



Historic female-inclusive Asia Cup commences today

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KHALID HOSSAIN

The much-awaited Women’s Asia Cup, played in the 20-over format since 2012, returns with its eighth edition in Sylhet as the curtain-raiser sees defending champions Bangladesh take on Thailand at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium Ground 2 (SICS Outer) today from Bangladesh Standard Time 9:30 am.

The coronavirus pandemic had postponed the biennial event by a couple of years after the previous edition was played in 2018, where Bangladesh broke the complete monopoly India had over the regional competition. The final was a game to remember for everyone, a game which saw the Tigresses bag a three-wicket win with a last ball thriller to seal their maiden Asia Cup triumph against the six-time winners.

A competition that featured only two teams – India and Sri Lanka – in its aural edition in 2004 before Pakistan and Bangladesh began participating from the second and fourth edition onwards, respectively, this Asia Cup features as many as seven teams

be participating in a complete round robin format. The ACC is constantly striving toward being more inclusive,” stated Jay Shah, president of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC).

Record participants aside, as maiden hosts, Bangladesh would be part of a historic chapter as all of the two on-field umpires and the match referee are set to feature female figures, composed of the Sri Lankan trio of Dedunu De Silva, Nimali Perera, and Vanessa De Silva.

“The 2022 edition of the Women’s Asia Cup will therefore see more embedded female participation. For the first time ever, an ACC tournament will see an all-female presence on the playing field, with the women’s tournament slated to have only female umpires and female match referees. As an organisation, we hope to continue to take steps to strengthen the sport by highlighting female talent in every avenue,” further stated the ACC president.

This Asia cup has a lot at stake, as ever, especially considering the top teams taking the tournament as a launching pad to get into the groove ahead of the upcoming T20 World Cup in 2023. Bangladesh have come a long way since debuting in the T20 international circuit in 2012 and would want to see their growth curve going upward following a string of impressive performances this year in the format.

Even though the Tigresses missed out on a spot at the Birmingham Commonwealth Games as the result in the decider in January went into Sri Lanka’s favour, but following that event, Bangladesh, however unsurprisingly, had sealed their spot in the upcoming T20 World Cup by becoming the unbeaten champions in the recently concluded Qualifiers, held in the UAE.

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As far as tournament favourites are concerned, India remain the team to beat.

Teams: India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, UAE		
FIXTURES		
DATE	MATCH	TIME
October 1	Bangladesh vs Thailand India vs Sri Lanka	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 2	Pakistan vs Malaysia Sri Lanka vs UAE	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 3	Pakistan vs Bangladesh India vs Malaysia	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 4	Sri Lanka vs Thailand India vs UAE	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 5	UAE vs Malaysia	9:00 am
October 6	Pakistan vs Thailand Bangladesh vs Malaysia	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 7	Thailand vs UAE India vs Pakistan	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 8	Sri Lanka vs Malaysia India vs Bangladesh	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 9	Thailand vs Malaysia Pakistan vs UAE	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 10	Sri Lanka vs Bangladesh India vs Thailand	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 11	Bangladesh vs UAE Pakistan vs Sri Lanka	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 13	SF 1: Team 1 vs Team 4 SF 2: Team 2 vs Team 3	9:00 am 1:30 pm
October 15	Final	1:30pm
* All matches will be played at SICS Ground 1 and Ground 2 in Sylhet		



India's Mithali Raj is the competition's top scorer (588)

including hosts Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, and the UAE – aim to fight for the Asian supremacy over the span of two weeks. “For the first time in history, 7 women’s teams will



2012 was the first time Bangladesh participated in Women's Asia Cup

The latest Commonwealth Games finalists are enjoying a good run of form and despite Jhulan Goswami calling it quits recently, the Harmanpreet Kaur-led side appear well balanced without their star performer.

Meanwhile, Pakistan are undergoing a rebuilding phase. Their Commonwealth Games journey in July was a disappointment as Pakistan lost all three of the games to remain as bottom dwellers in their group. How captain Bismah Maroof marshals her troops without the injured star pacer Fatima Sana will be a tough ask too, and Pakistan’s first big obstacle will be in their second game against Bangladesh on October 03.

Sri Lanka, too, would be eager to see their women go the distance after the men’s cricket

team sealed the bragging rights earlier in the Asia Cup, held last month. Among the seven teams, the UAE and Malaysia – who booked their Asia Cup berths on the virtue of reaching the final of the 10-team ACC Women’s T20 Championship earlier in June – would want to display competitive cricket alongside Thailand.

As far as the tournament format is concerned, it involves each side playing the other once in a round-robin format. Afterward, the top four sides progress to the semi-finals before the grand finale on October 15.

With women’s sports in Bangladesh gaining traction after the sustained and recent success of the country’s cricket and football teams alike, the historic all-female on-field Asia Cup could provide a massive boost to the fast-evolving sector as the defending champions could draw crowds in numbers to Sylhet from all parts of Bangladesh.

Experts may deem India as favourites on paper, but given the tournament features the shortest format, the games are prone to be more competitive. And that is why, when The Daily Star asked Bangladesh captain about her expectations in the Asia Cup and about the difference in quality between Bangladesh and other teams, Joty had replied: “In T20 cricket, the difference in levels are very close. Whichever team makes fewer mistakes on a particular day has a higher chance to win the game.”

‘It’s also about margin, strength and awareness’

Bangladesh women’s team are set to begin their Asia Cup title defence with the eighth edition of the continental championship set to be played in Sylhet from October 1 to October 15. The Tigresses made history when they clinched their maiden title by beating a strong India in Malaysia in the previous edition in 2018. As the Nigar Sultana Joty-led side look to retain the trophy, The Daily Star’s Abdullah Al Mehdi caught up with Nazmul Abedin Fahim, who served as a mentor for the reigning Asian Champions in the last edition, as the veteran coach talked about the Tigresses chances and shared his views ahead of the tournament. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): You have previously worked with this team. What’s your thought on the stability and improvement of the current squad following their T20 World Cup qualifier triumph?

Nazmul Abedin Fahim (NAF): I think there aren’t many changes in the squad from the previous edition. You can see a similar bunch of players in the vital role. In the qualifiers (T20 world cup), Ireland and Thailand are tough opponents for Bangladesh. If we won those matches with ease, I would have felt much better. I think the batting is still not up to the mark and needs to be improved. Since we have won Asia Cup in the past, so it is expected to win against these teams by a larger difference.

DS: Were there any opportunities for the new faces to shine in the qualifiers?

NAF: Of course, the entire set of players won’t change. There will be some key players who can change the scenarios of the match. But there’s always scope to try a new batter or a bowler to check them out. But I didn’t see that happening often. Most of these players are from the squad I left. Probably that’s why the results remained the same. If they had given a chance to one or two new batters, probably they could have taken the game to the next level.

DS: Joty (Nigar Sultana), Fargana (Hoque) played key roles in your tenure. They had runs with the bat in the recent qualifiers too. How do you see their progress ahead of the Asia Cup?

NAF: Of course, they are in good touch with



the bat. But when you will play against tougher opponents with the likes of India, Sri Lanka who have a tighter bowling attack and more aggressive body language. They’ll face a bigger challenge, and there will be pressure over us as we are defending the title. But I think the girls should play their usual game instead of taking the pressure. I’m not sure about whether they can win the tournament or not, but they can perform well if they play their own game.

DS: What should be our expectation from this Asia Cup?

NAF: As the defending champion, our efforts should be on retaining the title. However, if some new players come up in the tournament, we can move forward from here and look into the future.

DS: What would be your suggestion for the current quad?

NAF: Well, the opening needs to improve. We are not seeing consistent pairs at the start. We have always been good against spin, but the batters are struggling against fast bowlers sometimes. So there’s a scope of improvement over there. We have some good all-rounders, but we need to improve the level of our gameplay. As we haven’t played many international T20 cricket in the past, this still remained an issue. The management should play a role to bring out the best from these players. It’s not always about winning, but sometimes, it’s the margin, the strength and awareness. These are very important issues to work on as well.

