

Butler & Co looking to embrace Asian Cup challenge

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler was looking to embrace the challenge of facing strong opponents after his side were drawn in a tough group, which included defending champions China, in their maiden Women's Asian Cup campaign.

The women in red and green (Ranked 128th), who sealed a historic qualification earlier this month after upending higher-ranked sides like Myanmar and Bahrain in the qualifying stage, will be playing record nine-time champions China (ranked 17th), three-time winners North Korea (ranked 9th) and Uzbekistan (ranked 51st) in the 12-team tournament, to be held in Australia from March 1-21, 2026.

The draw of the continental competition was held yesterday at the Town Hall in Sydney, which is one of the three host cities alongside Perth and Gold Coast.

Talking about the draw later in the day, Butler said his side were prepared to embrace the challenge, and that they were ready to announce their arrival on the continental stage, come March 2026.

"It's a very strong group but I look forward to it. I think you've got to embrace it," Butler said in a video message shared by the BFF.

"China will be very very difficult as will be North Korea but anything's possible. I'd rather embrace the challenge and say to everybody out there that we will be



as good as we can. The most important thing is we'll make an impact," the Englishman added.

Bangladesh, the only side in the competition ranked outside 100, will begin their campaign against China on March 3 in Western Sydney Stadium before meeting North Korea at the same venue three days later. Butler's charges will wrap up the group stage against Uzbekistan at the Perth Rectangular Stadium.

The top two teams from each of the three groups alongside the two best-third-place finishers will make it to the quarterfinals. However, this tournament will also serve as qualifying platforms for the next Women's World Cup as well as the 2028 Olympic Qualifiers.

The four semifinalists will directly qualify for Brazil 2027 while the four losing sides in the quarter-finals will have another chance with a playoff to claim two more World Cup spots.

All the eight quarter-finalists will book a ticket to the Los Angeles 2028 qualifying tournament.

Butler, who is currently training the under-20 team for the AFC Women's U-20 Asian Cup Qualifiers to be held in Laos early next month, also reflected on the 'consistent improvement' his side have made since he took over around 17 months ago. With only seven months left, the Englishman said that he won't tinker much with his team ahead of the mega event in Australia.

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Bangladesh coach Peter Butler

GROUPS

- Group A: Australia, South Korea, Philippines, Iran
- Group B: North Korea, China, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh
- Group C: Japan, Vietnam, Chinese Taipei, India

BANGLADESH'S GROUP FIXTURES

- Bangladesh vs China: Sydney, March 3, 2026
- Bangladesh vs North Korea: Sydney, March 6, 2026
- Bangladesh vs Uzbekistan: Perth, March 9, 2026

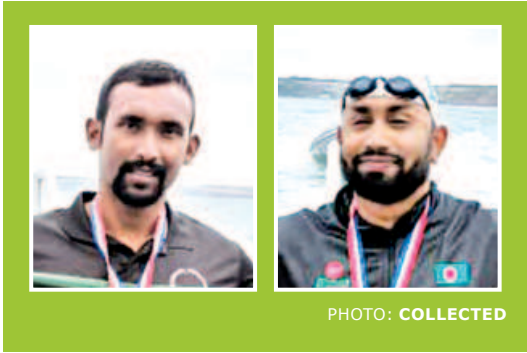


PHOTO: COLLECTED

After 37 years, Bangladeshi swimmers Mahfizur Rahman Sagor and Nazmul Haque Himel crossed the English Channel, a strait in the Atlantic Ocean, on Tuesday. It took them 12 hours and 20 minutes to complete a relay, along with three Indians and a Mexican. Bangladesh Swimming Federation joint secretary Nibedita Das confirmed the news to The Daily Star. Mosharraf Hossain was the last Bangladeshi swimmer to cross the English Channel in 1988.

Gambhir clashes with Oval staff

AFP, London

India head coach Gautam Gambhir was involved in an angry exchange with Surrey's head groundsman at the Oval ahead of Thursday's final Test against England – the latest incident during an increasingly tetchy tour.

Ben Stokes' team are resting ahead of the decisive fifth Test but the tourists were practising in the nets as they attempt to salvage a 2-2 draw.

Gambhir was seen sharing terse words with Lee Fortis, Surrey's lead curator at the London ground.

The 58-Test veteran was caught on camera wagging his finger as Fortis towered over him, repeatedly stating: "You can't tell us what to do" and "You don't tell any of us what to do".

Gambhir can also be heard adding: "You're just the groundsman, nothing beyond."

Fortis is understood to have been keeping a protective eye on the playing area during India's practice, with plenty of cricket still to be played on it this season.

After walking away in conversation with India batting coach Sitanshu Kotak, who appeared to take on the role of mediator, Fortis told Gambhir he may be forced to lodge a complaint against him, drawing a response of: "You can go and report to whoever you want".

It is unclear whether India have concerns over the pitch, which is expected to provide greater pace and bounce than has been seen in the previous four matches, potentially favouring England's quick bowlers.

The home team's attack has struggled for penetration at times, including in India's second innings at Old Trafford, where the bowlers took just four wickets in 143 overs as the fourth Test ended in a draw on Sunday.

The series has become increasingly heated, with the tourists refusing to shake hands on a draw early in Manchester to allow Washington Sundar and Ravindra Jadeja to reach centuries, a decision that angered England.

India captain Shubman Gill accused England of ignoring the "spirit of cricket" with time-wasting tactics in the third Test at Lord's, where India fast bowler Mohammed Siraj was fined for the aggressive "send-off" he gave to Ben Duckett.



Zinnat eager to showcase skill and technique

SPORTS REPORTER

New York-based boxer Zinnat Ferdous expressed excitement over making her domestic debut in Bangladesh at the National Boxing Championships yesterday – nearly two years after first representing the country at the 2023 Hangzhou Asian Games.

The 31-year-old, who advanced to the semifinals with a bye, comfortably defeated her opponent Achia Khatun to reach the final of the 52kg weight category. In today's final, Zinnat will be facing Afra Khandokar – the elder sister of Bangladesh football captain Afeida Khandokar – who beat Sejuti Islam in the other semifinal.

"When I entered the ring, many supporters were cheering for me. I felt their love because they think I'm playing for Bangladesh. It was really exciting, and I enjoyed it," Zinnat told reporters after completing her first bout in Bangladesh.

"I feel very good to be playing in Bangladesh for the first time after representing the country internationally for two years. Playing on home soil in front of a lot of fans is a feel-good factor for me."

Regarding her opponent, Zinnat said, "Style makes the fight. Every boxer has their own style. I think Achia was a bit different – she seemed loaded and played defensively. The fight could have been different had she been technically sound, but I never underestimated her. A win is a win."

Zinnat mentioned her eagerness to show her prowess in the final.

"I want to enjoy the final fight. I'm excited and want to show my skill and technique," she added.

Inspired by her husband, Zinnat began boxing in 2021 at the age of 27. Since then, she has won medals in five of the seven tournaments she has competed in. Now working at Google, she dreams of winning gold for Bangladesh on the international stage.

"I've won five medals in seven tournaments. My goal is to win a medal in every event. I share the dream of winning at the upcoming South Asian Games and hope to become the first Bangladeshi boxer – male or female – to win gold in the next international tournament for Bangladesh," she said.

Zinnat's parents – her father from Nawabganj and mother from Pabna – moved to New York in 1987. There, she has been training rigorously: six days a week, running four days, boxing five days, and doing strength training three days a week.

Zinnat, who believes boxing has strong potential in Bangladesh, was not dissatisfied with the current setup at Mohammad Ali Boxing Stadium, mentioning "many things can be improved in the coming days."



Zinnat Ferdous lands a punch on Achia Khatun in the 52kg weight category semifinal of the National Boxing Championships at the Mohammad Ali Boxing Stadium in Dhaka yesterday. Zinnat went on to beat her opponent comfortably, setting up a final showing with Afra Khandokar today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Aminul steps in as 'wickets exist but no plan'

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Wickets have been at the centre of recent conversations in Bangladesh cricket. Not only did the surfaces recently used against Pakistan draw sharp criticism, concerns over practice wickets have also been simmering for years, with players increasingly voicing their discomfort.

So, when the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Aminul Islam Bulbul personally inspected the practice pitches at the Academy Ground and the ones near the indoor facility, it naturally raised eyebrows. Why would the board president need to get involved in such matters, especially when the Grounds Committee exists to handle them? His presence suggested just how far the department had lagged behind.

As a former Bangladesh captain with experience at the ICC, Aminul felt compelled to intervene.

"I talked to the players after the last match we played [against Pakistan] and felt their needs regarding good practice wickets," Aminul told The Daily Star on

Tuesday. "Since I understand wickets quite a bit, that's why I wanted to see for myself."

He added that while the players offered hints, his own observations confirmed that wicket preparation lacked planning. With major assignments like the Asia Cup and World Cup coming up, he stressed the importance of aligning practice conditions with the ones players will face – particularly in places like Dubai.

"If our boys can play in similar wickets, they will perform there."

Cricketers, in fact, have long felt that the practice surfaces, particularly the greenhouse wickets meant for use during the monsoon, have hampered development. According to the BCB boss, the problem stems from poor planning.

"Most of the wickets are underprepared, especially the greenhouse wickets where only two wickets out of 14 can be used. I am not a groundsman and my main reason for going there was whether we were preparing the wickets to reflect conditions such as Dubai or Sharjah."



"When I went there, I found that wickets exist, but no plan is there. I have been seeing it for years and years but what action has taken place?" he said.

The BCB president says he is shifting focus to also bring wickets into the equation, recognising its crucial role in impacting top-level performance.

"I really feel bad about this that I demand so much from a player and even chastise them for

playing badly. But do we think about what wickets we serve them?"

"I have started asking for reports from the relevant department (grounds)... so that at least we quickly prepare wickets such as Sharjah and Dubai's for immediate needs... You have to give the players that confidence," he said, adding that weather cannot be a factor behind poor wickets since countries like

Sri Lanka have more rain than Bangladesh.

Not only practice surfaces, but the centre wickets were also under inspection. Mirpur's head curator, Gamini de Silva, often comes under the spotlight for wrong reasons. Aminul asked questions regarding soil and process.

"I asked when he [Gamini] used new soil and whether he plants the grass or uses seeds. He said he plants them. I asked him how deep the roots go since sometimes when you plant, the root doesn't go deep. But when you use seeds, it will. Since we have regular matches in the centre wicket, it's better to plant rather than use seeds. But in the academy, you must use seed," the president reflected.

Amid speculation that Gamini might be reassigned outside Dhaka, Aminul informed "there is no truth to that" but the board is "talking with other curators and may replace him".

"His contract ended so maybe something like a sudden death phase may come up," he concluded.