

Former footballers 'feeling empty'

SPORTS REPORTER

The country's former national footballers are bearing internal bleeding after having watched Bangladesh's timid surrender to lightweights Bhutan in their Asian Cup Play-Off Qualifiers on Monday and they partly laid the blame for the 'unacceptable defeat' on the lack of quality players.

Although no former footballers are ready to accept the defeat against Bhutan, the present condition of the national football team has not reached its nadir overnight. While once there were good replacements in all positions till the early 90s, the players' pipeline has been stagnating for a long time. It is a harsh truth that none of the players of current bunch are really capable of competing at the international level with their poor skills, positional sense, technique and knowledge.

"I am really shocked and shattered by the defeat. It is not acceptable that the footballers, who have been earning millions from the domestic circuit, can lose to a team like Bhutan. To be truthful, I don't want to introduce myself as a footballer," said former national team footballer Hasanuzzaman Khan Bablu, a midfielder who made a great contribution in Bangladesh's second-place finish in the inaugural President's Cup in Dhaka.

"There is not a single player in the current team of our calibre and it is also true that the footballers do not seem to have any feelings after such defeat," said Bablu, who played in the 70s and early 80s. "However the higher-ups of the football federation and the clubs cannot avert their responsibility for such consequence."

"I never dreamt of a defeat against Bhutan. It is a totally unexpected result but it is the outcome of not having a proper plan of development," said Sheikh Mohammad Aslam, a national striker who was well known for his powerful side-volleys and trademark headers.

Having said that there is no match-winning striker at the moment, the former Abahani striker



(L) Dejected Bangladesh players after their defeat to Bhutan. (R) Fans express their anger with banners denouncing the current state of the national team.



Salahuddin knew result from before

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Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Kazi Salahuddin said he knew what the outcome of the Bangladesh-Bhutan encounter of the Asian Cup Play-Off Qualifiers would be and that he was not surprised with the 3-1 drubbing at the hands of Bhutan.

"I expected this result. What I predicted happened [in Thimphu] because I knew my defence was not good in dead-ball situations. When they concede five goals in a practice match, you cannot call it a defence. I knew this would be the result," said Salahuddin, who wants to learn from this defeat and take new initiatives.

"We have future plan and there is no worry about it. We know how to lose and how to win. What we have to do is to take a lesson from the defeat and restructure things. We have learned that this is not a team and we will build a new team," said the BFF president who has been at the helm of the federation for nearly nine years.

The BFF said that they would reveal the overall future planning in 15 to 20 days and that they have a British technical and strategic director working on it.

added: "Now the players are very weak technically and they are not willing to sharpen their technique through individual training. A striker can only demonstrate his best when he is super fit, but they lack willingness to be a good striker."

However, former national captain Jewel Rana believes that Bangladesh would not lose to Bhutan again if they played with proper plan.

"It is painful for me as a former footballer but I believe the standard of Bangladesh football has not fallen that far. However the defeat against Bhutan is not acceptable. I think there was a lack of a proper plan and tactics as our footballer are not fit for hit-and-run football. The players don't have that physique or technique to pick up this type of style within a few days," said Jewel, who guided the national team to win the SAF Games gold medal in 1999.

Jewel believes a centre-back has a lot of roles in the match as he synchronizes with the wing-backs as well as the midfielders, and said it was problematic that Bangladesh do not have any permanent centre-backs in the team.

"It is a big problem that we don't have a permanent centre-back who is a leader as a lot of players have been used in this position recently. It is an obvious duty for a defender to cover the position of his goalkeeper when the keeper goes to negotiate the ball in their air but I don't see it from the defenders who stick to the post during set-pieces," said Jewel, one of the best central defenders the country has produced.

"I feel empty after the defeat and it feels like I have lost something," said recognized striker Alfaz Ahmed, who had struck five goals for Mohammedan against Laos Electric in the Asian Cup championship encounter in 1996 and thus was named the player-of-the-month across Asia by the AFC.

"Now no one can dream to be a striker due to the presence of the foreign strikers at every club at the top level. Aside from that, there is no competition among the strikers, so they can't hone their skills. I think the BFF should stop allowing foreign strikers for the next three years and see what happens and give a coach some time to build a team," said Alfaz.

"I can't explain my pain in words. I still can't accept this defeat. I never thought such a thing would happen and I can't understand what happened to the players. But I can say that this group of players is not as mentally strong as our generation's players," said wing-back Firoz Mahmud Titu, who had struck a brilliant goal against Yugoslavia after overlapping from the left flank.

Fans to deal with Buttler in silence

SPORTS REPORTER

Ben Stokes' reaction to Bangladesh players' send-off after his dismissal in the second ODI against Bangladesh and Ben Stokes' reaction after that game had drawn the ire of the Bangladeshis public.

However, the legions of fans on social media, through an event page on Facebook have decided to adopt a unique approach to deal with the batsman in the third and final ODI in Chittagong today.

Bangladesh fans have engineered a social media campaign, urging people both at the venue and at home to celebrate Buttler's dismissal with silence.

Mockingly referring to the gesture as 'a show of respect', the stand-in England captain will be glad to know that he will not be facing any boos today, but the eerie silence is expected to get the message across. Ben Stokes will also perhaps be given the silent treatment, although to a lesser extent.

While the passionate fans in the country have let their emotions get the better of them at times, a unified silence at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chittagong might be a fitting reply after the unruly scenes in Sunday's game.

Chencho to join Ctg Abahani

SPORTS REPORTER from Thimphu

Bhutan forward Chencho Gyeltshen is all set to join Chittagong Abahani ahead of the second leg of the Bangladesh Premier League, the Bhutan forward confirmed on Monday morning.

The 20-year-old, who spent last season on loan in Thailand's second tier after being signed by premier league outfit Buriram United, said he will arrive in Bangladesh within the week to join Chittagong Abahani.

"I was contacted by Chittagong Abahani's Serbian coach [former coach Jozef Pavlik] and decided to join the club, who are one of the best in Bangladesh," Chencho said. "As I want to play in different leagues, I hope to do well in Bangladesh. I will be coming by the 15th of this month."

Chencho, affectionately known as CG7 for the similarities of his playing style to that of Cristiano Ronaldo, added to his growing reputation as one of the best forwards in South Asia by helping Bhutan seal a final round qualification spot for the 2019 Asian



Cup with a brace in their 3-1 win over Bangladesh on Monday night.

Already the highest scorer for the Himalayan Kingdom with 9 goals in 23 matches, Chencho is expected to add valuable firepower to big-spenders Chittagong Abahani, who are currently in third position on the league table, just one point behind joint leaders Rahmatganj MFS and Sheikh Jamal DC with two rounds remaining in the first leg.

Shakil Mahmud Chowdhury, football manager of Chittagong Abahani, confirmed in Dhaka that Chencho will play for Chittagong Abahani from the second leg of the ongoing professional football league.

Pogba sinks Netherlands

Benteke scores fastest ever international goal

AFP, Amsterdam

A searing first-half strike from Paul Pogba handed France a 1-0 win at rivals the Netherlands as Belgium and Portugal clocked up 6-0 victories and Christian Benteke grabbed a slice of World Cup qualifying history.

Criticised by coach Didier Deschamps for his performance in Friday's 4-1 win over Bulgaria in Paris, the world's most expensive footballer emphatically replied with a towering display for Les Bleus in Amsterdam in the most eye-catching fixture on Monday.

The Manchester United midfielder's powerful hit from 25 metres out after half an hour left diving Dutch goalkeeper Maarten Stekelenburg able to get his hands to the fizzing ball but unable to stop it.

"I didn't speak to him (Pogba), I just said a few words to him before entering the changing rooms, 'I have confidence in you,'" said Deschamps.

"The match confirms what he is able to do. Pogba was much better in

everything he did. He showed what he can do."

"We never doubted he could do it. We mustn't forget Paul is relatively young and he can still progress."

France, losing finalists on home soil at Euro 2016, are equal on seven points at the top of Group A with Sweden, who beat Bulgaria 3-0 at home in Solna. The two countries will play on November 11 at the Stade de France.

Pogba, 23, was imperial in front of a central defence made up of Raphael Varane and Laurent Koscielny, who pushed back wave after wave of Dutch attacks.

And Pogba nearly doubled his account with a header off a Dimitri Payet corner on 66 minutes just lacking power.

"If the team has a good match, I have a good match," said a defiant Pogba. "If it's a bad match, I have a bad match."

"We're not going to talk about individual performances. It's true it's not always nice to hear criticism, 'bad things' about myself. There wasn't any answer. Today it was a good team effort."

The Dutch failed to make it to the Euros and now sit third in the group,

needing to improve fast if they are to make it to Russia in 2018.

Belgium and Portugal went on goal sprees against minnows Gibraltar and the Faroe Islands.

Belgium striker Benteke set a new World Cup record for the fastest goal ever -- just seven seconds -- on his way to a hat-trick in Faro.

Belgium top Group H on nine points out of nine, ahead of Greece on goal difference.

The 25-year-old Crystal Palace forward picked up the ball in the first action in Faro and racing towards goal with the Gibraltar defence in disarray left goalie Deren Ibrahim with no chance.

Benteke's quick-fire goal eclipsed the previous best of 8.3 seconds achieved by San Marino's Davide Gualtieri in a World Cup qualifier against England in November 1993.

Portugal, bidding to catch Group B leaders Switzerland, matched their 6-0 win over Andorra on Friday.

Andre Silva scored a hat-trick for the European champions before captain Cristiano Ronaldo netted his fifth goal in four days, with Joao Cancelo and Joao Moutinho also scoring late on.

Ashwin's 13 seals whitewash

AFP, Indore

Spinner Ravichandran Ashwin claimed seven wickets to lead India's whitewash of New Zealand as the hosts romped to a 321-run victory on day four of the third and final Test on Tuesday.

Ashwin with career-best match figures of 13-140 helped India skittle out the visitors, who were chasing a daunting 475-run target, for 153 in under two sessions of play at Indore.

Ashwin, the highest wicket-taker in the three Tests with 27 scalps, was named both man of the match and player of the series.

India, who climbed to the top of the world Test rankings after their series-clinching win in Kolkata, remain in number one position ahead of Pakistan.

New Zealand, whitewashed in India for the second successive time after their 2-0 loss in 2012, suffered an early blow when Umesh Yadav trapped opener Tom Latham lbw for six.

The visitors took tea on 38 for one but lost nine more wickets in the final session of play.

"The bowlers have responded beautifully every time we've been in pressure. Someone has always put up their hand," said Indian skipper Virat Kohli.

"And that's the difference: this team is up, we get wickets in bunches. We have that attitude and we do get the results."

Ashwin, who registered his 21st five-wicket haul in Tests, took charge in the evening session to remove skipper Kane Williamson for 27.

It was the fourth time in a row that he had dismissed the Black Caps' star batsman, who missed the second Test



Ashwin... 13 for 140

Neesham.

Ashwin then disposed of the tail as the hosts celebrated their 3-0 series triumph.

Earlier in the day, a century by Cheteshwar Pujara had put the hosts on course to set New Zealand a daunting victory target at India's newest Test venue, Indore's Holkar Stadium.

Pujara struck an unbeaten 101 as India, who started the day on 18 without loss, declared their second innings on 216 for three in the afternoon session.

Pujara, who recorded his eight Test hundred, put on 76 for the second wicket with Gautam Gambhir (50).

India had already gained the upper hand after bowling out New Zealand for 299 in response to their massive first innings score of 557 for five declared.

SCORES IN BRIEF
 INDIA: First innings 557 for five decl
 NEW ZEALAND: First innings 299
 INDIA: Second innings 216 for 3 decl
 (Gambhir 50, Pujara 101 not out; Patel 2-56)
 NEW ZEALAND: Second innings 153
 (Guptill 29, Williamson 27, Taylor 32, Watling 23 not out; Ashwin 7-59, Jadeja 2-45)
Result: India won by 321 runs and clinched series 3-0.
Player-of-the-match: Ravichandran Ashwin.
Player-of-the-series: Ravichandran Ashwin.

due to a viral infection.

Ross Taylor showed some aggressive intent with 32 off 25 balls including five fours and a six, but did not last long before he was bowled by another Ashwin turner.

Left-arm spinner Ravindra Jadeja soon joined forces with Ashwin to dash New Zealand's hopes of surviving the day after getting the all-important wickets of Martin Guptill and James

57-20 loss for Bangladesh

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh suffered a heavy 57-20 defeat to holders India in their second match of the Kabaddi World Cup in Ahmadabad, India yesterday.

Bangladesh came into the match on the back of a morale-boosting 52-18 win over England but failed to maintain momentum to be all out four times (four Ionas), twice each in either half.

Although the half-hearted Bangladesh was initially on equal footing to have the score at 4-4 at one stage after earning the first point of the match, they could not keep up the tempo as the match progressed in the face of firm challenges from well-built Indians, who were very aggressive in defence.

The Bangladeshi players looked ecstatic after catching the Indian raiders four times in the initial moments but their smiles soon evaporated as India started to earn points one after the other from both raids and defence to finish the first half on a dominating 27-10 points.

Bangladesh will play their third match against leaders South Korea tomorrow.

IHF TROPHY HANDBALL Bangladesh set for semifinals

SPORTS REPORTER

The semifinal lineups for the IHF Trophy Handball Tournament were finalized at the Shaheed Captain M Mansur National Handball Stadium yesterday, with both the men's and women's team from Bangladesh moving into the battle of the last four of their respective categories.

The semifinalists of the men's section comprises of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal, all of whom won their respective matches on the fourth day of the tournament. Meanwhile the women's section comprises of Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Bangladesh drubbed Afghanistan 34-7 in the first match of the women's section group stages with the girls in red and green dominating the first half 16-2. Rubina, deservingly, was the highest scorer of the match with nine goals for Bangladesh.

The day's second match of the women's section was a real nail biter as Pakistan edged past Nepal 21-20. Nepal held the lead at 20-19 during the game's last gasp but Pakistan scored twice in the last minute to register an exhilarating victory. Sehar Iqbal of Pakistan tied for the title of highest scorer with Nisha Roy of Nepal as they had nine goals apiece.

In the third match of day, India dominated Maldives 51-13 to cruise into the semis with Menika and Nidhi scoring nine and eight goals respectively.

As for the men's section, Nepal's K.C. Chandra scored nine as he steered his team to a 32-21 victory over Maldives in the first match of the day.

In the second match of the day Pakistan outplayed Afghanistan 44-20 to top the group. Pakistan led the first half 22-12. Belal scored the highest 11 goals for Pakistan. Both the teams entered the semifinals.

In the third match of the day, Bangladesh's Rabiul Awal took a mammoth tally of ten as the boys outplayed their Sri Lankan counterparts 46-17.

Maria plays in charity event

AFP, Los Angeles

Maria Sharapova set foot on a tennis court for the first time since her positive drug test at the Australian Open on Monday, smiling throughout an appearance in the World Team Tennis Smash Hits charity event in Las Vegas.

The Russian star, who last week earned a reduction in her drug ban that will allow her to return to tennis in April, played in two light-hearted doubles matches in the event at Caesar's Palace to benefit the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

Sharapova lost her doubles match with American youngster Taylor Johnson when they faced Martina Navratilova and Liezel Huber.