

◀ BANGLADESH V QATAR ▶



Bangladesh are aware of the challenge posed by Asian champions Qatar in their World Cup qualifier today. However, after a creditable performance in the reverse fixture in Dhaka, this time around in Doha the booters are hoping that their defence will hold firm and that a few balls drop their way on the counterattack.

PHOTO: BFF

Optimistically up against it

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh drew a lot of praise as they played above their usual standards in the FIFA World Cup Qualifying home tie against Qatar last year. But ahead of today's reverse fixture, the discussion has been confined to the expected margin of defeat instead of a repeat of the home performance at the Abdullah Al Khalifa Stadium in Doha.

The main reason behind the lack of belief is the long layoff that the players had to endure due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which kept the Bangladesh players confined to their homes before they started training together in the latter part of October.

Five weeks of preparation, including four warm-up matches, is far from an ideal way to gear up for the clash, especially as the men in red and green have not been playing domestically. Qatar, on the other hand, have found plenty of time to prepare for the resumption of the Asia's World Cup qualifiers after its suspension in mid-March.

The hosts have played five international friendlies in preparation and have also been playing domestic football. A year ago, the Asian champions played on a rain-soaked Bangabandhu National Stadium but this time, they have the edge on a fast-paced pitch that



suits their style and the backing of the home crowd.

However, Bangladesh are thinking positively and have prepared as well as possible to face the challenge against Qatar, who are ranked 56th in the FIFA Rankings, 125 places ahead of Bangladesh.

"We know it is going to be very challenging but we are mentally ready after preparing ourselves. We are in better shape physically than we were for the Nepal ties, but we lack match fitness," goalkeeper Ashraful Islam Rana told The Daily Star from Doha.

Qatar showed their potency with 26 shots on target in a goalless draw against India last year but goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu stood tall and thwart their efforts.

Bangladesh are also expected to adopt a defensive approach and Rana believes the duty to stop them is collective and not dependent on the man between the sticks.

"We must have big respect for the Asian champions. We aren't even daring to dream of playing a 50-50 match against them but we will definitely try to defend first. Not only the backline, the midfield will have to work hard. We don't want to concede in the first half. After stopping them, we will be try to hit them on break," added the Sheikh Russel goalkeeper.

Rana also admitted that Qatar failed put up their usual performance in Dhaka and that they expected them to come out firing.

Bangladesh are used to playing counter-attacking football under British coach Jamie Day, who is likely to stay in dugout following his recover from Covid-19. The coach also hinted that counters would be the order of the day.

"It's going to be an extremely tough match but one we look forward to. Hopefully we can perform to the best of our abilities and make everyone in Bangladesh really proud. We know Qatar are the best team in Asia and should win. But for us it's about making sure we put in a good performance, make it difficult for them to get the result that they should get. You never know in football. We could get that one chance and take it," Day said.

'Nothing to lose, much to gain'

SPORTS REPORTER

With the FIFA World Cup Qualifying tie against hosts Qatar being dubbed as a match where Bangladesh will have to limit the damage after months of inactivity due to the coronavirus pandemic, local coach Saiful Bari Titu believes keeping the margin respectable will also be a tough task in today's match at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium in Doha.

"Of course, keeping the margin to a respectable level is also a difficult task for Bangladesh because everything was in our favour in Dhaka [in the first leg in October 2019] with a wet pitch and the Cosco ball. But you can't compare Dhaka's Qatar and Doha's Qatar," the AFC A-licensed coach told The Daily Star. "There is actually nothing to take from the Dhaka match because it was played a year ago. The boys should forget the 0-2 loss and keep in mind that they have nothing to lose against the Asian champions, but many things to achieve."

Mentioning four aspects -- fitness, technique, tactics and psychology -- that will be factors in the match, the 48-year-old coach stressed on the need for Bangladesh's defence to be consistently watertight in today's match to keep Qatar at bay.

"The players have to utilise four things -- fitness, technique, tactics and psychology -- at optimum level. We can expect Qatar to play the pressing game against Bangladesh,

so it is very important to have technique as well as good tactical knowledge. In this regard, a great challenge lies ahead of Bangladesh in that a lot of balls will come into Bangladesh's half and it is important to defend really well and not allow Qatar to play in the gap between the defence line and the midfield line," Titu suggested.

"So, it is very important to stay close the gap between the two lines -- defence and midfield."

The Sheikh Russel coach also believed that the players must implement the game plan to perfection to resist Qatar.

"If you give Qatar space in between the two lines, they won't hesitate to punish Bangladesh. It is also equally important to distribute the responsibility among the players -- who will go forward to press, who will mark the players and how long it will last," he added.

However, there are serious concerns over how long the boys in red and green can resist 59th-ranked Qatar, especially in light of the shortcomings in fitness and stamina of the Bangladeshi players following a seven-month coronavirus-induced break.

"In terms of fitness, Qatari players may have an advantage but if you have some ball possession, then you get less tired. So, you also need to have some ball possession to thwart their [Qatar's] efforts. Besides, if the humidity in Doha is less than Dhaka, the players will sweat less and have some energy to stop Qatar," said Titu.

HIGHLIGHTS OF BANGLADESH-QATAR TIE IN DHAKA



- ▶ Match ended 2-0 in favour of visiting Qatar
- ▶ Hosts showed spirit and fight on rain-soaked ground
- ▶ Bangladesh had some good counterattacks
- ▶ Raihan Hasan's long throw-in unleashed havoc in the Qatar defence
- ▶ A draw against Qatar would not have been a

- surprising result
- ▶ Bangladesh made two defensive lines to thwart the Asian champions
- ▶ The play was confined to the Bangladesh half
- ▶ Jamie Day termed it the "best performance ever"
- ▶ Jamal was disappointed to miss scoring chances

Can they thrill again?

SPORTS REPORTER

The second round of fixtures of the Bangabandhu T20 Cup begin today with the five-team tournament wide open and all teams still in the race for the title. However, Gazi Group Chattogram look like the team to beat, having won all four of their matches.

Today will see the repeat of the opening-day fixtures, which had sparked an exciting start to the tournament with two final-over thrillers.

Ariful Haque's four massive sixes in the final over off Mehidy Hasan Miraz had helped Gemcon Khulna take



Ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan plays football during practice at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

the game away from Fortune Barishal while an all-round performance from Mahedi Hasan -- who hit a fifty and then defended nine runs off the final over -- helped Minister Group Rajshahi seal a two-run victory over Beximco Dhaka on the opening day.

The teams meet once again today, albeit at different times than usual. The day game between Tamim Iqbal's Barishal and Mahmudullah Riyad-led Gemcon Khulna will start at 12:00pm while the second fixture between Mushfiqur Rahim's Dhaka and Najmul Hossain Shanto's Rajshahi will commence at 5:00pm. Although the last match of the first round of fixtures saw Chattogram win a high-scoring thriller against Rajshahi on Wednesday, such fascinating encounters have been few and far between. The pacers have been the highlight of the tournament and, with the second round beginning today, the onus will be on batsmen to give spectators what they seek the most from T20 cricket -- high-scoring encounters.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

WHAT THEY SAID



NEXT STOP: 800

"750 goals, 750 happy moments, 750 smiles on the faces of our fans. Thanks to all the players and coaches who have helped me reach this incredible number, thanks to all my loyal opponents who have made me work harder and harder every day. Next stop: 800," Ronaldo said on Instagram after scoring the 750th goal of his remarkable career in a 3-0 win over Dynamo Kyiv on Wednesday.

The 35-year-old has scored 450 goals for Real Madrid, 118 for Manchester United, 102 for Portugal, 75 for Juventus and five for his first club, Sporting.

'GIROUD A ROLE MODEL'

Chelsea's youngsters should look up to Olivier Giroud as a shining example of professionalism, manager Frank Lampard said after the 34-year-old Frenchman scored four goals in their 4-0 Champions League demolition of Sevilla on Wednesday.

At 34 years and 63 days, Giroud became the oldest player to score a Champions League hat-trick and also the oldest to do it in the European Cup since former Hungarian



great Ferenc Puskas did so in September 1965 for Real Madrid against Feyenoord.

"He is the ultimate professional. He isn't always a regular but his performances have shown that he is a great sign for young players to keep training well," Lampard said after Chelsea secured the top spot in Group E with a match to spare.

'I WANT TO PLAY WITH MESSI'

Neymar dropped a bombshell on Wednesday as he followed up scoring twice for Paris Saint-Germain in their 3-1 Champions League win over Manchester United by revealing his desire to reunite with Lionel



Messi next season.

The Brazilian enjoyed four successful seasons alongside the six-time Ballon d'Or winner at Barcelona before making a world record 222 million euro (\$264m) move to the French capital in 2017.

"It's what I most want, to enjoy being with him on the field again," Neymar, whose contract at PSG runs until 2022, told ESPN. "I want to play with him for sure, next year we have to do it."

KOEMAN ROOTING FOR GRIEZMANN

Barcelona head coach Ronald Koeman is pleased with Antoine Griezmann's improving confidence and form, as the French forward scored in three consecutive games for the club for the first time.

Despite missing several key players, including Messi, Barca beat Ferencvaros 3-0 away from home to maintain their perfect record in the Champions League.



"It is always a matter of trust of a player. As I said many times, Antoine has always worked hard to improve his game and effectiveness for the team," Koeman said after the match. "I hope he can continue with this effectiveness he's having lately."

'ANOTHER BARRIER HAS BEEN BROKEN DOWN'

With Juventus already qualified from Group G and Dynamo Kyiv already eliminated, the main interest was focused on Stephanie Frappart but the Frenchwoman was barely noticed -- usually regarded as a good sign for a referee's performance.

She became the first woman to referee a men's Champions League game who has already made history as the first woman to referee in Ligue 1. She took charge of



the 2019 UEFA Super Cup final between Liverpool and Chelsea and also made her Europa League debut in October.

"Another barrier has been broken down, we know that she is very good, which is the most important and fundamental thing," Juventus chief football officer Fabio Paratici said before the game of Frappart.

'I love you, Diego'

APE, RIO DE JANEIRO

"I love you, Diego" Pele has written on social media, a week after the death of his "great friend" Diego Maradona, a "genius who enchanted the world".

In Brazil, it is common to pay homage to the deceased a week after their death, when a "seventh-day mass" is celebrated by Catholics like Pele.

The two players are often rated against each other in discussions about who was the greatest of all time but Pele insisted in his Instagram post on Wednesday night that the Argentinian was second to none.

"The world would be much better if we could compare each other less and start admiring each other more. So, I want to say that you are beyond comparison," said the three-time World Cup winner. The post is illustrated with a series of photos of the two legends together, including one showing a young Maradona all smiles next to Pele playing the guitar.

"Your journey was marked by honesty. You have always declared your loves and dislikes to the four winds.

"And in your unique and particular way, you taught us that we have to love and say "I love you" a lot more often.

"Your quick departure didn't let me say it to you, so I will just write: I love you, Diego."