

BANGLADESH IN ASIA CUP: AN ENDURING AFFAIR

Bangladesh's journey in the Asia Cup has been one of persistence, heartbreak, and hope. Since debuting in 1986, the Tigers have hosted the tournament, endured decades of struggles, and emerged as three-time runners-up. From near glory in 2012, 2016, and 2018 to recent setbacks in 2022 and 2023, the Asia Cup has remained central to Bangladesh's cricketing story. As they kick off their 16th campaign against Hong Kong in Abu Dhabi, Litton Das' side will once again chase the elusive title.

*** Read full story on The Daily Star's website*



Bulbul's tip for Litton & Co

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Aminul Islam Bulbul believes sharper running between the wickets and better fielding could give the Tigers an edge in the ongoing Asia Cup in the UAE.

"This format sees most teams perform similarly in batting and bowling. If we can add 15 runs through running or save 10 in the field, those 25 runs could decide matches," Bulbul told reporters in Mirpur yesterday, after the opening day of a three-day Run Scoring Workshop.



Having previously worked with the ICC in the UAE, Bulbul said he was confident about Bangladesh's chances. "It's hard to predict in this format, but I really expect the team to go a long way," he added.

Bangladesh face Hong Kong today in Abu Dhabi before taking on Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Despite Afghanistan's familiarity with UAE conditions, Bulbul backed the Tigers: "Considering the skillset of our players, I believe they can do well."

Finding the right balance KEY FOR TIGERS

EKUSH TAPADER FROM ABU DHABI

Bangladesh are set to begin their Asia Cup campaign against Associate Nation Hong Kong in Abu Dhabi today. The Litton Das-led side enter the continental tournament on the back of a decent run of form, but even during Tuesday's practice session, some familiar issues resurfaced.

There were encouraging signs as well -- especially from the top order, which appeared in rhythm.

Litton, who struck two fifties in a recent three-match series against the Netherlands at home, looked in fine touch again. He had specifically requested to face a left-arm pacer during nets, and among the bowlers provided by the UAE Cricket Board, one happened to be from Cumilla, Bangladesh. That bowler, Yunus Ali, who is trying to settle in the Emirates, was given a harsh reality check. "I landed the ball in good areas, yet he kept hitting me," Yunus admitted afterward. Litton did not spare his teammates either, peppering the nets with aggressive strokes.

Before Litton, openers Tanzid Tamim and Parvez Hossain Emon had kept journalists and staff alert, as balls repeatedly sailed beyond the small practice ground's fences, prompting loud warnings of "watch, watch."

But once the top order stepped aside,

the nets fell flat -- almost mirroring Bangladesh's recent batting trend of starting brightly but losing momentum in the middle overs.

Towhid Hridoy, once seen as one of Bangladesh's most promising T20 batters, looked stiff, out of rhythm, and struggling with his timing -- making his place in the XI uncertain. By contrast, Saif Hassan has made a stronger case. Capable of batting in both top and middle order while also offering useful off-spin, his versatility could help balance the side. As India skipper Suryakumar Yadav recently noted: "In T20 cricket, a top-order batter who can bowl is a blessing for any team's balance."

The Zayed Cricket Stadium surface generally offers good bounce. While batters tend to score freely here, pacers usually benefit most, with Oman's Bilal Khan -- also a seamer -- being the leading wicket-taker at the venue in T20Is. Since all of Bangladesh's group-stage matches will be played at this ground, the role of pacers is expected to be pivotal.

Bangladesh are likely to field three pacers, with Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed almost certain selections. The third seamer's slot remains open, with Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Mohammad Saifuddin, and Shoriful Islam all competing. Sakib and Saifuddin bowled

extended spells early in training, while assistant coach Mohammad Salahuddin later recalled Shoriful for an additional session under lights yesterday.

Strength and conditioning coach Nathan Kiely, alongside chief physician Dr. Debashis Chowdhury, monitored the workload closely to guard against injuries in the intense Emirati heat and humidity.

As for their first opponents, Hong Kong, Bangladesh will draw confidence from a few factors. While Hong Kong famously upset the Tigers in Chattogram during the 2014 T20 World Cup, none of those players remain in their current squad. Moreover, they began this Asia Cup with a crushing 94-run defeat to Afghanistan and had to travel far from their base camp to reach Abu Dhabi for today's match.

Bangladesh trained during that Afghanistan-Hong Kong encounter, but still kept an eye on proceedings. The gulf in quality was evident, and the Tigers would have noted it as well.

Though Hong Kong have promised to bring "quality cricket" against Bangladesh, Litton's side will look not only to secure the expected result against a lower-ranked opponent but also to address their middle-order concerns and strike the right balance ahead of tougher contests against Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Kuldeep Yadav returned figures of 4-7 to lead India to a crushing nine-wicket win over UAE in their opening match of the Asia Cup T20 in Abu Dhabi yesterday. India skittled out UAE for 57 -- their lowest total in T20Is and the second-lowest in Asia Cup T20 history (going past Hong Kong's 38 all out against Pakistan in 2022) -- and chased down the target in 4.3 overs.

Slow and steady, Suehlamong shaping stars in the hills



In the hills of Rangamati, the quiet hum of football drills tells a bigger story.

Passing the winding slopes into Kawkhali, the real landmark here could very well be the upazila field, where dozens of young girls train under the guidance of Suehlamong Marma. It is here that two of Bangladesh's brightest names in women's football -- Ritu Porna Chakma and Monika Chakma -- honed their craft.

Women's football in the Chattogram Hill Tracts has not been built overnight. It has been shaped by the persistence of people like Suehlamong, who believed in the game's potential to change lives.

Since founding the Suehlamong Football Academy in 2018, he has nurtured talent from the Chattogram Hill Tracts, often funding food, education, and training from his own pocket. With over 50 girls now in his programme -- eight representing Bangladesh and many pursuing diverse careers -- Suehlamong's steady dedication has also become a launchpad for other related ambitions, writes our Rangamati correspondent **Rikors Chakma**.

Read the full story on The Daily Star website.

Brazil, Argentina stutter, Bolivia clinch playoff spot

REUTERS

Bolivia shocked Brazil 1-0 to secure a spot in the intercontinental playoffs for next year's FIFA World Cup while Argentina suffered a 1-0 defeat by Ecuador in the final round of South America's 2026 qualifiers on Tuesday.

Bolivia's Miguel Tercecos converted a penalty in first-half stoppage time to secure the home win over five-times World Cup winners Brazil in La Paz, a result which saw Carlo Ancelotti's side drop to fifth in the standings.

Bolivia, who are seventh on the standings, will be joined in the playoffs in Monterrey and Guadalajara in March by two teams from CONCACAF as well as one each from the African, Asian and Oceania confederations in the hunt for two places at the World Cup in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

While Ecuador and reigning champions Argentina had already qualified for the World Cup, there was no shortage of intensity in their match in Guayaquil.

Argentina's Nicolas Otamendi was sent off in the 31st minute



Qualified (CONMEBOL):
Argentina,
Ecuador,
Colombia,
Uruguay, Brazil,
Paraguay
Playoff spot:
Bolivia

before Enner Valencia scored from the spot just before half-time. Despite Moises Caicedo's red card early in the second-half, Ecuador held firm to win and secure second place. Argentina

still topped the table with 39 points, nine clear of Ecuador and 10 ahead of Brazil.

Elsewhere, Luis Suarez scored four as Colombia thrashed Venezuela 6-3 in Maturin to finish

third, extinguishing Venezuela's play-off hopes. Uruguay secured fourth after a 0-0 draw with Chile in Santiago, while Matias Galarza's strike earned Paraguay a 1-0 win over Peru to seal sixth.



Striker Erling Haaland scored five goals and substitute midfielder Thelo Aasgaard added four more as Norway hammered Moldova 11-1 on Wednesday to take another huge step towards qualifying for the World Cup finals for the first time since 1998. Haaland, who completed his fifth hattrick, has now scored 48 goals in 45 games for his national team. With five games played, the Norwegians top Group I of the UEFA World Cup Qualifiers with 15 points, six ahead of second-placed Italy.

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM