

# Morsalin ‘here to stay’

SPORTS REPORTER FROM BENGALURU

Bangladesh's attacking midfielder Sheikh Morsalin is having the time of his life after getting his maiden international goal in a 3-1 triumph over the Maldives in the ongoing SAFF Championship in India on Monday.

The 17-year-old's goal wrapped up a win for his side and, after achieving his dream of making it to the national team, the teenager said he would establish himself as a mainstay after many drew parallels between his abilities and a long forgotten prospect, Hemanta Vincent Biswas.

"I have come here to stay. I am not getting lost. If you all pray for me. I will stay here," Morsalin told The Daily Star after the match.

Morsalin came on as a substitute for Javier Cabrera's side and found the net with flair in stoppage time to mark an uplifting victory for Bangladesh after a brave resistance against Lebanon in their opening fixture came to a suicidal end.

The attacking midfielder came off the right flank and faked a shot before cutting the ball back onto his weaker left foot and dispatching a low finish to the near post.

It was a refreshing scene to witness such masterful trickery from a 17-year-old playing in only his third international match. His impressive displays are of more interest since he was not even initially included in Cabrera's 35 member



**"I don't know what's happening on social media as I don't follow social media. I have nothing to say about it."**

Attacking midfielder  
SHEIKH MORSALIN

preliminary squad for the SAFF Championship. He only found a place after striker Matin Mia was ruled out with injury.

Morsalin, who made his Bangladesh Premier League debut in June 2022, drew national attention when he netted a long range strike against his parent club Bashundhara Kings while on loan with Mohammedan.

Since then, he has built a reputation when it comes to taking shots from outside the box, a trait that he said comes to him naturally.

"I have developed this skill since childhood and have kept honing it every day in training. I also tried it today [Sunday] from outside the box, but unfortunately I drove it straight to the goalkeeper," he said after the match.

After an impressive loan spell at Mohammedan in the 2021-22 season which saw him become a starter for the Black and Whites at the age of 16, Morsalin came back to his parent club the following season and made seven appearances for the league champions.

He netted his first goal for Kings in a 6-4 win over Sheikh Russel, following it up with two assists in the next match against Mohammedan to cap off an impressive season. He believed that the impressive displays in those two contests helped catapult him into the limelight and get his national call up.

"I think I was picked after my performances in the last two-three matches, which I think was the plus point for me because I performed really well in those matches," Morsalin said. "I think I could not fully satisfy my coach [Oscar Bruzon] during the place-deciding Federation Cup match against Sheikh Russel, but the coach gave me another chance in the league against the same opponents and I availed the opportunity," Morsalin revealed to The Daily Star earlier this month.



Bangladesh players were back in training yesterday at the Bhaichung Bhutia Football Stadium, a day after beating Maldives in their crucial SAFF Championship fixture. The men in red and green will take on Bhutan in the last group fixture tomorrow.

PHOTO: BFF

# ‘Freedom to move’ SPARKS transformation

ANISUR RAHMAN FROM BENGALURU

Bangladesh had faced harsh criticism after poor performances in twin friendlies against an amateur-heavy Seychelles team in March and that negativity continued following a dismal performance against Cambodia in a friendly in June.

Interestingly, the criticism came despite the men in red and green posting two victories. They defeated Seychelles 1-0 before losing by the same scoreline and then beat Cambodia 1-0. But even in victory, Javier Cabrera's team could hardly hold on to the ball, making erratic passes or taking loose touches to cede possession.

Playing a possession-based game appeared a pipe dream given the showings, despite the fact that Cabrera's charges had shown signs of improvement and their fighting character in the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers in Malaysia last year.

That attitude had gone missing for Bangladesh's next five matches until the team started showing those characteristics afresh in the ongoing SAFF Championship.

Speaking about what made the transformation possible, captain Jamal Bhuiyan said: "We worked on those areas (build-up, attack, maintaining possession) and fine-tuned those things. The players also discussed

which style would be suitable for us before sharing it with the coach. We believe the players will get tired if we always play on the counter-attack," said Jamal, who is playing in his fifth SAFF Championship.

"The coach also wants possession and a build-up game, but he prefers counter-attacking football. But we expressed our desire to the coach, believing we would get more chances if we play a possession-based game. And we are doing that now," Jamal continued.

"If you compare our recent performance to the matches against Seychelles, we are more flexible than we were in those games because we had been static in our own positions then. We could not move from our position as per the directives. But this time around, we were given more freedom to move to other places. That's why Bishwanath Ghosh went up front to help Sheikh Morsalin score the third goal."

Goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico echoed Jamal's sentiments about the team's transformation from a gritty defensive team to a build-up-focused unit.

"We have been together for a long time and the coach has been trying to play a build-up game. We tried it against Lebanon but could not do well because of their press. So we were forced to play

long balls even though we planned to attack by building up from behind," Zico said, opining that they could not perform well against Seychelles and Cambodia because both teams pressed till the last minute.

Assistant coach Hasan Al Mamun, who has been with Cabrera since the start of the last year, said the Spaniard's plan, methodology and execution had helped Bangladesh put up good performances against Lebanon and Maldives.

"Since Cabrera took over, he was planning to form a squad with a mix of experienced and young players. He placed a lot of emphasis on scouting players over the past 15 months," Hasan said, adding that younger players also had an impact on performance.

"You know there are a lot of young players in the squad such as Isa Faysal, Rafiqul Islam and Morsalin. They are playing their first international tournament while Md Ridoy, Mojibur Rahman Jonny and Mohammad Sohel Rana are also fresh players. If you look at the profile of these players, they have less experience in international matches. It was not easy to come back against Maldives with a team that features players with that sort of profile," Hasan, who was Bangladesh's stand-in captain during the 2003 SAFF Championship triumph, concluded.



**Sean Williams was unstoppable on Monday, smashing a career-best 101-ball 174 to power Zimbabwe to a 304-run win over the USA -- the biggest margin win for Zimbabwe and the second-largest win overall in terms of runs in ODI history -- in the ICC Cricket World Cup qualifiers in Harare. Hosts Zimbabwe made 408 for six, their highest ODI total, before bundling out the USA for just 104 to stay perfect in Group A with four successive wins. Zimbabwe narrowly missed out on breaking the record for the biggest margin victory in ODIs, held by India for their 317-run win over Sri Lanka at the start of the year in Thiruvananthapuram. But the in-form African side became the seventh country to breach the 400-run barrier in ODIs and have already made it to the Super Sixes of the qualifiers, in which they will have an added advantage as they will be carrying two points from their win over West Indies on Saturday.**

PHOTO: ZIMBABWE CRICKET



Australia, world champions in both white-ball formats in women's cricket, also proved just too good with the red ball as they sealed an 89-run victory against England in the one-off Ashes Test on Monday. In chase of a women's Test record 268, England were all out for 178 with Ashleigh Gardner taking all five wickets to fall on the final day at Trent Bridge. Gardner returned career-best figures of eight for 66 in the second innings.

PHOTO: REUTERS

# Fitness key in Jahanara's exclusion

SPORTS REPORTER

Veterans Jahanara Alam and Rumana Ahmed were excluded from Bangladesh's 20-member preliminary squad for the upcoming series against India at home, announced the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

The India series is a big challenge given the ODI leg of the tour, being part of the 2022-2025 ICC Women's Championship, will determine qualification to the 2025 ODI World Cup.

However, more than just results, the team management is focusing on the bigger picture -- by bringing up younger stars to build a more competitive unit for the 2024 T20 World Cup next year in Bangladesh.

The team management are of the belief that the team could have performed better in last few assignments.

Unlike Rumana, however, veteran Salma Khatun returned after being dropped from the last series. Meanwhile, pacer Marufa Akter returned to the squad after sitting out the Lankan series due to academic involvement.

The main reason for the changes, according to sources, were the calamity in fielding. It all came down to fitness issues in the end.

"Most of our defeats have come due to fielding, so we are emphasising



PHOTO: BCB

more on our fitness. If you see our progress from last year, we could have won some series but that didn't happen. It's high time we pick some young players. We have the 2024 World Cup at home," a member of the team management told The Daily Star on conditions of anonymity.

The presence of younger stars such as Rabeya Khan, Shorna Akter and Sanjida Akter Meghla certainly gives indications of current requirements.

Asked why Salma had been included, a source informed that off-spinning options were required due to the presence of left-handers in the India lineup. Salma was the highest wicket-taker in the recently concluded Women's DPL with 17 scalps.

Along with Marufa and Salma, Shathi Rani and Dilara Akter also returned to the squad for the

upcoming series.

The Tigresses had been undergoing training camp on an individual basis and following the Eid-ul-Adha vacations, they will report back for the camp on June 30 before their first training session commences on June 1.

India are set to arrive in the country on July 6 to play three T20Is and as many ODIs against the hosts, scheduled to take place in Mirpur from July 9 to 22.

The tour is the first to be hosted by Bangladesh that falls under the 2022-2025 FTP cycle. After failing to win the preceding two series against New Zealand and Sri Lanka -- part of ICC's Women's Championship 2022-2025 -- Bangladesh occupy eighth spot with four points in six matches.