



The gold medals won by Sonia Khatun, a BKSP natant who struck as many as ten in the National Age-group Swimming Championship at the Mirpur Swimming Complex yesterday, looked a bit heavy for an 18-year-old girl.

PHOTO: STAR

BKSP drown challengers

SPORTS REPORTER

The Mir Akhter Hossain Ltd 31st National Age-Group Swimming Championships were completed yesterday at the Syed Nazrul Islam Swimming Complex in Mirpur, with a total of 27 national records being set in the three-day competition.

Ariful Islam of Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protisthan (BKSP) hogged the limelight from the first day till the closing day, bagging 12 gold medals in the 18-20 age group. He created eight new national records (hand-timing), three of which were set on the closing day, and was subsequently adjudged the best swimmer among the boys.

Ariful's teammate, Sonia Khatun, lit up the pool with her brilliant performance to grab ten gold medals in 18-20 age group.

However, Sonia could set only one national record, but her junior teammate Rupa Akhter in 10 age group outshone Sonia by creating five national records. Rupa bagged six gold medals and was named the best swimmer in the girl's section.

The feats of Ariful, Sonia and Rupa helped BKSP finish top with 71 gold, 62 silver and 36 bronze medals.

Bangladesh Ansar became runners-up with 31 gold, 25 silver and 15 bronze medals while Jessore Swimming Club bagged one gold, one silver and eight bronze medals to finish third.

An odd time to vacation

SPORTS REPORTER



Since the national cricketers will get involved in the first round of the National Cricket League today, it was expected that head coach Chandika Hathurusingha would be present at one of the four venues. But the Sri Lankan, who joined the camp on September 7 after a long vacation, has been granted another ten-day leave, starting today.

The national cricketers will play the first round as part of their preparation for the upcoming two-match Test series against Australia, so the coach could have gotten some first-hand experience to work on the small issues ahead of such a big home Test.



CHANDIKA HATHURUSINGHA

While it's true that he has a settled team -- there are hardly any chances to deliberate on the players' performances before selecting the final squad -- Chandika could still have worked on some of the finer points. And with the way he injects fresh blood into the team, nothing could be better than eyeing domestic matches

for new talent.

Many in the board were surprised by his decision.

"This round was arranged specifically to focus on the players' preparations, so why is he not taking the opportunity? It may be considered a big deal since he could work with the selectors to fine-tune the team ahead of the series. It also sends the wrong message to the players, since he cannot gauge the capabilities of the vast number of players without watching domestic cricket," said an official on condition of anonymity.

However, BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury defended their decision, saying that since most of the national players were touring India, they allowed the coaching staff to go on holidays.

Lopez starts strong

SPORTS REPORTER



Newly-appointed coach Fabio Lopez had enjoyed his first day under a scorching summer sun at the artificial turf of the BFF House, where he got the first glimpse of his national players in business yesterday.

He had assessed 35 players from the preliminary list of 41, who underwent some training drills under fitness coach Angelo Pavia and assistant coach Costantino Zuccarini, the other two Italians who arrived in Dhaka on Wednesday evening. Lopez then watched from the sidelines as the players played 20-minute games among themselves. And of course, those games were played in line with the new coach's instructions.

"We have just started training in order to scout the players from the given 41. We focused on their technical skills and the tactical awareness of the players on the first day. We will run this scouting programme for three to four days though it is not enough time to choose the players because I am new. However I will take help from [Saiful Bari] Titu and [Masud Parvez]

Kaiser," said Lopez reiterating that he would only pick players who would perform on the pitch regardless of their previous profile.

He will trim the side to 23 by the end of the short programme.

Defenders Mohammad Linkon and Kesto Kumar left the camp due to injuries, while injured midfielders Shahedul Alam Shahed and Hemanta Vincent Biswas sought a couple of days to join. Midfielder Jamal Bhuiyan is in Denmark and midfielder Masuk Mia Johnny has been in the preparation camp of the national U-19 team.

"The injured players will join the camp after recovering and they will stay with the 23-man final team if they are ready to play and deserving," said Lopez. "The playing eleven of the national team must comprise of players who play for the starting eleven of their clubs. I can't allow any player in the starting eleven, who sits on their club's bench," he added.

When his attention was drawn to the group of the SAFF Championship, he admitted that Bangladesh have been placed in the stronger of the two groups.

"It's a strong group where every match will be difficult. But I am not scared," he concluded.



Bangladesh's new Italian coach Fabio Lopez (C) had his first training session with his charges at the Astro-turf ground, adjacent to the BFF House yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Colts aiming to bounce back

SPORTS REPORTER



Host Bangladesh are looking forward to putting their mediocre performance against Saudi Arabia behind them and have a much better display against the United Arab Emirates in the second and final match of Group D in the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers today.

The match will get underway at 6:00pm with state-owned television BTV telecasting the match live from the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

The 5-1 drubbing at the hands of Saudi Arabia had definitely shattered the confidence of the boys in red and green, but having taken the inspiration from their SAFF U-16 Championship performances, the boys want to shrug that off.

Bangladesh stunned their mighty opponents, Saudi Arabia, after taking a lead, but surrendered that, eventually conceding a big-margin defeat as goalkeeper Faisal Ahmed was given his marching orders five minutes into the second half. Saudi Arabia took full advantage of their extra man and struck four goals, with the last three coming in the final ten minutes of the game.

It seemed Bangladesh's tactics were lacking and they actually needed two lines of defence to stop the opposition's speedy wingers and forwards, especially after being reduced to ten men. Taking a cue, coach Syed Golam Jillani realised that he needed more work on his back-line for the match today.

"Today [Thursday] I worked on the defensive organization of our team. I also showed them the way we want to play against UAE, who I believe are stronger than Saudi Arabia," said Jillani, adding that they want to display a better performance than what they showed against Saudi Arabia.

Law warns Australia

AFP, Dhaka

Former Australia batsman Stuart Law warned Thursday that rookie skipper Steve Smith and his new charges would have a real fight on their hands from fast-improving Bangladesh in their upcoming two-Test series.

Law, who is now advising Bangladesh under-19s, said the world champions would be in for a rude shock if they took victory over cricket's traditional whipping boys for granted.

"If Bangladesh play anywhere near what they have been in recent times, they will give Australia a real fright," Law told reporters.

"People who are expecting Australia to come here and be the big bully and beat Bangladesh out of the stadium, don't think that's the case.

"Bangladesh will be ready for a fight.

"Australia are going through rebuilding. It is a different look team. The amount of experience that has left the team recently is a huge hole to fill," he said.

'Bangladesh not a trial series'

AGENCIES, Melbourne



Australia's new captain Steve Smith has batted away any suggestion that the upcoming Qantas Tour of Bangladesh is a good chance to give some new players exposure at Test level.

Australia's 15-man squad is one of the most inexperienced in recent memory, featuring two uncapped players and only five with more than 10 Tests of experience.

But Smith, who will lead the Test side in a full series for the first time, dismissed the suggestion that the series against the ninth-ranked Test nation is a good chance to trial new players.

"Not at all," Smith said. "Every Test you play you want to win, you want to win very series you play, and it's no different going to Bangladesh.

"It's going to be difficult playing over there, they've played some very good cricket in their own backyard. It's going to be a tough tour but hopefully we prepare well and adapt to the conditions accordingly and have a successful tour."



STEVE SMITH

He added that leading a fresh young side in such foreign conditions is a golden opportunity for Australia to improve their record away from home. Australia have won just one of their past 15 Tests in Asia -- the lone victory coming in the Sri Lankan city of Galle in 2011 -- and Smith said it was time to turn that statistic around.

"The conditions can be quite foreign to what we're used to in Australia so the guys will have to adapt right away and have plans in place to make sure they're doing everything they can to make sure they have success over there.

Australia's leading spinner, who will be hoping to get some purchase from the conditions there, echoed his captain's sentiments.

"We had a couple of days off after the Ashes, but now it's back into training full swing," he said. "I'm trying to get ready, get myself prepared to face Bangladesh.

"It's going to be a tough challenge, especially over there in their conditions.

"They're a talented team and they've been playing some good cricket at home, so it's going to be a challenge for us, but we're up for it and we're looking forward to it."

NCL inspires a festive mood

SPORTS REPORTER



It will be a return to action for a majority of the country's cricketers when the 17th National Cricket League (NCL), the season opening four-day competition, begins at four venues across the country today.

Experienced campaigner and Khulna captain Abdur Razzak probably best described what this tournament meant for the cricketers.

"You can say the cricket festivity for the cricketers all over the country begins tomorrow [Friday]. Not long ago we played the Bangladesh Cricket League, but in reality there was only one round, so basically most of the cricketers besides those from the national team will return to cricket after a long break during this league," said the left-arm spinner.

The participation of the national team players in the first round added some extra flavour to the start of the league. And Shakib Al Hasan's return to the tournament after a near three year break will definitely make the occasion special for Khulna, who host Dhaka at the Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium.

"I am lucky that a player like Shakib is in my team. His inclusion simply changed the atmosphere of the team. Not only is he an inspiration to the younger players, but also an ornament of the team. When a player like Shakib plays, it means a lot to the youngsters and also adds a lot to the tournament," said an excited Razzak.

New bowling sensation Mustafizur Rahman, who took 21 wickets from five matches last season, will also feature alongside Shakib.

"He is now our national asset and I only hope

he will concentrate on his job," added Razzak.

Selector Habibul Bashar said that there was a very slim chance that the performances during the first round matches would have impact on the selection process for the two-match Test series against Australia as they wanted to ensure some match practice for national players ahead of the home series. Mahmudullah Riyad, however, said that he would try and maximise his confidence when he plays for Dhaka Metro against Rangpur at the Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogra.

"It's true that this is like a practice match for us, but there is no way I can be relaxed because I know any good performance here will boost my confidence," said the national all-rounder.

Interestingly, competitive cricket will return to Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogra after 2013, so what is the condition of the ground?

Riyad was excited as he said, "The outfield is fantastic. The two practice wickets where we practiced today are brilliant. The pitch looked very good and I hope it will be sporting."

The tournament committee promised better wickets for this season and hoped that the two-tier and relegation systems will bring a more competitive spirit to the league.

Tushar Imran, another of the long-serving participants like Razzak -- he has been playing since 2000-2001 season -- also expressed his optimism over the level of competition.

"From my long experience, I can assure you that the standard of this league is gradually improving. I hope this season it will be much better. Everybody is now taking this league seriously. Most importantly the players are earning money from this competition," said Tushar, who played five Tests and 41 ODIs and made his last international appearance in 2007.

Restoring parity A team's aim

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh A will need to come out with their best today in the second one-dayer against their Indian counterparts if they want to stay alive in the three-match series. The match will start at 9am local time at M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bangalore.

The visitors suffered a heavy 96-run defeat in the first game following a top-order collapse in chase of 322 runs.

"The boys understood after the first game what they need to do to come back in the series. We are looking forward to a much-improved performance in the second game," chief selector and manager Faruque Ahmed told The Daily Star last night.

"India is a very strong side and it's especially hard to beat them in their home, but I believe we have got the ability to show a much better performance," he added.

Pacer Taskin Ahmed returned home after suffering a side strain in the first match and Al-Amin Hossain is most likely going to replace him for the second game. It's a tour where right-arm paceman Al-Amin Hossain can revive his career. He had vanished from the scene after being sent back home from World Cup due to disciplinary issues.

"Yes, Taskin's injury created an opportunity for him [Al-Amin Hossain]," said Faruque.

The team think-tank however, will look forward to the top order to deliver tomorrow, after their dismal showing in the first game. Rony Talukdar, Soumya Sarker and Mominul Haque failed to provide a platform and only the fifth wicket 120-run stand between Nasir Hossain and Liton Das helped the team to avoid a complete embarrassment.