

Cabrera lost for words after 'painful' defeat

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera had neither any explanation nor any excuse after his side lost a FIFA friendly match against Maldives 1-0 at home, dashing their hopes of getting a favourable draw in next year's Asian Cup Qualifiers.

The men in red and green had played with much positivity and attacking intent, creating a number of chances – something Cabrera had declared his side would do, but in the end it was veteran Ali Fasir's 18th-minute header which saw his side suffer their first home defeat against the islanders.

"It's difficult to explain, very painful in the end," exclaimed a visibly resigned Cabrera, who's extended contract runs out in December, at the post-match press conference following the defeat at the Bashundhara Kings Arena.

While Cabrera vowed to egg his side on for a better result in the second match on Saturday, any realistic hope of moving into Pot 3 from Pot 4 for next month's Asian Cup Qualifiers draw were all but extinguished. The Spaniard said he could not explain the defeat after his team had created 'most chances of his tenure as Bangladesh coach during this match.'

"We did everything to score," the Spaniard said. "I don't know how many chances we created and I don't know what else we could do."

While Cabrera was right to rue the attacks that were not turned into scoring shots, and the one occasion Sohel Rana's shot hit the woodwork, the reality was that there were not many scoring opportunities created by the hosts due to a lack of



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

cohesion among the forwards as well as in defence from his charges, a stark contrast to the rousing 2-1 win a year ago at the same venue in a World Cup Qualifying playoff, which had seen his side sneak into main qualifiers at Maldives' expense.

The coach also bemoaned the lack of concentration of his charges for the decisive goal as Fasir was left unmarked by a napping defence on a free-kick from Hamza Mohamed.

Rakib Hossain and Faysal Ahmed Fahim, the two forwards operating under the wings, failed to put the right crosses

inside the box while at the other end, there was a clear lack of understanding in defence where young Abahani centre back Shakil Ahad Topu was handed his debut, leaving some 4000 spectators frustrated.

Cabrera had thrown in four pairs of fresh legs towards the end, injecting some much-needed pace but the final shot, be it from Rakib or Sheikh Morsalin or substitute Mojibor Rahman Johny was always missing.

The defeat also closes in on a dismal year for the Bangladesh team following an upward tick in performance and

results last year when they had reached the semifinals of the SAFF Championship and qualified for World Cup Qualifiers. In 2024, Cabrera's men have now six of the seven matches they have played, scoring just one goal and conceding 14.

Although Cabrera did not comment on speculations regarding his future with Bangladesh football, the Spaniard would need to find a positive and reassuring performance from his charges in the next match to survive as the team's head coach in the Asian Cup Qualifiers in March next year.

Security measures in focus in France-Israel encounter

AGENCIES



France will host Israel in a UEFA Nations League group-stage fixture at the Stade de France on Thursday, a week after supporters of Israeli club Maccabi Tel Aviv were subject to targeted assault in Amsterdam following a Europa League contest between Maccabi and Ajax.

The violent clashes in the aftermath of which about two dozen people were injured and more than 60 were arrested spurred on against a backdrop of high tension caused by the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

The France-Israel fixture has been deemed as high risk and in response Paris police have heightened security measures, deploying 4,000 gendarmes around the stadium, on public transport and across the French capital.

Paris police chief Laurent Nunez said that the national police force's elite unit would be tasked with protecting Israel's footballers.

French President Emmanuel Macron will be in attendance in a sign of solidarity.

Firm favourites going into the contest, France will secure their spot in the quarterfinals of the competition if they avoid defeat against Israel and Belgium fail to come out on top in their penultimate group fixture with Italy.

Italy need just a point, Belgium much more

AGENCIES

In-form Italy will need just a single point to secure a place in the UEFA Nations League quarterfinals when they visit Brussels to face hosts Belgium in a League A Group 2 game on Thursday night.

However, the game is a must-win for Domenico Tedesco's side in order to stand any chance of progressing to the quarters in March. Even if they manage to win, Belgium will have to hope for other results to go their way.

Having previously fought back to draw 2-2 in Italy, Belgium's sole win remains September's 3-1 success against Israel.

Occupying third place with just four points – five below France, and six shy of leaders Italy – Tedesco's side seem to be heading for a relegation playoff.

A top-two finish is required to reach the knockout phase for a second time, so their task is straightforward on Thursday: they must win to stay in contention.

That would take it down to Sunday's game, when they will meet rock-bottom Israel in Hungary.

However, the Belgians have failed to beat Italy in a competitive match since 1972.

Meanwhile, after putting up a dismal defence of their title at the last Euros, a new-look Italy under Luciano Spalletti have been a breath of fresh air in Group 2 thus far. They have racked up 10 points from a possible 12 to inch within a whisker of securing progress, which they will do just by avoiding defeat against Belgium.

The curious case of NCL's older stars

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Being in and around the national team periphery can help cricketers remain in contention to earn their place in the national team, but not if they are of a certain age. Players who have played a few matches in the national team but have not earned their place back are usually above 30. The case of Imrul Kayes, who played his last Test for Bangladesh in 2019 and is set to retire from first-class cricket on 16th November, is of that same ilk.

The performances in the National Cricket League (NCL) are not a barometer; the specific nature of the challenge in selecting players from a month-long tournament perhaps overlooks that red-ball stars need more exposure throughout the year. Current selector Abdur Razzak was perhaps the only example of an older star returning at the age of 36, albeit for one Test against Sri Lanka in 2018, through NCL performances.

Imrul feels that there is no plan in place regarding

players of a certain age in Bangladesh's cricket culture.

"You can see what priority was given to age-level players in the BPL [Bangladesh Premier League], even ones who did not play a single season of BPL. To come up the ranks, we had to play well in two to four editions. Sometimes people get things easily, and that's our problem. We always think that the class of 19 will bring solutions, but ultimately the older stars have to perform," Imrul told The Daily Star yesterday.

Imrul argued that he has not been playing first-class cricket frequently in recent years, as his intention was not to return to the national team anymore.

"I used to play previously because there was a plan to get into the national team, and I felt there was a plan regarding me. But honestly, that's not there anymore. I play now because of my career, the feel-good factor, and because young players enjoy playing with us," he added.

The NCL's challenge has increased over the years, and Imrul agrees but points out that only stats-based assessment is made.

"Player-wise, our quality has increased in our first-class cricket... but some players don't survive long in internationals. The plan we play cricket in, that's not done in any other country."

"Ultimately, we just see flat-out how many runs someone scored or how many wickets someone got. We don't see in what situation those runs or wickets were taken. We don't verify those things," he said.

National team selector Hannan Sarkar yesterday mentioned players such as 35-year-old Marshall Ayub, who scored

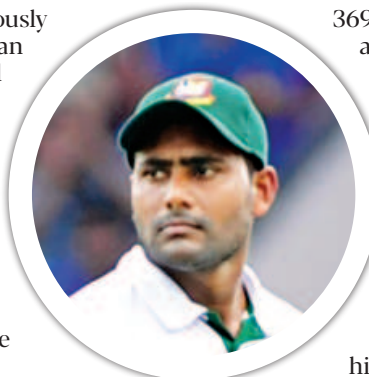
369 runs at an average of 61, alongside the likes of Imrul, Shamsur Rahman, and Naeem Islam, during a press meet, suggesting they will be considered in future.

However, Hannan also pointed out the quality gap between the NCL and international cricket, as someone like Mominul Haque had highlighted after a Test against Sri Lanka recently.

Imrul argued that players need exposure to play international Tests.

"You can't base [selection] on the NCL to think about the Test team. You need to have 30-40 players under BCB [Bangladesh Cricket Board] to get performances throughout the year. These players need to be playing longer versions throughout the year."

"You can't rely on a one-and-a-half-month tournament and think you can select players from there. It's difficult. You see that players who don't play BPL are only watching games. Why can't we build a curriculum so they are amid games?" Imrul said.



Argentina's Lionel Messi prepares during a practice session in Buenos Aires on Wednesday ahead of their trip to Asuncion to face a tricky Paraguay in a World Cup qualifying game on Friday. Argentina, who sit atop the South American qualifying standings with 22 points, will hope to build on their momentum from a 6-0 thrashing of Bolivia last month and get three points to have one giant foot in the finals already. Meanwhile, just hours before Argentina get into action, Brazil will play away to Venezuela, and the five-time world champions will look for nothing but a win to boost their chances of qualifying as they sit fourth in the standings, six points behind leaders Argentina. PHOTO: REUTERS

District swimmers treading in shallow waters

ANISUR RAHMAN

The Bangladesh Navy and Bangladesh Army dominated the recent national swimming championships, securing all 42 gold medals and leaving district and club teams, apart from BKSP and the Bangladesh Air Force, without any podium finishes.

For years, the swimming pool in the national championships has been ruled by service teams like the Navy, Army, Air Force, and Bangladesh Ansar. Occasionally, district and club teams have made it onto the medal table, hinting at swimming talent beyond these better-resourced teams. However, a shortage of facilities and training opportunities restricts their potential.

Unlike previous editions, only four teams out of nearly 50 participating teams – Navy, Army, BKSP, and Air Force – shared all medals in the 33rd national swimming championships, raising fears of swimming fading out at the district level.

"Usually, district and club teams struggle to compete against swimmers from service teams who are given round-the-year training facilities," said Bangladesh Swimming Federation (BSF) treasurer Rezaul Hossain Badsha, who also took care of four Pabna swimmers in the just-concluded championships.

"Besides, there are no DSA [District Sports Association] committees in many districts, while some ad hoc committees have been formed in others, so there has been no training at the district level. Most districts participated in the championships without financial help from the DSA,"

noted that his district currently lacks a functioning sports association committee, which has led to a next-to-nothing preparation for the championships.

"I brought four swimmers to the championship at my own cost, and two of them met the set time.



said Badsha, who brought four Pabna swimmers to the championship at his own expense.

"To be honest, sports at the district level remain stuck, and it is also challenging for both district sports associations and clubs to conduct swimming," said Badsha.

Echoing Badsha's views, Jotindra Nath Biswas, a coach from Bagerhat,

They have therefore been given the promised facilities by the federation, but the other two were covered by me," said Jotindra, adding that the federation should provide financial support to clubs to develop swimmers at the grassroots level to prevent extinction.

Nazim Uddin, general secretary of Jhenaidah Swimming Club,

highlighted the unique challenges faced by district-level athletes. Unlike their service team counterparts, district swimmers often train in ponds or rivers and lack access to proper diet and fitness resources.

Asked why district and club teams participated only nominally in the national championships, Nazim said, "You can't hold the national championships with only four or five services teams. Besides, the districts and clubs are invited by the federation to participate. There is also the question of councillorship in the federation."

Former national swimmer Karar Samidul Islam noted that swimmers at the district level do not have the capacity to clock the times needed to win a medal at the senior level, so proven swimmers continue to excel in every competition.

Samidul, however, informed that district and club teams are producing swimmers at the junior level, and the service teams are recruiting these talented swimmers at a young age to groom them for senior competitions and for national representation.

Interestingly, 11 swimmers shared all 19 gold medals in the men's events, while only five swimmers shared 16 gold medals in the women's events of the senior championships, highlighting the widening gap between service and district teams.