

'Modern football demands athletes'

Outspoken, stubborn, successful. That is probably the best way to describe Peter Butler, the coach of Bangladesh national women's football team. He may have ruffled a few feathers in several quarters since taking charge of the team in March 2024, but the Englishman has delivered success, and more importantly, he has shown the pathway to the football federation how to keep growing and achieving bigger targets. In a freewheeling interview with *The Daily Star's* Atique Anam at the team hotel in Dhaka, the former West Ham United midfielder opened up about his football methodology, plans for the future, the shortcomings of the federation, men's football, and the controversies he has found himself in. Following is the first part of the two-part interview:

The Daily Star (DS): SAFF Championship 2024, Asian Cup Qualifiers, and SAFF U-20 Championship -- three tournaments, three trophies. Can we expect two more in the next two months?

Peter Butler (PB): I would say that more than the trophies, the most important thing I've tried to instil is a competitive environment. The team needed a shake-up. For too long, it had been a copy paste selection approach, with players almost picking themselves. That's not a knock on them -- it's just that things had become stagnant. I wanted to bring in new faces and make players fight for their places again. It's about getting them out of their comfort zone.

DS: But the team did win the SAFF Championship in 2022, and won by playing good football.

PB: They did, but if you look at what happened after that, it was a disaster. The team suffered heavy defeats and lacked a clear plan. For nearly a year, things were going nowhere. When I did my research before taking this job, I noticed massive cracks in the system. Some players had reached the end of their cycle. That doesn't mean they had no value, but there's a difference between being a focal player and being an impact player. My philosophy is simple: create competition, play high tempo, high intensity football. But that demands fitness. And many of the players were struggling with that.

DS: You've emphasised on fitness and food since the very beginning. What exactly did you do in those areas?

PB: I never imposed a strict diet. What I did was introduce responsibility -- weight management and portion control. For instance, instead of having rice three times a day, maybe cut it down to once or smaller portions twice. It was about being aware, I gave advice, not rules. If you're ordering takeaway pizza at 10pm, that's not the behaviour of a professional athlete. I paid attention to these things because they influenced selection. If someone can't last 90 minutes, that becomes a factor -- especially at the international level,

where you're facing teams ranked in the top 50. Modern football demands athletes. If you're not one, you can't compete.

DS: Paul Smalley reportedly introduced proper diet charts for the players before you came.

PB: Well I don't know. I don't want to comment on Smalley, but Smalley basically got a lot of things wrong. I'm sure he did many things right, but when it comes down to diet, when it comes down to the food they were eating, it was atrocious. Not nutritious at all. It's improved a bit now, thanks to the president.

If you ask me, fish is great -- high in protein. Bread and roti in large quantities? Not so much. Steamed rice in moderation? Better. Lean meats, less fat, less fried food. That's the core message. It's about making small, sensible changes. You can still eat the local diet -- just do it with awareness.

DS: What about the living conditions?

PB: The living conditions are still atrocious. I've never seen a football team kept in such poor facilities. It's not humane.

DS: But when the media write exactly what you're saying, they vilify the BFF.

PB: That's the truth, though. And thankfully, the president agrees with me. Things are slowly improving. For example, the president has approved hotel stays for camps so the girls don't have to go back to the BFF dorms. But some people still want to keep the old system because it suits them. That's wrong. I'll keep pushing for change -- not just for the women's team, but also for places like Kamalapur Elite Academy -- the boys' academy -- which is also in bad shape.

DS: With 'Mission Australia' in focus, You've submitted a plan to the president, Tabith Awal. What are the key aspects of that proposal?

PB: The most important thing is to continue actively with the under-20 programmes. Over 50% of our group are under-20s, and that won't change. I won't tinker with it. My rotation was geared toward AFC qualification.

SAFF was always going to be a rotational



project. AFC (Asian Cup) is a great opportunity for the girls to get three competitive games under their belt. Keep in mind, there's no FIFA window in February -- only in March. But I told the president I'll never turn down a game, even outside the window.

DS: Have you submitted any requests for specific support staff -- physiotherapists, coaches, etc?

PB: I'm quite loyal -- maybe too loyal. I back people who back me. The program is geared toward the 29th of July -- when the draw happens. Then we'll know where we'll be.

I've done my research. I know Australia well -- I lived there for two years... So it's about developing camps -- maybe in the Middle East -- where we can get games. We need to play teams like UAE or Myanmar -- ranked 55. I think we're better than Myanmar. Can we reach 55? Yes, but it's about managing squad selection, camps, and FIFA windows.

DS: You're having to work with three teams simultaneously: seniors, U-20s and U-17s. With the groups overlapping, does it make

your work a bit easier, in as much as having a better idea about the pool of players?

PB: No, it's really difficult. It's draining. That's why I look knackered -- lack of sleep. It's really challenging. But I knew I could make it work. The ultimate prize was qualification for the AFC, so I used the Under-20s wisely.

In fact, some of the girls going to Bhutan actually helped me because it opened up opportunities for other players like Oyeshi Khatun, Ayonto Bala, Trishna Rani, who haven't been utilised much. I strongly believe we've got the nucleus of a really outstanding group of young players coming through. Shanti Mardi will only get better, and Umehla Marma too. But we've got to keep getting them on the training ground -- drill them, organise them.

I don't believe in philosophies. I believe in methodology. I believe in good, solid principles. What I believe in are fundamentals, principles, and creating a clear playing identity -- a DNA.

Bangladesh football never had a DNA

before I came. The DNA was: smash it down the pitch, fight for second balls, and the ball comes straight back. My DNA has always been: we look to play, we press, we play with intensity, we get the ball down, and we pass with a clear identity. I'm trying to build that for the federation.

DS: You recently said that Ritu Porna deserves to be playing in a better league, like the UAE.

PB: She should be. And Monika as well. But Monika has to be careful about her fitness. My biggest concern with the players going to Bhutan is the fitness levels, the training intensity, and the lifestyle. They don't play enough games.

I strongly believe we have a group of players who, in my personal opinion, can go on and play in stronger leagues. But the problem is breaking the myth. Immediately, when people hear "Bangladesh," the reaction is: "No league." That works against them. And then there's the FIFA ranking -- we've got to improve that to gain credibility.

DS: Have you spoken to the president or the women's wing chairman about the women's league?

PB: Yes, I have. My view is plain and simple. I've put it forward: a six-team league, under-23s only, with three overage players allowed. If you're over 30, you can't play. That's my honest opinion.

You've got to develop a league that gives young players game time. You can't have teams loaded with senior national team players like before -- like when Nasrin Academy and others were stacked with them. That doesn't work.

DS: Any restriction on how many national players can be in one team?

PB: I believe in a quota system. You shouldn't be allowed to have more than five national players on the field at one time. And if you're playing an under-20 on the bench, you must replace them with another under-20. I've put those ideas forward to Fahad Karim and (Mahfuz Aker) Kiron. Now it's up to them to consider implementation.

'Amateur' off the banner, still in the manner

RAMIN TALUKDER

Sometimes, a name is more than just a name -- it's a reflection of identity.

The Bangladesh Amateur Boxing Federation recently rebranded itself by dropping the word "Amateur," but the reality, as revealed in the lead-up to the National Women's Boxing Championship, tells a different story.

On Saturday, the federation organised a press conference to announce the championship -- the first in over six years. The invitation mentioned the press room of the National Stadium as the venue, scheduled for noon. However, when journalists arrived, they found no arrangements there. An elderly man informed them of a last-minute venue change -- to the federation's own office building.

There, the disarray continued. With the main conference room unavailable, the press meet was hastily shifted to the



federation president's cramped office, where several reporters had to stand in the balcony, with no space to sit.

The event began with a one-page press release that didn't even mention the championship's name. General Secretary M.A. Quddus Khan addressed the press, but questions quickly arose about Zinnat Ferdous, a US-based boxer hyped as the star attraction. She didn't arrive, reportedly due to flight issues.

Then came the confusion over participants. Khan mentioned that

four foreign athletes would take part in what is supposed to be a national championship. When questioned, he gave a vague explanation -- that these athletes were foreign students at local universities. Moments later, he contradicted himself, saying those universities had been excluded and that one team had already been dropped for fielding foreigners.

He further stated that 71 teams would now participate -- from clubs, districts, schools, colleges, universities,

city corporations, the Army, Police, and Ansar. Notably, BGB was not among them. Additionally, several new clubs -- some unregistered -- were reportedly being considered for inclusion less than 24 hours before the event begins.

Asaduzzaman, president of a club named 'A Boxing Club', alleged exclusion due to their involvement in professional boxing. The federation responded that only those who apologised for previous professional stints were being allowed, and even at the last moment, new teams could be accepted if they approached the federation.

The championship begins July 27 and runs through July 30, featuring boxers from across the country. But the lack of organisation, the contradictory communication, and the murky eligibility rules leave one wondering: has the federation actually shed away its 'amateur' status or just removed the word from its signage?

UAE to host Asia Cup from Sept 9

AGENCIES

After months of speculation, the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) has officially confirmed the dates for the 2025 Asia Cup T20.

The tournament will be held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from September 9 to 28, ACC president and Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Mohsin Naqvi announced via his official X (formerly Twitter) account on Saturday.

The announcement followed the ACC's Annual General Meeting held in Dhaka on Thursday. "I am delighted to confirm the dates for the ACC Men's

FIXTURES



Group Stage

- 9 Sept: Afghanistan vs Hong Kong
- 10 Sept: India vs UAE
- 11 Sept: Bangladesh vs Hong Kong
- 12 Sept: Pakistan vs Oman
- 13 Sept: Bangladesh vs Sri Lanka
- 14 Sept: India vs Pakistan
- 15 Sept: Sri Lanka vs Hong Kong, UAE vs Oman
- 16 Sept: Bangladesh vs Afghanistan
- 17 Sept: Pakistan vs UAE
- 18 Sept: Sri Lanka vs Afghanistan
- 19 Sept: India vs Oman

Super 4

- 20 Sept: Group B Q1 vs Group B Q2
- 21 Sept: Group A Q1 vs Group A Q2
- 23 Sept: Group B Q1 vs Group A Q2
- 24 Sept: Group A Q1 vs Group B Q2
- 25 Sept: Group A Q2 vs Group B Q2
- 26 Sept: Group A Q1 vs Group B Q1

Final: 28 Sept

Asia Cup 2025 in UAE," Naqvi wrote, calling it a prestigious event.

Originally granted to India, the hosting rights will remain with them despite the change in venue, in line with past hybrid models approved by the ACC.

The shift to UAE comes amid heightened political tensions between India and Pakistan, who have not played a bilateral series since 2012 and only meet in multinational events at neutral venues.

This edition of the Asia Cup will be played in the T20 format, serving as a key build-up to the ICC T20 World Cup 2026 in India.

The five ACC full members -- Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka -- have earned automatic qualification. They will be joined by Hong Kong, Oman, and UAE, who secured their spots via the ACC Premier Cup.

Tigresses to face men's U-15 team for WC prep

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) will stage a three-team Challenge Cup next month as part of the national women's team's preparation for the upcoming ICC Women's World Cup, scheduled in India between September 30 and November 2.

The Challenge Cup, which will run between August 18 and 28 at the BKSP, will see two women's teams, composed of national team players and probables, and the men's U-15 national team compete in a round-robin league tournament.

This is not the first time the Tigresses will face an age-level team for preparation as last year they had played practice games against the U-19 team ahead of the Women's Asia Cup.

The women's team are currently in the last phase of their Sylhet camp, which will end on July 29. They will take part in another camp at the BKSP on August 6-15.

"We currently have 18 players in the camp

[Sylhet]. Maybe two to three players will be added for the next camp at the BKSP. Then the tournament will happen," chief selector of the women's wing Sazzad Ahmed Shipon told *The Daily Star* yesterday, adding the women's team could have another camp in Dhaka in September.

It was learnt that the women's team is expected to leave for India in between September 20 to 22. They will begin their World Cup campaign against Pakistan on October 2 in Colombo.

The Tigresses have not played any international matches since the qualifier tournament in April while the seven other World Cup bound teams have either played international matches or are set to play before the tournament.

England, New Zealand, South Africa and Sri Lanka have had international engagements since May. India will host Australia for three ODIs in September and Pakistan will play three T20Is against Ireland next month.



England captain Ben Stokes ended his more than two-year wait for a Test hundred as his dominant 141 powered England to 669 all out -- their fifth-highest total of all time -- and helped the hosts take a 311-run lead on Day 4 of the fourth Test against India at Old Trafford, Manchester yesterday. In doing so, Stokes became just the third all-rounder in Test history to achieve the double of 7000 runs and 200 wickets, joining the exclusive company of Sir Garfield Sobers and Jacques Kallis. He had brought up his 200th Test wicket last year at Lord's against the West Indies. Chris Woakes then rattled India, taking two wickets, with India's score on nought. The visitors, however, recovered and went to tea at 86-2, with KL Rahul and Shubman Gill unbeaten.

PHOTO: REUTERS