

CABRERA HAPPY with ‘lucky’ win in Thimphu

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera expressed his satisfaction with a “lucky” win as his charges ended three months of footballing hiatus with a 1-0 victory against Bhutan in a FIFA friendly fixture at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu yesterday.

The Bangladesh players, who had last played a competitive match on June 11 and did not have any club engagement either since then, took the lead through a Sheikh Morsalin goal in the sixth minute of the game.

The young forward bundled home the rebound, on the second attempt, after Bhutan goalkeeper Tshering Dhendup failed to gather a fairly straightforward cross from Rakib Hossain in the right, instead parrying the ball straight at Morsalin who was standing a mere few feet away.

Cabrera admitted it was a lucky goal, but the Spaniard took heart from the fact that his team came out with a victory despite not being in the best of shape and having to deal with the high altitude of



PHOTO: BFF

Thimphu. It was Bangladesh's first victory at the venue, where they had suffered their only defeat to Bhutan in 2016.

“We knew it wasn't going to be easy. We were lucky, scoring that goal early in the game. After that we were struggling until the 20th or 25th minute of the game. Slowly the team got into the game and since then the team did extremely well,” the Spaniard said at the post-match press conference.

“[It was a] very mature performance, and that is what we were expecting. With six-seven training sessions we came here to play at [high] altitude, with a team that is in the middle of the season. I'm very, very happy -- more than the result, about the way they have performed,” the coach opined.

While there was very little intensity on either side throughout the match, Bangladesh were largely untroubled by the

hosts who had the advantage of playing on their home soil and in front of a passionate crowd. The coach said that it was good to have a win under their belt after four defeats in a row in the World Cup Qualifiers and following a three-month gap.

“Obviously it was important to win but that wasn't the main target,” Cabrera said. “[It was good to] get the players after three months and start getting ready for what is coming from next year. But it was important to win after four defeats in a row, especially for the confidence.”

The coach, meanwhile, expected a much tougher challenge from the hosts in the second match on Sunday; in probable absence of Rakib, who injured his left ankle towards the end of the first half and was subsequently taken off.

Morsalin, meanwhile, was happy to have scored the winning goal for the team, taking his tally to five international goals in 12 appearances.

“We played the way the coach had instructed us to play,” the teenager said. “Our target was to take it match by match, and if we can play according to the coach's plan, we can have another positive result.”

US Open to crown fresh royalty

AGENCIES

This year's US Open will see two new champions crowned, regardless of the semifinal outcomes, following the quarterfinal eliminations of former title holders Daniil Medvedev and Iga Swiatek yesterday.

Jannik Sinner, after defeating 2021 winner Medvedev 6-2, 1-6, 6-1, 6-4, will face Jack Draper tomorrow. Draper, Sinner's friend and recent doubles partner, is currently playing some of the best tennis of his career.

The reigning Australian Open champion, Sinner, is the only man in the 2024 US Open semifinals with a Grand Slam title, as Draper and American players Taylor Fritz and Frances Tiafoe all chase their first major.

Unlike Medvedev's exit, top seed and 2022 champion Swiatek losing in straight sets, 6-2 6-4, to Jessica Pegula

In the past 20 years, 11 grand slams have seen one former major winner reach the men's singles semis. That player has gone on to win the event nine times, with Rafael Nadal (French Open, 2005) and Andy Murray (US Open, 2012) the exceptions.

of USA -- who finally reached a Grand Slam semifinal at the seventh attempt -- came as a shock.

“I feel like I was able to kind of jump on her really early and I think frustrate her,” said Pegula, who will take on Karolina Muchova (6:15am, today) after the unseeded Czech beat Brazilian Beatriz Haddad Maia 6-1 6-4 in the day session at Arthur Ashe stadium despite battling a “bug”.

Hoping for the rich vein of American success to continue, the sixth seed American will be cheering for compatriot Emma Navarro in her semifinal clash (5:00am, today) against top title contender Aryna Sabalenka -- former runners-up and two-time Australian Open champion.

Bangladesh Tigers programme proves its worth

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

A combined effort from players, selectors, and coaching staff, alongside a lack of interference from the board in cricketing matters during the series, led to Bangladesh's historic series win in Pakistan. When it comes to coaching and preparation in particular, the Bangladesh Tigers programme had a major role, and thus the coordination between the national team, the programme, and cricket operations can go a long way to a successful tour of India in September.

The function of the Tigers programme, which began two years ago, was often questioned. After the successful Pakistan tour, its value has finally come to the limelight, especially in how players talked about the benefits of their preparation.

In December last year, a scheme in coordination with the programme was charted out to align the national team's schedules with Bangladesh Tigers. It was done to finally realise the purpose of the programme in fulfilling how practice will take place, the schedules and the schemes with which practice will take place.

Main objectives were to keep players prepared for national team duties, particularly those not currently in the team but considered probables. When a series comes up, the programme is fine-tuned to prepare for specific goals.

Head coach Chandika Hathurusingha was fully aligned to the programme, and plans are in place for series or tournaments till June 2025. Also, the coaches

in it were given full freedom on how they will manage the specific needs of individual players.

Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto, upon returning to the country, mentioned they had clear instructions on their roles and endorsed continuity, emphasising focus on process and not on outcomes.

Maintaining this coordination, selectors had already named a pool of players in three categories for preparing the team for the India series almost two weeks ago. Players from HP had begun on September 4. The Test team players and the A team players make the other two categories.

Under the Tigers programme, the Test side will undergo preparation from September 8 to 14 before departing on the 15th, while the white-ball stars will continue preparation till September 30.

Tareq Aziz, former national team player and now a bowling coach of Bangladesh Tigers, talked about the specifics, especially regarding work with bowlers.

“We know that India's batting lineup is laced with skillful players. To beat them you need skill. We are collecting information from our analyst and planning accordingly,” Tareq told reporters yesterday as the national team look forward to reaping benefits of the programme.

“How to stop certain players in T20s and get them out are things we have discussed with performance analysts to fine tune and point things out to players once things begin in full tilt on 8th, both for red-ball and white-ball bowlers. We want our players to go prepared mentally, physically, and skill-wise,” he added.



SHORT CORNER

England captain Buttler ruled out of Australia T20Is

England white-ball captain Jos Buttler will miss this month's three-match Twenty20 series against Australia due to a right calf injury, with Phil Salt leading the side in his absence, ECB said on Thursday. Buttler has been named for the five-match ODI series against the same opponents later this month but remains a doubt.

Spain should lose 2030 WC unless racism declines: Vinicius

Brazilian striker Vinicius Junior has called for Spain to be stripped of its 2030 World Cup hosting duties unless it makes progress on the issue of racism in stadiums.

No CR7, Messi in Ballon d'Or nomination for first time in 21 years

For the first time since 2003, neither Cristiano Ronaldo nor Lionel Messi have been included in the nominees for the men's Ballon d'Or award, with England's Jude Bellingham among the 30 players named on Wednesday. Portugal's Ronaldo, who has won the award five times, also failed to receive a nomination last year, while Messi, who won for a record eighth time in 2023, misses out despite Argentina's Copa America win this year.

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Spalletti vows to create new Italy

AGENCIES



Italy manager Luciano Spalletti pledged to revamp his team ahead of their Nations League encounter against France at the Parc des Princes in Paris on Saturday.

Spalletti's Italy endured a disappointing campaign in the recent European Championship as the reigning champions exited the tournament in Germany in the last 16 following a 2-0 defeat against Switzerland, with the side only winning once in the group stage.

“Now, we turn a new page and from now on, we have to think more about our identity,” Spalletti told reporters on Monday.

“I am going to create a new group, a new team, putting less pressure on them and hopefully they feel the beauty of the Azzurri shirt even more.”

Didier Deschamps' France, on the other hand, had a better outing in the Euros as they lost to eventual winners Spain in the semifinals but they were far from convincing throughout the tournament as they found the net just once from open play. Deschamps received his fair share of criticism for his reserved tactics which did earn him results but the subpar displays could very rarely be swept under the carpet.

Deschamps has placed his faith mostly on his regulars but he did drop Adrien Rabiot and Benjamin Pavard. Real Madrid duo Aurelien Tchouameni and Ferland Mendy were also sidelined due to injury.

Bayern Munich winger Michael Olise received his maiden call-up after impressing at the Olympics by recording seven goal involvements. Meanwhile, eight players from Spalletti's Euros squad, including Gianluca Mancini and Jorginho, were left out, while injuries ruled out Gianluca Scamacca and Nico Barella.

OSTAD FAZLU A dedicated soul for Bangladesh hockey

SPORTS REPORTER

Rafiqul Islam Kamal, one of the finest hockey players Bangladesh has ever produced, has paid rich tribute to veteran coach Fazlul Haque, who passed away in Dhaka on Wednesday. To Kamal, Fazlul was a ‘member of the family’ and a ‘dedicated soul for Bangladesh hockey’.

The coach, who hails from Shaheb Bazar in Old Dhaka and is popularly known as ‘Ostad Fazlu’ in the country's hockey fraternity, had played for several top-level clubs in the country in the 1980s and 1990s before dedicating his life to grooming young players. One of his most successful disciples was Kamal, who scored more than 200 goals in domestic hockey and a further 56 in the international circuit.

“He was family to me,” Kamal told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday. “When he used to play for Usha [KC], he would come to my house in the morning, wake me up from sleep, and take me to the hockey field which instilled the passion for the game in me. He would often give his hockey sticks, jerseys, shin guards, etc.”



Fazlul had a decent career in top-flight hockey, but could never make it to the national team. Once he was very close to making it, an injury to his eye compromised his chances. Since then his whole focus turned to playing domestic hockey and working with young boys and turning them into finished articles, many of whom have featured for the national team.

Kamal recollected how it was due to Fazlul's insistence that he became a hockey player.

“When I was called up for the school hockey team, it was ‘Ostad’ Fazlul who managed to convince my parents to allow me to take part,” Kamal recalled with gratitude.

After calling an end to his career, Fazlul founded an academy at the Armanitola High School, a hallowed place in Bangladesh's history. He would spend his whole day coaching kids at the academy, barely caring about the well-being of himself and his family.

“His life was dedicated to hockey. He may not have had groceries at home, but he was present at the hockey field. He played hockey but didn't get much in return. He hasn't left much wealth for his family.

“He got a lot of love from the people. He was a very nice human being, apart from being a great hockey coach. The number of people that attended his namaz-e-janaza is a testament to how much loved he was.”

Kamal urged the government and wealthy sports organisers to help out Fazlul's widowed wife and young daughter so that they could at least live a decent life.



Following the completion of the Women's National Cricket League, Bangladesh cricketers travelled to Sri Lanka yesterday to play two one-dayers and five T20s under the banner of the ‘A’ team. The tour is being treated as part of the Tigresses' final preparation ahead of the upcoming ICC Women's T20 World Cup, to be hosted by Bangladesh and played in the UAE in October.

PHOTO: BCB