

Africa the next frontier for trophy hunter Salah

AFP, Abidjan

Serial goal scorer Mohamed Salah has conquered the world, Europe and England with Liverpool. Now he dreams of leading Egypt to African glory.

He has come agonisingly close twice with his country, being part of the teams that lost the 2017 and 2022 Africa Cup of Nations finals to Cameroon and Senegal respectively.

In between reaching those title deciders, hosts Egypt suffered a humiliating last-16 loss to outsiders South Africa that left a 70,000 Cairo crowd speechless.

Egypt are among the favourites for the 2024 title in the Ivory Coast as they seek a record-extending eighth title in the premier African sporting event.

Drawn with Ghana, Cape Verde and Mozambique in Group B, it is widely expected that Egypt will finish first and qualify for the round of 16.

But captain Salah and his Pharaohs teammates want more. Much more. They want to play in the February 11 final at the 60,000-seat Alassane Ouattara Stadium in Abidjan and win it.

"I want to win this competition," said the prolific scorer in Cairo as he showed off a new haircut following social media criticism of his scraggly locks.

"Having come so close twice, I would love to help Egypt win the final and lift the Cup of Nations trophy.

"I am so happy to play in this wonderful African football tournament and my teammates and I are desperate to succeed.

"It means a lot to play for the Egyptian national team. It is a great feeling to put on the red jersey, which has been



worn by some many greats in the past.

"Every time I step on the pitch I am conscious of my role – I am representing millions of Egyptians.

"We know the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and other cities, towns and villages will be empty when we play in the Ivory Coast.

"People will either be at home or in cafes, cheering our every move, willing us to score and wishing us success."

Salah, who arrived at Liverpool in 2017 after spells with Al Mokawloon in his homeland, Basel, Chelsea, Fiorentina and Roma, is no stranger to success.

He helped Liverpool win the Club World Cup and UEFA Champions League in 2019 and the Premier League one year later.

In his last match for the Reds before flying to Egypt, the 31-year-old whose full name is Mohamed Salah Hamed Mahrous Ghaly netted twice in a 4-2 league win over Newcastle United.

Ghana boast the third most successful Cup of Nations record with four titles, behind Egypt (seven) and Cameroon (five), but it is 42 years since they last triumphed.

Otto Addo, who quit as Black Stars coach after an early 2022 World Cup exit in Qatar, turned heads when he said the fixture against Egypt will be the easiest in the group for his country.

"Egypt are going to be overwhelming favourites to beat Ghana so all the pressure will be on them. The Black Stars will be motivated by the fact that no one gives them a chance.

"I believe it is easier to face Mohamed Salah and the other Egyptian stars than trying to break down the well-organised defences of Cape Verde and Mozambique."



As the Bangladesh Premier League nears, all the franchisees and the big-name cricketers have started gearing up for the country's only franchise-based T20 tournament. Rangpur Riders must have been delighted to see Shakib Al Hasan (bottom) swinging the willow in the nets of the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday as the all-rounder continues to recover from a finger injury. Comilla Victorians' Liton Das (top), who was injured during Bangladesh's recent tour of New Zealand, was also back in action.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Tamim 'fine' after latest injury

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) team Fortune Barishal informed that their star player Tamim Iqbal "is quite fine" after he was injured during a net session in Mirpur yesterday.

The veteran opening batter, who has been undergoing training at the nets adjacent to the indoor facilities at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium for the past few days, got one delivery from speedster Taskin Ahmed to strike his left index finger.

As a result, Tamim abandoned day's training after receiving initial treatment and had left the arena.

"Tamim Iqbal has no complaints. He is quite fine," physio Bayjedul Islam was quoted as saying by Fortune Barishal.

Tamim – till date the country's only male cricketer to have scored a T20I century – is slated to feature in the BPL fixture on January 20 when his side take on Rangpur Riders.

The 10th edition of the BPL kicks off on the previous day when Dhaka Dominators take on defending champions Comilla Victorians.

False sense of confidence again?

MAZHAR UDDIN

The 10th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) is less than two weeks away, a tournament that will kickstart the national team's buildup to the forthcoming ICC Twenty20 World Cup in June.

The Tigers only have eight T20Is lined up this year – three at home against Sri Lanka in March and five against Zimbabwe in April – ahead of the World Cup in the United States (US) and the West Indies, amplifying the importance of this year's BPL.

Even though the T20 World Cup is almost six months away, talks about the tournament have already begun in the country's cricket fraternity and even Shakib Al Hasan, who is set to return to action with the BPL, had to field questions about the event.

Shakib, who was elected as a member of parliament a couple of days back, joined the Rangpur Riders training session yesterday where he expressed optimism for the upcoming T20 World Cup considering the recent performance of the Tigers in the shortest format.

"We have played really well in the last one year. I think the team is balanced and in a good rhythm too. Everyone is playing well and we did well in New Zealand recently so the expectations will definitely remain high," said Shakib to the media yesterday.

"Since the tournament will take place in the United States and West Indies it will suit our style of cricket. So, we have a chance," added the 36-year-old. Shakib's claim over Bangladesh's recent performance in T20s can't be totally dismissed.

Excluding the three matches played by a second-string Bangladesh team at the Asian Games, Bangladesh had a terrific 2023, winning eight of their 11 matches, which included a 3-0 clean-sweep at home

over England and their maiden T20 win over New Zealand in New Zealand.

But drawing inspiration from triumphs in bilateral series could set up Bangladesh for major disappointment as similar optimism was shared by captain Shakib and many others prior to last year's ODI World Cup as well but that campaign ended up being the Tiger's worst in two decades.

Shakib also pointed out that the conditions in the US and the West Indies will suit the Tigers, who are placed in Group D alongside South Africa, Sri Lanka, the Netherlands and Nepal.

But this observation also falls flat after further examination.

Bangladesh will play a couple matches at St. Vincent, a venue they haven't played in since 2014, and two more in Dallas and New York, which are yet to host an international game.

Moreover, ICC usually produces true wickets in mega events, meaning hoping for low and slow pitches similar to what the Tigers get in Bangladesh, is not a wise thing to do.

There are also some issues lingering over the team that need to be solved as early as possible.

Firstly, the board needs to decide whether they would continue with Shakib as captain or choose Najmul Hossain Shanto, who has impressed with his leadership skills in recent times.

The board also needs to reveal how much headway has their special committee to investigate the ODI World Cup disaster made.

And without selecting a leader well before the tournament and identifying the issues that harmed the team in the past, the team can't hope of doing well in the T20 World Cup, no matter how optimistic anyone feels.



Coaches clueless as rifle shooters 'break down' too

SPORTS REPORTER

Mirroring the disappointing performance of Bangladesh's pistol shooters the day before, the rifle shooters failed to fulfil expectations during the Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Jakarta yesterday.

With the hope of a final-round berth riding on them, all two Bangladesh teams dwelled around the middle of a 30-team table of 10m air rifle mixed team event.

The pair of Shaira Arefin and Robiul Islam finished 14th, having shot a 625.3 – which was 3.1 points less than their Iranian counterparts who finished eighth but ended up progressing into the six-team final as one of two teams from both India and China had to withdraw from the final round despite having qualified.

Bangladesh's second team, formed by Jafirah Chowdhury and Arnab Sharar, finished 22nd with a score of 620.3.

The Bangladesh coaching staff, however, "had an expectation" that one team from Bangladesh would qualify for the final round.

"Shaira and Robiul did make a good start, continuing to the second and penultimate series, but both of them failed to carry the momentum in the third and final series," said assistant coach Golam Shafiuddin Khan Shiplu.

"It was not possible to recover from that poor performance.

"The shooters are breaking down in the competition despite their good show in the training session. We can't find any reasons behind their breakdown in the competition," added the former national shooter, hoping that the rifle shooters would bounce back in the 10m air rifle events today.

An icon of German sporting success

REUTERS

Franz Beckenbauer, who has died at the age of 78, helped modernise football and came to personify Germany's post-war sporting success, captaining his country to the 1974 World Cup title on home soil to anchor his legacy.

'Der Kaiser', as he was nicknamed for his imperious playing style and command of the game, was for decades synonymous with Germany's success on the pitch, as player and then coach.

He amassed every major honour in his glittering playing career and continued his extraordinary record of success after switching to the manager's bench.

Beckenbauer won 103 caps and captained West Germany to World Cup success in 1974, two years after lifting the European title.

At club level he steered Bayern Munich to three successive European Cup victories from 1974 to 1976 and won the World Club Cup, the European Cup Winners' Cup and eight domestic trophies – four league titles and four cup triumphs.

He was West Germany's footballer of the year a record four times and twice European footballer of the year.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest soccer players of all time, and by many as the best European, as a player he invented and defined the modern libero role.

Always calm under pressure and a skillful marshal of his defence, Beckenbauer could read the game so astutely he knew



exactly the right moment to surge upfield. The unhurried sweeper never seemed to break sweat as he sprayed perfect long raking passes to his strikers.

He enjoyed success as a coach while leading the Germans to the 1990 World Cup title in Italy, one of only three men to have won world titles as both player and coach.

But despite heading the 2006 World Cup on home soil as organising chief, his reputation was tarnished in recent years following an investigation into a potential slush fund for that tournament and a 6.7 million euros (\$7.34 million) payment to world football's governing

body FIFA in 2005.

Beckenbauer, who had been battling several health issues in recent years, denied any wrongdoing and largely withdrew from the public eye.

Born in Munich on Sept. 11 1945, Beckenbauer, a postal official's son who once trained to be an insurance salesman, joined Bayern's youth teams in 1959.

He progressed to the first team and, with Beckenbauer orchestrating from midfield, Bayern rocketed to international prominence from the obscurity of West German regional league soccer to establish the most powerful brand in

German football.

Shortly after his 20th birthday Beckenbauer was capped for the first time in a World Cup qualifier against Sweden and became a fixture in the national team for more than a decade.

Beckenbauer produced notable performances in three World Cups before moving across the Atlantic to New York Cosmos in a multi-million-dollar deal in 1977.

He stayed in the United States for three lucrative years before returning to West Germany in a shock that which took him to Bayern's northern rivals Hamburg SV.

Beckenbauer retired to a comfortable life at his home in the Austrian ski resort of Kitzbuehel, spending much of his time on the local golf course.

But he kept in the public eye with a regular column in West Germany's mass-circulation Bild newspaper and eventually took over as Germany coach despite his lack of managerial experience.

Beckenbauer brought discipline to the squad and commanded instant respect.

Less than two years after taking over, he guided West Germany to the 1986 World Cup final in Mexico where they lost 3-2 to Diego Maradona's Argentina.

However, they won the title four years later in rematch against the Argentines to give Beckenbauer a rare World Cup double as player and then coach and enhance his legacy.



Real Madrid players pose for a photograph before boarding the Riyadh-bound flight on Monday ahead of their Spanish Super Cup semifinal against city rivals Atletico Madrid at the Al-Awwal Stadium tonight. The two Spanish giants will be facing each other twice in a matter of days, with Diego Simeone's side also set to host Real Madrid in the Copa del Rey last 16 on January 19.

PHOTO: X