

A memorable day for Jessy

SPORTS REPORTER

It was a special day for Shathira Jakir Jessy yesterday. The former Bangladesh women cricketer officiated in the traditional Independence Day exhibition match between Bangladesh Red XI and Bangladesh Green XI at the Academy Ground in Mirpur, and according to Jessy, it was a unique experience.

"It felt amazing. To be officiating in such a game and be around legends like [Khaled Mashud] Pilot bhai, Minhajul Abedin [Nannu] bhai was really special for me," Jessy told The Daily Star.

Since completing her professional umpiring course back in 2009, such opportunities have been few and far between for the



31-year-old. According to her, it is the mindset of the mass that has hindered the progress of female umpires in the country.

"Girls in other countries are making strides in this sector. They are officiating in high-profile matches. But that's not the case in Bangladesh.

"The reason could be that people are not used to seeing a woman officiate a cricket match. Also, there seem to be mental biases at play here. People think that as she is a girl, she is soft-hearted and would just nod to an LBW appeal the moment the ball hits the pads," Jessy explained.

The former cricketer, however, was overwhelmed by the appreciation she and her umpiring partner, Dolly Rani Sarkar, received from the former Bangladesh cricketers and BCB officials present at the exhibition match.

"Even many BCB officials did not know about us. But yesterday was different. We were highly appreciated by everyone and I hope that now we will get more opportunities too," Jessy concluded.

‘It’s the right time to RAISE THE BAR’

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As the focus now shifts to Durban and the first Test of the two-match series between Bangladesh and South Africa from March 31, the Tigers' Test outfit took part in a training focused on match scenarios at the Chatsworth Cricket Oval yesterday.

To celebrate Independence Day, members of the Bangladesh team gathered and sang the national anthem ahead of training.

Expectations of the fast-bowling unit rose after a historic Test win at Mount Maunganui earlier this year spearheaded by pacer Ebadot Hossain. They hit further heights after Bangladesh clinched their maiden ODI



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in the pace department means Abu Jayed Rahi, known as a Test specialist, will have to contend for a place in the playing eleven against Taskin, Ebadot and Shoriful Islam.

"Competition has increased given the way our pacers have performed recently. I think it's healthy competition and I think it's the right time for us to raise the bar. We will keep trying to reach the next level," Jayed told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

As in the preceding ODI series, fast and bouncy tracks in South Africa will offer ample purchase to seamers.

According to Jayed, it will be important how the seamers apply themselves when the ball gets older.

"It is important to get early wickets with the new ball, but the challenge for pacers will be in utilising the old ball. I think once the ball gets older, it's

important to contain runs and bank on reverse swing. Length will also be key. If we can get seam movement, it will help a lot," he added.

The architect of that triumph in Mount Maunganui, Ebadot, was taking confidence from that win against New Zealand and the ODI series triumph in South Africa.

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"It was difficult to beat South Africa in their home in the ODIs, but we did it courtesy of the pacers and also the batters. We also want to win the Test series in South Africa."



Bangladesh contingent observe the country's 52nd Independence Day at the Chatsworth Cricket Oval in Durban yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Salah gets better of Mane

REUTERS, CAIRO

Mohamed Salah got the better of his club mate Sadio Mane as Egypt edged Senegal 1-0 in the first leg of their World Cup playoff on Friday to take a slender lead to Dakar for Tuesday's return.

The rematch between the two Liverpool greats, six weeks after Senegal beat Egypt on penalties to win their first Africa Cup of Nations title, saw Salah set up the only goal. Salah hit the crossbar in the fourth minute and then watching the rebound come off Senegal defender Saliou Ciss's knee for an own goal.

Meanwhile, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia all took a significant step closer to the World Cup finals after Friday's first legs of their playoff matches, but new African champions Senegal are going to have to come from behind if they are to qualify for Qatar.

The playoff results reflected a major shift in power north to the Arabic-speaking countries, who have long dominated African club competition and are now flexing their muscles at national team level too.

Islam Slimani scored for Algeria while Tunisia benefited from a horror own-goal as their sides won away in Cameroon and Mali respectively, while Morocco came from a goal down to draw in Kinshasa against the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Home advantage in Tuesday's return legs sets them all up for a place in November's tournament.

The West African derby between Ghana and Nigeria in Kumasi ended goalless, leaving it all to play for in Tuesday's return in Abuja.

The aggregate winners in the five playoff ties will represent Africa at the World Cup in Qatar.



Swiatek savours ‘surreal’ No. 1 achievement

REUTERS

Poland's Iga Swiatek said capturing the women's world number one ranking was a "surreal" achievement, with the 20-year-old set to replace retired Ash Barty at the top of the rankings.

Swiatek clinched the ranking after defeating Viktorija Golubic 6-2, 6-0 in the second round of the Miami Open on Friday, becoming the first Polish player to ascend to the No.1 position in singles.

She will become the new world No. 1 when the WTA rankings are released on April 4. At 20 years, 308 days old, Swiatek will be the youngest player to make her No.1 debut since Caroline Wozniacki in 2010. "It's a dream come true, for sure," Swiatek told reporters. "It's that kind of thing that I wanted to happen someday, but I didn't really know that it's going to be possible for me. So it's even more surreal for me."

Swiatek, who won her maiden Grand Slam title at the French Open in 2020, said she is ready to deal with the pressure of being the top-ranked player.



Messi ‘didn’t expect anything less’

REUTERS, BUENOS AIRES

Lionel Messi paid tribute to Argentina fans in what could be their last home game before November's World Cup finals and said the raucous support in their 3-0 win over Venezuela was vital in preserving his happiness.

"I didn't expect anything less of people, of the union between the Argentina public and this team," Messi said after their comfortable

Argentina are one of four South American sides to have qualified for the Qatar finals, along with Brazil, Ecuador and Uruguay. The final round of qualifying games next Tuesday will determine whether Peru, Colombia or Chile go into a playoff against a team from the Asian confederation.

win at Boca Juniors' Bombonera stadium.

The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner has struggled at Paris Saint Germain since signing from Barcelona in August 2021 but he was as spritely as ever against a poor Venezuela side and the adoration of the home crowd was evident.

Argentina fans revere Messi, and all the more so since he led them to the Copa America in 2021 - their first major international honour

in 28 years.

The feeling is mutual, with Messi leading his team mates on a victory lap around the ground and chanting and singing along with the 50,000 crowd. "I've been happy here for a long time, since before we won the Copa America," Messi said.

"People have shown that they love me and I am grateful for that. Everything flows naturally, that makes it easier on and off the pitch."

Friday's game marked Messi's return to the national side after being rested for Argentina's previous two World Cup qualifiers against Chile and Colombia.

He made several unsuccessful attempts at goal from free kicks outside the box but eventually score the third, a curious miskick meters from goal.

Messi chested down a pass from Angel Di Maria and although he didn't connect cleanly it was enough to beat Venezuela's diving goalkeeper.

The 82nd minute goal came after earlier efforts from Nicolas Gonzalez and Di Maria, whose clever play and passes opened up a stuffy Venezuelan rearguard. Argentina travel to Ecuador for their final game.

