

'We have to be realistic'

STAR SPORTS DESK

"Like snakes and ladders, what goes up sometimes comes down," Bangladesh women's football head coach Peter Butler reflected on the team's landmark climb in the FIFA rankings.

Following their breakthrough campaign in Myanmar in June-July this year, the women in red and green surged from 128th to 104th in the latest FIFA rankings, the biggest leap by any nation.

The ranking boost mirrors Bangladesh's commanding qualifying performance at the age group level, as the U-20s on Sunday secured their first-ever berth in the AFC Women's U-20 Asian Cup, sealing the ticket to Thailand for April next year, as one of the three best runners-up among eight groups.

"I'm mindful that it can come tumbling down pretty quick, it can go up pretty quick," Butler said via a video shared by the Bangladesh Football Federation yesterday.

Butler credited this progress to a "competitive and healthier working environment" and said, "The girls deserve the recognition and accolades they're receiving."

The U-20s entered the qualifiers as reigning



SAFF champions, riding a six-match unbeaten streak, and carried that strong form through their campaign in Laos.

After emphatic wins over the hosts and Timor-Leste, the final group game pitted them against a world-class team like South Korea, a test they ultimately lost 6-1.

Reflecting on the defeat, Butler was candid: "I was proud of the girls, but at half-time I knew they were spent, they were done. We'd had fevers, injuries, and other issues... the South Koreans really put us to the sword in the second half."

"Having worked with FIFA and AFC, I've seen football federations worldwide are run by government funds, but in Bangladesh we run it with sponsors' money... We should've a training centre where the girls can stay comfortably, with gym and swimming pool facilities. Without a ground to practice properly, how can we expect anything good?"

Mahfuza Akhter Kiron, head of BFF women's wing, told reporters yesterday.

This was a match where Bangladesh had hoped to at least avoid a big-margin defeat but they conceded three late goals. Ultimately, the outcome did not spoil the party for Butler's charges.

Rejecting a defensive approach, the former Liberia and Botswana coach explained, "We could have parked the bus, just gone route one, smashed it down the pitch and just defended that for our lives, but that's not how I work."

"We went toe to toe in the first half, and at half-time it was one apiece. I admire the girls' durability and spirit."

"But it was a great learning curve yesterday [Sunday] against probably one of the best sides in world under-20 women's football."

Looking ahead, he opined, "So, we have to be realistic and keep striving, keep working to actually try and maintain that FIFA ranking and bring it down below 100."

Ultimately, Butler's reflections struck a balance between pride and pragmatism. The double dose of historic qualification and rankings rise mark significant milestones for Bangladesh women's football, but competing with Asia's elite will demand continued commitment, growth, and resilience.



PRODIGY'S GAMBIT

Already the youngest to earn a Woman GM norm, British chess prodigy Bodhna Sivanandan has now become the youngest female to beat a grandmaster. Aged 10 years, five months and three days, she outmanoeuvred 60-year-old English GM Peter Wells in the final round of the 2025 British Championships, surpassing American Carissa Yip's 2019 record. The daughter of Indian Tamil parents, Bodhna learnt chess during lockdown at five. In February last year, Indian-born Singaporean Ashwath Kaushik became the youngest ever to beat a GM, defeating Jacek Stopa at eight years, six months and 11 days.

PHOTO: FIDE

Proteas pace prodigy takes flight

AGENCIES



In just over a year, Kewa Maphaka has gone from dominating schoolboy cricket to unsettling some of the world's best batters.

On Sunday night in Darwin, the 19-year-old left arm quick once again underlined why many believe he is South Africa's next great fast-bowling hope.

Against Australia in the opening T20I, Maphaka returned career-best figures of 4-20, dismissing Mitchell Owen with a 144kph thunderbolt in just his fourth delivery and later removing power-hitter Tim David after conceding only 14 runs from 11 balls to him.

He capped his night with the scalps of Adam Zampa and Ben Dwarshuis, while also holding two sharp catches in the Powerplay.

It was the latest chapter in a rise that has been nothing short of meteoric. Maphaka burst onto the global stage at the ICC Under-19 Men's Cricket World Cup 2024, where his 21 wickets at 9.71 earned him player of the tournament honours despite being just 17.

His exploits caught the attention of IPL scouts, leading to a Mumbai Indians contract before he had played senior international cricket. Rajasthan Royals snapped him up in 2025.

International cricket followed swiftly. In his maiden ODI against Pakistan last December, Maphaka was clocked at 151kph. Two weeks later, he became South Africa's youngest Test debutant at 18 years and 270 days, showing the pace, skill, and temperament to trouble seasoned batters.

Maphaka's edge lies not just in his physical attributes - his whippy action, ability to move the ball at high speed, and athleticism in the field - but in his mindset. Teammates describe him as quiet off the field but fiercely competitive on it, unafeared of verbal exchanges with senior pros. Against Australia, he stood toe-to-toe with David, a decade older, and refused to blink.

With a T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka less than a year away, Maphaka has already made a compelling case to be a key figure in South Africa's plans.

If his development continues at this pace, the Proteas may have unearthed a bowler capable of leading their attack for the next decade.

'Satisfying to see the group evolving'

After winning a bilateral YODI series in South Africa 2-1, Bangladesh Under-19 team capped off their month-long Africa tour with a tri-national YODI series win in Zimbabwe involving the hosts and South Africa. U-19 team head coach Naveed Nawaz talked to **The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan** about the successful tour and the team's preparation for next year's U-19 World Cup. The excerpts are as follows:

DS: How do you rate the overall performance of your side in the last two series?

NN: It's very satisfying to see the boys performing really well. South Africa was quite different from Bangladesh in terms of wickets, and conditions. We played some really good cricket there. When we came to Harare, we found that things were quite different. The ball was keeping up and down and there was a bit of seam movement. But when the ball got older, it became easier to bat. These were the challenges for us throughout the series.

DS: How satisfying was it to see a different player emerging as the match winner in every game?

NN: We saw different players coming up with solutions to the problems they faced in the middle. They performed well to make an impact on the result as well. It was satisfying because you can see the group is evolving. It also means we are building a strong unit, with players who have confidence to handle situations under pressure and also make their presence felt in the middle.

DS: As the next U-19 World Cup will be held in Zimbabwe and Namibia, how important was this tour?

NN: It was important for the boys to have some understanding on how the wickets will play. Although we will play in Bulawayo, which we didn't go to this time as we played all the matches in Harare, still it's not going to be a lot different. This tour will help the boys and all of us



as well to help them prepare for the World Cup.

DS: This group of players won the Asia Cup, did well in Sri Lanka and now had a great tour in Africa. Do you feel your side is developing into a top contender for the next World Cup?

NN: As a team, we never speak about outcomes. We only speak about the roles the people will have to play and the process that we follow and the discipline that we need to maintain. If the players can play their roles well and as a team, if we can play good cricket, the outcome will take care of itself. We are looking forward to the World Cup but we really don't want to feel under pressure because of it. The main objective is to produce good

cricketers for Bangladesh.

DS: Do you see any similarities between this and the 2020 batch, which you coached to World Cup glory?

NN: It's too early to say, but yes, there is definitely potential here.

DS: Are you satisfied with the preparation for the World Cup so far? **NN:** We have played around 20 YODIs starting from the UAE in 2024. We have a series in September against England and then a home series against Afghanistan in October. Asia Cup will probably happen in December. So, there are more games to play and it will add to the players' experience, which will be good for them. So far, I'm very happy with the developments and outcomes as well.

AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE Abahani, Kings face stern tests in openers

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's top two clubs, Abahani and Bashundhara Kings, kick off their AFC Challenge League campaigns today, with Abahani hosting Kyrgyzstan's Muras United in Dhaka and Kings facing Syria's Al Karamah SC in Doha.

Despite less than ideal preparation ahead of their first matches of the season, both sides are eager to produce positive results against higher-ranked opponents and progress from the preliminary stage to the 20 team final round of Asia's third-tier club competition.

Abahani, six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions, have not advanced beyond the preliminaries of an AFC competition since their 2019 AFC Cup inter-zonal semifinal run.

Participating in continental tournaments for the 13th time since 1985, the Sky Blues face a stern challenge from Muras United, a club formed in 2023 but already leaders of the Kyrgyzstan Premier League with 11 wins in 15 matches.

For AKM Maruful Haque's men, overcoming a foreign-player-laden Muras will require a disciplined performance.

In Doha, domestic powerhouse Bashundhara Kings -- five-time league champions in six seasons -- are aiming to break their continental jinx, having exited at the group stage in four straight AFC competitions, the last without a single point.

New Brazilian coach Sergio Farias has had just one training session with the full squad, as foreign signings and expatriates Tariq Raihan Kazi and Michel Orellana joined only yesterday.

Kings now face a daunting task against Al Karamah, eight-time Syrian league winners and former runners-up in both the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup.

With minimal preparation, they will be banking on resilience and flashes of brilliance to pull off a surprise in Qatar.

When the Mo magic goes missing

STAR SPORTS DESK



For all his reputation, records, goals, and moments of wizardry, Mohamed Salah's big-stage resume has left a lot to be desired. Sunday's Community Shield defeat to Crystal Palace was no different as the 33-year-old failed to make an impact, earning the lowest average rating based on his statistical output -- no goals, no assists, no chances created, no successful take-ons, and no accurate crosses.

Salah in finals (including Community Shield):
Finals: 13, Goals: 2, Assists: 2, Penalties scored: 2, Finals won: 5, Finals lost: 8

*Salah has yet to score from open play in a major final and has no assists in the seven he's started for Liverpool.



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