

'Hope this championship inspires the nation to unite'

I would like to dedicate this trophy and championship to the heroes who sacrificed their lives for a new Bangladesh. We want to dedicate this trophy to the martyrs of July and August, as well as to the flood-affected people of the country, because we played for them to win the trophy. I think they will be happy with this triumph.

Head coach Maruful Haque after a 4-1 victory over hosts Nepal at the ANFA complex in Lalitpur saw Bangladesh clinch their maiden trophy in the regional youth championship in their sixth attempt.



SPORTS REPORTER

When Bangladesh coach Maruful Haque announced before departing for Nepal that his team would not only play in the final but also lift the SAFF U-20 Championship trophy, there was little hope of clinching the elusive title, especially given only a two-week preparation period.

The youth footballers had been idle for the past two months since the completion of the Bangladesh Premier League in May. However, the UEFA A licenced coach made incredible strides in a short time, preparing the players to be match fit.

Eventually, proving why Maruful is regarded as the best local coach in

the country, the boys in red and green overcame three-time champions India in the penultimate hurdle and two-time champions Nepal in yesterday's final.

Ecstasy was in abundance among the Bangladesh players and coaching staff following a 4-1 victory at the ANFA Complex in Lalitpur, but they did not forget the heroes who died in the anti-discrimination student-led movement during July-August, as well as the flood victims of late, and dedicated the victory to them.

"I would like to dedicate this trophy to the heroes who sacrificed their lives for a new Bangladesh. We also faced severe flooding, and many people and families are

suffering from a lack of food and drinking water. Our new government is working to rebond the nation, and I hope this championship will inspire all Bangladeshis to unite and support the country's reform," said coach Maruful at the post-match conference, adding that his players executed the style of play he wanted from the start of the all-important match.

Working as a unit with utmost determination were the promising bunch, comprising Mirajul Islam, Rabby Hossain Rahul, Mohammad Asif, Mehedi Hasan Srabon, Piash Ahmed Nova, Asadul Mollah, Ashraf Haque, Shakil Ahmed Topu, and others, who did not let the initial pressure from Nepal derail them from their ultimate objective.

Mirajul - the tournament's top scorer, with four goals, and its most valuable player - said, "To tell the truth, I never thought I would be the top scorer; it was beyond my expectations. My goal was to advance Bangladesh."

Asif, who was named the best goalkeeper of the tournament, said, "We had never been champions from U-17 to U-20, and we were deeply disappointed after being runners-up in 2022. This time, we wanted to leave the pitch with smiles instead of tears. I can't express my excitement at becoming champions."

Rahul, who also scored one of the four goals in the final, said, "It is impossible to fully express my feelings, and I think this is the biggest achievement of my footballing career. I shared with my teammates that Nepal would be morally high after beating us in the group stage, but we aimed to take advantage of that."

SHORT CORNER

'Shakib earned many things for himself but not for nation'

Dr Asif Nazrul, the adviser for Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs to the Interim



Government, said that Bangladesh cricketer Shakib Al Hasan has not 'earned anything for the nation' but hoped that the all-rounder would not be arrested when he returns to Bangladesh over a murder case filed against him. Comparing Shakib's case with that of former national team goalkeeper and BNP leader Aminul

Haque, who was denied bail time and again during the Awami League regime, Nazrul said: "Shakib has earned many things for himself but not for the nation while Aminul had won for Bangladesh."

Malan retires from international cricket

Dawid Malan retired from international cricket on Wednesday, with the batter saying his England career "has not been easy". Malan signed a 12-month central contract in October and was England's leading run-scorer in their woeful 50-over World Cup title defence in India in the weeks that followed.

Bangladesh Women's 'A' team to tour Sri Lanka in September

Bangladesh Women's cricket 'A' team will tour Sri Lanka for seven white-ball matches in September, a press release by Sri Lanka Cricket confirmed on Wednesday. Bangladesh will arrive in Sri Lanka on September 5 and play two 50-over matches followed by a five-match T20 series.

*Read full stories on The Daily Star website

Tigers shouldn't overthink about facing Abrar, experts suggest

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Bangladesh should keep their focus on getting a positive result from the series-deciding second Test against Pakistan and play according to their strength rather than concentrating on the opposition squad, cricket experts opined on Wednesday.

The Tigers humiliated Pakistan in the opening Test with a 10-wicket win, forcing the hosts to make several changes for the second Test squad.

Pakistan, who went into the first match in Rawalpindi with four seamers and no frontline spinner in the playing XI, brought in in-form leg-spinner Abrar Ahmed alongside uncapped all-rounder Kamran Ghulam and pacer Aamir Jamal for the second Test.

Abrar's inclusion looked obvious since the two Bangladesh spinners - Shakib Al Hasan and Mehedi Hasan Miraz - picked up seven wickets to guide the tourists to a historic victory.

The 25-year-old Abrar, who made a brilliant start to his Test career by taking 38 wickets in six Tests, had a successful outing against Bangladesh 'A' during a recent four-day contest, finishing with

figures of 4-103. Pakistan will surely want a similar performance from him in the crucial second Test.

"Whoever is included or not, we have to think about getting a positive result from the match. Previously, we won the first Tests against teams like Australia and New Zealand but in the second Tests, we were unable to earn even a draw," local coach Wahidul Gani told the Daily Star yesterday.

"We have played well against Pakistan but our improvement will be noticed if we can earn at least a draw in the second match. They will definitely pick a spinner



and probably Abrar is the best spinner for them at the moment.

"They will also definitely back their pacers but we have to play according to our strength. I think Bangladesh need to go into this match with the aim of winning," the veteran coach added.

In recent past, Bangladeshi batters weren't challenged by leggies in red-ball cricket and the likely presence of a leg-spinner could be a cause for concern for the visitors.

The last time Bangladesh faced a proper leggie was 22 Tests ago in 2021

when they toured Sri Lanka for a two-match Test series and they had to face Wanindu Hasaranga in the opening Test in Pallekele.

Bangladeshi batters handled Hasaranga exceptionally well in that contest as he remained wicketless despite bowling 45 overs in two innings and was eventually dropped for the second Test.

In recent times, Bangladesh only faced Chinaman spinners like Afghanistan's Zahir Khan (in 2023) and India's Kuldeep Yadav (in 2022) in red-ball cricket, with both finishing with good amount of success against Bangladeshi batters.

"Playing with a leg-spinner in Tests is very common for Pakistan. Leggies like Yasir Shah, Danish Kaneria played for them over the years," said coach Sohel Islam, who monitored some of the Test cricketers in Bangladesh Tigers camp before their departure for Pakistan.

"They made a wrong call by playing without a spinner in the first Test. Abrar was initially in the squad and was later dropped. Abrar bowls really well in red-ball cricket. We played leg-spinners in red-ball cricket before and also took preparation against them. Let's see how the batters deal with him this time," he concluded.

The new UCL format explained

AFP, Paris

All eyes will be on Monaco today as the draw of the updated version of the UEFA Champions League for the 2024-25 season will take place at 10:00 pm.

The new format of the league will see 36 clubs feature in the competition proper, an increase from 32 under the old format.

There is an extra place for the fifth-best European league according to UEFA's ranking, which means France's Ligue 1 now has three automatic qualifiers.

In addition, there is an extra berth for each of the two leagues with the highest coefficient ranking from last season in UEFA competition, which this year are Germany and Italy.

The remaining extra slot goes to a national champion to emerge from the qualifying rounds, which will be completed this midweek.

Since 2003, the Champions League featured 32 clubs split into eight groups of four, with the top two from each section advancing to the last 16.

That has now changed radically, and from this season the 36 clubs will be pooled together in one league, in a so-called 'Swiss system' more commonly associated with chess.

Before, participating teams played six games in the group stage, facing each opponent home and away. Now clubs will each have eight games.

The 36 teams will be split into four seeded pots of nine. Every club will play two teams from each

pot, one at home and one away.

This "raises the prospect for fans of seeing the top teams go head to head more often and earlier in the competition," UEFA say, a nod to the fact this format was introduced at a time when the spectre of a breakaway Super League hung over European football.

No team will come up against another club from the same domestic league, and every club can only face a maximum of two teams from any one country.

Whereas in past years the group stage ended in December, the expansion of the Champions League means the two extra matchdays will be staged in January.

The number of games is increasing from 96 in the old group stage, up to 144 in the new league phase.

The 36 clubs will be ranked together in the one league, with the top eight all progressing to the last 16 and the format of the competition from that point on remaining the same.

However, it will be seeded, taking into account positions in the league phase.

In addition, a play-off round will be introduced, with the teams finishing from 9th to 24th in the league phase going through to a two-legged knockout tie to decide the remaining spots in the last 16. These play-off ties will be seeded.

The bottom 12 teams in the league phase will be eliminated, with no access to the second-tier Europa League, as was the case in the past.



'No worry' over Mbappe's Liga form



REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti is not worried about Kylian Mbappe's start at the club after the France striker failed to score in his opening two league games. Mbappe, 25, joined the La Liga and Champions League winners as a free agent from Paris St Germain in June, bringing an end to a transfer saga that had rumbled on for years.

Despite making a promising start by scoring on his debut to help Real earn a

2-0 win over Europa League champions Atalanta in the UEFA Super Cup final two weeks ago, Mbappe has yet to find the net in two La Liga games with Real and struggled in a draw at Mallorca and in a four home win against Real Valladolid.

"His last goal was on August 14th. It has only been two weeks since, that is no reason to worry. Neither we are not worried as a club, nor him," Ancelotti told a press conference on Wednesday, ahead of Thursday's La Liga match

at Las Palmas. "He is very happy here, delighted, sure he wants to score in the next game. So does Vinicius, who has yet to score this season and I don't see him worried either. (Mbappe) is progressing really well, I see him doing better every day, excited, motivated, training well. He is very humble. I think his adaptation is going really well."

Ancelotti said a slow start was to be expected after key midfielder Toni Kroos retired, while they are also trying to fit Mbappe into a new centre-forward role.

"Every year has its own challenge because there are changes in the structure of a team, the system that is implemented," Ancelotti said.

"Last year we also needed time at the start of the season, we needed a late goal to get a result in many games. It will take some time until we find our mojo and the best version of ourselves but it's a normal thing."

"I didn't ask Toni Kroos to be Aurelien Tchouameni last year, just as I won't ask Tchouameni to be Kroos. Each player has his own characteristics. The team has to adapt to the characteristics that Tchouameni has, which are very important for us."

With a game in hand, Real Madrid are fifth in the La Liga standings on four points, five behind leaders Barcelona.