

Booters swap big win for clean sheet

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh completed their preparation for the joint qualifiers of the 2022 World Cup and 2023 Asian Cup with a second consecutive victory, handing Bhutan a 2-0 defeat in the second international friendly match at Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Defender Yeasin Khan struck on either side of the break in front of a 5,000-strong crowd, giving the men in red and green the perfect preparation ahead of their clash against Asian champions Qatar on October 10.

Head coach Jamie Day made three changes to the squad that played the first match, with goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Soheli, right-back Sushanta Tripura and left-winger Rabiul Hasan replacing Ashraf Islam Rana, Bishwanath Ghosh and Mohammad Ibrahim respectively.

However, Sushanta was immediately replaced by Raihan Hasan as the former suffered a muscle strain and the hosts were under pressure from the outset in the face of a possession-based display from Bhutan. The visitors kept the Bangladesh backline on their toes with crisp passing

flicked a Raihan free-kick to Biplu Ahmed in a good position, but he took too much time and wasted the chance from inside the danger zone.

Moments later, Bhutan launched a counter-attack with Chencho Gyltsen galloping towards the box, but Raihan brilliantly stopped the pacy striker before goalkeeper Soheli blocked a grounder from Kabi Raj.

Bhutan continued to give Bangladesh the defence a tough time and although the defence was flummoxed by an attack in the 13th minute, they managed to negotiate the murky waters.

Bangladesh gradually grew in confidence with captain Jamal Bhuiyan working hard in the middle to launch attacks and it looked like the hosts were confident of taking a lead.

Yeasin Khan finally broke the deadlock in the 22nd minute after heading home a long throw from Raihan. Jibon also came close, but saw his header go narrowly wide of the near post on the half-hour mark.

Bhutan then launched another quick

Bangladesh 2 – 0 Bhutan
'Yeasin Khan 22', 66'

counter-attack and came close to equalising but Soheli did well to grip a Dawa Tshering grounder in the 31st minute.

Day made three changes in the first fifteen minutes of the second half and Bangladesh seized control and pressed hard for the second goal. They eventually doubled their lead in the 66th minute, with Yeasin again heading home a cross from Mohammad Ibrahim.

The visitors found themselves under increasing pressure to stop the Bangladeshi forwards after the fresh legs of Mamunul Islam and Jewel Rana were introduced, but Bangladesh squandered at least three scoring chances with Mahbubur Rahman Sufil, Arifur Rahman and Ibrahim either missing the target narrowly or being denied by goalkeeper Jampel.

Ultimately, instead of another big win like the 4-1 in the first match, Bangladesh had to be satisfied with the 2-0 scoreline.



Bangladesh defender Yeasin Khan (L) was the hero during the FIFA friendly against Bhutan at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday, scoring both goals and putting in a solid defensive shift during a 2-0 win.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Joy falls one short in U-19s' win

SPORTS REPORTER



Although Mahmudul Hasan Joy missed his century by just a solitary run, the Bangladesh Under-19s secured a comfortable six-wicket win over their New Zealand counterparts in the second of the five-match one-day series at the Bert Sutcliffe Oval in Lincoln yesterday.

The match, which was originally scheduled to be played on Wednesday, took place yesterday on the allocated reserve day after rain meant there could be no play on Wednesday.

With this win, the young Tigers now lead the series 2-0.

In chase of a challenging 242 for six, Bangladesh opener Tanzid Hasan gave the visitors a decent start.

Although opener Parvez Hossain was dismissed for just six runs in the sixth over, Tanzid and Mahmudul strung together a 95-run second-wicket

partnership to set the tone before Tanzid fell in the 22nd over.

However, Mahmudul kept going and strung another crucial 77-run stand with Towhid Hridoy.

Mahmudul -- whose fabulous recent form has seen him score a century and also end in third place in the run-scorer's list in the recently-concluded Under-19 Asia Cup in Sri Lanka in September -- unfortunately fell just short of the glorious three-figure mark.

He was dismissed in the 46th over after scoring a 125-ball 99, laced with 10 boundaries. Despite Mahmudul's dismissal, however, Bangladesh romped to victory with six wickets and 21 balls to spare.

Earlier, after electing to bat, a magnificent 142-ball 112 from opener TAD Zohrab helped New Zealand post a challenging total. Mrittunjoy Chowdhury was the pick of the bowlers for Bangladesh, returning figures of two for 41 in seven overs.

It is seen that the pacers play less matches as the wicket mostly remains spin friendly [in NCL]. But we [pacers] too have lacking. We are not the type of fast bowlers who can bowl over 140 Kmph. And if we exclude four or five pacers, most of the pacers do not want to play red-ball cricket. We need to play as many first class matches as possible, if we want to play Test cricket.

ABU HIDER
Left-arm pacer

AN AGE-OLD ISSUE

ATIQUE ANAM

Kamal Babu was distraught, not just because his team had lost the final match of the Walton U-18 Football Tournament, but because they had lost against a team which had fielded an overaged player in the previous match and, despite there being evidence of it, were allowed to play in the final.

The veteran coach is known for guiding unfancied sides to great things and turning fresh talents into complete footballers. He has been around the block long enough to know many of the players and also the workings of the football administration.

He was understandably upset with the well-drilled Saif SC players for losing to a hastily-prepared NoFeL SC side, but was also

registration is not always taken very seriously.

An age-fraud of outrageous proportions in the much-hyped Indian Super League (ISL) last year had hit international headlines. Jamshedpur FC striker Gourav Mukhi was hailed as the youngest goalscorer at 16 when he scored against Bengaluru FC in an ISL game, only for it to be found soon after that he was much older than that.

While some international media outlets called him 28, it was finally settled upon that his real age was 21. And unfortunately, that was not the first time he was caught up in cheating with age. The Jharkhand-born striker was pulled up in an India U-16 camp in 2015 for being too old to take part.

But since we are concerned here about Bangladesh football, let us keep our focus on what is happening at home.

As Bangladesh is sending teams to age-group football abroad and staging domestic ones more frequently these days, these cases are falling under the scanner more due to increased media focus.

Recently, Bangladesh played in the SAFF U-16 Championship with 11 players of the

The AFC, unlike SAFF, is strict on these issues, something the BFF knows all too well, having been punished twice for fielding overaged players, getting officials suspended in the 2000 U-17 AFC Championship in Vietnam [the BFF did not have a medical committee of its own] while having the entire team ejected from the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers in 2007 [the BFF medical committee was dissolved during that time].

Since those two cases, the BFF has been very serious in selecting players for AFC under-16 tournaments, an age-level where an MRI can give an accurate reading regarding a player's age. However, when it comes to sending teams to South Asian events or staging domestic events, that seriousness is hardly present.

Earlier this year, a semifinal-winning team in the JFA Cup U-14 National Women's Football were barred from playing in the final as they had fielded four players who had participated in more than two editions of the competition, which was against the bylaws. Needless to say, in their third appearance, all four of those players were aged above 14.

event in South Asia and Africa.

MRI AND ITS USAGE IN AGE VERIFICATION

In order to curb age-fraud, FIFA introduced mandatory use of MRIs in 2009 for the FIFA U-17 World Cup, replacing the old X-ray system which was deemed to be less accurate and physically harmful to young players.

The established method of medical age testing in sport is the use of MRI scans in order to determine the state of fusion of the radial (wrist) bone.

Research conducted by FIFA's Medical Assessment and Research Centre showed that 99 per cent of the time, complete fusion of the radial bone occurs only after a player turns 17. Thus, it is regarded as an effective test to weed out overaged players in under-16 competitions.

The AFC conducts checks on players prior to and during tournaments. The AFC regulations on player eligibility provides strong sanctions for age fraud and the AFC disciplinary bodies are consistent in delivering them when cases have been discovered.

WHY AGE MATTERS

Dr. Ali Imran, an associate professor of the physical medicine and rehabilitation department of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, is the deputy chairman of the medical committee of Bangladesh Football Federation. He has been associated with the committee for more than a decade and also works as a medical officer for the AFC. Dr Imran says that even a gap of one year can create a huge difference in performance at the age-group level.

"Up to 18 is the growing age and children grow continuously at this stage before growth is stopped. So even six months or one year's difference can make a huge difference -- both physical and physiological -- at this level," he said. "However, while the MRI can give accurate results at 16 and 17 years, after that you have to rely on documents and certificates."

So, he says, there is no foolproof measure on their part to ascertain the ages of players who were playing at the under-18 tournament. And age-determining MRIs are a very expensive procedure, which most clubs and even the federation cannot afford for every tournament.

The verification of age is one of the activities that the Age-verification Committee of the BFF Medical Committee undertakes, in conjunction with BFF personnel, and MRIs are done in only a few cases. In most cases, they use X-ray reports or their own medical expertise to determine age in other tournaments.

In developed countries of the West, this has hardly ever been an issue as birth registration is a must. But in less developed countries of Asia and Africa, where birth certificates can be prepared at will, players or their teams can take advantage by producing counterfeit

certificates.

While playing overaged players in age-group football can deliver instant rewards for clubs or national teams, its long-term impact can be devastating as has been evidenced from previous experiences.

Despite the senior team failing miserably in South Asian competitions over the last decade, Bangladesh has had some astonishing success in recent times in age-group football, not just in the South Asia region but also beyond it.

While it would be unjust to put all those teams under the microscope of suspicion, there have been a number of complaints from opposing teams in those instances, a suspicion that has only been given fresh impetus by the discrepancies of age of some of the players between two events.

Maruful Haque, a former coach of the national team who has scouted many young and promising players and turned them into complete footballers, says that clubs either scout players from private academies or select them through open trials for their age-group teams.

Only after a player is selected, he is required to produce documents proving his identity and age. While there are usual medical procedures followed to recruit players, no thorough testing is done to prove the validity of the player's age.

WHAT IS THE BFF DOING ABOUT IT? The BFF's general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag feels this is not an issue which can be solved by the federation itself, opining that the clubs need to ensure their integrity when participating in age-group events. He also believes birth registration should be strictly enforced so that age is not faked when a child's initial documentation is made.

"The onus mostly falls on players or clubs to prove their integrity regarding age. The clubs bring players through scouting or through their youth system, so if they produce fake certificates, there is very little we can do at present to stop that until there is proof of those certificates being counterfeit," the BFF spokesman claimed.

Shohag, however, said that since MRIs are a very expensive method which clubs and even the federation cannot undertake for each tournament, they would stress on making it mandatory for clubs or players to have their birth registration on the national database right from the grassroots level. But if the initial information is incorrect there is nothing the BFF can do about it.

Although Shohag raised valid points, with its resources and coaches, the BFF can at least ensure a certain degree of accountability if it properly monitors the recruitment of national age-group players at the grassroots level. In that context, the BFF cannot wash its hands of the responsibility that it has as the governing body of the country's football.

Weekend
WINDOW

finding it hard to take in the fact that his side, which he claimed obtained three certificates from each player to prove their legitimate age -- birth certificate, school certificate and passport -- might have lost to a team that could not vouchsafe for the credibility of their players' ages.

"I have been around the country and I know many of the players who played in this tournament. There are players who are married with kids. There are players who have been playing in first division or second division for a few years. How can they be eligible to play in an under-18 tournament?" the coach questioned.

Interestingly, NoFeL were not the only team to have taken fraudulent measures regarding players' identity or age. Quarterfinal winners Chittagong Abahani were found to have produced counterfeit certificates of a player. The port city side were later expelled from the tournament, but only after the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) took into cognizance the allegations.

These two incidents are the latest in a series of age-fraud in our football, which is being perpetuated sometimes due to the game's local governing body's reluctance to verify age and in cases under its auspices. And the frequency of such incidents is increasing due to the increase in participation and hosting of age-group tournaments, not only in domestic circuit but also in international participations.

A HISTORY OF AGE FRAUD

Age-fraud is not an exclusively Bangladeshi football phenomenon, rather it's a global age-old phenomenon, prevalent more in South Asian and African countries where birth



team allegedly found to be overaged on magnetic resonance imaging [MRI] scan. The MRI report was available before the event, but the team went on with those players as the local football body does not ask for medical-based age certificates, leaving avenues to flout such regulations.

However, those 11 players were subsequently excluded from AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers over fears that they may be found out and be punished by the AFC, the continental body of football.

Last year in the under-18 football tournament, a Farashganj SC player, namely Angkon Mondol alias Sabuj Roy, had produced fake certificates about his age and identity, showing his age a little less than 18. Meanwhile, according to the certificate he had produced for playing in the third division league, his age was 25.

Gourav Mukhi and Angkon Mondol [Sabuj Roy] may be extreme cases of age-fraud, but stealing two or three years in order to get into youth teams is a commonplace