

Syria bring young squad

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA from New Delhi

Bangladesh take on Syria in their lung-opener on the second day of the ONGC Nehru Cup international football tournament beginning at the Ambedkar Stadium here on Friday.

The 27-member Syrian team led by Tajeddin Fares, vice president of the country's soccer federation, arrived here yesterday to become the first foreign team to reach the Indian capital for the five-nation competition.

The Syrians, who had a two hour workout here soon after arrival, are without six key players, four of whom are preparing back home for this month's Beijing Olympics qualifier against Bahrain on August 22.

Fares informed that two other Syrian players have not been released by their clubs in Kuwait and Jordan.

However, he was confident about his team's prospects in the tournament.

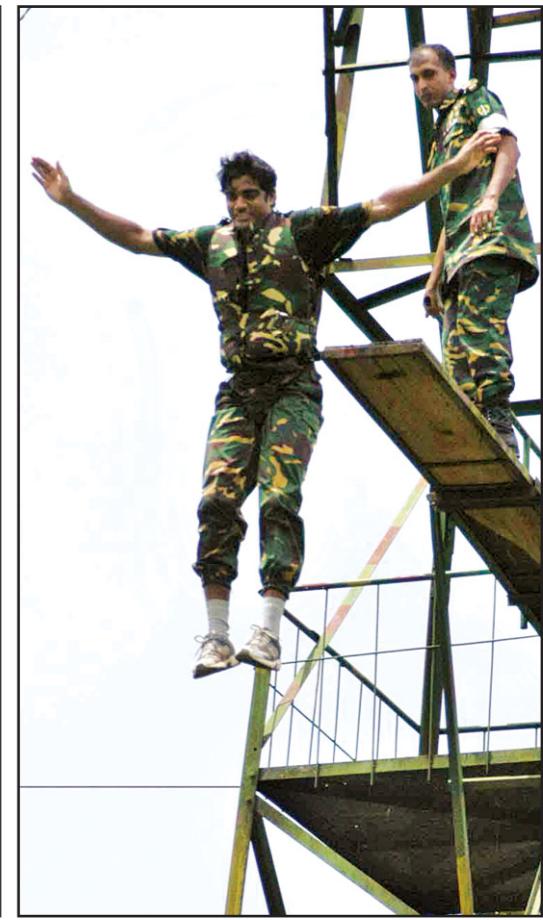
Syrian coach Fajer Ibrahim, who has been in charge for the last two years, said Syria had beaten Kyrgyzstan in the last World Cup qualifier and have a very good record against Bangladesh.

They also beat Jordan and Lebanon before losing to Iraq in the semifinal in the West Asia Cup tournament.

"We have a good team but we don't take other teams lightly. We have some talented youngsters who can deliver the goods in the absence of some key players," said former international Ibrahim, who played for the national team for five years.

Syria, placed 113 in FIFA rankings, are the highest top-ranked

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IN THE ARMY NOW

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN

(Clockwise from L) Bangladesh fast bowler Mashrafe Bin Mortaza takes part in the sliding exercise; (L-R) Junaed Siddique, Mohammad Ashraful, Nazimuddin, Forhad Reza, Mahmudullah Riyad, Shakib Al Hasan, Ziaur Rahman and Mashrafe cool down after stretching; Forhad Reza rappels; Zia jumps from the platform during hallow casting and captain Ashraful does the mountain climbing. All the pictures were taken yesterday at the School of Infantry and Tactics in Sylhet where the Bangladesh national cricket team members are having a military training.



Rajib draws 3rd round tie

SPORTS REPORTER

International Master Enamul Hossain Rajib drew his third round game against Armenian Grand Master Anastasian Ashot in the Master tournament of the 17th Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival in Abu Dhabi yesterday.

With the result, Rajib has so far collected 2.5 points and is in second place with six other competitors.

Georgian GM Pantsulaia Levan and GM Amin Bassem of Egypt are leading the table with three points.

Boot camp boosts Tigers

Cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

It has been told time and again that the Tigers are not mentally tough enough to cope with the pressure of international cricket but captain Mohammad Ashraful believes that their ongoing commando training will make a positive impact in this area.

"Honestly speaking initially we were a bit shaky with a kind of training we had never attended before but ultimately we started to enjoy everything about the new adventure. Definitely we would have missed something if we had not taken part in this kind of training," observed Ashraful, who was wearing a camouflaged battle dress and an oversized helmet.

The Bangladesh captain, however, said that they had thoroughly enjoyed the session of self-criticism and counseling.

"It's really an amazing experience the way we talked openly in this session. I must say it is the best part of this training. We have had discussion in our team meetings but never spoke as openly as we did in this session," said Ashraful.

The day started with an event

called 'Tiger Chase' where eight players had to run round eight hills, covering a distance of 1.5 kilometres. Young Shakib Al Hasan finished first and the all-rounder along with Forhad Reza showed that they could have been the best cadets had they taken up a career in the Army.

The whole squad also echoed Ashraful's sentiment that the hard training improved their self-confidence especially the way they enjoyed everything in the special training under a unit of Bangladesh Army.

"What I can say that I fully enjoyed it," responded Bangladesh vice-captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza who joined the camp on the fourth day after returning home from India.

Major SM Asheq, officer in charge (OIC), expressed his satisfaction over the cricketers' response to the training programme.

"It's totally a new experience for the cricketers but still they responded brilliantly. It was nice to see the way they communicated with us. I think it will be helpful for them," he observed.

The Tigers are scheduled to return to Dhaka tomorrow.

Scots' date with India today

BBC ONLINE, undated

Scotland take on India on Thursday in a one-day international in Glasgow. For India it is one of two warm-ups before the one-day series against England.

Video of the match will be broadcast live on the BBC Sport website, via the red button on Interactive, and on BBC2 for viewers in Scotland.

Scotland are boosted by county players Navdeep Poonia and Dewald Nel.

India may rest a number of their Test stars, and are sure to field as many of their one-day specialists as possible.

Batsmen Robin Uthappa, Rohit Sharma and Gautam Gambhir may come into the frame.

With 2,000 tickets pre-sold, spectators will be disappointed if the likes of Rahul Dravid and Sachin Tendulkar elect to skip the match.

"We have no target in the two tournaments," said Sultan referring to the Merdeka Cup in Malaysia, where the BFF is sending a second-string national team.

"We want to finish with honour in the two events and hope to build a good team for the SAFF Championship," Sultan told.

Bangladesh play pre-tournament favourites Syria in their opener before meeting India, Cambodia and Kyrgyzstan in the league matches.

Nayeemuddin, showing no emotion about returning to India and the prospect of facing a team he had built before being relieved of charge, said "fighting all the way" is his target apart from improving day by day.

Booters leave today for Nehru Cup

Football

SPORTS REPORTER

Syed Nayeemuddin returns to his homeland with a completely different role he had played in the past.

The former Indian international and coach, who guided India to win the SAFF Football Championship twice including the previous title in 2005, will be up against his home team when he leads Bangladesh in the five-nation Nehru Cup which kicks off on Saturday.

Bangladesh football team will fly for New Delhi today without any particular target, as said by Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president SA Sultan in yesterday's press conference at the BFF Bhaban.

"My motto is to fight and fight. Those who represent Bangladesh have the motivation to do that and I have told them not to fear whatever opponents they are facing.

We don't want lose before the match begins," told Nayeemuddin.

"You can be successful if you play as a team and implement your abilities. We may win we may lose but the focus would be to play the level best.

"Also, without discipline, success is impossible. So I will try my best to maintain that during the trip."

Responding to the strong criticism of BFF's decision to send two national teams to different tournaments, Nayeemuddin said there was little difference between the two sides.

"Both teams are equally strong and both are Bangladesh national teams. The level of motivation is similar for players. There is no use drawing a line between the two," Nayeem added.

First time chosen to lead the national team, Abahani centre-back Nazrul Islam said that the main advantage of the team could be playing the tournament just after the professional football league.

"We come straight from the field after the six-month long B. League and the fitness level is good," said Nazrul, the steadiest performer of the season.

"In the national camp, the coach went step by step. He felt that as we have played a lot of football, our muscles were weaker and he initially emphasised on power training before we began to work with the ball," he said.

Like the coach, the new captain also felt the lack of match practice.

"We have a number of newcomers. It would be better if we could play a few matches," added Nazrul whose side played just one match at BKSP against the local youth team.

The team for Merdeka Cup, under coach Hasanuzzaman Babloo, will leave for Kuala Lumpur on Saturday.

India United

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

The most delightful sight moments after India pulled off the historic draw at The Oval on Monday was the one of Rahul Dravid, Sourav Ganguly and Sachin Tendulkar locked in ecstatic embrace.

None of India's batsmen made a big statement in the middle, yet everyone came with his own Gettysburg address. Dinesh Karthik isn't a classical opener — most expected him to fail — yet he showed how confidence could help overcome conditions. The hard work at the nets would have helped; the time spent sharing dinners with teammates, especially those with a vast wealth of experience, were crucial.

Mahendra Singh Dhoni is a young man with a cowboy's reputation. But his clear-headedness and ability to adapt have played a part. He had a torrid time behind the stumps, he had edgy phases with the bat yet, when he needed to adapt, he stood up. Watching him assault Monty Panesar at The Oval was special, seeing him knockle down and craft an ugly 76 at Lord's more so. Memorably he smiled his way through it all.

It's been a series for fun. India took their cricket seriously, yet made sure they had their fun. Here was a bunch of senior pros mingling with young boys, a get together of uncles and high-schoolers. On the first day at Lord's, India's frontline bowlers are flayed to different corners. In walks Ganguly and strikes first. When India batted, RP Singh stuck

it out as a nightwatchman. Anil Kumble's maiden Test hundred was simply the icing on the cake. Bits and pieces don't get better.

At Nottingham Zaheer Khan ran in as if his life depended on it. Jelly beans were only part of the story. Here was a fast bowler desperate to win India a Test. RP Singh didn't merely land up at Lord's, he went all the way to the honours board. Yes, the same lanky, nonchalant Rudra Pratap who usually picked up the second fiddle. Even on the last day of the series he was bouncing Kevin Pietersen, forcing him to weave out of the way. Is that you, RP?

Lost amid the intrigue surrounding India's coach, both the previous one and the unknown newcomer, buried under the wretched disappointment over the World Cup, blurred by the unprintable shenanigans of the Indian board, is the gradual re-evolution of India's Test side. A journey that threatened to reach a standstill in 2004, when India surrendered a series to Australia and went into an internal tailspin, appears to be back on track. Two big series, one at home against Pakistan and another away at Australia, beckon. In six months we'll know if they've learnt their lessons from three years ago. As of now, it's time for champagne.

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Ian Chappell, the former Australian captain, has delivered a withering verdict on the standard of English wicketkeeping, and believes that England will never regain the Ashes so long as men of the standard of Matt Prior and Geraint Jones are selected in the Test side.

Prior endured a desperate match in the series decider at The Oval, dropping both Sachin Tendulkar and VVS Laxman in the course of India's first innings of 664, and speaking to Cricinfo at the end of the match, Chappell was scathing about his abilities.

"I cannot see how England are going to win against decent sides with a wicketkeeper who is woeful," said Chappell. "An old skipper of mine, Les Favell, said that once a wicketkeeper starts costing you games, he's got to go, Matthew Prior is in that category for me."

For Prior, it is a far cry from the acclaim he received at the start of the summer, when he scored a flamboyant debut century against West Indies and was being seen in some quarters as the answer to England's prayers. Chappell, however, did not pretend to be one of

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Chappell slams 'keeping policy

CRICINFO, undated

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BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION

www.bffonline.com



Bangladesh's new football captain Nazrul Islam (L) addressing a press briefing on the eve of their departure for India today to participate in the Nehru Cup.

PHOTO: STAR

GOALKEEPERS: Biplob Bhattacharya, Ziaur Rahman Zia, Mamun Khan, defenders: Feroz Mahmud Titu, Atiqur Rahman Mishu, Rajani Kanta Barman, Nazrul Islam, Ariful Islam, SM Rajib, Mofazzal Hossain Saikat; midfielders: Mehdi Hassan Ujjal, Arman Aziz, Abul Hossain, Zahid Hossain, Zahid Parvez, Akramuzzaman Liton; forwards: Alfaz Ahmed, Mohammed Robin and Zahid Hassan Emili.

OFFICIALS: Shafiqul Islam (team leader), Mojammel Haque Mukta (manager), Syed Nayeemuddin (coach), Golam Jilani (assistant coach), Debasish Chowdhury (physician).

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