



The Bangladesh girls celebrate on the winners' podium after clinching the first-ever SAFF Under-15 Women's Championship title with a 1-0 win against India in the final at Kamalapur yesterday.

PHOTO:
FIROZ AHMED

A window into the future

ATIQUÉ ANAM



Shamsunnahar was not the centre of attention when the SAFF Under-15 Women's Championship got underway in Dhaka a week ago. With nippy forwards like Saraban Tahura and creative midfielders like Monica Chakma and Maria Manda hogging the limelight, Shamsunnahar was mostly called into action for taking spot kicks, aside from her usual defensive duties.

But she proved her versatility when she hogged the limelight with a sublime performance in the final against India yesterday, scoring the decisive goal and creating a number

of scoring chances for her teammates, that too playing in a position she was not accustomed to thus far.

The dependable left-back turned into a threatening winger and made life difficult for the opposition teams all through the tournament, trying the best for the final.

"Someone asked sir [Golam Rabbani Choton] a few days ago how a left-back would cope with the duties of a forward. Sir had said 'she will show you how it is done', was her reply when asked how she felt about contributing to the title triumph at the post-match press conference.

Choton explained his belief behind playing her in a new position. "Shamsunnahar is a gifted player; one with great skills with the ball and

good at going forward. Moreover, we had a good left-back in Nila [Nilufa Yasmin], so trying Shamsunnahar in the wing was a good option for me," Choton said. "In fact, we have quite a few players like that on both wings and wing-back positions."

Indeed, there are quite a few fine players among this group. And that gives Choton, who has been the head coach of the Bangladesh women's teams of all age groups for close to a decade, hope for the future.

"When we played the first SAFF Women's Championship in 2010, we conceded six goals against India within the first half. I used to walk to the dugout wondering how many goals we would concede. But last year in the final in Siliguri, we

fought hard, and with a bit of luck, we could have beaten India in the final," the successful coach opined.

This group of players, some of whom have already played for the senior side, and those who have graduated through, makes the coach optimistic that Bangladesh can win the SAFF Women's Championship title in three years' time, if not less.

"I really think and hope that we will be in a position to win the title in 2020," he said.

Choton was probably being a bit conservative in his assessment. Truth be told, if the current blend of youth and experienced players are properly guided and kept in training, they can win the title as early as the next edition in 2018.

Girls add SAFF to conquests

SPORTS REPORTER



The otherwise underappreciated Bishreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur turned into a scene of great joy for Bangladesh football yesterday. The venue at the remote corner of the city, which is mostly used to host second-tier professional football league matches, became the focal point of the rise of women's football in Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh team got the better of their Indian counterparts by a solitary goal, scored by winger Shamsunnahar in the 41st minute, in an entertaining final to clinch the title of the inaugural SAFF Under-15 Women's Championship. This group of girls had previously clinched two more titles -- the AFC U-14 Girls' Regional Championship in 2015 and 2016 -- but the win in front of their home crowd having remained unbeaten throughout gives the victory a new significance.

This win was not unexpected as the girls in red and green had gotten the better of the same opposition twice in last year's AFC Regional Girls' Championship and ambled past them by a bigger margin during the league stage fixture of this competition. Yet the anticipation of the victory in the grand finale pulled droves of people to the venue.

There were at least 8,000 spectators, including some celebrity footballers, and quite a few more taking advantage of the vantage points from nearby houses, plus millions keeping an eye on the action on different media formats. They were not disappointed by the famous girls of Golam Rabbani Choton.

The victory margin could have been bigger though as the hosts, understandably a bit tensed by the weight of expectations, spurned a number of chances. In fact they could have got into the scoresheet as early as the first minute had Bhutanese referee Choki Om not controversially disallowed a first-minute strike from Sara Ban Tahura,

who had poked in Marzia's cross after the ball seemed to have slipped out of Monica Devi's grip.

There were chances aplenty in the first half as the hosts dominated the game, with Shamsunnahar and Tahura wreaking havoc through the left side of the attacking third, but there was no reward for a long time. Tahura, dubbed Messi of Kalshindur, nutmegged an India defender in the 32nd minute, but her shot whizzed across the face of the goal.

All that pressure eventually paid off four minutes before the break when Shamsunnahar darted into the box and, despite losing the ball, saw Anuching have a go at goal. The India keeper tried to block the shot, only managing to lob it up for Shamsunnahar to poke it in with a flick.

The second half started in a similar fashion to the first, with Anuching heading over a corner-kick before her snap-shot at the near post was parried away for a corner.

India, who enjoyed greater possession yet posed very little in terms of attacking threat as the game wore on, failed to really test Bangladesh goalkeeper Mahmuda Akter. Instead, the hosts should have extended the margin right after the hour-mark when a darting run by Anai Mogini followed by a flick from Anuching to release Tahura inside the box, but the nippy forward tried to get around the goalie and in the process made the target too acute to affect a fruitful shot.

Towards the end, Shamsunnahar failed to get her legs on the end of a shot from Marzia as the hosts passed some frustrating moments. But they were hardly under any pressure from the opposition as the final whistle was soon blown to a collective euphoria and with hopes of even bigger accolades in the near future.



SHAMSUNNAHAR

Most valuable player: Akhi Khatun (BAN)
Highest scorer: Priyanka Devi (IND)
Fair play trophy: Bangladesh.

Dead rubber but pride still alive

AFP, Melbourne



England have lost pace-man Craig Overton and may make a further change as they try to restore some pride in Tuesday's fourth Melbourne Test after surrendering the Ashes to Australia.

It's been a tour from hell for Joe Root's beleaguered team, succumbing to three heavy defeats which rendered the last two Tests in Melbourne and Sydney "dead rubbers."

Several other under-performing senior players, notably Alastair Cook, Stuart Broad and Moeen Ali, have also been under the gun as some critics call for their axing.

Cook, who became the first Englishman to play 150 Tests during the

series, has scored just 83 runs in six innings, while Root has two half-centuries but only a total of 176 runs at 29.33.

In comparison, Australia skipper Steve Smith is in cracking form and is coming off a Test-best 239 in the third Test. He is averaging 142 for the series.

The Australian skipper is gunning for his fourth consecutive Melbourne Test century.

Even with pace spearhead Mitchell Starc out with injury, Smith has vowed no let-up in short-pitched bowling against England's tailenders, despite claims the umpires should give the lower order more protection.

"We obviously had a plan from the start of the series that we were going to bowl a lot of short stuff to those guys, much like we did back in 2013," Smith said in the past week.

Starc leads war of words

STAR SPORT DESK

Australia speedster Mitchell Starc may be out of tomorrow's Boxing Day Ashes Test through injury, but he had a verbal bouncer for England pace spearhead James Anderson, who said last week that beyond Australia's first-choice pace trio they 'have a problem'.

Starc, the leading wicket-taker of the five match series that Australia have already won 3-0, will miss the fourth match in Melbourne tomorrow with a bruised heel but hoped that his replacement Jackson Bird continues inflicting body blows on the English batsmen.

"I think they have got bigger things to worry about than the depth of Australia's fast bowlers," the BBC quoted Starc as saying in Melbourne yesterday. "I hope he [Jackson] takes five wickets and sticks it up for those daft comments from the Poms. They haven't taken 20 wickets so far in the series and we have and they are having a crack at our depths."

Combative Australia opener David Warner joined the fray.

"He went very quiet as soon as he saw the wicket quite flat at the WACA."



MITCHELL STARC



JAMES ANDERSON

Sometimes you pick your times when you want to go at people, sometimes you go into your shell like a turtle," Warner was quoted as saying by the BBC.

"We've probably shut them up a little bit at the moment. Hopefully this gets them up and going and they fire some barbs at us, because I love that. I love when we're in a contest and I feel like they were quite flat in Perth."

England all-rounder Chris Woakes played the voice of reason.

"The amount of chat that goes on in an Ashes series is ludicrous, to be brutally honest. The thing that is most important is how you perform. We haven't performed well enough and we'll try to put that right at the MCG."

'Kohli will surpass all'

PTI, Karachi

Pakistan's former captain Waqar Younis has tipped Indian skipper Virat Kohli to break all batting records in the years to come.

"The way he is maintaining his fitness and the way he enjoys his game and focusses on his skill level, I think he is destined to break all batting records in the years to come," Waqar said.

The former fast bowler, who resigned as Pakistan's head coach last year, said that Kohli was a supreme-talented batsman in contemporary cricket.

Talking about the best batsmen of his era, Waqar said although cricket had changed a lot in the last decade he still rated Kohli at the top because of his commitment to fitness and improving his batting skills.

"The way I see it he should go on to achieve a lot of batting records," Waqar said.

Asked to compare Sachin Tendulkar and Brian Lara - the two greats of his time - Waqar said he rated the Indian maestro higher.

"I played a lot against Tendulkar and he made his debut against us. Over the years I saw him become a thorough professional and I have not seen such a committed player. He was the best batsman I bowled to and it used to be a challenge."

He said Lara was naturally gifted and could be devastating on his day.

Waqar said that during his tenure as captain and coach he never compromised on discipline.

"I always believe that unless you are disciplined particularly in cricket sense all your talent is off no use to your team."

'Play with full enjoyment'

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza is known for his inspirational presence and the national team has benefited

from that for more than a decade, but yesterday he turned his motivational prowess towards a younger group the Saif Hasan-led Bangladesh Under-19 squad that will leave for the unfamiliar climes of New Zealand tomorrow to participate in the ICC Under-19 World Cup from January 13.

Most of the members of the current Under-19 side are unfamiliar with Kiwi conditions, but Mashrafe urged the cricketers to remain mentally strong and shared his experience with the youngsters at the National Cricket Academy in Mirpur yesterday.

"The time for hard training has gone as they have been working hard in the last year and a half to two years; they will apply those on the field now, so there is no point talking about hard work now," Mashrafe told reporters after speaking to the youngsters.

"What I said is to remain mentally strong as they might feel the conditions there are against them, which is normal. Even when our national team goes there that is the situation for us."

Under the leadership of Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Mashrafe's current teammate in the senior side, hosts Bangladesh achieved their best result by finishing third in the last event in 2016 when home advantage along with the presence of experienced players helped the youngsters.

"I told them to play cricket with full enjoyment as I know that the more freedom you give to the under-19 cricketers, the more they will enjoy and perform rather than placing the extra pressure of reaching the semifinals or winning the World Cup," Mashrafe added.

"If there are no issues with the weather I think pitch will be flat and I even believe that the batsmen will get better wickets for batting. On the other hand the hard task bowlers might face is having to bowl against the wind, as wind can play a big role in New Zealand. That's the adjustment and as they are going 15-20 days early I told them that this adjustment

will be very important for the bowlers, along with the batsman, to play according to the plan," he said.

The valuable tips from the inspirational cricketer had a positive impact on the youngsters and according to skipper Saif the motivational talk from Mashrafe helped to relieve some pressure.

"Mashrafe Bhai talked about the conditions in New Zealand and motivated us. His motivation is on a very high level and it will definitely help us. He doesn't put any pressure and has always told us to enjoy the game, which actually help to release the pressure. Not only the captain; every single member of the team can take the responsibility and it makes things easy. According to Mashrafe Bhai all the players are captain," Saif said after the session.

Before taking the field against Namibia on January 13 in their first Group C match, the young Tigers will play two warm-up games against Pakistan and Afghanistan in Christchurch. The remaining two group matches against Canada and England will be held on January 15 and 18 respectively.



Bangladesh's inspirational ODI captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (L) is mentoring the youth team ahead of their departure for New Zealand for next month's ICC Under-19 World Cup.

PHOTO:
BCB