

## Search for opening slot options continues

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh sent in as many as six openers along with Soumya Sarkar to the Emerging Asia Cup in Sri Lanka, hoping to gauge the cricketers' performance for the backup opener slot in the national team. Whether the team management achieved what they were looking for is a big question following the team's defeat to India A in the semifinals.

As the uncertainty regarding Tamim Iqbal's return to the national team lingers on, the discussion regarding the backup opener slot looks set to gain more prominence.

National team opener Mohammad Naim, the backup opener before Tamim's retirement saga, played two rather unconvincing innings in the two ODIs against Afghanistan in Chattogram, returning figures of 0 and 9, which means the team management might have to keep looking for the solution to Liton Das's opening partner.

Naim, along with Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Zakir Hasan, Saif Hasan, Mahmudul Hasan Joy and Parvez Hossain Emon, had been taken to the Emerging Asia Cup while Soumya was included as a batting all-rounder down the order.

With three fifties in the tournament, Tanzid was the most convincing amongst those openers, showing a very positive approach. He scored 179 runs in four games at an average of over 44. Mahmudul Hasan Joy struck a hundred against Afghanistan A with the team losing early wickets and his tournament tally of 131 runs in three innings suggest that he may be one for the future but an ODI call-up is still an unlikely scenario.

Naim had appeared in the opening slot alongside Tanzid and scored 125 runs at an average of just over 41. Despite Soumya and Sheikh Mahedi's performances, it remains to be seen whether the team management would have enough confidence on them performing in the number seven role in the national side.

Meanwhile, the murky situation regarding Tamim's return continued further. According to media reports, a surgery may put Tamim's World Cup participation in doubt given the recovery period. BCB president Nazmul Hassan was asked yesterday regarding the situation.

"Tamim is our captain for the World Cup and if he returns, he will be doing that but if he doesn't, someone else will. We are not certain which matches he will be able to play and which he may not. We want him to recuperate and return soon," Nazmul told reporters.



Bangladesh batter Fargana Hoque, who recorded the first century in women's ODIs for the country on Saturday in the third of the three-match series against India in Mirpur, and skipper Nigar Sultana Joty were present at a hotel in the capital when the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced a Tk 35 lakh cash prize for the Tigresses, who drew the India ODI series 1-1 with the final game tied.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## 'Our importance increased massively'

EKUSH TAPADER

Fargana Hoque was about to check out from the team hotel on Sunday when a large number of photojournalists stopped her, requesting pictures.

Fargana patiently accepted and posed for a few snaps, absorbing all the limelight that the right-handed batter rightfully has been getting since registering the maiden hundred for Bangladesh in Women's ODIs in the third of the three-match series against India in Mirpur on Saturday. Bangladesh shared the series with India – the best outcome for the Tigresses against India.

Understandably, the environment inside the team hotel yesterday was something the Bangladesh women cricketers have rarely experienced. Asked how it felt, Fargana replied: "It's a different experience. Everyone [the media and the BCB officials] came here and I am enjoying this. It seems our importance has increased massively."

Fargana's assumption was correct as the women cricketers in Bangladesh last received such adulation when they clinched the Asia Cup in 2018.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan Papon, who was out of the country during Bangladesh's third ODI, rushed to the hotel yesterday along with other board members to congratulate and spend some time with the girls.

The BCB boss also announced a cash bonus of Tk 35 lakh to the team to



encourage the cricketers for their brilliant display against India.

"This win gave us the momentum and we are willing to keep this momentum in the coming series as well. We don't want to look back from here, and as I said, we will play every series from now on with the urge to win. Obviously, it feels good to receive the bonus," skipper Nigar Sultana Joty said.

At the other side of the team hotel, another young prospect of the team, young pacer Marufa Akter, was seen enjoying every moment of the occasion. "It feels great. Everyone is praising me, encouraging me and they told me that I have to play even better in the coming days," said Marufa, who shone with seven wickets in three games against India.

Despite the cash prize, the BCB boss admitted that the board has been unable

to provide enough support and facilities that the women's team deserved.

"We gave them a bonus but the more important fact is that we are willing to give more focus on them. They need support staff along with coaches. They have asked for a pace bowling coach and we have decided to fulfill those," said Papon.

Papon also pointed out a few areas in order to develop women's cricket.

"We also want to have school cricket for the girls and we are willing to start it this year which will help us to get new players. They [players] have also asked to introduce the women's BPL and we assured them that we have already taken a decision in principle to start that," Papon added.

It will be important for the BCB to implement what Papon promised which will surely help the women's cricket in Bangladesh take the next step forward.

## 'Hope Mbappe stays at PSG this season'

AFP, Osaka

Paris Saint-Germain captain Marquinhos said Sunday he hoped the club would solve its dispute with Kylian Mbappe and welcome the France superstar back into the squad for the upcoming season.

Mbappe was left out of a squad of 29 players for the French champions' pre-season tour of Japan and South Korea amid an ongoing contract dispute.

"He is an exceptional player but it is a decision that was taken over our heads, by the management," Marquinhos told reporters in the Japanese city of Osaka.

He admitted it was a "delicate" subject. "Even in Japan you are here with your questions," he complained, although new coach Luis Enrique, sitting alongside the Brazilian, escaped without being asked about Mbappe.

"We always want to have top players with us and I hope a decision will be taken to allow him to be with us and help us this season," Marquinhos added.

The 24-year-old Mbappe has said he will not extend his existing deal with the Qatar-owned club, which expires next year, and PSG therefore decided not to take him on the trip east.

He has said he wants to remain in Paris for one more year, but PSG say they would prefer to sell him in this transfer window rather than seeing him depart as a free agent in 2024.



## Sri Lanka to 'come out fighting' in last Pakistan Test

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka coach Chris Silverwood believes his team will "come out fighting" to level the two-match series and beat Pakistan in the second Test starting Monday in Colombo.

Pakistan arrived in Sri Lanka without a Test win in their name in 12 months but, despite a wobbly final-innings chase, a four-wicket victory in Galle means the visitors need only a draw to win the two-match series.

"The motivation is there -- the players know how important it is to be picking up Test points, and how important it is to win at home," Silverwood told reporters on Sunday.

"Listening to the chat in the dressing room... they are going to come out fighting and push much harder."

In their last Test, other than Dhananjaya de Silva -- who made 122 and 82 -- their batters failed to deliver in Galle, many of them getting into the 20s and 30s but not building on their starts.

But Pakistan coach Grant Bradburn said the team wanted to be "number one" in the world. "We want to entertain, we want to be dynamic," Bradburn said.

Sri Lanka are playing their first Test match at the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC) after five years -- a match they lost to England by 42 runs, when Silverwood was England's bowling coach.

## 'Well-organised league but lack of competition at top'

SPORTS REPORTER

Ever since the introduction of professional football league in 2007, local coaches had been demanding disclosure of league fixtures ahead of time so that they could better prepare their sides. Those demands continued to fall into deaf ears until being materialised in the 14th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League, which concluded on Saturday.

The just-concluded league saw advanced revealing of fixtures of two separate legs, including probable pauses due to international engagements or holidays, allowing the clubs plan, prepare and execute their training, travel and other things much more smoothly than the past.

UEFA A licence holder Maruful Haque, who was always vocal in demand for advanced fixtures, termed the league as a well-organised one.

"The league was well-organised as the fixtures were revealed much ahead of time, allowing the coaches to complete their training cycle properly in between two matches, a system followed worldwide. I think



this system should be continued in future," Maruful told The Daily Star.

For the first time, the league matches were scheduled only on Fridays and Saturdays while Tuesdays were reserved for Federation Cup fixtures, allowing the coaches to test bench strength in Federation Cup matches. This gave some clubs the luxury of bringing seven to eight changes in Federation Cup matches, three or four days after the league matches.

Explaining the reasons behind massive changes in playing eleven, Maruful said, "Each club had differing targets in league and Federation Cup. They knew who

their opponents were in each of the fixtures and what their targets were. So the coaches came out of their previous habit of using fixed elevens and gave more players opportunities to play from the start."

The 53-year-old coach, however, lamented a lack of competition when it came to the title race, which he felt was a result of lack of quality players overall.

"Even though there was competition for the second position and for avoiding relegation, there was no competition for the title race. All the quality players lined up for one team, leaving the other

teams compete against each other," Maruful opined. "The lack of competitiveness at the top may have an impact on the performance of the national team as well."

The experienced coach believes the impact of foreign players was felt in every position, not just in striking position.

"It is happening because of the fall of quality players in every position, not just strikers. The decisive passes in midfield were provided by foreigners; the main roles played in defence were by the foreigners; the ones creating goalscoring chances were foreigners. It has been a total drop in quality of our football compared to five to seven years ago," said the former national team coach, who has been involved with the professional league since its second edition.

In order to improve the quality of the league further, Maruful emphasised on rescheduling the timing of matches, selection of venues nearer to the capital, improvement of venues, training grounds, dressing rooms and of some other facilities.



France's Leon Marchand smashed Michael Phelps's last remaining world record on Sunday when he clocked 4min, 02.50 -- more than a second faster than Phelps -- to win the men's 400m individual medley at swimming's world championships in Japan. Marchand finished ahead of American Carson Foster in 4:06.56 and Japan's Daiya Seto in 4:09.41.

PHOTO: AFP