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Football requires rethink

AL MUSABBIR SADI

Only the high-ups of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) would be able to tell how much impact its extravagant experiment of sending two different 'national' teams to India and Malaysia this month will have in the near future.

With the SAFF Championship due this December, the footballers will get just four months to prepare in a bid to regain the regional trophy they gave up to India in December 2005.

The two national teams had similar results in the two separate events, the senior side losing three of their four matches in the Nehru Cup in New Delhi under Indian coach Syed Nayeemuddin and Hasanuzzaman Babloo's second-string team going down in all three group matches in the Merdeka Cup in Kuala Lumpur.

Lack of preparation, however, was evident in Bangladesh's games in the Nehru Cup where they even failed to beat Cambodia, whose last-gasp equaliser forced a 1-1 draw -- the only point Bangladesh earned in the five-team round robin league.

While hosts India began their preparation months ago and played five warm-up matches in Portugal, the Bangladeshi footballers did not even get the chance to know their teammates properly as they camped for less than two weeks after playing the inaugural professional league for six months.

The last time Bangladesh played in the SAFF Championship, under Argentine coach Diego Cruciani, they got four months to unite and reached the final. To be one of the final pairing again in Sri Lanka and Maldives, who host the eight-nation meet jointly, the BFF must start implementing its plans now.

And football's governing body must not only concentrate on the

only plan it had shown in the past: Long-term camp and no preparation matches.

Playing together for over a month gave India a flying start in the Nehru Cup as they had made up their mind on the starting line-up.

On the other hand, Bangladesh seemingly never picked the right team as Nayeemuddin had to experiment from the word go.

The young Ariful is an excellent stopper when he plays at the right side of a three-man central defence but choosing him as the rightback of a flat-four backline was the mistake that was repeated by the veteran Indian coach in every match.

Bangladesh's first half performance against Syria in their opener was perhaps the best 45 minutes the team ever had in New Delhi.

However, Ariful's limitations were exposed as he failed to cover the gap after overlapping, costing both the goals against Syria and Baichung Bhutia's lone strike against India.

Bangladesh should have won against Cambodia but they failed to build on a first-half lead and conceded a late equaliser.

In the final game, the pressure of playing four matches inside seven days told as the tired legs failed to cope with Kyrgyzstan winger Vadim Herchenko's numerous crosses from either flank to go down 3-0.

The coach should have used fresh legs, at least in the final match, to test the strength of the newcomers he had picked but the headstrong Nayeem stuck to his own ideas.

Needless to say, the two reserve keepers never got the chance with Biplab in tremendous form, but it was surprising to see Ujjal and Zahed Parvez being used for brief periods as substitutes.

Debutant fullback Mishu got only one half, another newcomer Rajib -- a defender -- got a couple of minutes in the midfield, midfielder Liton never left the bench like defender Saikat and virtually, there was no replacement for holding midfielder Arman Aziz, who had to continue despite exhaustion.

Among the rookies, Zahid Hossain was really impressive with his speedy runs at the right flank and his ability to release stunning shots from distance makes sure he is the horse for a long race. Alfaz started at the bench in the first two matches but his expertise was needed as the veteran, who had announced his retirement, was picked in the starting line-up later.

However, as a team, Bangladesh hardly impressed when they attacked. Most of the time, the two frontliners were not joined by the men from behind and were easily outnumbered by opposition backline.

"You can't expect better than this in ten days' preparation. Also, the fixture was very tiring for us as we hardly got any rest after one match," said Nazrul Islam, Bangladesh's Nehru Cup captain who was outstanding in central defence, yesterday.

"Due to the lack of preparation, we never had the combination and coordination. It's necessary to play warm-up matches to enhance stamina and tactics," said Nazrul, who returned home on Saturday with the team.

"If we use the next four months properly, we will be able to beat India who picked their best team. We did not pick that bad against them but their preparation made



An AFP file photo shows Bangladesh midfielder Zahid Hossain (L), who had an impressive tournament, vying for the ball with Kyrgyzstan's Namatov Bakytbek during their Nehru Cup match in New Delhi last Friday.

Last practice match today

SPORTS REPORTER

The national cricketers will play their last Twenty20 practice match at the Mirpur Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium today.

After six days of commando training, a first of its kind for the Tigers, under an Army unit in Sylhet, Mohammad Ashraf's men have so far played a number of practice matches to prepare for next month's ICC Twenty20 World Championship in South Africa.

Bangladesh, which will leave for Kenya on Wednesday, will be involved in a four-nation warm-up event in Nairobi prior to the main competition starting from September 11.

Instead of the usual fitness and net sessions, the management has arranged warm-up matches to make sure that the batsmen adopt to the new version of the game but the outcome were not very satisfying.

"I think 180-plus is a standard total but so far, we have failed to fulfill our expectations. We have to adjust to the new version of the game and for that hard work on our part is required. The good news is that both our openers have finally scored some runs but the problem is that we haven't exploited the slog overs properly," said Ashraf adding that none of the batsmen could carry on in their innings during the matches.

Southpaws Tamim Iqbal (27 off 30 balls) and Junaed Siddique (36 off 31 balls) finally showed some mettle in yesterday's match but the total runs achieved by their team (Green XI) was a modest 134-6 in their allotted 20 overs.

Alok Kapali, who played as a makeshift opener, continued his form with a 64-ball 68 but it could

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Aftab Ahmed of Mashrafe XI smashes the ball towards midwicket during his team's practice match against Ashrafur XI at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Hockey team leaves today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national hockey team leaves for India today to take part in the 7th Men's Asia Cup Hockey tournament to be held in Chennai from August 31 to September 9.

Bangladesh are placed in Pool B of the 11-team meet with South Korea, India, China, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

They will play their first match against Thailand on August 31, the second against China on September 1. Then they take on Sri Lanka on September 3, while their fourth match is against hosts India on September 4, and then play their last group game against Korea on September 6.

The other teams are Pakistan, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

"We want to win against

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Juliano Belletti

(Chelsea's Brazilian defender) "Everybody knows Mr. Mourinho is one of the best coaches in the world. When he goes for a player, he knows what he wants and he goes for quality. I am sure Chelsea will only be successful under his direction."



ESPN
England v India
Third ODI
Live from 3:15 pm
TEN Sports
US Open tennis
Day One
Live from 9:00 pm

England alert on Freddie

Third one-dayer against India today

Cricket

CRICINFO, undated

To Fred or not to Fred? That's England's question before the third one-dayer at Edgbaston. Barely had Andrew Flintoff returned to international cricket than his ankle, and now knee, are causing problems. Peter Moores, England's coach, made optimistic noises about the chances of him playing tomorrow but added they would take the long-term plans into the equation.

The latest issue relates to an irritation and inflammation inside the right knee joint. He recently underwent an ankle surgery, on his left leg, and expectedly Flintoff didn't bowl at the nets this morning. A massage on his ankle and some hopping exercises on the wobble-ball were followed by a batting session against both spin and pace. He didn't appear in too much pain while batting but didn't look entirely at ease either.

"He's very keen to play," said Moores after the practice session.

"He's missed a lot of cricket and wants to go out there but we need to balance it over a long series. They [the medical staff] have looked at the injury and there's no major concern with it long term. If we know there's no risk of him playing, we'll take it. If we think it's more sensible to miss a game than carry on after, we'll do that. We'll see in the morning, if it's settled down, if the swelling is gone..."

India will no doubt be lifted by his absence and Mahendra Singh Dhoni, their vice-captain, said as much. "He's a kind of player who always has an impact on the game -- the perfect all-rounder. He comes in as a third seamer during the field restrictions, then bowls three overs in the middle and comes back at the death. If he's not playing I think the England team will be slightly on the back foot."

Ultimately, as Moores himself admitted, it may come down to Flintoff himself. "It's a very tough decision. He's played a lot of cricket, he knows his body. You trust a player to a degree and then take all opinions or whatever. He is keen to play but also knows what's

there to come. And he doesn't want to miss out on that. So between Fred, myself and the medical team we'll have to work it out."

The anti-inflammatory injection was a precautionary measure, said Moores, going on to explain the sequence of events. "He had a little bit of pain after the first game. Nothing major, a little bit of soreness. Afterwards he stiffened up and was sore in the night. It's sensible to get it checked out, doesn't seem to be any major structural thing."

"He saw the specialist and he said, 'It looks ok.' It's a bit of precaution measure which Fred was happy with. It would settle it down quickly. The physio seems to think it's all gone very well. Everything's positive today but we'll have to wait and see tomorrow."

The tone seems to be one of guarded optimism. England have already called up Jon Lewis as a backup bowling option and there's Owais Shah for batting cover. Flintoff, though, is irreplaceable and England's decision in the morning could well make the final difference

Roger's money on Rafael

Year's final Grand Slam starts today

AP, New York



Silly as it sounds nowadays, there was a time when some in the tennis world wondered whether Roger Federer was equipped to handle the US Open.

Even Federer himself harboured doubts. It took him longer, after all, to get past the fourth round at this Grand Slam tournament than any other.

"Hey, New York is a crazy place," he said in a recent interview with The Associated Press. "There's the heat. There's the humidity. There's the wind. ... If you can win the US Open, you can win anything."

Federer, of course, overcame all of those factors to take the past three championships at Flushing Meadows, part of his haul of 11 Grand Slam titles -- three shy of Pete Sampras's record. When play begins Monday at the year's last major, Federer will be trying to become the first man since Bill Tilden in the 1920s to win the American Slam four times in a row. Now it's another top player's

turn to prove he can deal with all of the challenges the US Open presents: Rafael Nadal. His career record of 8-4 in New York is his worst at any major.

Last year, the Spaniard reached the Open's quarterfinals for the first time, yet here was his assessment then: "I cannot say I am very happy with my tournament."

"I want to play the final in every tournament," Nadal said. "I know that's impossible, but I'm going to try, no?"

After No. 1 vs. No. 2 showdowns at the French Open and Wimbledon, Federer and Nadal can become the first pair of men to contest three consecutive Grand Slam finals since Ken Rosewall and Fred Stolle in 1964-65.

There is a lot more parity in the women's game, with five players divvying up the past five majors. Four -- No. 1 Justine Henin, No. 2 Maria Sharapova, Serena Williams and Venus Williams -- already have won the US Open at least once and are the top contenders this year, although each has had recent injuries. The fifth, Amelie Mauresmo, withdrew because of health concerns.

Two other players, both from Serbia, appear on the verge of a first major title: Jelena Jankovic and Ana

Ivanovic.

As is often the case, the true wild cards are the Williams sisters. Serena Williams, whose eighth major title came at January's Australian Open, hasn't played in 1 and 1/2 months because of a thumb injury. Venus Williams won Grand Slam No. 6 at Wimbledon, then entered only one tournament since and lost in the quarterfinals.

Still, other players know they have to watch out for the Williams family.

Here's what defending US Open champion Sharapova said about Venus: "I know what she's capable of. I know she can produce great tennis. That's what has won her so many Grand Slams, kept her at the top."

Mainly because of a lack of activity, the sisters have seen their rankings fall from those heady times when they were meeting in Grand Slam final after Grand Slam final -- the way a couple of guys have been doing lately.

Nadal beat Federer twice for the title on clay at Roland Garros. Federer beat Nadal twice for the title on grass at the All England Club. So the hard courts of the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center could provide a tiebreaker of sorts

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NCA open Australia tour today

SPORTS REPORTER

BCB National Cricket Academy (NCA) team will launch their campaign with a limited-over match against Western Australia in the Institute Challenge competition at the Marrara Cricket Ground 2.

Mehrab Hossain's led NCA left

Dhaka on Thursday to play five

limited-over matches, one three-

day match and a four-day game

during their 20-day trip in Darwin.

Orissa record second win

SPORTS REPORTER

The visiting Orissa State team thumped Bangladesh 4-0 in yesterday's women's exhibition football match at Narayanganj.

The winners led the first half 3-0 at the Khan Shaheb Osmari Stadium with goals from Sumita, Sushmita and Suprobha. Captain Pinky sealed the victory early into the second half.

The two teams will play the last match of the series today at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

After the first match was postponed, the hosts held Orissa to a goalless draw in Dhaka and lost the second match in Chittagong 2-0.

Tyson topples Powell

Athletics

AFP, Osaka

American Tyson Gay blazed down the track in 9.85 seconds to claim the world 100 metres title on Sunday, beating a panicked world record-holder Asafa Powell.

Powell was quickly into the lead but Gay overtook his man in the last 20 metres with the Bahamas' Derrick Atkins claiming silver in 9.91.

It was a big disappointment for Powell, who faded to finish third in 9.96. But he will be pleased to leave the lighting Osaka track with his 9.77 world record intact.

"I stumbled out of the blocks but I was leading until the end. I made a couple of mistakes and I lost the race," said Powell. "I felt him (Gay) coming on my shoulder and that's when I panicked. It slowed me down."

Gay, 25, claimed his first world title in the second-fastest time this year after his 9.84 sec in June.

Gay and the 24-year-old Powell both went into the final unbeaten this season but yet to face each

other. They lined up amid unbearable tension in the 50,000-seat Nagai Stadium, where thousands of fan-waving spectators had braved the evening heat.

The surprise of the night was Atkins picking up silver.

He has been fast improving, and set a new national record here Sunday, but was not expected to beat Powell.

"I wanted gold all season and I got silver but I am happy with it," he said.

"I am very happy with the national record and I am very happy that Bahamas athletics is in such good shape."

Gay has been in the ascendancy, timing a wind-assisted 9.76 and a season-leading 9.84 in June on his way to the fastest 100-200 combination in history.

Powell has been affected by knee tendonitis and a groin injury but bounced back with 9.90 last month in Rome, the second best time this year.

Powell set his record 9.77 sec in June 2005 and equaled the mark twice last season.

The only man to run as fast as disgraced world and Olympic champion Justin Gatlin, who failed a dope test last year.

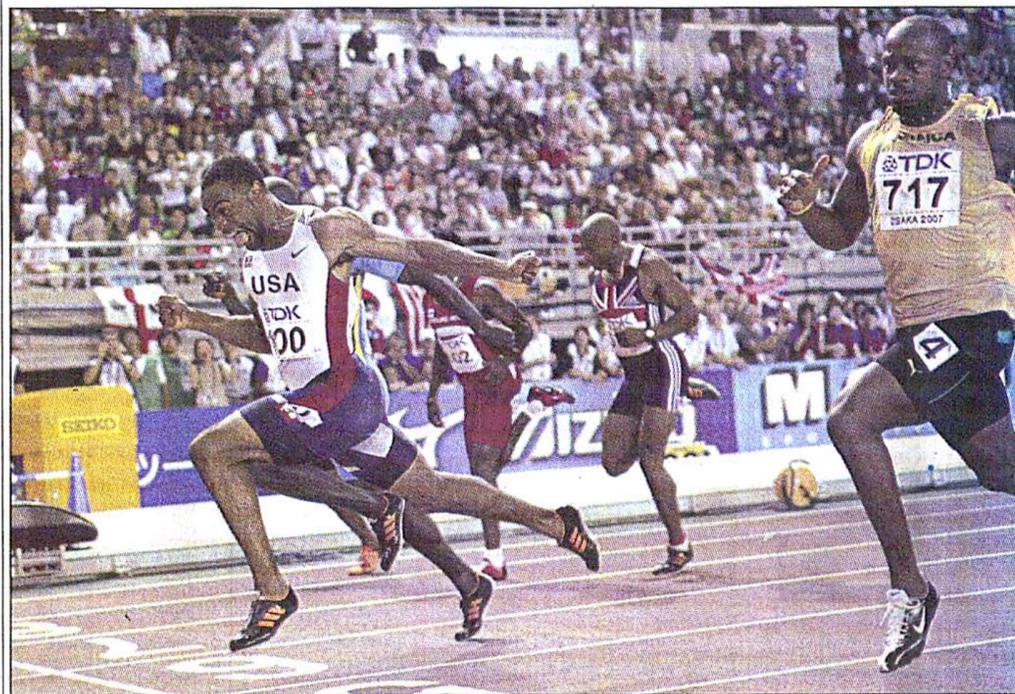
The 100m, the world championships' blue ribbon event, was unusually held on the first weekend as organisers bid to boost ticket sales.

Gay is also competing in the 200m, which he leads this season with 19.62. He has enjoyed his breakthrough season without coach Lance Brauman, who is in jail for embezzlement, theft and mail fraud.

Neither Powell or Gay owned a major title heading into the world championships, although the Jamaican claimed Commonwealth gold last year.

Powell, who false-started out of the last world championships and failed to get out of the blocks in the Athens Olympics, was voted male athlete of last season after 16 successive wins.

The Jamaican caused a stir here when he interrupted his build-up for a late night out.



TERRIFIC TYSON: American Tyson Gay (C) crosses the finish line ahead of Jamaica's Asafa Powell (R) during the men's 100m final at the 11th IAAF World Athletics Championships in Osaka yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP