

SPORT

BD's bad start

ATIQUÉ ANAM from Kathmandu

Bangladesh coach Lodewijk de Kruif had repeatedly stated that his side were the 'outsiders' in the SAFF Championship and Nepal were the favourites in the first match against Bangladesh. Last night at the Dasarath Stadium in Kathmandu, de Kruif's disciples made sure his words were vindicated by being outplayed 2-0 by a more potent and speedy Nepalese side.

Two expert headers from Nepal's two most potent forwards Anil Gurung and Bharat Khawas killed the game off in the first half. The scoreline is actually a bit flattering for Bangladesh as they could have conceded a few more goals but for three excellent saves from goalkeeper Mamun Khan. Mamun's opposite number, Kiran Kumar Limbu, was the most inactive player on the field as he had to make only one save in the entire match, that too a feeble chipped attempt from winger Taklis Ahmed, which was easily grasped.

The absence of skipper Mamunul Islam robbed Bangladesh of the creativity in the midfield and a link between the defence and the attack. Jamal Bhuiyan and Atiqur Rahman Meshu struggled to hold the ball in the midfield, allowing possession to the Gorkhalis, who were

spearheaded in attack by Anil and Bharat. The two forwards made inroads right from the start and profited from the lethargy of the Bangladesh backline. The first goal came in the 18th minute when Anil headed in a Bholanath cross expertly from in front of the goal.

The second goal was not long in coming. Bharat doubled the margin with a brilliant side-header on a corner from Jagjit Shreshtha. There were passages in the second half when it looked like Bangladesh might put on a fight with some urgency in attack, but they could not get the ball out to the last quarter as the cutting edge was lacking from Zahid Hossain Emily, Taklis and Mobarak Hossain. Wahed Ahmed was the lone frontman and saw very little of the ball.

Nepal put the foot off the gas a bit in the second half, trying to pounce on the counter attacks as Bangladesh became desperate for a lifeline. Those attacks opened up the tired Bangladesh backline, but Mamun Khan denied Anil twice with two brilliant saves.

Two years ago in New Delhi, Nepal handed Bangladesh an early ticket home with a 1-0 win in the last group match. They dominated that match too, but had to be content with a last-minute goal. Yesterday's result has not only shown an increase in potency, but they may have also engineered Bangladesh's exit once again.

TEAMS

BANGLADESH: Mamun Khan (GK); Ariful, Nasiruddin, Wali Faisal, Linkon (Raithan), Jamal, Meshu (Rony), Zahid (Mobarak), Taklis, Emily and Wahed.

NEPAL: Kiran Kumar, Sagar Thapa, Sandip Rai, Rabin Shreshtha, Biraj Maharjan, Rohit Chand, Bholu Natha Silwal, Jagjit Shreshtha, Raju Tamang (Jumanu Rai), Bharat Khawas, Anil Gurung (Bikram Lama).

Yellow Cards: Nasiruddin, Taklis, Linkon (Bangladesh); Kiran Kumar Limbu (Nepal).

Man-of-the-match: Bharat Khawas (Nepal).



Veteran Nepalese striker Anil Gurung heads in the opening goal past a baffled Bangladesh defence during the SAFF Championship opener at the Dasarath Stadium in Kathmandu yesterday. PHOTO: COURTESY

Defence to blame

SPORTS REPORTER from Kathmandu

Bangladesh's coach Lodewijk de Kruif widely blamed his defenders for conceding two early goals and though that those goals determined the fate of the match. The Dutch coach, who was appointed along with a Dutch coaching staff to revolutionise Bangladesh's football three months ago, felt his team played with the wrong intentions in the match against Nepal.

"I think we could see two teams with different intentions of playing football. The total picture of the game is Bangladesh gave it away in the first 25 minutes of the game," said de Kruif at the official post-match press conference. "You cannot win games anywhere in the world if you don't sort your defence. If you go behind 2-0 in a stage like this, in this stadium, before this crowd, you know you can't win the game," said de Kruif.

The Dutch coach passively admitted that his lessons are not getting through to his charges and that they were not focused fully with his game plan. However, de Kruif said he is an optimistic person and wants to put behind the game. "We are very motivated and eager. I just hope it was only a bad day for us, a bad 30 minutes."

Nepal tuned to football

ATIQUÉ ANAM from Kathmandu

People of Kathmandu woke up early on Saturday, despite it being a weekly holiday. Usually people here wake up late on Saturdays and Sundays as there is no hurry to get to work or school. But yesterday was no ordinary Saturday. It was a special day for the football loving Nepalese people as the 10th SAFF Championship kicked off, with the hosts playing against Bangladesh in the opening fixture.

The amount of expectation surrounding the hosts was evident from the enthusiasm of the people. Boys and girls, young and old -- with the quadrilateral flag in hand and red painted on their cheeks -- stood in long queues hours before the scheduled start of the match.

"Go, Nepal go," was the overriding theme of those people, as this is no less than a World Cup for the football-crazy nation, which is devoid of success in sports at the international level.

Vikram Thapa, the CEO of Goalnepal.com, one of the most informative football portals in the South Asian region, summed up the scenario precisely. "We do not have too much to boast about in sports. We do not play cricket at

the top level and other sports are not that good too. Football is where we think we can achieve greatness in time."

Outside the stadium, stalls have been set up to sell Nepal jerseys, flags and souvenirs which are running out fast. The gates opened at 4pm, two-and-a-half hours before the kick-off, and it did not take long to fill up the 20,000 capacity stadium.

This football frenzy has not developed in a day. It took time, but it has taken great strides in the last ten years. Three FIFA Football Academies have been set up during that period, which are scouting football talent from all over the country and producing complete footballers. Some of the Nepalese footballers ply their trade in the Indian league these days. The national team is producing better results, challenging the likes of Bangladesh and Maldives regularly. The media has played a pivotal role in hyping up interest, and sponsors also tap into the football enthusiasm. But in the end it all boils down to which sport the people want to stick to over the long run.

"Maybe Nepal have not achieved greatness in football as yet, but people stick to this game as football has become a sort of national obsession that cuts through age and race, gender and religion," opined Vikram.



Guptill out of tour of Bangladesh

REUTERS, Wellington

Batsman Martin Guptill needs an ankle surgery and has been ruled out of New Zealand's tour to Bangladesh in October, the country's cricket board said on Saturday.

New Zealand physiotherapist Paul Close has advised the 26-year-old to undergo an operation next month for the right ankle injury he has been carrying for the past year.

TV hosts v Broad!

ANI, London

British television host Piers Morgan has reportedly agreed to bat against England fast bowler Stuart Broad in a match-up to raise money for charity.

According to the Daily Star, the presenter is set to bat for six balls against the 95mph fast bowler, who has said that he will bowl at his head for extra donations.

However, Morgan has appeared to prepare himself for batting against the English star by posting a link of a video of when Broad was once hit for six off every ball of an over.

Morgan jokingly tweeted that he did not realise that Broad was this 'unplayable', adding that they may have to rethink their showdown.

Too big, but too late

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh hockey team earned a consolation victory in the AHF 9th Asia Cup with an easy 11-3 win over Chinese Taipei in a place-deciding match at the Azlan Shah Stadium in Ipoh, Malaysia yesterday.

The lone victory after four straight defeats meant Bangladesh finished seventh among eight teams. Bangladesh were finally able to put behind their forgettable performances of the last four matches to post their biggest ever win in Asia Cup. However the players lifted their performance only when nothing was left to achieve.

Bangladesh dominated from the outset and implemented coach Naveed Alam's instructions perfectly to take a 4-0 first-half lead, before adding seven more goals in the second half, with penalty corner specialist and captain Mamunur Rahman Chayan converting four goals and Pushkor Khisha Mimo striking three. Moinul Islam Koushik and Rasel Mahmud Jimmy also wrote their names on the score-sheet with two goals each.

Bangladesh's pre-tournament target was to claim either the fifth or sixth position in a bid to play the next Asia Cup directly, but Bangladesh never looked to have played to that target with continuous dismal performances that saw them concede 22 goals in three matches including a shock 2-4 defeat at the hands of Oman to finish fourth in Pool B.

They still had chance to claim the fifth place, but failed to improve their performance under the guidance of coach Naveed and suffered a 0-3 defeat to Japan in one of the two place-deciding matches before the match against Chinese Taipei, who they defeated 3-1 in a practice match before the start of the tournament.

The crisis in the domestic circuit regarding the inter-club players' transfers might have made an impact on the performances of the boys in the tournament, but the tactics of the Pakistani coach also came into question by former players. The coach however said his boys needed time to adopt his style.

"When I took charge of the team, the boys looked good in practices and though we worked hard, they are not up to the mark for international level," said Naveed. "But an 11-3 win over Chinese Taipei means Bangladesh is improving and today [Saturday] they played as a team instead of putting up individual performance."

SAFF to felicitate Biplob

SPORTS REPORTER from Kathmandu

South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) will felicitate Bangladesh's long-serving goalkeeper Biplob Bhattacharjee for a record number of appearances in the biggest football event of the region, according to a source inside the team. The felicitation will take place during the SAFF Conference on September 10, it was learnt.

The 35-year old goalkeeper has been part of the Bangladesh squad in seven editions of the tournament, starting with the Kathmandu SAFF Championship in 1997. The 10th SAFF Championship in Kathmandu will be his eighth, a feat unmatched in this region.

"This will be a very proud moment for me as I stand on the verge of my eighth SAFF Championship," said Biplob Bhattacharjee at the team hotel yesterday.

The veteran goalkeeper, who remained as an understudy to Aminul Haque for the better part of his career, achieved his career-best moment at the Dasarath Rangasala when he lifted the title of the 1999 SAFF Games Football. Now that Biplob has decided to hang up his boots at the age of 35, this will certainly be his last SAFF Championship and he would be hoping that it ends as a memorable one.

2 slam winners knocked out

AFP, New York



Victoria Azarenka reached the fourth round while past Grand Slam champions Petra Kvitová and Svetlana Kuznetsova were ousted from the US Open in early upsets Saturday while Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer prepared for later third-round matches.

At the time this report was filed, Nadal had a one set lead and was 3-1 up in the second set against Croatian Ivan Dodig. Before that, two-time Australian Open champion Azarenka reached the fourth round of the US Open with a 6-7 (2/7), 6-3, 6-2 victory over French 26th seed Alize Cornet.

2004 US Open and 2009 French Open champion, made 35 unforced errors in losing 7-5, 6-1 to Italy's 83rd-ranked Flavia Pennetta, who had lost their five prior career matchups. Pennetta will next face Romania's Simona Halep.

Halep breezed into the fourth round at a Grand Slam for the first time by ripping Russian 14th seed Maria Kirilenko 6-1, 6-0 in 51 minutes.

Second-seeded Nadal and Swiss star Federer, who will face French left-hander Adrian Panatta, have never played each other on the Flushing Meadows hardcourts, but triumphs later would put them each in the round of 16 on a collision course for the last eight.

US 13th seed John Isner gets a chance to avenge a third-round US Open ouster last year when he meets German 22nd seed Philipp Kohlschreiber.

Britain's Daniel Evans, in his deepest Grand Slam run, tries to reach the last 16 against Spanish 19th seed Tommy Robredo. Evans would be the first qualifier in the US Open fourth round since Luxembourg's Gilles

Muller in 2008. Spanish fourth seed David Ferrer will meet Russian-born Kazakh qualifier Mikhail Kukushkin while French eighth seed Richard Gasquet faces Russia's 32nd-seeded Dmitry Tursunov.

A day earlier on Friday, Australian warhorse Lleyton Hewitt battled to a five-set US Open win over Argentine sixth seed Juan Martin Del Potro Friday, relegating Andy Murray, Novak Djokovic and Serena Williams -- all of whom moved into the third round -- to supporting roles.

The 2001 champion defeated the 2009 winner, 6-4, 5-7, 3-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-1. Hewitt, 32 years old and down at 66 in the rankings after a lengthy battle with injuries, served up a trademark warrior-like performance that recalled his golden days when he was world number one and Wimbledon champion.

It was his 32nd career five-set victory and gave him a third-round match-up with Russia's Evgeny Donskoy, the world number 102.

Mash looks to warm-up

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh team management were looking forward to the coming three-day practice match to assess state of fitness of the country's leading paceman Mashrafe

Bin Mortaza ahead of the home series against New Zealand in October.

The focus will be on Mashrafe -- who recovered from the left-heel injury he had suffered during the BPL final in February -- when the Mushfiqur Rahim-led Green Team take on Mahmudullah Riyad's Red Team in the three-day match, starting from September 3 at the Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium in Khulna.

There has been talk about the chances of Mashrafe reviving his Test career, but head coach Shane Jurgensen said yesterday that they were waiting to get back the premier paceman for limited-overs cricket at the moment.

"If Mash (Mashrafe Bin Mortaza) plays in the Tests it will no doubt be great for the team. He is fit. However, as of now we

are looking at him for the one-dayers and T20s of the New Zealand series. Still, there is a three-day match coming up. We can assess him better after that," said Jurgensen.

Mashrafe also said yesterday that he was eagerly waiting to make his comeback to international cricket and that he has yet to think about reviving his Test career.

"It's too early to say anything about my chance of playing Test cricket again. I'm practising and time will only tell whether I can play longer-version cricket any more. On the other hand, the decision is not only mine; there are the selectors, the coach and the captain. And I have to assess my bowling also. So it would not be wise comment on my Test return," said Mashrafe, who bowled off a full run-up for the first time yesterday after a long break.

He also said that he was not looking to the World Cups (the World Twenty20 in 2014 and the 50-over World Cup in 2015); he was rather looking to the next home series. "I am eagerly waiting to play competitive cricket," said the Narail Express.

Sohel, Raju stay on

SPORTS REPORTER from Kathmandu

Goalkeeper Shahidul Islam Sohel and midfielder Monayem Khan Raju have been kept with the Bangladesh team, as per coach Lodewijk de Kruif's interest, despite not being officially part of the squad anymore. Sohel was ruled out due to a groin injury while Raju, who was tried as a cover for injured players, failed due to late registration.

"They have been retained as per coach's intention. Their return tickets were booked too, but the coach wanted to keep them to make them part of the team and so that the team also feel motivated," confirmed Maruf Hasan, the team leader of Bangladesh.