

## Performance review far from an ideal solution

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The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) released its list of centrally-contracted players for 2023 on 21 January with the caveat it was set to introduce a 'six-month review' clause for those with central contracts. But the BCB are yet to reveal what action may be taken if a centrally-contracted player underperforms.

News had previously surfaced that the BCB was yet to decide whether a contract would be scrapped if a players was performing below par, with the possible motive behind such a move being to keep the players on their toes and foster a competitive environment.

After a review of the past year, Mahmudul Hasan Joy and Yasir Ali were dropped from the list of centrally-contracted players while Zakir Hasan impressed enough with a debut Test ton against India to be included. This year's review will be done on a more official basis.



"We can't talk about how it will be implemented. We have done performance reviews before. That's how we make the central contracts. Yes, there will be a review after six months as has been clarified," chief selector Minhajul Abedin told The Daily Star a few days back.

Asked whether the contracts may be scrapped in case of poor performance, he said: "We can only talk about that when it happens."

Youngsters such as Shadman Islam and Mohammad Naim have failed to retain central contracts and performances in the domestic circuit remain the most viable way of making the list in the future. Joy has been in and around the national side, but it remains to be seen whether programmes with the A team and Bangla Tigers can help his case.

It was learned that the BCB would alert the players to review their performances following the review but whether just getting a talking could provide impetus for performance remains to be seen.

While it also heats up the competition for places, could the review process also put pressure on players that are already underperforming? "Why would that happen. This is not about pressure," the chief selector said. Whether a half-yearly performance review imposes any discrepancies in the system or whether it impacts the contract itself is anyone's guess for the time being.



Bangladesh players celebrate the dismissal of a UAE batter during their ICC U-19 Women's T20 World Cup fixture in Potchefstroom yesterday. The Young Tigresses won the match by five wickets, chasing down a 70-run target with 65 balls to spare. However, the effort was not enough to see them through to the last four as India and Australia advanced due to a superior run-rate. PHOTO: ICC

## An American resurgence in Melbourne?

AFP, Melbourne

American men's tennis is witnessing a resurgence with an unlikely trio reaching the Australian Open quarter-finals, and they are thriving off each others' success.

Ahead of the Grand Slam, world number nine Taylor Fritz and 17th-ranked Frances Tiafoe were the names on everyone's lips after they led the United States to glory in the inaugural mixed teams United Cup.

But it has been lesser-known players Ben Shelton, JJ Wolf, Sebastian Korda and Tommy Paul who have grabbed the spotlight in a sign of renewed strength and depth in the men's game.

Two of them, former college standouts Shelton and Wolf, surged into the last 16 on their tournament debut, while Korda and the more experienced Paul have enjoyed their best Grand Slam ever.

While tennis is an individual sport, Paul said there had been an element of group mentality in Melbourne, with each of them feeding off the other.

"Absolutely. I think we see people that we've played our whole lives, kind of felt like we've been around the same level as them our whole lives, and we see them doing big things in big tournaments," said the 25-year-old. "We're like, 'OK, I can do that.'"

"At the same time I think we push each other, not just from results-wise, but when we're talking to each other, we help each other, we push each other, we want each other to do well.



"It's a good group coming up." The last time three American men reached a Grand Slam quarter-final was the 2005 US Open, led by Andre Agassi, James Blake and Robby Ginepri.

You need to go back 23 years for the feat at Melbourne Park, when Agassi, Pete Sampras and Chris Woodruff made the grade.

Incredibly, no American man has won a Grand Slam since Andy Roddick in 2003 after the golden era of Agassi

and Sampras, as Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray dominated.

But with nine Americans now in the top 50, and Shelton and Wolf surging up the rankings, optimism is high that the glory years could be revisited.

Most of the them, who also include Jensen Brooksby, Reilly Opelka and Paris-born Maxime Cressy, are 25 or under and just starting their careers.

"I think with how many great athletes coming out of States, it was just a matter of time," said Wolf, whose penetrating forehand took him into the last 16, where he was beaten by Shelton, a 20-year-old on his first trip outside the United States.

"The level of tennis worldwide is so high I think it's kind of hard for anyone to make that next jump, but I think we all have a good chance at it now.

"Having a lot of Americans seeded and a lot of rivalries like that I think will be really good to push each other... It's good to feel like we've kind of got a team out here."

John Isner, one of the older cohort inside the top 50, said last year it would not need an American to win a Grand Slam to be able to say that men's tennis in his country was back.

"The bar has been set pretty low since 2003, probably," he said. "I think getting two guys in the top 10 would be a good starting point, then you go from there."

Paul defeated Shelton in the quarter-finals on Wednesday to become the first American man into the last four of the Australian Open since 2009.

## SAFF C'ship in BFF's sights

SPORTS REPORTER

Although the details of the next edition of the SAFF Championship are yet to be ironed out, Bangladesh are thinking of preparing the national team for the regional football extravaganza by playing friendly matches during March's FIFA window.

The revelation came following a meeting between National Teams Committee chairman and BFF vice-president Kazi Nabil Ahmed and head coach Javier Cabrera yesterday, during which they discussed several aspects including the preparation of the national team and possible opponents for the friendlies.

"We discussed how we can prepare for the upcoming March window and who our opponents could be. We want to play friendly matches at home during the FIFA window to prepare the national team for the SAFF Championship, which will possibly be in June-July," Nabil told reporters after the meeting.

Since the 2009 SAFF Championship, Bangladesh have failed to make it out of the group stage five times in a row. The closest the boys in red and green got was in the 2021 SAFF Championship in Maldives, when they were on the verge of making the final after a five-team round robin phase.

However, Nepal broke their hearts by notching a come-from-behind 1-1 draw that left Bangladesh fourth in the five-team table instead of getting a taste of a first final in 16 years following a 2-0 loss to India in the 2005 final in Islamabad.

It has been learnt that the SAFF Championship is likely to be held in India from June 20.

Cabrera, who guided Bangladesh to one win, two draws and five losses during last year, was ecstatic after being handed another one-year contract.

"It was fantastic experience from beginning to the end with the Bangladesh team. The results could have been better, but we showed improvement in our performances match by match. Now our challenge and mission is to improve in terms of results," Cabrera said. "We need to compete, progress and improve and we are eager to put up a good performance in front of home crowd. We have to work on the field to get ready for the March window," Cabrera said, adding that they did not have 'any specific target'.

## BD to play in Special FIDE Olympiad

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Bangladesh will take part in the inaugural FIDE Olympiad for People with Disabilities, to be held in Belgrade from January 29.

The Bangladesh team, comprising Khorshed Alam, Syed Ejaz Husain, Bappy Sarkar and Ali Newaz Sarker will take part in the six-round Swiss-League tournament.

106 countries applied for participation, but FIDE selected only 24 countries and two teams from host nation Serbia. "FIDE will bear the air fare while the hosts will bear the cost of accommodation and food," Bangladesh Chess Federation general secretary Syed Shahabuddin Shamim informed at a press conference yesterday.

"We hope to finish between 10th and 15th in the tournament, and we believe participating will enhance Bangladesh's image since FIDE included only six countries from Asia," said Shamim.

The players will be accompanied by FIDE instructor Masudur Rahman and are scheduled to leave for Belgrade on January 28.

## 'Bale is so good at golf, it's not fair'

REUTERS, London

Former Real Madrid forward Gareth Bale has made no secret of his passion for golf and his game has received a ringing endorsement from one of the world's best ahead of his debut at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am in California next month.

The 33-year-old Bale ended his glittering soccer career this month leading to speculation that the Welshman might try to become a professional golfer.

Spaniard Jon Rahm got a close up view of Bale's golf game when partnering him at the Pro-Am ahead of this week's Farmers Insurance Open at Torrey Pines and was clearly impressed.

"I told Gareth you can't be so good at professional football and golf at the same time, that doesn't seem fair," Rahm, the 2021 U.S. Open champion said. "You can't be dedicated to one thing and have this much talent for golf."

Bale's love of golf often led to criticism while he was in Madrid, especially after

once posing in front of a banner which read: 'Wales. Golf. Madrid. In that order'.

World number three Rahm said there was not much advice he could offer Bale on his golf swing.

"He didn't ask for anything, nor should he be asking, he's already good enough," the 28-year-old said. "He has no business being that good when he's a professional football player."

"When he can actually practise more, he's going to get a lot better. He got two strokes in the Pro-Am, which I think is already wrong. He should be giving strokes back to the rest of the amateurs because he is a very, very good player."

Bale has constructed three iconic golf holes -- the 17th at Sawgrass, the Postage Stamp at Royal Troon, and the 12th at Augusta -- in the back garden of his Cardiff home.

Last year the five-time Champions League winner, a two-handicap golfer, became a global ambassador for the Royal and Ancient (R&A).



Lazio midfielder Mattia Zaccagni (L) celebrates with forward Felipe Anderson after scoring his side's second goal during a 4-0 thumping of defending champions AC Milan in their Serie A fixture at the Olympic stadium in Rome on Tuesday. The win lifted the capital side to third position, a point behind Milan and 13 points adrift of leaders Napoli.

PHOTO: AFP