

Sabina uncertainty for Bangladesh before Bhutan semi

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Bangladesh could be without captain Sabina Khatun for their semifinal clash of the SAFF Women's Championship against Bhutan in Kathmandu today, but coach Peter Butler said he has alternates ready in attack to replace the veteran forward.

The defending champions stormed into the semifinals with a 3-1 win against India after having laboured to a 1-1 draw against Pakistan in their opening match. Sabina, the top-scorer and best player of Bangladesh's triumphant campaign two years ago, was largely ineffective in both matches, playing in deeper role than she is used to playing.

Having been taken off in the second half of the match against India, Sabina drew controversy over a post from her Facebook account, which she soon replaced with an apology post.

She had also spoken to media about 'taking blessings' from former coach Golam Rabbani Choton, which the current coach apparently did not take too kindly.

The 30-year-old forward did not train with the team yesterday, with coach



Butler saying he has 'Plan B in place'.

"Sabina is a bit sick, has a bit of fever. I haven't spoken to her. I just wished her birthday yesterday and I haven't seen her since," the Englishman said after the team's training session at the Army Headquarters Ground.

"If she's sick and has a fever, she

might struggle. I'll have her rechecked tomorrow. But I've got Munki (Akte), Monika (Chakma), (Mosammat) Sagorika - I've got attacking options," Butler added.

Midfielder Maria Manda, however, claimed that Sabina just didn't turn up for training but will be available for the game on Sunday.

With or without Sabina, the Bangladesh coach is keeping his charges focused against an "improved" Bhutan side.

Although the women in red and green beat Bhutan 8-0 in last edition's semifinals, and registered 5-1 and 4-2 wins against the same opposition in Thimphu earlier this year, the Bhutan team have shown much more resolute display during the current campaign, having scored 17 goals and conceding just a single goal in three matches.

Butler is wary of the threat of allowing any complacency against the Himalayan side.

"It won't be as easy as people expect it to be," the former West Ham United player said. "They have improved, so we have got to show them respect, and keep our feet on the ground.

"I think it's really important for us to keep switched on, to be motivated. If we do take anything for granted, I think it will be a reason for that (downfall)."

The match will kick off at 1:45pm Bangladesh time at the Dasharath Stadium before the second semifinal between India and Nepal at 6:45pm.

Tabith Awal's leadership promises BFF reform

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After being elected president of Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), Tabith Awal stated that the board's focus is on action rather than mere talk, with the goal of advancing the nation's football in the coming days.

Former footballer-turned-organiser Tabith expectedly won the elections with a landslide victory over unheralded organiser AFM Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury by 123-5 votes, as 128 voters out of 133 delegates cast their votes to elect a new committee for the next four years, from 2024 to 2028.

Asked how the BFF, which had previously been run single-handedly by president Kazi Salahuddin, would be governed under his leadership, two-time former vice-president Tabith said, "We believe in action rather than talk, and we will let you know how the committee will run after our first EC meeting."

Tabith, a politician, businessman, and former footballer, also termed their victory "a triumph for the country and its people."

"We don't want to seal this victory for the people; rather, it is our duty to protect their triumph... We can expect modern football [from this committee], and we want to keep Bangladesh united with football and bring some happiness to the country's



people through football," he said.

The newly elected BFF president is also not worried about the challenges ahead of them, even though the country's football has downgraded in the recent past.

"I think no work is a challenge for us because it is our responsibility given by the voters... I am hopeful of meeting the expectations of the countrymen," said Tabith, who thanked the sports adviser Asif Mahmud for creating a proper environment for the BFF elections.

Tabith also emphasised the need for reforming the BFF constitution in the coming days, for the sake of football development.

"We all agree that we want to bring reform to football, and to start it, we want to reform the constitution. At the same time, we want to keep football rolling on the ground so that the standard of the country's football improves."

Newly elected vice-president Nasser Shahrear Zahedee, who received the highest votes of 115 among six vice-president candidates, is optimistic about progressing football in the country despite a financial crisis looming in the board.

"The elections were held with huge enthusiasm among the voters. If we can keep patience, respect, and support among us, then we can present beautiful football locally and internationally, irrespective of politics and opinions.

"I also believe the executive committee can meet the expectations of the country's people. I think if we want the country's football to progress, we need to emphasise district football and ensure playgrounds everywhere, apart from establishing academies at the divisional headquarters," said Zahedee, also the chairman of Radiant Pharmaceuticals.

Replying to a query, he said, "I think there will be a financial crisis in the BFF, but if we want to make a collective effort to popularise football, then there won't be any financial crisis."

Magnificent Santner ends NZ's 69-year wait

AGENCIES

New Zealand ended their 69-year wait as left-arm spinner Mitchell Santner tore through an explosive Indian batting order for the second time in as many days to catapult the Kiwis to their maiden Test series victory in India.

Santner, with match figures of 13-157, bowled his side to a 113-run win at the Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium in Pune on Saturday. New Zealand had won the first Test in Bengaluru by six wickets and hence have now taken an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

The Black Caps have been touring India since 1955 and in the 36 Tests they have played in Indian soil before the ongoing series, they lost 17, drew 17 and won only three.

"Immensely proud to be in a position of winning two Test matches here. Proud of the group," New Zealand skipper Tom Latham said of his history-makers.

"Lot of New Zealand teams have come over the past 69 years and 13 series, and to be the first team to win a series here is special," he added.

Meanwhile, India, who had not lost a home Test series since 2012, succumbed to an embarrassing series defeat with one match to go.

"We lost the game and the series, that is hurting," said India skipper Rohit, whose side travels to Australia for a five-Test series starting next month.

"But we won 18 series in India and that means we did a lot of good things [in the past]. I will not think too much into this.



PHOTO: AFP

We had two-three bad innings, but it happens sometimes," added the opener.

Santner's spin proved to be too much for the Indian batters throughout the game. The left-arm on the second day had stunned the hosts with career-best figures of 7-53 and the very next day, when Yashasvi Jaiswal had launched into attack, with India chasing 359, Santner shut down the threat.

He dismissed the flashy left-hander for 77 off 65 balls and also claimed the wickets of Rohit (eight), Shubman Gill (23), Virat Kohli (17), Sarfaraz Khan (nine) and Ravichandran Ashwin (18) on his way to claiming 6-104.

Santner's match figures are the third best ever for a New Zealander in Tests, behind Richard Hadlee (15-123 against Australia in 1985) and Ajaz Patel (14-225 against India in 2021).

The 32-year-old left-arm spinner bowled 29 overs unchanged from one end, even with a side strain, to ensure New Zealand's victory.

"I found it early on in my spell, but I wasn't going to stop. Every time I got a wicket, it got a little better. It was a bit strange for me, but it was important to contribute in the win," Santner said. The third and final Test will begin on November 1 in Mumbai.

Masood savours 'special win' soaked in sweat and blood

AGENCIES

Pakistan captain Shan Masood said his team showed tremendous character to register back-to-back victories against England and win their first Test series on home soil since 2021.

Smarting from an innings defeat in the series opener, Pakistan levelled the series in Multan before arriving in Rawalpindi where they rolled out a raging turner.

Their spin twins Noman Ali and Sajid Khan claimed 19 of the 20 English wickets to bowl Pakistan to a nine-wicket win that also secured their 2-1 series victory on Saturday.

***This was only the second time that Pakistan have come from behind to win a Test series, with the first being a 2-1 series win after losing the first match against Zimbabwe in 1995.**

"Like London buses they come together," Shan said of their successive victories in the series.

"The first win came after a long



PHOTO: AFP

time and it was backed up by a series win. It's special."

England captain Ben Stokes admitted that Noman Ali and Sajid Khan were too good for his team as the irrepressible pair shared 39 wickets in the last two Tests.

"You've got to hold your hands up to say that those two in particular were obviously too good for our batting line-up in those last two games," Stokes said.

Noman and Sajid both came into the side following Pakistan's heavy

defeat in the first Test in Multan, their inclusion proving pivotal in the hosts' 2-1 series triumph.

"Credit to Noman and Sajid, the way in which they bowled in the second Test match and in this game, you know it was very good and challenging," said Stokes.

After losing the opener, Pakistan took a bold selection call by dropping three frontline players - batter Babar Azam and the pace duo of Naseem Shah and Shaheen Afridi.

"For everyone to stand up and give

their best means a lot," said Shan, who sealed Pakistan's victory with a six off England spinner Shoaib Bashir.

"It is about characters, people you can trust, people you think can bleed for you - Sajid literally bled for us yesterday. To be here and standing as the winning team is the most special thing for us."

The sight of the defiant Sajid, waiting in a blood-stained shirt while a new one arrived after he had cut his chin on Friday, epitomised Pakistan's grit and resilience.

England folded for a meagre 112 in their second innings with only Joe Root (33) looking comfortable against Pakistan's rampaging spinners.

Their usual tactics of swashbuckling batting have looked somewhat one-dimensional and inadequate on turning tracks and against in-form spinners. "The last couple of Tests we've been thrown some challenges, and I think it's pretty easy to assess that we weren't able to stand up to those challenges," said England captain Ben Stokes. "The great thing about sport is that those challenges will always come along, but in the last two games we weren't able to match what Pakistan threw at us."



Depleted Arsenal face steep Liverpool test

AGENCIES

Injury-hit Arsenal have little room for error when Premier League leaders Liverpool visit the Emirates on Sunday despite losing just once so far this season.

Arsenal were tipped to push Manchester City all the way again this season after twice coming so close to a first Premier League title since 2003/04.

But it is Liverpool who lead the way after a near flawless start to Arne Slot's reign.

The Gunners suffered 2-0 shock defeat to Bournemouth last week and their situation worsened with additions to the injury list.

Arsenal could be without three of their most important players with William Saliba suspended, Martin Odegaard sidelined by an ankle injury and Bukayo Saka a

doubt due to a hamstring problem.

Defenders Riccardo Calafiori and Jurrien Timber could also be missing and Mikel Arteta has called on the Arsenal fans to be the 12th man on Sunday. "The place has to be rocking here against Liverpool to give us all the possible energy that they can," Arteta said.

On the other hand, Liverpool, with 11 wins from 12 matches in all competitions, are flying under their new manager but victory against Arsenal would be the clearest statement yet that they are genuine title contenders.

The Reds (7-1-0, 21 points) earned a gutty 2-1 home win over Chelsea last Sunday and followed that with a 1-0 Champions League victory at RB Leipzig to extend an impressive win streak to eight in all competitions.