



A Satkhira player acrobatically volleys the ball into the Dhaka court during the final of a sepak takraw tournament, organised to mark the July Uprising Day, at the Shaheed M Mansur Ali Handball Stadium in Dhaka yesterday. A total of eight teams participated at the daylong event, won by Satkhira. Although quite low-key in Bangladesh, the sport enjoys massive popularity in Southeast Asia and has been an Asian Games discipline since 1990.

PHOTO: STAR

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Charioteer at The Oval: Krishna delivers under fire

KHALID HOSSAIN

In every great war, the final blow is rarely dealt by the generals. The ones history often conveniently chooses to forget are the footsoldier in the mud, the archer behind the ridge, the undercover who doesn't blink. The battle, however, remembers. If Mohammad Siraj was the warrior who swung the sword at the decisive moments at The Oval Test, fellow pacer Prasidh Krishna was the charioteer who steadied the charge.

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Potatoes for Danish football's MOTM



AFP, Copenhagen

French footballer Maxime Soulas's prize for his man-of-the-match award in the Danish first division did not go down like a sack of potatoes -- more like a wheelbarrow's worth. After performing when the chips were down by opening the scoring for Sonderjyske in their 3-2 win against Nordsjaelland on Sunday, Soulas received 55 kilograms of the tasty tubers, the 26-year-old defender told AFP on Tuesday. "I gave the potatoes to my club's cafeteria, and they donated some to a soup kitchen," he said. It marks the first time the man of the match can eat his award for his post-match supper. "The sponsor of the match decides on the reward. He found it funny and now the story's gone round the world," said the club's communications director, Jacob Ravn. Originally from Montpellier in southern France, Soulas came to Denmark in 2020 to play for Amager in the capital Copenhagen, before joining recently promoted Sonderjyske in 2021. Before that he played his football in the Netherlands.

U-20s out to 'make an impact' in Asia

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Under-20 women's team will look to build on their recent run of form when they face hosts Laos in their opening Group H match of the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers today. The match is set to kick off at 6:30pm at the Lao National Stadium in Vientiane. From the senior side to the youth teams, the women in red and green have shown steady progress under English coach Peter Butler. Last month, he guided the senior national team to their first-ever Women's Asian Cup qualification before leading the U-20s to an unbeaten title run in the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship at home. Butler's squad will aim to carry that momentum into the Asian qualifiers, strengthened by a mix of senior players and rising talents who impressed in the recent SAFF campaign. Still, Bangladesh's track record at this level offers little comfort -- they failed to clear the qualifiers in their

five previous attempts between 2006 and 2023. In the last edition, however, they managed a breakthrough of sorts, beating Turkmenistan 4-0 before narrowly losing 1-0 to Iran, who scored just five minutes from time to top the three-team group. This campaign, too, presents a steep challenge -- especially with two-time champions South Korea in the mix -- but Bangladesh remain hopeful of strong showings against Timor-Leste and Laos. "Our goal is to make an impact," Peter Butler said during the pre-tournament briefing in Laos yesterday. "I think the most important thing is we know we're streets behind [South] Korea in terms of their actual professionalism, organisation, investment, quality of players, etc. "We've restarted... we've achieved a long term goal by qualifying for the Women's Asian Cup next March. Obviously, this is a very, very important competition for us in terms of seeing where we are, and in

terms of development at the U-20 level," added the English coach. Captain Aleida Khandokar added: "We have come here to qualify for the finals and we will be trying our level best to display a good show in every match." South Korea -- also twice finishing third -- are favourites to top the four-team group. Bangladesh, however, could still qualify for the 12-team final round as one of the three best runners-up from eight groups. For that, they must rack up big wins over Timor-Leste and Laos, and limit the damage against South Korea in the final match. Laos remain something of an unknown for Bangladesh, though they have pedigree at this level -- having beaten Myanmar 4-2 in 2018 and drawn 2-2 with the Philippines in the previous edition. Still, it's Bangladesh's young women who have been rewriting the script in recent months. And they'll hope to keep that momentum going on Asia's bigger stage.



Wirtz unfazed by huge Liverpool price tag

AFP, London

Florian Wirtz says his huge price tag "doesn't matter" as he prepares for his first season in the Premier League after a switch to champions Liverpool from Bayer Leverkusen. The attacking midfielder arrived at Anfield for an initial £100 million (\$132 million) that could rise to £116 million with add-ons, making his move a potential British record. However, speaking after impressing in a 3-2 friendly win over Athletic Bilbao on Monday, the 22-year-old brushed off the size of his transfer fee. "I don't think about it. I just want to play football, and how much money the clubs pay between each other, it doesn't matter," he said. "Of course, the big challenge is to win the title again, and it is the most difficult thing so, (I will) try and just create chances and also work against the ball. "I can also run a lot so, (I will) bring this to the team, and then with the ball, I can make the team better and bring my teammates into better situations." Liverpool face FA Cup winners Crystal Palace in the season-opening Community Shield on Sunday and kick off their Premier League title defence at home to Bournemouth on August 15. Germany international Wirtz said he was relishing the challenge. "There are some differences to Germany, but I think there is also something I can learn and make me better. So, I am really looking forward to it," he said. "It's more intense and more physical, every player is really strong, really fast. That is what everybody is telling me."



NEYMAR MAKING A CASE FOR BRAZIL RETURN?

Neymar, once seen as the next big phenomenon coming out of Brazil, has fallen by the wayside due to recurring injury problems. Having plied his trade outside Europe for over two years now, Neymar remains a story of "what could have been" for Brazil supporters. Could the 33-year-old be getting another shot in the famous blue and yellow jersey? The forward certainly thinks so. "Everyone knows what I'm capable of. I'm available and I feel good. The decision [of getting a call-back by Carlo Ancelotti's Brazil] is in the hands of the national team staff," Neymar said after a standout performance in Brazil's Serie A on Tuesday. He scored twice in Santos' 3-1 win over Juventude -- his first brace in over two years. It was also the first time he started five consecutive matches since August 2022. Santos, however, are still struggling in 15th place on the points table. But Neymar, who moved to his boyhood club after an injury-plagued and disappointing stint at Saudi Pro League side Al Hilal, certainly seems eager to make a case for the national team once again.

From sidekick to showstopper

REUTERS

Mohammed Siraj landed in England as Jasprit Bumrah's trusted sidekick and then produced a stellar display across five gruelling Tests to prove that he possesses both the heart and the craft to lead India's pace battery. India arrived with a depleted attack after veteran seamer Mohammed Shami was deemed unfit for the tour and pace spearhead Bumrah available only for three of the five Tests. It meant Siraj had to shoulder a bigger responsibility and the 31-year-old responded with a lion-hearted effort -- playing all five Tests and finishing the series as its highest wicket-taker. Thanks to his never-say-die attitude, India drew the series 2-2, winning in Birmingham and at the Oval -- matches that Bumrah sat out. Siraj bowled a staggering 185-odd overs in the series claiming 23 wickets and drawing 283 false shots -- edges

or misses -- according to data and analytics provider CricViz. "You got to tip your cap sometimes," England coach Brendon McCullum told Test Match Special after Siraj fashioned India's thrilling six-run win



in the series finale on Monday. "A guy playing his fifth Test match (of the series), bowling 30 overs, bowling 90 miles-an-hour in the 30th over to take five wickets to get the job done -- fair play." Siraj not only survived the rigour of playing five Tests in a row but was also unrelenting whenever he had the ball in his hand. It prompted England batting mainstay Joe Root to call Siraj a "real warrior" while former India captain Virat Kohli singled out the bowler for his relentless aggression. "Special mention to Siraj who will put everything on the line for the team. Extremely happy for him," Kohli wrote on X. Siraj, who won the player of the match award at The Oval, did not fuss about his workload and said his "body is fine". "(Whether) you bowl the sixth over or the ninth over, I don't care," he told reporters on Monday. "I believe you bowl every ball for your country, not for yourself. (When) you play for the country, give it everything."