

## Time for BFF to match Ritu and Co's level

ASHFAQ UL ALAM

If winning the SAFF Championship in 2022 and 2024 warranted the Bangladesh women's team an open-top bus parade, what would be a proportionally appropriate celebration for the miracle they have just pulled off in Myanmar?

The word miracle is often thrown around casually in sports writing, but the achievement of the Bangladesh team -- qualifying for the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 -- really warrants this distinction.

Still, for the unconvinced, here is a stat: on Wednesday, Bangladesh became the lowest-ranked team in history to qualify for the Women's Asian Cup.

Bangladesh, ranked 128th, thrashed the 92nd-ranked Bahrain 7-0 and defeated the 55th-ranked hosts Myanmar 2-1, to secure top spot in Group C with a match in hand and earned their ticket for the mega event set to take place next year in Australia.

This record previously was held by Indonesia, who were ranked 96th when they qualified for the 2022 edition of the tournament.

Another way to understand the magnitude of what Ritu Porna Chakma and Co have pulled off is to take a look at the four teams that had qualified before Bangladesh -- Japan, Australia, China, and South Korea.

Japan, the highest ranked team in Asia at seventh, is a two-time Asian Cup winner and are also the only Asian side to win the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2011.

China, ranked 17th, are record nine-time winners and the defending champions in the Asian Cup, while Australia (15) have won the continental



tournament once and South Korea (21) are still searching for their maiden title, having finished as runners-up in the last edition.

Come March next year, Bangladesh will be up against one, if not more, of these behemoths in the land down under, a battle they have earned the right to fight through their grit.

All four of these countries have a long history in women's football, having been active in the international scene since the 1990s, the decade when women's international football first started taking shape.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's history in women's football officially began in 2010, when they took on Nepal in their very first international game in Dhaka, in the South Asian Games, a match they lost 1-0.

For years, Bangladesh's football revolved around wanting to win the SAFF Championship, a tournament that holds

no real esteem in the global sense, and failing to achieve that.

The wonderous women's team have broken through this cycle of mediocrity with consecutive SAFF successes and the miraculous Asian Cup qualification.

For a country so deprived of sporting achievements, these girls have done more than enough to become the toast of the nation.

And while they have received the love and admiration of the people, exhibited through how thousands who flocked to their victory parades for SAFF triumphs, they have not received a proportionate monetary return nor the facilities high-achieving athletes like them deserve.

The women's team basically functions out of the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) dormitory, which was claimed to be "like a prison" by former women's team captain Dalia Akter last year.

Despite repeated successes, the

women's team still don't have a dedicated training ground, let alone the bare minimum standard of training facilities. Questions have been raised over the diet prepared for them by the BFF and their overall sub-standard living condition during the tenure of the previous president, Kazi Salahuddin.

BFF has also failed to establish a proper domestic structure for the girls. The Women's Football League first began in 2011, ran for two seasons, then didn't happen for seven seasons straight before resuming in the 2019-20 season.

The top men's clubs have been reluctant to form teams in the women's league from the beginning, with none taking part in last year's edition.

Without the participation of top clubs, the league faces a lack of competition, with current champions Nasrin Sporting Club signing almost all of the national team stars.

The current women's team setup is reaping the rewards of the talents unearthed in school-level and age-level competition in the 2010s. But without a proper domestic system, the pipeline of players is at risk of drying up.

Considering how these girls have time and again exceeded expectations, despite the glaring limitations, an open-top bus parade to welcome Ritu and Co will only be reflective of how things are often operated in Bangladesh -- prioritising glitz over meaningful work.

Maybe this time, the country will see a different approach, one that ensures that this doesn't end as another flash in the pan and that Bangladesh continues climbing up the ranks in women's football.



## Gill piles on the runs against England

India skipper Shubman Gill piled on the runs against hosts England, smashing his maiden Test double ton on Day 2 of their second match of the five-match series at Edgbaston in Birmingham on Thursday. The right-handed batter, who recently took over the reins in the format for India, scored 269 as the visitors were bowled out for 587 soon after tea. In just his second Test as captain, Gill set a new record for the highest score by an India batter in a Test in England, surpassing the great Sunil Gavaskar's 221 at the Oval back in 1979.

PHOTO: AFP

## Collapse curse continues under best minds

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

On November 6 last year, a day after Mohammad Salahuddin was appointed as Bangladesh's senior assistant coach, the team suffered a familiar collapse in the ODI series opener against Afghanistan in Sharjah.

Chasing 236, the Tigers collapsed from 120-3 to 143 all out, losing by 92 runs, as rookie spinner AM Ghazanfar tore through the lineup with a career-best 6-26.

Salahuddin, who was not with the team at the time, began his tenure in the following West Indies tour. But since his arrival, little has changed. Batting collapses have continued to haunt them across all formats.

Seven months on, the collapse repeated in eerily familiar fashion.

In Wednesday's ODI opener against Sri Lanka in Colombo, Bangladesh collapsed from 100 for two to 105 for eight -- the worst-ever fall from the second to eighth wicket in men's ODIs -- before losing by 77 runs, undone again by spin as Wanindu



Hasaranga and Kamindu Mendis shared seven wickets.

When

coaching staff, it was seen as a breath of fresh air. Known for his rapport with players and ability to address technical and mental flaws, his appointment was seen as a long awaited shift toward greater comfort and communication in the dressing room. But those expectations

have yet to materialise.

In the West Indies, Bangladesh collapsed in both Tests and continued the trend in the white-ball games. The ICC Champions Trophy brought more of the same, as they stumbled to 35 for five against India before managing 228 which was insufficient to trouble the eventual champions.

The batting woes persisted on tours to the UAE, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and even in their home Test series against Zimbabwe.

Salahuddin's addition also completed a high profile trio with chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu and cricket operations chairman Nazmul Abedeen Fahim -- touted as the country's finest cricketing minds. Together, they were expected to change the trajectory of Bangladesh cricket.

So far, however, the cycle remains unbroken. Whether this think-tank can reverse the tide is still uncertain.

Time will tell, but it might run out faster than anticipated.

### Bangladesh tour of UAE against Afghanistan

1st ODI: 120-3 to 143 all out

3rd ODI: 53-1 to 72-4, 244-8

### Bangladesh tour of West Indies

1st Test 2nd innings: 23-4, 102-6 to 132 all out

2nd Test 1st innings: 139-7 to 164 all out

2nd ODI: 26-1 to 115-7, 227 all out

2nd T20I: 8-1 to 88-7, 129-7

### Champions Trophy

Against India: 35-5, 228 all out

Against NZ: 97-3 to 118-5, 236-9

### Zimbabwe tour of Bangladesh

1st Test 1st innings: 98-3 to 146-7, 191 all out

1st Test 2nd innings: 194-5 to 255 all out

### Bangladesh tour of UAE

3rd T20I: 10-1 to 84-8, 162-9

### Bangladesh tour of Pakistan

1st T20I: 100-3 to 164 all out

2nd T20I: 44-1 to 77-7, 144 all out

### Bangladesh tour of Sri Lanka

2nd Test 2nd innings: 63-3 to 133 all out

1st ODI: 100-2 to 105-8, 167 all out

## Djokovic evokes nostalgia

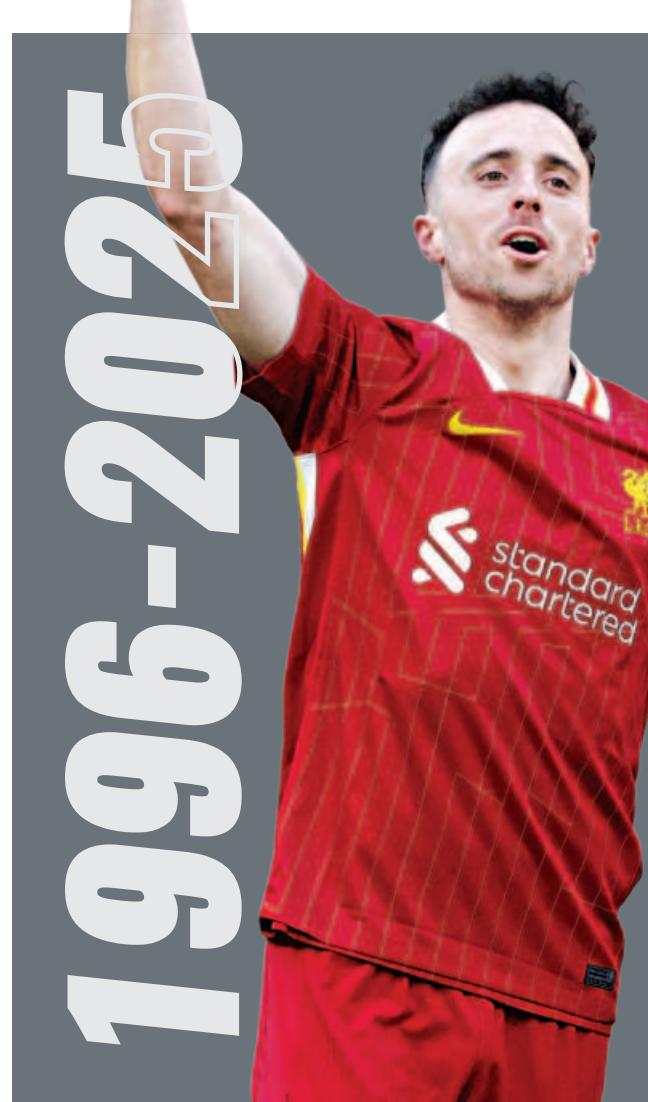
REUTERS, London

Seven-time Wimbledon champion Novak Djokovic showed that he remains a real threat for a record-extending 25th Grand Slam title at the age of 38 with a clinical 6-3, 6-2, and 6-0 destruction of home hope Dan Evans on Centre Court on Thursday, moving into the Wimbledon third round.

The Serb continues to rage against the dying of the light and, having identified the grass of Wimbledon as his best chance of adding to his extraordinary tally, showed exactly why in a superb all-round performance where he looked as sharp and fit as any time in his career.

He was never really troubled on serve all afternoon while wildcard Evans had to scramble for almost everything on his -- saving nine first-set break points before eventually succumbing on the 10th.

Djokovic continued to dominate, as Evans, who beat him in their only previous meeting on clay four years ago, saw his tame sliced backhands repeatedly crashed back past him as the sixth seed romped home.



## 'HEARTBROKEN' Jota leaves lasting impact

Liverpool's Portuguese forward Diogo Jota died in a car crash near Zamora in Spain with his brother Andre on Thursday, leaving the football world and beyond mourning the 28-year-old's untimely demise. Jota's brother Andre played as a midfielder for FC Penafiel in Portugal's second tier. Though tragically cut short, Jota's footballing journey was filled with remarkable moments and achievements at both club and international levels.

• In 398 appearances across his club career, Diogo Jota scored 136 goals and provided 66 assists.

• He rose to prominence at Liverpool under Jurgen Klopp, having also played for Wolves and Porto among major clubs.

• At Liverpool, the forward won the Premier League (2024/25), FA Cup (2022), and the English League Cup (2024, 2025).

• He also won the Championship in 2017/18 with Wolves, helping the club promote to the Premier League.

• He netted 14 and assisted 12 in 49 appearances for Portugal.

• With Portugal, he won the UEFA Nations League twice (2025, 2019).

"I'm heartbroken. Diogo was not only a fantastic player, but also a great friend, a loving and caring husband and father!"

Former Liverpool coach JURGEN KLOPP

"It makes no sense. We were just together with the national team (they won the Nations League title last month), you had just gotten married."

Portugal captain CRISTIANO RONALDO