



Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and his Abahani teammates had their interests piqued by something or someone on the field during training at the BCB Academy ground yesterday. It could have been the potential return of (inset) Mohammad Saifuddin ahead of their DPL match against Prime Bank today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Shakib granted NOC for IPL

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh's ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan has been given a No Objection Certificate (NOC) for the upcoming Indian Premier League (IPL), scheduled to start from tomorrow.

"He has been given anNOC for the IPL," Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury told The Daily Star yesterday.

Shakib suffered an injury to the little finger on his left hand while playing for his side Dhaka Dynamites in the Bangladesh Premier League final against Comilla Victorians on February 8. He has since been out of action, missing the entirety of the Tigers' tour of New Zealand which ended earlier this month.

Shakib's two-week rehabilitation program -- an extended period of recovery -- following the injury was completed on Wednesday but he could not meet with BCB officials that day due to heavy traffic on the roads caused by students protesting the death of a university student run over by a bus in the capital on Tuesday.

However, BCB officials met with the 31-year-old yesterday and the chief physician Dr Debashish Chowdhury informed that the report of the X-ray conducted on his injured finger was positive.

However, Nizamuddin mentioned that, keeping in mind Bangladesh's upcoming tri-nation series in Ireland set to start on May 7, the



team management could opt to call Shakib for national duty whenever they deem fit.

"If the team management thinks they need him for practice ahead of the Ireland series then they can call him back from the IPL campaign. The team management may also decide that he can play the IPL and join the team in Ireland directly after," added Nizamuddin.

The CEO also mentioned that the BCB had advised Shakib to keep in touch and consult with its medical team throughout the IPL campaign, which starts on March 24 with his team Sunrisers Hyderabad taking on Kolkata Knight Riders.

Shakib, who helped Sunrisers finish runners-up in the last edition of IPL, was retained by the franchise. Although Shakib had a torrid time with the bat, the left-hander finished as the second-highest wicket-taker for Sunrisers, scalping 14 in 17 matches.

After being out of action for over a month, Shakib could use the IPL to get back his rhythm ahead of the World Cup.

## 'Expectations are too high'

Having apologized for Bangladesh's 4-0 drubbing to India in the semifinal of the SAFF Women's Championship, the Bangladesh Football Federation's technical and strategic director Paul Smalley suggested nurturing multiple age-group teams and introducing the women's league in a bid to even the balance in the senior women's team, among other topics. The excerpts from his interview are below:

### ON MANAGING EXPECTATIONS FOR THE TEAM

Taking everything into the context, the girls are young players from the U-16 and U-18 teams apart from one senior player -- [captain] Sabina Khatun. The expectations are sometimes too high. I understand that everybody wants these girls to perform every time they participate in an international game or tournament. The SAFF Championship provided the most interest, provided the media with something to look at, to look forward, to be proud of. I apologize for the situation. You need to be patient because these girls will need time to be better and to mature at the senior level.

### ON HIS RECOMMENDATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

The strategy is to have multiple age-group batches with each group having 20 to 25 players and having the programme of training and international matches. It is also very important to introduce the women's football league in order for the players to mature.

### ON THE THREE-YEAR DIFFERENCE IN AVERAGE AGE BETWEEN THE BANGLADESH AND INDIA SENIOR TEAMS

It is a huge difference. I think it is not fair to compare our players with others because Nepal and India have more age-group players. They have a pool of players for each age-

group team, whereas in Bangladesh we have a group of players playing in multiple age groups. That can be an advantage, but development wise it is a disadvantage. So, you have to give them time and have to be a little be patient... It is not that there are not talented players; rather they are young players. It is football so sometime it is unfair to be critical or to have high expectations.



### ABOUT THE ALLEGATIONS OF BANGLADESH FIELDING OVER-AGE PLAYERS IN THE U-15 TEAM

I'm very insulted with these comments and very disappointed. Those are derogatory comments by neighbouring coaches for no reasons. All I can say is that we work very hard to recruit players for the U-14 and U-15 teams because we believe they need training early. The next stage is to continue the development of this group and broaden our pool of talent. There are some raw players in Bangladesh and [we have to consider] how can they get into football without the development of a strategic programme for different age group.



Bangladesh all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz got engaged to Rabeya Akter Priti at Kashipur village in Khulna yesterday. The pair will tie the knot after Mehedi returns from the World Cup in England, preferably after the final on July 14. However, Mehedi is just one of four youngsters in the national squad who have decided to get married within days of each other. Mustafizur Rahman dropped a bomb yesterday when it was learnt that the pacer is soon to be married while Sabbir Rahman secretly completed his nuptials a few days ago. Lastly, Mominul Haque and Fariha Bashir will hold their reception ceremony on April 19.

PHOTO: STAR

## Have the girls ground to a halt?

ANISUR RAHMAN from Biratnagar

Two-and-a-half years ago, a group of girls emerged out of the blue at the Bangladesh National Stadium and enthralled the country with their surprising performances that catapulted them to the final round of the AFC U-16 Women's Championship Qualifiers as unbeaten group champions ahead of strong contenders like Chinese Taipei and Iran.

That group of girls then underwent rigorous training for one year, traveling to countries like South Korea, Japan, China and Singapore, in order to prepare for the final round of the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Thailand in 2017.

They played 22 practice matches against those teams in an attempt to close the gap between themselves and the top sides as well as to alleviate nerves when playing against top-quality opposition. At the championship proper, Bangladesh showed their character and fighting spirit against Japan and Australia, although they were blown away by the outstanding North Korean women's team.

After September 2017, the girls again had round-the-year training and took part in eight international tournaments -- the SAFF U-15 Championship and the Tokyo Olympic Qualifiers and the AFC U-16 Women's Championship. The AFC U-19 Women's Championship Qualifiers and the Tokyo Olympic Qualifiers -- in the span of 11 months from December 2017 to November 2018.

That was supposed to help the girls mature and gain more international experience to bank on when coming into senior level competitions like the SAFF Women's Championship in Biratnagar, coupled with sweet memories of finishing runners-up in the previous edition of the championship in 2016.

However, despite the plethora of international matches, the

that the average of the Bangladesh senior women's team was 18, whereas India's average age was 21.4 and Nepal's a little more. It was also unfortunate that nervousness still grabbed them despite their experience of playing against stronger sides than either India and Nepal.

The Bangladesh team is comprised of players from the U-16 and U-19 teams and one



After having lost their semifinal encounter with India 4-0, the Bangladesh team returned from their SAFF Women's Championship campaign in Nepal yesterday.

PHOTO: BFF

girls' performances were not up to the mark in any of their three matches of the SAFF Women's Championship against the lowly Bhutan, experienced hosts Nepal and a young India. As a consequence of humiliating defeats to India and Nepal, the girls in red and green returned home with a wooden spoon.

After that exit, it is being said that the girls -- who have been tagged youngsters by the coaching staff -- were nervous and could not come back into the match as they conceding early goals due to their own errors. However, the fact is

senior player -- captain Sabina Khatun -- and the performance of the U-16 players has been the best among the bunch. Of the five U-16 players in the starting eleven, Monica Chakma, Akhi Khatun and Shamsunnar were more consistent than others.

Questions also arouse about the team's vulnerable defence -- which was tremendous against Australia and Japan during the 2017 AFC U-16 Women's Championship -- and it's inability to hold the line and track back after attacking set-pieces. Along with the silly mistakes in defence

and the attackers' lack of composure across most departments, it was also asked whether the girls have improved at all in the past year-and-a-half despite all the investment.

Further still, there were also questions over the team's game plans despite the presence of the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF's) technical and strategic director Paul Smalley.

In reality, the BFF has only 45 players engaged round the year and plays them at different age-group and senior level matches. It seems that it has no intention of reviving the women's football league, which was halted in 2013, and even the National Women's Championship is not being held regularly.

Instead, they are more focused on the U-15 and U-16 teams which bring laurels from the sub-continent and Asia although a couple of coaches have even raised questions about the ages of players in Bangladesh U-15 and U-16 teams.

The final between India and Nepal was inevitable as both the countries have good domestic structures and a lot of players in their age-group teams. Those players are gaining valuable experience and maturing by playing domestic and international tournaments while also playing friendly matches. The absence of those things certainly contributed to Bangladesh exiting from the semifinals of SAFF Women's Championship for the third time.

Now it is time for the game's local governing body to rethink a continuous development programme for the women's football team instead of focusing solely on the U-15 and U-16 teams.

## Dreams bigger than the challenges they face

Marzana Akter injured her legs in 2015 when she fell off a tree, and has been unable to walk since then. She has to move around in a wheelchair now, but her dreams are much bigger than her condition. Marzana, who is captain of Bangladesh Wheelchair Basketball team, said she never knew that a wheelchair could bring her a chance at a new beginning in her life. A 10-member team led by Marzana will go to Thailand's Suphan Buri for seven days' training. This is the story of how the Centre for Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP) is changing lives.



The Bangladesh women's wheelchair basketball team attended a training session at CRP in Savar yesterday. The squad are set to fly out to Thailand tomorrow to participate in a seven-day long training camp.

PHOTO: AKLAKUR RAHMAN AKASH



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