

# SPORT

## It's make or break against Afghans

ATIQUÉ ANAM from Trivandrum

Despite their waning prowess in South Asian football, there is one statistic that Bangladesh can take heart from and one that they would desperately want to keep unblemished. The men in red and green have never lost against Afghanistan -- the holders of SAFF Championship and arguably the most-improved side of the region over the last decade -- in a competitive match. Bangladesh have beaten the Lions of Khorasan once in five meetings while drawing on the other four occasions, the last of which came during a friendly at the Bangabandhu National Stadium in June this year.

Tomorrow at the Trivandrum Sports Hub, alternatively called the Greenfield Stadium, Mamunul and Co. will be taking on the Afghans, knowing that this 'is a must-win game' for them and one that might shape their fate in the tournament. After meek exits from the group stages of the two previous editions, Bangladesh and their new coach Maruful Haque are bent on winning this opening match so that the rest of the campaign in the group, which also features the ever-so-impressive Maldives and a fast-improving Bhutan, becomes easier.

The coach admitted that he didn't get enough time to prepare the side for this major tournament, but felt the experience of playing together and having played a host of qualifying and friendly matches this year made sure the players were well-oiled.

"It's true that I got only 18 days to train the team, but we've worked hard in those days for this tournament which is the most important one for this region. These players have been playing together for quite some time and they played so many matches this year that I think the lack of preparation time will not be that big of an issue," the UEFA A-licensed coach said during the official pre-tournament press conference.

Skipper Mamunul Islam felt the matches they played against teams like Australia and Jordan in the World Cup qualifies this year have given them confidence of taking on any side.

"Afghanistan are undoubtedly a good side and they have better individual players. But we are not bad either; they play power football while we play more tactical football," opined the midfielder.

Bangladesh, who held a tactical training session yesterday afternoon following two days of recovery sessions since arriving at the Kerala capital, thankfully have had no injury issues thus far. However, defensive midfielder Jamal Hossain Bhuiyan is all but ruled out of Thursday's Afghanistan fixture as he has not yet recovered enough to be match-fit, with either Moneam Khan Raju or Atiqur Rahman Meshu likely to take his place.



The captains and coaches of the seven participating teams pose for photographs during the pre-tournament press conference of the Suzuki SAFF Cup, 2015 at the Vivanta Taj Hotel in Trivandrum, Kerala yesterday.

PHOTO: BFF

## Trivandrum misses the vibe

ATIQUÉ ANAM from Trivandrum

As the football world reeled from the sensational punishments meted out to the two most powerful men of the game, one idyllic city in the southernmost part of India was yesterday trying to lift itself up to the challenge of hosting a major international football tournament for the first time.

Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, seemed quite lethargic in getting into the mood of the SAFF Championship, or the SAFF Suzuki Cup as it has been branded this time around, which kicks off today in the recently-built state-of-the-art Sports Hub when Nepal take on Sri Lanka.

The state of Kerala is known to be one of the few strongholds of football in India, and when the average ISL matches featuring the local franchise draw crowds of 50,000 on average, there is no scope to question the popularity of the game in this part of the world. The

idea of taking the apex South Asian football event to this state, and especially to the state-of-the-art stadium, was to highlight the city and the state in a new light. But thanks to the lack of coordination between the Kerala Football Federation, the All India Football Federation and the SAFF, that cause seems to have been hurt a great deal.

There were hardly any noticeable promotional activities surrounding the event in the city as most of the activities were confined within the walls of the two five-star hotels where the seven teams and the officials were staying.

The indifference towards a major tournament like this and the inherent organising failures took much of the focus away from the game during the pre-tournament joint-press conference. Afghanistan coach Peter Segrt started the pre-tournament joint-press conference with a flurry of allegations of organisational inefficiency, which were shared by most of his peers, and quite interestingly, reinforced by the coach of

the host country, Stephen Constantine.

Once the frustration and accusations were set aside and the game took the centre-stage, it was evident how much this tournament meant to most of these teams. Most of the teams have been preparing for the last 15 to 20 days and some of those teams, including Maldives and Bhutan, came here after holding training camps overseas.

Afghanistan -- the defending champions who have been pitted in Group B alongside Maldives, Bangladesh and Bhutan -- have brought a new-look side with only two players retained from the previous edition two years ago. Yet, they are the favourites thanks to 18 Europe-based players in their ranks, while India, the beaten finalists in the last edition, are the six-time winners of this tournament and will start as favourites in Group A, which also features Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Most of the coaches felt that this tournament would be very competitive since there is very little difference between most of the teams in terms of quality.

## Meeting today for Tigers' strategy

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's) cricket operations committee is scheduled to meet in the afternoon today to formulate the national team's upcoming plans.

More importantly, the meeting is likely to provide the board with a recommendation regarding Bangladesh's upcoming series against Zimbabwe.

Bangladesh were originally supposed to play two Tests against Zimbabwe in January. However, a recent statement from BCB president Nazmul Hassan Papon suggests that the board might replace the Tests with T20s in order to help the team prepare for the upcoming ICC World Twenty20. However a final decision will only be made once suggestions are received both from the team management and the cricket operations committee.

The word around the BCB headquarters at the moment is that the committee may go on to recommend that Bangladesh play at least one Test aside from the T20s against Zimbabwe next month.

"That may be a possibility. But there are still plenty of discussions left to have," cricket operations chairman Naimur Rahman told The Daily Star.

"We will be discussing a number of issues in the meeting today aside from the Zimbabwe series. We have to make a proper plan for the ICC World T20 and the Asia Cup. But at the same time we also have to focus on the longer version of the game," he added.

A lot will depend on what steps the board takes in the next few days. The question of course remains whether the upcoming national camp will concentrate solely on T20 cricket or whether there will be a focus on Test cricket as well.

The plan will have to be made in accordance with the schedule of the Asia Cup.

BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury yesterday told reporters that the Asia Cup is scheduled to begin on February 24 and will go on till March 6. All the matches will take place in Fatullah and Mirpur.

The tournament is set to host eleven matches between five teams. The fifth spot will be finalised after four associate teams take on each other in the qualifiers which will begin on February 19.

## Baz to call time in February

APP, Wellington



Blockbusting New Zealand batsman Brendon McCullum announced Tuesday he will bow out of international cricket after the Test series against Australia in February, saying "all good things must come to an end".

The New Zealand captain's 101st and last Test will be the second Test against Australia which starts in his home town, Christchurch, on February 20.

"I've loved my opportunity to play for and captain the Black Caps," the 34-year-old said.

McCullum said there was "something romantic" about finishing in front of his home crowd and he made the announcement now because his name would be missing when the New Zealand team is named soon for the World Twenty20 in India from March 8 to April 3.

"Ideally, I would have preferred to wait until after the Test in Christchurch to make this news public," he said.

"However, the schedule for naming the ICC World T20 squads means I couldn't have managed this without causing a lot of confusion and speculation, something I was keen to avoid."

The big-hitter, with a Test best 302 and co-holder of the world record of 100 Test sixes with Australian Adam Gilchrist, said now was not the time for him to dwell on his achievements.

"There's a time and place for reflection and that's at the end of your career," he said.

"For now, I'll be giving all my attention to helping the team focus on what's coming up over the next few weeks -- and making sure we're in the best possible shape for what's going to be a very challenging summer."

Kane Williamson was confirmed by New Zealand officials as captain for the World Twenty20.

## Hockey players' transfers deferred

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Hockey Federation yesterday deferred the players' transfer of the Dhaka Premier Division Hockey League by two weeks.

The transfers are now scheduled to take place from January 24 to 26 instead of the previous scheduled January 10 to 12.

The decision was taken at the meeting of the league committee where all clubs were present for Bangladesh Railway was except.

The meeting also decided to allow clubs to field five foreign players in a match as opposed last season's rule of four.

Furthermore it was decided that the clubs could sign up to a maximum of seven players from BKSP and three from service teams, subject to the permission of the service authorities.

The season is scheduled to get underway in March with the Club Cup tournament.



Members of the Bangladesh Women's team make their way through broken objects at the BFF House on Tuesday evening after a horror show by some hooligans, who stormed at the country's football headquarters and vandalised its furniture and window panes in what appeared to be a follow-up action that brewed in a Bangladesh Championship League match between Arambagh KS and Police AC at the Kamalapur Stadium.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Mushy picked by Karachi

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh wicketkeeper-batsman Mushfiqur Rahim was picked by Karachi Kings during the last day of the draft of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) yesterday.

Mushfiqur was selected in the Silver category for the fixed price of 25,000 US Dollars by the Karachi franchise. He became the fourth Bangladeshi cricketer to be picked in the PSL after Shakib Al Hasan, Mustafizur Rahman and Tamim Iqbal.

Aside from Mushfiqur and Shakib, the Karachi Kings have also signed up Shoaib Malik, Ravi Bopara, Lendl Simmons, Sohail Tanvir and Mohammad Amir.

Earlier, Bangladeshi pace sensation Mustafizur Rahman was taken by Lahore Qalandars, while opener Tamim was roped in by Peshwar Zalmi.

The five-team tournament is scheduled to take place from February 4.

### SQUADS

**Islamabad United:** Watson, Russell, Misbah, Badree, Irfan, Haddin, Sharjeel, Sami, Latif, Azam, Khalid, Ghulam, Amin, Billings, Raees, Butt, Zaidi, Ajmal, Talat, Siddiq.

**Karachi Kings:** Malik, Shakib, Tanvir, Wasim, Bopara, Simmons, Amir, Bhatti, Vince, Iftikhar, Anwar, Mushfiqur, Mir, Sohail, Hamza, Safiullah, Dilshan, Hasan, Fawad.

**Peshawar Zalmi:** Afridi, Riaz, Sammy, Kamran, Hafeez, Jordan, Tamim, Junaid, Allenby, Yamin, Malan, Imran, Yousuf, Rehman, Musadiq, Hasan, Asghar, Hodge, Israrullah, Wali.

**Quetta Gladiators:** Pietersen, Sarfraz, Shehzad, Anwar, Holder, Wright, Babar, Gul, Chigumbura, Asif, Shafiq, Nawaz, Nasim, Nabi, Akbar, Bismillah, Sangakkara, Cheema, Raja.

**Lahore Qalandars:** Gayle, Bravo, Umar, Rizwan, Yasir, Maqsood, Mustafizur, Cooper, Delpoort, Gohar, Azam, Zia, Zohaib, Azhar, Yasin, Rasool, Razaq, Mukhtar, Adil, Butt.

## Law to return to guide U-19s

SPORTS REPORTER

Former Australian batsman Stuart Law is set to arrive in Dhaka on January 2nd to oversee the last-minute preparation of the Bangladesh Under-19 cricket team for the ICC Under-19 World Cup which is to be held from January 22 in Bangladesh.

Law was appointed by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) as the technical advisor to the youth team and performed his first duties in the last week of August but only stayed four weeks. He is now set to return to his responsibilities till the end of the World Cup.

"Law will arrive on January 2, the day before the start of the final preparation camp and will oversee the team in the three-match series against West Indies and in the World Cup," informed Nazmul Abedin Fahim, BCB's national game development manager.

"Our team played some wonderful cricket against their Sri Lankan, South African and Zimbabwean counterparts but suddenly lost the rhythm during the tri-nation series in India in last month. The last series however helped us to point out the weakness of the team before the World Cup. I think the arrival of Law will help the boys to work on their weak points before the mega event," he added.

Bangladesh has been placed in Group A along with Namibia, Scotland and South Africa.

## BFF House attacked

SPORTS REPORTER



A group of rowdy supporters, allegedly loyal to Arambagh Krira Sangha, vandalised the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) House yesterday evening following their 2-3 defeat to Bangladesh Police AC in the Bangladesh Championship League encounter in Kamalapur, leading to the league being suspended indefinitely.

While some players of the women's Under-14 national team were waiting for their bus at the BFF House's reception area, a group of 30-35 people rushed into the four-storied building and started wrecking everything in sight.

Windows were shattered and the reception area was vandalised while some vehicles in the parking area were also targeted, creating anxiety among the women footballers and BFF employees.

The unruly group managed to flee before police arrived and secured the BFF House. However, no one was injured.

The incident happened in the aftermath of Arambagh and Police's encounter, where supporters wrangled with each other as assistant referee Monir Hossain was left with a head injury.

Arambagh president Mominul Haque Sayeed, who is also the ward commissioner and a Jubo League leader, was present along with his 100-150 followers to watch the match at the big bowl.

An Arambagh player, who identified himself as Halim, claimed that they were not happy with referee Jalal Uddin, who booked a number of Arambagh players before the break and ignored a penalty in the eleventh hour with Arambagh trailing by a single goal.

"Following the incident, ball-boy Jewel hurled abuse towards the referees during their way back to the dressing room with the police escort. On-duty police slapped Jewel and that made the supporters furious and some incidents happened there between police and supporters," said Dalim, adding that the police also assaulted players at the club tent, which is only a few blocks away from the BFF house, after the incident at the BFF House.

"We don't know the reason behind such rampage but we can speculate that the losers of today's [Tuesday] match between Arambagh and Bangladesh Police did this," said BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag. "We will take legal steps after the getting reports from the match referee and the match commissioner."