

## U17s excited for AFC Qualifiers challenge

SPORTS REPORTER

Amidst all the criticisms over the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) inability to send the women's football team to the Paris Olympic Qualifiers in Myanmar, the focus now shifts to the girls, who are waiting to prove themselves in the upcoming AFC U-17 Women's Asia Cup Qualifiers, starting on April 26 in Singapore.

Players like Ruma Akter, Souravi Akanda Prity, Trishna Rani, Joynab Bibi, Kanon Rani, Sanggita Rani, Puja Das and Nusrat Jahan Ritu have already gathered valuable experience having played in the SAFF U-15 Women's Championship in November 2022 followed by the SAFF U-17 Women's Championship in March 2023 which they will look to put to good use.

Golam Rabbani Choton's troops are eagerly waiting to prove their worth in the Group D fixtures against debutant Turkmenistan and hosts Singapore. "Our target is to win both matches to emerge as group champions and progress to the Round-2 of the qualification," head coach Golam Rabbani Choton told The Daily Star.

"The girls are really excited to go abroad and play the tournament for the first time away from home. They are also eager to perform on foreign soil," he added.

The eight group-winners will advance to the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2 scheduled for September 16 to 24. They will be divided into two groups and the top two teams from each will join the three highest seeded sides from the AFC U-16 Women's Championship Thailand 2019 – defending champions Japan, DPR Korea, and China PR – and hosts Indonesia in the finals, set for April seven to 20 in 2024.



## Sachin cherishes 'slowest fifty'

AGENCIES

Legendary India batter Sachin Tendulkar reached yet another milestone yesterday, this time off the field, when he set foot on his 50th birthday.

Indian Premier League franchise Mumbai Indians, however, celebrated the maestro's birthday two days ahead on Saturday during their match against Punjab Kings at the Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai.

Speaking with former India all-rounder and head-coach Ravi Shastri, he said this has been the slowest but the most interesting and fulfilling fifty of his life.

"This has been the slowest fifty of my life but the most fulfilling one and interesting one. It's a package of highs and lows. I've thoroughly enjoyed scoring this fifty, it has taught me a lot. Above all, it has given me the honour of representing India for 24 years," said Tendulkar.

Tendulkar was also honoured along with Brian Lara by the Sydney Cricket Ground as they joined Donald Bradman on Monday in having a set of gates named after them, with all visiting players passing through them to access the field of play.

The gates were unveiled to mark Tendulkar's 50th birthday and 30 years since West Indies legend Lara's 277 at the stadium – the first of his 34 Test centuries.

The Australian cricket team enter the field via the Don Bradman Gates, with the visitors now coming through the Lara-Tendulkar Gates.

"The Sydney Cricket Ground has been my favourite ground away from India," said Tendulkar, who played five Tests there, averaging 157.



Following a 1-0 win at Juventus on Sunday, Napoli now remain on the brink of claiming their first Serie A title since 1990. A stoppage-time goal by forward Giacomo Raspadori saw Napoli 17 points clear, with a real possibility of them claiming their third Serie A championship next weekend if they beat Salernitana and second-placed Lazio fail to win at Inter Milan.

PHOTO: AFP

## Will Arsenal be another City fatality?

AGENCIES

Arsenal outperformed all expectations and were at one point cruising towards their first Premier League title since 2004.

Mikel Arteta's men made their best-ever start to a league season, accruing 50 points from 19 games at the halfway point of the league – only six teams had garnered more at this stage of a campaign in English League history.

The Gunners even had an eight-point cushion over defending champions Manchester City till January 18.

However, as is the case with Arsenal often, they seemed to have pressed the self-destruct button at a critical juncture of the league, with just a five-point lead over Pep Guardiola's second-placed Manchester City, who have two games in hand and on Wednesday welcome Arsenal for the most crucial game in the title race for the ongoing season, touted as 'the final' by Arsenal's Gabirel Jesus.

Apparently, Arsenal suffered defensively in recent games that led to their slump with relentless City breathing down their necks. Arsenal fans now worry that things could take turn for the worse after two consecutive matches where the team have given away a 2-0 lead to draw 2-2, despite seeming to be in complete control, followed by Friday night's shock 3-3 draw at home to

ARSENAL IN PREMIER LEAGUE 2022-2023 SEASON		
First 18 matches		Last 14 matches
14	Goals Conceded	20
0.78	Goals Conceded/Game	1.43
9	Clean Sheets	3
75%	Shots Saved	65%
8.7	Shots Faced/Game	9.2
3	Shots On Target Faced/Game	4.1

bottom club Southampton – which saw the Gunners draw for a third successive game.

Arsenal have conceded 1.43 goals per game since they beat Spurs in January compared to 0.78 per match up to that point. They have allowed more shots, an average of one more effort on target per game and the chances they have given up have been higher quality – 0.14 xGA per shot faced on average compared to 0.11 in the first part of the campaign.

While at halfway point of the league Arsenal looked on course for finally ending their 19 year title drought, now they run the risk of being part of an unwanted record. Arsenal sit atop of the table with 75 points from 32 games while City have 70 points from 30 matches. Only 18 teams have previously ever earned 70 or more points after 30 games of a Premier League campaign. 15 of those have gone on to win the title, meaning whichever team between

Arsenal and City end up in second place will be just the fourth team to do so in Premier League history having accrued 70 points or more after 30 games.

What could strike more fear into Arsenal fans' hearts is that the previous three teams who lost their way after gaining 70 points from first 30 games have all finished runners up to Man City: Man Utd 2011-12 (73 points), Liverpool 2018-19 (73 points) and Liverpool last season (72 points).

"We have to face them like a final. This is the most important game of the season for us. We have to manage ourselves to come back and be focused again. This is the Premier League, it's so difficult to win this competition," Arsenal forward Jesus remained optimistic ahead of the tour to his old club.

But the real question is, will the optimism be enough to compensate for all the lost points, especially in the last three games, for Arsenal?

## Spalletti urges to celebrate in 'right time'

AGENCIES

Thousands of joyous Napoli supporters greeted the team early Monday as they returned from their victory over Juventus, which brought the prospect of a historic Serie A title within touching distance.

Fans flew banners and flags and sang songs as the team arrived at Naples-Capodichino Airport from Turin.

Napoli coach Luciano Spalletti could barely contain his delight after witnessing his Napoli side triumph at Allianz Stadium and edge even closer to clinching the title. But he said it isn't time for Napoli to start celebrating.

"The joy we feel is immense," the coach admitted in the wake of Sunday's 1-0 victory.

"It's another big brick to add to all the others we've laid on our quest for victory. But we must wait before celebrating. We'll keep the champagne on ice until the time is right."

If Napoli beat regional rivals Salernitana on Saturday they will need Inter Milan to avoid home defeat to Lazio on Sunday to be crowned champions for the first time since 1990.

## 'Super happy' Alcaraz wants to play against the best

AGENCIES

World number two Carlos Alcaraz beat Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3 6-4 to win the Barcelona Open on Sunday and clinch his third ATP Tour title of the year and the ninth overall for the 19 year-old.

It was Tsitsipas's fourth consecutive loss to Alcaraz. "Today I was myself, I was fluid and relaxed. It was the perfect moment to do it and I'm super happy to have delivered it in outstanding fashion," Alcaraz told TVE.

Alcaraz may end up as the favourite for the French Open, which runs from May 28 to June 11, with world No 1 Novak Djokovic and 14-time Roland Garros champion Rafa Nadal nursing elbow and hip injuries respectively.

"I've always wanted to play against the best, it's a shame that we haven't been able to enjoy Rafa these last two years," added Alcaraz.

"Let's hope he continues to play for a long time and that we can enjoy his tennis, but obviously we are not here to take over from anyone, but to build our own history."



## Sky is the limit for Wrexham

AFP, Wrexham

Wrexham's new-found corporate appeal under the ownership of Hollywood stars Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney means the Welsh club are not concerned about spending caps in the English Football League (EFL), according to executive director Humphrey Ker.

After 15 years in the National League, Wrexham were promoted back to the EFL on Saturday thanks to heavy investment from Reynolds and McElhenney since they took control from a supporters' trust in 2021 for an initial £2 million (\$2.5 million) investment.

But they have reportedly spent £10 million in total restructuring the club and investing in player transfers and wages.

League Two clubs, where Wrexham will play next season, can spend up to 50 per cent of their turnover on player-related expenditure for players aged 21 and over.

However, the global attention garnered by "Deadpool" star Reynolds and McElhenney, most famous for his role in comedy series "It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia", has seen Wrexham attract major sponsors, social media platform TikTok and travel company Expedia.

"We're not losing too much sleep about that (spending caps). I think we'll fall well within the boundaries of what we are permitted to spend."

"We feel that the sky's the limit for Wrexham," he added. "The interest in this club is astronomical."



## CRICKETERS RETURN TO THEIR ROOTS FOR EID

Busy schedules coupled with having the weight of expectations on their shoulders are something that cricketers need to deal with on a regular basis. The human aspect is often lost on fans but when it comes to celebrating Eid, even the cricketers enjoy going back to their roots where they find comfort and tranquility. Star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, pacer Shorif Islam, and left-arm spinner Taijul Islam were no different in that regard as they spent some time with their loved ones back at their native addresses during the Eid holidays. But as is the case with cricketers, their schedule demands them to return to the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium tomorrow as the Bangladesh team start a preparation camp eyeing the tour of the United Kingdom for the Ireland series next month.

PHOTOS: FACEBOOK