



bKash partners with AFA

SPORTS REPORTER

The Argentine Football Association (AFA) and bKash Limited (bKash), the largest mobile financial services provider in Bangladesh, announced their partnership to promote further financial inclusion through sports yesterday.

With this initiative, bKash became the first and only Bangladeshi brand partner of the reigning world champions.

After years of support for La Albiceleste from countries like Bangladesh, India, and China, the AFA has devised diverse brand expansion programmes. This partnership is the expression of that trajectory and greater scope.

Claudio Fabian Tapia, president of AFA, said: "The Argentina national football team felt the strong and passionate support of the Bangladeshi community throughout the World Cup. We are delighted to have bKash as the first regional brand partner of the Argentine Football Association. A true milestone of financial inclusion has been achieved in Bangladesh through bKash. This collaboration will take us closer to new regions where our football team has millions of fans. We welcome bKash as the first regional brand partner of Argentine Football Association in Bangladesh."

Kamal Quadir, founder and CEO of bKash, said: "This partnership will explore new opportunities of solidarity through sports and entertainment while helping to tell the inspiring story of Bangladesh to the world in an immersive and emotional way."

Towards even stronger ties

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That Bangladesh is a football-loving nation, with massive fanbases of two of the most entertaining and decorated national teams, namely Brazil and Argentina, was common knowledge inside Bangladesh prior to the 2022 World Cup.

From time to time, international media would highlight how the whole country splits into two distinct groups -- hoisting massive flags and painting houses in the colours of their favourite teams and often going as far as engaging in skirmishes over results.

However, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar brought a paradigm shift in terms of the global media's depiction of that craze in Bangladesh.



Despite being aeons away from making it to Qatar, Bangladesh drew constant attention throughout the month, with FIFA's social media handles and leading news outlets around the world relaying stories and videos of the nation's football craze, especially for the two South American giants.

Photos of thousands of students dressed in Albiceleste colours and revelling at the Dhaka University in front of giant screens in the dead of night or people lining the streets of mufassil towns holding massive sky blue-white flags were splashed across sports pages in leading newspapers across boundaries.

The enthusiasm reached a crescendo when Argentina claimed a third world

title, beating France in a thrilling final at the end of a rollercoaster tournament.

When Lionel Messi lifted the coveted trophy in Qatar's Lusail Stadium on December 18 last year, millions cheered across Bangladesh as if the prize belonged to them as much as it did to the Argentines.

The love and admiration that Bangladesh showed the Albiceleste did not go unnoticed in Buenos Aires, with the South American nation quickly moving to reopen its embassy 45 years after closing it due to a lack of economic and cultural exchange between the two countries.

The bond that Bengali poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Argentine

writer Victoria Ocampo forged more than a century ago was reinforced, albeit from one side, by the love and admiration of the Bangladeshis for Diego Maradona in the '80s and '90s, eventually making global headlines and being institutionalised following Messi's World Cup triumph.

The Argentine foreign minister has since visited Bangladesh with an entourage that included economic, political and sporting representatives as the two countries, more than 16,000 kilometres apart, look to get closer. It is hoped that the ties will get stronger, not only on the footballing front but also on the political, educational, cultural and, of course, financial front.

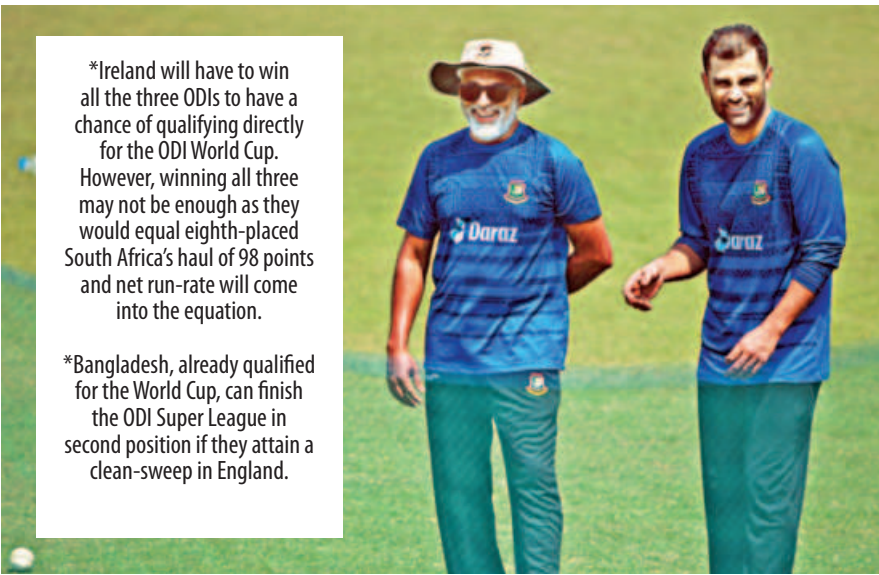
Approach important but CONDITIONS HOLD KEY

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The weather and conditions in England appears to be the trickiest aspect Bangladesh faced ahead of their three-match ODI series against Ireland in Chelmsford, starting today.

The Tigers ODI captain Tamim Iqbal mentioned on Sunday that their preparations in England have not gone as planned. Head coach Chandika Hathurusingha echoed those sentiments yesterday.

"Very unique situation since we are playing Ireland in England and normally that doesn't happen. We can't blame anyone and it's the first time," Hathurusingha told the travelling journalists yesterday when asked whether Bangladesh have been unlucky



*Ireland will have to win all the three ODIs to have a chance of qualifying directly for the ODI World Cup. However, winning all three may not be enough as they would equal eighth-placed South Africa's haul of 98 points and net run-rate will come into the equation.

*Bangladesh, already qualified for the World Cup, can finish the ODI Super League in second position if they attain a clean-sweep in England.

will have their work cut out.

As the team have shown the urgency to play a more aggressive brand of cricket, especially against Ireland recently at home, the head coach was asked if they want to keep the same approach.

"Yes, we play the same way to our potential, skill-set and competence. The only thing we will take into account are the conditions which will dictate tactically how we play. Other than that,

we are looking to play same brand of cricket," he said.

It gives the impression that the team know the challenges of away conditions where runs are available but a good start may prove pivotal. The likes of Towhid Hridoy and Rony Talukdar have recently come in to the side but both have shown fluency in white-ball formats at home conditions. Hathurusingha was hoping the duo would find their feet in different conditions like England.

"Yes for sure [good opportunity for both]. For international cricket, they need to play in all kinds of conditions. This is the first opportunity they get, I hope they prove to themselves that they can do the same thing," he remarked.

With ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan back with the squad and Mehedi Hasan Miraz already there, the Tigers have the flexibility of playing an extra batter or a bowler. Hathurusingha backed Mehedi for the number seven slot but the idea was not to set up the squad thinking of the ODI World Cup.

"We are not playing in similar conditions to India. We will contemplate on winning the series in these conditions," he said with the wicket having some tinge of green as Bangladesh went about their session yesterday.



Murray earns first title since 2019

REUTERS

Andy Murray bounced back to beat number 17 American Tommy Paul 2-6, 6-1, 6-2 on Sunday in the Aix-en-Provence Challenger Tour final, earning his first title at any level since 2019.

The three-time major winner converted four of nine breakpoints to claim his first clay title since 2016, a boost for the 35-year-old who said he hoped to play the French Open later this month despite suffering early exits from Madrid and Monaco.

It was Murray's third victory over a top-20 player this year and the twice Olympic gold medallist is expected to climb from 52nd to 42nd in the rankings after Sunday's win.

"This last year, 18 months, has been a bit of struggle with my game. But (my team) have been there supporting me and working with me to try and get better," Murray said in remarks provided by the ATP. "We keep going from here."

Paul, who lost to Novak Djokovic in the Australian Open semi-finals in January, stumbled into a trio of double faults and was unable to set up a single breakpoint opportunity in the final two sets.

The Challenger Tour said Murray's win marked the longest gap ever between titles on the secondary circuit, with Murray having last won more than 17 years ago in Binghampton.

Can Haaland make the difference?

AFP, MANCHESTER

As Manchester City plot a revenge mission against Real Madrid in the Champions League semi-finals they can draw confidence from the presence of Erling Haaland as the major difference from when the sides met 12 months ago. City seemed set for a second consecutive final when they led 5-3 on aggregate heading into stoppage time of the second leg at the Santiago Bernabeu last season.

But they were stunned by two goals in two minutes by Rodrygo before Karim Benzema's penalty completed the comeback in extra-time as Madrid went on to lift the European Cup for a 14th time.

A late defensive collapse was only part of the story. City also paid for not taking a series of chances to kill the tie off over both legs without a natural goalscorer.

Less than a week later, City announced they had won the race to arguably the greatest guarantee of goals in the world right now by beating off Madrid to sign Haaland.



Manchester City hitman Erling Haaland will be looking to add to his 12 Champions League goals this season when the Citizens meet Real Madrid in rematch of last year's semifinals tonight. But the Spanish giants will be hoping their wily midfield will have enough in the locker to keep Pep Guardiola's men at bay at the Santiago Bernabeu.

PHOTO: REUTERS/REAL MADRID



The Norwegian has more than justified the hype with 51 goals in all competitions during his first season in England.

"With Erling we knew he scored everywhere," said City boss Pep Guardiola after Haaland set a new Premier League record of 35 goals in a season last week.

Real Madrid are also aware of that

key threat, as evidenced by Los Blancos winger Rodrygo's words. "Haaland scores a lot of goals. Nobody knows how to stop him but I hope he doesn't score any against us."

Despite rewriting the record books, Haaland has made clear his desire is for trophies to remember the season by rather than personal milestones.

But most see Madrid as the biggest

hurdle left for Guardiola's men to scale with either AC Milan or Inter Milan awaiting the winners in the Champions League final.

Madrid maintain their aura under the lights of the Bernabeu on a Champions League night, while City are still waiting for Guardiola to conquer Europe seven years into his reign.

But City are the form side not just in England but all of Europe. The Premier League leaders are unbeaten in 20 games in all competitions and will also relish having home advantage for the second leg having won all 14 games at the Etihad in 2023.

"We are in exactly the same position as last year in Europe. Real Madrid again. Three games away from winning the Champions League," City winger Jack Grealish told the Daily Mail. "All I can say is that I have never had so much confidence and belief in my teammates and myself before a game as I have before going there next week."

A confidence that comes from having the most prolific striker in the world on their side.



After issuing an apology on Friday, Lionel Messi was allowed by Paris Saint Germain to rejoin training yesterday while the rest of the team enjoyed a rest day following their 3-1 league win against Troyes. Messi was out of training since an unsanctioned trip to Saudi Arabia led to a two-week suspension. Reportedly, the club has decided to commute that suspension, with the Argentine now heading towards a return to first-team action and an interesting reception at the Parc des Princes on Saturday against Ajaccio.