



BEYOND BRAGGING RIGHTS

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The Asia Cup is just a day away from making the much-awaited comeback after a four-year interval – the longest since the 2008 edition – with some of the world's top teams prepared to lock horns in the United Arab Emirates, where its maiden edition commenced in 1983.

As the only continental tournament in the sport, the Asia Cup has remained mounted on a pedestal for the participant nations, with the winning team eyeing the bragging rights over their noisy neighbours, at the very least.

For Bangladesh, the Asia Cup has long been by far the biggest stage until the Tigers qualified for their maiden World Cup in 1999. The competition later presented a high point

in Bangladesh cricket history in 2012, when they agonizingly fell short at the final hurdle. One might wonder how much a first major trophy could have influenced Bangladesh from then on.

A marquee event like the Asia Cup, compared to World Cups, allows a greater possibility of staging multiple high-voltage encounters between India and Pakistan, which has produced numerous iconic moments in history. Since the two sides, unfortunately, have not played a bilateral series for nearly a decade, the cricket fans would want to absorb everything that an India-Pakistan match has to offer. In this edition, the two long-standing powerhouses are pitted in the same group, and can potentially meet three times.

When it comes to India – the defending

champions and most successful team in Asia Cup history – they will be hoping to win the continental title for the third time in a row. However, teams like Afghanistan or Sri Lanka, both placed in the same group as Bangladesh, may spoil India's party as the tournament heads into the knockout phase.

Sri Lanka have somehow peaked at the right time leading into the tournament and Afghanistan continue to grow in strength ever since they debuted in the competition in 2014. Meanwhile, Pakistan are enjoying a healthy run of form across the formats, and the only Asian representative in the semi-finals of the latest T20 World Cup would not want to settle for anything other than the trophy this time.

Whereas for Bangladesh, the debacle in the aforementioned World Cup exposed their

technical shortcomings in key areas of T20 cricket; and the results afterward do not speak highly of themselves. Thus, the expectations from the Asia Cup remain a bare minimum for the three-time runners-up and the finalists of the past two editions.

As the shortest format's popularity kept proliferating since its inception, a revamped Asian Cricket Council (ACC) in 2015 decided to oscillate the Asia Cup between the T20I and the ODI format. These days, it's even more apparent that 50-over cricket is gearing up to assume a permanent place in the backseat as the sporting landscape transforms on the basis of maximizing financial benefits and entertainment value for an ever-growing audience worldwide.

As far as the host nation is concerned, the

ACC ultimately opted for the UAE instead of Sri Lanka, who were initially slated to host but months of political and economic crises swept the competition away from the island nation. However, Cricket Sri Lanka still owns the six-nation tournament's hosting rights, which is crucial to boost their economic recovery.

A lot is at stake for all the participants. Bragging rights aside, the upcoming Asia Cup presents the platform for teams to gain momentum leading into the fast-approaching T20 World Cup in Australia, scheduled for October-November this year. For teams like Bangladesh and Afghanistan, however, winning the Asia Cup could mean the world to them, especially in order to possess the elusive self-belief during the major events that follow.

Daraz

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