



## Breaking barriers with boldness and brilliance

KHALID HOSSAIN

In the heart of Yangon, under the weight of history and the roar of a partisan crowd, Bangladesh women's team paid a tribute to the beautiful game by being tactically astute, fearless in execution, and united in belief.

With a 2-1 victory over hosts Myanmar yesterday, the two-time SAFF champions shattered the regional ceiling to qualify for the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 in Australia -- the first time the women's team reached the continent's top tier.

The qualification was confirmed after the day's second Group C fixture between Bahrain and Turkmenistan ended in a 2-2 draw. This will be only the second time Bangladesh take part in Asia's showpiece football tournament, following the men's appearance 45 years ago.

It is also the crowning moment for a women's side that, after a 19-year drought, reclaimed SAFF supremacy with a title-winning run in 2022.

Against a side ranked 73 places higher in FIFA rankings and with World Cup ambitions of their own, Bangladesh dominated both the scoreboard and the story. And they did it their way: with a brand of football that was world

class in its philosophy and thrilling in execution.

What Peter Butler's side produced at the Thuwunna Stadium was a showcase of identity in all its evolving glory.

A high-risk, high-reward 3-4-3 formation packed the midfield with intelligent ball-players. From the first whistle, the women in red and green pressed high, rotated smartly, and dictated the tempo with confidence.

At the back, a three-player defensive line -- all long-haired and braided -- operated with poise: experienced Shamsunnahar, Sheuli Azim, and captain Afeida Khandokar. Defensive midfielder Kohati Kisku dropped deep during transitions to form a temporary back four, while goalkeeper Rupna Chakma played as a sweeper -- alert, composed, and instrumental in maintaining shape.

Even after Myanmar pulled one back in the 89th minute, there was no panic. The backline held their nerves, avoiding unnecessary clearances and trusting their structure.

In midfield, Sapna Rani -- sporting a top knot -- and Maria Manda provided both muscle and metronome; like two knights on a chess board. Monika Chakma, the left-footed creative fulcrum, popped up between the lines, pulled defenders out of shape, and switched flanks with intelligence.

Her interplay with forward Tohura Khatun -- unmistakable in her military-style boy cut and operating as a fluid false nine -- allowed the front line to keep Myanmar constantly guessing.

And the face of the collective belief was 21-year-old Ritu Porna Chakma, the flamboyant winger who scored both goals -- a curling rebound and a sumptuous lob -- on either side of the interval.

Ritu, Shamsunnahar Jr, and Tohura interchanged fluently up front, pressing relentlessly -- never frantic, always calculated and collective.

Butler, who took charge after restoring SAFF supremacy in 2024, had made bold calls -- none bigger than sidelining long-time talisman Sabina Khatun to evolve the team's style. And yesterday, that evolution bore fruit for all to see.

From the 7-0 demolition of Bahrain to this watershed moment, Bangladesh's transformation has been as psychological as it has been tactical.

With qualification sealed, Bangladesh face Turkmenistan on Saturday: a dead rubber on paper, but another chance to build momentum.

This breakthrough could open new doors: high-level exposure; investment; and a growing fan base.

On the pitch, this team have already shown they belong on Asia's grandest stage. And how did they get there?

## Taskin makes grand return but Tigers falter

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's most experienced pacer Taskin Ahmed made a grand return to competitive cricket yesterday, finishing with figures of 4-47, but it was all for naught as Bangladesh suffered a 77-run defeat against Sri Lanka in the first ODI of the three-match series at the R Premadasa Stadium in Colombo.

Chasing 245, Bangladesh went from 100-1 to 105-8 in a horrendous collapse orchestrated by spinner Wanindu Hasaranga (4-10) and Kamindu Mendis (3-19) and in the end were bundled out for 167 in 35.5 overs.

But before the disappointing batting, Bangladesh had done well in the bowling department with the leader of the attack Taskin making an impressive come back.

Taskin was out of competitive cricket from March due to an injury in his Achilles tendon. He returned to the side for the Sri Lanka ODIs after a long rehab which began following consultations from different medical experts in England in April.

The 30-year-old had to fight against time to satisfy both the BCB's medical team and the selectors to get picked in the ODI side.

Bangladesh badly missed the service of Taskin, a three-format player for the Tigers, in all of their recent assignments



— a home Test series against Zimbabwe, T20I series in the UAE and Pakistan and Test series in Sri Lanka.

Taskin could do nothing but watch from the sidelines as the Tigers suffered defeats to teams like Zimbabwe and UAE, as at that time, he was undergoing a comprehensive rehabilitation programme which was formulated and implemented under BCB's supervision.

The seasoned campaigner made his presence felt immediately in his return when he opened the bowling for Bangladesh yesterday. With a fantastic opening spell, he gave much-needed



momentum to the side, who had lost their last six matches in this format and are currently reeling at number 10 in the ICC rankings.

In his first spell, Taskin, in his usual manner, hit the deck hard and extracted movement from the pitch and didn't need to wait too long for success as he got rid of Nishan Madushka (six) and Kamindu Mendis (0). He bowled 24 dot balls in the five-over spell, which included two maidens, and only went for only 14 runs.

In the next spell, Taskin was a bit costly as he leaked 26 runs in three overs but when he returned for his final two overs

during the slog overs against centurion Charith Asalanka and dangerous-looking Wanindu Hasaranga, the pacer showcased his mettle once again.

Taskin made great use of the slower delivery, deceiving the set Hasaranga (22) and tail-ender Maheesh Theekshana (one) to remove both in the 46th over, which went for just two runs, and put the brakes in Sri Lanka's innings.

He then gave away just five runs in the penultimate over, playing a vital role in ensuring Sri Lanka did not go past the 250-run mark in a challenging track in Colombo. But his efforts were undone by the batters as the Tigers suffered their seventh straight defeat in ODIs.

### SCORES IN BRIEF

Sri Lanka: 244 all out in 49.2 overs (Kusal Mendis 45, Asalanka 106; Taskin 4-47, Sakib 3-45)  
Bangladesh: 167 all out in 35.5 overs (Tanvir 62, Shanto 23, Jaker 51; Hasaranga 4-10, Kamindu 3-19)

Player of the match: Asalanka  
Result: Sri Lanka won by 77 runs.

## U-18 hockey team eye winning start

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh men's youth hockey team are looking for a positive start to their U-18 Asia Cup campaign today when they take on Hong Kong in the first match of Pool A in Dazhou, China today.

The match will begin at 6:30am Bangladesh time.

With the top two teams from the pool slated to qualify for the semifinals, Bangladesh coach feels they cannot slip up in the opening two fixtures -- against Hong Kong and Sri Lanka -- as the group stage will get more competitive towards the business end, where Bangladesh will face China before wrapping up against top-ranked Pakistan.

Bangladesh, runners-up of last edition held in Dhaka nine years ago, had a 30-minute practice match against Kazakhstan, coming out with a 4-0 win after having landed in the northeastern city of China on the previous day.

Bangladesh coach Moududur Rahman Shuvo, speaking to The Daily Star from Dazhou yesterday afternoon, said that all the players are fit and that the weather is similar to that of Dhaka's.

"The practice game was more of getting accustomed to the conditions and the turf here. We are comfortable and looking forward to a positive start," said Shuvo, whose charges feature 16 running BKSP students and two who have already graduated from the sports institute.

"We can't take any chances. We will have to win the first two matches because things will get tougher from thereon. We want to start with a victory, no matter what the scoreline is," added Shuvo, who had guided the under-21 team to their first-ever World Cup qualification last year.



In a game in which Juventus goalkeeper Michele Di Gregorio was in inspired form, Real Madrid youngster Gonzalo Garcia headed home the only goal to help Los Blancos to a 1-0 win over the Italian side in the Club World Cup round of 16 in Miami on Tuesday. Garcia's third goal in four appearances in the tournament saw Real extend their unbeaten run under new coach Xabi Alonso, as they set up a quarterfinal clash against Borussia Dortmund, who edged Mexican side Monterrey 2-1 later in the day.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Sabalenka praying for no more Wimbledon upsets

AFP, London

World number one Aryna Sabalenka said she hopes there are "no more upsets" at Wimbledon after reaching the third round with a hard-fought 7-6 (7/4), 6-4 win over Marie Bouzkova on Wednesday.

Several stars suffered shock first round exits from the All England Club, including second seed Coco Gauff, third seed Jessica Pegula and fifth seed Zheng Qinwen.

Top seed Sabalenka was pushed hard by Bouzkova in Wednesday's opening match on Centre Court as her Czech opponent matched fire with fire in a bruising encounter.

But she eventually had too much in her locker for her 48th-ranked opponent, firing an impressive 41 winners in a match lasting one hour and 35 minutes.

The Belarusian said after her win she was aware of the seeds who had crashed out but planned to focus on her own game.

"Honestly it's very sad to see so many

top players losing in the first round but you better focus on yourself and stay away from the results," she said.

"I mean of course you're going to know the overall picture but it's better to take it one step at a time and do your best every time you're out here competing and I'm trying to stay away."



"I hope it's no upsets anymore in this tournament, if you know what I mean!"

The first set went with serve until Sabalenka doubled-faulted in the 11th game to hand Bouzkova the chance to serve for the set.

But the Belarusian broke back with a searing backhand down the line and came out on top in the tie-break to establish a foothold in the match.

Sabalenka broke again in the fifth game of the second set to move within sight of victory and closed out the match with little fuss.

She will face 2021 US Open winner Emma Raducanu or former Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova in the third round on Friday.



India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates reaching his 11th Test fifty on Day 1 of their second Test against hosts England at Edgbaston in Birmingham on Wednesday. Even though Jaiswal could not get to the three-figure mark, the left-handed batter's 87-run knock helped India get off to a strong start as they accumulated 182 for three in 53 overs at Tea.

PHOTO: REUTERS