

Nepal stand between Bangladesh and elusive trophy

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh team management will be hoping to field a fully fit squad in the final of SAFF U-20 Championship when the men in red and green take on hosts Nepal at the ANFA complex with a target of winning the elusive title of regional youth championship.

Having beaten three-time champions India in the semifinals on Monday, the charges of Maruful Haque have apparently struggled to recover owing to a lack of facilities in Nepal. However, the head coach is expecting that the players will be fully fit before facing Nepal, who won the title in 2015 and 2017.

Bangladesh have never won the trophy in five previous attempts, despite making the final three times previously. They have not even been able to beat Nepal in four meetings.

"From Day 1 till now, the boys have been on the right track as we have come to this stage following ups and downs. If the boys remain fit and play according to game plan, we can return home with the trophy. I hope the boys will be fully fit before the final," Maruful said at the pre-final press



conference yesterday.

The veteran coach fears Nepal could come stronger than the group stage match, where they beat Bangladesh 2-1 even though he believes his charges are ready to take more challenge this time.

"If they [Nepal] gave 80 percent in the group stage match against us, they will come stronger with 100 percent effort in

the final. They may also change tactics compared to that match," Maruful said. "However, losing to Nepal once doesn't mean we will not be able to beat them in the final. If the boys can give their 100 percent and play according to game plan, it is possible for us to win."

Nepal will have the advantage on playing on their home turf, which is an

artificial one, and in front of their home crowd and under familiar weather. Some of the Nepal players are also much quicker than their Bangladeshi counterparts while playing on the artificial turf, which is why Maruful is planning to change his strategy.

Bangladesh will be missing out on the services of experienced goalkeeper Mehedi Hasan Srabon, who returned to Dhaka on Tuesday following an injury in the semifinal, and experienced defender Kamacai Marma Aky, who was given marching order against India just a minute before the final whistle.

"After winning against India, the mental condition of the players is very strong but that match is now past. It is a new day and new opponents, who are a talented side with some quick wingers. I think we have to take more challenge in the final," said the UEFA A-licensed coach.

Nepal coach Urjan Sheshtha, however, is rating Bangladesh as a top team. "We see Bangladesh as the top team, who played a very good match against India. I think the final is going to be an interesting game where we will do our level best," said Shreshtha.

SHORT CORNER

No bar on Shakib to continue playing
Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) president Faruque Ahmed said that star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan can continue to



represent the country as long as he is not proven guilty of any misdeeds. "There are a lot of legal procedures left to prove someone guilty. At this moment there is no bar on Shakib to continue playing," Faruque said.

Jay Shah elected Independent Chair of ICC
Jay Shah, the current honorary secretary of the BCCI, has been elected unopposed as the Independent Chair of the ICC, and will assume his position on 1 December, 2024. On August 20, it was announced that current ICC Chair Greg Barclay would not seek a third term and would step down at the end of his tenure in November.

Sports associations to have student reps
The National Sports Council introduced a position for student representatives in the new seven-member ad-hoc committees to be formed nationwide, a press release confirmed yesterday.

Read full stories on The Daily Star's website.

BCB scratching its head to solve the BPL problem

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

The newly-elected Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Faruque Ahmed has called a board of directors' meeting on Thursday where among several key issues, holding the upcoming Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) in scheduled time is likely to be discussed.

Faruque has inherited a BCB that has been in limbo ever since the fall of the Awami League government on August 5 in the face of a student-led people's movement. Many BCB directors, who had links with the previous government, have gone into hiding since, leaving various standing committees at a standstill.

Resuming activities of those standing committees with changes in personnel will be a key agenda in the meeting, as will be the forthcoming BPL, which is facing a plethora of challenges at the moment.

The biggest challenge is the uncertain status of several franchises whose owners had strong ties with Awami League and are on the run after the recent political developments in the country.

Comilla Victorians, the most successful team in BPL history with four titles, was run by Nafisa Kamal, daughter of Awami League lawmaker and former finance minister AHM Mustafa Kamal. Teams like Durdanto Dhaka, Fortune Barishal and

Khulna Tigers are also known to have political ties.

The remaining three teams of the seven-team tournament - Sylhet Strikers, Chattogram Challengers and Rangpur Riders - are expected to continue but they are also facing financial challenges.

"The Awami League backed teams are not in the scene at the moment. Apart from that, the market situation is not good at all. There were sponsor issues in the previous editions and now the challenges will exacerbate," a franchise official told The Daily Star yesterday, wishing to remain anonymous.

"Previously, we would have to spend around Tk 15-16 crore each season and would hardly get Tk 3-5 crore from sponsors.

Getting that same amount from sponsors is also unlikely for the next edition," he added.

Before the start of the last ICC T20 World Cup in the USA and West Indies, the BCB had reached out to the franchisees, seeking their participation confirmation and some teams had responded positively.

However, since the change in government and Faruque taking over as BCB president, replacing Nazmul

Hassan Papon who was an Awami League lawmaker, they are yet to establish any formal communication with those franchisees.

Previously, the BCB had planned to



hold the players' draft for the upcoming BPL in the first week of September as the tournament is scheduled between January 1 and February 11 next year. But after the recent changes in the board, holding the draft in the scheduled time seems highly unlikely.

"In these extraordinary circumstances, there is a big question whether the teams would play or not. The board is yet to receive confirmation from them as well. We have to see which teams are in a position to participate. We are currently working on that," a BCB official told the Daily Star, requesting anonymity.

"We are trying to stick to the legal framework. If the franchisees do not respond, the board will then decide whether or not to terminate the contract. Whatever we do, we have to maintain the legal framework.

"We are closely monitoring the situation. We are also considering what the impact would be like if the number of participating teams went down to five from seven."

Another huge challenge for Faruque, who has been a staunch critic of BPL's financial issues over the years, would be to introduce a new structure for the tournament, which has been thrown into controversy many times due to mismanagement since its inception in 2012.

The BCB would also need to address the issue of some teams still not having cleared players' payments from the previous edition.

Amidst all the challenges, there is one silver lining as it was learnt that some interested companies have already met the newly-elected BCB president, showing interest to buy new franchises in the BPL, and the board is still holding out hope of going through with the event.

"We are very optimistic to hold the tournament in time. We believe we can make it happen," concluded the board official.

Offloading players Chelsea's main target: Maresca

REUTERS

Chelsea's main aim in the transfer window is to offload players from their squad so the club can balance its books, manager Enzo Maresca said on Tuesday.

Chelsea have been busy in the market since American owner Todd Boehly took over two years ago.

The West London club have spent over 160 million pounds (\$211.50 million) on 11 new signings for this season, including winger Pedro Neto, forward Joao Felix, midfielder Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall, and goalkeeper Filip Jorgensen.

Chelsea sold Conor Gallagher to Atletico Madrid and defender Ian Maatsen joined Aston Villa, but they still have over 40 senior players registered are at risk of falling foul of the Premier League's profit and sustainability rules.

"The target is to solve the economic problem in terms of selling players," Maresca told the club website. "From there, we try to do our best and see where we arrive."

Chelsea's struggles to offload players are well documented, with England internationals Ben Chilwell and Raheem Sterling among a group of about 15 high earners frozen out by the manager and not training with the first team.

"For us, the target in this moment is to improve players. No one from the club asked me to compete for the Premier League, or compete for a Champions League spot," the Italian Maresca added.

"I want to see my team play the way we want to play, and compete every game. I want to see on the ball a clear idea of what they want, and off the ball, a very aggressive team. The most important thing is to be better game after game."

Djokovic 'avenges brothers' to kick off record bid

REUTERS, New York

Novak Djokovic's bid for a record 25th Grand Slam title kicked off on Monday with a rusty 6-2, 6-2, 6-4 win over qualifier Radu Albot in the US Open first round as the defending champion returned to the court after his Olympic triumph and managed to 'avenge' his brothers.

Three weeks after winning the singles title at the Paris Games, Djokovic toted his rackets and gear in a pair of gold-coloured bags onto centre court where the Arthur Ashe Stadium crowd gave him a hero's welcome.

But the Serb's golden touch was decidedly lacking in the late night match as he struggled with serve and racked up nearly twice as many unforced errors as winners.

For all that, he had more than enough weapons to handle Moldovan Albot in their first tour clash and claim a record 78th win at Arthur Ashe under a closed roof.

"I was not aware of it, to be honest with you," Djokovic said of the centre-court milestone.

"It's definitely the loudest stadium

we have in the history of our sport. The night sessions are the best in the world here."

While having never played Albot before, Djokovic said he had done his homework on the 34-year-old who beat both his younger brothers Marko and Djordje during their playing days.



"They both lost to him so hopefully I can avenge my brothers tonight," he told ESPN commentator Brad Gilbert with a laugh before taking the court.

Djokovic duly avenged the family name in three clunky sets but he will hope for better from his game as he looks to move past Margaret Court on the all-time Grand Slam winners' list.

With 10 double faults, his serve was wild by his usual standards, and he winced throughout the night as 40 unforced errors piled up.

His coach Nenad Zimonjic was an animated presence, barking instructions in Serbian at the wayward champion, who could convert only six out of 16 break points.

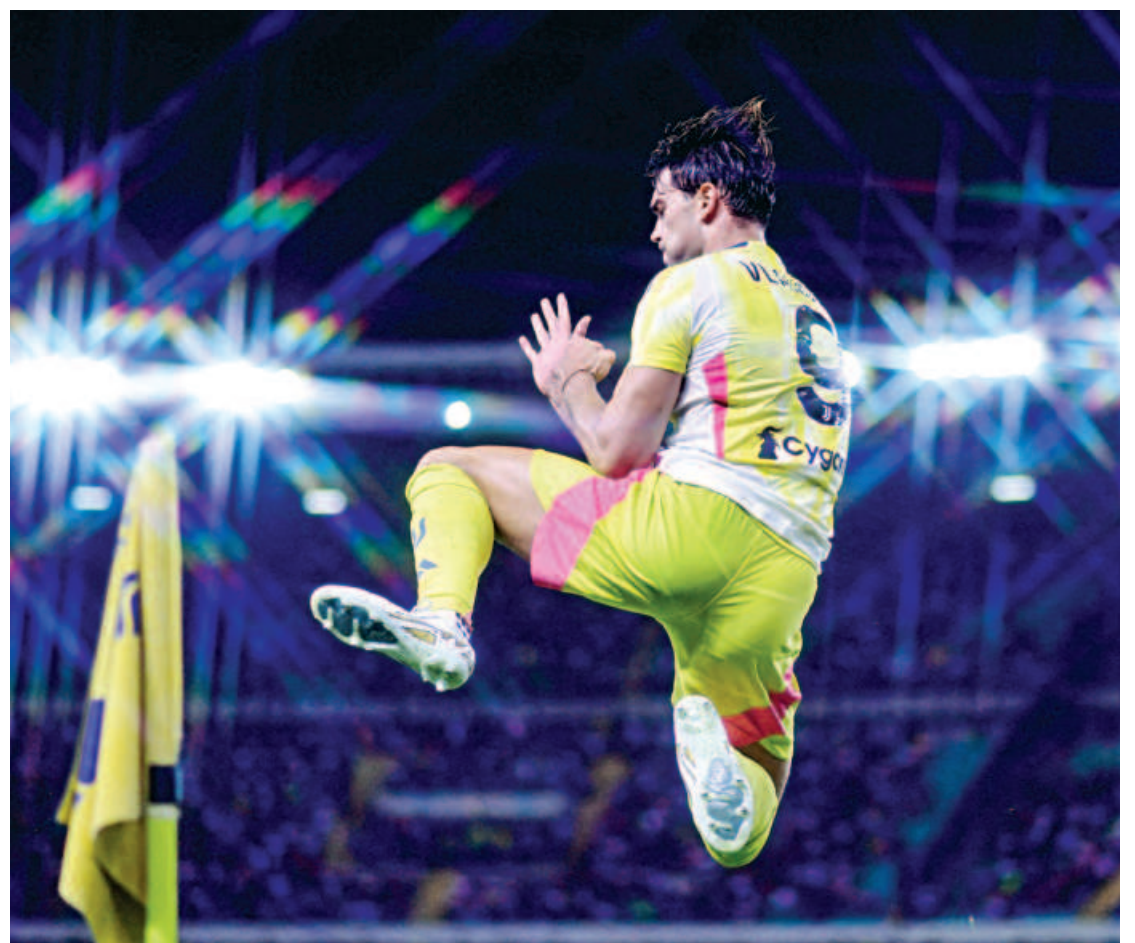
Though Djokovic was well off his best, Albot was unable to make the world number two pay.

After bright starts in the first two sets, he crumbled on serve in each of them before making a better game of the third.

In the twilight of a record-smashing career, Djokovic is eyeing several milestones in New York, including a fifth title at Flushing Meadows to match the professional era record held by Pete Sampras, Jimmy Connors, and Roger Federer.

He also hopes to become the first back-to-back winner in the men's singles since Federer's run of five successive titles from 2004-08.

Serbia's Djokovic will face fellow countryman Laslo Djere in the second round today.



Dusan Vlahovic netted a brace as Juventus continued their flying start under new manager Thiago Motta with a comfortable 3-0 victory at Hellas Verona in Serie A on Monday. Juventus, who look to reclaim the Serie A title after four years, are the only side to have kept their points tally at a maximum over the opening two match days of the Italian top flight and lead the standings with six points. PHOTO: REUTERS