

Preparation the priority

The Infinix Tri-Nation Series, featuring Bangladesh, Malaysia and Azerbaijan, kicks off at Dhaka's National Stadium today. Bangladesh face Malaysia at 7:00 pm, aiming to build on recent improvements under coach Peter Butler. Bangladesh are preparing for the 2026 AFC Women's Asian Cup, Malaysia for the 2025 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, and Azerbaijan for the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup Qualifiers.

BANGLADESH: Rank 104 (biggest rise, 24, in August FIFA update)

Returning to National Stadium for first time since 2013

“ It's very difficult to get international friendly fixtures in women's football. So, we're thankful.

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler

MALAYSIA: Rank 92; Squad arrives after a one-week training camp

“ Ahead of the SEA Games, it's very important for us to face strong teams.

Malaysia's coach Joel Comelli

AZERBAIJAN: Rank 74; Fielding a second-string squad; 15 currently playing in leagues abroad

“ The competitive gap between Europe and Asia is not significant.

Azerbaijan coach Siyaset Asgarov

Head-to-Head

Bangladesh vs Malaysia

Malaysia won 2-0 (Singapore tri-nation, 2017), Bangladesh won 6-0 (Dhaka friendly, 2022), Draw 0-0 (Dhaka friendly, 2022)

Fixtures

Nov 26: Bangladesh vs Malaysia

Nov 29: Azerbaijan vs Malaysia

Dec 2: Bangladesh vs Azerbaijan

All matches at National Stadium, 7:00 pm



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

A feat 'challenging from all angles'

Domestic stalwart **Marshall Ayub** recently became only the fourth Bangladeshi batter -- after Tushar Imran, Naeem Islam and Mominul Haque -- to reach 10,000 first-class runs. The 36-year-old, who played just three Tests for Bangladesh between 2013 and 2014, never received a second opportunity despite consistently performing in domestic cricket. In a recent conversation with The Daily Star's **Samsul Arefin Khan**, Marshall discussed his milestone, the disappointments of his international career, and other aspects of his journey. Excerpts follow:

The Daily Star (DS): How satisfying is this achievement?

Marshall Ayub (MA): This is definitely a big achievement for me. Only four or five cricketers in Bangladesh have reached this mark. A few of us -- Farhad Hossain, Shamsur Rahman, and I -- were all around 9,000 runs. We used to say that reaching 10,000 runs is a major landmark in Bangladesh's first-class cricket. So, I'm very happy to finally achieve it.

DS: How difficult was it to reach this milestone?

MA: When we started, we used to play 10 four-day matches in the NCL (National Cricket League). Now we play seven there, plus a few matches in the BCL (Bangladesh Cricket League) only if the tournament takes place.

And in the last four or five years, rain washed out two or three matches almost every season. These disruptions and the reduced number of matches made things challenging.

Another big challenge was playing with the Duke ball in the last four or five years. It swings more and gives fast bowlers a bigger advantage, so big innings are rare. Maintaining fitness over a long career is also tough. Considering everything, it was challenging from all angles to reach



10,000 runs.

DS: As someone who mainly plays first-class cricket, how do you manage the off-season period?

MA: After the Dhaka Premier League ends, we usually take a break for one to one-and-a-half months. Then we focus heavily on fitness and skill work.

Earlier, leagues used to take place in cities like Sylhet, Chattogram, Khulna, and Rajshahi. But for many years, those leagues haven't happened regularly. So we spend most of the off-season working on fitness. For the last two or three years, I've

been training with [Yakub Chowdhury] Dalim bhai, who has helped me a lot. That's how the off-season goes.

DS: Your international career was short. **MA:** I was dropped around 2014-15. After that, I became the highest run-scorer in both the BCL and NCL, but I wasn't called up again. Even when I performed consistently for two years, nothing happened. It still hurts when I think about it. Players like us don't have many facilities; I grew up in Dhaka but sometimes couldn't use the Mirpur indoor facilities. If we had more support and better facilities, maybe I could have reached 10,000 runs one or two seasons earlier. Being underestimated like that is painful.

DS: You were unlucky not to get more chances compared to young players at present.

MA: Of course. I'm a middle-order batsman, but internationally I was made to bat at number three. I didn't get to play in my usual position, which was painful.

DS: Why do young players today show less interest in first-class cricket?

MA: Players in the national team who play all formats find it difficult to play four-day matches. They want breaks for family.

Another reason is match fees, which are low compared to other countries. In modern cricket, youngsters prefer white-ball formats. That's why interest in four-day cricket is low.

DS: How do you see the current state of domestic cricket in Bangladesh?

MA: When we started, our seniors used to say our wickets were not good -- they favoured spinners too much. Recently, the wickets have improved slightly. We're a Test-playing nation for 25 years, yet our first-class wickets have only improved in the last two or three years. If we want to develop and truly enjoy Test cricket, we must have sporting wickets in domestic cricket. And again, if the match fees improve, players will take first-class cricket more seriously.

DS: How long do you see yourself continuing?

MA: I haven't thought about international cricket for seven or eight years. I play for my family; sometimes they come to watch, and my children enjoy it -- that motivates me. Players like me, Naeem [Islam] bhai, and Shuvro [Shamsur Rahman] know one bad year can make people say our time is over, so we take that as a challenge. As long as I enjoy the game, I want to continue playing red-ball cricket.

Is Ankon the new middle-order solution for Bangladesh?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Batting crises have long been a recurring feature for Bangladesh, and the attempts to manage them often appear tentative -- driven more by hope than by evidence-backed planning.

With less than three months before the T20 World Cup, top teams have already settled their combinations. Bangladesh, meanwhile, are still searching for answers to a recent concern in the shortest format: the instability in the middle order.

Mahidul Islam Ankon has emerged as the newest attempt at a solution -- or at least a hopeful patch. The wicketkeeper-batter earned his maiden T20I call-up for the upcoming three-match series against Ireland, starting Thursday in Chattogram. His inclusion comes as Bangladesh left out Shamim Hossain, signaling a direct move to reinforce the middle order.

The selectors have been eager to reshape the batting core with the World Cup approaching. Ankon's selection gained weight primarily due to his Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) performances earlier this year, where he finished among the top run-scorers with a strike rate above 170.

However, his recent form tells a different story. His highest score during the Asia Cup Rising Stars -- 27 not out against Afghanistan A -- was followed by three single-digit dismissals, including a five-ball duck in the final against



Pakistan Shaheens, which eventually lost in a Super Over.

In that context, his T20I call-up comes at a time when his white-ball performances have not been particularly convincing. This is in contrast to his Test call-ups last year -- the second South Africa Test and the West Indies series -- when he had produced consistent outings in the domestic longer-format competitions.

"We have a few players for similar positions -- [Nurul Hasan] Sohan, Jaker [Ali] and Shamim [Hossain]," Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) chairman of the selection panel Gazi Ashraf

Hossain Lipu said when explaining Ankon's selection. "We wanted to give an opportunity, since there is not much chance available before the World Cup, to someone who can play at number four or five."

Lipu added that the selectors wanted a fair, like-for-like assessment. "In this category, BPL was the format. Ankon was impressive there last time. In that light, and considering our long-term vision, we made the consideration."

It appears the management is hoping that one of the players tested during the Asia Cup Rising Stars will translate those opportunities into stability for the national side's vulnerable batting order.

"In the West Indies series, we had Shanto and [Towhid] Hridoy out injured and learned that we need players ready," Lipu said. "In the Emerging teams, we tried three middle-order players to see how they respond to a slightly lower level than the national team. With the World Cup coming up, we can't give numerous chances, so from the prospective options we felt Ankon might occupy that position. His recent white-ball performances in the Windies ODIs were also considered."

While Bangladesh continue their T20I experiments, Ankon now has a significant opportunity to prove himself. Yet the larger concern remains unchanged: even the available options during such batting crises rarely inspire confidence -- a problem rooted far deeper than selection alone.

Tigers begin campaign against Windies in Kolkata



Bangladesh have been pitted in Group C for the 2026 ICC Men's T20 World Cup, along with West Indies, Italy, England, and Nepal, as the International Cricket Council (ICC) announced the schedule for the 20-team mega event yesterday. The tournament runs February 7–March 8, 2026, across India and Sri Lanka.

GROUPS

Group A: India, USA, Namibia, Netherlands, Pakistan

Group B: Australia, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Ireland, Oman

Group C: England, West Indies, Bangladesh, Italy, Nepal

Group D: South Africa, New Zealand, Afghanistan, Canada, UAE

Bangladesh Group Fixtures:

Feb 7: Bangladesh vs West Indies, Kolkata, 3:30 pm

Feb 9: Bangladesh vs Italy, Kolkata, 11:30 pm

Feb 14: Bangladesh vs England, Kolkata, 3:30 pm

Feb 17: Bangladesh vs Nepal, Mumbai, 7:30 pm

(All are in Bangladesh time)

Co-hosted by India (5 venues) and Sri Lanka (3 venues)

Top two teams from each group advance to Super Eights

Semifinals: Kolkata/Colombo and Mumbai

Final: Mar 8, Ahmedabad or Colombo

Total group matches: 40 (February 7–20)

The tournament will use the same format as 2024 -- 20 teams in four groups, ahead of a Super Eights phase, with the top two finishers from each group making it to the playoffs

India vs Pakistan showdown on February 15, Colombo; first clash since 2025 Asia Cup

Pakistan play all matches in Sri Lanka due to neutral venue agreement

Arsenal, Bayern put perfect records on the line

STAR SPORTS DESK

Arsenal and Bayern Munich -- the two top-ranked teams in this season's Champions League -- collide in a blockbuster Matchday 5 encounter at the Emirates Stadium on Wednesday.

Mikel Arteta and Vincent Kompany have guided their teams to 12 points from 12, while also leading their respective domestic leagues.

Arsenal boast the competition's only unbreached defence, while Bayern have scored a joint-high 14 goals -- level with PSG. Harry Kane, who has 15 goals in 21 career appearances against the Gunners, will again be central to Bayern's threat. He has struck six times in 10 matches at the Emirates -- the most by any visiting player.

The Gunners enter the clash unbeaten in 15 games since their August defeat to Liverpool, winning 13 and drawing two. Their eight match winning run in Champions League league-stage fixtures, with a combined 24-2 goal tally, is the longest in the club's history.

Bayern's European form is even more imposing. Since a 3-0 loss to PSG in 2017, they have suffered only three defeats in 52 league-stage matches -- all away from home. Kompany's side have won a record 17 of their 18 games in all competitions, the only blemish a 2-2 draw with Union Berlin.

Arsenal, however, have painful memories of this fixture. Bayern have eliminated them several times, including last season's 3-2 aggregate win in the quarterfinal and three consecutive 5-1 defeats in 2015-16 and 2016-17 before that, and the Gunners are winless in the last five meetings. Wednesday marks their 15th Champions League clash -- more than Arsenal have faced any other team.



India's Sai Sudharsan and nightwatchman Kuldeep Yadav look dejected as they walk back to the pavilion at the end of fourth day's play of the second Test against South Africa in Guwahati yesterday. South Africa are now on the brink of a first series win in India in 25 years, as they had the hosts tottering at 27-2 after setting a mammoth target of 549.

PHOTO: AFP