

## MESSI'S EMOTIONAL home qualifier farewell

Lionel Messi bid farewell to home World Cup qualifiers in unforgettable fashion at Buenos Aires' Monumental Stadium on Friday (Bangladesh Time), walking out hand-in-hand with his three sons -- Thiago, Mateo and Ciro -- as his wife Antonela and mother Celia watched from the stands. At 38, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner lit up the night with a brace in Argentina's 3-0 win over Venezuela, equalling Ecuador's Ivan Hurtado's record of 72 qualifier appearances and drawing level with Cristiano Ronaldo on 36 goals in such matches, just three shy of all-time leader Carlos Ruiz of Guatemala.



"I love this, I love playing football and I don't want it to ever end, but I'm also aware that the moment will eventually come... I want to take it step by step, feeling things day by day."

Messi on football.

"Same as I said before about the World Cup that I don't think I'll play another. Because of my age, the most logical thing is that I won't make it. But well, we're almost there, so I'm excited and motivated to play it."

Messi on World Cup 2026

## U-23s eye comeback against Yemen

SPORTS REPORTER

Smarting from a 2-0 defeat to hosts Vietnam, Bangladesh are aiming to bounce back in their second AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qualifiers encounter against Yemen, scheduled to kick off at the Viet Tri Stadium at 3:00pm Bangladesh time on Saturday.

Despite the disappointing start, the young men in red and green remain upbeat, with hopes of securing their first ever qualification from the group stage.

Putting the performance against Vietnam behind them, the team is now focused on staying in the race with a must-win match against Yemen, who beat Singapore 2-1 to share the top spot in Group C alongside Vietnam.

"We couldn't perform in the first match as per our expectations because we couldn't play our natural game," said Hasan Al Mamun, who is guiding the side in the absence of head coach Saiful Bari Titu, currently sidelined due to illness. "Now, we are looking forward to showcasing our true potential against Yemen, and the boys are ready to fight for all three points."

Captain Sheikh Morsalin echoed the urgency of the task ahead, saying, "It is a do-or-die match for us, and we must win at any cost to keep our qualification hopes alive. We've already analysed Yemen's strengths and weaknesses through video sessions and have made our final preparations accordingly."

## Match against Nepal, focus on Hong Kong

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to fine-tune their preparations for October's Asian Cup Qualifiers against Hong Kong as they take on Nepal in the first of two international friendlies at the Dasharath Rangasala Stadium in Kathmandu on Saturday, with the match is scheduled to kick off at 5:45pm Bangladesh time.

"Our focus is to prepare as well as possible for the matches against Hong Kong," said Bangladesh head coach Javier Cabrera during a pre-match press conference on Friday. "What we are really thinking about is how we can improve on our last performance against Singapore and how we can perform at our best against Hong Kong in October."

Recalling his previous experience of playing against Nepal in 2022, Cabrera said, "I think it's always difficult for Bangladesh to play here in Kathmandu. My only experience here was in September 2022, and we were trailing 3-0 at half-time (eventually lost 3-1). So that was quite tough. We expect another tightly contested match, but we believe we are going to perform better this time. Although the pitch is not in ideal condition, hopefully it doesn't rain on match day. If the weather holds, we'll be able to put on a good show."

The Spaniard admitted that the team's preparation has been far from ideal, with only half of the squad available for nearly 20 days before 10 players from Bashundhara Kings joined the camp just two days prior to their departure for Nepal. Bangladesh also played two closed-door warm-up matches against Police FC, which featured Nepal

national team captain and goalkeeper Kiran Kumar Limbu -- a move that raised questions about Cabrera's planning ahead of facing Nepal. However, the head coach defended the decision, saying, "It wasn't so much about confidentiality, but rather about finding the right context for the team to focus on the concepts we were training."

though some people may call it a B team. We are expecting a tough competition here."

Nepal's Australian head coach, Matt Ross, also said that their focus was on preparing for the upcoming Asian Cup Qualifiers, but stressed the importance of making a strong statement on home soil



Despite the absence of players such as Hamza Choudhury, Shamit Shome, Fahamedul Islam, and several under-23 players currently competing in the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qualifiers in Vietnam, Cabrera remains optimistic. "Many players are not here, but to be very honest, we competed at a very high level a few months ago with 95 percent of this current squad. Most of them are U-23 players who delivered fantastic performances against teams like Lebanon, Palestine, and even Australia. I would still say we've brought our A team,

-- especially after their disappointing 2-1 defeat to Laos in their last qualifier.

"I know our boys are really looking forward to these games, which will be closely contested," said Ross. "We talk a lot about preparation for the next AFC Qualifiers, but when the whistle goes, it's about those 90 minutes. We're desperate to show that our performance against Laos was not up to our standards. The boys are 100 percent ready to show that we are here to win and continue the progress we've made over the last few months."

## Hridoy missing T20 beat?

ASHFAQ UL ALAM

If the 2-0 margin of victory doesn't make it obvious, the fact that only eight Bangladeshi batters got a chance to bat in the three-match series against the Netherlands is a solid indicator of just how one-sided the series in Sylhet was.

The number would have been halved to four had the Tigers not batted first in the third match on Wednesday, which got called off due to rain after the hosts made 164-4 in 18.2 overs.

Four batters -- Towhid Hridoy, Shamim Hossain, Jaker Ali, and Nurul Hasan -- batted for the first time in the series in that game.

While Nurul (22 off 11 balls) and Jaker (20 off 13) hit some boundaries in their short stay and Shamim (21 off 19) got some game time after recently recovering from fever, there were no positive takeaways from Hridoy's 14-ball stay in the middle, which yielded nine runs.

His knock was the only boundary-less innings from a Bangladeshi batter in the series and also the only innings with a strike-rate lower than 100.

This poor innings against the Dutch wasn't an aberration but a reflection of how Hridoy has been batting in the shortest format in this calendar year.

The 24-year-old's last half-century, an unbeaten 63 off 42 balls against India, came in October last year. In the 12 innings



since then, he has crossed the 30-run mark thrice, with his best knock being a 24-ball 45 against the UAE in a losing cause.

Both his strike rate and average in T20Is have dropped significantly from last year. In 2024, he averaged 30.81 at a strike rate of 130.08, whereas in 2025, his average dipped

to 20.45 and strike rate plunged even further to 110.84.

The slump in Hridoy's T20I numbers indicates that other teams now know how to keep him quiet.

His struggle to rotate the strike is still apparent. At one point during his innings on Wednesday, he had hit three consecutive deliveries straight to fielders inside the circle -- twice at short-third and once at cover point -- ruining the momentum of the innings with dots.

After six dots against a sub-par attack, Hridoy tried to break free by charging down the wicket against Tim Pringle, only to get caught at long-off.

Batting is not the only aspect of his game where he is showing a lack of match awareness.

In the first match of the series, he missed a blatant run-out opportunity at the non-striker's end -- first trying to run in from extra-cover to break the stumps, then trying to hit the wickets with an underarm throw.

In the same match, he also misjudged a catch at the boundary, as the ball went over his head and dropped before the ropes to trundle over the line.

While Hridoy's struggle continued, in the same series, Saif Hassan made an impressive comeback, hitting a brisk 19-ball 36 and taking a couple of wickets in the first T20I.

With Saif's resurgence, Hridoy's spot in the middle-order does not look set in stone anymore.

## What to WATCH

### T SPORTS

Zimbabwe vs Sri Lanka  
2nd T20I  
Live from 5:30 pm  
STAR SPORTS 1,2

US Open  
Women's final  
Anisimova vs Sabalenka  
Live from 2:00 am (Sunday)

SONY 1,5  
World Cup Qualifier  
Armenia vs Portugal  
Live from 10:00 pm  
England vs Andorra  
Live from 10:00 pm

## Same goal, different milestones

AGENCIES

Aryna Sabalenka and Amanda Anisimova will clash in a highly anticipated US Open final on Sunday night, with both players chasing different individual milestones.

For Sabalenka, it is about completing unfinished business. The defending champion is through to her third straight final at Flushing Meadows and is aiming to become the first woman since Serena Williams in 2014 to retain the crown in New York.

The 27-year-old Belarusian has dominated the season with three titles and 45 weeks at the top of the rankings, but her quest for a fourth Grand Slam has repeatedly stalled. She fell short in both the Australian Open and French Open finals this year, losing to Americans Madison Keys and Coco Gauff respectively.

For Sabalenka, this final will also serve as an opportunity to avenge her Wimbledon semifinal loss to the American earlier this year.

"Just super happy to be back in the final and hopefully I can go all the way again," said Sabalenka after overcoming Jessica Pegula 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 in a re-run of last year's final.



Sabalenka is aiming to become the first woman since Serena Williams in 2014 to retain US Open.

Anisimova is searching for her maiden Grand Slam title.

"I badly wanted to give myself another opportunity, another final, and I want to prove to myself that I learned those tough lessons and I can do better in the finals. If I'll be able to hold that trophy, it's going to mean a lot for me. I'll be the happiest person on earth, probably."

Anisimova, meanwhile, is embracing her dream run on home soil. The 24-year-old American rallied from a set down to defeat four-time major champion Naomi Osaka 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 in the semifinals and will play her first US Open final just miles away from her New Jersey roots. It marks her second Grand Slam final of the year, following Wimbledon in July, and caps a remarkable comeback after taking a mental health break in 2023.

"It means the world. I'm trying to process that right now, it's a dream come true," Anisimova said. "The hope is to be the champion, but I'm in the final now and I'll try to get ready."

Already guaranteed to rise to world number four, Anisimova has shown grit throughout the fortnight, beating 2022 French Open champion Iga Swiatek and Osaka in back-to-back rounds. She also holds a winning head-to-head record against Sabalenka, including their most recent clash at Wimbledon.

As Sabalenka looks to finally turn consistency into silverware and Anisimova bids for a maiden major, Arthur Ashe Stadium is set for a battle of power, belief, and redemption.

At 18 years and four months, Estevao Willian opened his Brazil account in their convincing 3-0 win against Chile in a World Cup qualifier at the Maracana on Friday. With goals also coming from Lucas Paqueta and Bruno Guimaraes, Carlo Ancelotti's Brazil -- who have already qualified for the 2026 World Cup -- displayed an inspiring performance for the first time since the Italian took charge of the five-time World Champions in May.

PHOTO: AFP

