

SPORTS



Sabina and Co take on Bhutan

ANISUR RAHMAN from Biratnagar, Nepal
Bangladesh will begin their bid to play in back-to-back finals of the SAFF Women's Championship when they take on Bhutan in a Group A encounter at the Sahid Rangshala in Biratnagar, Nepal today.

The match will get underway at 3:15pm (BST). An outright win would place Bangladesh in the last four with a match in hand following Bhutan's defeat at the hand of hosts Nepal in the tournament opener. The women in red and green looked quite serious on the ground during an hour-long training session at the match venue yesterday. Interestingly, the serious mood reflected the tournament's festivities or lack thereof seeing as the banners, festoons and posters were hardly noticeable on the dust-covered Biratnagar. Nepal's most densely populated area, due to construction works.

A slip against Bhutan, a team Bangladesh have never lost to at any level, may jeopardise Bangladesh's progress to the semifinals, as was the case during the second edition of the championship in Colombo, 2012.

Although a 1-0 win would suffice to see off Bhutan, Bangladesh will keep the goal difference in mind. Nepal beat Bhutan 3-0 and so a win by a



The Bangladesh team participated in an hour-long training session at the Sahid Rangshala in Biratnagar, Nepal yesterday, ahead of today's SAFF Women's Championship encounter with Bhutan. With qualification to the semifinals in their sights, Bangladesh will surely look for a win. PHOTO: BFF

greater margin would put Bangladesh ahead when they face the hosts in the group deciding match on March 16 in which case, a draw would see them through as group champions.

Even though Bangladesh recorded a 9-0 win over Bhutan during the inaugural edition in 2010 in Cox's Bazar before registering a 1-0 win in the next edition in

Colombo, Bhutan have improved significantly with their academy-grown footballers.

With that in mind, Bangladesh Football Federation technical director Paul Smalley, also the technical adviser to women's football teams, had a busy time yesterday, showing the women in red and green how they should defend, attack, take free-kicks,

throw-ins and corners as well as how to take their positions.

The team management will definitely be banking on strike pair Sabina Khatoon and Sifat Jahana Swarna since forward Krishna Rani will miss the game due to a knee injury sustained during a training session a few days ago. Midfielder Maria Manda and Monica Chakma will also be an added advantage for

Bangladesh as the two key midfielders have experience of scoring from distance.

Sabina and Swarna together scored 11 of the 19 goals Bangladesh scored in the four matches they played in the last edition in India. Sabina, considered the spearhead of Bangladesh's attack, played in all four previous editions of the championship and took part in domestic leagues of India and Maldives.

"Now the situation is that we can ensure our semifinal berth by beating Bhutan and we are really mentally prepared to win the match at any cost," Sabina said. "First we want to win the match and then think of goal difference."

We know it well that Swarna and I have to do good work up front and we are responsible for scoring the goals. As the team will rely on us, I can tell you that we will be giving our hundred per cent to complete the job in a bid to notch up a big win over Bhutan.

SABINA KHATUN
BANGLADESH CAPTAIN

Under the weather



SPORTS REPORTER from Christchurch

Ever since Bangladesh arrived in New Zealand, apart from the challenge of adapting to seaming, green pitches, the weather too has been unpleasant for the visitors. Despite it being summertime in New Zealand, there was unexpected rain as well as chilly weather which has made life difficult for the Tigers and also played a crucial role during the matches as well.

Bangladesh reached Christchurch from Wellington yesterday afternoon and the entire day had been warm and sunny, but the temperature suddenly dropped drastically with strong winds since late afternoon.

After the first two days of the second Test in Wellington were washed out and the much of the Test being played in overcast conditions, it seems like inclement weather is following the Tigers.

Bangladesh will take part in the third and final Test against New Zealand from March 16 at the Hagley Oval and according to the weather forecast, there will be rainfall for the next seven days, which means there is a more than even chance of rain marring a majority of the third Test.

Even the members of the Bangladesh team were saying amongst each other yesterday afternoon, after the sudden change in weather, that there must be some connection between their presence and the unpleasant weather in New Zealand.

FROM THE LAND OF THE LONG WHITE CLOUD

The Wellington warning

SPORTS REPORTER from Christchurch

I have long been hearing, from cricketers and fellow journalists, about the fear that flying into the powerful wind of Wellington engender even among hardened passengers. So there were some real nerves while travelling from Hamilton to cover the second Test, especially when the pilot announced that the aircraft was about to land in Wellington. I was expecting turbulence and stiffened up for some time but luckily, the experience turned out not to be scary as it was a smooth landing to the capital. Fortunately, I never had a fear of flying and was very confident when it was time to fly out from Wellington towards Christchurch for the third Test.

However, yesterday was probably the first time that I was a perturbed passenger when the aircraft took off from as the entire plane was shaking. The sense of security on the ground gave way, and I was taken to a certainty that the contents of my stomach would escape the way they went in and my hands started to shake and sweat at the same time. After experiencing the most horrible takeoff in my life for at least two minutes, things finally returned to

normal but I will never forget this experience. I now also have a Wellington warning for my friends.

IS THAT MUSHRIQUR?

In the recent ESPN's The Magazine named the top hundred famous athletes in the world for the year 2019 and Mushfiqur Rahim was among three Bangladesh cricketers in the list alongside Shakib Al Hasan and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza.

The survey was conducted on the basis of three fame factors - Google trend score, endorsement dollars, and social media followers, to calculate an overall ranking. Mushfiqur was ranked 92nd in the list and talking about his popularity, the former Bangladesh captain is being recognised widely across the world. Such an incident took place when the wicketkeeper-batsman just came out of the team hotel in Christchurch and a few of the passer-by were whispering, "Is that Mushfiqur?" Just a few steps later there was a group of Indian tourists who started to follow Mushfiqur and were saying to each other: "That's the Bangladesh captain, he is staying in the same hotel. We should take a picture with him."

I indeed Mushfiqur is famous!

Mithun and the will to fight

MAZHAR UDDIN from Christchurch

Mohammad Mithun is not the most technically sound batsman in the Bangladesh team or even the most gifted player who is widely rated as a star talent.

What sets the 28-year-old cricketer apart from other Bangladesh cricketers not part of the senior group is his determination and urge to fight it out in tough situations even with limited resources. That mental fortitude has now taken him to a level of consistency that many of the Bangladesh batsmen lack.

Mithun's comeback to the side for the 2018 Asia Cup was a new beginning of sorts for the right-hander, who was dropped after playing just two ODIs in 2014 - the year he made his debut - and 12 T20Is up till early 2016.

It proved to be a turning point as he displayed maturity and played 20 plus goals in difficult situations, displaying a lot of assurance in the middle order.

Another important factor that worked for him was the team management allowing Mithun to string together a few matches on the trot, which freed him up to play his own game rather than thinking of losing his place after a couple of failures.



The Tigers yesterday reached Christchurch, where they will play the third and final Test against New Zealand on Saturday. PHOTO: MAZHAR UDDIN

Mithun also realised his role and stuck to his plan instead of looking to do anything out of the box, which earned him a Test cap as well in 2018.

"Until you get success you won't have the proper idea of your strengths. Previously, I was in and out of the team... it was rare that I played two consecutive games. There is always mental pressure in such situations as its totally a different environment in the national team and it's a matter of adjustment."

"I have always wanted and thought that if I am able to play a good innings

things will change for me. Thankfully I got a good start in the Asia Cup and since then my self-confidence has grown a lot and I discuss it with the coaches and the senior members of the team," Mithun told the reporters in Christchurch yesterday.

The calm and collective Mithun continued his consistency in the three-match ODI series against New Zealand, striking two fifties before missing the third game due to injury.

After failing in Hamilton, Mithun once again displayed his fighting attitude in the second Test

in Wellington, where he sustained a blow to his chest off a Neill Wagner bouncer in the second innings but maintained his focus. He was eventually dismissed for 47 off 105 deliveries, but according to Mithun it is important to have that commitment and eagerness to play.

"As I play for my country I always try to give my best, but it's not that I will be successful every time. What is important is how much I am trying and my commitment towards the game is more important," he said.

Until you get success you won't have the proper idea of your strengths. Previously, I was in and out of the team... it was rare that I played two consecutive games. There is always mental pressure in such situations as its totally a different environment in the national team and it's a matter of adjustment.

MOHAMMAD MITHUN

Flawless Sylhet win 2nd WNCL on the trot

SPORTS REPORTER

Sylhet became champions of the 10th Women's National Cricket League, which concluded yesterday at the Sheikh Kamal International Cricket Stadium in Cox's Bazar.

Lahana Alam A'sli lifted their second consecutive title with an unbeaten batting record as they finished with 14 points from seven matches while Dhaka finished runners-up with 10 points.

On the final day Khulna (159-0) beat Barisal (156 all out) by four wickets. This year's league reverted to a 50-over format from last year's Twenty20 tournament with eight Divisional Tests - Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Rangpur, Barisal and Mymensingh - participating.

Khulna's Rumana Akter and Rajshahi's Almas Khan were adjudged the player of the tournament for making 205 runs and taking 16 wickets.

Khawaja ton seals historic series for Aus

AGENCIES, Delhi

Opener Usman Khawaja struck his second century of the series as Australia beat India by 35 runs in the fifth and final one-day international to clinch the series 3-2 at the Feroz Shah Kotla in Delhi on Wednesday.

Leg-spinner Adam Zampa took for 237 on the final ball of their innings while chasing a target of 273 following Khawaja's 106-ball 100 to set up Australia's third straight win after trailing 0-2 in the hard-fought series.

On a sluggish pitch, India needed to bat with discipline but apart from Rohit Sharma, the others disappointed against a high quality Australian attack.

Shikhar Dhawan fell cheaply for 12 while Virat Kohli was dismissed by Marcus Stoinis as the Kotla crowd went silent. Ishabh Pant then walked out looking confident but he did not last long either, falling for 16.

Vijay Shankar looked promising but

miscued an Adam Zampa delivery to Khawaja immediately after hitting the leg-spinner for a six. India were in deep trouble at this stage but there was still hope with Kedar Jadhav joining Rohit Sharma in the middle.

Rohit Sharma became Zampa's second victim when he was out stumped; India slipped to 132 for 5 and the onus was really on Ravindra Jadeja to stand firm with Jadhav. However, disaster struck again three balls later when Zampa snared Jadeja for a duck.

In a breathtaking display of audacious stroke play, Jadhav and Bhuvneshwar added 91 for the seventh wicket off 17.1 overs. But the top order failure had left Bhuvneshwar and Jadhav with too much to do.

Pat Cummins removed Bhuvneshwar for 46 in the last ball of the 46th over. Jadhav fell in the first ball of the 47th over. And it was game over for India as Australia raced toward a historic series win. No team had ever defeated India in an ODI series after taking a 2-0 lead.

Earlier, Australia batted well after winning the toss. Aaron Finch and Khawaja added 50 runs for the third successive time in the series before the Australian skipper perished to Jadeja for a 43-ball 27 after a 76-run partnership with Khawaja for the opening wicket.

Peter Handscomb picked up from his left off in Mohali and scored an enterprising fifty before a middle-order collapse got Australia worried. Glenn Maxwell, Marcus Stoinis and Alex Carey did not set the Kotla on fire but cameos from Jhye Richardson and Pat Cummins helped Australia reach a competitive total. At the end, it was enough for Australia to win their first ODI series since January 2017.

SCORES IN BRIEF
AUSTRALIA: 272 for 9 in 50 overs (Khawaja 100, Handscomb 52; Kumar 3-48, Jadeja 2-45, Shami 2-57)

INDIA: 237 all out in 50 overs (Zampa 56, Kumar 46, Jadhav 44; Sharma 3-46, Stoinis 2-31)
Result: Australia won by 35 runs.
Player-of-the-match: Usman Khawaja.



Australia's Usman Khawaja struck a blistering 106-ball 100 during the fifth ODI against India at Delhi yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

India begin with a bang

SPORTS REPORTER from Biratnagar, Nepal

Defending champions India started their SAFF Women's Championship campaign with a bang, handing a massive 6-0 defeat to Maldives in the Group B opener at the Sahid Rangshala in Biratnagar yesterday.

With the win, the four-time champions extended their winning streak to 19 out of 20 matches in the tournament, where only Bangladesh had held them to a 1-1 draw in the last edition. India also has the advantage of playing against Sri Lanka in the group-deciding match on March 17.

India, who beat Maldives 8-0 in the third edition in 2014, toyed with the islanders after taking a five goal lead and eventually added another to their tally.

Sanju struck a brace while Dangee Grace, Sandhya Ranganathan, Indumathi Kathiresan and Ratnabala Devi scored one goal apiece for favourites India.