



What to WATCH

T SPORTS

Zimbabwe vs New Zealand
2nd Test, Day 1
Live from 2:00 pm
SONY SPORTS 5

The Hundred
Northern Super-chargers vs
Welsh Fire
Live from 11:30 pm

SAGORIKA BRACE gives Bangladesh winning start

SPORTS REPORTER

Mosammat Sagorika scored a brace as Bangladesh got off to a winning start in their AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers with a 3-1 win over hosts Laos in their first Group H fixture at Lao National Stadium in Vientiane on Wednesday.

Coming off an MVP performance in Bangladesh's title-winning SAFF U-20 Championship campaign, Sagorika scored either side of the break. Munki Akter added another goal to help the women in red and green secure all three points, following South Korea's

dominant 9-0 win over Timor-Leste in the earlier fixture at the same venue.

Peter Butler's charges looked slightly nervous in the opening half, struggling with errant passes and an occasionally exposed backline. Despite several long-range efforts, Bangladesh failed to capitalise early on. Laos forward Vanvaly Bounlamy nearly punished the visitors, but Bangladesh held firm.

The breakthrough came in the 36th minute when Sagorika headed in a left-footed corner delivered by Shanti Mardi. Sinha Jahan Shikha came close to doubling the lead five minutes later,

but her effort struck the woodwork.

Bangladesh looked more composed after the break, controlling possession and creating chances. However, they initially failed to convert, with Shanti Mardi missing a clear opportunity in the 46th minute and Trishna Rani narrowly off-target from close range shortly after.

The second goal arrived in the 58th minute when Munki, played through by Trishna, nutmegged defender Nitzia Sumalit and calmly slotted the ball into the near post past goalkeeper Thongsamoud Vongkhamphan.

Sagorika nearly added another

in the 72nd minute off a cross from Sapna Rani, only to be denied by the crossbar. Laos pulled one back in the 86th minute through Anna Keo Onsy, raising hopes of a late comeback. But Sagorika sealed the victory in stoppage time with a composed left-footed finish from inside the six-yard box.

Bangladesh will take on Timor-Leste in their next match on Friday, while South Korea will square off against Laos. Only the winners of the eight groups along with three best second placed finishers will advance to the final round, which will be held in Thailand in April next year.

For whom the whistle doesn't blow Stalled Pioneer League leaves youth development adrift

KHALID HOSSAIN

For a nation that claims to love football, we have a curious way of showing it.

The Pioneer Football League (PFL), long seen as the launchpad for Bangladesh's most promising talents, hasn't been held in over three years. Since Barishal Football Academy lifted the trophy in the 2021-22 edition, thousands of aspiring professionals – mostly teenagers and under the age of 15 – have been caught in limbo.

The PFL was once the cradle of Bangladesh's footballing future, producing stars like Monem Munna, Rummon Bin Wali Sabir, Jewel Rana, and Alfaaz Ahmed – and more recently, national players like Mohammad Abdullah and Jafar Iqbal. Although it ran regularly from 2012 to 2016 during former Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Kazi Salauddin's second term at the helm, the most extensive grassroots competition in the country has since faded into neglect, held just three times in the past eight years.

With such initial conditions in place, generation after generation are being set up to end with unfulfilled potential.

Yesterday, many officials from PFL outfits gathered outside the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) headquarters. Some carried placards. Others brought children who should have been out on a field, not protesting on a pavement.

"Let's start the Pioneer League or step down," one sign read. Another asked a simple question: "Why is it stopped?"



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

It's a fair question. If football is to be taken forward, why does the federation stay fixated on national teams and Dhaka's top-tier leagues, while grassroots football withers? How can development thrive when a tournament of such scale and legacy lies dormant?

The BFF appointed executive member Tipu Sultan as chairman of the Pioneer League committee in November last year, but the rest of the committee is yet to be finalised.

"We plan to resume the Pioneer Football League tentatively from mid-October," Sultan told The Daily Star from Kathmandu yesterday, adding that he will meet board president Tabith Awal to expedite the process once he returns.

But the clock, typically unforgiving in nature, is ticking.

In a footballing culture where women players have had to fight for basic necessities like nutritious food or address unpaid salaries – even after landmark victories – or when women's team head coach describes the living standard in the BFF Elite Academy in "bad shape", something just doesn't add up.

If the roots are diseased, how can the tree bear fruit?

Even with financial constraints or logistical hurdles, youth development cannot be sacrificed.

As Mohanagar Krira Chakra's Alamgir Hossain warned yesterday, "If the league is held irregularly, then you won't find any footballers in the coming days."

Shahadat Hossain of Laizu Football Academy cautioned as well, that time is slipping away, noting, "If they can't start the league in October, it will be deferred by another six months due to the preparation for the national elections and Ramadan."

Bangladesh can no longer afford to let this sleeping giant lie. The youth are waiting, and they don't tend to have the patience to wait for long.

A little over a year ago, all-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin inadvertently exposed the sorry state of the players' pipeline in Bangladesh when he told the media, "To be honest, there are 20-25 players in Bangladesh who are capable of playing international cricket... Opportunities will come if I can stay fit."

To his credit, Saifuddin substantiated this statement himself by getting called up for the series against Sri Lanka and Pakistan in this year's July out of the blue.

Saifuddin also features in the recently announced 25-member preliminary Bangladesh squad for next month's Asia Cup – an assortment of players which looks less like a shortlist of the country's premier T20 players, and more like the collection of almost every available white-ball cricketer fit to play for the Tigers.

Barring the players who only feature in Tests – like Mominul Haque, Shadman Islam and Mahmudul Hasan Joy, some domestic performers who have not been able to replicate it in international cricket – Anamul Haque Bijoy, Mosaddeq Hossain, Afif Hossain and Yasir Ali, and some young upstarts yet to break into the national side – Akbar Ali, Jishan Alam, anyone who could have been drafted into the 25-member squad, has in fact, been drafted.

Few of the inclusions are quite baffling, given how they had either failed to prove their mettle in the format in the past or were very recently dropped from the side.

One of those selections was Mohammad Naim, who was picked for last month's T20I assignments against Sri Lanka and Pakistan on the back of good performances in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) and also an 82-run knock against New Zealand A in May.

But the opener could not make the opportunity count, failing to inspire with a 29-ball 32 in the only match he featured in the Sri Lanka series and his lethargic batting in the Pakistan series raised the question of what exactly he has improved upon after being left out of the T20I setup in August 2022, due to a

lack of impactful knocks.

Naim has so far played 38 T20Is which obviously points to the fact that he is not untested in the format. While selectors may feel there is a chance for him to stake a claim in the setup, so far it remains only a hypothesis.

Soumya Sarkar perhaps exists in the opposite end of the spectrum as impact has not been a problem for him but consistency has always been a thorn.

Soumya, who has featured in 87 T20Is, was dropped from Bangladesh's last two series, did not score big for Rangpur Riders in the Global Super League in the Caribbean in July, but perhaps in the spirit of being in the radar, remains in the 25-member squad.

Even former skipper Nazmul Hossain Shanto was called up to the preliminary squad after being dropped from Sri Lanka and Pakistan T20Is.

Current ODI captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz could not impress in the three games he played in the last two series, but that didn't affect his status as a player in the T20I radar as he was duly picked in the preliminary squad.

There are also two returnees in the squad in Nurul Hasan Sohan and Saif Hassan, who have not played in T20Is for Bangladesh since 2022 and 2023 respectively, as apparently it was their turn to get reshuffled into the national team's mix after spending a little time at the periphery.

Calling up these players do not necessarily reflect that the selectors are wrong to include them. However, the fact that familiar faces keep circling back into the mix after being out for a few series favours the hypothesis that there just aren't enough players in the pipeline.

BPL, a tournament that was supposed to unearth fresh talents in T20s for Bangladesh, has not been very successful at it and there are hardly any other avenues for players to emerge from.

The dearth of players means less competition for a spot in the side, which is never a good thing. But until new, exciting talents emerge, the selectors have no choice but to shuffle around the same group of players in the hopes of a better outcome.

PHOTO: BCB

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