

"Bangladesh and it's the same with a lot of countries at this age level, there's so much talent. It's just about executing under pressure consistently that will highlight them for the next level."

Bangladesh U-19 cricket team coach Stuart Law



BANGLADESH'S U-19 obsession and its consequence



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Basking in the glory amid a crowd of cricket-crazy home fans, Shoriful Islam (holding the trophy) and teammates received a hero's welcome upon their arrival in the country after having clinched the ICC U19 World Cup in South Africa in 2020. Shoriful was the first member of the winning squad to receive a national call-up, and the fast-bowler went on to establish himself as an indispensable component of Bangladesh's pace battery.

Percentage-wise, Bangladesh have a success rate of 47.85 in turning age-level cricketers into senior national team players, meaning almost one out of every two cricketers have made it to the international stage.

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

Which of these two countries are more successful in age-level cricket, India or Bangladesh?

This question may seem redundant at first, given that India are the most successful team in the ICC U-19 World Cups, with five title wins compared to Bangladesh's one.

India's dominance in the ACC U-19 Asia Cup is also undeniable, having won seven out of the nine editions while the young Tigers have won it just once in last year's December in Dubai.

India's win percentage in Youth ODIs, 76.25, is also the best in the

world, much better than Bangladesh's 58.12. However, Bangladesh can still claim to be more successful than their cricketing giant neighbours in age-level cricket in one parameter.

Unlike international cricket, where winning is the be-all and end-all, the main goal of age-level cricket is to unearth and then nurture young cricketers who can later go on to represent the country at the senior level.

And in that metric, Bangladesh have India beat by a country mile.

Till 2022, 163 different cricketers have played for Bangladesh in U-19 World Cups. Out of them, 78 have gone

to play for the Tigers in at least one format.

Percentage-wise, Bangladesh have a success rate of 47.85 in turning age-level cricketers into senior national team players, meaning almost one out of every two cricketers have made it to the international stage.

India, on the other hand, have had 162 cricketers represent the country at the U-19 World Cup since 1998, out of which 41 have played for the senior team.

India's conversion rate is 25.31 percent, which means only one out of four U-19 cricketers were able to make the jump to the senior team.

Not just India, Bangladesh are unmatched in the cricketing world in terms of churning out international cricketers out of U-19 players.

From just the last three U-19 World Cups, which also includes the championship-winning batch of 2020, 18 cricketers have received the Bangladesh cap.

India, who have won two titles and finished as runners up once in the last three editions, have given international debuts to seven U-19 cricketers from those batches.

Other top cricket countries like Australia and England have been even more selective about handing out debuts to U-19 players, calling up only two and four cricketers respectively into the national team from those three batches.

This gulf between Bangladesh and other top cricketing sides could mean one out of two things.

Either, Bangladesh continuously discovers incredible talents at age-level cricket who are ready for the trials and tribulations of international cricket right as they enter their 20s.

Or, more likely, the cricket authorities in the country have little to no faith in the standard of the country's domestic circuit and are singling out age-level cricketers who they think could develop into an international-level cricketer and fast-tracking their inclusion in the national team in hopes of accelerating their development.

This tendency of fast-tracking age-level cricketers into the national team is nothing new in Bangladesh.

From handing a Test debut to an 18-year-old Mushfiqur Rahim at Lord's in 2005, a year before he played in the Under-19 World Cup, to roping in Tanzim Hasan Sakib into last year's ICC ODI World Cup squad after him taking part in consecutive U-19 World Cups, examples of thrusting untested young cricketers into the big stage are a dime a dozen in Bangladesh cricket.

But plucking a talented young cricketer and throwing him at the deep end has its risks as the heightened competition at the senior level could prove too much for him.

Also, not going through the grind

of First Class and List-A cricket leaves them unprepared for the ruthless competition that awaits them on the international stage.

An age-level player from Bangladesh, who had shown tremendous promise but is yet to live up to his potential is Anamul Haque.

The wicketkeeper-batter finished as the highest run-getter in the 2012 edition of the U-19 World Cup with 365 runs and made his international debut that very year.

An unfortunate injury, failure to grab onto opportunities and the apparent flaws in his game which have persisted from the very beginning have kept him from fulfilling his promise.

Pakistan's talisman Babar Azam was part of that same Under-19 World Cup, had made 78 runs fewer than Anamul to finish second in the run-getters' list and had to wait another three years to play his first international match.

But that wait, where he had to ground it out with experienced cricketers at the first-class level helped him mature as a cricketer and it enabled him to deal with the ebbs and flows of international cricket, something Anamul and many like him in Bangladesh often do not get.

In about two weeks, another group of Bangladeshi teenagers will begin their campaign in the ICC Under-19 World Cup 2024 in Bloemfontein on January 20 against India.

The Mahfuzur Rahman Rabby-led side have gone to South Africa with hopes of doubling Bangladesh's trophy count in the tournament.

Bangladesh, a country that hardly tastes success in sports at any level, will surely burst into celebration if they go on to win the trophy.

But for the sake of the country's cricket, the authorities need to refrain from jumping the gun with these young players and stunting their growth as cricketers.

Because in the long run, the careers of these young cricketers could prove to be much more valuable for Bangladesh cricket than an age-level trophy.

'Should be a bridge between U-19 and national team'

The Asian Champions Bangladesh Under-19 team will soon fly to South Africa in pursuit of their second ICC Under-19 World Cup, which begins on January 19. The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin caught up with Bangladesh Cricket Board's game development committee chairman Khaled Mahmud Sujon where he spoke about his expectations from the upcoming event and about preparing future stars in an exclusive interview. The excerpts of the interview are given below:

The Daily Star (DS): How's the preparation for the upcoming ICC Under-19 World Cup?

Khaled Mahmud Sujon (KMS): I think we had a good preparation. We have been working together for the past 18-20 months now. We toured a lot, played a good number of matches, we brought good coaches and developed the facilities. So overall, I think we were able to prepare well. The team has gelled together, the boys are playing as a team which was our first priority.

DS: Do you think the expectations from the Under-19 team have increased since winning the World Cup and Asia Cup?

KMS: It certainly has since winning the World Cup. We couldn't do well in the last U-19 World Cup due to the Covid-19 pandemic where our preparation was very poor and we couldn't tour much. Our boys are used to playing at home and to be honest, you can't develop without playing abroad. This is the reason why we couldn't do well in the previous tournament.

DS: Do the boys feel the pressure of expectation?

KMS: We don't burden them with any pressure. I fully agree with Law (U-19 team head coach Stuart Law) that the process is very important at this level and if the process is right the result will definitely come. Even if we are unable to meet our expectations this time around, I won't be disappointed because our process was right. I think it's very important to develop the pipeline at this level. From that point of view, we focus on preparing future

stars for the national team. Many members of the Akbar Ali-led team that won the World Cup have gone on to represent the national team which is pleasing for us. We also want players from this squad to represent the national team on their merit. Obviously, we all want to win a tournament but we don't want them to feel under pressure about it. We want them to learn how to build the innings, score

difference between the U-19 level and the national team. Players are analysed more in the national team compared to age-level so it will be tougher for them once they get to the national team. So before going to the national team, I think they should get enough opportunities in the High Performance unit and A team to develop themselves. I think we should increase away tours of the A team, HP unit and

level groups like us. Other teams start their World Cup campaign six or eight months before the tournament and they don't play that many matches or go on as many tours compared to us. I think the BCB since it bears the cost of those tours. These boys feel that they are a big team at the U-19 level. This is the reason why the likes of Towhid Hridoy and

DS: Do you think success in age-

level gets more highlighted because of the lack of success in the senior level in Bangladesh?

KMS: Look, the national team hasn't won the World Cup nor the Asia Cup, the U-19 team has and that's why it gets more highlighted. I think we are a big team at the junior level because of our process. I don't think any other team in world cricket gives such emphasis on age-

others are mentally so strong.

DS: Do you view the U-19 level as a development programme or a result-oriented one?

KMS: Look, the initial goal is development since they are part of the game development group. But when you compete at the world level, obviously the result is also important. We work to prepare them mentally, physically and skill

wise and give them the opportunity to play in different environments and conditions. Whenever we play the World Cup, we think of doing well. If we don't do well, one section of our people would say we have a poor pipeline and don't have enough players. To be honest,

the ones who say such things don't have any idea of what a pipeline is. I see some of them talk on television but they don't know how Bangladesh cricket works. The process we follow to scout players is not easy and they actually demean a lot of people who are involved in this process at the root level like district coaches, selectors or those who work in the development committee. So, I will say we have a strong pipeline.

DS: There are whispers about some players of the squad being over 19 and also some have called for allowing a player to appear at the Under-19 World Cup only once. What's your take on that?

KMS: We are very serious about this issue. We have done bone testing and the BCB is very strict. We get a lot of requests, but we don't allow any irregularities. I don't know what was the situation 10 years back but since I have taken over the role, we have maintained it strictly. We have a system in place where if we have any confusion, we recheck the issue. And look, if a player's age allows it, why shouldn't we include them?

