

## U-17s eager to make a mark at home

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's age-group teams have been haunted by failures in the SAFF championships but the boys in red and green want to banish that disappointment by producing a good result in Group E of the AFC U-17 Championship Qualifiers, which will get underway at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium today.

The hosts will face Singapore at 7:00pm after group favourites Yemen take on Bhutan at 4:00pm in the two Group E encounters.

Ten group champions and five best runners-up will join the hosts in the 16-team 2023 AFC U-17 Championship.

Since the introduction of the AFC U-16 tournament – which often changes to a U-17 competition – in 1985, Bangladesh have qualified for the tournament proper six times, the first time in 1992 and the latest in 2006.

But in the six editions from 2008 to 2018, Bangladesh have failed to advance past the qualifiers. More recently, the boys in red and green lost the SAFF U-20 Championship final to India, who also beat Bangladesh in the semifinals of the SAFF U-17 Championship last month.

Bangladesh's youth team comprises players from the BFF Academy, who have been training together for the past year and have even played together in the country's second-tier Bangladesh Championship League.

Asked how confident they were of qualifying for the AFC U-17 Championship proper – which is far more competitive than SAFF tournaments considering the inclusion of Middle and Far-East nations – captain Mohammad Imran said: "First of all, we all have recovered from shock of the loss at the hands of India. That is in the



past. Now, all of us that have been training for the past year and have a good bond and combination are fit and eager to play a tournament on home soil."

"In the past two weeks, we worked on rectifying the mistakes we made in the two recent tournaments, so we are confident of qualifying," said Imran, who also captained the U-17 side in SAFF Championship.

However, Paul Smalley, the head coach of the youth side as well as the Bangladesh Football Federation's technical director, was cautious of declaring a target. Instead, he pledged that the team would show improvement.

"We are looking forward to this AFC competition. The boys certainly learned a lot from the SAFF U-20 and U-17 Championships. We wish to continue the progress and development of the younger players. Everybody is looking forward to the competition," Smalley said at the pre-tournament briefing.

He also outlined three aims: improvement, learning, and ultimately results.

Smalley will certainly also want a good start against Singapore in the opening match, but Singapore coach Angel Toledano was also expecting a result against the hosts.

"I want the boys leave everything on the field, which is a bit faster, and focus on the game plan to get the best result possible against Bangladesh," the Spaniard said.

In their group, however, there is little chance to look past Yemen.

Nevertheless, Yemen is going to be the tournament's toughest side. They have already announced their intention to qualify after successful campaigns in East Asia and Saudi Arabia. They have previously qualified more than nine times.

Last time, Yemen put behind Bangladesh and Qatar to emerge as group champions, with two wins. Yemen beat Bangladesh 2-0 before Bangladesh beat Qatar 2-0 to finish as runners-up.



Bangladesh players get into a huddle ahead of their first training session in Christchurch on Tuesday, ahead of their first match of the tri-nation series against Pakistan on Friday. (Bottom) Batting coach Jamie Siddons is engaged in a deep ith wicketkeeper-batter Liton Das.

PHOTO: BCB

## ‘Young’ team has a ‘bit of learning to do’

SPORS REPORTER

Bangladesh are gearing up for a tri-nation series in New Zealand involving the hosts and Pakistan, with the tournament slated to begin with the opener between Bangladesh and Pakistan on October 7.

Tigers' batting coach Jamie Siddons said that the team management were excited by the prospect of playing against big sides ahead of the T20 World Cup in Australia, but cautioned that players still have a bit of learning to do.

"We just came from Dubai and played a couple of games against the UAE. We had a week practice there and the facilities were fantastic (in the UAE).

"The boys are coming along and we have a pretty young team. Some of the senior players have retired or are not on this tour and the young team is excited, but they have a bit learning to do. We are looking forward to seeing how we fare against two pretty strong teams here," Siddons said yesterday.

Bangladesh's batting coach seemed happy with the opportunity to play in conditions similar to the ones that will test the young side in the World Cup.

Ahead of the previous T20 World Cup last year, the Tigers played on dull wickets at home which saw them outfox teams such as Australia and New Zealand. But the effect of playing on slower wickets was telling as Bangladesh's batters failed to adjust to better and faster wickets at the showpiece event.

This time, they began their preparations in Dubai before heading to New Zealand, where batters need faster hands to adjust to pace and bounce, not

dissimilar to conditions in Australia.

"We came out of 40 degrees, so it's nice to be in some cool weather, at least for the Aussie guys in the group. But conditions are very similar looking at the wicket over there. The Hagley (Oval) will play a lot like Australia. I think early season Australia is pretty similar to what it is here," Siddons said.

The team had a walk around Christchurch on Tuesday and then took part in their first practice session at Lincoln yesterday.

Liton Das and Soumya Sarkar were batting in the nets and, with opening slots still being an issue, there are chances of the management making changes at the top. Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Sabbir Rahman have opened the innings in T20Is since the Tigers' last Asia Cup game against Sri Lanka, but the latter has not been impactful.

With stalwarts like Tamim Iqbal, Mahmudullah Riyad and Mushfiqur Rahim retiring from the shortest format, Siddons said the management was excited to see what the others could make of the opportunity.

"People like Sabbir and Miraz opening the batting is certainly different from Tamim and Liton. Liton, however, is there at number three or four, so we still have a bit of experience in the team. But the youth is very exuberant and energetic and we are looking to see what they bring to the table. We can't ask for much better preparation, going up against the finalists of the last World Cup and Pakistan, who are obviously on the up and are a fantastic T20 side. So if we can challenge them, we will have gone a long way to getting ready for the World Cup," he concluded.



## Rafael Leao aiming for Chelsea

AFP, Milan

As AC Milan prepared to kick-off their thrilling 3-1 win at Empoli on Saturday, a fan invaded the pitch in search of Rafael Leao, a superstar in the making who will lead the Rossoneri's charge at Chelsea on Wednesday.

The supporter wanted a selfie with the Portugal winger, who was already a favourite after the way he played in Milan's Serie A title triumph but is now being spoken of in the sort of tones as for the past icons who made them seven-time European champions.

After hitting double figures for both goals and assists last season the 23-year-old had started this campaign in even more spectacular form, scoring four times and setting up six more in all competitions.

Milan's only defeat of the season came in the one match Leao has missed, against Serie A leaders Napoli.

And although Stefano Pioli's team have been hit with a raft of injuries – France's Theo Hernandez and Mike Maignan among those on the treatment table – Leao's form has them travelling to London in high spirits.

Saturday's incredible win was a perfect example of both Milan's never-say-die spirit and mercurial talent of their star man, who had a hand in all three of the Rossoneri's goals.

Having set up Ante Rebic's 79th-minute opener with a typically devastating display of dribbling, Leao also launched the pass which eventually led to Fode Ballo-Toure putting Milan back in front in stoppage time.

He then capped off a dramatic win in the



most stylish of fashions with 96 minutes on the clock, racing towards goal before scooping a perfect finish over Guglielmo Vicario.

Red-hot Leao will be the key man at Stamford Bridge as Milan attempt to hold top spot in Champions League Group E, which they lead by one point from Dinamo Zagreb, and increase their hopes of making the knockout stages for the first time since the 2013-14 season.

A good performance will surely increase

the Blues' interest in Leao after they made an informal bid to Milan in the close season.

Milan value Leao at well over 100 million euros (\$98 million) and want to get maximum value from an asset they know will eventually join one of football's financial heavyweights, a status they once held in Silvio Berlusconi's heyday.

Club legend and technical director Paolo Maldini confirmed last month that Milan had rejected an offer from Chelsea but added that "it's pointless being a romantic... When offers of a certain type are made, no one is unsellable."

Milan are trying to get Leao to extend his current deal which runs to 2024, and Italian daily Corriere Della Sera report that they are offering 6-7 million euros a year in a bid to stave off interest from the Premier League.

They are hoping to get the new deal signed before the World Cup, when Leao will have the chance to shine on the biggest stage of all.

Portuguese outlet Record also claim that Maldini has met with Sporting Lisbon director Frederico Varandas twice as part of discussions over the 20 million euros Leao has to pay his former club.

Leao unilaterally terminated his contract with Sporting in 2018 after fans invaded the club's training ground, joining Ligue 1 side Lille.

And Milan are reportedly trying to cut a deal with the Portuguese club in the hope it will convince Leao to stay long-term at the San Siro – which fans are packing out thanks in part to Leao's development into one of the world's best.

## Marsh returns against Windies

REUTERS, Melbourne

Australia all-rounder Mitchell Marsh is set to return at number three in the first T20 World Cup warm-up against West Indies on Wednesday but will be spared bowling duties as he continues his recovery from an ankle injury.

Marsh's return is good news for defending champions Australia in the lead-up to the Oct. 16 to Nov. 13 World Cup given Marcus Stoinis is still nursing a side strain.

Captain Aaron Finch said Stoinis remained on track to play against England in Perth on Sunday in the first of three T20Is.

"He's at a level where we think that he'll be fully fit for that first game against England," Finch told reporters on the Gold Coast on Tuesday.

"We were just conscious of the travel with a quick turnaround.

"It can be quite a high-risk game for some guys with some soft tissue injuries so he's just still planning and preparing there."

Should Stoinis and Marsh prove their fitness over the next couple of weeks, Finch said it was unlikely that young all-rounder Cameron Green would play a part at the World Cup.

## Moeen closes door on Test return

REUTERS

England all-rounder Moeen Ali said he has closed the door on a return to Test cricket after having an "honest" conversation with coach Brendon McCullum.

Moeen made his test debut in 2014 and went on to score 2,914 runs in 64 tests at an average of 28.29, picking up 195 wickets.

The 35-year-old announced his retirement from the longest format of the game in September last year but in June said McCullum had sounded him out about a potential red-ball return.

England's Test side next play a three-match series against Pakistan in Rawalpindi, Multan and Karachi in December but Moeen said he would not be with them.

"I've had an honest chat with Baz (McCullum) and I can't see myself being stuck in hotels for another month and playing to the best of my ability," Moeen wrote in his column for the Daily Mail on Monday.

"Baz phoned me, we spoke at length and I said, 'Sorry, I'm done'. He understands, he knows the feeling. Test cricket is hard work. I'm 35 and something's got to give.

"I want to enjoy my cricket and it wouldn't be fair to reverse my decision and then struggle to give it my all. It's time to close the door on that side of my career. To play 64 tests for England has been a privilege and a dream fulfilled."



## I need to adapt, says Mane

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich striker Sadio Mane admitted he still needs time to adjust in his new surroundings, saying he knew his switch from Liverpool would "not be easy".

Speaking to UEFA in an interview published Tuesday, Mane said he was in the process of adapting to the Bundesliga after eight years in the Premier League.

"Switching from one club to another is not easy," Mane said.

"I spent eight very nice years in England, six years at Liverpool and two at Southampton.

"Now I am in a new country. It is not easy because everything changes so suddenly: people, training, everything. Everything is changing so it is not easy at all.

"I need to adapt. I knew that and it came as no surprise."

Mane scored his first goal in six matches in Bayern's 4-0 win over Bayer Leverkusen on Friday.

The win represented a return to form for Bayern, who had not won in the league since the last game where Mane scored, on matchday three – Bayern's longest winless run in two decades.

Mane said his young team were still developing and were bound to have inconsistent results.

"We have a very, very young squad. It's the first time in my career that I have been part of such a young group," Mane said.

