

Afeida, Ritu Porna headline Rajshahi Stars’ title ambition

SPORTS REPORTER

Newcomers Rajshahi Stars FC are set to make an ambitious debut in the BFF Women’s Football League, bolstered by the inclusion of national captain Afeida Khandokar and star forward Ritu Porna Chakma, with the top-tier league returning on December 29 after a one-and-a-half-year hiatus and featuring 11 teams.

Alongside Afeida and Ritu, several national senior and age-group players – including Sheuli Azim, Munki Akter, Shaheda Akter Ripa, Alpi Akter, Sauravi Akanda Prity, Puja Das, Nadia Akter Juthi and Swarna Rani Mandol – are likely to join the Rajshahi-based side, who are also exploring signings from Nepal and Pakistan.

“Rajshahi Stars, funded by Nabil Group, have almost completed forming a strong squad. We will fight for the league title,” the team’s manager Musfikur Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday, adding that their contracts offer a minimum of Tk 75,000 to a maximum of Tk 5.5 lakh.

He added that the initiative follows Nabil Group’s involvement in franchise cricket with Rajshahi Warriors and aims to support the growth of women’s football, while also providing opportunities to players from Narayanganj, Rajshahi and other districts.

Under the BFF framework, clubs can sign five players from Pot-1 (13 senior players), five from Pot-2 (18 age-group players) and one goalkeeper from Pot-3 from a 36-player central pool, with the month-long tournament set to ensure competitiveness. The 13-day transfer window closes on December 26, with other teams, including defending champions Nasrin Sports Academy, also finalising squads.

Newcomers Bangladesh Police Women’s FC initially planned to form a star-studded lineup featuring Maria Manda, Monika Chakma and Rupna Chakma, but later revised their plans due to financial constraints.

Meanwhile, Nasrin Sports Academy are expected to form a moderate squad this season, while Bangladesh Army, Ansar and VDP, and BKSP will mainly rely on their own players, with Ansar and VDP likely to include a few national team members.



Dhaka Capitals’ Mahidul Islam Ankon inspects his bat as he shares a light moment with teammate Jaker Ali and Dhaka Capitals opener Saif Hassan during a training session at the Cricket Academy in Purbachal yesterday, ahead of their departure for Sylhet for the opening phase of the BPL.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

ILT20 clash disrupts BPL’s foreign contingents

SPORTS REPORTER

A clash of dates with the ongoing International League T20 (ILT20) has cast a shadow over the availability of overseas players in the opening phase of the 12th Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), set to begin on December 26.

ILT20’s league phase matches run until December 28, with playoffs and the final scheduled between December 30 and January 4. Many foreign roped in by BPL sides are currently tied up in this league and if their respective teams qualify for the playoffs, they are likely to miss the Sylhet phase, which will run till January 2.

Dhaka Capitals have assembled a strong overseas contingent featuring England batter Alex Hales, Afghanistan wicketkeeper-batter Rahmanullah Gurbaz and Sri Lanka all-rounder Dasun Shanaka. However, all three are currently in action in the ILT20.

Shanaka’s participation remains

particularly doubtful for the entire tournament as he was recently appointed as Sri Lanka’s T20I captain till the ICC T20 World Cup, and the Lankans have a three-match home T20I series against Pakistan lined up early next month.

Dhaka officials, however, remain hopeful about having Usman Khan, Imad Wasim, Odean Smith and Zubaid Akbari from the start, with all four expected to arrive in Sylhet by December 24.

Rangpur Riders also face uncertainty over Kyle Mayers as the all-rounder’s ILT20 side Gulf Giants are fourth on the table with two league matches remaining. If they advance to the playoffs, Rangpur are likely to miss Mayers for at least part of the Sylhet leg, where they play four matches starting December 29.

“If Mayers’ team is out of the ILT20, we are hopeful to get him from the beginning. Otherwise, he may miss a few games,” a Rangpur official said, adding that the franchise expects their other

foreign players to be available from the outset.

Newcomers Noakhali Express are also waiting on several overseas recruits. Mohammad Nabi and Sadequallah Atal are currently representing Dubai Capitals while Johnson Charles is playing for Sharjah Warriorz in the ILT20 and will join after completing their stints. Sri Lankan wicketkeeper-batter Kusal Mendis’ availability is in serious doubt after he reportedly suffered an injury and may require surgery.

Sylhet Titans’ Moeen Ali and Azmatullah Omarzai, both part of the Gulf Giants in the ILT20, are expected to arrive only after the tournament in the UAE concludes.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh pacers Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed, currently representing Dubai Capitals and Sharjah Warriorz respectively, are expected to link up with their BPL franchises after December 24, the last date of their NOCs.

Can Arsenal crack Christmas curse?

AFP

Arsenal held off Manchester City to stay top of the Premier League at Christmas courtesy of a Viktor Gyokeres penalty in the 1-0 win at Everton on Sunday.

The Gunners will be top of the tree on Christmas Day for the third time in four years after grinding out a first Premier League away win in four games on Merseyside.

Being in first place at that landmark point of the campaign is usually a sign of future champions, but it has proved to be more of a curse for Arsenal.

In the four previous times they have led at Christmas in the Premier League era, they have not gone on to win the title.

That includes two recent examples as Mikel Arteta’s men were reeled in by Manchester City in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Indeed the last five times the leaders at Christmas did not go on to become champions, City have won the title.

“What gives me belief and confidence is the level of performance and the consistency of that,” Arteta told AFP.



Morocco forward Ayoub El Kaabi celebrates with Anass Salah-Eddine after scoring with a stunning overhead kick during a 2-0 win in the opening match of the Africa Cup of Nations against Comoros at Prince Moulay Abdellah Stadium in Rabat on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

Bangladeshi bowlers making waves while batters overlooked



SPORTS REPORTER

Three Bangladesh national team players are currently plying their trade across two franchise leagues, with one thing in common – they are all specialist bowlers.

Leg spinner Rishad Hossain is making a solid impression in his debut season in Australia’s Big Bash League (BBL) for Hobart Hurricanes, and in the UAE, pacers Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed are plying their trade in the ILT20 for Dubai Capitals and Sharjah Warriorz, respectively.

All-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who is no longer part of the national team setup, is also playing in the ILT20 for MI Emirates. But with his batting capabilities greatly diminished, the 38-year-old is primarily playing as a bowler for his team.

Bangladeshi players have never really been sought-after commodities in franchise cricket. Other than Shakib and Mustafizur, others have hardly attracted interest from franchises in top leagues.

However, the presence of three Bangladeshi players in different leagues at the same time hints at a positive shift in this regard – at least for the bowlers.

Their performances have also been encouraging. Rishad, who

earlier this year played for the Lahore Qalandars in the Pakistan Super League, has claimed three wickets in three appearances so far in the BBL at an economy rate of 7.20.

Taskin has bagged six wickets in four matches for the Warriorz till Sunday, while Mustafizur is second in the wicket-taker’s list with 14 scalps in seven innings.

On Sunday, Mustafizur bagged the player-of-the-match award for figures of 3-34 against Gulf Giants, and on the same day, Shakib also won it after returning 1-14 with the ball and scoring an unbeaten 17 off 25 balls against Desert Vipers in a low-scoring affair.

Even teams in the Indian Premier League (IPL) – the biggest franchise league in the world – had shown interest in Bangladeshi bowlers.

In order to get short-listed in the final auction list in the IPL, players who had registered must be named in the wish list of at least one of the teams. A total of seven Bangladeshis were in the final shortlist of the recent IPL mini-auction, and all of them were specialist bowlers.

Mustafizur was the only one to get a team, however, as he went to the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) after a bidding war for a whopping INR 9.20 crore.

The increased interest for Bangladeshi bowlers in the franchise world and the lack of it for the batters is not just a coincidence but an accurate reflection of the nation’s current cricketing state.

In recent times, Bangladesh’s batting has looked increasingly volatile, with little to no solidity at any position. Meanwhile, in the bowling end, even though limitations exist, performances have been somewhat consistent.

This tendency did not go unnoticed by franchise sides, who regularly scour through the world of cricket, from top Test-playing nations to the backwaters of the game at the Associates level, from the international arena to unprofessional local cricket, in search of talented players who can give them the edge.

In franchise cricket, national labels mean little as skills triumph over all else, so getting opportunities in top leagues for a player is proof of quality in the shortest format.

For Bangladesh cricket, the surge in franchise opportunities for bowlers serves as recognition for the consistent bowling unit, and for the batters, it’s a reminder that the batting lineup needs urgent consolidation to match global standards.

Learning through play: Shaping young minds for a lifetime of learning

By Shahnaj Khan

From their earliest days, children explore and make sense of the world through play. In the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) for early years, play is not a pause from learning – it is the heartbeat of learning. The programme offers opportunities for exploration, creativity and discovery while nurturing the holistic development of every child. The IB emphasises that “Through play, learners develop agency and take ownership of their learning”.

Purposeful play enables children to express ideas, build relationships and tackle problems in authentic contexts. These experiences strengthen confidence, belonging and emotional well-being – foundations for capable, curious and compassionate learners.

The IB’s early years philosophy shows that children learn best when they are free to make choices, try out their ideas and collaborate with their peers. When classrooms support this kind of agency, children build deeper conceptual understanding, stronger thinking skills, greater creativity and a growing sense of emotional resilience.

Play sparks imagination and boosts early cognitive skills
In PYP early years classrooms for children aged three to six, learning spaces are intentionally designed to spark imagination and strengthen cognitive skills. Open-ended materials and carefully curated zones – construction areas, dramatic-play corners, sensory tables and art studios – invite children to choose, explore and experiment. They build, pretend, test ideas and solve problems at their own pace. Educators guide inquiry by asking questions and encouraging reflection. They help children link their observations with new ideas. This aligns with psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s view that imaginative play leads to realistic thinking and supports co-construction of knowledge through social interaction.

By joining children’s play with light prompts and supportive conversation, educators help them connect ideas and build understanding. This reflects Vygotsky’s view that imaginative play fosters realistic thinking and shared learning through social interaction.

This is evident when children explore seasons through a playful, nature-themed collage. Using recycled and natural loose parts – leaves, twigs, stones, fabric scraps and bottle caps – they build their own scenes, from sunny gardens to autumn forests and rainy-season paths. As they arrange and adapt materials, children demonstrate flexible thinking, practise self-regulation while sharing resources, and strengthen communication by discussing what people do, wear and eat in each season. Their growing confidence shows as they proudly contribute to the evolving nature scene, turning simple art-making into a rich, joyful learning experience.

The educator simply joins the play rather than directing it. Children continue exploring in their own way, and within that flow they naturally begin sorting materials, noticing differences, making predictions, using descriptive language and working together to solve problems.

From play to learning: strengthening early literacy and numeracy

In IB early years classrooms, play is where real learning comes alive. A dramatic-play kitchen, for example, becomes much more than a pretend space – children read menus, write lists, measure ingredients and compare quantities, naturally practising literacy and numeracy while they play. When this play is self-directed, the learning deepens even further. Children take the lead in planning their restaurant, choosing roles, gathering materials and organising their



space. In doing so, they practise thinking ahead, solving problems, negotiating with peers and managing resources – all essential early learning skills.

Their conversations grow richer as they explain their ideas and collaborate. Math and language emerge naturally because they are meaningful parts of the play. At the same time, children develop confidence, independence and social – emotional skills through taking turns, teamwork and decision-making.

A child-led play kitchen becomes a small world of inquiry where imagination, communication, thinking and early math blend seamlessly – reflecting the IB belief that young children learn best when they follow their curiosity and take ownership of their learning.

Outdoor learning opportunities such as gardening activities invite children to plant seeds, observe growth and record changes, prompting scientific thinking through questions such as, “Which seed will grow first?”, “How does sunlight help the plant?” or “What happens if I water it too much?”. Sensory and hands-on activities further reinforce early literacy skills. Tracing letters in sand, shaping alphabet forms with dough or identifying sounds through tactile resources help strengthen phonics, letter recognition and early writing.

Loose-parts play – using buttons, stones, shells, blocks or recycled materials – nurtures counting, classification, sorting and pattern recognition. These cognitive tasks strengthen neural connections and build essential numeracy foundations.

Purposeful play also supports the development of the IB approaches to learning (ATL) skills – a set of skills designed to help students become self-regulated, lifelong learners. Through collaboration, communication and problem-solving, children learn to think critically, manage emotions, work as a team and build resilience.

Play: the foundation for lifelong growth

Play-based learning remains the most authentic form of early education. Children who inquire, explore and experiment through play develop the competencies necessary for both academic success and personal growth. Albert Einstein captured this reality profoundly: “Play is the highest form of research.”

By embedding the IB’s philosophy of purposeful play and aligning with world-class early childhood pedagogies, the Aga Khan Academy Dhaka’s early years PYP classrooms lay the foundation for lifelong learning – shaping confident individuals and compassionate global citizens.

Shahnaj Khan is the Early Years Coordinator at the Aga Khan Academy Dhaka.