

Tim David smashed a 52-ball 83 to salvage the innings, while pacers Josh Hazlewood and Ben Dwarshuis scalped three wickets each to help Australia to a 17-run win over South Africa in the first T20I of the three-match series in Darwin yesterday. It was Australia's ninth straight T20I win – their longest streak.



PHOTO: ZIMBABWE CRICKET

Rizan stars as U-19s win Zim tri-series

Bangladesh U-19s finished the tri-nation series in Zimbabwe like they started, thumping South Africa by 33 runs in the final at Harare Sports Club yesterday. It was an all-round performance from Rizan Hossain, who made 95 off 96 deliveries to propel the young Tigers to 269 for five before bagging a fiver (5-34) to bundle out South Africa for 236 in 48.4 overs. Legspinner Shadhin Islam provided two crucial breakthroughs in the middle to halt the momentum of South Africa, while pacer Al Fahad picked up three for 50 in nine overs. Having clinched the final, Bangladesh will be returning home with six wins in seven matches in the tournament.

ATIQUE ANAM

Bangladesh women's football team coach, Peter Butler, had hoped his side would gain valuable lessons when they faced South Korea in their final Group H fixture of the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers on Sunday.

The Englishman praised South Korea's technical superiority and well-funded development structure. "They spend millions and millions on development. They've spent fortunes on planning and organisation. I'm sure their players don't stop at Level III of BFF. I just hope we learn some lessons from this tournament," he had said.

Bangladesh did, indeed, learn lessons at the Lao National Stadium in Vientiane – though perhaps not in the way Butler had hoped. The indomitable Young Tigresses were handed a sobering 6-1 defeat by a dominant South Korean side, who exposed some weakness in Bangladesh's game.

Despite the heavy loss, Bangladesh progressed to the final round of qualifiers – deservedly – as one of the three best runners-up teams. But the manner of their defeat has raised a few serious questions for Butler and his staff to ponder.

Bangladesh entered the final group match surprisingly in pole position, ahead of group favourites Korea, following commanding wins over Laos (3-1) and



Timor-Leste (8-0). With Korea only edging Laos 1-0, Bangladesh led the group on goals-scored count, and fans dared to dream of a famous result – buoyed by an eight-match winning streak and the senior team's recent successes against stronger opposition.

However, the gulf in class was quickly apparent. South Korea, ranked 21st at the senior level compared to Bangladesh's 104th, put on a display of technical brilliance, tactical discipline, and superior fitness, exposing both Butler's game plan and the team's physical limitations.

Bangladesh actually struck first, taking the lead in the 15th minute. But the lead

lasted only four minutes, as Korean captain Lee Haeun equalised with a clever run behind Bangladesh's high-line defence.

In response, Butler shifted from his preferred three at the back system to a four-player defence, sacrificing two wingers. But the tide had already turned. South Korea's relentless pressure saw them score five more goals in the second half, capitalising on Bangladesh's fading fitness and broken confidence.

It wasn't just this match that exposed vulnerabilities. The senior team also showed signs of fragility during their Asian Cup qualifying campaign, often relying on moments of individual brilliance from

the likes of Ritu Porna Chakma or Rupna Chakma – or simply sheer luck – to get over the line.

With less than seven months to go before the Women's Asian Cup in Australia – where Bangladesh will face more ruthless sides such as North Korea and China – the team will need far more than luck or individual sparks to avoid heavy defeats.

To his credit, Butler has done a commendable job since taking over. Under his stewardship, the senior team defended their SAFF Women's Championship crown and booked a maiden Asian Cup berth. He also led the U-20s to a SAFF title and their first-ever AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup qualification – all the while navigating through a distressing player-rebellion and managing success without some of the more experienced players.

Most importantly, the former West Ham United midfielder has given the Bangladesh women's teams a clear identity – one built on attractive, attacking football and a never-say-die attitude. But defeats like Sunday's come with a stark reminder to assess the broader picture – to refine strategies, improve conditioning, and close the gap in technical quality, leaving all illusion or ego aside.

The clock is ticking toward Australia, and the road ahead demands clarity, courage, and complete commitment from all involved.

AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

Debutant Abahani bank on Diabate

SPORTS REPORTER

Six-time Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) champions Abahani began preparations for the AFC Challenge League with much vigor in the middle of last month, bolstered by new signings and the expectation of three foreign recruits joining the club.

However, ahead of their playoff against Muras United FC of Kyrgyzstan tomorrow, the Sky Blues appear a bit out of sorts, with Malian forward Souleymane Diabate the only foreign recruit to have arrived. Diabate joined Abahani after spending six seasons at archrivals Mohammedan.

For both Diabate and Abahani, the AFC Challenge League will be a new experience, as they will be making their debut in the competition. Abahani's best-ever run in an AFC tournament came in 2019, when they reached the zonal semifinal of the AFC Cup.

Two other potential foreign recruits – Brazilian Raphael Augusto and Nigerian Emeka Ogbou – failed to join the Sky Blues. Abahani could not confirm Augusto's transfer, leading him to sign for Bashundhara Kings, while Emeka was unable to travel from Nigeria due to domestic issues.

Despite this, Diabate's words may offer some confidence to Abahani ahead of the clash against Muras United FC, who are scheduled to arrive in Dhaka this morning.

"This will be my first time playing in the AFC

Challenge League, but all football [matches] are the same. I'll just play my game and do everything I can to win and score for Abahani," Diabate told reporters after his first training session with the club at the National Stadium yesterday.

Although it will be a new season, new club, and new teammates for Diabate, the 34-year-old forward is determined to prove his worth at Abahani.

"I know all the Abahani players, so they are not new to me. Maybe the competition is new, but like I said, football is the same everywhere. The players are good, the coach is very good, and Abahani is a strong team. We will try to fight and win the game, insha'Allah," said Diabate, who was initially set to play for Mohammedan – the club that actually qualified for the AFC Challenge League but was barred from participating due to licensing issues.

Mohammedan had previously completed their licensing requirements for the tournament several times but failed to qualify in those years.

Asked how he planned to repay Abahani's faith in him as their lone foreign striker against Muras FC, Diabate replied: "Football is not a one-man game. Abahani have many good local players. Football is not only about foreigners – it is for local players as well. Foreigners are important, but local players are also very good. I played against them last season, so I know their quality. If they join me and help me, we can achieve something."

Liverpool's Wirtz named Germany's POTY

AFP, Berlin

Liverpool's club-record signing Florian Wirtz has been named Germany's player of the year, further cementing the attacking midfielder's status as a rising star.

Wirtz, whose £100 million (\$134 million) transfer fee with add-ons could rise to £116 million in what would be a British record, secured 191 votes among German sports journalists, putting him comfortably ahead of runner-up Michael Olise of Bayern Munich, who garnered 81 votes.

The 22-year-old attacking midfielder arrived at Anfield from Bayer Leverkusen in June, part of a spending spree that has seen players including French forward Hugo Ekitike and Hungarian leftback Milos Kerkez join the squad as Liverpool bid to retain the Premier League title.

Wirtz has been hailed as one of the "top players in the world" by former Leverkusen coach and ex-Liverpool midfielder Xabi Alonso, who is the new boss of Real Madrid.

After joining, Wirtz told Liverpool's website that he "would like to win everything every year!"

Wirtz also played a key role in Leverkusen's greatest season as they claimed a first-ever Bundesliga title and the German Cup in 2023/24 without losing a single game domestically under Alonso.

Liverpool are already blessed with an abundance of forward options – including Mohammed Salah – but the club are banking on Wirtz's creativity to help maintain the 33-year-old's prolific goalscoring and ease the burden of carrying the Liverpool attack.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Chelsea fuelling Samba ambitions

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

There is a lot to get excited about this season for Brazil fans, and for that the Selecao loyalists would be tempted to tune in to Chelsea games.

Plus it wouldn't be surprising to even see Brazil's coach Carlo Ancelotti in the stands at Stamford Bridge, gauging his player pool.

Fresh from winning the Club World Cup last month and a Conference League triumph in May, Chelsea boast some of the most exciting young players in world football, with a few standout Brazilians.

Topping that exclusive crop has to be winger Estevao Willian – widely considered the best talent to have come out of Brazil since Vinicius Junior.

After an impressive Club World Cup campaign with Palmeiras, 18-year-old Estevao made his highly anticipated debut for Chelsea in a friendly against Bayer Leverkusen on Saturday, marking the occasion with a goal in a 2-0 win for the home side at Stamford Bridge.

The flair, the deft touches, the body feints, and every bit of movement he made coming off the right fascinated the fans, who often responded with ooohs and aaahs from the stands. Estevao's style combines classic Brazilian directness with youthful boldness and creativity.

For five-time world champions – who have underwhelmed since their 2002 triumph, and have struggled to find a reliable option down the right flank in recent years; often trying Rodrygo, Antony – Estevao, who already has five caps for Brazil, seems to be the answer for



the Selecao.

Still early days, but the polished performances he's producing seem to have put him ahead of Vinicius, who copped a lot of flak for rawness, and it was not until his third season with Real Madrid that he hit the

ground running.

The second Brazilian to find the net on Saturday was striker Joao Pedro, whose clinical finish sealed the victory for Chelsea. He was also on target yesterday in his team's 4-1 win over AC Milan.

One of Chelsea's Club World Cup heroes, Pedro, who hit a brace in the semifinal and struck in the final to bring Chelsea the title, might fill one of the biggest voids in the Brazil team.

A technically gifted forward, Pedro is known for his clever movement, excellent link-up play, ability to thrive in tight spaces, and has an eye for the spectacular. At this moment, none of the competition – Richarlison, Gabriel Jesus, Matheus Cunha – seem to be showing the kind of sizzle and consistency that he has.

Great against his back to goal, he has a knack for driving the ball forward, and a brilliant work-rate shows he is fit for any style of play Ancelotti opts for.

Moreover, in the middle of the park, there is Andrey Santos, who had a breakout 2024-25 season with Ligue 1 side Strasbourg, so much so that Chelsea have called him back to strengthen the side.

Good in tight spaces, expressive in passing, while also an expert in controlling tempo and dictating play – a balance hard to find in midfielders – Santos, a key figure for Brazil across age-group football, seems ready for the big stage.

Ancelotti will undoubtedly monitor Santos closely, as his qualities could provide Brazil with a strong spine and help redefine the team's style, thrilling fans and neutrals alike.



RUN, RANA, RUN: Pacer Nahid Rana stood out during Bangladesh's fitness test at the National Stadium yesterday. Rana, who earned his teammates' approval during their session under strength and conditioning coach Nathan Kelly, clocked 5 minutes and 31 seconds to be the fastest in a 1,600-meter run without breaks. After the run, the cricketers also enjoyed a football session as preparations continued for the upcoming Netherlands series and the Asia Cup.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED