



With a final berth at stake, Bangladesh players are determined to turn the table against Nepal in their all-important fixture of the SAFF Championship in Male today.

PHOTO: BFF

Do-or-die against Nepal

ANISUR RAHMAN from Male



Bangladesh national football team are looking forward to putting an end to a 16-year drought for a place in the SAFF Championship final as they square off against Nepal in a do-or-die clash at the National Football Stadium in Male, Maldives today.

The match will get underway at 5:00pm (Bangladesh Standard Time) before hosts Maldives and India play the final group match at five hours later.

Both matches have seemingly turned into virtual semifinals as Bangladesh and India need victories to advance to the final while a draw for Nepal and Maldives will see them through.

Though Bangladesh hold an edge over Nepal in head-to-head record, with the men in red and green winning 12 out of 24 matches against Nepal's eight wins, the Himalayan nation have a better record in recent times. The Gorkhalis have beaten Bangladesh in last three meetings of the SAFF Championship. Nepal have not lost against Bangladesh in their last three meetings, winning the most recent encounter 2-0 in Kathmandu in March this year.

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Overall
Matches- 24, Bangladesh won – 12,
Draws – 4, Nepal won – 8
In SAFF Championship
Matches-7, Bangladesh won -4,
Draws-0, Nepal won -3

Nepal have shown character in the ongoing tournament by beating Maldives 1-0 and Sri Lanka 3-2 before suffering a 1-0 defeat against India in their last match.

Bangladesh had a good start too with a 1-0 win against Sri Lanka followed by a 1-1 draw against seven-time champions India, despite playing majority of the second half with 10 men.

However, the charges of Oscar Bruzon are under pressure following their 2-0 defeat against Maldives as they now need a victory in the must-win fixture.

After two days' rest and three days' practice,

the confidence of Jamal and Co is apparently high and they look determined to bounce back.

"Thing is back on the track. The energy is full, the intensity is full, and willingness to do something is full. We are going to face Nepal, who have self-characteristic that we need to be aware of. They are not going to be a team that won't fight us for the possession of the ball. They are not going to be a team that won't play in our half. They are really sharp and practical. They have excellent runners in the central area of the pitch, so we may need to change a bit of our game style. All of us have to try to find out the best way to beat Nepal. We have our own weapons and we are really confident that tomorrow is going to be our day," Bruzon said at the pre-match press conference yesterday.

"We all are taking it as the true semifinal and it is fantastic to be here in this position. Before the tournament, I said that our main rivals are Maldives and Nepal. We could not make it against Maldives but now we have another opportunity against Nepal and we will be trying to make it against Nepal and keep trusting us," said Bruzon, who got only six sessions to prepare the team before heading for the tournament last month.

Can booters roll back the years?

SPORTS REPORTER from Male



Those days when the country's football fans could make a fair assumption of Bangladesh's results against opponents like the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka are long gone.

Those predictions would mostly be in favour of Bangladesh as the country boasted reliable forwards like Kazi Salahuddin, Enayetur Rahman, Sheikh Mohammad Aslam, Ashraf Uddin Ahmed Chunu, Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib, Alfaz Ahmed among many others.

However, probably only a handful dare to bet on Bangladesh when the men in red and green take on the same opponents nowadays. And the reason could be the absence of genuine strikers in this Bangladesh side.

Bangladesh are all set to take on Nepal today in a bid to make it to the final of the SAFF Championship for the first time in 16 years.

Bangladesh defeated Nepal in four editions of the regional championship -- in

Forward Rizvi Ahmed's brace gave Bangladesh a 2-0 win over Nepal in the 1995 edition before goals from Mizanur Rahman and Alfaz Ahmed helped the booters to a 2-1 win over Nepal in the semifinal of the 1999 edition.

It was Alfaz's long-range strike in 2003 and a brace from striker Rokonuzzaman Kanchan in 2005 that helped Bangladesh beat Nepal and keep a perfect record against them till that edition of the tournament.

Surprisingly, skipper Jamal Bhuiyan is not sweating over who will come up with the winner against Nepal even though it took strikes from defenders Tapu Barman and Yeasin Khan to beat Sri Lanka and clinch a crucial draw against India.

"For me, it doesn't matter who scores. Even if we win 1-0, I will be happy. It is the media who are making a fuss over who is going to score. The most important thing to me is that we win," Jamal said.

Meanwhile, coach Oscar Bruzon thought that the team would need to make most of their set-pieces against Nepal.

"If you analyse, you can see that all of



1995, 1999, 2003 and 2005 respectively. But their failure to even score a single goal in their defeats to the same opposition in 2011, 2013 and 2018 goes a long way to show how Bangladesh's prowess in front of goal has diminished over the years.

our goals in the tournament came through transitions, counter-attacks and set-pieces. Tomorrow [Wednesday] we are going to work in these areas and I think having control of the ball is going to be crucial for us," said Bruzon.



Pacers could be crucial in Oman

SPORTS REPORTER



A lot will depend on the bowling department if Bangladesh want to yield a good result in the upcoming ICC World T20 in the Middle East.

There have been a lot of talks over the Tigers' preparation ahead of the mega event as Bangladesh utilised the home advantage to clinch maiden T20I series wins over New Zealand and Australia before heading into the World Cup.

It was the slow and low pitch in Mirpur that aided Bangladesh spinners to a great extent as the visiting batters struggled against the Tigers' spin-heavy bowling attack.

But it will be a totally different ball game in the flagship event, especially in Oman where, according to Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) sector Habibul Bashar, the surfaces will be sporting, bringing in the seamers into the game just as it did in Bangladesh's unofficial warm-up game against Oman A last Friday.

"The pitch in Oman was pretty fresh as not many games were played there in recent times. The Indian Premier League (IPL) matches are being played in the UAE where we have witnessed how the pitch behaved," Bashar, who is with the Tigers for the World Cup, told the media on Monday.

"But the pitch in Oman looks different. Here, you hardly get any spin while there is the due factor in play in the afternoon which we get to know about during the practise game," Bashar added.

Bangladesh will begin their World Cup mission with the qualifier round in Oman and will take on Scotland in the first game on October 17 at Al Amerat Cricket Stadium in Muscat. Bangladesh will then face the hosts Oman and Papua New Guinea on October 19 and 21 respectively at the same venue in the qualifying stage.

According to Bashar, the pacers will have to play a crucial role in the mega event.

"It is pretty hot during the daytime in Oman but the weather is pleasant once the sun sets. The pitch is pretty

good -- true wicket. Pacers can get good purchases from the surface and it's also good for the batters. The spinners might not get enough turns but the condition is pretty much similar to our country as there's not much of a difference," he added.

Undoubtedly, left-arm seamer Mustafizur Rahman will have to lead the Tigers' pace bowling department with the likes of Taskin Ahmed, Shoriful Islam and Mohammad Saifuddin also playing crucial roles.

However, according to BCB's cricket operations committee chairman Akram Khan, there is some injury concern in the Tigers' pace bowling department. And keeping that in mind, the team management decided to keep Rubel Hossain with the team in Oman and the UAE as an additional member who can be called up to the squad if needed.

"Taskin and Saifuddin have got slight injury concerns. So, keeping that in mind, we have decided to include Rubel as a backup option. Rubel's inclusion is just a precautionary measure," Akram told the media on Monday.

Germany qualify but have work to do

REUTERS, Skopje



Germany are on the right track ahead of next year's World Cup in Qatar after on Monday becoming the

first European nation to qualify, but the players know there is still considerable work to be done to reach world class level.

The four-time world champions crushed North Macedonia 4-0 to secure top spot in Group J with two games left to play, as they look to make amends for their shock 2018 World Cup first-round exit and their Round of 16 elimination at this year's Euros.

"We should keep our sights low at the moment," midfielder Leon Goretzka said. "There were a lot of things also in today's game that we need to be better.

"We have the quality but we also have to grow together as a team and we have to use every available training session to do that. We are on the right track but still have work to do."

Germany have won all five matches under new coach Hansi Flick, who replaced Joachim Loew following their disappointing performances in their last two international tournaments.

Flick, who took over in September following his successful stint at Bayern

Munich, seems to have found the right mix of youth and experience, with veteran Thomas Mueller indispensable once more after having been dropped by Loew for two years.

They have scored 18 goals and conceded four in their last five matches. Although their opponents - Liechtenstein, Armenia, Romania, Iceland and North Macedonia - have been far from European heavyweights, they are raising the fans' expectations.

"The last few games have shown what kind of quality there is in our team," goalscorer Kai Havertz said. "Especially after the Euro - that was bitter for us - we wanted to qualify quickly.

"That (run of wins) gives us a lot of confidence but we have a long road ahead of us."

The Germans still look vulnerable at the back, especially against quick breaks, while lacking some precision up front.

"When you play for Germany then it is about winning titles and reaching the highest peak," Havertz added.

"That is how we will arrive there at the World Cup next year but we have a lot of work before us. We will do everything so that in the coming year we prepare well for it."



Jimmy suspended for semifinal

SPORTS REPORTER

Rasel Mahmud Jimmy, the veteran forward of Bangladesh hockey, has been suspended for one match from the ongoing SIBL Club Cup Tournament for assaulting an umpire and attacking opposition players during Mohammedan's group-stage fixture against Bangladesh Police on Monday.

The former national team captain will miss Mohammedan's crucial semifinal fixture against Mariner Youngs Club tomorrow. The forward has also been fined Tk 50,000 for unruly action. The decision was taken a meeting of the tournament committee yesterday.



The match ended abruptly after Police players stormed off the pitch protesting a decision of the umpire, who, as per bylaws, declared Mohammedan as winners after waiting for 10 minutes. The high-tempered fixture also saw players, including Jimmy, getting into scuffles.

Bangladesh Hockey Federation's vice-president Abdur Rashid Shikder told media that the decision was based on match report and video footages. He also said that the action deserved harsher punishment, but they were lenient considering that hockey returned after three years and the league will commence soon.

Meanwhile, defending champions Abahani will take on Sonali Bank in the other semifinal on the same day.