

Shanto stakes claim for solidity

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto made a big statement ahead of the squad's final training session at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday, saying that they are going to the Champions Trophy with the goal of winning the tournament. Far from trying to convince anyone, Shanto was perhaps just sending a message of what goal they should seek out.

The Tigers' best outing in the tournament came in the last edition in 2017 in England when they made the semifinals against India – also their best-ever finish in an ICC tournament. But there has been an overhaul of the squad from that time and recent ICC events have not gone in Bangladesh's favour.

Shanto, however, was seeking solidity in an ICC tournament during this phase of Bangladesh's transition. The Tigers' growth in the ODI format has remained incomplete. They are yet to fire in the biggest stages against the biggest opponents when it really matters. ODI cricket on more batting-friendly surfaces have also caught the Tigers napping. But for seminal work on the team's mettle, there needs to be solidity, something that was missing due to haphazard batting order changes in the 2023 ODI World Cup in India where Bangladesh had one of their best-ever squads.

The results suffered greatly and Bangladesh squeezed into the Champions Trophy by winning their final league phase fixture against Sri Lanka. Shanto said they have a good idea about the batting order this time around and injuries during the West Indies series allowed them to take a litmus test on their overall abilities.

"In the last series [in West Indies], two-three players couldn't play due to injuries. This gave an opportunity to Jaker [Ali], who had a brilliant series.

[Mahmudullah] Riyad bhai performed well, and [Mehedi] Miraz did well at number four. We have now understood where each player fits best and who is in good form. The injuries helped us see these things. We are pretty clear about the batting order and who will bat where. We know each player's role, so this won't be a big issue," Shanto said.

The bigger worry would be around high-scoring pitches, given the team's struggles in the West Indies on lavish batting-friendly wickets.

"I expect the pitches in Pakistan to be 300+ wickets. If we bat first, we need to post such scores. Even while defending, we will need to defend such scores. In Dubai, conditions vary at different times. Still, I think scores will be around 260-280. It's tough to predict exact numbers, but historically, that's how it has been," Shanto replied to a question regarding what scores they expect to see in the tournament.

Spinners were especially ineffective on those St. Vincent surfaces and lack of wickets in the middle-overs were an issue. Shanto backed the three spinners in Mlraz, Nasum Ahmed and Rishad Hossain to play to their abilities. There are gaps yet, such as Shakib Al Hasan's exclusion, but Shanto did not want to reflect on it at this stage.

This time there is an in-form Taskin Ahmed, and Nahid Rana's raw pace gives them a slight morale-boost. Asked which would be their strongest suit – the batting or bowling, Shanto felt they have new utilities and now only execution remains.

"We are not thinking separately. At one point, we didn't have quality pace bowlers, but now we have a strong pace-bowling unit. We didn't have wrist spinners before, but now we do. Overall, we have a balanced team. If everyone fulfils their responsibilities properly, we can defeat any team at any time," Shanto concluded.



Long-ignored district leagues back in focus

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) is set to revive district football leagues, which have been neglected for over a decade.

Since the formation of District Football Associations (DFAs) in 2008 under FIFA guidelines, the league has been held only four times – 2013, 2014, 2018, and 2020 – under former BFF president Kazi Salahuddin. This decline has weakened the supply line of footballers to Dhaka leagues from districts.

Financial constraints and limited stadium access have been major obstacles, as District Sports Associations control both facilities and government funding, excluding football.

Keeping both issues in mind, Iqbal Hossain-led new BFF district football league committee has assured the DFAs of partial financial support as well as assistance in resolving ground-related problems through the National Sports Council.

"Some 10 to 12 districts have agreed to start their respective leagues, and they are supposed to inform us about their league schedules by February 15, as we want each DFA to hold their district league regularly to revive football across the country," Iqbal told The Daily Star yesterday, adding that they would recommend the BFF executive committee make the district league mandatory for all DFAs.

"Those DFAs which will not be able to run the league at their district level don't need to be associated with the football federation. The DFAs must hold the league, either on a big scale or a small scale, because we will provide financial support to them if needed," said the former national midfielder, adding that they have been searching for area-based sponsors to support the district leagues.

So far, 11 districts have agreed to run their respective district leagues: Narail, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Madaripur, Faridpur, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Narayanganj, Gazipur, Dinajpur, and Sunamganj.

Sunamganj DFA president Juned Ahmed Rajran told The Daily Star yesterday, "I held the district league once in 2022 and organised the DFA Championship tournament twice without financial help from the BFF. Now, we can't hold the league due to the unavailability of the ground, despite the allotment of the district stadium being sought from the district administration last December.

"If the football leagues in all 64 districts are held regularly and some four to five good players from each district emerge, then the crisis of quality footballers can come to an end."



Sri Lanka captain Charith Asalanka led by example and smashed a belligerent hundred to set up a 49-run victory over a depleted Australia in their low-scoring opening ODI in Colombo on Wednesday. Australia's second-string pace attack bowled out Sri Lanka for 214 in 46 overs despite Asalanka's nearly run-a-ball 127 while coping with cramps following his decision to bat first. Chasing a modest target, Australia could not recover from a top order meltdown and were all out for 165 in 33.5 overs.

PHOTO: AFP

Vinicius has the last laugh on City fans

AFP, Manchester

Vinicius Junior started the night with a reminder of his Ballon d'Or heartbreak, but ended it by reminding Manchester City why Real Madrid have such a strong record in the Champions League.

Real Madrid twice came from behind before snatching a dramatic stoppage-time winner in their 3-2 playoff round first-leg victory over Premier League champions City on Tuesday.

Home fans displayed a huge banner with a picture of City midfielder Rodri Hernandez holding the Ballon d'Or, which he won in October 2024 ahead of Vinicius.

"Stop crying your heart out" City's banner chided the Spanish giants, giving a nod to a song of the same name by Manchester band Oasis.

However, it was City who ended the night in tears after Jude Bellingham stabbed home a late winner, set up by Vinicius.

Kylian Mbappe levelled for Madrid after Erling Haaland sent them ahead, and Brahim

Diaz snatched an 86th-minute equaliser after the Norwegian netted his second from the penalty spot.

Vinicius and Bellingham combined for Madrid's third in the 92nd minute, sealing another late comeback win for a side who have made a habit of them in Europe.



The City fan group who organised the banner said it was aimed at Real Madrid chief Florentino Perez.

The home fans certainly had Vinicius in their sights though. "Where's your Ballon d'Or?" jeered supporters at the Brazilian winger.

Vinicius responded in the moment by pointing at the badge on his sleeve, the number 15 representing Real Madrid's record number of European Cup triumphs.

However, Vinicius' most

effective answer came on the pitch.

The forward's shot was saved with Diaz turning home the rebound to tie the game at 2-2 before Vinicius helped engineer Madrid's winner on the night.

Vinicius burst into the area, lofting the ball past the onrushing Ederson, with Bellingham able to turn home from close range.

"I saw the banner, but whenever opposition fans do things (like that) it gives me more strength to have a great game, and here I did that," Vinicius told Movistar.

It was not a vintage Vinicius display, although his persistent probing down the left was still enough to earn the man of the match award – the best way he could have answered all the jeers and taunts by City fans as he posed with the MOTM crest in front of the City fans, at their home ground.

Not someone to let something go, Vinicius will be scenting blood in the second leg at the Santiago Bernabeu next Wednesday, although he said the team comes above individuals.



● This is the first time that Real Madrid beat Manchester City at Etihad in the Champions League. Real had lost three and drew three in their previous six visits.

● Manchester City have failed to win any of their last four Champions League games in which they've scored first, with all those coming this season (1-4 v Sporting CP, 3-3 v Feyenoord, 2-4 v PSG, 2-3 v Real Madrid).

● City failed to win a Champions League game in which they led twice for the third time, and first time ever at the Etihad Stadium. All three occasions have been against Real Madrid (also September 2012 and April 2024).

● Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund and Real Madrid) became the first English player to score a Champions League goal against an English side for two different clubs.

● Manchester City have conceded 57 goals in 38 games in all competitions this season, three more than they did in 59 games last term. Only in 2016-17 (60) have they conceded more in a campaign under Pep Guardiola.

Stars sidelined in CHAMPIONS TROPHY 2025

The ICC Champions Trophy 2025, running from February 19 to March 9 across Lahore, Karachi, Rawalpindi, and Dubai, is already marred by high-profile withdrawals. A mix of established and rising stars have been ruled out, with two-time champions Australia hit the hardest. Here's a look at the biggest absentees ahead of the mega event:

Jasprit Bumrah (India; fast bowler; lower back injury)	Pat Cummins (Australia; all-rounder; elbow injury)	Josh Hazlewood (Australia; fast bowler; hip injury)
Mitch Marsh (Australia; all-rounder; lower back pain)	Mitchell Starc (Australia; fast bowler; personal reasons)	Anrich Nortje (South Africa, fast bowler, back injury)
Saim Ayub (Pakistan; batter; ankle injury)	Jacob Bethell (England; batter; hamstring injury)	AM Ghazanfar (Afghanistan; spinner; spinal fracture)

Arsenal's Havertz out for season

AFP, London

Arsenal's bid to win the Premier League could suffer a major setback following reports Kai Havertz is set to be ruled out for rest of the season.

The German forward sustained an injury during the club's warm-weather training camp in Dubai and was due to face further tests on the club's arrival back in England.

The Athletic reported on Wednesday the 25-year-old Havertz had suffered a torn hamstring.

Arsenal, however, have yet to comment on the extent of Havertz's injury.

His potential long-term absence would though compound the problems confronting Gunners boss Mikel Arteta after Arsenal were unable to bolster their attack during the recent January transfer window.



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