

## Hamza, Shamit deserve a system, not just a jersey

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh's 2-1 defeat to Singapore in the Asian Cup Qualifiers wasn't just a defeat -- it was a missed opportunity to build something better with the right tools finally in hand. And that's exactly what former striker and Mohammedan's league-winning coach Alfaz Ahmed is talking about: we finally have the parts, but we don't know how to assemble the machine.

For the first time in years, the Bangladesh team have access to quality midfielders in Hamza Choudhury and Shamit Shome -- players with international pedigree and the technical capability to dictate play. Yet, on the night it mattered, they were left stranded, victims of a system that failed to support them.

"Hamza found the ball but whom he did he get to play it to?" Alfaz asked, bluntly summing up the disjointed midfield.

It's a valid point. You don't bring in a Leicester City-bred midfielder like Hamza just to recycle possession sideways or to rely on individual hustle. You bring in players like him and Shamit to control the tempo, launch transitions, and create space for attackers. But what was witnessed instead was tactical confusion -- a midfield too narrow, wingers isolated, an attack that lacked punch, and overall a pattern of play that went missing.

This wasn't just about

underutilising individuals. It was about wasting a system's potential. Alfaz pointed to the lack of width, where left-footed Sohel Rana could have unlocked the left flank. Instead, the team became lopsided. While Hamza funnelled most passes to the right, Mohamad Ridoy offered no support on the left, cutting the field in half -- limiting options, and predictably, Bangladesh's threat.

Then there's the question of selection. Alfaz questioned the

omission of Taj Uddin, who had impressed against Bhutan. The same goes for Sohel, another performer option wasted in a rigid 4-2-3-1.

Let's be honest -- what was Bangladesh's game plan? Sit deep, defend, and maybe pounce on a counter? That strategy collapsed within 45 minutes.

"The defensive organisation was also not good because the defenders should close down the shooting space of Singapore's unmarked No. 7 while we conceded the first goal.

There were no steps to go follow-through after the goalkeeper punched the ball," Alfaz noted. The first goal, a simple failure in defensive tracking, said it all.

But beyond tactics, there's a psychological weight the team

carried. Expectations were sky-high at home. The stadium was packed. The fans were ready. And yet, the players looked more burdened by the occasion than inspired by it.

"High expectation was another factor," Alfaz said. "They played all out only after losing everything."

It's the oldest problem in football: pressure without purpose. Instead of setting up the team to play to its strengths -- midfield control, width, pace on the flanks -- we boxed ourselves in with conservative decisions.

And here's where Alfaz hit hardest: What's the point of having overseas talents if they're not used effectively? The entire narrative around Bangladesh's football "turnaround" revolves around the inclusion of foreign-born or foreign-trained players. If they're shoehorned into outdated systems or asked to play roles that negate their strengths, then we've learned nothing.

Hamza and Shamit can be game-changers. So can Rakib Hossain, Faysal Ahmed Fahim, and Fahamed Islam, if they get the ball in the right spaces. But none of that matters if the coach doesn't build a system that gels them together and brings the best out of them.

If Bangladesh want to dream of getting into the Asian Cup after 47 long years, the time for safe football is over. It's time to play smart, play bold -- and most importantly -- play to the team's strengths.

Otherwise, it's just dressing up talent in red and green and asking them to fight with one hand tied behind their back.



South Africa pacer Kagiso Rabada emerged as the chief destroyer as he picked up his 17th five-wicket haul to bundle out Australia for 212 in 56.4 overs on Day 1 of the World Test Championship final at Lord's yesterday. The Proteas pacers made early inroads, reducing defending champions Australia to 4-67 before Steven Smith (66) and Beau Webster (72) hit half-centuries to stop Australia's slide. But the pace quartet of Rabada (5-51), Marco Jansen (3-49), Wiaan Mulder, and Lungi Ngidi kept the pressure on to bowl out Australia cheaply.

PHOTO: AFP

## Sammy fears more shock retirements

AGENCIES



West Indies coach Daren Sammy has said he was not surprised by Nicholas Pooran's shock retirement from international cricket -- and even predicted that more players may follow suit early in their careers.

"Surprised? No, I'm not surprised," said Sammy, who captained West Indies to T20 World Cup titles in 2012 and 2016. He added that he had already begun planning for a future without Pooran before the announcement came.

Pooran, 29, announced his retirement from international cricket on Monday. Though he never played a Test and last featured in an ODI two years ago, he is West Indies' all-time leading run-scorer in T20Is. His decision -- just eight months before a T20 World Cup -- shocked many, especially considering his success in the global franchise circuit.

"I'm pretty sure more will follow in that mood, in that direction," Sammy said after West Indies suffered their sixth consecutive white-ball defeat on the ongoing England tour. "That's the way T20 cricket is now -- especially for players from the West Indies, given the challenges we face in keeping them motivated to play for the crest."

"I said something to the guys in the team meeting today: we don't have control. It's up to each individual," he said. "I made my debut in 2004 at this very ground. Today, I saw the same loyal fans in the stands -- the same people from 21 years ago, bringing food, cheering us on."

"The passion they have, traveling from all over just to watch us -- not because we're great, but because of what West Indies cricket means to them. It gave them pride when Sir Viv [Richards] and Clive [Lloyd] came here in the 80s and won. That legacy matters."

"It's up to each player to understand what the crest represents, and to play with that passion. I can speak about it, but I can't force anyone to feel it -- just as I can't decide when someone retires."

## No buzz in Mirpur as Tigers' practice game begins

SPORTS REPORTER

The two-day intra-squad practice match between BCB Red and BCB Green began in Mirpur yesterday in humdrum fashion as instead of a large media contingent with cameras capturing even the minutest action, which is usually the case, there was hardly anyone present, creating an eerie environment that did not go unnoticed.

The team began training for their Sri Lanka tour on Monday during the ongoing Eid vacations, which somewhat explains the absence of fans who usually come to the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium to watch training sessions.

However, the number of reporters at the venue was less than even when the team had held closed-door training sessions in the past, which reinforces the public perception of cricket's waning popularity in Bangladesh.

Usually during practice matches, it's difficult to draw attention of the coaching staff. But yesterday, even the coaches were seen casually walking by the boundary ropes.

"Who is the top-scorer today?" this reporter asked Bangladesh's spin-bowling coach Mushtaq Ahmed who was near the sidelines. "Mominul Haque," he replied. But when he asked how many runs, all the coach could say was, "More than 50."

BCB Red's Mominul had actually made 78 off 131 balls, but he played two innings on the same day.

As it is an intra-squad match, the hard and fast rules of first-class cricket did not apply, allowing Mominul to bat again after he got run out at the non-striker's end when Najmul Hossain Shanto's straight drive ricocheted off Nahid Rana's fingers and onto the stumps.

In his second opportunity, Mominul batted for a long time under extremely hot conditions before Ebadot Hossain's plan of bombarding him with short deliveries eventually worked as he flashed one to deep third-man. Ebadot in total claimed three wickets, earlier having seen the back of Shadman Islam (17) and Mushfiqur Rahim (0).

On the other hand, skipper Nazmul Hossain Shanto, who opened the innings, scored a positive 39-ball 40 but fell leg-before, trying to execute a reverse-sweep.

Nayeem Hasan also bagged three wickets while Liton Das got 43 at number six as BCB Red managed 247 for 9 before declaring. BCB Green, in reply, reached 31 for 1 at day's end.

The Bangladesh contingent is set to leave for Sri Lanka in two batches on Thursday and Friday in what is shaping up to be a tough assignment.

If interest in cricket is really waning, the day's progress showed that performances alone can reclaim what is being lost.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



Vinicius Junior fired Brazil to a 1-0 win over Paraguay, handing coach Carlo Ancelotti a perfect 66th birthday gift and preserving Brazil's unique record of appearing in every World Cup. Australia beat Saudi Arabia 2-1 to qualify from Group C. England, meanwhile, suffered a shock 3-1 home defeat to Senegal in a friendly match -- their first ever loss to African opposition.

PHOTO: AFP

## Olympic return demands cricket's best

AGENCIES

Cricket will mark its Olympic return after 128 years at the 2028 Los Angeles Games, featuring six-team men's and women's T20 tournaments.

But the host nation's chances of participation remain uncertain, as many in the cricketing world push for only the highest-ranked teams to compete -- regardless of geography.

The U.S. sits 17th in the men's rankings and 24th in the women's, making automatic qualification unlikely.

"I'd love an associate member to get in there but let's be realistic," Sumod Damodar, who represents associate members like the U.S. in the ICC Chief Executives' Committee, told Reuters.

"Should the U.S. get an automatic place? I'll say let's put the best that we can on show."

"We're coming back into the Olympics after 128 years. We need to make that impression so that people will say, 'Okay, we don't want them to go back and beg 'please include us' before every Olympics.'



## THIAGO ALMADA

### The making of Argentina's midfield maestro

AGENCIES

In a year of transitions and trials for Argentina, one name has risen steadily from promise to prominence: Thiago Almada.

The 24-year-old, long tagged as a "gamble" in Argentina's setup, has finally shed that label and cemented his place as a genuine national team player.

Though Almada was part of the World Cup-winning squad in Qatar, his minutes were limited. It wasn't until 2025 that he truly stepped out of the shadows. With Lionel Messi absent for three of Argentina's four matches this year, Almada embraced the responsibility and the spotlight.

His performances in March and June have transformed him from squad player to central figure.

Against Uruguay and Brazil, Almada didn't just fill in, he led. A stunning goal against Uruguay capped a second-half resurgence he largely orchestrated. In the



emphatic 4-1 win over Brazil, he didn't appear on the scoresheet but was instrumental in the build-up play.

June brought further validation. With Messi watching from the bench against Chile, Almada

delivered again, assisting Julian Alvarez for the match-winning goal.

Even when Messi returned to the starting lineup versus Colombia, coach Lionel Scaloni found no reason to sideline Almada. The duo shared glimpses of a potentially potent partnership. And when Argentina were a man down and trailing, it was Almada who salvaged the draw with an 81st-minute equaliser -- a thunderous strike.

Almada credits his growth to the rigors of Brazilian football and his recent move to French side Lyon. "Lyon gave me rhythm and helped me settle in Europe," he said. "Brazil prepared me to play every three days. I think I adapted well, and I hope to keep showing I'm in good form."

Scaloni, clearly impressed, praised Almada's fearlessness and maturity: "He takes on the challenge. He asks for the ball. He keeps us calm."

