

# SOUTH ASIA’S WORLD CUP BEGINS TODAY

Sports lovers across South Asia and beyond will have a feast of football to devour upon over the next sixteen days as five nations of the region renew their rivalry for regional supremacy in the Maldivian capital Male today. Dubbed by many as the World Cup of South Asia, the 13th edition of the SAFF Championship will feature seven-time champions India, hosts and defending champions Maldives, rising power Nepal, one-time champion Sri Lanka and of course Bangladesh, who hoisted the trophy 18 years ago. Iconic players like Sunil Chhetri, Ali Ashfaq and Jamal Bhuiyan alongside up-and-coming stars such as Ahmed Wazeem Razeek, Anisur Rahman and Anirudh Thapa will have plenty of opportunity to rub shoulders against each other during this round-robin format competition. Whichever two teams make the final on October 16, it promises to be an action-packed sixteen days of top quality football. So keep your eyes on your favourite teams and footballers.



## BANGLADESH: WILL THE LONG WAIT BE OVER?

**FIFA RANKING** – 189  
**Appearance** – 11  
**Champions** – 1 (2003)  
**Runners-up** - 2 (1999, 2005)  
**Star player** – Jamal Bhuiyan

Bangladesh had their prime time in the SAFF Championship from 1999 to 2005 when the men in red and green played in three successive finals and clinched the title on home ground in 2003. But those days are long gone as Bangladesh have failed to get out of the group stages of the past four editions. Ahead of another tournament, Bangladesh were in a bit of a turmoil following the release of long-time coach Jamie Day but under interim coach Oscar Bruzon and boasting a good blend of young and experienced players, Bangladesh are dreaming to end a 16-year wait for reaching the final.

# ‘No choice but to leave it to fate’

ANISUR RAHMAN

Ahead of the 13th SAFF Championship in the Maldives from October 1, Bangladesh will hope their desire to play the elusive final does not again turn to despair.

Bangladesh were considered favourites at the regional extravaganza till the late 2000s, but that tag has long been forgotten. Instead, Bangladesh now fear another premature elimination following four consecutive exits from the group stages. But memories of the glorious past, especially a maiden triumph in 2003, weigh heavy on minds.

“We had always taken part in the SAFF Championship with the tag of favourites. But these days we have to leave it to luck,” striker Alfaz Ahmed, who led Bangladesh to SAFF Championship glory on home soil in 2003, told The Daily Star.

Bangladesh reached three successive SAFF Championship finals, in 1999, 2003 and 2005, with the illustrious Alfaz playing a vital role up front and making key contributions.

“George Kottan built our 2003 squad for two years and all the players were cut from the same cloth. He inspired loyalty and brought out our best. The players even cried out before leaving the dressing room to play the semifinal and final,” recalled the former striker, who, along with Rokonzaman Kanchan and Ariful Kabir Farhad, kept the opposition on their toes in 2003.

That midfield, featuring Arman Mia, Matiur Rahman Munna and Arif Khan Joy, was also stable while a rock-solid defence -- marshalled by Rajani Kanta Barman,



Mohammad Sujjan, Nazrul Islam, Hasan Al Mamun and Firoz Mahmud Titu -- conceded just two goals in five matches.

“We had a completely mature squad in every department from goalkeeping [Aminul Haque] to the forward line-up. Everything was balanced and Kottan

included Arman Mia and influenced the federation to lift a ban on Matiur Munna to balance the side properly,” the 50-year-old said.

Kottan could ensure the team was gelling ahead of the tournament in 2003 as they participated in the World Cup Qualifiers and Asian Cup Qualifiers as well as an invitational tournament in Bhutan.

“We also produced good results in an invitational tournament in Bhutan, which boosted our confidence ahead of the SAFF Championship at home,” said Alfaz, who struck the only goal of the opening match against Nepal to give Bangladesh a winning start in 2003.

Asked to compare that winning team to the present squad, Alfaz said: “We had good alternatives at every position. Are there any match-winners in the current squad? If not, how can we have faith that they will play the final? There is no choice but to leave it to fate.”

Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon has been named head coach of the national team and given just two weeks to prepare and Alfaz, who already left the national team’s fate to luck, slammed the Bangladesh Football Federation’s timing in parting ways with former head coach Jamie Day.

“To be honest, Jamie Day could not make a solid team despite working for three years. Of course, I admit there is a lack of quality players here. Jamie should have been removed after failing in the Three Nations Cup in Nepal, but the federation did not do that. Since they didn’t terminate him after the Three Nations Cup in Nepal, I think the federation could have given him one last chance in the SAFF Championship.”

## 13TH SAFF CHAMPIONSHIP

**TEAMS:** INDIA, MALDIVES, NEPAL, BANGLADESH AND SRI LANKA.

**Venue:** National Football Stadium, Male

### FIXTURES

DATE	MATCH	TIME (BST)
October 1:	<b>Sri Lanka v Bangladesh</b>	<b>5:00PM</b>
	Nepal v Maldives	10:00PM
October 4:	<b>Bangladesh v India</b>	<b>5:00PM</b>
	Sri Lanka v Nepal	10:00PM
October 7:	India v Sri Lanka	5:00PM
	<b>Bangladesh v Maldives</b>	<b>10:00PM</b>
October 10:	Maldives v Sri Lanka	5:00PM
	Nepal v India	10:00PM
October 13:	<b>Bangladesh v Nepal</b>	<b>5:00PM</b>
	India v Maldives	10:00PM
October 16:	Final	9:00PM



## INDIA: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

**FIFA RANKING** – 107  
**Appearance** -12  
**Champions** – 7 (1993, 1997, 1999, 2005, 2009, 2011, 2015)  
**Runners-up** – 4 (1995, 2008, 2013, 2018)  
**Star Player** – Sunil Chhetri

India, without a doubt, are the superpower of South Asian football. They have the most titles in their cabinet and ranked way above the rest of their competitors in FIFA ranking. The Blue Tigers have played all the finals except for the fifth edition in 2003 when they were eliminated from semifinals by eventual champions Bangladesh. Since then, they played seven successive finals and became champions four times, even claiming three of those titles with U-23 sides. Under the guidance of Igor Stimac, Sunil Chhettri and Co will once again be the team to beat.

## MALDIVES: ONUS ON HOSTS TO DEFEND TITLE

**FIFA RANKING**– 158  
**Appearance** – 10  
**Champions** – 2 (2008, 2018)  
**Runners-up**- 3 (1997, 2003, 2009)  
**Star player** – Ali Ashfaq

Once the punching bag of regional football, Maldives have gradually established themselves as the second force in South Asia after India. The tiny island nation won the SAFF Championship twice in five final appearances. Ali Ashfaq, the greatest ever player to come out of the country and one of the all time greats of the region, missed out on the 2018 edition which was Maldives’ second success after winning their maiden title in 2008 when they co-hosted the championship with Sri Lanka. This time, though, Maldives are the sole organisers of the event and they will be strong contenders for the title too.



## NEPAL: THE PERENNIAL UNDERACHIEVERS

**FIFA RANKING**– 168  
**Appearance** – 12  
**Champions** – Never  
**Runners-up**- Never  
**Star player** – Rohit Chand

The Nepalese fans are arguably the most passionate ones in South Asian region, nations, but unfortunately their team’s performance hardly ever matches the fans’ lofty expectations. This is the only team to have never made it to the final of the SAFF Championship, let alone winning it. In the last four editions, their journey ended in the semifinals stage. However, the Gorkhalis have tasted success in recent times in other platforms such as the Bangabandhu Gold Cup and AFC Solidarity Cup. The charges of Abdullah Almutairi, who have also fared admirably in recent World Cup qualifying matches, have all the ingredients to at least make it to the final this time around.

## SRI LANKA: MISSION REBOOT

**FIFA RANKING** – 205  
**Appearance** – 12  
**Champions** – 1 (1995)  
**Runners-up**- 1 (1993)  
**Star player** – Dillon De Silva

Although Sri Lanka were dominant during the first two editions of the SAFF Championship in 1993 and 1995 when they finished runners-up and champions respectively, since then the Islanders miserably failed to perform in the following 10 editions of the tournament. Barring two semifinal appearances in 2008 and 2009, they failed to make it out of the group stages on the other occasions. However, boosted by the inclusion of England-based midfielder Marvin Hamilton, Queens Park Rangers winger Dillon De Silva and Germany-based Ahmed Wazeem Razeek, the Lankans may cause a lot of trouble this time around to the other teams.

