

Hamza's arrival sparks festivities in Habiganj

MINTU DESHWARA

Excitement and anticipation are at an all-time high in Snanghat village of Bahubal Upazila, Habiganj, as English footballer of Bangladeshi origin, Hamza Choudhury, prepares for a historic visit.

The Sheffield United star, who has decided to represent Bangladesh at the international level, will arrive at his ancestral village today ahead of his debut for the Bangladesh team in the Asian Cup Qualifiers against India in Shillong on March 25.

The entire village has transformed into a festival ground, with over 500 decorative gates erected along the 4.5 km road from the Putijuri highway to his home. People from all walks of life, politicians to sports enthusiasts, have united to celebrate the arrival of the prodigal son of Snanghat.

Mohammad Monir Khan, a local entrepreneur, shared his excitement: "My house is just 100 feet away from Hamza's. Everyone is eagerly waiting for his arrival. Even families with past disputes have come together in joy. This is a moment of unity and pride for us."

Hamza's visit coincides with an annual Urs at his family home, where his father initially came to perform his grandfather's annual rites. However, his homecoming



is more than just a personal visit — it's a momentous occasion for Bangladesh's football scene.

Local resident Sajjad Mia expressed his pride: "It is an incredible feeling that a player from our village has played in the English league and will now represent Bangladesh. Hamza's father often spoke of his son's deep connection to Bangladesh, and now that love has turned into action."

Hamza's connection to his ancestral home goes beyond football. With his financial support, an orphanage, mosque,

and madrasa have been built, reinforcing his commitment to giving back to his roots. During his visit, Hamza is expected to meet and exchange greetings with orphaned students.

Among the many excited fans is Jadi Hasan, who travelled to his in-laws' house just to catch a glimpse of Hamza. "I have never been this thrilled! Just the thought that a star player has roots here is amazing. I won't leave until I see him."

A grand reception has been arranged by the villagers, and Faizabad High School's

Breaking the 20-second barrier

The 20-second barrier in the 200m is one of the defining marks of world-class sprinting — a threshold that few ever cross. Now, for the first time in history, an Australian has done it. Teenage sensation Gout Gout has etched his name into the record books, becoming the first-ever Australian to achieve the feat. Stopping the clock at a wind-assisted 19.98 (+3.6) in the Under-20 200m final of the Queensland State Championships, he made history just hours after turning heads with a world leading time of 20.05 (+1.2) in the heats.



Bangladesh Football Federation president Tabith Awal (L) shakes hands with United Commercial Bank's managing director and CEO Mohammad Mamdudur Rashid (R) as the bank's chairman Sharif Zahir watches on during an MoU signing ceremony at the bank's head office in Dhaka yesterday. Both parties hoped that the financial package would help improve the national men's football team.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Sohan, Shadman tons keep Dhanmondi, Agrani on course



SPORTS REPORTER

Nurul Hasan Sohan hit an unbeaten 132 to ensure a 97-run win for Dhanmondi Sports Club against Shinepukur Cricket Club at BKSP-4 in the Dhaka Premier League yesterday.

Batting first, Habibur Rahman struck a 42-ball 45 at the top before Nurul took charge of the innings with his fifth List A ton. Nurul and Sunzamul (40) notched a 113-run fifth-wicket stand and the former remained unbeaten on 132 off 131 deliveries to take Dhanmondi to 277 for nine. In reply, Shinepukur were skittled out for 180 as pacer Kamrul bagged three for 23 while Sunzamul scalped four for 49 for Dhanmondi.

Agrani Bank picked up their third successive win, beating Rupganj Tigers Cricket Club by seven wickets, courtesy of Shadman Islam's unbeaten 115.

Amit Majumder, who had been amongst the runs, hit 81 while Asadullah Galib managed 57 as Rupganj reached 260 all out. Ruyel Miah and Taibur Rahman both bagged three wickets each for Agrani.

In reply, Shadman's 108-ball 115 and Imrul Kayes' 58-ball 62 saw Agrani coast to win in 44.5 overs, keeping their fourth spot in the standings.

Gulshan Cricket Club enjoyed second successive win by beating Partex Sporting Club by 57 runs at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur. Liton Das scored 22 on his return after being rested due to cramp in the earlier match while Azizul Hakim's 62 at the top saw Gulshan reach 221 for nine.

Spinners Nihad Uzzaman and Naeem Islam bagged two wickets apiece as Gulshan maintained winning run.

With Abahani, Gazi Group, Mohammedan and Agrani at the top of the table with four wins each, the DPL standings look tight as the season wears on.



ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Who are the seniors in Bangladesh cricket?

Ask any avid Bangladesh cricket fan or expert this question at this moment, and the answer will likely include Mahmudullah Riyad, Mushfiqur Rahim, and Tamim Iqbal.

Interestingly, these three, alongside Shakib Al Hasan and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza — all part of Bangladesh's 'Big Five' — have been the senior figures in Bangladesh cricket for decades. This raises a debate: Why hasn't the batch that followed them been considered seniors, even after nearly a decade of international experience?

The answer lies in how this group was managed by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), particularly in ODIs.

When Mushfiqur started his career, his record was far from what it is today, with 7,795 ODI runs before retiring from the format. With 274 ODIs played, it may seem like there was no incubation period for him. However, the reality is that players

like Mushfiqur, who have long held the senior tag, were given time to develop early on.

This raises the question: Did the next generation receive the same patience from selectors?

In his first two years of ODIs, Mushfiqur averaged just above 20 in 29 innings, scoring 476 runs at a strike rate of 56.06. Comparatively, Towhid Hridoy, who debuted in 2023, accumulated 984 runs in two years at an average of 35.14 in 31 innings.

Even accounting for differences in eras and opposition strength, Mushfiqur required patience before his numbers improved. Three years into his ODI career, his stats surged. Between 2009 and 2011, he scored 1,270 runs in 36 innings at an average of over 35 and a strike rate of 94.5, with more significant contributions.

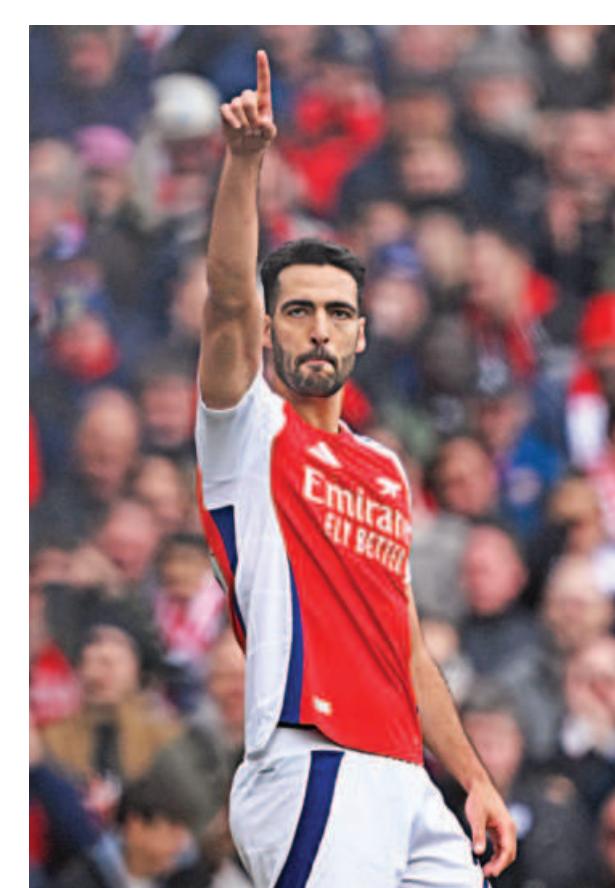
Soumya Sarkar, who debuted in 2014, made match-winning contributions early on. However, in 11 years, he has played only 76 ODIs — having been dropped mostly due to inconsistency. In his first

two years, Soumya scored 723 runs at an average of 42.52 and a strike rate of 100.4. Among top-order batters (positions 1-3) who played at least 10 matches in that period, Soumya had the sixth-best strike rate globally. He averaged more than Chris Gayle and Quinton de Kock, who had superior strike rates in that category.

In the case of Tamim, he played 53 innings during his initial years, scoring 1,370 runs at an average of just over 25. Tamim, Mushfiqur, and Shakib belonged to a transformative era in Bangladesh cricket, where the team was shedding its 'minnows' tag and competing against stronger sides. ODI cricket was also evolving, and Bangladesh's current veterans grew with it with plenty of patience provided by selectors.

However, Bangladesh cricket did not afford the same caution or planning to the next batch, including Soumya, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Taskin Ahmed, and Liton Das.

Recently, Soumya remarked that, despite 11 years in international cricket, they haven't been recognised as seniors.



Arsenal defeated London rivals Chelsea 1-0 for their first win in four Premier League games on Sunday as a headed goal by stand-in striker Mikel Merino boosted their faint hopes of catching up with runaway leaders Liverpool. The win left second-placed Arsenal 12 points behind Liverpool.

As ODI cricket continues to evolve, this mixed batch of seniors and 'to-be seniors' has struggled to find consistency — one reason Bangladesh are yet to secure a major title.

Two days ago, Miraz stated that they are ready to take the next step, acknowledging that many of them have "7-8 years in international cricket." However, it is not the first time that similar statements were made by Miraz, Taskin, Liton, and Soumya, indicating that they have yet to truly step up — a transition that, in an ideal cricketing culture, should have already occurred.

This failure could be attributed to the board's inability to facilitate a seamless transition to seniority, as it did for the previous generation, and also to the way the likes of Miraz, Taskin, Liton, and Soumya failed to make the most of the chances they received.

Now, with Bangladesh cricket moving forward without most of its established seniors, will experienced players like Taskin, Miraz, and Soumya finally take the next step?

A major T20 league on the horizon!

AGENCIES

Saudi Arabia is secretly planning a new global T20 cricket league, which could mark one of the most significant changes in the sport for decades.

According to a report in the Sydney Morning Herald, the league has been in development for over a year and is the brainchild of former New South Wales and Victoria all-rounder Neil Maxwell, who also manages current Australian captain Pat Cummins.

Saudi Arabia's SRJ Sports Investments will serve as the main financer of the yet-to-be-named T20 league, backing it with a substantial investment of \$500 million.

The report also highlights that discussions are already underway with the International Cricket Council (ICC), which is currently chaired by former BCCI secretary Jay Shah. If realized, this initiative would significantly bolster Saudi Arabia's growing influence in global sports.

This latest move aligns with Saudi Arabia's broader sports expansion strategy, which already includes investments in LIV Golf, a Formula 1 race, and hosting rights for the 2034 FIFA World Cup. The introduction of a

high-profile T20 cricket league would further cement Saudi Arabia's status as a major player in international sports.

According to the report, the league will consist of eight teams and will be structured similarly to tennis Grand Slams. The matches will take place across four different locations throughout the year, ensuring a unique and dynamic competition format. This approach mimics tennis's Grand Slam model, which includes the Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, and US Open.

Recognizing the packed international cricket calendar, the league will be played during designated open windows to avoid clashes with international fixtures and established domestic T20 leagues such as the Indian Premier League (IPL) and Australia's Big Bash League (BBL).

The teams will be new franchise entities, potentially representing different countries, including one from Australia. Additionally, the league will feature both men's and women's competitions, further enhancing its global appeal. The final showdown of the tournament will be hosted in Saudi Arabia, promising a grand spectacle for cricket enthusiasts worldwide.

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Mbappe dismisses 'Ronaldo and Cristiano' comparisons

AGENCIES

In a season filled with expectations, Kylian Mbappe continues to shatter records and silence doubters. His brace in Real Madrid's 2-1 comeback victory over Villarreal on Saturday not only secured crucial points in the LaLiga title race but also cemented his place in Madrid's rich footballing history.

With 31 goals across all competitions this season, Mbappe has now surpassed Brazilian icon Ronaldo's tally from his debut campaign in 2002-03. Brazil's Ronaldo scored 30 goals in 44 games in his debut season with Real Madrid in 2002-03.

The French forward is closing in on another milestone — the 33 goals scored by Cristiano Ronaldo in 35 games in his first season with Los Blancos in 2009-10. Yet, for Mbappe, who has played 44 games for Real Madrid so far, it's not just about records — it's about legacy.

"They are legends who have defined an era," Mbappe told Real Madrid TV. "It's important, but they are just numbers. If I score more than Ronaldo and Cristiano, it doesn't mean I'm bigger — just that my first season is going well. The most important thing is to help the



team win titles."

His determination was evident against Villarreal, especially after Madrid's grueling 120-minute battle against Atletico Madrid. Despite exhaustion, the squad showed resilience, with Mbappe leading the charge.