

Liton unfazed by form

SPORTS REPORTER

Liton Das was in immense form last year across formats and consequently picked up the top Kool-BSPA (Bangladesh Sports Press Association) sports award yesterday at a ceremony held at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in the capital. The Bangladesh star batter has not shone in a similar way this year but said he was not worried about his current form.

Liton scored runs across formats last year, notching an average of 44.44, 52.45 and 28.63 in Tests, ODIs and T20Is, respectively. This year his T20I average has improved but ODI average declined, having notched two fifties in nine ODIs so far this year.

With the ODI World Cup in India coming up, Liton's form would be key if Bangladesh are to make a case for themselves. Liton himself was not overtly worried about lack of form.

"You can't play good cricket every day. Some days you will play well while on others days it will go badly. Actually, I'm not worried. I'll just keep practicing and see what happens," he told reporters yesterday after receiving both the Sports Person of the Year and Cricketer of the Year in male category.

The Tigers will gear up for the lone Test against Afghanistan next month with their training camp expected to begin from Monday. Liton felt the immediate focus was not the World Cup but the Afghanistan Test.

"There is still some time before the World Cup. Tomorrow [Monday] we may begin our camp, so let's see but we will start with that."



Pacer Hasan Mahmud is expected to play a key role for Bangladesh when they face Afghanistan in the one-off Test in Mirpur next month, especially with the growing likelihood that the Tigers would take lessons from their scathing 224-run defeat in the only Test ever played against the Afghans in 2019 and prepare a much better pace-friendly surface this time around.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Akhi leaves BFF camp

SPORTS REPORTER

Akhi Khatun, a key member of the national women's football team, has left the camp with aim of going to a Chinese sports institute.

The centre-back, who was a key member of the SAFF Women's Championship winning team following a number of successes with age-group teams, confirmed that she has left the camp two days previously and conveyed her desire to go to China to BFF's technical director Paul Smalley.

"I have already left the camp. I talked with Smalley sir about this and I'm hoping I would get permission. If not, I don't know what I would do but I'm adamant to go there," Akhi told reporters during a programme at the Sonargaon Hotel yesterday.

Although Akhi could not provide much details about what her trip to China might entail, she said she would look to continue her studies and sports there.

"I'm not leaving football for good. I'm not leaving BFF for good. I might be back sometime," she said.

When asked whether she was going there in order to get married, which rumours had suggested, Akhi said, "Anything can happen."

'Smalley is irreplaceable, Choton not'

ATIQUE ANAM

Kazi Salahuddin, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president, claimed that the success in women's football is largely due to the effort of technical director Paul Smalley. He also said that while Golam Rabbani Choton's sudden departure is a setback, the long serving head coach is not irreplaceable.

The BFF president said the above while reacting to a report published on The Daily Star's May 28 issue, titled 'Wheels finally fall off', retorting that "wheels are not falling off at all".

"I phoned Choton today and he said he wouldn't reconsider his position," Salahuddin said yesterday. "Choton could have talked to me if he had any issues. I think he chose the time, when the BFF is under pressure, to malign me and my organisation."

"Choton is an honest and hardworking person. But he is not irreplaceable. Paul Smalley is irreplaceable. If Smalley leaves today, women's football will be finished."

"I'm not taking credit away from Choton and others, but success in women's football is due to Smalley's effort. He is the one who keeps pushing me for increasing facilities for the women footballers. If I put a local coach in his place or take him out of that

position, I can bet women's football will not win a trophy in a year," the 69-year-old opined.

Smalley was appointed as technical director of the BFF in 2016 and barring one year when he was the manager of Brunei football team, the Englishman has been working with various aspects of Bangladesh football, with special emphasis on women's football teams.

According to a BFF spokesman, Smalley gets a monthly salary of 16,000 dollars post-tax, and has reportedly negotiated a hefty raise in recent weeks while in contract, with his current one running till August, 2024.

Asked whether Smalley gets a proportionately higher salary compared with BFF's other coaches, Salahuddin asserted, "Smalley more than deserves what he gets."

This development comes at a time when the women's team members have staged two protests at the camp in demand for raise in wages and improvement of overall facilities, without getting anything concrete except for assurance.

The senior team, since winning the SAFF Women's Championship title in September last year, have not played a competitive game while their Indian counterparts played five international friendlies since SAFF Championship till

BFF president called me today. I told him I was not going to return there. I'm quitting BFF to relax now and will not change my decision. For the players, I feel the federation should take steps to stop their exodus and stage the proposed Women's Super League as soon as possible.

Golam Rabbani Choton,
Departing coach of Bangladesh women's team

I think leaving football is a loss for the girls, especially after considering where Bangladesh women's football stands now. At the end, following the success of the team, the federation may not provide any financial help but the financial help from outside the federation is a matter of honour.

Sabina Khatun
Bangladesh women's football team captain

the Olympics qualifiers, from which the BFF pulled out the Bangladesh women's team citing financial shortcomings.

Moreover, Sabina Khatun and company had to let go off offers from the Indian league due to the lure of the proposed Women's Super League in Bangladesh which, however, remains far away from seeing light.

Despite having no qualms about raising Smalley's wages, Salahuddin said he is helpless in regards to the demands of the players, citing a lack of funds and lack of interest from sponsors.

Regarding Sirat Jahan Swapna's retirement and Akhi Khatun's intended departure from the camp, Salahuddin said he expected more players to leave, not due to financial reasons but for personal and societal issues.

"Akhi [Khatun] is going to China for personal reasons. There is, I'm sure, a personal reason behind Swapna's departure too," Salahuddin opined. "These girls are 22-23 years old. At this age, they may leave due to pressure of getting married. Others will come and fill their void."

Kostyuk jeered as Tsitsipas moves on

AFP, Paris

Aryna Sabalenka won a politically-charged French Open duel against Marta Kostyuk on Sunday as jeers rained down on the defeated Ukrainian who refused to shake hands with her Belarusian opponent.

World number two and Australian Open champion Sabalenka swept 10 of the last 12 games to win 6-3, 6-2 as she kick-started her push to reach the second week in Paris for the first time.

Kostyuk honoured her pledge not to shake hands with Sabalenka in protest at Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Belarus is a key military ally of Moscow.

"It was a very tough match, tough emotionally. I didn't know if the booing was against me but thank you so much for your support, it's really important," said Sabalenka who apologised for her exaggerated, theatrical bow to the Court Philippe Chatrier crowd.

Kostyuk, 20, famously refused to shake hands with Sabalenka's Belarusian compatriot and former world number one Victoria Azarenka at the US Open last year. She opted instead for a cursory touch of racquets at the net.

The 39th-ranked Kostyuk, who has been a vociferous critic of the decision



She (Sabalenka) never says that she personally doesn't support this war, and I feel like journalists should change the questions that you ask these athletes because the war is already there. It's been 15 months since the war has begun.

Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk whose parents still live in Ukraine, said Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus had a duty to speak up because of her status as a top player.

to allow Russian and Belarusian players to keep competing on tour since the invasion of her country, questioned the crowd's motives in boozing her stance.

"I want to see people react to it in 10 years when the war is over. I think they will not feel really nice about what they did," she said.

"I didn't expect it. People should be honestly embarrassed."

Sabalenka had admitted on the eve of the tournament that she could accept if Kostyuk had feelings of "hate" towards her.

"I never said publicly nor privately nor to anyone that I hate Aryna Sabalenka or any of the players. I just don't respect her because of her position in this situation," added Kostyuk, who wants Russian and Belarusian players to individually denounce the war which has raged on since February last year.

Meanwhile, Greek fifth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas, who blew a two set lead to lose the 2021 final to Novak Djokovic, made the second round Sunday with a 7-5, 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 (9-7) win over Jiri Vesely, the 45th-ranked Czech.

Vesely, who had previously only played in two second-tier Challenger events this year, squandered four set points which would have forced a deciding set.



World Cup winner Lionel Messi scored the only goal in Paris Saint-Germain's 1-1 draw at Strasbourg, an outcome that helped PSG clinch a French record 11th Ligue1 title on Saturday. With his 496th strike in Europe's top five leagues, Messi, who is expected to leave the French club at the end of the season and could end up playing football outside of Europe next season, surpassed long time rival Cristiano Ronaldo's previous record of 495 goals. Also, the silverware was Messi's 43rd in a glittering career, making him the most decorated footballer alongside former Barcelona teammate Dani Alves.

PHOTO: AFP