

BCB mulls revisiting the past amid fears and excitement

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) officials are considering adding some overseas flair in the country's first-class competitions – National Cricket League (NCL) and the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) – a move that has already caused some controversy, and brought forward arguments both for and against it.

BCB is considering including two overseas players in each team in the next NCL. It is also tinkering with the idea of bringing in a foreign team in the BCL and as per sources, 'A' teams of Afghanistan and Sri Lanka are being considered.

For the local players, who get a maximum of 12 first-class matches in a year, inclusion of foreign players in the NCL would mean fewer opportunities.

"I feel the question is, are you bringing players of a higher quality? For instance, someone like Kane Williamson? Foreign players such as [Kumar] Sangakkara and [Tilakratne] Dilshan have played here before. If you aren't bringing quality players, then a local player isn't playing for someone who is not of high calibre... What benefit would come from including a foreign team in BCL?" a veteran domestic player told The Daily Star under conditions of anonymity.

➔ On November 17, 1997, 11 Bangladeshi players made their first-class debut against Northern Conference in The Shell Conference in Hamilton, New Zealand. Seven of them later played in Bangladesh's inaugural Test against India.

➔ In the match, pacer Hasibul Hossain Shanto picked up 6 for 143, becoming the first Bangladeshi to take a five-wicket haul in first-class cricket. Al Shahriar became Bangladesh's maiden first-class centurion in the third game of the tournament at Dunedin. Bashar and Co played seven matches in that 1997-98 tour.

"You can actually invest money on local players instead of bringing in foreign players. We lack facilities," another player opined.

But not all players are against the move, as a young speedster said, "I think the idea of a new team in BCL is a good one. Once we went to India's Bengaluru where our 'A' team played against their first-class team. It can be good as it could provide tougher competition since Sri Lanka 'A' are a good side."

The idea of a foreign team in the country's domestic first-class competition may seem without precedence. But Bangladesh's own first-class journey began with such an endeavor.

Just a few months after winning the 1997 ICC Trophy, Bangladesh were invited to take part in the inaugural edition of The Shell Conference – a first-class tournament in New Zealand.

Former Bangladesh captain Habibul Bashar, who was part of that series, feels it can be a good move.

"It won't be the first instance since in 1997, we played in New Zealand's first-class competition. The experience was really good," recalls Bashar.

"I don't see a problem. In the English County Championship, one foreign player is allowed per side. Even in Bangladesh, when Biman was champion, Imran Farhat [Pakistan left-handed opener] was playing for us and I actually learned a lot from him before I played international cricket. Shaheed Mahmood was a leg-spinner [from Pakistan] who played for Chattogram, and I learned a lot about playing leg-spin from him.

"It's not something new and it can help our players a lot. I don't know if it will happen but it can be good," said Bashar, who serves as head of operations in BCB's game development.

While there are doubts over availability of foreign players during the October-November window of NCL, it could significantly help bolster the country's domestic competitions even as arguments exists both for and against it.



PHOTO: BFF

Bangladesh captain Afeida Khandokar looks focused during their final practice session at home on Thursday, ahead of leaving for Laos on August 2 to play in the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers.

AFC U-20 WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS SAFF champs set for LAOS ASSIGNMENT

Recent past record: 2024 Qualifiers: Bangladesh secured a 4-0 win against Turkmenistan but lost to Iran, missing out on progression; 2019 Qualifiers: A 5-1 win over Tajikistan was overshadowed by losses to South Korea (7-0) and Chinese Taipei (2-0).

Bangladesh fixtures:
Laos: August 6 (7pm)
Timor-Leste: August 8 (4pm)
South Korea: August 10 (4pm)

BANGLADESH SQUAD

Mile Akter, Swarna Rani, Fardosi Shonale; Afeida Khandoker (c), Nabiran Khatun, Puja Das, Surma Jannat, Joynob Bibi, Kanom Akter, Kanon Rani, Ruma Akter; Sapna Rani, Munki Akter, Oeyshi Khatun, Ayonto Bala, Rupa Akter, Bonna Khatun, Nadia Akter; Mosammat Sagorika, Trishna Rani, Shanti Mardi, Umehla Marma, Sinha Jahan.

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh women's youth team now have their sights set on the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers in Laos, taking place from August 6-10, as the buoyant bunch will aim to match the recent feat of the senior side.

The squad, unchanged from their victorious SAFF U-20 Women's Championship campaign at home, was announced yesterday. The team will depart for Laos on August 2.

Bangladesh have been placed in Group H alongside hosts Laos, South Korea, and Timor-Leste. South Korea, a formidable force in the tournament's history with two titles to their credit (2004, 2013) – will be the key contenders to advance as group champions.

Coach Peter Butler, however, remains focused on taking it

match by match at Laos National Stadium, with the opening game against the home side on August 6 critical for building momentum.

"Our first priority is Laos. South Korea are very strong, but we'll be fit and ready for that," Butler told reporters at a press meet in Dhaka yesterday.

Captain Afeida Khandoker echoed her coach's sentiment. "We know South Korea are tough, but we aim to qualify for the final round," said the defender, who recently captained the senior team in Myanmar to a historic berth at the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 before the SAFF U-20 triumph at home.

Eight group winners and three best runners-up from the qualifiers will join hosts Thailand for the 2026 AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup. The top four teams from there will secure spots in the

FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup 2026 in Poland.

Asked about the possibility of his charges advancing as one of the best runners-up, coach Butler reiterated the need for keeping up the development arc. "The SAFF tournament was experimental for me and for the players. When it comes to the AFC, it's a different kettle of fish. We're talking a step up... [Since] we don't have a league, and I think it's really important to understand that our development comes from playing high profile games against the best oppositions we possibly can," said the Englishman.

"And since I've come here, I've requested that, and... shown that we can actually compete with teams who have higher rankings," added the former Liberia and Botswana coach.

Family's constant support, and a golden debut

ANISUR RAHMAN

"Hit her, hit her hard," shouted Afeida Khandokar, captain of the Bangladesh women's football team, from the stands of the Mohammad Ali Boxing Stadium in Dhaka yesterday.

Her presence came as a surprise, even to her elder sister Afra Khandokar, who was in the ring battling Zinnat Ferdous in the 52kg final of the 31st Men's and 7th Women's National Boxing Championships. Afra didn't know until just before the bout that Afeida would make it to the stadium, especially after attending a U-20 national football team practice and press conference earlier in the day.

Afeida arrived with their parents to cheer on Afra, adding energy to a surprisingly lively crowd on the championship's final day – rare for a tournament that usually ends without much buzz.

But this year, the spotlight was firmly on New York-based Zinnat Ferdous, who made her domestic debut memorable by clinching gold, outclassing Afra despite the latter's strong family support.

The atmosphere, however,



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

contrasted with the poor conditions inside the stadium. Spectators, including the services team members, sat in dusty galleries. Many had to climb ladders to access the stands, as the entrance gates were locked.

Yet, the excitement was palpable. Fans welcomed both fighters with loud cheers, with Afra's family being the most vocal. Her father, Arif Hassan Prince, even offered tactical instructions from the stands.

In the ring, Zinnat controlled all three rounds with sharp footwork and fast, accurate punches, while Afra stayed on the defensive. The result was a convincing win for

Zinnat.

"It felt great to see so many fans in the gallery. This is just the beginning for me in domestic competitions, and I hope to continue," said Zinnat after the bout.

Afra, collecting her second consecutive silver at the senior level, remained upbeat. "She [Zinnat] is a skilled boxer with great technique. I just focused on staying in the ring – I was determined not to get knocked out."

Zinnat, in turn, praised Afra's resilience. "Bangladeshis have strong eagerness for the sport. With better technique, they can achieve even more," she said.

Afeida, watching her sister take the punches, admitted, "I was scared seeing the blows land on her, even though I enjoyed the match."

In the overall standings, Bangladesh Army topped the table with 17 gold medals in men's and women's events, followed by Bangladesh Ansar with six.

But regardless of the results, the crowd's passion, despite infrastructural shortcomings, offered hope that boxing could rise in popularity – even in a country dominated by cricket and football.



On 21, India captain Shubman Gill ran himself out on Thursday's opening day of the fifth and deciding Test against England, coming close to Sunil Gavaskar's national record for runs in a single series. Gill needs just 32 more runs to overhaul Gavaskar's mark (774) for the most runs scored by an Indian batter in a Test series -- achieved against the West Indies in 1971. Gill struck several elegant trademark drives and rarely looked in trouble till he pushed the ball into the offside and set off for a single that was never on. India were 85-3 at Tea after rain stopped play for a second time at the Oval in a game that the tourists must win to square the five-match series at 2-2.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pak, Windies eye revival in low-key US clash

AGENCIES

Pakistan and West Indies, once cricketing powerhouses, now meet in Florida under far less fanfare.

Their three-match T20I series, starting Friday [6am, Bangladesh Time] in Lauderhill, comes as both teams seek redemption after bruising recent runs, amid dwindling interest and sluggish ticket sales in the US.

Once iconic rivals in the 1980s and '90s, their stature has eroded sharply. West Indies have won just one of their last 12 T20Is, enduring whitewashes against Bangladesh, England and Australia, while injuries to Brandon King and Shimron Hetmyer further weaken their batting depth.

Pakistan, under new coach Mike Hesson, are similarly adrift, losing to Bangladesh and slipping against lower-ranked sides like USA and Ireland. Frequent captaincy changes and revolving-door coaching stints mirror their instability.

Both sides are trying to rebuild before the 2026 T20 World Cup, but their struggles underline deeper systemic issues. Pakistan have recalled Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf to bolster their bowling, while West Indies lean on replacements like Alick Athanaze and veteran Johnson Charles, underscoring a lack of depth.

Yet beyond cricketing concerns, the series highlights the game's faltering foothold in the US. Lauderhill, envisioned as a hub to woo South Asian and Caribbean diasporas, has seen sluggish ticket sales despite steep price cuts, underlining waning enthusiasm.

In a nation with little organic cricketing footprint, the tepid response speaks volumes. For two teams long fallen from their peak, this series feels less like a marquee clash and more like a quiet attempt to regain relevance - both on the field and in a market still proving elusive.



Lionel Messi returned from a one-match suspension in style, assisting both goals as Inter Miami edged Atlas 2-1 in their Leagues Cup opener in Fort Lauderdale on Wednesday. His stoppage-time pass set up Marcelo Weigandt's winner after Telasco Segovia's earlier strike. This was the fifth assist in the month for Messi, who, along with teammate Jordi Alba, was handed a one-match suspension by Major League Soccer for skipping its All-Star game.

PHOTO: INTER MIAMI



An underwater view shows French star Leon Marchand powering to 200m medley gold at the 2025 World Aquatics Championships in Singapore on Thursday. A day after shattering Ryan Lochte's record, the Paris Olympics hero admitted: "I felt so excited yesterday that I couldn't sleep." Despite the fatigue, he clocked 1:53.68, the second-fastest ever, sealing his sixth world title.

PHOTO: AFP