



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Butler’s Bangladesh ‘underdogs’ with a plan

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh head coach Peter Butler struck a note of cautious optimism ahead of the team’s departure for Myanmar, where they will contest Group C of the AFC Women’s Asia Cup Qualifiers.

With higher-ranked opponents and only the group winners advancing to the final round, Butler was careful not to make bold promises, instead reminding that his side have shown notable growth in recent times.

Ranked 128th, Bangladesh face a daunting challenge in a group that includes hosts Myanmar (55th), Bahrain (92nd), and Turkmenistan (141st). Although expectations have risen following spirited showings against stronger teams like Jordan and Indonesia, the Bangladesh coach acknowledged the scale of the task at hand.

“We probably are underdogs,” Butler told reporters at a press conference at the BFF House yesterday, on the eve of their Myanmar flight in the early hours of today.

He added that belief and adaptability would be key. “Sometimes you’ve got to flick systems... be flexible.”

Butler credited the side’s progress, pointing to a marked improvement in their work ethic and tactical understanding, especially out of possession. He believes Bangladesh now have the tools to make life difficult for more established teams through “energy, tactical nous” and discipline.

Having lost 5-0 to Myanmar in 2018, Bangladesh’s record in the group is not inspiring, but Butler dismissed past results as irrelevant. He is more focused on the present squad, which he described as “exciting” and filled with emerging talent.

Although the English coach had limited preparation time, he praised the players’ effort and openness to new ideas.

“I’m not an old-school coach, [but someone] who actually embraces new ideas,” he said, underlining his confidence in captain Afeida Khandokar and the group she leads.

Afeida, meanwhile, spoke of her ambition to make it out of the group. “We didn’t get much time after coming back from Jordan,” said the 18-year-old rock-solid defender. “But we trained the way the coach instructed us.”

The squad sees three changes from the one that played in Jordan, with goalkeepers Swarna Mandol and Mile Akter added, while seasoned defender Nilufar Yasmin Nila returns in place of Shanti Mardi.

**Goalkeepers:** Rupna Chakma, Mile Akter, Swarna Rani

**Defenders:** Sheuli Azim, Joynob Bibi, Shamsunnahar Sr, Afeida Khandokar, Nilufa Yasmin

**Midfielders:** Monika Chakma, Maria Manda, Sapna Rani, Kohati Kisku, Halima Akter, Munki Akter

**Forwards:** Ritu Porna, Tohura Khatun, Shamsunnahar Jr, Mosammat Sagorika, Sauravi Akanda, Shaheda Akter, Mosammat Sultana, Nabiran Khatun, Umehla Marma

### FIXTURES

**June 29:** Myanmar vs Turkmenistan, Bangladesh vs Bahrain

**July 2:** Turkmenistan vs Bahrain, Bangladesh vs Myanmar

**July 5:** Myanmar vs Bahrain, Bangladesh vs Turkmenistan

# Tigers look to break pattern in Colombo

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will aim for a rare slice of history when they take on Sri Lanka in the second and final Test at the Sinhalese Sports Club Cricket Ground in Colombo today, hoping to seal their first-ever Test series victory over the hosts.

Although the Galle Test ended in a draw, the Tigers largely dictated terms, only to miss out on a golden chance to win after opting for a cautious declaration on the final day.

Still, the positives from Galle were plenty. Captain Najmul Hossain Shanto struck twin centuries, while Mushfiqur Rahim and Litton Das showed signs of form after lean patches. Nayeem Hasan’s maiden overseas five-wicket haul also stood out, offering a much-needed lift at a time when interest in the team had waned following poor performances across formats in recent months.

The visitors will be hoping that the Galle Test performance doesn’t only remain as a one-off, as on previous many occasions, Bangladesh wasted opportunities of winning series through their poor showings in the series deciding matches due to their lack of consistency in this format.

In 2022, they drew the opening Test against Sri Lanka in Chattogram but suffered a crushing 10-wicket defeat in the series decider to lose the series 1-0 after demonstrating a woeful batting performance in their second innings in Mirpur.

Bangladesh also squandered their lead against New Zealand twice -- once at home and once away -- in the last three and a half years, as they conceded defeats in the second Test and lost the opportunity to clinch series victories. On both occasions, they failed to replicate their first Test performances, especially their batters, and the onus will be on them again to avoid such a situation.

“The home team have been playing good cricket. It’s not going to be an easy match to win,” head coach Phil Simmons told reporters on the eve of the Colombo Test yesterday.

“We will try to do the same thing we tried to do in Galle, I’m looking to win and find the best way to win.”

**Bangladesh, who will be completing 25 years in Test cricket on June 26, will be looking to register their 24th win in the format in the second game against Sri Lanka in Colombo.**

Ahead of the Colombo Test, Bangladesh team management are also having a hard time selecting their playing eleven. All-rounder Mehidy Hasan Miraz, who couldn’t feature in the series opener due to fever, is expected to return to the side for the all-important game. To accommodate him, however, in-form off-spinner Nayeem could be left out or a specialised batter sacrificed.

Simmons insisted that they would pick their playing eleven based on the wicket and conditions, although he also didn’t deny the fact that they would have a tough time deciding on the matter.

“First thing, we have come here and we will assess what the wicket looks like and the conditions here. Then we will decide which way we want to go -- whether three spinners would play,” said Simmons.

“Nayeem had a fantastic game in Galle. It’s tough to leave someone out after such a performance. But everyone understands the team requirements,” Simmons added.

He confirmed Shanto had recovered from a finger injury sustained during slip-catching practice on Monday and also threw his support behind opener Anamul Haque Bijoy, who scored just four runs on a flat Galle pitch.



## Dhananjaya wants strong showing in first innings

SPORTS REPORTER

Sri Lanka skipper Dhananjaya de Silva wanted to set the tone with the bat in the second Test against Bangladesh in Colombo, starting on Wednesday.

The hosts batted comfortably at the top end of their first innings in the Galle Test but saw their advantage slip, conceding a 10-run first innings lead to Bangladesh. On Day 5, they struggled in the few remaining overs, losing four wickets.

On a good batting surface, the Lankan skipper urged his team to put on a strong showing in the first innings.

“We always talk about big first-innings runs. If we can post a strong total, the pressure shifts to the opposition. Then it’s about taking 20 wickets to win the match,” Dhananjaya was quoted as saying by media.

Galle Test was expected to provide sharp turn but eventually provided little assistance to bowlers.

“It’s going to be a batting wicket. Normally, these kind of wickets tend to take turn in the last couple of days,” he added.

Sri Lanka have three uncapped players in the squad for the match and Dhananjaya said that left-arm spinner, Sonal Dinusha, fits the bill given the conditions that will be on offer in Colombo.



PHOTO: REUTERS

**England’s Joe Root approaches Jamie Smith after the latter hit a boundary to bring up a five-wicket win over India in the final session of Day 5 of their first Test at Headingley in Leeds on Tuesday. After a Ben Duckett (149 off 170) century had laid the foundation for England in chase of 371, India made the game interesting with a few quick wickets in the second and final sessions of the day. However, Root (53\* off 84) and Smith (44\* off 55) starred in a 71-run unbroken sixth-wicket stand to see the hosts take a 1-0 lead in the five-match series.**

# ‘Step by step to the Olympics’ ALIF’S MEASURED MARCH

Teenager **Abdur Rahman Alif** stole the spotlight by winning gold at the Asia Cup Archery Stage-2, especially after senior archers Ruman Sana and Abdur Hakim Rubel migrated to the USA. Alif first made headlines in 2021 as a ninth-grader by winning the national recurve title. Despite early promise, the BKSP student from Pabna struggled for years before regaining form with a silver at last year’s Asian Youth Archery Championship. He spoke to **The Daily Star’s Anisur Rahman** on success, setbacks, migration, and Olympic dreams. Below are excerpts from the interview:

**The Daily Star (DS):** How does it feel to win your maiden gold medal in your first Asia Cup Archery final?

**Abdur Rahman Alif (ARA):** It feels really good. I didn’t expect to reach the final or win gold, though I was confident about doing well based on my scores in practice.

**DS:** Your win contrasts with Ruman Sana’s repeated final losses. Are you mentally stronger?

**ARA:** Archery is all about confidence and shooting. Even without perfect focus, good shooting with confidence brings results. I believe I have that, so I just played to my ability.

**DS:** The final saw momentum shift to your opponent before the deciding fifth set. What was on your mind then?

**ARA:** I stayed confident. I believed Allah was testing my patience. I

recited a Surah from the Quran, kept calm, and focused on my shots.

**DS:** Did Ruman and Rubel’s US migration help you break into the team?

**ARA:** My performance wasn’t bad; others just had better averages at the time. Now my scores have improved. When key players leave, the team needs time to rebuild, but with juniors like Sagor [Islam], Rakib [Mia], Mishad [Proddhan] and me, we’ll get results soon.

**DS:** What do you consider your biggest strength?

**ARA:** My self-belief. I never give up. Anyone who knows me knows I’ll fight till my last breath.

**DS:** You shot perfect 30s in elimination rounds. How do you rate your average score?

**ARA:** Averages vary by match and tournament. I won gold with my current form, but I aim to improve further with time.

**DS:** Many are hoping you and Sagor will win an Olympic medal in 2028. How confident are you of qualifying?

**ARA:** It’s a big ask. Even world no. 1 Kim Woo-Jin [South Korea] won Olympic gold in his third attempt in 2024. I’ve just won the Asia Cup. Next are the Asian Championship, World Cup, World Championship, and then the Olympics. I’ll try to deliver step by step.

**DS:** Do the moves of Ruman, Rubel, Diya, and Ashim to the USA discourage or motivate you?

**ARA:** It’s their choice. They did what they felt was best. But I want to build my career in archery, become known in this sport, and win for Bangladesh.

**DS:** How did you start your archery journey?

**ARA:** I always loved sports, especially football, though my family wasn’t supportive at first. My mother eventually convinced my father, who is a college professor, to let me attend a trial at BKSP. I was selected for football, but on the suggestion of one of my father’s friends, I also tried out for archery. I got selected and joined BKSP in class six in 2018. Since then, archery has been my path, and I’ll continue as long as I can represent the nation.



will pay a heavy price. We’re facing the European champions, but we must take our chances.”

The 38-year-old striker remains a threat, and with Messi pulling the strings, anything feels possible.

Miami coach Javier Mascherano, another former Barça man, summed it up with a fighter’s spirit: “They are probably better than us, but in football you never know. Maybe Sunday will be our day.”

For Luis Enrique, it’s not just a tactical battle—it’s a reunion with players he once molded into legends. “He made me even more competitive,” Suarez said of the Spanish tactician.

# CWC clash rekindles Barca bonds

AGENCIES

Lionel Messi will spearhead a Barcelona reunion like no other when Inter Miami face Paris Saint-Germain in a tantalising last-16 showdown at the Club World Cup in Atlanta on Sunday.

The Argentine great will be joined by ex-Barca teammates Luis Suarez, Jordi Alba and Sergio Busquets-- all of whom once flourished under current PSG boss Luis Enrique.

It’s a fixture dripping with history and emotional subplots. The four Miami stars famously featured in the 2016-17 Champions League campaign that saw Barcelona pull off a miraculous 6-1 second-leg comeback to knock PSG out, overturning a 4-0 first-leg deficit in what remains one of football’s most jaw-dropping nights.

Now, years later, the stage is set for a reunion-- but with loyalties shifted and stakes just as high. PSG, finally Champions League winners this season under Enrique’s guidance, arrive as heavy favourites.

Yet Miami, runners-up in Group A after a dramatic 2-2 draw with Palmeiras, are not short on belief or pedigree.

Luis Suarez, who scored in that match and was named man of the match, acknowledged the challenge ahead: “If we make these mistakes against PSG we