

'I want to represent Bangladesh in ATP Tours'

Zarif Abrar, a 17-year-old teenager, has quickly emerged as the beacon of hope in Bangladesh tennis at a very young age. The Grade-II student was recently crowned champion in the National Tennis Competition and has already represented Bangladesh at international meets in both junior and senior levels. The 17-year-old Zarif, who is now in Florida and training under renowned coach Ashley Hobson at the Hobson Performance Tennis Academy, talked to **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman** recently about his current training, his journey in tennis and his future plans. Below are excerpts of the conversation:

DS: You left to train in the USA right after becoming champion in the National Tennis Competition in Dhaka. How is the training going on?

Zarif Abrar (ZA): Training is always excellent here. It's a bit tougher, but I believe that's essential for my improvement. I'll be staying here for six months.

DS: You had trained at the same academy in two spells in 2023. Why did you choose this academy?

ZA: My father did extensive research before selecting coach Ashley Hobson for my training. He has an outstanding profile in the international tennis arena, making him the perfect coach to guide me.

DS: Can you share your ultimate goal in tennis?

ZA: My ultimate goal is to compete in the international professional circuit, the ATP Tours, and proudly represent Bangladesh on the global stage.

DS: How much does training under Ashley Hobson cost and how much has it improved your performance?

ZA: The training is quite expensive—it costs around USD 5,000 per month. So far, I have managed most of it through sponsorships, while my father, a retired army officer, has supported the rest. The facilities, technical expertise, and experience of coach Hobson have significantly elevated my game, allowing



me to win five championship titles in Florida.

DS: What made you interested in tennis?

ZA: My father, who was an excellent tennis player, inspired me. Watching him win numerous trophies sparked my passion for the sport. I started my tennis journey at the age of eight at Jashore Cantonment under coach Shariful Islam Tinku from BKSP.

DS: You became champion in various age-level national championships before winning the National Tennis Competition, which was held after a gap of 12 years. How did it feel to be crowned champion at only 17?

ZA: It was an incredible moment, and I feel truly honoured and delighted to receive the support of my family and well-wishers. I also want to thank the

Bangladesh Tennis Federation (BTF) for organising the National Competition after such a long gap.

DS: How do Bangladeshi's domestic competitions compare to USTA events in Florida?

ZA: There is a lot of room for improvement in our domestic tournaments compared to USTA competitions. We need better training facilities and experienced coaches to bridge the gap.

DS: You have represented Bangladesh in the Davis Cup at both junior and senior levels. What was that experience like and how do Bangladeshi players compare with other countries?

ZA: Wearing the national jersey and representing Bangladesh at the international stage is always an incredible experience. However, our players struggle in areas like stamina, technique, mental game, and match temperament compared to international players.

DS: What is your strongest point, and what areas do you need to improve?

ZA: My strongest point is my mental side. I think I'm mentally strong and confident when I go out in a match no matter who I'm playing. I think that's what makes me less nervous. I need to work on lots of tactical and physical aspects.

DS: Who is your idol in tennis?

ZA: My idol is Novak Djokovic.

HAMILTON content with first Ferrari day

AFP, Melbourne

Lewis Hamilton said Friday his first competitive day in a Ferrari had been "completely different" but he is relishing trying to squeeze out more pace at the season-opening Australian Grand Prix.

The seven-time world champion officially began work at the Scuderia in January after his shock move from Mercedes after 12 years.

While he completed 162 laps of testing in Bahrain, the Briton was in the Ferrari cockpit for the first time at a grand prix, finishing fifth in second practice after coming 12th in the opening session.

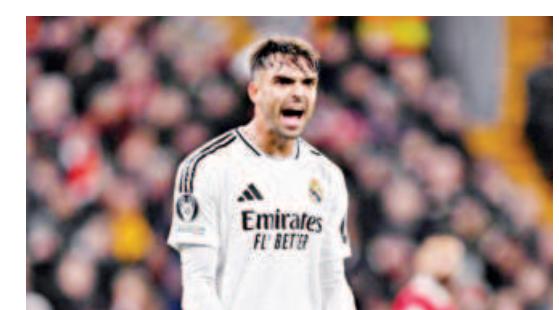
"It's been a learning day as I continue to understand and get to grips with the new car," said the 40-year-old.

"Everything is so completely different from what I've been used to for so long, but that's the challenge and I'm embracing it."

Hamilton was 0.42 seconds behind teammate and pacesetter Charles Leclerc around Albert Park, but was satisfied that he was making progress.

"We were not completely satisfied with FP1 but we made some good progress in FP2 and got some solid longer runs in, which was important," he said.

"There's still balance work to do overnight, and we're missing a bit of pace, but that's expected."



Gavi out, Asensio in for Spain

REUTERS, Madrid

Real Madrid defender Raul Asensio has earned his first call-up from Spain manager Luis de la Fuente on Friday for their two-leg Nations League quarter final against the Netherlands.

The 22-year-old Real Madrid academy product has made 14 LaLiga and eight Champions League appearances this season. Barcelona defender Inigo Martinez returns after being left out of Spain's Euro 2024 winning squad.

Barcelona midfielder Gavi, who helped Spain in their 2023 Nations League win, was expected to return to the national squad after a 14-month absence due to an ACL injury, however, De la Fuente has not selected him.

Forward Marco Asensio, who has regained form scoring seven goals from eight appearances since joining Aston Villa on loan from Paris St Germain in the mid season transfer window, was also left out. Spain face Ronald Koeman's Netherlands away on Thursday before returning home for the second leg on March 23.



FERNANDES HITS HATTRICK, WILLIAMS BAGS A BRACE

Manchester United captain Bruno Fernandes netted his second hattrick for the Red Devils to help them to a comfortable 4-1 win at home against Real Sociedad in the last-16 of the Europa League on Thursday. Courtesy of the hattrick, the Portuguese midfielder has now been directly involved in more goals than any other player in Europa League history – 24 goals and 17 assists in 53 games. United, who drew the first leg 1-1 in Spain last week, thus cemented a spot in the quarterfinals of the competition. Meanwhile, Spanish winger Nico Williams scored a brace to spearhead an Athletic Bilbao comeback at home against Roma. Roma, who were 2-1 up in the first leg, were down to 10 men in the 11th minute after Mats Hummels saw red and were beaten 3-1 as Bilbao confirmed their qualification into the last eight.

PHOTO: MANCHESTER UNITED/REUTERS



Tuchel hopes to bring Premier League power to England reign

AFP, London

Thomas Tuchel said his England team must reflect the physicality of the Premier League as he hopes to inject more "intensity" into the Three Lions.

The German's appointment as the third foreign manager to take charge of England has raised the pressure on Tuchel to deliver a first major trophy since 1966 at next year's World Cup.

After consecutive European Championship final defeats under Gareth Southgate, plus semi-final and quarter-final exits at the past two World Cups, the English Football Association has invested heavily in Tuchel's track record as a serial winner.

The 51-year-old guided Chelsea to Champions League glory in 2021 and also won league titles at Bayern Munich and Paris Saint-Germain.

Tuchel, though, said he is hoping to deploy the pace and power of the Premier League, rather than a continental influence, as he looks to shape his England team.

"The Premier League is a very physically demanding league, is a very direct league and I think we should be brave enough to play like an England squad and should not try to copy other nations' styles too much,"

England manager Thomas Tuchel



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"I think we need to increase the rhythm and intensity of our game compared to our last matches. This is where the focus is and then hopefully it's an exciting watch and we have the effect that we wish for."

Tuchel's contract only lasts until the end of

the 2026 World Cup and he is aware of the need to make an immediate impact.

Qualification should be a formality in a group also containing Serbia and Andorra.

But Tuchel is wary that his time with the players is limited in his first foray into international management.

"We are now consecutive in semi-finals and finals and the feeling is that it's just a little step to bring it over the line," he added.

"I am very convinced that if we want to be prepared to be in the next final and to make the last step we need to do it now in the first camp, as boring as it may sound for you."

"If you go on a journey, it starts with the first step. This journey starts clearly with the first camp."

"We only have six camps, we only have 60 days (together ahead of the World Cup), we need to take care of every single day and make sure that we are on point."

"If we do this, hopefully the last step takes care of itself."

Recalls for Marcus Rashford and Jordan Henderson were the headline news from Tuchel's first camp.

Arsenal defender Ben White has ended a self-imposed international exile that has lasted since the 2022 World Cup, but is not included due to a lack of match fitness.

Tuchel confirmed that Harry Kane, who he managed at Bayern, will be retained as England captain.



Following a nerve-wracking win over city rivals Atletico Madrid in the Champions League last-16 tie last Wednesday, Real Madrid's Kylian Mbappe turns his focus onto their LaLiga game away to Villarreal tonight. A win would see Real go top of the standings, surpassing archrivals Barcelona, who have played a game less than Los Blancos and will be facing third-placed Atletico Madrid on Sunday night.

PHOTO: REAL MADRID