

It will be a wrong move. Shanto is not an opener and he started as a number four at the beginning of his career. Since we had senior players such as Shakib or Mushfiquar at number four or five, Shanto was promoted to three. [Batting at] Three is okay, but opening is completely different. I was batting at number three and had to go out to face the second delivery of an innings at times. People do not see the difference but when I batted in the opening slot, I failed. I know Shanto, and if it helps the team, he would open. But it's not right. Ricky Ponting scored loads of runs at number three but never opened.

Bashar feels Shanto as opener would be the wrong move



## ‘On-again, off-again’ nature of Galle adds to Tigers’ challenge

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh cricket team has long epitomised an on-again, off-again pattern -- considering their enduring struggle with inconsistency across all formats.

This very trait may present an added challenge for Najmul Hossain Shanto and his side as they prepare for the upcoming first of two Tests against hosts Sri Lanka.

“There is likely to be an on-again, off-again game in Galle,” former Bangladesh captain Habibul Bashar told The Daily Star yesterday.

“It might start and stop raining during the match. That period of interruption -- what we refer to as switch-on or switch-off time -- is something the Sri Lankan players are used to. But we are not.

“So, it’s important for the batters to maintain their concentration, as such breaks don’t affect bowlers much. These interruptions can impact batting and play a role in the game,” Bashar explained.

Batting collapses have remained a key reason behind Bangladesh’s frequent struggles. For a group of batters who have rarely maintained consistency throughout their careers, the stop-start

nature of conditions in Galle could pose a steeper challenge than in many other venues.

Upon arriving in Galle, Bangladesh were greeted by rain, prompting them to focus on indoor gym sessions in the lead-up to the first Test. With limited time to adjust to the conditions, they will have to adapt quickly before action begins on Tuesday.

Rain and overcast skies -- combined with a stadium that lacks floodlights -- often lead to interruptions during Galle Tests. What will be especially difficult for Bangladesh’s batters is sustaining focus during these breaks, particularly on a surface known for being conducive to spin and where batting for long periods is crucial to achieving positive results.

“Usually, it’s a bit slow, and it turns in Galle. It will be interesting to see what kind of conditions they [Sri Lanka] prepare. We have a good fast bowling unit, and their top five batters are strong.

“Spin usually plays a key role in Galle, though our spin attack isn’t bad. Still, I think Sri Lanka may opt for a more pace-friendly wicket for the series overall. But in Galle, it’s unlikely to be heavily suited to pace,” Bashar added.

To handle such interruptions, Bangladesh will rely heavily on veterans Mushfiquar Rahim and Mominul Haque -- two of the most experienced Test players in the squad and key pillars in the batting lineup alongside captain Shanto.

Both Mushfiquar and Mominul -- the Tigers’ batting mainstays -- have been preparing for the series for a while. They have undergone extensive net sessions and played practice matches. They looked to have been in a good Test temperament, leaving deliveries well and adjusting to bounce effectively on wickets they have batted in recent times.

However, spin has traditionally troubled Bangladesh batters in Sri Lankan conditions.

“Both are very experienced. Mushfiquar has a double century in Galle (2013), and Mominul also found some runs here. They can adjust to recent challenges.

“But for the team as a whole, the top five will need to score. It cannot just be about Mushfiquar or Mominul -- support from the rest of the batting unit will be vital,” Bashar emphasised, reminding what will be needed for the Tigers to start their new World Test Championship cycle on a positive note.



## Perennial chokers exorcise their demons

ASHFAQ UL-ALAM

Can the perennial chokers defeat the ultimate champions? This was the question floating around before the World Test Championship (WTC) final between South Africa and Australia.

Australia hardly lose finals, and South Africa don’t win; that was both team’s reputation heading into the crunch match at Lord’s.

Interestingly, both sides earned their polar opposite reputations from the same match, a 50-over bout that ended up becoming the canon even for both cricketing nations as it defined their identities for the years that followed.

The match in question was the 1999 ICC World Cup semifinal in England.

Set a 213-run target, South Africa levelled the scores with three balls to go, but a tragic mix-up between Lance Klusener and Allan Donald resulted in a run-out and Australia went through as they had finished higher in the Super Six stage.

In isolation, this could have been just another high-stakes match where the side that held their nerves better got the job done. But for South Africa, this was a continuation of them finding new ways of faltering on the biggest stage.

Seven years ago, they fell victim to the rain law in the semifinal against England and missed out on the final berth. In the 1999 edition, they had lost to Australia in the Super Six after Herschelle Gibbs dropped captain Steve Waugh, who went on to hit a match-winning hundred. Had Gibbs taken that catch, South Africa could have won,

and Australia would not even qualify for the semifinal.

Questions over South Africa’s mental fortitude to win the big matches were being asked beforehand, and the elimination against Australia answered that query.

There were no more doubts, South Africa were the undisputed chokers of cricket -- a moniker that has stuck around ever since.



In the six ODI World Cups since then, they have played three semifinals and one quarterfinal, but the matches have always ended in heartbreak, with two of those defeats in semifinals coming against Australia in 2007 and 2023.

They came agonisingly close to ending their title drought in last year’s T20 World Cup, but lost their way in a nervy chase against India in the final.

While generations of South African cricketers had to carry the weight of that choker tag, the Australians had a very different experience.

After knocking out South Africa, Australia made easy work of Pakistan



in the final, winning the first of their hat-trick World Cup titles in 1999. They also went on to win 16 consecutive Tests -- most by any team -- twice and also picked up a couple of Champions Trophy titles and a T20 World Cup trophy along the way, establishing themselves as cricket’s ultimate winners.

Fast-forward to June 2025, both sides were set to face off in another big match, the format was different, but the implications were the same.

For most teams, facing Australia in the final is a daunting proposition, but for the Proteas, it was like coming face to face with their worst nightmare.

It was a frightening challenge, no doubt, but from another point of view, it was also South Africa’s best shot at true redemption as the only way to exorcise one’s demons is to face them head on.

For South Africa to shed the chokers tag for good, they had to defeat the Aussies in a final in an ICC event.

Temba Bavuma’s side did exactly that.

And they did not just scrape by and win a close match, what was telling was how they achieved that victory. There were no shenanigans involved, no murky umpiring decision that changed the momentum, and there were no questions that South Africa were the superior side.

South Africa fought hard to overcome a 74-run deficit and showed tremendous composure to chase 282 runs in the fourth innings against the most decorated bowling attack in world cricket.

On Saturday, once again, South African players and fans were in tears after an ICC knockout fixture against Australia, but this time those were tears of joy.

Thanks to Bavuma and Co., a new generation of South African cricketers will now grow up with the belief that they can win the big one, they have what it takes to beat the best on the biggest stage, that they are not born to be chokers but destined to be champions.

### SHORT CORNER

#### SL name squad for Galle Test against Bangladesh

Sri Lanka named an 18-member squad for the first Test match against Bangladesh, starting in Galle on June 17. Led by Dhananjaya de Silva, the squad features, among others, Angelo Mathews who will retire from Tests following this match. There are also six uncapped players in the squad, namely, Lahiru Udara, Pasinda Sooriyabandara, Sonal Dinusha, Pavan Ratnayake, Isitha Wijesundara, Tharindu Ratnayake.

#### Miraz doubtful for first Test against Sri Lanka

Bangladesh off-spinner Mehidy Hasan Miraz’s involvement in the Tigers’ first Test against Sri Lanka in Galle is in doubt due to the 27-year-old suffering from fever, head coach Phil Simmons told the media today. “Miraz’s illness is concerning. If can’t get well enough to play it will bring an opportunity for someone else. Everyone is hoping he recovers,” Simmons told the media today after a training session at the match venue.

#### Gattuso named new Italy coach

Gennaro Gattuso was named Italy’s new coach on Sunday and will be tasked with helping the Azzurri qualify for the 2026 World Cup after replacing Luciano Spalletti. Four-time champions Italy have failed to qualify for the past two World Cups and started their bid to reach next year’s tournament in North America with a 3-0 loss to Norway last week.

\*\*Read full stories on The Daily Star website.



Lionel Messi walks back with his Inter Miami teammates after his side were held to a 0-0 draw by Egyptian side Al Ahly in the Club World Cup opener on Saturday. FIFA’s new 32-team tournament got off to a smooth start in front of 60,927 fans in Florida, but it would have been a much more exciting occasion had Messi not been denied a storybook stoppage-time winner when he saw his curling shot from 20 yards out tipped on to the bar by Al Ahly keeper Mohamed El Shenawy in the Group A clash. Al Ahly, however, would rue a first-half penalty from Egypt international Trezeguet, which was saved by Miami’s Argentine keeper Oscar Ustari.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Financial constraints holding back revival of district football

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation’s pledge to revive district football is apparently going to face a big hurdle due to financial constraints.

The district leagues, a breeding ground of budding players, was largely ignored since the formation of District Football Associations (DFA) in 2008 in line with the FIFA guidelines.

Majority of DFAs were only able to hold leagues four times -- 2013, 2014, 2018 and 2020 -- with direct financial support from the game’s local governing body under former president Kazi Salahuddin.

However, new president Tabith Awal has shown keenness to revive district football and on Saturday, he pledged to start district leagues after a couple of youth football tournaments.

Iqbal Hossain, chairman of BFF district football league committee and an executive member, said that a couple of districts have already started their leagues while some 15 to 20 districts have also assured of

starting leagues soon.

“We have asked the DFAs to send tentative budgets, league bylaws and fixtures and we will provide them with partial financial support,” Iqbal told The Daily Star, adding that he has to officials of a number of DFAs regarding the progress of their preparation.

The former footballer said that they started the process in February but breaks due to Ramadan and the Eids have forced them to go a bit slow.

However, reality seems different as the financially-constrained DFAs are also struggling with availability of grounds and uncertainty over the fate of committees following the BFF’s decision to dissolve 29 DFA committees.

Madaripur last held the first division and second division leagues in 2021 and 2022 respectively with Tk 5 lakh provided by the BFF.

Madaripur DFA president Golam Kabir told The Daily Star that they have sent an estimated budget worth Tk 5.6 lakh for an eight-team league and took a



resolution at a DFA meeting to start the league on June 21, but the availability of funds remains a concern.

Rangpur DFA president Shamim Khan Miskin said that they have last held the league in 2020, and are getting ready to hold a 10-team league in August once the ground is prepared.

Khulna DFA general secretary Yousuf Ali informed that despite receiving a letter from the BFF regarding the league, they have not taken any initiative yet as

there is uncertainty over the DFA committee which has reportedly been dissolved by the BFF.

Replying to a query, Yousuf said that they have failed to get a reply from companies for sponsoring football in the district, which had in the past produced many top players.

Iqbal Hossain, meanwhile, informed that they are trying to rope in some corporate houses in a bid to assist the DFAs to run district leagues.

“It is really tough to get big amount of money from a specific sponsor, so our president is trying to rope in four or five corporate houses for holding the district football leagues,” Iqbal said. “The executive committee might have dissolved a few DFA committees but the notices have not been served yet. So, we hope all DFAs will take initiative to hold leagues.”

Meanwhile, it has been learnt that the Ministry of Youth and Sports, with assistance from the BFF, has decided to organise a nationwide football tournament involving all district teams with a budget to the tune of Tk 15 crore.