

# Sabina sees ties against improving Bhutan as opportunity

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Bangladesh women's football team captain Sabina Khatun is looking forward to some much-needed change of environment as the team flies off to Thimphu today for two friendly matches against Bhutan.

The team will play the two matches at the Changlimithang Stadium in the capital on July 24 and 27, with the aim of some match-practice ahead of October's SAFF Women's Championship.

Bangladesh had last played two friendlies against Chinese Taipei at home in June, losing by 4-0 and 1-0 margins, under new coach Peter Butler. While Bhutan are a weaker side compared to Chinese Taipei, Sabina believes the two matches against the Himalayan nation can provide Bangladesh with some physical and mental boost before their SAFF title defence.

"We have been inside the BFF camp for a long time. So I believe this tour will freshen us up for future competitions," Sabina said prior to the team's departure, adding that Bhutan are no longer pushovers in women's football like they



used to be.

The captain, however, believes the team will need to play stronger opponents in the next FIFA window in order to properly prepare for the regional tournament.

In the first match against Chinese Taipei, coach Butler played a 3-5-2 formation with a high line defence, something that the players were not used to. The 4-0 defeat in that game, which was

the British coach's first match as the head coach of the women in red and green, he was forced to go back to a 4-4-2 formation in the following game.

The team gave a much better account of themselves in that game, and buoyed by that performance, Sabina believes they should have a convincing series against the Bhutanese women.

"We played defensively against Chinese Taipei, but I feel we should play more attacking football against Bhutan and play for victories," said Sabina, the all-time leading scorer for the country.

The team will miss the services of first-team players like Shaheda Akter Ripa, Shamsunnahar Jr. Afeida Khondokar and Tohura Khatun due to exams while striker Krishna Rani Sarkar is still recovering from injury.

Sabina, the poster girl of Bangladesh football, however, is not quite sure of Bangladesh's chances of defending the seven-nation SAFF Women's Championship as she feels, "the departure of stalwarts like Sirat Jahan Swapna, Akhi Khatun and the injury to Krishna could be crucial to their chances in Kathmandu."

## India post their highest WT20I total in UAE rout

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India registered their highest ever total in Women's T20Is in a 78-run victory over the UAE in a Group A fixture of the ongoing ACC Women's Asia Cup at the Rangiri Dambulla International Stadium in Dambulla yesterday.

In a dominating batting display, India skipper Harmanpreet Kaur and Richa Ghosh smashed blistering half-centuries after opener Shafali Verma hit the ground running with an 18-ball 37. Kaur scored a 47-ball 66 while Ghosh took only 29 deliveries for her 64 to propel India to 201 for five.

UAE's Kanisha Kumari scalped two wickets but had little say in keeping a lid on the proceedings along with the rest of the bowling line up.

Kumari also managed to contribute with the bat as she managed a 32-ball 40, UAE's highest individual score, and Eosha Oza scored a steady 36 ball 38 but could never pose a serious challenge to India's daunting total.

India's Deepti Sharma was the pick of the bowlers with two scalps as the UAE were restricted to 123 for seven.

With a second victory in the bag, India are on the brink of the semifinals and will have the opportunity to progress as unbeaten group-winners when they take on Nepal in their final Group A fixture on Tuesday.

## 'Management must take responsibility for continuous batting failure'

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Bangladesh women's side slumped to a seven-wicket defeat against Sri Lanka in their ACC Women's T20 Asia Cup opener in Dambulla on Saturday, once again bringing the team's batting frailties to the fore.

Bangladesh batting collapsed early, three wickets going down for eight runs on what appeared to be a decent batting wicket. After they slumped further to 49 for five, some rearguard effort from skipper Nigar Sultana Joty and middle-order batter Shorna Akter saw Bangladesh reach 111 for 8.

Sri Lanka batters flourished in the flat batting track and reached the target in 17.1 overs.

It was another dismal effort from the Tigresses and Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, who closely monitors women's cricket as its wing development manager, felt that the current state of the batting unit is unbelievable.

"It was unbelievable. The players who are playing now are either new or have returned after having received some chances before. I saw no dependability in the batting unit. I am doubtful if the management were able to make the players see how competent they are technically or how courageous they could be."

Joty struck an unbeaten 59-ball 48 to see Bangladesh cross the 100-run mark. A 14-ball 25 from Shorna got some wind in Bangladesh's sail and it further

highlighted the ineffectiveness of the batting order.

Shorna, who used to bat higher up the order, has not been banked upon to take the game on as she was sent in at lower middle-order. Meanwhile veteran batter Rumana Ahmed was not picked despite the coach and the skipper saying that her experience could have had a big effect on



the side.

"Shorna has been with the side for a while and I don't understand why we still haven't found a settled place for her in the side. Why is she batting at number eight?" Fahim asked.

"The team did not trust her. But if she can bat like that at number eight, she would definitely play a lot better further up the order. At one time, she was batting at five or six. Rabeya [Khan] has potential

but why she isn't improving isn't clear either.

"Rumana not playing means that players better than her are playing. But that didn't seem to be the case. Rumana knows how to bat in the middle-order and she does not get scared of the task from what I have seen. I can understand Jahanara [Alam] not playing due to team combination but the decision on Rumana surprised me," he added.

Fahim feels that the team management needs to take responsibility for the constant batting failures.

"Not only those playing the game but those in charge of the batting unit and coached them must be held accountable too. We can't only blame the players. In the Premier League [WPDL], I saw many playing well but when they go to international matches, they can't perform. So I am not sure whether the players are being able to play their natural game," Fahim analyses.

"The responsibility to create the environment which brings out their natural game, lies with the management. You can't just tell a player to play as she wants. They have failed consistently and the management must take responsibility," he said.

Bangladesh play Thailand in their second Group B game but with questions over batting and the team's current morale, it remains to be seen whether the Tigresses can bounce back.

## BCB HP look to avoid defeat against Pak Shaheens

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Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) High Performance (HP) unit are looking to avoid defeat, having reached 20 without loss at the end of day three after being set a target of 429 runs in their second innings by Pakistan Shaheens in the first four day game at DXC Arena Ground in Darwin yesterday.

Having won the toss on Friday, BCB HP elected to bowl but bowlers failed to trouble Pakistan batters in both innings.

Pakistan put on 468 for three in the first innings, courtesy of Mohammad Hunaira's 218 and Kamran Golam's unbeaten 100. BCB HP pacer Ripon Mondol bagged two wickets in the innings.

The HP unit were bundled out for 266 with Pakistan's right-arm pacer Khurram Shahadat bagging six for 72. Opener Shadman Islam struck 88 in the first innings while Aich Molla and Shahadat Hossain Dipu contributed with 70 and 36, respectively.

Pakistan piled on further 226 runs for three wickets in the second innings to take a 428-run lead as Omar Bin Yousaf hit 100 not out. HP pacers Ripon, Mukidul Islam and Rejaur Rahman Raja bagged a wicket each.

On their multi-format tour of Australia, BCB HP are scheduled to play the second four-day from July 26 before taking on Northern Territory on August 1 in a three-nation bilateral one-day tournament, also involving Pakistan Shaheens.

## Marquez replaces Stimac as India coach

AFP, New Delhi

Manolo Marquez has been appointed the coach of the India men's football team, over a month after Igor Stimac's acrimonious exit.

Spaniard Marquez, 55, has been coaching league teams in India since 2020 and will take on the role for the national team "effective immediately", the All India Football Federation said in a statement on Saturday.

"We are delighted to welcome Mr Marquez to this important role," AIFF president Kalyan Chaubey said, adding the federation was looking forward to working with the new coach "in the years ahead".

Marquez, who has more than two decades of international experience in football management, had been the coach of FC Goa since June last year and said he was "grateful" to AIFF for the opportunity as he considers India "my second home".

"I want to do my best to bring success to the millions of fans we have," he said.

Former West Ham and Croatia defender Stimac was sacked in June following India team's poor performance in World Cup qualifiers.

Stimac's five-year tenure ended controversially, with India's federation accusing him of using astrology to pick his teams.

Stimac, who played a World Cup semifinal for Croatia in 1998, became India coach in 2019 and they briefly broke into the top 100 of FIFA's world rankings for only the second time in nearly three decades.

Once called "a sleeping giant" of the sport by former FIFA president Sepp Blatter, India are currently ranked 124th.

## 'Bickering' and 'cold sweat' as Paris built its Games

AFP, Paris

The seven-year odyssey of the Paris Olympics should reach shore after a spectacular but hopefully serene opening cruise down the Seine on Friday at the end of a voyage that has survived rocky political moments.

Following the horse-trading to win the Games, came the French infighting over how to host them.

Paris was not sure it wanted to risk another rebuff after losing its 2005 bid for the 2012 Games to a London bid that the French believed inferior.

After the 2015 terror attacks on the French capital, Anne Hidalgo, elected Paris mayor in 2014, decided the city needed to act to rebound from the trauma.

Just after his election as president in 2017, Emmanuel Macron promoted France's case to the International Olympic Committee.

Since 2005, France had built a national velodrome and a canoe-kayak venue near Paris.

"By missing the Games, we

built all the facilities," said a former elected official.

After Los Angeles agreed to go for the 2028 Games, France was awarded the 2024 Games in September 2017.

France would host a "sober" Games, using existing facilities and temporary arenas in postcard Paris: the Eiffel Tower, the Invalides, Place de la Concorde. After testing the water with a cautious toe, it added politically-charged swimming in the Seine.

Hidalgo, a Socialist, dredged up an old and unfulfilled promise by Gaullist Jacques Chirac, when he was mayor, that Parisians that would be able to swim in their river.

On July 17, ten days before the Games, Hidalgo took a dip in front of a battery of cameras.

Behind the scenes, the

waters were sometimes murky as the national government, local elected officials, and the organizing committee (COJO) bickered.

Deep down, we are pains in the ass," said one former elected official to describe the relationship with COJO.

There was a race to complete all the work, with finishing touches still being applied days before the start.

Nicolas Ferrand, in charge of the construction of the athletes' village, said he was in a "cold sweat" after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, fearing shortage of materials.

Whatever happens, "two weeks before everyone will say that 'it's a disaster' and in fact it's not," said a close friend of mayor Hidalgo.

Verstappen says he is no longer leader of the pack

AFP, Hungary

Max Verstappen conceded he is no longer leading the pack and feels as if he and Red Bull are "chasing" after he qualified third for the Hungarian Grand Prix behind McLaren duo Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri.

The three-time world champions and series leader has claimed only one pole position in six Grand Prix as Red Bull's grip on a substantial performance advantage has disintegrated and rival teams have drawn level or passed them.

Verstappen has taken 40 pole positions in his career, but only one in Austria since dominating the early season races by taking seven in succession before his spell was broken by Ferrari's Charles Leclerc at the Monaco Grand Prix.

"I love competition," he said on Saturday. "But I like being on top of the competition. At the moment, I feel like we are chasing and having a few more difficult weekends. I don't back out of a fight, but it's just a tricky situation I guess."

In spite of his declining fortunes in qualifying, he has managed without tangible support from struggling teammate Sergio Perez to remain a strong

contender in races and starts Sunday's contest with an 84-point lead ahead of Norris in the drivers' title race.

However, Red Bull have begun to appear increasingly stretched and desperate in a bid to defend their titles as their performance superiority ebbs away, as the Dutchman admitted when he welcomed the team's major upgrade package this weekend.

"Let's see," he said, when asked about his prospects in the race. "The last few races, the McLaren especially has been really good in the race even compared to qualifying."

"Today was a lot colder than expected, I guess, with the clouds and the rain and tomorrow is going to be quite a different day so I just hope that will help us."

The changing weather conditions have influenced and affected recent results as Mercedes won in Austria and Britain, but struggling in the heat at the Hungaroring where Mc Laren shone on Saturday.

"I tried," said Verstappen. "The whole weekend we have been a little bit behind and I think that was also the case in qualifying. I tried to make it as close as possible, but unfortunately just not enough."

