

Konstas' whirlwind debut hogs the spotlight

REUTERS, Melbourne

Cricket coaching manuals probably don't recommend scooping Jasprit Bumrah 11 deliveries into your Test career but Australia's 19-year-old debutant Sam Konstas was working from his own playbook in the Boxing Day Test on Thursday.

His first effort missed the ball, as did his second a couple of overs later, triggering laughter from India's players in front of a huge crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground for day one of the fourth Test.

Unbowed, Konstas's persistence paid off as he shuffled across the crease and flicked Bumrah over the wicketkeeper's head for four on the third attempt.

He then pulled off a reverse scoop that cleared the rope for six on the next ball, wiping the smiles off the visitors' faces. Another reverse scoop three balls later went for four in the same over, sending home fans into a frenzy.

Few batters are able to make India's pace spearhead look silly and hold onto

their wickets for long but Konstas kept bashing away at Bumrah in a 65-ball 60.

He eventually fell lbw to the spin of all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja before lunch.

Watching in the crowd, Konstas's twin brother Johnny told host broadcaster Seven Network that the opener had talked about pulling out a ramp shot against India over Christmas dinner on Wednesday.

The player confirmed it was a pre-planned tactic to put pressure back on Bumrah, the most dominant bowler of the series so far, and that he had been practising the shot with his personal batting coach, Tahmid Islam.

"Definitely premeditated, especially with the pace," he told reporters after Australia went to stumps at 311 for six.

"But just trying to keep my head still and just watch it onto my bat. But yeah, got a few away today and changed the field, which was good."

India were riled by Konstas's youthful exuberance.

Virat Kohli, the team's 36-year-old megastar, bumped shoulders mid-pitch

with the teenager at the end of the 10th over.

Both turned around to exchange words, prompting umpire Michael Gough and opener Usman Khawaja to step in to defuse things.

Konstas responded by slogging Bumrah for four over mid-off on the next ball he faced, then hit the pacer over his head for six as he took 18 runs from the over.

Paceman Mohammed Siraj, who was booted in the second test in Adelaide for giving a send-off to Travis Head after taking his wicket, also tried to intimidate Konstas but got little reward.

After Konstas charged down the wicket and missed the ball, Siraj stared daggers at the teen and offered a few choice words.

Konstas smacked him for three off the next ball and kept up the aggression.

"Obviously it got heated at times, which was good for me," said Konstas.

"I just feel like that brings the best out of me. Hopefully it goes well in the next innings."



A LOOK BACK AT 2024

Neer grounded despite 'dream' year

IM Manon Reja Neer has been the standout performer in Bangladesh's otherwise lacklustre chess scene in 2024. The 15-year-old not only claimed the national chess championship but also became the country's youngest International Master. Currently in New York for the World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championships, Neer spoke to **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman** about his stellar year, challenges, and future aspirations. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): How was the year 2024 for you as a chess player?

Manon Reja Neer (MRN): The year 2024 has been the best year for me. Achieving the IM title and winning the National Chess Championship was a dream come true... I had nothing in 2023; there were no IM norms, and I only had 2200 rating points. But in 2024, I crossed 2400 rating points and secured all three norms needed to become an International Master.

DS: Were you satisfied with participating in 18 FIDE-recognised tournaments at home and abroad in 2024, playing nearly 200 matches, given players often highlight a lack of opportunities?

MRN: I was very satisfied with playing all those tournaments because I performed well overall... I think playing 18 to 20 local and international tournaments each year is good enough to create opportunities and achieve targets.

DS: Did you notice any weaknesses in your gameplay during the year?

MRN: I think everything, except handling mental pressure, was in the right place. For instance, I needed only a

draw in one match to secure a GM norm, and in another instance, I needed a win, but I couldn't hold my nerve. That's how I missed out on two GM norms.

DS: You faced several Grandmasters in 2024, winning six matches and drawing ten. Any memorable moments from these games?

MRN: I think my best win was against Israel's Grandmaster Ido Gorshtain, who had a rating of maybe 2560 or 2570 (actually 2543). I believe I can achieve good results against anyone if I perform well.

DS: How do you view the overall condition of the country's chess in 2024?

MRN: Actually, I don't know much about it. I've always travelled abroad at my own cost or through sponsorships to play in overseas tournaments. Other players performed well, but there were no notable achievements except my IM title.

DS: Did you experience any disappointments in 2024?

MRN: Missing out on two GM norms was definitely sad, and the departure of Zia [GM Ziaur Rahman] was unfortunate

for all of us.

DS: What are your expectations from the newly appointed ad hoc committee?

MRN: I don't have any expectations from committees because I've lost faith in them. However, I do hope the new committee will organise training for promising players, send them abroad for overseas tournaments, and hold all local tournaments on time.

DS: Any specific goals for 2025?

MRN: I don't have specific targets because what will happen, will happen. However, I'll try to give my best, which you could say is my target for 2025. I haven't set a target for securing GM norms either, as I believe that if I perform well throughout the year, the norms will come automatically.

DS: What's your evaluation of Indian GM Gukesh Dommaraju, who became world champion at just 18?

MRN: He didn't become champion by chance... There has been tremendous support for chess in India, and he benefitted from that. Of course, he's a talented player, which is why he became world champion. If I also receive financial support or sponsorships, I believe I can aim for such achievements.

DS: What are your expectations at the World Rapid and Blitz Championships?

MRN: My only expectation is to perform well – nothing else.

SHORT CORNER

Shakib's absence from BPL disappointing: Sujon

Dhaka Capitals head coach Khaled Mahmud Sujon said the players will be disappointed if ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan eventually does not participate in the upcoming edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), starting on December 30. "A top cricketer cannot play the biggest tournament in the country. I think all the cricketers are also disappointed [about Shakib not playing in the BPL]. Not everyone can speak in front of the mic. Shakib has a friendly relationship with all the cricketers. He helps everyone in every way. So, it feels bad, that's all. He is known all over the world as a cricketer. He joined politics and I don't know how much injustice he committed. But I'm surprised that we combined his long career with those seven-eight months [in politics]," Mahmud told reporters after his side's first practice session at the National Cricket Academy Ground in Mirpur on Thursday.

Dilara hits maiden ton in WBCL

East Zone opener Dilara Akter Dola notched up her maiden first-class century to put her side on top against Central Zone on the opening day of the second-round match of the ongoing Women's Bangladesh Cricket League 2024-25 at the Shaheed Kamruzzaman Stadium in Rajshahi on yesterday. Dilara scored 102 off 131 balls with 11 fours and two sixes, while Jannatul Ferdous Tithi and Sharmin Akhter Supra contributed with 65 and 62 runs, respectively, as East Zone made 316-8 at stumps after opting to bat first. Dilara and Jannatul shared a 154-run stand for the second wicket which give their side a solid platform after losing opener Shompa early.

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City pay penalty for Haaland miss

AFP, Manchester

Erling Haaland had a second-half penalty saved as Manchester City's astonishing slump continued with a 1-1 draw against lowly Everton at the Etihad Stadium.

Winners of the last four Premier League titles, the English champions have won just once in their last 13 games in all competitions.

Bernardo Silva put City in front early on before Ilman Ndiaye salvaged a point for the Toffees.

Haaland had the chance to end his longest goal drought at the Etihad but his spot-kick was that of a striker short in confidence as Pickford dived low to his right to make the save.

City climb to sixth but could end the day five points adrift of the top four.

An eventful but predictable year in football

ANISUR RAHMAN

In the year 2024, Bangladesh football followed the familiar beats of the preceding years with a few new developments sprinkled in between.

The women's team excelled once again, winning their second successive SAFF Women's Championship title, while the men's team remained stuck in mediocrity. Age-level teams found success at SAFF level while Bashundhara Kings carried on with their domestic domination.

The change in leadership at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) was the biggest new development at the administrative level while the demise of five members of the Swadhin Bangladeshi Football team was the saddest.

The year is ending on an optimistic note with news of England-born Bangladeshi footballer Hamza Choudhury getting the green light to represent Bangladesh at the international level coming in December, something fans had long been waiting for.

Age-level teams triumph at SAFF

Bangladesh strengthened its stronghold in women's age-level football at the sub-continent level in 2024. The Under-19 team was named joint champions of the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship alongside India in February after a heated final in Dhaka that ended in a contentious manner.

This was Bangladesh's second triumph at the U-19 Women's Championship and fourth overall including the SAFF U-18 and U-20

Women's Championships. The U-16 team also lifted the title in the SAFF U-16 Women's Championship in March Bhutan in 2024.

In men's competitions, Bangladesh won its maiden SAFF U-20 Championship in Bhutan in August, while the U-17 team finished as runners-up in the SAFF U-17 Championship.

However, when competing at the AFC level, the age-level teams struggled. The women's U-17 team finished bottom of the four team group in the second round of the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup qualification in September while the men's U-20 team finished third among five teams in the AFC U-20 Asian Cup Qualifiers.

New FIFA sanctions

Last year, FIFA had dropped a bombshell on BFF when it banned the federation's general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag for two years for using falsified documents to justify payments made by the BFF with FIFA funds.

In continuation of that investigation, the global football body in May imposed fresh sanctions on Sohag, former chief financial officer Abu Hossain and former operations manager Mizanur Rahman. It also fined senior vice president Abdus Salam Murshey, who stepped down from his post on August 9, further diminishing BFF's already dwindling reputation.

BPL teams Sheikh Jamal DC and Sheikh Russel KC withdrew from the top-flight in the 2024-25 season, citing sponsorship crisis. Their departure reduced employment opportunities for local players. Some top footballers have also reportedly taken a pay



Unstoppable Kings

Bashundhara Kings won their fifth successive Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) title this year – becoming the first ever team to do so in the country's domestic football. Kings also bagged the treble in the 2023-24 season – the second Bangladeshi club to do so after Sheikh Russel KC. However, Kings again failed at the international level, losing all four of their matches in the newly introduced AFC Challenge League.

Two top flight clubs withdraw

BPL teams Sheikh Jamal DC and Sheikh Russel KC withdrew from the top-flight in the 2024-25 season, citing sponsorship crisis. Their departure reduced employment opportunities for local players. Some top footballers have also reportedly taken a pay

cut this season as many clubs are dealing with financial crunch.

Sabina and Co run it back in Kathmandu

Despite a lack of practice matches and disagreements between senior players and head coach Peter Butler, Bangladesh women's team triumphed in Kathmandu once again and retained their SAFF Women's Championship in October – an unprecedented feat in Bangladesh football.

Men's team continue to disappoint

Bangladesh men's team had another forgettable year as Javier Cabrer's charges lost six off the eight matches they competed in 2024, only winning against Bhutan and Maldives. The men in red and green could score only three while conceding 15 goals in those fixtures.

Change in BFF leadership

The 16-year tenure of Kazi Salauddin as the BFF president came to an end in October as former footballer, politician and businessman Tabith Awal got elected as the new honcho of the country's football. Tabith's ascension has sparked hopes of better days in football, however, several members of the Salauddin-led BFF also got re-elected in the election.

Country losses five of its bravest footballers

Five members of the Swadhin Bangla Football team, which played some 16 matches across India to raise funds for the freedom fighters and to draw the world's attention during the liberation war in 1971, breathed their last in 2024. They are – captain Zakaria Pintoo, Bimal Kar, Aminul Islam Suruj, Fazle Sadain Khokon and organiser Saidur Rahman Patel.

A long-awaited homecoming

On December 19, Leicester City's Hamza Choudhury announced that he has attained all necessary approvals and is available to represent Bangladesh in football. Hamza is set to be the first English Premier League player to play for Bangladesh and is expected to debut against India in March next year.

Overall, 2024 has not been devoid of success in football for Bangladesh. However, if Bangladesh want to break the pattern of only succeeding at SAFF and falling flat on at the Asian level, the country's football authorities have to ensure investment in infrastructure, coaching, and youth development, a challenge the new federation must undertake in 2025.