

Women booters warn of walkout if Butler stays

SPORTS REPORTER

A group of senior women footballers has threatened to resign from the national team if Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) goes on to keep recently renewed Peter Butler as head coach.

"We won't train under Peter Butler in the camp until the BFF president takes necessary steps to solve the problem," read a three-page statement distributed among the media personnel before the likes of captain Sabina Khatun, Sanjida Akhter, and others spoke to the media at the BFF House yesterday.

The written statement mentioned the rift between them and Butler during last year's title defence of the SAFF Women's Championship in Nepal. There, the English coach "questioned the players' personal lives, misbehaved with them, and divided the team".

"As BFF did not renew our contracts after October,



it doesn't have any rights lawfully to take action against us. Despite that, if BFF considers punishing us and insists on keeping Peter Butler for the women's football team, we will together resign," the letter concluded.

Of the 30-member squad, 18 players boycotted the ongoing camp after refusing to train under Butler on Tuesday, even though they have been training under assistant coach Mahbubur Rahman Litu since January 15. They also skipped the gym session on Wednesday.

Responding to a query through a text message, BFF boss Tabitha Awal informed The Daily Star, "Yes, I have received a letter from the girls yesterday [Wednesday], and we are progressing towards a mutual solution very shortly."

CITY STAY AFLOAT but Champions League kings await

Champions League knockout phase

- Knockout phase play-offs: February 11-12 & February 18-19
- Round of 16: March 4-5 & March 11-12
- Quarterfinals: April 8-9 & April 15-16
- Semifinals: April 29-30 and & May 6-7
- Final: May 31



I don't know if they are happy to play against us, it is what it is. One [Real Madrid] is the king of the competition, the other [Bayern Munich] is the second or third king.

Manchester City coach PEP GUARDIOLA

PHOTO: REUTERS

Manchester City got out of the frying pan as they came from behind against Club Brugge to reach the Champions League knockout phase, where they were safely joined by PSG on Wednesday in the final round of league-phase matches.

On a dramatic night in which only two of the closing 18 games were dead rubbers, City got the win they needed to avoid an

embarrassing exit with a nervy 3-1 victory over Club Brugge but now could end up in fire as they will face either Real Madrid or Bayern Munich.

City fell behind at the stroke of halftime at the Etihad but Mateo Kovacic equalised shortly after the break before Joel Ordonez's own goal put City in front. Savinho's late strike added some gloss to the scoreline as Pep Guardiola narrowly avoided the earliest exit from the competition in his career.

Meanwhile, holders Real Madrid made sure they would be seeded for Friday's playoff draw by beating Stade Brest 3-0 away from home. It was a third straight win for Real after they started with three defeats in their first five outings, and that poor start is what led to them coming 11th in the standings.

PSV Eindhoven, Real Madrid and Sporting CP.

Playoff scenario ahead of Friday's draw:

- Confirmed in round of 16: Arsenal, Aston Villa, Atletico Madrid, Barcelona, Inter, Leverkusen, Lille, Liverpool
- Confirmed in knockout phase play-offs: Atalanta, Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich, Benfica, Brest, Celtic, Club Brugge, Feyenoord, Juventus, Man City, Milan, Monaco, Paris,
- Celtic or Man City will face Real or Bayern in the playoffs. The winners will meet either Atletico Madrid or Leverkusen in the Round of 16.
- AS Monaco or Brest will face PSG or Benfica in the
- playoffs. The winners will meet either Liverpool or Barcelona.
- Sporting or Club Brugge will face Atalanta or Dortmund in the playoffs. The winners will meet either Lille or Aston Villa.
- Feyenoord or Juventus will face AC Milan or PSV in the playoffs. The winners will meet either Arsenal or Inter Milan.



We don't like to play against City, but if we have to, we'll do it like on other occasions. City have more chances to win the Champions League.

Real Madrid coach CARLO ANCELOTTI



PHOTO: REUTERS



Khulna Tigers opener Mohammad Naim celebrates his maiden century in the Bangladesh Premier League during his team's 46-run win against Rangpur Riders at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Naim's 62-ball 111 also allowed Khulna to remain in contention for a playoff spot in the tournament's 11th edition.

PHOTO: STAR

BPL NON-PAYMENT ISSUE

NSC forms fact-finding committee

SPORTS REPORTER

The National Sports Council (NSC) formed a three-member fact-finding committee to investigate the non-payment of players in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League T20 (BPL), an NSC release confirmed yesterday.

The NSC director will work as the convenor of the committee, the personal secretary of the NSC chairman its member, with the deputy director acting as the member secretary. They have been asked to submit their findings within the next seven working days.

"The NSC has taken into notice several reports in the media about the payment of players in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League. If players are not paid in due time then it could tarnish the reputation of the Bangladesh Cricket Board, Bangladesh Premier League and the country," the NSC release said.

The ongoing 11th edition of the BPL has been plagued by the non-payment of players. Most of the violations in that regard have been made by Durbar Rajshahi as their players boycotted a practice session in Chattogram, and all their foreign recruits refused to play a match in Dhaka after not being paid. Chittagong Kings have also withheld payments of national opener Parvez Hossain Emon.

THE GRIM SPECTRE OF BETTING

Fixing epidemic returns to haunt Bangladesh football

ANISUR RAHMAN

Match-fixing and compromised results were once regular phenomena in Bangladesh's top-flight football, often used as a means to secure league titles or avoid relegation. However, the rise of live betting, spot-fixing, and online gambling has transformed these illicit practices into a systemic crisis, infecting not only the premier division but also lower-tier leagues.

The cancerous betting issue had been primarily associated with cricket, but it infested the country's domestic football circuit in the post-Covid era, with the 2020-21 Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) season marking a turning point. Arambagh KS became the first club to be found guilty of match manipulation, live betting, and fixing.

Former Arambagh KS general secretary Ezaz Mohammad Jahangir described the evolution of match-fixing: "It used to be limited to teams vying for the title or trying to avoid relegation. Now, live betting and spot-fixing are destroying the game, involving club officials, players, and even referees."

What began as an isolated case quickly spread, tainting the second-tier Bangladesh Championship League and the 2nd Division Football League in the 2021-22 season.



ILLUSTRATION: ANWAR SOHEL

Although the 2023-24 season remained largely free from controversy, the 2024-25 campaign has already seen three top-flight clubs – Chittagong Abahani, Fakirerpool Young Men's Club, and Dhaka Wanderers – facing allegations of betting and match-fixing, reigniting concerns.

Since the issue surfaced in 2021, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has punished 37 players, including three foreign recruits, from five clubs – Arambagh KS, Uttar Baridhara Club, Karwan Bazar Prograti Sangha, and BG Press and Recreation Club – for varying terms ranging from three

months to five years, with the former three clubs being slapped with a demotion of one to two tiers.

Moreover, from those aforementioned clubs, as many as 17 club officials – including club presidents, general secretaries, managers, assistant managers, coaches, physios, fitness trainers, and players' agents – were also handed bans between August 2021 and November 2022, ranging from six months to lifetime suspensions.

Yet, these measures have failed to curb the growing influence of gambling syndicates. A club official, requesting anonymity, revealed how

gambling syndicates manipulate clubs: "Travelling from club to club, they lure greedy officials with financial relief, convincing them that betting can solve their monetary problems."

Meanwhile, the BFF is about to inflict punishments on Azampur FC Uttara after launching an investigation against them on allegations of betting and fixing in late 2023.

New scandals rock the boat

This season, neither Chittagong Abahani's president nor its football committee chairman agreed to field a team, leaving former and current players to step in. This unusual transition has raised suspicions among club officials and former players, particularly as the port-city club now faces allegations of fixing and betting.

What drives individuals to engage in such a disgraceful act of match-fixing? Fortis FC head coach Masud Parvez Kaiser opined, "If an official truly loves football, he cannot be involved in betting and selling matches. They are doing it solely for financial gain because players cannot engage in such activities without the involvement of club officials."

Apparently, the roots of the crisis run deep. Club officials, coaches, and players have blamed financial instability, corruption, a lack of

oversight and transparency, the BFF's lack of proactiveness and, of course, betting circles for the rise of this particular epidemic.

A source within the BFF, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "When clubs fall into the trap of gamblers, the gamblers appoint their own officials in team management. They even buy one or two positions to ensure their own players are fielded, making match-fixing inevitable."

FIFA's warnings and BFF's passive role

Despite FIFA's repeated warnings about the risks of betting and match-fixing in financially struggling leagues in the post-Covid era, the BFF has largely remained reactive. Investigations into allegations have only taken place when FIFA has provided direct evidence. Even the recommendations of the BFF's own Fixed-Match Identification Committee (FIC) have often been ignored.

FIC chairman Humayun Khalid stresses the need for the BFF to educate club officials and players about the dangers of betting and fixing.

"They should also ensure players receive their salaries on time to reduce financial desperation," he told The Daily Star. He informed that the BFF had never provided feedback on the punishments or fines imposed by its

disciplinary committee.

BFF general secretary Emran Hossain acknowledged the crisis but pointed to organisational constraints. "We couldn't arrange awareness programmes this season due to the BFF elections, but we are investigating the allegations seriously. If anyone is found guilty, we will take strict action."

Beyond bans: A call for criminal prosecution

While suspensions and fines have been the primary punishments so far, former Arambagh general secretary Jahangir argues that such measures are ineffective.

"If an official earns one crore from betting, a lifetime ban means nothing. Instead, these cases should be dealt with under the country's existing [criminal] laws – only then will people fear the consequences," he suggested.

Historically, clubs embroiled in fixing scandals have been those struggling financially, often assisted by lesser-known organisers. However, football in Bangladesh now stands at a crossroads.

Without urgent intervention – stricter financial oversight, proactive governance, and legal repercussions – the country's footballing future may be dictated not by skill on the pitch, but by the highest bidder in the shadows.