

## Bangladesh football riding THE HAMZA WAVE

ATIQUE ANAM

When Bangladesh football team captain Jamal Bhuiyan told the press on Thursday, "It feels our [Lionel] Messi is here," about the arrival of Hamza Choudhury, he wasn't exaggerating.

Hamza's tryst with Bangladesh football till now - his arrival, the two-day visit to his ancestral home in Habiganj, him joining and then training with the Bangladesh team - has been treated like an event by the local media and lapped up with tremendous enthusiasm by the fans.

Seeing Hamza don the Bangladesh jersey has been a dream for legions of fans for years. And now, as the midfielder currently playing for Sheffield United in the English Championship League, who has represented England at age-level, and has nearly 100 appearances for former English Premier League (EPL) champions Leicester City, is days away from representing Bangladesh on the field, the excitement among fans and officials has reached the zenith.

Along with the excitement, inevitably, there also comes expectations. Hamza is set to debut for Bangladesh with the highly anticipated clash against India in an Asian Cup Qualifiers match in Shillong on March 25 and fans are hoping to see their ace from England bamboozle their neighbours in the tie.

However, the reality remains that football is a team sport. An individual, no matter how brilliant, can't win matches alone. If not, it wouldn't have taken Lionel



Bangladesh's Hamza Choudhury (C) with his teammates during yesterday's practice session at the North-Eastern Hill University ground in Shillong.

PHOTO: BFF

Messi

five

attempts

to

win

the

World

Cup.

Hoping that Hamza alone can transform Bangladesh's footballing fortunes won't be prudent, but still, his influence both on and off the field has the potential to be transformative.

A strong defensive midfielder who can also play as a right-back, Hamza's tactical awareness and European football experience will bring a new dimension to Bangladesh's squad. But at the same time, Hamza would also have to adapt to South Asian football's unique challenges, something his current captain can give

him a few pointers about.

Hamza's story draws parallels with that of Jamal, who first came from Denmark in 2011 and struggled in the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF's) trials, and was initially overlooked. However, he persevered, returned to the domestic league, and eventually became the leader of the team.

Players like Tariq Kazi and Syed Shah Kazem Kirmanee have followed Jamal's path, proving that foreign-based talents can thrive if given time and support. Hamza's journey in Bangladesh might

similarly get off to a jerky start, but his long-term potential is immense.

Hamza's decision to play for Bangladesh could pave the way for more players of Bangladeshi heritage to make the jump. BFF has been actively scouting talents from Europe and North America, hoping to strengthen the squad with foreign-based players.

Many nations have successfully adopted this approach. Sri Lanka have naturalised around 14 foreign-based players, Afghanistan boast a squad largely composed of foreign-based talents, helping them rise in Asian rankings, and Indonesia have integrated European-based players which has led to dramatic improvements in their international performance. Bangladesh are now trying to follow suit.

BFF, which usually struggles for sponsorship, has recently secured a long-term sponsor for the men's national team. Additionally, his influence could also inspire a new generation of young footballers in Bangladesh.

But Hamza's presence alone is not enough to ensure sustainable growth in Bangladesh football. For that the BFF must develop better football infrastructure, improve state of domestic football, and invest in youth development.

If these elements come together, then Hamza's arrival could become the catalyst for a new era in Bangladeshi football. For now, he may not be the ultimate solution, but he is certainly a step in the right direction.

## Sports reform proposal asked to be submitted by April 20

SPORTS REPORTER

The Youth and Sports Ministry on Thursday instructed the Search Committee to submit its reform proposal and finalise the formation of ad-hoc committees for various national sports federations by April 20 as the ministry has been facing difficulties in disbursing funds to federations due to the absence of full executive committees.

Following the fall of the Awami League government on August 5 last year, the interim government formed a five-member Search Committee on August 29. The committee was later revised on October 1 with the objective of reforming and depoliticising the country's sports sector. However, only 21 ad-hoc committees have been formed out of the 55 sports federations and associations over the past six months.

"Five months after the committee's revision on October 1, the formation of ad-hoc committees for various sports federations remains incomplete. As a result, the allocated budget for the 2024-25 fiscal year has yet to be disbursed due to the lack of ad-hoc or full committees," stated a circular from the Youth and Sports Ministry.

"This delay has hindered the federations' ability to conduct scheduled activities, negatively impacting the sports sector. Only three months left to the end of the current fiscal year, and if the federation can't spend its allotted allocation for the 2024-25 fiscal year, then it could hamper getting the desired allocation from the government for the upcoming 2025-26 fiscal year," the circular added, urging the Search Committee to expedite the formation of remaining ad-hoc committees and submit its reform proposal by April 20.

Search Committee convener Jobayedur Rahman Rana acknowledged the ministry's directive and said they would respond soon regarding their progress.

"We requested the ministry to arrange meetings with divisional sports associations long ago, but they have yet to respond. Without these meetings, finalising the reform proposal is challenging," Rana told The Daily Star.

Rana noted that while the committee has already met with officials and players from all 55 federations for two to four hours each, they have yet to meet with district organisers.

"We are making every effort to submit our recommendations and finalise the ad-hoc committees by the deadline, as 90 percent of the work has been completed," said Rana, adding that the Search Committee can only make recommendations for the ad-hoc committees, not announce it.

## There was no doubt about helping Shakib: Surrey coach

SCAN QR CODE  
TO READ FULL  
STORY



"He [Shakib Al Hasan] wanted to do some work to rectify his [bowling] action. There was no doubt in my mind that we were going to help him," Surrey head coach Gareth Batty said about all-rounder Shakib, whose bowling action was cleared on Thursday, allowing him to bowl in any competition.

## Run fest on the cards as IPL returns

REUTERS, New Delhi

Bowlers have been allowed to use saliva to shine the ball in the Indian Premier League but it is the batters who will be salivating at the prospect of breaching the 300 mark when the world's richest Twenty20 league gets under way on Saturday.

Lifting the saliva ban, a COVID-19 legacy, will allow the fast bowlers to try and generate some reverse swing in a format which treats them as cannon fodder.

But the continuation of the Impact Player rule, which allows teams to play an extra batter substituting a bowler in a match, will ensure it will rain fours and sixes across 13 venues over the next two months.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's 263-5 against Pune Warriors stood as the league's highest total for a decade but that 2013 mark was bettered four times in last year's IPL -- three times by Sunrisers Hyderabad alone.

Hyderabad's 287-3 against Bengaluru

This is the 18th season of the Indian Premier League.

With 8004 runs in 252 matches, RCB's Virat Kohli is the highest run-getter in the tournament.

Yuzvendra Chahal, who will play for Punjab Kings this season, is the highest wicket-taker in the tournament. He has 205 wickets in 160 games.

Chennai Super Kings' MS Dhoni is the player with most matches in the competition, having played a total of 264 matches.

is the new benchmark but Nathan Leamon, a strategy consultant with defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders, is among those who believe 300 is achievable.

"We have already seen a huge escalation in scores over the last two years," the former England lead analyst told ESPNcricinfo.

"It would be naive to think that we have got to the fullest extent of that -- of teams learning how to take advantage of the new laws. You have seen several games where 260 has been scored, which never used

to happen. You have seen several games where teams score 100 in the powerplay ... So something has changed."

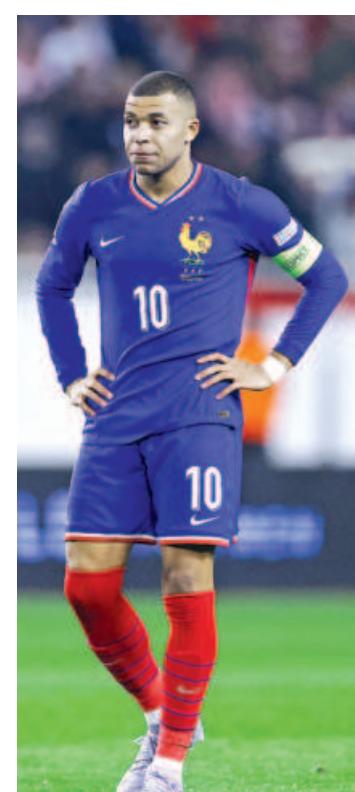
RCB, who face Kolkata in Saturday's IPL opener at Eden Gardens, are likely to be involved when the 300-mark is breached given the traditionally flat pitch and small boundaries in Bengaluru.

RCB's Rajat Patidar is one of five new captains in the 18th edition of the tournament, which will culminate with the May 25 final in Kolkata.

Ajinkya Rahane has been appointed Kolkatta captain after the departure of Shreyas Iyer, who will spearhead Punjab Kings' bid to win their maiden IPL title.

## A bleak France return for Mbappe

The UEFA Nations League on Thursday saw a few exciting games, including high-octane clashes between Spain and Netherlands. Kylian Mbappe also returned for the France national team, but the forward had a day to forget.



Real Madrid star Kylian Mbappe's return to the French national team following a six-month break did not go as planned as an Ivan Perisic-inspired Croatia beat the two-time world champions 2-0 at home in the first leg of their quarterfinal fixture.

Mikel Merino's 93rd-minute equaliser earned Spain a 2-2 draw against the Netherlands in the quarterfinal first leg. Spain raced into an early lead through Nico Williams but Dutch goals -- scored by Cody Gakpo and Tijjani Reijnders -- had flipped the tie on its head. However, an 81st-minute red card for teenager Jorrel Hato gave Spain a way back into the encounter.

Germany are in prime position to host the final stage of the tournament after coming from behind to beat Italy 2-1 in Milan.

Rasmus Hojlund fired Denmark into a slender 1-0 first-leg lead against Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal.

Vinicius Junior struck a dramatic winner in the ninth minute of stoppage time to give Brazil a 2-1 win over Colombia in their South American World Cup qualifier on Thursday. The five-time world champions had taken a sixth-minute lead in Brasilia through a Raphinha penalty only for Luis Diaz's fine 41st-minute strike for Colombia to level the game. The victory leaves Brazil well-positioned in second place in the 10-team CONMEBOL qualifying group, four points behind leaders Argentina who travel to Uruguay on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



The wicketkeeper-batter formed small partnerships with the lower order batters as Dhanmondi inched towards the target.

However, he kept losing partners in regular successions and Dhanmondi were soon 175 for 9, still 42 runs away from the target with 50 balls to go.

In the 44th over, Sohan decided to put caution to the wind, as he hit two consecutive sixes off Mohammad Saifuddin to complete his ton but in the next ball got caught at deep midwicket by Hridoy as Mohammad Seized victory. Despite the defeat, Sohan, who hit 10 fours and four sixes, was adjudged player of the match.

This was Sohan's second century in the ongoing DPL and with Mushfiqur Rahim having retired from ODIs, performances like these could put him back in the national team's radar.

"Obviously, if an opportunity comes, I will give my best. In ODIs I have done well and I will try to begin where I had left off," Sohan, who averages 82.50 in ODIs after five innings with three not outs, told reporters yesterday.

Meanwhile, Prime Bank Cricket Club romped to a nine-wicket win against Shimpukur Cricket Club at BKSP Ground 3 as Mohammad Naim hit a 64-ball 104 in chase of 160.

Abahani maintained their pole position, scraping to a two-wicket win over Gazi Group at BKSP Ground 4. Mominul Haque picked up a fourer to bowl Gazi out for 199 before Mohammad Mithun's 76 took Abahani over the line.