Star SPORT
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Bangladesh struck gold again after not winning any for three days at the South Asian Games, with three golds pouring in on the same day yesterday. (Clockwise from Top R) Mabia Akter Simanta got the first of the day, winning the 76-kg category of women's weightlifting , before her male counterpart Ziarul Islam won the 96-kg category of men's weightlifting. Fatema Mujib got the third, winning it in the women's individual sabre in fencing. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Soumya the big star of SA Games

ATIQUE ANAM *from Kathmandu*

Soumya Sarkar might have failed to score big against Nepal, but there was no failure in drawing fans wherever he goes since coming to Kathmandu for the 13th South Asian Games.

Bangladesh are strong favourites to win the title of men's cricket here, having already made it to the final. And despite Nepal not making it to the gold-deciding match, a strong home crowd is expected to turn up to cheer for a very popular Bangladesh team on Monday when they take on Sri Lanka in the final at the Tribhuvan University Ground.

Soumya, a two-time World Cupper, has been in talks among general people whenever cricket comes up, and that perhaps happens too often as cricket has become very popular in the country once dominated by football.

The Bangladesh opener scored only six runs in their game against Nepal, but once he came out of the ground after Bangladesh's 44-run win, his popularity in this country was quite evident, as he was thronged by expatriate Bangladeshis as well as locals, who were hoping to take selfies with him.

Preetam Duwal Shrestha and Shailesh Maharjan are two friends, both of whom came to the ground to watch Bangladesh, and especially Soumya, play.

"Soumya Sarkar is very popular in our country and so is Bangladesh. They play against Australia, India all the time. We have come to watch Bangladesh play Nepal here. We will be back tomorrow when Bangladesh play Sri Lanka in the last match of the group stage and then in the final the following day," said Shreshtha, who works for NCell, Nepal's largest telecom company.

Close to 4000 people turned up at the venue to watch the game and even though Nepal lost, many of the home fans like Shreshtha and Maharjan were happy to leave with a picture with the star Bangladeshi cricketer.

The two friends also got a bonus, a selfie with team manager and former skipper Habibul Bashar, whom they recognised instantly as he made his way towards the team bus leaving for the hotel.

Najmul, Afif power Bangladesh to final

SPORTS REPORTER *from Kathmandu*

Blazing half-centuries from skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto and Afif Hossain salvaged Bangladesh from a precarious position and powered them to a 44-run victory over Nepal at the Tribhuvan University Ground yesterday, sealing their place in the final of the South Asian Games against Sri Lanka on Monday.

Bangladesh, the defending champions of the 2010 edition which was the only time cricket was featured in this regional multi-sport meet, came to Kathmandu as strong favourites to retain the title.

However, they found themselves in a spot of bother in their penultimate group game against the hosts, losing their top three batsmen for just 16 runs after being asked to bat on a dodgy wicket at 9:45am in the morning.

Najmul and Yasir Ali (16) started the repair work before Afif blasted a 28-ball 52 to launch Bangladesh towards a big total. Afif was dismissed in the final over but Najmul remained unbeaten for a 60-ball 75 to take Bangladesh to 155 for six, a target which proved to too tall to surmount for Gyanendra Malla and Co.

The hosts lost three wickets for 14 runs, and despite a 43-run knock from skipper Malla, could only manage 111 for nine in 20 overs.

The win sealed Bangladesh a place in Monday's final against Sri Lanka, but before that these two teams will meet in a dress rehearsal for the final today.

Bangladesh manager Habibul Bashar was relieved after having navigated a potential banana skin.

"We were worried after the game was rescheduled from 11am to 9:45pm, to accommodate the match between Maldives and Bhutan, who wanted the game to be shifted to today from Sunday as Bhutan have their flights booked for Sunday. The organisers rescheduled the matches and wanted us to play at 9:00pm, but after a long discussion we convinced them to start it at 9:45am. It could be very tricky playing at 9:00am, with the toss winners getting a massive advantage," the former national skipper said.

Bangladesh were worried about umpiring too, with a Nepalese umpire officiating this match, but the match ended without any controversy.

There is no such worry regarding the final match, which is scheduled to begin at 1:00pm.

Skipper Najmul Hossain said they are prepared to win the title. "Even though we are taking one game at a time, we do have the target of winning the gold. It was good that we had the practice of getting out of a dangerous situation today," said the left-hander, adding that they are prepared to play four matches on the trot.

Women's team final today

Like the men, the Bangladesh women's cricket team will be favourites when they take on Sri Lanka in the final in Pokhara today.

Bangladesh, here with an almost full-strength side, won all their three of their round-robin league matches quite convincingly, including a seven-wicket win over Sri Lanka, who have four members of the national team in their squad.

Team manager Javed Omar Belim said they are confident they can win the title if the players play their natural game.

"The wicket here is fine. It helps spin a bit but not bad as a T20 wicket. If our batsman do well, we should win the game. Everyone is fit and raring to win the title," the former national team batsman told The Daily Star over phone.

Sri Lanka's Indunil Hearth crosses the finish line in first place to grab the gold medal in men's 800 meter run on the final day of athletics at the 13th South Asian Games in Kathmandu yesterday. Sri Lanka secured five more gold medals on the closing day to finish on top with 15 gold medals in athletics. Bangladesh could manage only one silver and one bronze in this event.

PHOTO: AFP

Booters relaxed despite tall ask

SPORTS REPORTER *from Kathmandu*

The Bangladesh football team assumed a very relaxed and jovial mood as they went through a practice session at the APF Ground in Kathmandu yesterday, not showing any signs of the stress of playing three matches inside five days or any tension ahead of their task against hosts Nepal on Sunday.

Jamie Day took his charges through half-an-hour's kickabout before getting them to a volleyball court for a bit of head-tennis in order to keep the players fresh for the Nepal match, from which they need a victory to move into the final.

> Everybody knows we must win, so we have only one target tomorrow [Sunday]. Nepal are a good team, but they have a game today so they will be tired tomorrow, which is an advantage for us.
>
> **JAMAL BHUIYAN**
> BANGLADESH CAPTAIN

Bangladesh players train at the APF Ground in Kathmandu yesterday, the eve of their SA Games match against Nepal. PHOTO: STAR

The coach was as frivolous as the players, trying his best to hide the tension simmering from the danger of missing out on the final.

"We don't want to do too much training with the boys. It's nice to have a bit of fun. They're not going to get any fitter now, so it's about having a bit of fun and being as ready as we can for tomorrow's match," the coach said after the session.

"Nepal are playing today. So, we will know exactly what we have to do when we play against them and we will certainly try to do that," Day said.

Later, Nepal beat Maldives and Bhutan beat Sri Lanka, with Nepal going to seven points and Bhutan finishing the stage with nine to confirm a berth in the final.

According to All Nepal Football Association officials, if two teams finish on equal points, head-to-head will count. Bangladesh, who are on four points, can beat Nepal to a place in the final with a win.

Captain Jamal Bhuiyan feels that despite the home advantage, Bangladesh can capitalise on the fact that they will be playing a Nepal team playing their second match in as many days.

"Everybody knows we must win, so we have only one target tomorrow [Sunday]. Nepal are a good team, but they have a game today so they will be tired tomorrow which is an advantage for us," the midfielder said.

Despite winning a match and drawing another, Bangladesh have scored only two goals in three matches, one of which was an own goal.

Nabib Newaz Jibon has been poor in front of goal, but with Mahbubur Rahman Sufil missing out due to suspension and Biplo Ahmed unavailable through injury, the coach has limited options up front.

Jamal feels they will have to convert chances against Nepal, if they do come, or else they will have to settle for a bronze medal which they achieved last time around.

"We need to have the right mentality and right tactics. We create chances but can't convert them. We have to avail our chances tomorrow," said Jamal.

The match will get underway at the Dasarath Rangasala at 5:15pm Bangladesh time

Pakistan recall Fawad after 10 years

AFP, *Karachi*

Pakistan recalled forgotten batsman Fawad Alam yesterday for the upcoming two-match Test series against Sri Lanka, after a gap of ten years following the left-hander's prolific form in domestic matches.

The 34-year-old hit a debut century against Sri Lanka but was discarded after playing just three Tests in 2009. But Alam hit four hundreds in the current Quaid-e-Azam trophy.

Pakistan is smarting from last week's 2-0 defeat -- both by an innings -- in Australia that left not only Misbah but new captain Azhar Ali under tremendous pressure.

The first Test starts in Rawalpindi from Wednesday, a match that marks the return of Test cricket to Pakistan after ten years.

They were forced to play home matches in the United Arab Emirates after the 2009 terror attacks. The country hosted international limited over matches between 2015-2019 although no team has yet agreed to play five-day matches.

Sri Lanka, who also played three one-day internationals and as many Twenty20s in Pakistan in September-October, arrive on Sunday. The second Test will be played in Karachi from December 19.

Anderson returns for SA Tests

AFP, *London*

James Anderson was recalled by England yesterday for their upcoming tour of South Africa after recovering from a calf injury, while his fellow bowler Mark Wood and wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow also returned to the squad.

The opening match of the four-Test series starts on December 26 at Centurion.

The 37-year-old Anderson, England's all-time leading wicket-taker, last played internationally in the first Ashes Test against Australia at Edgbaston in August before pulling up after bowling only four overs.