

CHEAT CODE HAMZA restores the roar

KHALID HOSSAIN

What Hamza Choudhury has done since pulling on the Bangladesh jersey belongs to sporting folklore. Football rarely grants a nation this sort of figure whose very arrival resets expectations in ways statistics cannot capture.

Since March 2025, Hamza has managed the improbable and unthinkable, doing so with a style and spirit that has turned an entire era mythic. Bangladesh have welcomed expatriate talents before, but none restored the sport's dormant roar with such natural ease as the 28-year-old Leicester City midfielder.

On the pitch, he resembles a wartime general: leading by example, reading danger before others sense it, smiling even when the tide turns against his side. A superior talent to those around him, he plays alive to pressure rather than burdened by it. At times, he looks like he is playing a video game with cheat codes switched on.

In national colours, he expresses parts of his game that his clubs seldom require: the direct free-kick, overhead kick, Panenka penalty, and so on. His outrageous volley against India at the National Stadium on Tuesday -- struck with his weaker left foot from distance -- felt like the culmination of what Bangladesh had been promised but never believed they would see.

For once, fans feel they have a saviour who gives everything. Earning the trust of a result-hungry fanbase is never easy, but Hamza has made it feel inevitable, as if the country was waiting for him all along.

"Seeing the fans in the stadium, their energy, their passion... it lifts you in a way you can't describe," Hamza said after scoring against Bhutan in a 2-0 victory -- his first



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

with Bangladesh. "I want them to enjoy every moment we play together."

Most legends of Bangladesh football thrived when the game was king or fading into second place. Hamza arrived in a different landscape, shaped by European broadcasts and a generation raised on global stars. The atmosphere at the renovated National Stadium now speaks to something deeper: watching a messiah-like figure inspire teammates and elevate the standard. It's a feeling Argentina know with Lionel Messi, Egypt with Mohamed Salah. Bangladesh finally have their own version.

In a dramatic fashion, the memorable 1-0 win over India became a checkpoint in Hamza's tale -- the completion of a narrative arc that

began with his debut in Assam, where he first felt the weight and warmth of the national shirt. His first major triumph, fittingly, also came against India.

"This is right up there with the FA Cup win [with Leicester]," Hamza said. The catharsis was complete; the stage set for what comes next.

His goals in the Bhutan and Nepal friendlies showed what freedom can unlock, and the potential ahead if teammates continue to evolve to bridge the gap between the system and the superstar.

Whatever happens next, Bangladesh will always have Hamza, and as long as he keeps spreading the stardust, they will always witness a football fairytale in real time, front row, no filter.

'Goal against India ranks above the others'

Sheikh Morsalin once again made the headlines with the goal that helped Bangladesh edge past India 1-0 after 22 years. The 19-year-old forward, who has now scored seven goals in 21 international appearances, previously rescued the men in red and green by netting equalisers against Afghanistan and Lebanon, and struck the decisive goal in the 1-0 win over Bhutan. Yesterday, Morsalin spoke to *The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman* about the mood in the camp, his feelings, and his future ambitions. Following are excerpts from the conversation.

The Daily Star (DS): What is your feeling after scoring the decisive goal against India?

Sheikh Morsalin (SM): I am really very happy, Alhamdulillah. I think everyone prayed for us, and we are happy to deliver a win to the nation.

DS: In the counterattack, you and Rakib Hossain exchanged passes before you finished clinically. What understanding did you and Rakib have before the match?

SM: I have a good understanding with Rakib because we have played many matches together for both the national team and our club. The plan was simple: launch a quick counter and play the ball to whoever was in front of goal.

DS: You have scored quite a few important goals in your short career so far. Where do you rank the goal on Tuesday?

SM: I would definitely rank the goal against India above all the others because beating India after 22 years, in front of a full house, when the entire country was watching, is a huge achievement. Everyone would have been hurt if we hadn't won. That's why I rate it above all my goals.

DS: What did the players discuss among

themselves before the match?

SM: The only discussion was that we had to win the match at any cost. We also shared our feelings. I told the players to stand by one another, even if someone made a mistake during the match. The message was to help each other on the pitch.

DS: Bangladesh came close to victory in several matches of the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers, but couldn't finally come in the fifth match. How was it achieved?

SM: To be honest, we were ahead in previous matches too, but in the final moments we conceded goals due to a loss of concentration, which was our failure. This time, we all tried to stay focused from the first minute to the last.

DS: Everyone gave their best, but how would you assess Hamza Choudhury's performance against India?

SM: He is a true leader who guides us in both attack and defence. Hamza bhai's impact on the team is immense.

DS: Can Bangladesh build a winning habit after this historic victory?

SM: Hopefully we can. We are improving day by day and hope to improve even more in the days to come.



Shamit has eyes on SAFF success

MINTU DESHWARA

Fresh off Bangladesh's historic 1-0 victory over India, midfielder Shamit Shome chose a quieter, more personal celebration. On Wednesday morning, he travelled to Sreemangal -- his ancestral home -- to spend time with his relatives and soak in the serene surroundings after an intense international window. It is his third visit to Bangladesh, yet his first opportunity to explore the tea capital, something he described as "a wonderful feeling." But even amid

family time and much-needed rest, Shamit's mind remained fixed on the national team's future. Reflecting on Bangladesh's recent progress, the Cavalry FC midfielder said the side had been improving "little by little" with every match. "The SAFF Championship is coming up, and we hope to do well there," he said. "We want to grow into a competitive team capable of qualifying for the Asian Cup and World Cup in the future."

Read the full story on The Daily Star website



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

100TH TEST, 99 RUNS: A day to remember for Mushfiquur

ABDULLAH AL MEHIDI

Accolades were bestowed and heartfelt tributes flowed as Mushfiquur Rahim became the first Bangladeshi to enter the 100-Test club against Ireland in Dhaka on Wednesday. But for the celebrations to feel truly complete, it needed the history-maker himself to produce something special.

And that's exactly what the veteran batter did, remaining unbeaten on 99 at the end of the day as Bangladesh reached 292-4 at stumps.

From day's beginning till the end, everything revolved around Mushfiquur.

His first Test captain Habibul Bashar, who had presented him his Test cap which he still proudly puts on, presented him with another cap with '100' sewn on it. Bangladesh's first Test cricketer Akram Khan too presented a commemorative cap.

A crest was handed over to him by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Aminul Islam and cricket operations chairman Nazmul Abedeen Fahim. His teammates from his debut Test and his 100th Test presented him two signed jerseys as mementos.

"Disciplined life, disciplined in everything," Mushfiquur's long-time friend and teammate Mahmudullah Riyad, who was present during the event, told broadcasters when asked what was the secret behind his two-decade-long career.

"Everyone talks about your hard work and intensity on the field. But you always play for the team, think of the team -- you never play for yourself," Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto said.

The unyielding and unwavering Mushfiquur, who always puts his game above everything, did not get overwhelmed by the auspicious

occasion, and played a stoic innings that reflected the determination that has helped him keep going for so long.

Having hit only five fours in his 187-ball knock, the 38-year-old adjusted to the slower outfield to grind out his runs. He went to the crease after Shanto's dismissal, with the hosts 3 down for 95. His first boundary came after 67 deliveries, an elegant inside-out drive. Another of those saw him get to his fifty.

Even in the nineties, when the whole arena bore expectations, the wicketkeeper-batter picked up solid singles. He checked a scoop in the last second, adjusted for a safer paddle sweep to the relief of those present. It was nervy stuff for a first day's play and only Mushfiquur could evoke such emotions.

His seriousness is often so pronounced that Mominul Haque, who shared a 107-run stand with the veteran, was asked at the press conference whether jokes will be shelved for later with him on 99.

"No, no, it's not like that at all. Everything is normal as usual. Maybe now, we can joke around even more, as there's more time left," Mominul jokingly said as there are four days left in the match.

"It felt like a retirement ceremony that happens in other countries, not ours. Personally, I really liked it. If we can continue this culture in Bangladesh, the young generation will also be inspired to play Test cricket and play 100 Tests," he summed up the occasion.

Mushfiquur will be only the 11th cricketer to mark his 100th Test with a ton if he gets the single to complete his 13th Test century. But even if by the twist of fate he fails to get to the landmark, he has already done enough to make a historic occasion feel even more special.

STAR SPORTS DESK

With 42 teams punching their tickets after the final wave of direct qualifiers, the race to the 2026 FIEA World Cup has boiled down to six last spots -- four in Europe and two across the rest of the world. The continent playoffs now stand between 22 hopeful nations and football's grandest stage, setting up a tense March window in Europe and an intriguing intercontinental showdown involving teams from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania.

EUROPEAN PLAY-OFFS: 16 TEAMS, 4 SPOTS

The final four UEFA berths will be decided through the play-offs in March, involving 16 teams -- 12 group runners-up from the standard qualifying phase alongside the best four UEFA Nations League group winners.

The teams will be divided into four playoff paths and four pots of four teams each, with the 12 group runners-up in three pots and the four other teams in the



fourth pot. Each of the four paths will comprise two single-leg semifinals and one single-leg final. The teams for the paths will be drawn later on Thursday. The semifinals will be played on March 26 and the finals on March 31.

European play-off teams: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Denmark, Italy, Kosovo, Poland, Republic of Ireland, Slovakia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Wales,

Romania, Sweden, Northern Ireland, North Macedonia

INTERCONTINENTAL PLAY-OFFS: 5 REGIONS, 2 PLACES

Beyond Europe, six nations from four confederations will battle for the final two non-European World Cup berths.

The top two seeds -- Iraq and DR Congo -- have earned direct passage into the two finals. The remaining four teams will contest

two semifinals to earn the right to meet the seeded sides for a spot at the World Cup.

The fixture schedule for the intercontinental playoffs has not yet been confirmed.

Intercontinental playoff teams: Bolivia, DR Congo, Iraq, Jamaica, New Caledonia and Suriname

TEAMS ALREADY QUALIFIED FOR THE 2026 WORLD CUP:

Co-hosts: Canada, Mexico and the USA.

Africa (9): Algeria, Cape Verde, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia

Asia (8): Australia, Iran, Japan, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Uzbekistan

Europe (12): Austria, Belgium, Croatia, England, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland

Oceania (1): New Zealand

Americas (9): Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, Curacao, Panama, Haiti.

SHORT CORNER

India end Bangladesh's winning run

After opening their World Cup campaign in Group 'A' with a 42-22 victory over Uganda and sweeping aside Germany 57-27 in their second match, Bangladesh could not maintain their winning run in their third outing -- falling 43-18 to defending world champions India at the Mirpur's Suhrawardi Indoor Stadium on Wednesday evening.

BCB holds gender sensitivity training program

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is holding a gender sensitivity program with top women cricketers of the country. The event begun at BCB's National Cricket Academy building at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium premises on Wednesday. The training session comes on the backdrop of allegations made by former skipper Jahanara Alam against members of the team management and current players.

Santner fireworks give New Zealand ODI series win

Captain Mitchell Santner delivered late fireworks with the bat as New Zealand beat the West Indies by five wickets in the second one-day international on Wednesday to win the series. Santner smashed 34 not out off 15 balls to carry the hosts home at 248-5 with three deliveries to spare after the tourists posted 247-9.

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