

Wary of Palestine's prowess, Bangladesh hope for 'tight fight'

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will have their work cut out as they face Palestine, a team currently 86 places higher in FIFA rankings, in a World Cup Qualifiers Group I fixture at Jaber Al-Ahmad Stadium in Kuwait tonight. The match will kick off at 12:30am (Bangladesh Standard time).

The men in red and green, ranked a lowly 183, have recently raised the bar of expectations by displaying a better show against relatively superior sides such as Maldives, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Lebanon.

In the World Cup Qualifiers so far, despite losing 7-0 to Australia, Bangladesh boosted their morale with a come-from-behind 1-1 draw at home against Lebanon four months ago. However, given Palestine's performance in the AFC Asian Cup earlier this year, Bangladesh have little cause for optimism.

Palestine, featuring players who ply their trades in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Malaysia, Kuwait, Indonesia, Thailand and Belgium clubs, created history in the Asian Cup as the Middle East side registered their maiden entry in the competition's round of 16 before being narrowly beaten by eventual champions Qatar in the next hurdle.

Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera is wary of Palestine, especially after their Asian Cup show.

This is Australia's first-ever tour for a bilateral series. The last time they were in Bangladesh was when they defeated England in the final of the 2014 T20 World Cup at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium. Alyssa Healy, Ellyse Perry, and Beth Mooney were part of that World Cup-winning squad and have made the trip for this series.

Australia come into the Bangladesh series on the back of multi-format series wins at home against South Africa. They took the ODI series 2-1 but their loss in the second match was their first in the format against South Africa. Bangladesh also played their last series away in South Africa where the Tigresses made history by winning their first ODI as well as T20I in the country.

Bangladesh and Australia have faced each other only once in ODIs. The Tigresses gave the Aussies a run for their money in the 2022 Women's ODI World Cup in New Zealand but lost the contest by five wickets.

The series is part of the ICC Women's Championship which determines the five teams alongside the hosts to qualify for the 2025 ODI World Cup. The Aussies currently sit top of the table, having won 10 out of 15 ODIs so far in the cycle, while Bangladesh are seventh with four wins from 15 matches, seven losses, a tie and four washouts.



AUSTRALIA IN ODIs

Matches: **364**
Won: **288**
Loss: **67**
NR: **7**
Win percentage: **80.70%**

BANGLADESH IN ODIs

Matches: **63**
Won: **17**
Loss: **39**
Tied: **1**
NR: **5**
Win percentage: **29.30%**

Bangladesh spin spearhead Nahida Akter (L) and leg-spinner Rabeya Khan were in a jovial mood during training yesterday, on the eve of their first of three ODIs against the mighty Australia in Mirpur. With the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium known to favour spin, the hosts will bank on Nahida to put the reigning world champions under pressure. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

PAST MEETINGS

- 2021: Bangladesh 0-2 Palestine (Three Nations Cup in Kyrgyzstan)
- 2020: Bangladesh 0-2 Palestine (Bangabandhu Cup)
- 2018: Bangladesh 0-2 Palestine (Bangabandhu Cup)
- 2013: Bangladesh 0-1 Palestine (2014 Challenge Cup qualifier)
- 2011: Bangladesh 0-2 Palestine (2012 Challenge Cup qualifier)
- 2006: Bangladesh 1-1 Palestine (2006 Challenge Cup)

"If you followed Palestine in the last Asian Cup, you have seen they are a very strong team... They also fought very hard against Australia to lose only 1-0 in their first game of [World Cup] Qualifiers... Physically they are at a very high level and we hope that we will be able to minimize the difference and hopefully tomorrow [today] will be a very tight fight," said the 39-year-old Spaniard.

With wind in their sails, Palestine will be eager to come hard at Bangladesh to improve their chances of progressing to the third round by finishing as one of the group's top two teams. On the other hand, Bangladesh, in order to keep their qualification hopes alive, would be content to repeat the result of their inaugural fixture against Palestine: a 1-1 stalemate in 2006.

"Of course, we know Palestine are a very strong side and played well in the Asian Cup. We know they are one of the stronger teams in our group. We have to take this match very seriously, otherwise we will face a huge problem," captain Jamal Bhuiyan said yesterday, courtesy of an audio message sent by Bangladesh Football Federation.

"The coach has already warned me that they are very physical, strong and powerful, so for us it is about going hard and it is all about small details. Of course, we have to avoid [giving away] crosses, set pieces because 95 percent of their players are above 6 feet, I think.

"We must stick to our game plan... and do what the coach is saying and of course, avoid them entering our penalty box," Jamal added.

As most underdogs often operate, Bangladesh will look to capitalize on the counter to clinch their maiden win over Palestine, and their main weapon in this regard will be winger Rakib Hossain, with forward Sheikh Morsalin - who struck the equaliser against Lebanon in Dhaka - out injured.

Conditions key as hosts face uphill task

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There was an excitement building-up at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday as the Tigresses prepared to take on mighty Australia with the first of three ODIs slated to begin today at 9:30 am in Mirpur.

The match will be streamed live on Bangladesh Cricket Board's official Youtube channel, Bangladesh Cricket: The Tigers.

Bangladesh have enjoyed some boost to morale in recent few series. They drew the ODI series against India last year, where the nail-biting final ODI was tied. They beat formidable Pakistan in both white-ball formats as well before clinching their first-ever ODI and T20I wins in South Africa last year.

If those results transformed the mentality of the side, a notion that Bangladesh skipper Nigar Sultana Joty felt fully convinced by, the Tigresses also know that Australia, the seven-time ODI World Cup champions and six-time T20I world champions are a different beast, one that arrived with full strength.

"They are the better side. They

are the world champions. Playing against them is a huge experience for us," Joty said at the pre-series press conference yesterday.

"The way we have played in the last six or seven months and looking at their squad, it is clear that they haven't taken us lightly. The [T20] World Cup is also here. We have done well recently against India, Pakistan and South Africa but Australia are the better side," the wicketkeeper-batter added.

Managing women's ODI championship points is the big agenda for Bangladesh. The top five teams along with the hosts India would qualify for the 2025 ODI World Cup directly and Bangladesh are keen on being inside the top six. In fact, it is an added motivation to do well against Australia. Bangladesh have 13 points in 15 games and are currently seventh in the standings, just below India at six.

"Every point is important in the ICC cycle. We are really focused on not wanting to play qualifying round in the World Cup. We want to grab as many points as possible, which is leading us to play better," Joty said.

"We are exploiting our own home conditions. I am very confident in my team," Bangladesh head coach Hashan Tillakratne said during the presser. Joty echoed similar sentiments on testing a batting-dependent Australia side.

"Our home condition is going to be quite different for them [Australia]. Our batting seemed strong in South Africa. Our bowling seemed strong at home against India and Pakistan. It is a good sign that we are doing better in both departments. They depend a lot on four or five batters. They are a batting-dependent team. Our bowling is really good at home and have confidence to perform at a high level. If we can restrict them, we will have a chance," Joty said about the plan.

Australia skipper Alyssa Healy was keen on finding out about the conditions and Bangladesh's spin dominance.

"I think if you look at their squad as a whole, they possess a lot of skill within their bowling attack. I think a lot of spin which is quite noticeable and obviously a real challenge for teams not from the subcontinent.

"Watching a little bit of the series they played recently against India and in these conditions, they made it really challenging for the aggression of that Indian batting line-up," Healy said.



Hridoy earns maiden Test call-up

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Towhid Hridoy earned a maiden call-up to the Bangladesh Test side as the young batter replaces experienced campaigner Mushfiqur Rahim in the squad for the first Test against Sri Lanka which will begin at Sylhet International Cricket Stadium on Friday.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) relayed the news through a press release on Wednesday.

Mushfiqur was ruled out of the Test series against Sri Lanka due to a thumb injury he had sustained in the final ODI between the teams at Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium last Monday. The wicketkeeper was struck on his right thumb by a Taskin Ahmed delivery in the second over of the game and had to receive treatment from the team physio. Mushfiqur, who underwent a scan after the game, played the entire match and scored an unbeaten 37 to help the Tigers to a four-wicket win and clinch the three-match series 2-1.

Hridoy, meanwhile, has represented Bangladesh in 30 ODIs and 14 T20Is, making himself almost a constant feature in the Tigers' middle-order in white-ball cricket. The 23-year-old will hope to emulate his performances in red-ball cricket as well.

Following the first Test in Sylhet, the teams will travel to Chattogram for the second and final Test, beginning on March 30.

Ebadot hopes current pacers leave legacy behind

Bangladesh pacer Ebadot Hossain has been recovering from an ACL tear that he suffered in May last year. He will be watching from the outside when the Tigers take on Sri Lanka in the first of the two-match Test series in his hometown in Sylhet on Friday. In a conversation with *The Daily Star's Ekush Tapader*, Ebadot shared his thoughts on Bangladesh's recent ODI series win against the Lankans, revealed his expectations about the young pacers who could play in the Sylhet Test, and also provided updates on his injury.

The Daily Star (DS): Tell us about your recovery progress.

Ebadot Hossain (EH): I have been running for three weeks now and gradually have increased the intensity. No complaints on the running front. The way I am progressing, I expect to bowl two weeks after the Eid-ul-Fitr.

DS: How does it feel to watch the team from the outside?

EH: It is natural to feel bad as I can not play. But, it feels nice when the team wins. The only regret I have is not being able to play.

DS: Are you still in touch with Bangladesh's former bowling coach Allan Donald?

EH: We appreciate each other in our fast-bowling group. We also have Donald, and analyst Srinivas [Chandrasekaran] in our group [on social media]. We talk three to four days a week with Donald and are in touch. We discuss our problems and, in general, we share everything with him. He has worked with a lot of players and will work with many in the



future but when it came to our group, he said he always wanted to be with us because of a deep connection we built with one another through work.

DS: How do you rate the young pacers like Nahid Rana and Tanzim Hasan Sakib? Is it getting more competitive in the pace department?

EH: I won't play forever nor will Taskin [Ahmed]. They [the upcoming pacers]

will have to take the baton. We want them to accomplish way more than what we will leave behind. This is how we are, the pace group, and this is the mentality we have. Taskin and I have tried together to build this group in a way in which we can be examples for the next generation of bowlers so that they can elevate the standards even higher.

I have talked to Nahid Rana the other day in the academy. He is a very good bowler, a very good prospect. We want someone like him to be the quickest bowler, to be that aggressor. He has the pace and when he can balance it with accuracy, he can be very good.

DS: What expectations do you have from the pacers in the Tigers' upcoming Sylhet Test against Sri Lanka?

EH: I want them to use the new ball as much as possible and use the shine to induce edges to slip just like we did against Afghanistan (if the wicket is similar to the one used in that Test). I was hoping for an experienced bowler like Taskin or Fizz [Mustafizur Rahman] to be includ-

ed. Nevertheless, I am hoping for them to do well.

DS: Ebadot could have done the trick. Everyone misses Ebadot. How does it feel to hear this?

EH: I felt that someone had to take responsibility for breaking that partnership (between Pathum Nissanka and Charith Asalanka in Bangladesh's second ODI against Sri Lanka). When I saw Taskin, Shoriful, and Sakib bowl, I yearned to be there.

It feels good that people expect me to do those things (get breakthroughs in the middle overs). Shakib Al Hasan also regretted not having me for the World Cup last year. Not only him, but the coach also felt the same. When I see partnerships being built in the middle overs, I feel bad (about not being able to get those breakthroughs). So I miss my effort then. The captain would want two-three over bursts from me and would expect aggression to get a breakthrough which would make someone else's job easier from the other end.

Tamim gets runs, Shakib bags wickets

SPORTS REPORTER

Prime Bank made it four wins out of four in the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) yesterday as birthday boy Tamim Iqbal returned amongst the runs. In the adjacent field at BKSP, Shakib Al Hasan returned to DPL action too and played a hand in Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club's win.

All five Prime Bank bowlers picked up wickets as Rujpjanj Tigers were skittled out for 132 in a rain-curtailed 34-overs-per-side game at BKSP Ground 3. Shamsur Rahman got team-high 46-ball 50 for Rujpjanj but Tamim and in-form opener Parvez Hossain Emon stitched a 118-run opening stand to see Prime Bank to an eight-wicket win.

Emon, who hit two centuries already, made a patient 75-ball 50 to carry on his DPL form. Tamim, who got 67 off 78 deliveries with six fours and two sixes, fell to Abdullah Al Mamun in the 25th over.

Meanwhile, Shakib managed only 19 with the bat on his DPL return before Nurul Hasan Sohan's unbeaten 60-ball 72 and Yasir Ali's 57-ball 78 in a 138-run fifth-wicket stand saw Sheikh Jamal reach 215 for five in another 34-over-game at BKSP Ground 4. Shakib and pacer Ripon Mondol bagged three wickets each as City Club were restricted to 178 for nine in 34 overs.

Abahani dominated proceedings in Fatullah as spinner Tanvir Islam ran riot with five wickets for seven runs in six overs. Courtesy of that spell, Brothers were skittled out for just 71 in 21.3 overs. In reply, Abahani raced to the target, losing two wickets to remain top of the DPL standings courtesy of a higher net run-rate than Prime Bank's.