

Bangladesh upbeat about defending SAFF title

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh are upbeat about defending their SAFF Women's Championship title as they square off against Nepal in today's final at the Dasharath Stadium in Kathmandu, with the match kicking off at 6:45pm Bangladesh time.

Bangladesh's disappointing 1-1 draw against Pakistan in their tournament opener and midfielder Monica Chakma's subsequent comments to media regarding the team's head coach had apparently reflected an unhappy family.

However, everything started changing with the crucial match against India where coach Peter Butler kept his faith on the experienced guns, who totally outclassed the five-time champions to step into the semifinals with a big 3-1 win before storming into the final with a 7-1 thrashing of Bhutan.

"Having crossed different odds, the girls have come to this stage and I always try to motivate them and try to keep them united on the ground. I think there will be no shortage of anything on the ground tomorrow [Wednesday]



and we will be trying to play the way we have played in the last three matches," captain Sabina Khatun said yesterday.

"I think the crowd will enjoy the match because it will not be easy for either side. It will be a tough match -- a 50-50 game," said the experienced campaigner.

Coach Peter focused on the process to be right in the final.

"A lot of respect to the opposition Nepal in terms of their unity. I think there

will be a lot of our factors involved in the game tomorrow but our belief is that we go with the right attitude and the right focus and talents," the Englishman said.

Bangladesh are just one hurdle away from being crowned back-to-back champions and proving that their maiden title two years ago was not a fluke.

Former coach Golam Rabbani Choton's charges were not the favourites two years ago either, but they did beat the

▶ Nepal have never won SAFF Women's Championship despite playing in five finals before.

▶ Bangladesh played in two finals before -- losing to India in 2016 and beating Nepal in 2022.

▶ Bangladesh have only one victory against Nepal in 12 meetings, with five draws and six matches won by Nepal.

home side, cheered on by a vocal crowd, 3-1 to win the title for the first time. These two teams have played against each other three times since, all of those matches ending in draws.

Nepalese forward Sabitra Bhandari, who scored the equaliser against India in the semifinals, is expected to be a big threat for Bangladesh. However, the suspension to on-form Nepalese forward Rekha Poudel will be a big relief for the women in red and green.

BCB asked to amend constitution

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is set for an important meeting today with many important discussions to be held. The board is currently operating without any standing committee since Faruque Ahmed took charge of the BCB presidency following the resignation of Nazmul Hassan Papon.

Two separate letters have been sent to the BCB on October 28 and 29 from the National Sports Council (NSC), asking for clarification. The one sent on October 28 sought clarification on how many directors' positions are vacant due to absence from three consecutive board meetings, according to Clause 15.2 of the BCB constitution.

Following the fall of the Awami League government, many BCB directors have remained absent. The NSC also sought to learn whether any steps have been taken regarding fulfilling the vacant posts, according to section 13.4 of the BCB constitution.

In another letter dated October 29, NSC wrote that it feels the need for forming a sub-committee to reform the BCB constitution. The NSC letters mentioned that issues discussed in the said letters are very important.

The board is also expected to discuss the issue of Shakib Al Hasan's selection for the upcoming ODI series against Afghanistan in UAE. The all-rounder was set to play in his final Test in Mirpur but was advised not to come to the country by Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud. Shakib, who had already travelled to Dubai to return to the country, left without playing his final Test.

Shakib had said that he would bid goodbye to international cricket with the 2025 Champions Trophy. However, selectors remained unsure whether to pick him for the upcoming series in UAE until discussion with the board and the BCB president.

Meanwhile, all-format skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto had expressed wish to step down from captaincy and the BCB is yet to officially comment on the issue.

Naeem and Co grind out draw for Rangpur

SPORTS REPORTER

Rangpur Division remained second in the NCL standings after the second round following a draw against Dhaka Division on Day Four at BKSP Ground 3 yesterday.

Rangpur were 101 for five in the 57th over but Naeem Islam played a heroic knock under pressure, notching 75 off a whopping 246 deliveries. Tanbir Hayder helped close down one end, remaining unbeaten on 21 off 126 deliveries. After Naeem's dismissal, Rishad Hossain scored an unbeaten 19 off 58 deliveries to help seal the draw as Rangpur reached 165 for seven in 101 overs in their second innings. Earlier, Rangpur had managed 253 in the first innings before Dhaka had posted 327 in the first innings.

Suvagata Hom was the pick of the Dhaka bowlers with two wickets for 18 runs in 16 overs. Day 1 of the four-day match had seen no play due to wet outfield.

In another drawn second round game at Sheikh Abu Naser Stadium, Barishal opener Abdul Mazid hit 134 as they reached 287 for three against Khulna Division, who had declared their first innings at 408 for nine.

Safe approach pegs TIGERS BACK ONCE AGAIN

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Chattogram

A penchant for opting for a safe approach once again forced Bangladesh onto the backfoot on the opening day of their series-deciding second and final Test against South Africa in Chattogram yesterday.

Having taken little to no lesson from selecting a batter-heavy eleven during their seven-wicket defeat in the first Test, the Tigers once again opted to go with just four regular bowlers and eight genuine batters in their side for this series' final World Test Championship fixture -- a game that Bangladesh must win to level the series.

Given the historical trend of the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium offering batting-friendly wickets coupled with the fact that the weather in the port city has been very hot and humid in the last few days, the Tigers' selection process made very little sense.

Even the Proteas showed in the last Test, played in a much slower Mirpur surface, that having a properly balanced side was key -- their pacers scalped 13 wickets in that game while Hasan Mahmud, Bangladesh's sole seamer, was left ruing for not being able to bowl from 'both ends'.

Bangladesh did add one more pacer for the Chattogram Test -- pairing Hasan with Nahid Rana. However, the Tigers' choice of opting for only two spinners -- all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz and left-arter Tajjul Islam -- was just as baffling as



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

it was logical for South Africa to go with three pacers and two spinners.

When Bangladesh's newly-appointed coach Phil Simmons was made to answer queries as to what led to such a selection, things got clearer that it was the fear of batting collapse and the defensive mindset of preparing for 'a draw' from the onset saw the Tigers repeat such a questionable approach.

"It was [done after] a lot of consideration. There was a lot of talk about it [the team combination], and this what we came up with at the end," Simmons told reporters in Chattogram yesterday.

"There was a thought [given] to go

with a fifth bowler. First of all, you can win a Test. And if you get to a stage where you can't win it then you must be able to save it. This came into the equation and we decided to go this way," Simmons added, making it apparent where the priorities lie.

Unsurprisingly, South Africa batters made hay on Day 1 with opener Tony de Zorzi and Tristan Stubbs notching maiden tons to power the tourists to 307-2 at stumps, frustrating the Bangladeshi bowlers the entire day under scorching heat.

Bangladesh pacers Hasan and Nahid bowled 13 overs each, staying wicketless,

while the two spinners Tajjul (30) and Miraz (21) had to account for most overs. Part-time spinner Mominul Haque had to chip in with four overs, further proving that the Tigers were missing a fifth regular bowler who could have made things a lot easier for the other four bowlers in Chattogram's batting paradise.

Tajjul was the one to take both the Proteas wickets to fall on the day -- removing stand-in skipper and opener Aiden Markram (33 off 55) and Stubbs (106 off 198) late in the day to end a massive 201-run stand with De Zorzi, who remained unbeaten on 141.

Although the concussion of Jaker Ali Anik and Liton Das' fever at the eleventh hour had an impact on the selection process in the Chattogram Test, it was clear that the defensive approach of the team management has once again seen the Tigers on the back foot just after Day 1.

SCORES IN BRIEF

Bangladesh vs South Africa

2ND TEST, DAY 1

South Africa 1st innings: 307 for two (De Zorzi 141 not out, Stubbs 106, Markram 33, Bedingham 18 not out; Tajjul 2-110, Miraz 0-95, Mahmud 0-47)

LIST OF WINNERS

- Men's Ballon d'Or: Rodri (Esp/Man City)
- Women's Ballon d'Or: Aitana Bonmati (Esp/Barcelona)
- Johan Cruyff trophy: Carlo Ancelotti (Ita/Real Madrid)
- Johan Cruyff trophy: Emma Hayes (Eng/Ex-Chelsea women's coach)
- Gerd Mueller trophy: Kylian Mbappe (Fra/ex-PSG), Harry Kane (Eng/Bayern Munich)
- Raymond Kopa trophy: Lamine Yamal (Esp/Barcelona)
- Lev Yashin trophy: Emiliano Martinez (Arg/Aston Villa)
- Socrates Prize: Jenifer Hermoso (Esp/Tigres Monterrey)
- Best men's team: Real Madrid
- Best women's team: Barcelona

Rodri's Ballon d'Or: Deserved or not?

NABID YEASIN

Rodri becoming the first Manchester City player to win the Ballon d'Or award for the best player in the world on Monday did come as a surprise to many, and with ample reasons too as he pipped favourite Vinicius Junior of Real Madrid and Brazil to lift the most prestigious individual award in football.

While Vinicius' claim to the award can not be undermined -- given he had been the most influential player for Real Madrid in a season that they won the Champions League, LaLiga and Super Copa -- doubts could not be made about the City star's credentials.

It's just that the Ballon d'Or award has been dominated so much by attacking players over the years that seeing a midfielder bag it, especially when he was not even made favourite to win it while running against a prolific attacker like Vinicius, was bound to raise eyebrows.

Central midfielders don't often appear in the race for the Ballon d'Or, let alone win it -- a fact that could easily be established that in the last 17 years, only two midfielders won the award. The last one to win was Croatia and Real Madrid midfielder Luka Modric in 2018 and before him, it was Brazil's Kaka in 2007 -- and Kaka was hardly a traditional midfielder.



"This cannot be achieved alone, I am very lucky to be surrounded by players who make me better every day. Thanks to the staff, to the club workers, without you we would not achieve so much success."

Barcelona and Spain star Aitana Bonmati said on Monday after winning her second successive women's Ballon d'Or, having led her club to a historic continental quadruple of titles and claiming the Nations League with her country.

Not only midfielders, the criteria for winning the Ballon d'Or award is such that it sort of creates a barrier for any player other than a forward to win it -- the last defender to win the award was Fabio Cannavaro in 2006 and the only goalkeeper to ever win it was Russia's Lev Yashin in 1963.

The main three criteria for the award include individual performances, decisive and impressive character; team success, performances and achievements; and player behaviour, class and fair play. And, in that regard, a strong case for Rodri winning it could be made.

Rodri was one of the main figures for City in 2023-24, starting more matches (50) than any of his teammates, while he also played the most minutes (4,325) to help the English side an unprecedented fourth successive Premier League trophy. He was also named the best player at the Euro 2024, propelling Spain to a record-extending fourth title.

How pivotal Rodri was for Pep Guardiola last season could be gauged

just from the matches he missed -- in the nine games Rodri didn't feature, City won just five, losing four of them.

Playing 50 games in all competitions for City, Rodri had 22 goal involvements (9 goals, 13 assists), having never previously register more than seven goals or over seven assists in a single campaign.

Rodri became the first-ever Manchester City player to win the Ballon d'Or, and the first player from the Premier League to do so since Cristiano Ronaldo in 2008 when he was at Manchester United

Passing is the ultimate trait of a midfielder and Rodri dominated in that aspect as well, averaging 111.2 passes per 90 minutes with an accuracy of 92.3% which accounted to more passes per 90 than any other player from Europe's top five leagues in all competitions.

Rodri also set a new Premier League record (since 2003-04) for successful passes (3,359) and successful passes in the opposition's half (2,122) in a single season last year.

Hence, a deep look at Rodri's credentials might just be able to make things a bit clear as to why the journalists from 100 top-ranked FIFA nations voted him in ahead of Vinicius -- even though choosing a winner in a voting method is never free of bias.