

Sleepless night for Jamal

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national football team returned to Dhaka yesterday evening after playing out a 1-1 draw against India in their 2022 World Cup qualifying encounter at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on Tuesday.

Bangladesh, who came agonisingly close to a victory, had to remain satisfied with just a solitary point after an 88th-minute header from Indian defender Adil Khan found its way into the back of the net, crushing the hopes of the players and the fans nationwide.

The Red and Greens, who took the lead minutes before half-time from a Saad Uddin header, had a number of chances throughout the game. Winger Mohammad Ibrahim was denied by the woodwork while a clever chip from striker Nabib Newaj Jibon was cleared by Adil from the goalline.

Bangladesh coach Jamie Day felt that his



Bangladesh national football team, who had to be content with a solitary point after a late equaliser from India denied the men in red and green a victory during the sides' 2022 World Cup qualifying encounter at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on Tuesday, returned to Dhaka in the evening yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

charges were unlucky to not have registered a win.

"We had a couple of chances, the second one was on the line, that would have been game over but they defended well. They had good chances as well. We defended well. We conceded from a set piece. Just unlucky we could not hold on for the final four or five minutes," the English coach told reporters following the team's arrival at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport yesterday.

The 39-year-old was overwhelmed with the players' performance as he said that they had even exceeded his expectations.

"The boys showed different types of level

away from home in front of thousands of people. We conceded goal in the end, but for me it was the best performance by Bangladesh players. From the first minute to the end they were fantastic, showed attitude, worked extremely hard. They did more [than I asked for]," added Day.

Although the coach was satisfied with the performance, skipper Jamal Bhuyian said that he had a sleepless night after the match.

"I had almost a sleepless night. I went to bed at 5:00am. We just missed a good chance to secure three points against India. We should have won the match. Robul Islam was supposed to stand under the

near post but he was not in right position. Had he stayed in right position, he had a chance to stop that header," the 29-year old midfielder said with regrets before leaving Kolkata earlier in the day.

Meanwhile, Jibon could not believe how India defender Adil managed to make the goalline clearance which could well have sealed victory for Bangladesh.

"I can't still believe how Adil stopped the ball. If there was VAR, I'm sure it was a goal. I don't have regrets about missing the first chance but I can't forget the second one. I could not sleep last night. My luck is not good with the national team," lamented the Abahani forward.

Fans' belief reawakened

AL-AMIN



Football has always been closer to the hearts of fans than any other sport in Bangladesh.

Perhaps many will not buy this eulogy at a time when cricket is head and shoulders ahead in terms of popularity and success on the international front.

It might also sound like an effort from a football romantic to draw a comparison, one that may be partly true but is not necessarily embedded in the new generation of fans who have grown up watching the country's football in the sick-bed, unaware of what it actually meant to their fathers and grandfathers.

So, when a youthful Bangladesh side ground out a 1-1 draw against India at the Salt Lake Stadium on Tuesday night in a 2022 World Cup qualifying game, it touched upon the heart and minds of fathers more than offspring.

It was a contest of two also-ran teams that have never made it to the World Cup proper. Still, this particular battle meant a lot to the fans of the two neighboring nations because of its long history of emotional rivalry.

The match meant a lot to India, who have been striving for the last few years to make the statement that they no longer belong to the lower caste of Asian football. In a far better position in the FIFA rankings compared to Bangladesh and after a creditable away draw to 2022 World Cup hosts Qatar, India were thinking of a maximum three points at the iconic venue in front of a 60-thousand plus home crowd.

It was a first meeting between the two sides since 2014 and Bangladesh had lurched from bad to worse since that



A BFF file photo shows the Bangladesh players trying to foil Bhutan's attack during their 3-1 defeat in the Asian Cup qualifying playoff second-leg at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu on Oct 10, 2016.

drawn encounter. The men in red and green reached their nadir in 2016, when they suffered a 3-1 defeat to Bhutan in the Asian Cup 2019 Qualifiers play-off.

That defeat on that October night in Thimphu was so devastating that many passionate football followers, who had grown up watching the game as a daily dose of entertainment from the mid-70s to the early 90s, temporarily resigned from keeping track of what was happening on the domestic football front. An exception was only made to keep an eye on the progress of the women's football team.

The build-up to India game was still not inviting enough to excite fans, despite the fact that this young side, under the stewardship of English coach Jamie Day, were doing well -- winning the crucial play-off against Laos 1-0. They had also done well in their first two World Cup Qualifiers against Afghanistan and Qatar.

They lost 1-0 against Afghanistan in Dushanbe and suffered a 2-0 defeat against Qatar on a rain-soaked turf at the Bangabandhu National Stadium but they fought hard to make an impression. More importantly, they looked like a team quite capable of playing the proper football that the modern-day game demands and possessed a hunger to learn.

Still, to make an impression against India in their own den was a tough task for Bangladesh, who have never won a game on Indian soil.

But after 90-plus minutes of a pulsating game, it was the vibrant Bangladesh side that reinjected that forgotten belief among their loyal fans: they can play football, they can entertain and they can take the fight to the opposition till the end.

Some might say Bangladesh's failure to hold their nerve in the final moments cost them a late equaliser. But this does not reflect the bigger picture of a game where this young side withstood the pressure of the home side and the vocal support of a partisan capacity crowd, baying for blood; something they have never experienced before.

India might have enjoyed more possession, but Bangladesh were tactically the better side.

The result is the first firm step for a Bangladesh side on the redemption trail. If they can keep playing like this -- irrespective of a win or loss -- they can feel the beat of the fans louder and louder, reminiscent of that glorious past.

'A NEW BEGINNING'

SABBIR HOSSAIN



Those days are gone. Those who once saw the best of Bangladesh football often express their frustration over the dire state of the game. For youngsters, meanwhile, stories of the huge popularity of football during the sport's glory days from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s must sound like fairytales.

This gloomy backdrop may finally see some illumination following the recent performances of the national team under the guidance of Jamie Day, particularly the last battle against India that came hot on the heels of an impressive show at home against the formidable Qatar. Bangladesh played a superb game against India and were distinctly unlucky not to take yesterday's flight back home with three points.

Three leading local coaches -- Maruful Haque, Saiful Bari Titu and Zulfiker Mahmud Mintu -- lauded the Bangladesh's performance at the Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on Tuesday. They have termed the recent performance of the team under the tutelage of Day as a new beginning for Bangladesh football, but also urged for some caution. They believed that the return of football's good times can only be ensured by long-term planning, a good club structure and greater focus on youth



MARUFUL HAQUE

development.

"The return of the glory days will depend not just on the national team's performance," they echoed this common sentiment.

"The plan and strategy is being chalked out according to our strength and the opponent's strength. This is a significant improvement," said Mintu. "Of course, it's a new beginning but we have to take the proper initiatives to make it sustainable. Education of coaches is most important because at the grassroots level, where you have to spot new talent, we have to rely on local coaches," he added.

"I found two areas where Bangladesh made significant progress. One is fitness



SAIFUL BARI TITU

and the other is the change in mentality. It's a really good sign that the team was not fearful of conceding a goal and instead tried to perform their best... fear was not an issue, which is fantastic," said Maruful.

"But we should understand that our technique is very poor. If the technique was good, then [Nabib Newaj] Jibon would not have missed two goals and it was not just Jibon. This team will fight, play well but don't get any results and they will suffer outside the SAFF region, so I cannot be too optimistic. We have to work on technique at the age level, otherwise we will not be able to make any sustainable progress," he opined.

Titu however gave credit to national



ZULFIKER MAHMUD MINTU

coach Day. "It was not just against India, but Day has always chalked out plans according to the capacity of the Bangladesh players and their ability and he set a particular style for the boys. He also emphasised on stamina, fitness and some other basic issues. He also placed emphasis on off-field issues like food habits. He has been playing a great role in transforming the team into a unit."

"I think whether the glory days will return depends not just on the national team, but also the role of the clubs. No doubt the national team's results are important to generate interest among the supporters but we have to strengthen the club structure if we want to make a difference," Titu suggested.

'I feel like an inmate'

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh pace-bowling all-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin, currently recovering from a back injury, is finding it tough to sit idly by and watch the country's other cricketers play the National Cricket League.

The 22-year-old, who has been carrying the injury for quite some time now, had taken part in the T20I tri-series at home last month but is not able to endure the rigours of four-day cricket.

Even the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) doctors are struggling to identify the proper recovery programme and the board is still assessing whether to send Saifuddin abroad, with the Feni

cricketer undergoing yet another scan on Tuesday.

Saifuddin went to the BCB yesterday to consult with doctors, and the cricketer said that being off the field felt like being locked in jail.

"I feel like getting on the field tomorrow [Thursday]. It's like being an inmate stuck in jail; I can see but can't play. It is frustrating; it would be okay if it was for one or two weeks but it's becoming over a month now."

"But it is also a part of life as you will get injured while playing. I have had to stay off the field for a long time and I am getting used to it. I will try to make a comeback soon after recovering properly, which is my main goal," Saifuddin told reporters yesterday.



MOHAMMAD SAIFUDDIN

Premium on performance when 2nd round starts today

SPORTS REPORTER



After an eventful opening round, the second round of the ongoing 21st edition of the National Cricket League (NCL) is set to begin today with Dhaka Division taking on Rangpur Division in Chattogram while Khulna Division will face off against defending champions Rajshahi Division at home in the Tier-1 games. Tier-2 teams Barisal Division will battle it out with Chattogram Division in Fatullah and Dhaka Metropolis will play against Sylhet Division in Bogura.

There was more hype surrounding this edition than usual with national players participating and the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) emphasising on fitness by raising the

required level in the beep tests before the tournament. The excitement will only increase in the second round as the national selectors keep a close eye on performances and chief selector Minhajul Abedin said on Tuesday that the squad for next month's India tour will be named after the end of the second round.

Bangladesh left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman, who sat out the opening round of the NCL due to a slight problem in his ankle, is expected to feature for Khulna. However, as Minhajul mentioned on Tuesday, the 24-year-old cannot bowl more than 15 overs in the second round.

Left-handed opener Tamim Iqbal, who has been going through a lean patch since the World Cup, could not convert starts into big scores in the first round. The 30-year-old,

who was seen toiling hard during practice in Mirpur yesterday, will look rediscover his form and head to India in confident mood when he turns out for Chattogram in the second round.

Meanwhile, this round will see the return of the likes of Nazmul Hossain Shanto, Sunzamul Islam, Saif Hassan, Anamul Haque and Ariful Haque, all of whom have come back from Bangladesh A's tour of Sri Lanka. Opener Liton Das, who also missed the first round due to his Caribbean Premier League commitments, is available and expected to play for Rangpur in this round.

Barishal's Shohag Gazi and Chattogram's Yasir Ali, who failed the beep test, were however allowed by BCB to play after being warned by the board that it would be the last time that they would be shown leniency.