

SPORT



Defender Topu Barman (R) celebrates with Monaem Khan Raju after scoring the opening goal in Bangladesh's 3-0 win against Bhutan in their last SAFF Suzuki Championship match at the Greenfield Stadium in Trivandrum yesterday.

Booters salvage face-saving win

ATIQUE ANAM from Trivandrum

Bangladesh ended their nightmarish SAFF Suzuki Cup campaign with a face-saving 3-0 victory over 10-man Bhutan at the Greenfield Stadium in Trivandrum yesterday. Topu Barman gave the men in red the lead with a header in the 8th minute before Hossain Rony scored on either side of the break as Bangladesh won their first points after defeats against holders Afghanistan (4-0) and Maldives (3-1).

23rd minute, earning Bangladesh a spot kick and their opposition a straight red card in the process, there was only one direction the game was headed to.

Rony, who had missed two sitters in crucial circumstances in the two previous matches, made no mistake this time, sending Bhutan keeper Hari Gurung the wrong way. The tall centre-forward could have doubled his tally in the 40th minute had his attempt on goal not been kept out brilliantly by the out-

BANGLADESH 3 - 0 BHUTAN
Topu 8; Rony 24, 66

Maruful paints a sorry picture

SPORTS REPORTER from Trivandrum

Under-fire Bangladesh coach Maruful Haque reiterated his stance on the possibility of an extension of contract with the national team while portraying a sorry picture for the future during the post-match press conference yesterday.

Having led the team to a 3-0 victory over Bhutan in the last group phase match of the SAFF Suzuki Cup yesterday following two frustrating defeats against Afghanistan and Maldives, the 46-year-old coach found no reason to celebrate as he felt this victory did not atone for the earlier losses.

"There is no question of escaping the liability. We had come here with

the aim of becoming the champions, and we are leaving from the group stages," Maruful said. "Maybe we have ended a long winless streak, but we were expected to win against a side we never lost to previously and used to win handsomely."

The UEFA-A licensed coach, however, bemoaned the lack of maturity and clinic of his side as Bangladesh forwards yesterday wasted a handful of chances against Bhutan, who were reduced to ten men in the 23rd minute.

"I'm disappointed with the performance because our team played immature football and could not take advantage of playing against ten men. They probably lacked concentration and were relaxed for some reason," opined Maruful.

The Sheikh Russel KC coach, who

was handed the national team's job for the SAFF Cup only, said he would only consider a proposition from the BFF if it is a long-term one.

"I didn't have a talk with him [the BFF boss] and I don't know [whether I'll be offered a new contract]. But I would only consider a proposition if it is of a long-term nature," said Maruful.

The successful domestic coach felt that the future of Bangladesh football is 'full of problems'.

"There are not enough quality players in the pipeline and not enough quality work being done at grassroots level compared to the other teams of the region. We need more confidence in our players and more aggressive football from them to change this situation," explained Maruful.

Decision on Maruful soon

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) will soon take a decision regarding the position of the national team's head coach as Maruful Haque's contract with the team came to an end after Bangladesh's exit from the SAFF Suzuki Cup yesterday.

The question remains as to whether Maruful will be reappointed for the Bangabandhu Gold Cup.

"I will sit with the national teams committee in one or two days to discuss the issue of the coach. I can't say anything regarding the decision of the coach's position," said BFF president Kazi Salahuddin, hinting that a local coach would guide the side in the eight-match tournament scheduled to take place from January 8 to 18. The BFF president further pointed out that the media were 'wrong' to state that Maruful would not continue as head coach after the SAFF Cup.

About the performance of the national team in the SAFF Championship, Salahuddin said, "I am very disappointed and surprised with the outcome. I can't understand the reason behind such a disappointing performance."

Imran backs Amir's return

AFP, Karachi

Legendary Pakistan all-rounder Imran Khan on Monday said he backs convicted spot-fixer Mohammad Amir's return to international cricket, urging sceptical players and fans to support the tainted paceman.

The 23-year-old Amir, who completed his five-year ban earlier this year, caused a stir last week when he turned up for fitness camp for prospective national players, with former Twenty20 captain Mohammad Hafeez and current one-day captain Azhar Ali boycotting training Friday.

Left-arm Amir is tipped to be selected for next month's limited-overs tour of New Zealand, almost six years after he and two others were banned and sentenced to six months in jail for arranging deliberate no-balls during a Test against England in exchange for money.

Khan, who led Pakistan to their only World Cup victory and is revered among the country's cricketing fraternity, said Amir had pled guilty before a court and deserved another chance.

"A 19-year-old boy commits a mistake and then did not lie in the court, confesses his guilt and completes his punishment, he should play again," Khan said in an interview on Pakistan's ARY channel. Amir was actually 18 at the time.

"He has apologised to everyone so I appeal to all those who are opposing his return to stop their moves against him," he added.

Khan, a former Pakistan captain turned opposition party leader, did not miss an opportunity to swing a punch at Pakistan's leaders in the interview.

"Criminals are running the country, so it is irrational that someone who has completed his sentence is opposed on his return," he said.

Before Amir's ban, Khan had described him as "the hottest property in international cricket", while another legendary paceman, Wasim Akram, said Amir was better than him at age 18.



Bodybuilding as a sport nowadays is not as popular as it was before when it was an obsession especially in the old part of Dhaka and different districts of the country. The art of muscle building has now been mostly confined to an annual event of Bangladesh Bodybuilding Federation. Here some bodybuilders perform during the qualifying phase of the 17th National Championship, which will conclude at the NSC Tower Auditorium today.

Nat'l women's handball begins

SPORTS REPORTER

The 26th National Women's Handball Championship witnessed a series of one-sided matches on the opening day of the competition yesterday. Twelve matches took place at two venues.

The highlight of the matches that took place at the Shaheed (Captain) M Mansoor Ali National Handball Stadium was the drubbing that Dhaka gave Feni as they beat them 25-0. They also beat Dinajpur 11-6.

Amongst the day's other games, Panchagarh and Jamalpur and Naogaon also witnessed wins.

At the Sultan Kamal Women's Sports Complex in Dhanmondi, Bangladesh Police beat Kishorganj 15-9, Kushtia beat Gopalganj 14-5, Faridpur outplayed Chuadanga 20-3 and Jessore defeated Narail 11-4.



New Zealand opener Martin Guptill plays a pull shot on way to scoring an unbeaten 93 off 30 during the second ODI against Sri Lanka in Christchurch yesterday.

Guptill lifts Kiwis

AFP, Christchurch

Martin Guptill's 93 off 30 balls smashed Sri Lanka into submission as New Zealand took just 8.2 overs to claim the second one-day international by 10 wickets in Christchurch on Monday.

Guptill went within a whisker of breaking the world record for the fastest ODI 50.

New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum said Guptill was "superb" while Sri Lanka skipper Angelo Mathews described his side's performance as "embarrassing" and "pathetic".

After being dropped off the first ball he faced, Guptill went on the warpath with a brutal assault that included nine fours and eight sixes.

For Sri Lanka it was a humiliating performance after being dismissed for 117 in 27.4 overs.

The Ronaldo of Bhutan

ATIQUE ANAM from Trivandrum

He has the same swagger as Cristiano Ronaldo; he even has the same hairstyle and the same shirt number as his idol. And like the Portuguese striker, he is the most valuable player of his side.

Chencho Gyeltshen may not still be a household name for football aficionados around the world, but the Bhutan number 7 has already carved a place in the South Asian football map. The baby-faced striker had led the tiny Himalayan kingdom to an unthinkable two-legged victory over Sri Lanka earlier this year and thereby secured a passage to the second round of the World Cup qualifiers.

The impact of that victory, where Chencho scored a brace in the second leg at home, made a massive impact in Bhutan. The country leaped 46 places in the subsequent month's FIFA ranking from the foot of the table, overtaking many of its superior neighbours, and football started competing with archery as people's game, with Chencho becoming a sensation.

"Scoring two goals against Sri Lanka and taking the team to the World Cup qualifiers was a special moment for me and the whole team," Chencho says during a conversation at the Taj Hotel in Trivandrum. "You know people in Bhutan used to underestimate us. But the win started to change things around. They follow us more now and feel proud of us."

It was not only his countrymen, but also other teams who underestimated Bhutan over the years despite their gradual rise in the South Asian football map. A Sri Lanka player had in fact described the fixtures against Bhutan as a waste. Did that statement make Chencho more resolute?

"I don't know," he says. "We didn't celebrate the away [1-0] victory because we knew we had one game left and we could have lost that game. So we kept our celebrations in check and prepared mentally for the home match."

While that match literally changed Chencho's life, the path to his stardom started quite a few years earlier. He got his first call up to the senior team at the tender age of 15 and scored against Nepal on debut. He went on to score in the SAFF championship that same year before repeating the feat in the next edition. His talent didn't go unnoticed as Thai Premier League outfit Buriram United poached him in 2014, making him the first Bhutanese player to play in a foreign league.

It's his playing style which started drawing comparisons with Ronaldo, someone whom Chencho idolises not only as a footballer but also as a human being.

"Ronaldo is my idol. I like everything about him - his playing style and his attitude," Chencho says as his eyes light up with a child-like enthusiasm. "I've been a fan of Ronaldo ever since I watched a documentary on him. And I want to say that Ronaldo is not at all arrogant as some people make him out to be."

As a footnote, Chencho's favourite club is Manchester United and his favourite team is Portugal.



Aussies amass big lead

AFP, Melbourne

Australia amassed a formidable 459-run lead over the West Indies and were heading for a series victory with two days left in the second Test in Melbourne on Monday.

After dismissing the outgunned tourists for 271 and a 280-run first innings lead, skipper Steve Smith did not enforce the follow-on, preferring to recharge his bowlers and bat a second time.

By close on the third day, Smith had led the Australians to 179 for three with his virtuoso unbeaten knock of 70 off 70 balls with the under-used Mitchell Marsh, elevated to fifth in the order, chipping in with 18.

The Australians have been far superior and seemed intent on constructing a huge overall lead and bowling out the Windies for a fourth time in the one-sided series.

The Australians went about chasing quick runs and lost wickets along the way.

Both openers were gone by the 11th over as the Windies bowlers enjoyed their best spells of the series.

Skipper Jason Holder had first-innings centurion Joe Burns caught by Kraigg Brathwaite at second slip for four.

Debutant Carlos Brathwaite followed up with the prized wicket of David Warner.

Warner attempted to steer a lifter behind the wicket only to be well caught by Holder in the gully to miss out again with 17 following his 28 in the first dig.

But despite their dire position the Windies showed more resolve against the odds on the third day.

SCORES IN BRIEF
SRI LANKA: 117 (Gunathilaka 17, Mathews 17, Kulasekera 19; Henry 4-33, McClenaghan 3-32)
NEW ZEALAND: 118 for no loss (Guptill 93 not out)
Result: New Zealand win by 10 wks and lead the 5-match series 2-0.
Player-of-the-match: Martin Guptill.

SCORES IN BRIEF
AUSTRALIA: First innings 551 for 3 decl.
WEST INDIES: First innings 271 (K Brathwaite 17, Chandrika 25, Bravo 81, Blackwood 28, C Brathwaite 59, Roach 22; Pattinson 4-72, Lyon 4-66, Siddle 2-40)
AUSTRALIA: Second innings 179 for 3 (Warner 17, Khawaja 56, Smith 70 not out, Marsh 18 not out; Holder 2-49)

SCORES IN BRIEF
ENGLAND: First innings 303
SOUTH AFRICA: First innings 214 (Elgar 118 not out, De Villiers 49; Broad 4-25, Moeen 4-69)
ENGLAND: Second innings 172 for 3 (Compton 49, Root 60 not out; Piedt 2-65)