

The six that announced SAIF

EKUSH TAPADER from Dubai

He lifts his back foot and, with a graceful flick of the wrist, sends the ball pitched on leg stump soaring into the stands. That six off Sri Lanka pacer Nuwan Thushara by Bangladesh opener Saif Hassan in the Asia Cup Super Four opener in Dubai on Saturday has since gone viral.

How did he generate such power without much of a backlift? Observers noted that by lifting his back foot, Saif balanced on the front, channeling strength into the shot.

For many, this ability of Saif was unknown. His inclusion in the T20 squad was itself a surprise, sparking questions in several quarters. Credit goes to the selectors – they must have seen something in him.

Against Sri Lanka, chasing 169, Bangladesh lost Tanzid Tamim for just 1 in the opening over. Usually, such situations make the Tigers go into their shell. Saif, however, counterattacked, putting the pressure back on the Lankans.

From his early days, Saif was known as a technically correct batter, seemingly destined for red-ball cricket. His first international chance also came in Tests. But that journey turned sour – across six matches, he never crossed fifty, averaging just 14.45. Questions grew louder: was he ready for the highest level?

His T20I debut was nothing short of dramatic. After Bangladesh's collapse in the 2021 T20 World Cup, the team went through sweeping changes. Then, team director Khaled Mahmud Sujon brought Saif into the T20 setup. The move raised eyebrows, as Saif failed to deliver. "Why Saif?" became an uncomfortable question for the selectors.

The only other three games he played were in the 2023 Asian Games in Hangzhou. Since the senior team wasn't involved, those appearances hardly counted.



His real return came just before this Asia Cup, when he was suddenly fielded against the Netherlands. It wasn't as though he had excelled in the last Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) – he scored 306 runs in 13 matches at an average of 25.50 and a strike rate of 119.06.

His selection, however, was justified by versatility – he could bat both at the top and in the middle, while also offering off-spin. Over recent months, Saif developed himself as a T20 cricketer. In his comeback game against the Dutch, he gave a glimpse of his hitting with a 19-ball 36.

In this tournament, the full picture emerged – Saif struck four sixes against Sri Lanka, each with authority. His improved fitness was evident, and his steady head allowed clean, powerful timing.

When the Test doors shut on him, Saif could easily have drifted away. But coaches and confidants reminded him his potential wasn't limited to red-ball cricket.

Now, hope surrounds the 26-year-old. The Pakistan and Indian media are suddenly curious – "Who is Saif Hassan? How did he rise?"

With attention comes scrutiny. Opponents will study his strengths and weaknesses. New challenges lie ahead. For Saif, the task will be to adjust himself through the challenges and make the most of it, just like he did with that six.



PHOTO: AFP

From fear of elimination TO HOPES OF PLAYING FINAL

EKUSH TAPADER from Dubai

In just a week, Bangladesh have found themselves in contrasting scenarios – from fearing elimination after losing to Sri Lanka in the group stage to brightening their hopes of a fourth Asia Cup final with a win over the same side in the Super Four opener.

Journalists, who were ready to return home, are now planning to stay till the end. The worried faces of the players, once wrinkled with tension, are now lit up. One cricketer said, "Brother, we have nothing to lose now. Only things to gain." That belief seems to be working like a tonic within the team.

This turnaround began when Sri Lanka beat Afghanistan in the last group-stage match, helping the Tigers advance to the Super Four. But it wasn't just Sri Lanka's result that carried them forward. Litton Das and Co also beat Afghanistan in a gripping contest, ensuring the Afghans – widely seen as finalists-in-waiting – were eliminated early.

Before the Asia Cup, several Bangladeshi players had spoken about their dream of playing in the final. Some even dared to mention becoming champions. It was on them to prove those weren't just empty words.

Realistically, apart from India, the other four Test-playing teams in this tournament are not too far apart in strength. So, dreaming of a final wasn't far-fetched for Bangladesh.

After the win over Sri Lanka, the

"Before coming here, everyone [players] believed that we would play the final. We are one step closer to the final. Still, two matches are remaining. The next focus is only on the next match [against India]. Definitely [time to dream big], one should dream. One should dream big. But we should proceed step by step."

– Bangladesh opener Saif Hassan after win against Sri Lanka

Bangladesh's remaining Super Four games: Vs India, September 24 Vs Pakistan, September 25

players spent yesterday resting at their team hotel. In the scorching UAE heat, recovery has become their biggest focus. They now have two full days of rest before back-to-back games against India and Pakistan on September 24 and 25.

What has further lifted spirits is the timely rise of key players. Towhid Hridoy, who had been struggling for form, finally stepped up. Even when he managed runs earlier, they came at such a slow pace that they hurt the team's cause.

Despite mounting criticism, the team management kept faith in

him, even after poor batting and fielding displays in the group stage. Cornered and under pressure, Hridoy responded with a blazing 58 off 37 balls against Sri Lanka – a joy for him and a bigger relief for the management.

Alongside Hridoy, Mustafizur Rahman continues to show why he remains Bangladesh's biggest T20 weapon. Except for one off game, the "cutter-master" has quietly done his job throughout the campaign.

The conditions too have suited Bangladesh. At this time of year, UAE pitches aren't flat, with matches being played on used tracks. That has worked well for the Tigers: on gripping wickets, Mustafizur is dangerous, spinners can thrive, and batters accustomed to medium-scoring tracks can pace their innings with confidence.

The omens also appear favourable. The last time Bangladesh reached the Asia Cup final in ODIs, back in 2018, it was at the same venue and on the same date – September 28 – at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium. Then too, their last group-stage match was against Pakistan, and on all three occasions they reached the final, they did so by beating Sri Lanka on the way.

But the Tigers would have to do their jobs in the rest of their Super Four games. Beating a strong India will be a tough ask, but a struggling Pakistan seem within reach. Win even one of those two matches, and the door to the September 28 final opens wide.

Senior division league returns on Nov 15

SPORTS REPORTER

After being sidelined for over a year, the Senior Division Football League – Bangladesh's third-tier competition after the Bangladesh Premier League and the Bangladesh Championship League – is finally set to resume on November 15.

A total of 20 clubs will take part in a round-robin format, with 190 matches planned. The month-long transfer window will run from October 1 to 30, revised from the original dates of September 15 to October 15.

Matches will initially be held on the newly-installed artificial turf at the Bishreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur. However, the Dhaka Metropolis Football League Committee (DMFLC) is actively seeking two additional venues to ensure smooth scheduling and timely completion of the tournament.

Despite recent enthusiasm from the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) for launching newer formats like futsal and eFootball, the lower-tier leagues – Senior, First, Second, and Pioneer – have been largely neglected. Under the previous Kazi Salahuddin-led BFF executive committee, these leagues were organised only twice in the last five years, denying young players valuable match experience and forcing many to abandon their football ambitions.

"A lot of football academies have sprung up across the country, but budding players are quitting due to the lack of regular competitions," said Narayanganj-based coach Nipu Das on the sidelines of DMFLC meeting yesterday. "Many non-school going players are taking up jobs, leaving only students to stay involved in the game."

A club official named Arman echoed the concern. "There's no shortage of footballers to form squads, but quality is suffering because players don't get enough competitive matches. Most clubs are willing to take part if the league is held consistently."

DMFLC chairman and BFF vice-president Ahmed Aref admitted the delay in restarting the league but reaffirmed the committee's commitment. "We took extra time because several clubs were restructuring their committees following August, 2024. There were also logistical challenges," said Aref. "Still, I told the clubs – we must move forward. We're determined to organise all lower-tier leagues under our committee without further delay."



Bangladesh players celebrate Mohammad Arif's 18th-minute opening goal during their 4-0 victory against Sri Lanka in their SAFF U-17 Group A fixture at the Racecourse Stadium in Colombo yesterday. A second win in two matches saw the boys in red and green emerge group winners to book a place in the semifinals of the seven-team competition.

PHOTO: BFF

Controversy looms as BCB councillors' list due today

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

After two deadline extensions, the draft list of councillors for the upcoming Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) election is set to be announced today.

The significance of who gets picked as councillors is immense as on October 6, these individuals would cast their votes and elect 23 board directors in three different categories who, along with two more directors nominated by the National Sports Council (NSC), will run the country's richest sports body for the next four years.

So far, current BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul and former Bangladesh skipper Tamim Iqbal have emerged as the only candidates for the BCB top post, however, none have made their candidacy official yet.

Even though it's yet to be revealed, the councillorship list has been at the centre of a brewing controversy over external influences in the polls.

Councillorship explainer

There are three categories of directors in the BCB: Category A: Regional, Category B: Dhaka Metropolis Clubs, and Category C: Others.

A total of 72 regional councillors – one each from 64 districts and seven divisions – will elect 10 Category A directors in the polls.

Category B consists of the highest number of councillors, 76, with 12 from premier division clubs, 20 from first division, 24 from second division and 20 from third division. These councillors will elect 12 board directors.

Category C will have around 42 councillors: 10 former cricketer, five former captains, five



NSC nominated, and rest from educational boards, universities and other organizations votes. Two directors will get elected from here. **Tamim says** The councillor list was supposed to be finalised on September 17, but got pushed to the 19th and then finally the 22nd by the board.

The reason for these deferrals, according to a letter sent to the ministry of youth and sports signed by BCB president Bulbul on September 18, was that some of the divisional and district sports associations didn't comply with the NSC's directive of nominating councillors from only within its ad-hoc committee.

But Tamim was not convinced by the reasoning and claimed it was proof of "tremendous amount of government influence" in the election process.

"It seems to me that a tremendous amount of interference is happening from various

parts of the government," Tamim said in a press conference called by an alliance of Bangladesh's district and divisional sports organisers, along with cricketers and club representatives, on Sunday.

"What we normally know from the BCB constitution is that those who are eligible, those related to sports, the Deputy Commissioner (DC) can give them councillorship. This has been the case for a number of years, a number of elections. But this time, I suddenly noticed something new: an ad-hoc committee was formed. The rule that it must come from the ad-hoc committee is not mentioned anywhere in our constitution," he added.

These ad-hoc committees were formed by the NSC after the fall of the previous Awami League regime. According to the BCB constitution, the regional associations will nominate councillors where former cricket players or

cricket organisers will get the priority. There is no such provision that councillors have to part of the ad-hoc committee. However, BCB in a press release sent on Sunday evening claimed that there is no scope for anyone outside of the committee to get nominated according to their analysis of the provision.

Bulbul and vice-president Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, interestingly, were added to the Dhaka Divisional and Dhaka District Sports Association's ad-hoc committees recently and got their respective councillorships from those organisations, even though they came into the current board as NSC nominated directors.

The other allegations

The Daily Star has spoken with members of several ad-hoc committees who have claimed that many BNP politicians have secured councillorship in Category A through pressurising the DCs.

SCHEDULE OF THE BCB BOARD OF DIRECTORS ELECTION 2025

Draft voters' list: September 22
Final voters' list: September 25
Nomination form distribution: September 26
Nomination submission: September 28
Nomination withdrawal and final candidates' list: October 1
Postal/ E-ballot collection: October 6
Election date and result: October 6

***The president and vice-president election will take place following the final result of the board of directors' election on the same day

"Ashraf Hossain Arman was given councillorship first [Sylhet Division]. He is a BNP leader and wasn't in the ad-hoc committee. But it has now changed. From the division, Rahat Shams, a former cricketer and local organizer, has now received the councillorship," a member of Sylhet Division ad-hoc committee, requesting anonymity, told The Daily Star, adding that the DC didn't even hold any ad-hoc committee meeting before finalising the councillorship.

Although nothing is confirmed yet, as of now, Tamim, who received councillorship from Old DOHS Club, is leading a panel which includes current board director Iftekhar Rahman Mithu, Fahim Sinha, BNP leader Ishraque Hossain, organizers Rafiqul Islam Babu, Masuduzzaman, Ishtiaque Sadeque and Shanian Taneem.

"We have already prepared for the election. We are going in with a panel. We haven't heard of rival panels but have heard that many might contest in the election independently," organiser Rafiqul told The Daily Star, adding that they are fearing of government interference and conspiracy in the upcoming election.

"Honestly speaking, we are yet to finalise the full panel. We will do it on the following day after seeing the councillorship list," he added.

What next

The much debated and awaited councillorship list is set to be revealed today. With so many allegations and counter-allegations being flung around, the list of councillors could end up indicating which way the BCB election is heading.