a World Cup finals -- picked up their first points in a 2-1 victory over Chile in Caracas. Victory in Montevideo left Brazil on top of South America's qualifying standings on 12 points with four wins from four games. Argentina are second on 10 points after beating Peru, with surprise team Ecuador third on nine points.

We needed this win, says Messi In Lima, Nicolas Gonzalez put Argentina ahead with an angled shot in 17 minutes following incisive work from Giovani Lo Celso on the left flank and then Lautaro Martinez doubled their lead 11 minutes later when he ran on to a superb pass from Leandro Paredes and rounded the keeper to slot home.

"From the very start we played a great game, the goals came and we created lots of chances," captain Lionel Messi said after the match. "Happy with the victory, we needed it after the game we played the other day," he added in reference to their

1-1 draw at home to Paraguay last week.

"This is the path we have to keep on going down."

The win extended Argentina's unbeaten run to 11 games. It also marked the first time since the year 2000 that the two-time world champions have won three consecutive away qualifiers.

Arthur delighted with Brazil goal



Richarlison celebrates his goal as Brazil beat Uruguay 2-0 in a World Cup qualifier in Montevideo on Wednesday morning to stay top of the table with four wins out of four. Argentina, meanwhile, had an identical-margin victory away to Peru, with Lautaro Martinez (top) and Nicolas Gonzalez getting the goals.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Nadal positive despite defeat

AFP, LONDON

Rafael Nadal insisted he can still win the ATP Finals for the first time despite a damaging 7-6 (9/7), 7-6 (7/4) defeat against Austria's Dominic Thiem on Tuesday.

Thiem overpowered Nadal behind closed doors at London's O2 Arena to put a dent in the Spanish star's bid to finally lift the one major prize missing from his packed trophy cabinet.

Thiem became the first player to qualify for the semi-finals a few hours later when reigning champion Stefanos Tsitsipas beat Russian seventh seed Andrey Rublev 6-1, 4-6, 7-6 (8/6).

Nadal, who lost the 2010 and 2013 finals of the event, has to beat Tsitsipas in his last group match to reach the semi-finals of the prestigious season-ending tournament.

Despite his perilous position, Nadal goes into the showdown against Tsitsipas, with the winner guaranteed to progress to the last four, in confident mood after battling hard against the inspired Thiem.

"He played I think an amazing match, and I played well too. So my feeling is not negative. I lost, but I had plenty of chances," said Nadal.

"I'm happy with the way I played. I think my chances are bigger to have a very good result now than five days ago because the level of tennis, even if I lost today, for me is much higher."