

Swimming still stuck on primitive lane

SPORTS REPORTER

Given the trend of yesteryears, it was almost inevitable that a common question will unify the two separate press conferences involving the athletics and swimming federations yesterday.

It thus came as no surprise that whether the electronic scoreboard would be in place this time was the main topic of discussion ahead of the junior athletics and swimming championships, set to begin today and tomorrow, respectively.

Bangladesh Athletics Federation (BAF) was pleased to announce that their 38th age-group athletics championships would be held under a newly installed electronic scoreboard at Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS). On the other hand, Bangladesh Swimming Federation (BSF) expressed their inability to hold the Saif Powertec 36th age-group swimming championships without hand timing despite the availability of a new scoreboard at Syed Nazrul Islam Swimming Complex in Mirpur.

Over the years, competitors in both athletics and swimming developed a false notion of their true timing recorded in a hand timer, leaving them struggling to be judged at the international level.

While the renovation of BNS includes a new track and a new electronic timer for athletics, swimming has been left in the dark due to a defective electronic timer built in 2019 at a cost of Tk 5 crore.

"We want to run all events on an electronic timer if we can accommodate the time in a three-day competition. However, all sprint events such as the 100m, 200m, and 400m of various age groups will be held under an electronic timer," said BAF general secretary Abdur Rokib Montu, adding that a record number of approximately 600 junior athletes will compete in the championships, with the possibility of receiving Tk 10,000 for each national record made.

Meanwhile, BSF general secretary MB Saif reiterated his powerlessness to resolve the broken electronic timer through the National Sports Council (NSC), the country's sports governing body.

"We don't know much about the technical aspects, and we couldn't get the right time by scheduling the trials at different times. So, because we have not taken over the electronic timer from the NSC, we are forcing the meets to be held in the hand timer," MB Saif stated at the press conference.

He added, "We had previously filed a complaint with the ministry [of Youth and Sports] and the parliamentary standing committee for youth and sports, and they promised us that they would take action after the investigation, but nothing happened."

Some 550 swimmers from 65 teams, including BKSP, Bangladesh Ansar, DSAs, and swimming clubs, are expected to compete in the championships, which has been sponsored by Saif Powertec since 2013.



Afif exposing BCB's bitter truth

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

Afif Hossain has been one of the most fortuitous cricketers in the national fold since his debut in February 2018.

With 69 T20Is, 31 ODIs, and more than six years of international cricket under his belt, the left-handed batter has always managed to dodge his way past the arrows of deserved criticism for his inability to make a difference for Bangladesh.

Barring a few knocks here and there, the 24-year-old has very little to show for in national colours and one would have to sit down for hours to decipher the merit of selection, even as a reserve, in Bangladesh's squad for the upcoming T20 World Cup in the USA and the West Indies next month.

Afif's selection underlines the dire situation in Bangladesh's available resources. Whether the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) would agree or not, allocating a reserve spot for Afif in the T20 World Cup squad highlights the fragile nature of Bangladesh's pipeline. In fact, it clearly shows a dearth in the emergence of quality players, proving the notion that the national team pipeline is indeed running dry.

Does it not show that the team management has had to bank on players living up to their "potential", largely due to the dearth in the pipeline, while selecting players for a major event instead of following the usual practice of calling up players on the back of their performances on the field?

Exhibit A in this regard is Afif who has

played two T20 World Cups (2021 and 2022) and as many Asia Cups (2022 and 2023). In Bangladesh's disastrous run in the 2021 T20 World Cup, he scored 54 runs in eight matches and managed 95 in five games in the major event a year later. In the 2022 Asia Cup, the left-handed batter scored 51 in two matches and registered 16 in as many games in the following edition.

To add to this abysmal run, he rarely could justify his selection with performances in domestic competitions — be it the Dhaka Premier League or the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

Such is the state of the resources in the player pool of Bangladesh, it never strikes as a surprising move to see Afif in and around the squad or to be in contention for a spot come tournament time.

Ideally, there seem to be two things wrong with his selection into the T20 World Cup squad. Firstly, his role is yet to be ascertained. Whether the team management looked to reinforce the top order or boost depth in the middle order with Afif's inclusion is still a question.

However, one fact that can be derived from his frequent selections is that he is thought to be one of the best options, at least amongst the players on the fringes of the playing eleven. This has, for the most part, worked in favour of Afif as the selectors, time and time again, have gone back to him ahead of major events.

Afif holds the record for playing the most number of consecutive T20Is for Bangladesh without being dropped. Since his T20I debut in February 2018, he played 61 matches in the shortest format before

being left out for the Tigers' home series against England in March 2023. Out of the 99 T20Is Bangladesh have played since his debut, Afif featured in 69.

Despite all these opportunities, all that Afif had to show for are two match-winning fifties against Zimbabwe and the West Indies and a career-best of 77 against the UAE in T20Is. In ODIs, his highlight reel would include a 93 not out against Afghanistan and an unbeaten 85 against Zimbabwe.

However, it must be pointed out that Afif's underwhelming display for Bangladesh is not entirely of his own making. The left-handed batter is often thought to be a stylish and elegant stroke-maker who seems comfortable taking on the new ball. He, indeed, prefers to punch the ball rather than exercise muscle and is keen to play in straight lines.

Afif played a key role at the top of the order in the 2019-20 season of the BPL when his side Rajshahi Royals won the title. Afif opened with Liton Das and managed to score 370 runs at a strike rate of 131.20. But to his misfortune, the national team management has always been keen to take away from his strength and play him as a finisher — a role he has never been able to come to terms with. He averages below 20 while batting at five and six for the national team at strike rates of 126.68 and 111.27, respectively.

But on the broader picture, the fact that the management had to go back to Afif, even as a reserve, brings the ugly picture of an underproducing pipeline to the fore.

SHORT CORNER

Nadal faces Zverev at farewell French Open

Rafael Nadal was drawn to face world number four Alexander Zverev in a blockbuster opening match at his farewell French Open tournament on Thursday. Nadal, the record 14-time champion at Roland Garros, is unseeded this year after injury saw his ranking plummet to 276.

West Ham appoint Lopetegui as head coach

West Ham United have appointed former Spain and Real Madrid manager Julen Lopetegui as their new head coach, the Premier League club said on Thursday.

Bayern on verge of naming Kompany as coach

Bayern Munich are close to completing a shock move for Burnley boss Vincent Kompany to replace Thomas Tuchel as coach, German and English media reported on Wednesday. As a result, the German club is now working on a compensation package for Burnley, where Kompany still has four years on his contract.

Nepal bid to include Lamichhane for WC

Nepal said Thursday they were still trying to include controversial star Sandeep Lamichhane in their T20 World Cup squad, despite the spin bowler having been denied a US visa.



Murshida notches record ton in Mohammedan win

Bangladesh national star and Mohammedan Sporting's Murshida Khatun notched the highest individual score ever in a women's Dhaka Premier League game, striking an unbeaten 179 off 157 deliveries against Gulshan Youth Club Women's Cricket Team at BKSP's ground three on Thursday.

Sri Lanka T20 league to go ahead despite match-fixing allegation

Sri Lanka's T20 Premier League (LPL) vowed Thursday to press ahead in July despite the arrest of a team's British owner over alleged involvement in match-fixing. The five-team cricket tournament was thrown into doubt after the arrest of Tamim Rahman, owner of the Dambulla Thunders, on Wednesday.

Lewandowski suggests he will stay at Barcelona next season

Barcelona forward Robert Lewandowski has suggested he will remain at the LaLiga club next season and said he hopes to contribute to his side's ambitions for silverware.

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Flower eager to see Kohli bloom in T20 WC

AFP

An IPL title has eluded Virat Kohli for 17 years, but Royal Challengers Bengaluru coach Andy Flower praised the star cricketer for his enduring "hunger" for the game.

Bengaluru were knocked out of the Indian Premier League playoffs by Rajasthan Royals on Wednesday in Ahmedabad with a distraught Kohli tipping the bails after the four-wicket loss.

Flower said he was looking forward to watching the India cricket hero bat in the T20 World Cup starting June 1 in the West Indies and the United States.

"The way he thinks about the game — and he backs that up with an amazing level of skill, aggression and hunger — I look forward to watching him in the World Cup," former Zimbabwe captain and England coach Flower told reporters.

"I think it's amazing that he is still evolving his game, even though he has got an incredible record already," he added.

Kohli, 35, has led the IPL batting charts with 741 runs, including a century and five fifties, but failed to inspire his team to the finish in a roller-coaster season.

Former Bengaluru teammate AB de Villiers said Kohli, who had taken a dig at his critics, performs best under pressure. "Maybe it was a blessing in disguise, getting a bit of criticism, because stuff like that motivates him so much," De Villiers said on Jio Cinema.



Gasperini's Atalanta end Italy's 25-year drought

AGENCIES

Ademola Lookman was Atalanta's hat-trick hero on the club's greatest-ever night in Dublin as German champions Bayer Leverkusen were vanquished 3-0 in the Europa League final on Wednesday.

Leverkusen arrived in the Irish capital unbeaten in 51 games this season and on course for a remarkable treble.

But it was Atalanta's rise under Gian Piero Gasperini that finally found its ultimate reward.

Gasperini was proud of bringing the Europa League trophy to Italy after 25 "cursed" years, the coach said after his side's emphatic victory.

Ademola Lookman's stunning hat-trick helped Atalanta secure a second major trophy in their 117-year history in the final in Dublin on Wednesday.

They became the first Italian club to win the competition since Parma in 1999, when it was known as the UEFA Cup.

"Hugely proud for all of Italy, because it was a cursed trophy, even if it was only Inter and Roma who made the final over the last 25 years and

lost," Gasperini told reporters.

"Having won it with Atalanta is perhaps one of those footballing fairytales that very rarely happen and it does show there's still room for meritocracy in football.

"There's still room for ideas, and it doesn't only come down to numbers and the super league (clubs)."

The club, founded in 1907, has a long and rich history intertwined with the northern Italian city of Bergamo. In 2020, Bergamo became an epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The severity of the outbreak reported a death rate five times higher than in previous years and wreaked havoc on its economy.

Asked what it means to the people of Bergamo after the challenges of the pandemic, he said: "It's hard to erase certain scares even if a number of years have since passed by. They were very painful moments.

"The people of Bergamo were always ready to react even when it got tough. Of course, we won't be able to do away with all of that pain, but I think we have managed to put a smile on the faces of the people of Bergamo."



Atalanta forward Ademola Lookman became the sixth player to score a hat-trick in a major European final and the first to do so since Jupp Heynckes in 1975.

Atalanta ended a remarkable run by Xabi Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen that saw them win their first-ever Bundesliga title and go unbeaten in a record 51 games across competitions.

This was Atalanta's first European trophy in their 117-year history.

Having lost four finals, it was also Atalanta manager Gian Piero Gasperini's first triumph in a major final, giving him his first major trophy.

Atalanta became the first Italian club to win the competition since Parma in 1999, when it was known as the UEFA Cup.