

# SPORT



**Bangladesh girls take a much deserved victory lap after thrashing the United Arab Emirates 4-0 in their final Group-C fixture of the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers yesterday at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.** PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## New-look booters face Bhutan today

*Coach omits Mamunul, few other seniors for the crucial tie*

SPORTS REPORTER



Having officially taken over the job of steadying the rocking boat of Bangladesh football just two weeks ago, Tom Saintfiet was dealt a crucial blow when he saw his side go down to a crushing 5-0 defeat against Maldives in a friendly fixture in Male last Thursday. The defeat seems to have altered some of his plans for today's Asian Cup Qualifying Playoff against Bhutan as the coach sprung a big surprise by omitting six players from the squad along with skipper Mamunul Islam.

Terminating the Bhutan fixture as a crucial and difficult encounter for Bangladesh, the Belgian named his 23-member squad, which is a mixture of some experienced players alongside a number of young ones who have not yet been tested at the highest level. The coach explained his decision to omit Mamunul.

"The problem started two weeks ago when five players including Mamunul decided to leave the team and play for the Navy team," Saintfiet explained. "I have never seen this in my life. He returned from that game with an injury. He didn't help his country with that. His replacement [Mohammad] Abdullah did very well and did exactly what I wanted. So my choice was whether to pick a player who went to play for Navy and got injured a bit or one who stood out and played well and I made my decision accordingly."

The list of omissions also includes veterans such as Nasiruddin Chowdhury, Yeamin Munna, Wali Faisal, Pranotosh Kumar as well as fringe players such as Mohammad Nehal, Sentu Das and Aminur Rahman Sajib. With defensive midfielder Jamal Bhuiyan and winger Sohel Rana already missing due to suspension and injury, the coach's job of eking out a positive result in the first leg of this fixture will be very hard.

"The other players I omitted because they could not perform under pressure in the second half against Maldives in the way they should have, being experienced players. If we analyse that match and the training sessions in Dhaka, we could not take the risk of having

them, especially against Bhutan who have speedy players," the coach defended.

The former Togo coach has decided to staff his side with forwards and attacking players as he wants to take a victory to Thimphu for the away leg in a month's time. The 43-year-old Belgian, however, said they cannot go all-out against their opponents today as the Bhutanese forwards are speedy and can catch Bangladesh on the break.

"I will be happy with a win no matter where the goal comes from. It will be nice if we don't concede a goal. If its 1-0 I'm happy; if its 2-0 I'm more happy; if its 3-0 I'll be even more happy," Saintfiet said. "But we can't attack blind because if we do so, Mr. Chencho Gyeltshen will be free and score, which will put us in deeper trouble."

In Mamunul's absence, goalkeeper Ashraf Islam Rana was introduced as the captain of the side. The Chittagong Abahani goalkeeper said: "I was not mentally prepared for the role of captain. But tomorrow [Tuesday] is one of the most important matches of the Bangladesh national team and we are determined to put our best to win the match at any cost. There are no external pressures and we will take the field just to win."

Bhutan coach Pema Dorji informed that they got only three weeks' time, and a friendly against India which they lost 3-0, to prepare for this match. "We are used to practising on artificial turf back home, but here the match will be held on grass. So it is very difficult for us. On top of that the pitch is very heavy," the Bhutan coach said.

The match kicks off at 7:00pm at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

### BANGLADESH SQUAD

- Goalkeepers:** Ashraf Islam Rana (C), Shahidul Islam  
**Defenders:** Raihan Hasan, Monsur Yamin, Topu Barman, Atiqur Rahman Meshu, Enamul Haque Sharif, Rezaul Karim, Arifur Islam, Mamun Miah  
**Midfielders:** Atiqur Rahman Fahad, Hemanta Vincent Biswas, Jewel Rana, Didarul Alam, Emon Mahmud  
**Forwards:** Mahadi Hasan Tapu, Shakhawat Hossain Rony, Nabib Newaz Jibon, Mehbub Hasan Nayan, Mohammad Abdullah, Zafar Iqbal, Sohel Rana, Rubel Mia

## Teamwork the common thread

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Hosts Bangladesh, exceeding all expectations in the AFC U-16 Women's Championship Qualifiers, stunned favourites Iran and Chinese Taipei to emerge champions and earn huge admiration not only from the domestic fraternity but also from coaches of the other participating nations.

Bangladesh had started the Group C Qualifiers as the third favourites behind Iran and Chinese Taipei, who played the last edition of AFC U-16 Women's final round in 2015 but the home side comprising a bunch of talented booters were tagged as one of the favourites after their 3-0 triumph over Iran in their first match and they finally ended their campaign with an all-

win record after thrashing United Arab Emirates yesterday. Their exploits drew high praise from all quarters, but the most ringing endorsements were from the coaches of their opponents. The common thread in their praise was the Bangladeshis' teamwork, which was strongly backed by the individual brilliance of the likes of skipper Krishna Rani Sarkar.

"Bangladesh played as a team throughout the qualifiers as they have a good attacking line-up and have a striker like [captain] Krishna Rani Sarkar, who has good speed to penetrate the opposition backline," Chinese Taipei coach Chang Li-Chuan said through the team's translator.

Li-Chuan was not happy with the match officials in the Bangladesh-Chinese Taipei match but he believes a good future awaits the Bangladesh U-16 women's team.

"Bangladesh have a good future and they must be prepared well for the final round. I think there is nothing to be ashamed of if Bangladesh can't do well in the final round as they have already achieved something big," said United Arab Emirates coach Azzam Ghotok, who divided the group's participants in two tiers with Bangladesh, Iran and Chinese Taipei in the top tier.

Iranian coach Shadi Mahini, who has been following the Bangladesh U-14 team in the last two editions of the AFC U-14 Girls Regional Championship, said that they expected Bangladesh to perform well but never dreamt that they would come up so strongly.

"Bangladesh are a technically sound side with a good understanding among the players and I think they have a good future," said Singapore

coach Chen Caiying. "The girls of Bangladesh were hungry for the win and everyone always fought for the ball as they had a physical advantage. I think they fought as a team."

Both the Singapore coach and Kyrgyzstan coach -- Pokachalova Svetlana -- said the qualifiers were a good experience for their girls, who have learnt a lot from the tournament.

"You may say that Iran and Chinese Taipei were the favourites but I think Bangladesh were a strong side, who started as top favourites and they proved it in the tournament. We wish them good luck for the future," said Kyrgyzstan coach Pokachalova Svetlana through the team's translator.

"I am impressed with their midfielders and attackers who are really good players. Bangladesh team were the best balanced side of the tournament," said Svetlana.

## Mamunul says he's retiring

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh national football team's skipper Mamunul Islam yesterday announced his decision to retire from international football after being excluded from the 23-

member squad for today's Asian Cup Qualifying Playoff against Bhutan. Even though coach Tom Saintfiet said at the pre-match press briefing that Mamunul's injury last week, which kept him out of training for a whole week and forced him to miss the Maldives friendly was the reason for his omission, Mamunul begged to differ.

"I have not been included in the squad for the Bhutan fixture. I don't know why the coach took the decision and he didn't even let me know about his decision. I felt insulted, hence I decided to retire from the national team," the 28-year-old midfielder told The Daily Star. "I didn't play the Maldives friendly only to gain full fitness before Bhutan match and I did full training in the last two days."

Mamunul, however, hasn't yet tendered his official resignation to the Bangladesh Football Federation.

It was not only Mamunul, but quite a few other senior players such as Wali Faisal, Pranotosh Kumar, Yeamin Ahmed Munna were excluded due to poor performance.

Wali, the veteran left-back, also announced his retirement from international football in the wake of the exclusion.

"I don't want to blame anyone for my retirement decision but I will never change my mind," he said. "The coach might think that I have nothing left to give to the national team so he took the decision."

"I have earned a lot by playing for Bangladesh and I wish the team good luck for tomorrow's match."

It has been learnt that some of the senior players went to team leader Shawkat Ali Khan Jahangir on the previous day to give their opinion regarding formation and style of play, which didn't go down well with the coach and that might have influenced the coach to dropping those players.



## Duckett on Eng's radar

AFP, London

Northamptonshire batsman Ben Duckett is being watched closely by the England management ahead of next month's tour of Bangladesh, his county coach said Monday.

England are due to play three one-day internationals and two Tests in Bangladesh in October.

The uncapped 21-year-old left-hander has been in superb form this season, scoring 1,043 runs in the County Championship at an average of 54.89.

In July he struck a blistering 220 not out off 131 balls for string England Lions in a one-day game against Sri Lanka A.

"I'm having some good communication with (England selector) James Whitaker and England about how they are viewing him [Duckett] and how close he is," Northamptonshire coach David Ripley told the BBC on Monday.



**Bangladesh coach Tom Saintfiet (R) elaborates his plans for today's clash against Bhutan during a press briefing at the BFF House yesterday.** PHOTO: STAR

## A bold step

AL-AMIN



Tom Saintfiet, the Belgian coach of the national team, invited the most important debate Bangladesh has ever come across in its footballing existence when he dropped 'inspirational' captain Mamunul Islam and four other key players for today's crunch Asian Cup Qualifying Playoff against Bhutan.

On the face of it, Saintfiet, with a heavy profile to show for it, might be risking his short Bangladesh stint to even shorter by taking such a bold decision, but with a lot of logic to it. He said he dropped Mamunul for playing for Bangladesh Navy along with four other players while skipping the national team training session two weeks ago and returned with injury.

"I have never seen this in my life," is what he exactly said while explaining his decision to drop the midfielder. Regarding the other players, who featured in Bangladesh's 5-0 defeat against Maldives in an international friendly in Male last week, he said: "The other players whom I omitted was because they could not perform under pressure in the second half against Maldives in the way they should have, being experienced

players. If we analyse that match and the training sessions in Dhaka, we could not take the risk of having them, especially against Bhutan who have speedy players."

He was so forceful and articulate while explaining his decision that not many in the briefing came up with any counter logic. But we can rest assured knives will be drawn from all quarters if his gamble with a new-look team backfires against Bhutan. A defeat will be considered a humiliation against a team Bangladesh have never lost to. Besides, cynics will come up with the same old rhetoric that a foreign coach, who is not aware of our culture, should not have been given a free reign when the Bhutan game was of paramount importance to us in achieving short-term goals.

But for many, including yours truly, Saintfiet's professional outlook is something our football desperately needs to start from scratch with, even if it is at the expense of a defeat against Bhutan. Bangladesh football -- both mentally and physically -- is at a stage now where there is no quick fix. It needs a coach like Saintfiet, whose voice should be heard and heeded by our football authority if we are to be a competitive team in this part of the world and beyond.

Go on Saintfiet. Win or lose, we are rallying behind you.

## Chess teams back to winning ways

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh men's and women's chess teams got back to winning ways in the third round of the 42nd Chess Olympiad in Baku, Azerbaijan on Sunday.

The men's team beat Jordan by 3.5-0.5 points, with GM Enamul Hossain Razib, GM Ziaur Rahman and IM Minhazuddin Ahmed winning their boards and GM Abdullah Al Rakib drawing his board. The women's team won too, beating Uruguay by 2.5-1.5 points. Shamima Akter Liza won her board while Sharmin Shirin Sultana, Nazrana Khan Eva and Sultana Zakia drew their respective boards.

The men's team were scheduled to take on Albania while women's team were to play against Turkey on Monday.

## Farewell tour for the Dilscoop

AFP, Palkelele

Retiring "Dilscoop" inventor Tillakarathne Dilshan has a last chance to showcase the audacious shot that bears his name when Sri Lanka play Australia in two Twenty20 internationals this week.

The Sri Lankan's cheeky ramp shot, in which he goes down on one knee and flicks the ball over the wicketkeeper's head, has plagued bowlers and inspired fellow batsmen since he unveiled it in 2008.

Fans have a final opportunity to see the 39-year-old -- and with luck, his famous "Dilscoop" -- when Sri Lanka take on Australia in Palkelele on Tuesday and in Colombo on Friday.

## Morgan buoyed by Eng's progress

AFP, Cardiff



England limited overs captain Eoin Morgan said he was "excited" by his team's progress in 50-over cricket despite a season-ending four-wicket loss to Pakistan in Cardiff on Sunday.

That defeat meant England had to be content with a 4-1 one-day international series win rather than a first home 5-0 whitewash.

England may still be fifth in the International Cricket Council ODI rankings but they have made significant progress since their embarrassing first-round exit at last year's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

And with England staging both the 2017 Champions Trophy and the 2019

World Cup, it is no longer fanciful to think they could win their first major international 50-over trophy within the next few years.

"We've been outstanding," said Morgan. "Every game throughout the series, we've come out with a hunger and determination to perform at our best."

"I think it's exciting," he said. "The attitude and hunger to want to be better playing in that manner, I think, sums up the direction one-day international cricket is going and the talent we have."

But with world number one-ranked Australia also completing a 4-1 series victory away to Sri Lanka on Sunday, Morgan denied England -- beaten on home soil in the 2013 final by India at Edgbaston -- were favourites for next year's Champions Trophy.

"Australia are playing some really strong cricket... South Africa, India as well," said the Irishman.

"I know the last Champions Trophy we played (here), the pitches were a bit drier than we thought, and brought in sub-continent teams."

"I don't think, this far out, you can label anybody as favourites."

Player-of-the-match Sarfraz Ahmed, who also scored Pakistan's first ODI hundred at Lord's in the second match, was the leading overall run-scorer in the series with exactly 300 at an average of 60.

"The way Sarfraz batted, this whole tour he's been exceptional," said Pakistan one-day captain Azhar Ali following a much-needed win.

"He's been positive and scoring good runs at number five, so we've got some good performances but we just need to bind it together."