

SPORT



Just like in this picture, the Bangladesh players, especially the defenders, will have to keep their eyes on the ball for the whole 90 minutes when they face Qatar in the World Cup qualifying match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium on Thursday. PHOTO: STAR

Messi's Argentina coming!

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The Argentina national football team are likely to play a FIFA friendly match against Paraguay at the Bangabandhu National Stadium on November 18, according to Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) officials as well as reports in both Paraguay and Argentina.

Following a post on the Paraguay national football team's verified Twitter page, which gave a schedule with Paraguay taking on Venezuela on November 15 followed by a match between Paraguay and Argentina three days later -- both at the Bangabandhu National Stadium -- BFF officials yesterday admitted they were in an advanced stage in negotiations to host the match between Argentina and Paraguay, but there were no talks about the other match.

Abu Nayeem Shohag, general secretary of the BFF, claimed that they had been working on this match for a few days and have been in talks with the respective South American football bodies, even though the final call depends on the government's green signal on security as well as getting funds to host the match.

"We have been working on this for quite some time. At the moment, there is a 50/50 chance of the match [between Argentina and Paraguay] taking place in Dhaka. There are issues such as funding and security assurances involved. If those issues are solved, hosting the match is very likely. We are discussing things with the government agencies," Shohag told The Daily Star.

The local football governing body has been for quite some time planning to host high-profile international teams later this year as build-up to the celebration of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary next year, even though the schedules of some high-profile teams was hard to get.

The BFF spokesman also said that they would be able to come to a final decision regarding the match within the next 10 days after meetings with all the parties involved.

BFF senior vice-president Abdus Salam Murshedy, who is reportedly negotiating with different stakeholders including the agents who are supposed to bring the Albiceleste to Bangladesh, echoed the BFF

general secretary's claim. "Twitter posts do not mean that the match will necessarily take place in Bangladesh. There are three issues here: security, money and a third one which I am not willing to share at the moment. If we can meet these three issues, the match will take place," Murshedy said.

While there has been no official post



from the Argentina Football Association in this regard, Argentine media are already running stories regarding the team's Asian tour, reporting a match against Brazil in Saudi Arabia on November 15 followed by the one in Dhaka.

The interest in Bangladesh, though, will be roundly on Argentine superstar Lionel Messi, who is slated to be back in action for the Albiceleste this month following a three-month international ban, which was imposed on him for openly criticising 'biased refereeing' at this year's Copa America in Brazil.

If Messi does come to Dhaka, it will be his second visit to the country with the Albiceleste. He led the team to a 3-1 victory in a FIFA friendly against Nigeria in 2011.

Even though the Barcelona star did not score that game, goals from Gonzalo Higuain, Angel di Maria and an own goal by Elderson Echiejile ensured the South Americans an easy victory, with Chinedu Obasi scoring the consolation goal for Nigeria.

Focus on stopping Qatar

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When the Bangladesh Under-23 team tamed their illustrious Qatari counterparts 1-0 in August 2018 to advance to the second round of the Asian Games, there were discussions regarding the ability of the hosts of the 2022 World Cup.

Four months later, Qatar silenced their critics by clinching the prestigious title of the Asian Cup, defeat Japan 3-1 in the final.

Now, they will square up against the Bangladesh national team proper in a World Cup and Asian Cup qualifier tomorrow and the tie against the Asian champions is definitely going to be a tough challenge compared to the match at the U-23 level.

Forward Biplu Ahmed and defender Bishwanath Ghosh agreed that this clash against Qatar, who arrive on the back of a disappointing goalless draw against India, would be far more daunting.

Qatar only have two players from that U-23 squad in their senior squad while Bangladesh have 11 players from that team, of whom five are expected to start.

"The match against Qatar in the Asian Games was a different kind of challenge because we knew that a win would book our second-round berth, so we were desperate to achieve that target and, of course, to not concede. We also had chances but failed to convert them before captain Jamal Bhuiyan struck the winner in stoppage time," said right-winger Biplu, who is expected feature in the playing eleven against Qatar.

"I think this time the match against Qatar will be more challenging as they are reigning Asian champions and will play the World Cup. The Qataris play in foreign leagues so you can understand how hard the match will be."

However, Biplu emphasised that the booters would do their utmost to not concede.

"We will play with the same mentality to not concede and hold them as much as we can. If

we hold them for the first 45 minutes, then we will grow in confidence. They will also be crazy to get goals so we will then get the chance to counter."

Of the players who played Qatar in the Asian Games, Ashraful Islam Rana, Jamal Bhuiyan and Saad Uddin are likely to feature in the playing eleven while the others, barring Mahbubur Rahman Sufil, have been ruled out through injuries or suspension.

Ghosh has been ruled out of the game due to the bookings he received against Afghanistan and Laos, but the right-back is optimistic that the defence will be able to negotiate the challenge.

"Yeasin Khan and Raihan Hasan are experienced campaigners while Rahmat Mia and Riyadul Hasan are also performing well for the national team. I think the backline will not feel our absence," said Ghosh. "We know our standard and their standard, so we will try to give a hundred per cent effort to produce a positive result."

India Tests a test for NCL

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With a tour of India, which consists of a three-match T20I series followed by a two-match Test series, set to begin from November 3, the 21st edition of the National Cricket League (NCL) starting tomorrow will be of immense value to Bangladesh national players as the domestic four-day competition could be ideal preparation for the demanding tour.

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) selector Habibul Bashar had informed that the players in the T20I squad will feature in the first two rounds of NCL while Test players will play in the first three rounds before going to India.

It does not require a cricket expert to see that Bangladesh -- who are coming off a humiliating Test defeat to newcomers Afghanistan at home -- will face a very stiff challenge against top-ranked India. That the two-Test series will be Bangladesh's first foray into the ICC Test Championship will add an extra layer of pressure.

Pitches in the subcontinent typically favour spin bowling and it is a line of attack that the Tigers often rely upon in these conditions, but in India they may well be faced with some variation on that theme.

The first Test of the ongoing three-Test series between India and South Africa saw pacer Mohammad Shami run riot on the final day -- bagging a fiver -- after Ravichandran Ashwin had bagged a seven-for in the first innings.

Although it was just one match, the versatility in India's bowling will almost certainly mean that the Bangladesh batsmen have to tackle skillful and incisive bowling. The Tigers, who failed miserably against the spin prowess of Afghanistan at home last month, will need to tune up and work on shortcomings in the three NCL matches before the India tour.

Bashar, a former Bangladesh skipper, said that according to his experience, India will not be welcoming the Tigers with a traditional spinning track.

"Speaking from experience, it won't be the usual spinning tracks [in

India]. As far as my experience goes, I think they will instead be making a seamer-friendly track for the Tests," Bashar, who was unwilling to disclose any specific plans for the tour, told The Daily Star yesterday.

And if Bashar's words hold true, Bangladesh, who only have orthodox spinners, would need to work on their strengths if they are to make any impact in the Indian conditions. Taijul Islam has the knack of bowling in the right areas; Mehedi Hasan Miraz enjoys himself on pitches that offer turn and skipper Shakib Al Hasan excels by reading the batsmen. All three frontline spinners, however, will have to be able to work out how to get top-class batsmen out on wickets that may not be tailor-made for them.

The BCB had made all the right noises about making sporting wickets for the NCL, ensuring the participation of national players and raising fitness levels. How effective these measures are will be revealed when Bangladesh square off against India in whites next month.



Bangladesh left-arm spinner Taijul Islam (R), who is known for his ability to constantly bowl in the right areas, was also able to stick to his strength as he rattled the stumps of batsman Mahmudullah Riyad during their practice session in Mirpur yesterday. PHOTO: COLLECTED

BD women's A team whitewashed

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Having already won the three-match one-day series with a victory in the second game, the India women's A team completed a whitewash yesterday with a comfortable seven-wicket win over the hosts in the third and final match at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram.

Like the first two matches, it was once more a batting failure that undid the Bangladesh women's A team as the home side were bundled out for just 128 runs in 44.4 overs. India reached the target with 10.4 overs to spare.

Opener Yastika Bhatia top-scored with 48 while Devika Vadiya remained unbeaten on 42 as India eclipsed the meagre total with minimum fuss.

Earlier, after choosing to bat Bangladesh could not string together any partnership and lost wickets at regular intervals. Sanjida Islam's unbeaten 44 was the top score for the hosts, Tanushree Sarkar and Rashi Kanojia picked up three wickets each for India.

India A will lock horns against Bangladesh A in the first T20 of a three-match series on October 11 at the Sheikh Kamal International Stadium in Cox's Bazar.

Funding boost for women's cricket

REUTERS, London

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) has announced a funding boost for women's cricket of 20 million pounds over the next two years in a bid to increase grassroots participation and make cricket a gender-balanced sport.

Behrendorff to go under knife

ICC

Australian fast bowler Jason Behrendorff will undergo surgery to solve a recurring stress fracture in his lower back, and is set to miss the rest of the 2019-20 season.

Behrendorff was a part of Australia's campaign at the ICC World Cup earlier this year, where he took nine wickets in five games. Thereafter, he also featured for Sussex in the T20 Blast in England, but returned to Australia after his back problem resurfaced.

The 29-year-old has now decided to go under the knife in a bid to prolong his career. "After a lot of thought and discussion we've decided that surgery is the best opportunity to find a more permanent fix," he told.

Smith, Warner return to Australia T20 squad

AFP, Sydney



Steve Smith and David Warner completed their return from the wilderness Tuesday when Australia recalled them to a 14-man Twenty20 squad to play Sri Lanka and Pakistan with a firm eye on next year's World Cup.

The star batsmen were both banned for a year for their roles in a ball-tampering scandal but have returned to Australia's Test, one-day and now Twenty20 sides.

"We are delighted to welcome Steve Smith and David Warner back into the T20 international fold," chief selector Trevor Hohns said. "Steve is a world-class batsman in all formats, while Warner is Australia's highest ever T20I runs scorer. He was also the leading runs scorer at this year's Indian Premier League with Sunrisers Hyderabad."

The Twenty20 squad named Tuesday will face Sri Lanka and Pakistan in coming weeks but Hohns



said the focus was firmly on next year's World Cup, which will be held in Australia.

"It is almost a year to the day until Australia hosts the men's Twenty20 World Cup and we have selected this squad with that in mind," he said.

"We have looked to put a squad together that we think can take us through to that tournament."

Despite their success in other formats, Australia have never won a Twenty20 World Cup, with an appearance in the 2010 final their best showing.

U-15s take on Bhutan today

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Bangladesh will begin their SAFF U-15 Women's Championship journey with a game against hosts Bhutan at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu, with an eye on regaining the title they lost in the last edition at the same venue.

The Red and Greens lifted the title of the regional age-group competition by beating India 1-0 in the final in Dhaka in 2017, but relinquished the title to their neighbours last year following a 1-0 defeat in the final.

This time, with only four teams participating -- Maldives and Bhutan being the other two -- and

the championship being held in a round robin format, the same two sides are expected to top the table for a final clash.

Bangladesh should be favourites for today's match, having beaten Bhutan 3-0 in the group stage of the first edition before thrashing them 5-0 in semifinals last time around.

The championship will kick off with a game between India and Nepal at 3:00pm today while Bangladesh will square off against Bhutan at 6:00pm.

Bangladesh's next match will be against Nepal on Friday and the last group match between Bangladesh and India will take place on Sunday. The final will be held on Tuesday.