

The athlete-turned-footballer propelling Spain

AFP, Auckland

Teenager Salma Paralluelo gave another reminder of her precious talent by coming off the bench Tuesday for the second game running to play a pivotal role for Spain at the Women's World Cup.

Olga Carmona scored a cracker in the 89th minute in Auckland to give Spain a 2-1 victory over Sweden and send them into their first World Cup final.

But it was the 19-year-old Barcelona attacker Paralluelo who lit the fuse for a gripping finale, turning the ball into the Sweden net with a smart finish in the box on 81 minutes.

Sweden equalised through a Rebecka Blomqvist strike seven minutes later, only for defender Carmona to seal the semifinal in Spain's favour with a rocket.

Paralluelo also came off the bench to score against the



Netherlands in the quarterfinals, her classy goal in extra time proving decisive on that occasion.

A starter in every round before that, she also played a big part in the 5-1 demolition of Switzerland

in the last 16 with her deliveries from the left wing, two of which led to goals for Aitana Bonmati.

Spain are defined by technique and a mesmerising passing game, but the player who gives them that precious

something different with her pace, direct running and power on the flank is Paralluelo.

"She is a player with enormous potential and she is a long way from touching the ceiling in terms of what she can do," coach Jorge Vilda has said. "She is very young and has only been focusing fully on training for football for a year. We will see the best of Salma in the future."

Born in the northeastern city of Zaragoza to a Spanish father and a mother from Equatorial Guinea, Paralluelo grew up combining football with athletics.

"I started doing both when I was seven. At first it was just a game for me but little by little as I grew up I started to realise I could go further," she said of her early footballing days in an interview with FIFA.com last year.

Paralluelo won medals in several different track disciplines, taking part in hurdles and triple

jump. She also competed in the 400 metres at the 2019 European Indoor Championships in Glasgow, when aged 15.

Paralluelo's budding football career took her to Villarreal, where she suffered a ruptured ACL in her left knee in April 2021 that kept her out for nine months.

In July last year she joined Barcelona, the emerging superpower of European women's club football, just after another injury ruled her out of the Spain squad for the European Championship in England.

That move meant giving up athletics once and for all. "It was difficult to give up one sport, but it was a step I had to take and I couldn't be in a better place," she said at the time.

Having helped Barca win the Champions League, Paralluelo is now closing on a third world title with Spain.

Women footballers to come under BFF contract

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national women's football team players are set to come under a professional contract with the Bangladesh Football Federation.

A contract signing ceremony is scheduled to take place at the BFF House today where, according to a source inside the federation, around 30 footballers are set to come under the contract.

Currently the BFF dormitory houses around 70 female players in total – ranging from age group to senior women's team. The players get a monthly salary of around 10,000 on average – based on their performance and seniority. Reportedly, senior team captain Sabina Khatun draws a maximum of Tk 50,000 while the lowest amount is Tk 5,000.

The players have staged a number of protests and refrained from training a few times in recent months in demand for an increase of salaries and other benefits, including food, accommodation and sports kits. They had also met the BFF high-ups a few times, demanding a monthly salary of Tk 50,000 but they failed to see their demands met.

Some of the players had also participated in a local football tournament recently in Satkhira, outside the jurisdiction of the game's governing body as the relationship between the players and the federation became strained.

It is understood that the professional contract will offer them a higher salary compared to the current one, however, that will fall well short of their demand. It will also set out a code of conduct for the contracted players.

'Matildas Mania' sweeps Australia

REUTERS, Sydney

Australia and England re-engage one of the oldest and fiercest rivalries in sport when they meet with a place in the Women's World Cup final on the line at a sold-out Stadium Australia on Wednesday.

While England boast the pedigree as twice World Cup semi-finalists and winners of the European title last year, Australia's plucky Matildas have captured the hearts of a nation usually invested in other sports.

Australian rules and rugby league fans may be sketchy on the finer details of the round-ball game but they know 'Aussie grit' when they see it, and last Saturday's dramatic penalty shootout win over France certainly fit the bill.

Sports fans around the country celebrated goalkeeper Mackenzie Arnold's saves and Cortnee Vine's winning penalty as if the tournament was won, and there has since been blanket media coverage of a sport often disparaged Down Under.

Sydney's next two biggest stadiums will open their doors to allow ticketless fans to watch Wednesday's match on big screens and the prime minister has all but promised a public holiday if the co-hosts lift the trophy after Sunday's final.

Before they start thinking about taking on Spain, however, they must get past an England side who know all about the pressure of performing on home soil after similarly being embraced by their compatriots during last year's Euros triumph.



Abahani relishing Eagles challenge

SPORTS REPORTER

Six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani are looking forward to crossing the Club Eagles hurdle in the AFC Cup as the two teams face off in a Preliminary Round-2 fixture of Asia's second-tier club competition at Sylhet District Stadium today.

The match will get underway at 3:15pm.

Since qualifying for the inter-zonal semifinals of the AFC Cup in 2019 as the first Bangladeshi club, the Dhanmondi-based outfit have been struggling to get into the group stage. They have lost either against Maldivian or Indian clubs in the preliminary round or play-off matches in the last three editions.

However, this time Abahani are confident about turning the tide against Club Eagles, who landed in Sylhet five days ahead of the match in a bid to acclimatise with the conditions. The Sky Blues finished their BPL campaign last month and will play in front of a home crowd.

Abahani will have another advantage in the form of foreign players, availing all six foreign players' quota while Club Eagles have brought only five foreign players – two Uzbek defenders, one Estonian defender, one Brazilian forward and one Sri Lankan midfielder – apart from four Maldivian internationals.

Abahani's Portuguese coach



Mario Lemos identified his side as the favourites in the pre-match press conference yesterday.

"The AFC Cup has always been a special competition. We are getting six foreign players to play and I am trying to understand them and trying to get the best from them. We have changed some things tactically because it is all about winning the match," Lemos had told reporters before the team's departure for Sylhet.

Ahead of the match, the rain forecast and possible ground condition also came in discussion, even though Lemos did not want to attach much importance to that.

"The players are used to playing in every condition. If it rains, they have to play. If it is hot, they will have to play and it can't be an excuse," Lemos said. "If the ground gets wet due to the rain, then they have to play the simple game instead of the

pretty game because the ball stops on the heavy pitch."

Defender Rahmat Mia said, "we are hoping for something good as we have been preparing after watching the weak and strong points of the opponents. We now have 10 foreign players who have been competing among themselves to get a place in the playing eleven."

Club Eagles coach Shiyaz Mohamed, too, is hoping to get back home with a victory.

"We have come here to win the match. The preparation has been good as we came here on August 11 to adjust with the conditions and with the food. So, we are expecting a positive result tomorrow," said Shiyaz.

The winners of this match will face the winners between Machhindra FC of Nepal and Mohun Bagan Super Giants in a play-off match on August 22.

Challenges aplenty as Asia Cup set to be Shakib's litmus test

SPORTS REPORTER

Facing steep challenges both home and away in the previous ODI Super League had seen Bangladesh put on a brave face and set themselves ambitious targets in the upcoming 2023 ODI World Cup. Newly-appointed ODI skipper Shakib Al Hasan also made a similar assertion just a few days back.

Having taken over captaincy from Tamim Iqbal, the onus will be on Shakib to make the team tick at the right stage and at the right time. Going into two mega events such as the Asia Cup later this month and then the World Cup, the team will be tested like never before.

"It's a great challenge for our team to showcase how good we have become in the last four years. It will be a great opportunity for us to do well in the World Cup." Shakib had said in Colombo during a Lankan Premier League game.

A team is only as good as its weakest part, and opponents with high calibre will be targeting specifically those weaknesses. On the other hand, Bangladesh are a team that play well when everyone contributes and comes through as a unit. Thus, given the obvious flaws the team management will have to deal with profile-wise, mental strength is going to be a key factor in achieving lofty objectives.

Starting from the Asia Cup, the ability

to take on challenges will be on view. The challenge will be to focus on their strengths and manage their weaknesses.

Here, we take a look at how the challenges shape up for the Tigers ahead of the Asia Cup.

THE OPENING SLOT

Alongside Liton Das, in the squad are two openers in Mohammad Naim and Tanzid Hasan. The selectors had included both Naim and Tanzid in the recently concluded Emerging Asia Cup in Sri Lanka and the idea must have been to see how they perform because they stuck with the same opening pair throughout the tournament. Tanzid had shown promise, but Naim failed to live up to his potential. It would mean that Tanzid may just be the preferred one to partner Liton up top. A new opening pair always takes time to find rhythm but Tanzid, however, might just be the X-factor the team needs.

NUMBER THREE

Najmul Hossain Shanto holds the position previously owned by Shakib. His solidity against the new ball, albeit not consistently, and his ability to take advantage of the early field settings were shown in recent white-ball series. However, the Asia Cup and the World Cup will pose much steeper challenges. When up against quality bowlers at the biggest of stages, the need for something extra from the batter arises. And

Shanto's contribution will go a long way to defining if Bangladesh succeed or not.

MIDDLE-ORDER

Shakib has dropped lower down the order. His big hitting too now looks more menacing while he has not exactly flourished against the new ball. Tawhid Hridoy now comes in at four and it is likely he will change positions with Shakib depending on match scenarios



and in order to facilitate the left-right batting combinations. However, early collapses will put both these batters up against the new ball and Hridoy, in particular, has not been tested there. Mushfiqur Rahim, meanwhile, looks like a revelation at number six. He will be key, and whether the team can weather difficult situations will heavily depend on his consistency.

THE FINISHERS

This is one area where the team has always suffered. Shamim Hossain, Afif Hossain, Mahedi Hasan along with Mehedi Hasan Miraz will be the ones in at number seven or eight. Given the inexperience along with the lack of arsenal available in these positions, the Asia Cup will be the litmus test for how the team can end the innings on a high.

likely have to do the most damage with the new ball.

SPIN

Bangladesh lack quality wrist-spin options, an obvious game changer in modern cricket. Also, Nasum Ahmed and Mehedi are not particularly known for their wicket-taking traits, and the onus may just be on Shakib to add that variety.

ABSENCE OF SIXTH BOWLER

Mahedi's inclusion may mean that the sixth bowling option may be covered by him. In absence of a pace bowling all-rounder, Mahedi's role will be crucial whenever he plays. His ability to hold his nerve will be crucial.

FIELDING

Bangladesh have come leaps and bounds in terms of improvement on the field and it is understood that both Shakib and head coach Chandika Hathurusingha will not compromise on that aspect.

Former team director Khaled Mahmud yesterday identified that the 'Tigers' pace battery has now bolstered the team's ability to win games. However, against England at home, that same bowling lineup leaked runs. "If our team are to be champions, then we have to beat the strong sides," he reminded. At the moment, not much room for tinkering with the batting lineup, thus, the Asia Cup will provide answers to lots of questions.

Taskin Ahmed and Co may