

### Kings to dissect AFC Cup failure

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings want to assess what went wrong in their AFC Cup qualifiers campaign, which came to an end on Monday under controversial circumstances, and decide their plan of action to fix their woes in international competitions.

"Regardless of whatever happened, however our players performed and the calls the referee made, at the end of the day the reality is that we could not qualify," the Kings' president Imrul Hasan told the Daily Star yesterday.

"There are a lot of regrets, but now we want to look forward," he added.

Kings needed just one point from their final Group D match against Odisha FC in Bhubaneshwar to qualify for their maiden inter-zonal play-off semifinal.

But after their Uzbekistani midfielder Asror Gafurov was controversially shown a direct red card for a foul he committed near the centre line at the halfway point of the match, Kings lost their grip in the contest, suffered a second-half goal and lost the match 1-0.

This defeat cost Kings a chance to establish themselves among the big clubs in the South Asian region, which has been one of their main goals from the outset.

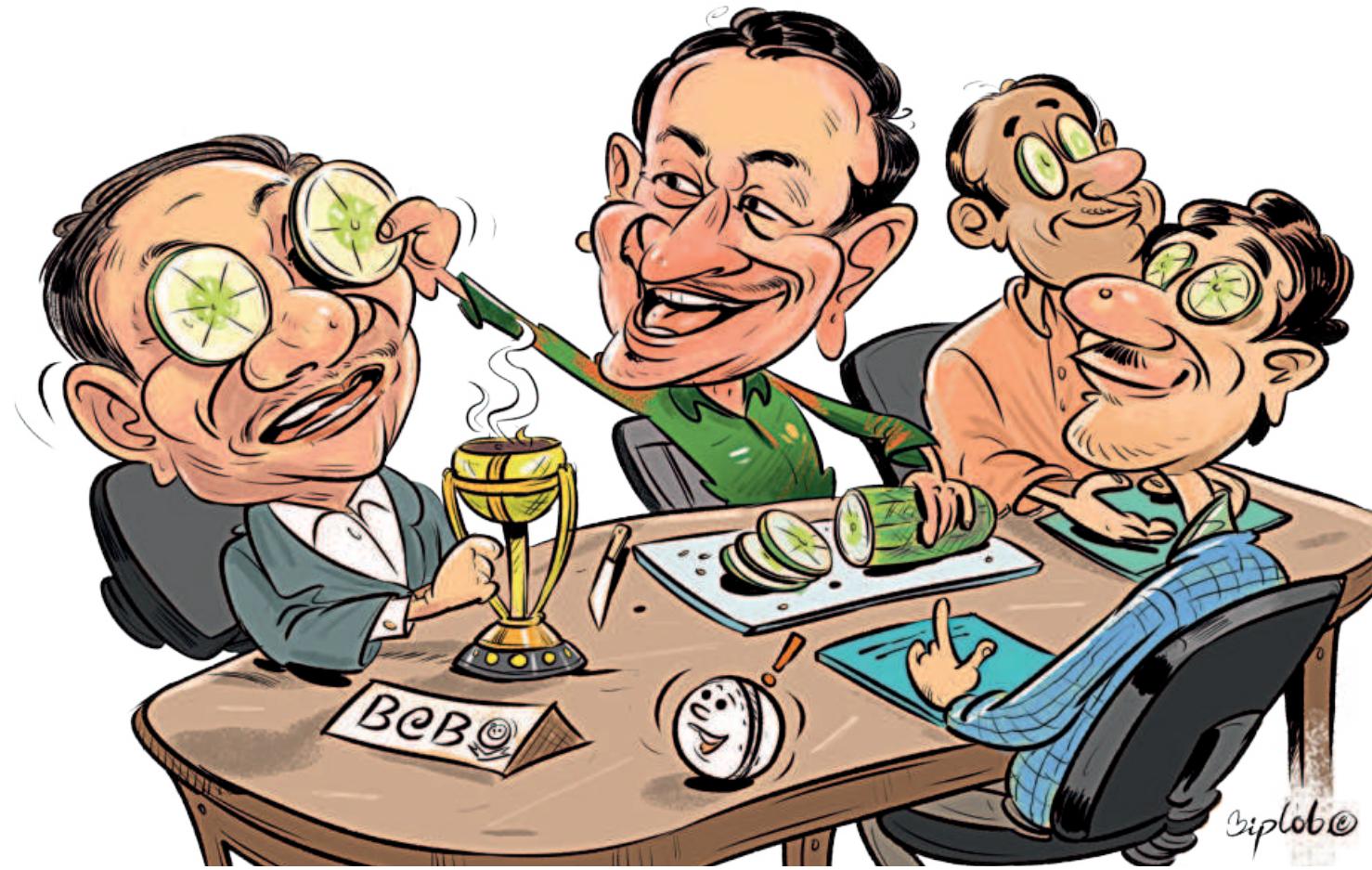
Under the guidance of Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon, the star-studded Kings are an unstoppable juggernaut in the domestic circuit, with four league titles and a couple of Federation Cup and Independence Cup titles each since joining the top-flight in the 2018-19 season.

However, success at AFC Cup remained elusive for Kings as they are yet to qualify for the knockout stage in four attempts so far.

After Monday's match, Bruzon implored the AFC to investigate the referee's actions "for the sake of football".

However, the Kings president first wanted to hear the accounts of the players and the coach before taking an official step.

"We want to first talk to everyone, go through the report and then make the decision."



## No soul-searching as BCB's old ways persist

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Just as strong winds do not necessarily blow away all heavy sand sediments in a desert, the recent World Cup debacle has not really had any effect in terms of changing Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) mindset.

A familiar pattern emerges yet again. It appears that the World Cup flop has also become just another regular event in Bangladesh cricket, with the reasons for such a disastrous campaign ready to be swept under the rug. The signs are emerging given what the BCB president had said recently -- that lack of an impetus from the rest of the board directors was the reason for the board in being unable to handle disciplinary issues.

"When I want to do it [bring back discipline] at that point, my colleagues of the board feel they [board] are behind him, and that is the reason no one does it [take steps]," the BCB president had said after the second Test against New Zealand.

The statement also brings to focus the need for his involvement on most important issues, further pointing to the fact that the processes needed to run the incumbent board do not function.

The BCB president's remark, or what ODI captain Shakib Al Hasan had said before the World Cup regarding his captaincy and then what he said on Monday, along with what cricket operations chairman Jalal Yunus said about Shakib's availability, all go a long way to understanding the recurring pattern.

Yet, on Monday, he said that he was hoping to play in all three formats and focus on national assignments instead of franchise cricket.

Shakib has often opted out of national assignments to play in IPL. However, IPL's interest regarding Shakib has been waning in recent years and the player's words from Monday were contradictory. Jalal's words to

**The BCB president's remark, or what ODI captain Shakib Al Hasan had said before the World Cup regarding his captaincy and then what he said on Monday, along with what cricket operations chairman Jalal Yunus said about Shakib's availability, all go a long way to understanding the recurring pattern.**

he will remain captain in the formats going forward.

"Since we have given him the mandate, we want him to stay as captain in the rest," BCB cricket operations chairman remarked.

Shanto was made the stand-in skipper for both red-ball and upcoming white-ball assignments against New Zealand. There was a feeling that with Shakib now on the last stages of his career, Shanto might take part of the leadership reigns. The chance of grooming Shanto may not remain when the likes of Shakib or others finally retire, leading to a hindered growth of a new generation.

The urge for overhaul is not felt within the board since they appointed personnel already within the board's power structure to conduct an assessment on the World Cup disaster. The three-member committee representatives themselves did not say they were involved in 'inquiry'.

Such inquiry committee findings in the past have previously not been availed to the public, most recently following the 2021 T20 World Cup.

Meanwhile, Tamim Iqbal's international involvement is still not clear. Even the falling out between Shakib and Tamim Iqbal have not been met with proper disciplinary processes because if there were forward-looking steps, BCB would have to take responsibility for many of their own actions, one they perhaps do not want to take.

The World Cup debacle was cause for soul-searching and overhaul of many processes, but problems are again being shelved for later. Reinforcing the notion, it appears that one or two sporadic victories are enough to satiate BCB's appetite.

## PSG's Champions League survival hinges on Dortmund tie

AFP, PARIS

PSG take on Borussia Dortmund in Germany on Wednesday in their final group-stage game with more than just Champions League survival hanging in the balance.

In Group F, the one that had all eyes on it when the draw was made, things could not be tighter as PSG, Newcastle and AC Milan all still have the chance to join already-qualified Dortmund in the knockout stages.

A win for PSG would ensure them not only of qualifying but of topping the group as they currently sit second with seven points, three behind Dortmund and two ahead of Newcastle and Milan.

In the return fixture on matchday one, PSG's campaign got off to a flyer when Kylian Mbappe and Achraf Hakimi's goals ensured a 2-0 win, giving them a better head-to-head record with the Germans should both sides finish the group level on points.

Since then, they have been up and down and a humiliating 4-1 away defeat to Newcastle and a 2-1 loss at Milan were backed up by a 1-1 draw on matchday



five against the English outfit.

In the group's other game, Newcastle's first UCL appearance in 20 years could end early when they host seven-times winners Milan, with both sides on five points and needing victory to have any hope of qualifying.

Rafael Leao returns for Milan. The Portugal attacker has been out of action

for the past month with a hamstring injury but Milan are confident their winger will be ready to start at St James' Park and repeat his mesmerising display against PSG from a month ago.

Milan will need the version of Leao which tore PSG to bits if they are to have any chance of progressing to the last 16 as a painful home loss to Borussia

Dortmund in their most recent group fixture left qualification out of their hands.

Leao has scored four times and set up three more this season but has been criticised for lacklustre performances. His equaliser in the 2-1 home win over PSG was his first goal in the best part of two months.

"Criticism spurs me on, keep talking because I'll reply on the pitch," said Leao after the PSG win, which was the last time he found the net as he picked up his hamstring knock a few days later at Lecce.

After the Dortmund defeat which left Milan bottom of the group, as things stand, Milan must beat Newcastle, not an impossible task judging by the 4-1 thumping Eddie Howe's team took at Tottenham on Sunday, but also need group leaders Dortmund to beat PSG.

A 3-0 thrashing in Paris in October means that Milan have to finish on more points than PSG otherwise it's relegation to the Europa League or -- if they don't win in England -- elimination from all continental competition.

**SONY SPORTS 2**  
UEFA Champions League  
Red Star Belgrade vs Manchester City  
Live from 11:45 pm

**SONY SPORTS 5**  
Newcastle vs AC Milan  
Live from 2:00 am (Thursday)

**SONY SPORTS 1**  
Dortmund vs PSG  
Live from 2:00 am (Thursday)

## 'Under-prepared' Mirpur reprimanded by ICC

SPORTS DESK

The International Cricket Council (ICC) handed a demerit point to the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur for using an 'under prepared' pitch in the second Test between Bangladesh and New Zealand.

The ICC rated the pitch 'unsatisfactory' after assessing the report submitted by match referee David Boon.

"It appeared that the pitch may have been under prepared, as it was not hard and was covered in grass clippings on day one," Boon said in his report.

"From the first session onwards, throughout the remainder of the match the bounce was inconsistent with numerous balls bursting the surface. Deliveries from spin bowlers often went over the batter's shoulder when playing forward and then occasionally stayed very low," the former Australia batter added.

The rain-hit match, which took place between December 6-9, was won by the visitors by four wickets.

After the match, Kiwi captain Tim Southee didn't mince his words when asked about his thoughts on the Mirpur surface, categorising it as "the worst wicket I've come across in my career".

However, Bangladesh's captain Najmul Hossain Shanto defended the highly unpredictable track, saying he saw nothing wrong in preparing such pitches to gain home advantage.

This is the second time the venue has received a demerit point. Earlier, it received one in 2018 following a Bangladesh-Sri Lanka Test match. If Mirpur accumulates six demerit points during a five-year period, it will be suspended from staging any international cricket for 12 months.



**The duo faced each other 36 times in their careers while playing for club and country, with Messi's teams winning on 16 occasions against Ronaldo's 11 while nine games resulted in a stalemate. Messi registered 22 goals in those fixtures, one more than Ronaldo.**

## Messi-Ronaldo 'dream match' on Feb 1

AGENCIES

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are poised to battle against each other after 50 days in what could potentially be the final meet for two of the all-time greatest footballers, as Inter Miami confirmed their upcoming pre-season tour yesterday.

Messi's Miami will play two matches in Saudi Arabia early next year, including one against Ronaldo's Al-Nassr on January 29 and former clubmate Neymar's Al-Hilal on February 1, with the Kingdom Arena in Riyadh staging both games, the Major League Soccer team said.

"This is another major opportunity to create lasting relationships with passionate fans," Inter Miami chief business officer Xavier Asensi said in a press release.

The three teams will clash in the Riyadh Season Cup in a round-robin tournament, after which Miami will travel to El Salvador and Hong Kong in their maiden international tour.

"We are excited to connect with new supporters in Saudi Arabia, and also hope people all over the world will be tuning in to see a pair of dream matches like these," added Asensi.

## Smith turns to golf after below-par form

AFP, Perth

Australia's Steve Smith conceded on Tuesday that he has not played to his usual high standards this year but believes he has found part of the solution -- taking up golf.

It has been a gruelling year of cricket for the star batsman, an integral part of the Australia team which retained the Ashes and won the World Test Championship and the World Cup.

But speaking ahead of the first Test against Pakistan starting on Thursday in Perth, the 34-year-old admitted that his form had dipped.

He averages 58.61 with the bat in Tests and is ranked third in the world by the ICC, but he averaged 37.30 in the Ashes and 29 in the away series in India.

"I don't have to reinvent the wheel," he told reporters in Perth. "I've performed at a high standard for a long period of time. I was probably below my standards of what I want. For me, it's about not overthinking it, not overplaying too much, not changing too much."

"Any sort of moment you can get to have a few days or a week just to get away from the game and get your mental side back to a position where you can go out and perform internationally, it's important," he said.

"I've sort of got into the golf a bit and played a bit of golf back home. The boys are continually laughing about it at the moment, that I'm getting into golf."

