

## Miraz supports youth inclusion for Zimbabwe Tests

SPORTS REPORTER

While the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) is ongoing, Bangladesh national Test team players are already setting their sights on the upcoming Test series against Zimbabwe in Sylhet and Chattogram.

With Test team's Liton Das and Nahid Rana expected to participate in the Pakistan Super League (PSL), several new faces may be called up for the series.

As the series against Zimbabwe is not part of the ICC World Test Championship cycle, it offers a valuable opportunity to test fresh talent. Mehedi Hasan Miraz, who is the vice captain of the Test side and had previously captained Bangladesh to a 1-1 series draw in the West Indies in December last year, emphasised the importance of including younger players, especially in the absence of experienced stars like Mushfiqur Rahim and Shakib Al Hasan.

"There are many young players who will have an opportunity going forward. When we won a Test match in the West Indies, we didn't have many [established] players, and that created chances for two or three youngsters. In this series against Zimbabwe, some young players will likely get opportunities, and it will be important for them to perform," Miraz told reporters after his DPL team, Mohammedan,



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

secured a five-wicket win over Prime Bank in Mirpur yesterday.

"Our senior-most players have retired, and we have to slowly take on the responsibility. Those who are here must perform and help take Bangladesh to the next level. This responsibility belongs to all of us," he added.

One promising name is Mahidul Islam Ankon, who impressed in the last Bangladesh Premier League and has been in good form during the current DPL. Ankon made his Test debut during the home series against South Africa last year, and with Liton unavailable for the upcoming matches, sources suggest

Ankon is the frontrunner to take over as the wicketkeeper-batter. He also featured in the warm-up match in the Caribbean during Bangladesh's last Test tour.

Miraz expressed confidence in Ankon's potential to contribute.

"He [Ankon] has performed well in domestic cricket over the past three to four years and has been considered a regular performer. He even earned his chance in the national team. I feel it's important to give them [young players] opportunities -- if they do well, they can serve Bangladesh for the next five to seven years. That's crucial. At the same time, he will develop the habit of performing in

international cricket. He is preparing well, and I've played alongside him for a long time. Given his mentality, I believe he will succeed in international cricket," Miraz said.

Zimbabwe are scheduled to arrive in Bangladesh on April 15, and with the DPL still underway, questions have been raised about how the national team will prepare for the two-Test series, which begins on April 20 in Sylhet before moving on to Chattogram for the second Test that starts on April 28.

The Tigers had recently participated in the Champions Trophy after playing in the BPL, a T20 competition, and coaches and officials had voiced concerns about the adequacy of their preparations.

"The schedule was set earlier, and you can't suddenly change the calendar. We have to adjust and play in the BPL, DPL, and international matches. In the future, the board could consider maintaining a better balance between domestic and international fixtures," Miraz suggested.

"We will have about 10 days before the Test series, and we hope to prepare during this time. We may have a two-day practice match in Sylhet or a match scenario practice session. But I believe 10 days is plenty of time to prepare," Miraz concluded.

## Emon etches name on record books



Bangladesh opener Parvez Hossain Emon etched his name on the record books during a Dhaka Premier League (DPL) game yesterday, smashing the fastest-ever fifty by a Bangladeshi player across formats. Emon reached his half-century in just 15 balls, eclipsing the previous record held by Shuvagata Hom, who had struck a 16-ball fifty for Shinepukur Cricket Club in the T20 edition of the DPL in 2019. This time it was Shinepukur who were at the receiving end as Emon's record-breaking 61 not out off 23 balls helped Abahani chase down a modest 89-run target in only 6.4 overs with 10 wickets in hand. Emon struck four fours and six towering sixes on his way to achieving the feat. The fastest fifty in world cricket, though, was scored in nine balls -- six less than Emon's -- by Dipendra Singh Airee of Nepal during an Asian Games match against Mongolia in 2023.

PHOTO: STAR

## 'Hamza helped us raise the level and quality of our game'

Bangladesh football has been witnessing mixture of excitement and dismay over the past few months. While Hamza Choudhury's introduction has taken the hype surrounding the men's team to an all-time high, the euphoria following the women's team's successful defence of SAFF Women's Championship last year has soured due to a long-standing rift between the senior players and the head coach.

To know about his views regarding the issues surrounding both teams, **The Daily Star's Atique Anam** contacted Bangladesh Football Federation president **Tabitha Awal**. Here are the excerpts of the interview:

**The Daily Star (DS): You sat with the six senior women's footballers on Saturday. Was it just a courtesy meeting or was there more to it?**

**Tabitha Awal (TA):** It is the mandate and obligation of the federation to routinely speak to all players concerned and especially those involved with the national teams.

**DS: Does the departure of senior players before the coach's arrival mean the process of their reintegration and contract signing is stalled for the moment or has there been any headway made?**

**TA:** It's a leading question, with speculation so I will respectfully not comment.

**DS: With the opponents in Asian Cup Qualifiers already fixed, has there been any discussion by you or the women's wing chairman with head coach Peter Butler regarding the standoff with 18 senior players and how many players he wants to start his camp with?**

**TA:** We are in continuous discussion with

all stakeholders to prepare for the AFC qualifiers. Our pre-training camp will have a revolving philosophy to accommodate as many talented players as possible. Then we will split the training sessions to prepare for both the women's senior team and the women's under-20 team.

**DS: Has there been any demands or suggestions made by the players regarding their contracts or when they are willing to join the camp?**

**TA:** It's the current policy of BFF not to discuss individual contracts or discussions with individual players.

**DS: What was your impression of the men's team's performance against India and which areas do you think need improvement?**

**TA:** As a tournament, we are happy with one point from a draw and that too from an away match. As an individual match, we played to win and could have won. We need to score goals and I am confident we will.

**DS: Hamza Choudhury showed his class in his first game for Bangladesh, even with five days' training with the team. People's interest about the men's team is probably at an all-time high. How should BFF cash in on the arrival of Hamza to make long-term progress?**



**TA:** BFF doesn't single out any individual player. We treat and respect all members of the national team equally. Hamza has definitely helped us to raise the level and quality of our game. We hope to now build the future teams at a higher quality of football as we now know what level we need to achieve.

**DS: What is BFF's stance regarding overseas-based players who have the interest of representing Bangladesh and possess a certain standard?**

**TA:** Anyone of Bangladeshi origin can be considered for the national team as long as they qualify to the standards and are able to play according to the Bangladeshi

football philosophy. We don't differentiate between players in the domestic league or any other leagues.

**DS: The exclusion of Fahamedul Islam from the squad for the India game, especially after the coach himself brought him from Italy, created a lot of controversy. There have been talks of syndicates and locals not being supportive of foreign-based players. How will BFF address these concerns, going forward?**

**TA:** This is a very uninformed question.

**DS: Jamal Bhuiyan's absence from the playing XI, too, raised questions. Have you or the technical committee had any discussion with the head coach or his coaching staff regarding the technical aspects, including the selection, of that game? If yes, what was the outcome?**

**TA:** All our players are equally talented and able to represent their country while supporting each other. We have SAFF ahead to win and AFC ahead to qualify and a pool of 30 players who will all be needed at various times.

## Hockey players feel the pressure of past successes in AHF Cup

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national hockey team feel the pressure of maintaining their streak in the AHF Cup as the winners of the last four editions are set to attempt a fifth straight triumph later this month.

The men in red and green clinched the AHF Cup title in the last four editions in 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2022 respectively and will start another campaign in the 10-team event from April 17 to 27 in Jakarta, Indonesia.

In the tournament, which will serve as the qualification tournament for the Asia Cup, Bangladesh are pitted against hosts Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Kazakhstan in Pool B.

"The only pressure is maintaining the standard we have set in the previous editions as we have won the tournament four times in a row. But we are hopeful about defending the title and qualifying for the Asia Cup as one of two sides," head coach Mamun Ur Rashid told *The Daily Star* yesterday.

The head coach has selected an 18-member squad for the event, picking new faces like Obaidul Hossain Joy and Abed Uddin.

"All 18 players were picked on the basis of their performances during the training camp," Mamun said, adding that he gradually trimmed the squad from 63 to 18 after evaluating their fitness, performance and a few other factors.

"I am hopeful about defending the title after the way the players trained in the camp. However, it would have been better if we could have played a few practice matches before the tournament but the federation could not arrange it due to financial constraints," said Mamun, adding that they are a bit wary of teams like Indonesia and Thailand, who prepared for the event in Malaysia, and Oman who trained in Pakistan.

## PSG's domestic dominance just routine as Europe awaits

REUTERS, Paris

With a 10th Ligue 1 title in the last 12 seasons, Paris Saint-Germain have made their dominance in French football a matter of routine rather than a contest.

Their 24-point lead over Monaco with six games left means they have sealed this season's title and tells the story of a club operating on a different planet to their rivals, a machine fine-tuned for relentless success on home soil.

Luis Enrique's side have been ruthless, their 6-1 mauling of St Etienne eight days ago yet another flex of their muscles, a statement that, even with change, their grip on French football remains iron-clad.

The victory against Les Verts extended their unbeaten away run to 38 games, a feat matched in the top five European leagues only by AC Milan from 1991-93, and while Saturday's 1-0 win against Angers was not impressive, it wrapped up the inevitable.

PSG can also become the only team in the French top flight to remain unbeaten throughout a season, which has been another procession and potentially damages the value of Ligue 1.

"We've been champions for weeks now," Enrique, who has lost only two of his 61 league games with PSG, told reporters last week.

Even the departure of Kylian Mbappe has not loosened PSG's stranglehold, instead giving the team a more collective mindset that allowed them to see off Liverpool in Champions League last 16.

Ousmane Dembele has filled the void with style, slotting into a false nine role and netting 23 times this year.

Their transformation under Enrique has extended beyond Ligue 1 and, while the ghosts of previous European failures still linger, their commanding progress at the expense of Liverpool hinted at a new, steeper PSG.

A Champions League quarterfinal against Aston Villa now awaits and, after that, a French Cup final against Stade de Reims will provide another test of PSG's hunger.

With the league wrapped up, Enrique's challenge is to keep his players sharp, their focus unwavering.

"It's about motivation," Enrique, who was criticised when PSG struggled at the beginning of the season, said recently. "We still have important matches to play to maintain the fairness of the championship, and we want to finish unbeaten," the Spaniard said on Saturday.

For PSG, Ligue 1 has become a procession. But this season will be judged on what comes next -- their pursuit of continental supremacy, the one prize that has always eluded them.



Both Real Madrid and Barcelona stumbled at home in LaLiga on Saturday night, but it was Real who were left ruing their 2-1 loss against Valencia more than their archrivals Barca, who were held to a 1-1 draw by Real Betis. (R) Valencia stole the show in the 95th minute as the Santiago Bernabeu when Hugo Duro headed past Real's third-choice goalkeeper Fran Gonzalez -- who started due to injuries to Thibaut Courtois and Andriy Lunin -- from a Rafa Mir cross following a slick counter-attack. Meanwhile, Barcelona failed to break down a frantic Real Betis defence, having failed to convert a series of lively attacks into goals. Barcelona cut open Betis in the seventh minute with a goal from Gavi, but the visitors hit back after 16 minutes when centreback (L) Natan Souza equalised. Despite the draw, Barcelona, who now have 67 points from 30 matches, moved four points ahead of Real Madrid atop LaLiga.

PHOTO: AFP/REUTERS