

## BPL: The testing ground for World Cup hopefuls

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) places heavy expectations on players from the franchises' side, creating a competitive grind that sharpens Bangladesh's national team toolbox, particularly those in the pipeline. From that perspective, the BPL offers a major platform to showcase performance in franchise cricket, but this time it presents a unique opportunity for players aiming to break into the Bangladesh T20I squad ahead of the World Cup in February.

That opportunity, however, also brings added pressure. Bangladesh T20I skipper Litton Das recently stated that the "team has been ready since the Asia Cup" following the Tigers' final bilateral series against Ireland before the global event. Litton further indicated that the window of opportunity is limited, suggesting that only extraordinary performances in the 12th edition of the BPL would "open doors" for players not involved in the most recent T20I series.

For Bangladesh, the biggest concern remains the batting department. While players such as Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Parvez Hossain Emon and Saif Hassan have shown improvement at international level, the BPL could just as easily work



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

against their World Cup prospects if runs are not forthcoming.

Jaker Ali, Nurul Hasan and Shamim Hossain were each tried during the Ireland T20I series, but none provided a clear solution to Bangladesh's middle-order issues. Mahidul Islam Ankon, included to assess "backup options", did not even get a game.

Even Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto is looking at the BPL as a route back into the T20I setup. With possibly just one middle-order slot available,

the tournament represents a major opportunity for Ankon and others to stake a claim for World Cup selection.

Ankon's Noakhali Express held their final training session in Dhaka yesterday before departing for Sylhet on Wednesday for the first phase of the BPL, and the batter remained optimistic about his chances.

"I feel if I can play good cricket, that chance will come," Ankon said.

Ankon typically bats at number seven or eight in franchise cricket, roles that are

currently of importance to the national team.

"Those of us in the middle or lower middle order may see our positions change at any time. So we are not trying to settle into a specific role. Instead, we are discussing possible batting positions and individual plans," he added, referring to discussions with Noakhali coach Khaled Mahmud.

Ankon was among the standout performers in the previous edition of the BPL, scoring 316 runs for Khulna Tigers at an average of just over 35 and a strike rate exceeding 170. Players such as Towhid Hridoy and Shanto had previously used the BPL as a launchpad into the national side. Aware of the dangers of carrying excess pressure, Ankon also mentioned he does not want to "think too far ahead".

Competing for a place in the playing XI alongside players such as Jaker, and against international stars set to feature in the BPL, could shape future selections. Like Ankon, several players will hope their performances in this edition resemble a final push for World Cup inclusion. After failing to make a significant impact in tournaments such as the Rising Stars Asia Cup, the BPL offers players like Ankon and Shanto a final chance to press their case.

**"Our primary task is to manage BPL 12 effectively on the field. Regarding security, we are following the instructions and guidance of the relevant law enforcement agencies. We will act accordingly based on the situation and are keeping a close watch on everything."**



BCB President Aminul Islam Bulbul told reporters yesterday while addressing security concerns over the upcoming BPL 12, which is scheduled to begin on December 26 in Sylhet.

## FEDERATION CUP Kings, Mohammedan produce stalemate

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Reigning champions Bashundhara Kings survived a stoppage-time scare to play out a goalless draw against rivals Mohammedan in a high-stakes Federation Cup Group B encounter at the Shaheed Dharendra Nath Datta Stadium in Cumilla on Tuesday.

The result saw 11-time Federation Cup champions Mohammedan maintain second place in the five-team group with five points from three matches, level with leaders Fortis FC. Four-time champions Kings, meanwhile, remained fourth with two points after registering their second consecutive draw in the competition.

Still reeling from a 2-0 defeat to Bangladesh Police FC in the Bangladesh Football League last Saturday, Kings struggled to penetrate a resolute Mohammedan backline, whom they had beaten twice earlier this season in the Challenge Cup final and the professional league. Kings' attack lacked sharpness throughout the match and Faysal Ahmed Fahim's series of crosses went in vain.

The opening half was evenly contested, with both teams battling for control in midfield. Kings briefly thought they had taken the lead when Rakib Hossain found the net from a Fahim square pass, but the goal was ruled out for offside. Mohammedan appealed for a penalty when Ghanaian forward Samson Boateng's header struck the hand of defender Saad Uddin inside the area, but referee Nasir Uddin waved play on.

Kings applied pressure in the final 10 minutes and came close on several occasions, but Mohammedan goalkeeper Sujon Hossain produced a series of fine saves to preserve a clean sheet.

Mohammedan nearly snatched victory in stoppage time when Samuel Boateng hesitated inside the six-yard box, allowing Kings captain Topu Barman to clear the danger and ensure the champions escaped with a point.



## SALAH'S LATE STRIKE RESCUES EGYPT

Mohamed Salah struck a stoppage-time winner as Egypt came from behind to beat Zimbabwe 2-1 in their opening Group B match of the Africa Cup of Nations finals in Morocco on Monday. Zimbabwe took a surprise lead through Prince Dube, Omar Marmoush equalised, before Salah sealed victory late.

PHOTO: X

## The pauseless winter grind

STAR SPORTS DESK

There are plenty of moments in an English Premier League footballer's life that might inspire envy, but playing through the holiday season is unlikely to be one of them.

Life in the Premier League is unrelenting at the best of times. The standards are unforgiving, the pace relentless and the scrutiny constant. Yet it reaches another level in December when fixtures come thick and fast, squeezed tightly around Christmas and New Year, just as much of European football shuts down.

For supporters, this is often the highlight of the season – a festive feast of football that fills cozy afternoons on the couch. But while fans sit back with hot chocolate and Christmas treats, spare a thought for the players grinding through matches in biting cold because unlike most of Europe, England offers no proper winter break.

A winter break is designed as a mid-season pause for rest and recovery, something embraced by LaLiga, the Bundesliga, Ligue 1, and Serie A. The Premier League, however, has long resisted the idea. Tradition plays a huge role, with



Boxing Day and New Year fixtures deeply ingrained and financially vital for clubs and broadcasters. Add to that the burden of domestic cups – the FA Cup and League Cup – and an already congested calendar, and a full shutdown becomes difficult.

The league did experiment with split winter breaks in 2019-20, 2021-22 and 2023-24, but these were half measures at best. There was no complete pause, with matches spread across two weekends and FA Cup

replays intruding into the supposed rest period. Covid disrupted plans in 2020-21, the winter World Cup ruled out a break in 2022-23, and the expanded European calendar has now killed the idea altogether for 2024-25.

This season, Ligue 1 will pause for 17 days, from December 15 to January 1. The Bundesliga will also enjoy a 17-day break, returning on January 9, while LaLiga will have a shorter 10-day hiatus. The Premier League and Serie A, meanwhile, will plough on. By the time the Bundesliga resumes, Premier League teams will have played four matches.

The toll is not lost on those who have lived it. Bayern Munich manager and former Manchester City captain Vincent Kompany recently reflected on his time in England: "In total, I had no winter break, no vacation for 13 years. I once had six days off in an entire year. For physical and mental health, I now feel how valuable this is."

Yet for all the strain it places on players, the festive schedule remains a cornerstone of English football. And as ever, while it is gruelling for those on the pitch, it promises another blockbuster holiday season for fans.

## A LOOK BACK AT 2025

# A year when women's sports surged

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## BANGLADESH'S PROMISE AMID GLOBAL MOMENTUM

While women's sport surged globally in 2025, Bangladesh also found moments that pointed toward a more promising future. Despite limited preparation, Nigar Sultana Joty and her teammates showed resilience and growth in a year that tested both resources and resolve.

The Joty-led Tigresses could not better their record of winning more than a solitary match at an ODI World Cup, but their performances at the 2025 edition, jointly hosted by India and Sri Lanka from September to November, offered signs of steady progress. Bangladesh began their campaign with a thumping victory over Pakistan and went on to push South Africa, England and Sri Lanka into narrow wins.

The match against Sri Lanka proved particularly agonising. Chasing 203, Bangladesh fell just seven runs short after losing their final five wickets in the space of six deliveries for a single run, a late collapse that turned what could have been a landmark victory into a painful near miss. Still, the Tigresses earned credit for competing fiercely against higher-ranked sides despite a patched-up preparation phase that saw them play age-level boys' teams due to the Bangladesh Cricket Board's inability to arrange international warm-up matches.

Away from cricket, Bangladesh's women

footballers carved out a historic year of their own. Despite a fallout between some senior players and the coach, the team achieved a first-ever qualification for the 2026 AFC Women's Asian Cup. Victories over hosts Myanmar, Bahrain and Turkmenistan saw Bangladesh top their qualification group, including emphatic 7-0 wins



against Bahrain and Turkmenistan and a memorable 2-1 win over higher-ranked Myanmar.

That commanding run propelled Bangladesh from 128th to 104th in the FIFA Women's World Rankings, making them the biggest climbers in early August and underlining a breakthrough year for the women's game at home.

## INDIA'S LONG-AWAITED MOMENT ON THE WORLD STAGE

At the global level, cricket delivered one of the year's defining moments as India

lifted their maiden Women's Cricket World Cup. The triumph sparked nationwide celebrations, with the streets of Mumbai turning into a carnival as fireworks lit up the sky, horns blared, and crowds danced late into the night.

Across the country, fans gathered around television screens in tea stalls



and living rooms, marking what felt like a cultural milestone. The victory also saw the brand value of India's top women cricketers soar, reflecting how success on the field translated into wider recognition and visibility.

## FOOTBALL BREAKS BARRIERS ACROSS EUROPE

Women's football continued its upward trajectory in 2025, highlighted by a European Championship in Switzerland that reached new peaks. Ticket sales eclipsed those of the 2022 tournament

even before the final matches were played, signalling growing demand and interest.

Hosts Switzerland captured attention with a dream run to their first-ever quarterfinal, igniting enthusiasm in a country better known for producing elite skiers and tennis players. After their exit against Spain, coach Pia Sundhage captured



the broader impact of the moment, saying: "We lost the game, but I think we gained a lot. When people shouted my name, I feel they were shouting for women's football."

Off the pitch, Arsenal shattered the women's transfer record by signing Canadian forward Olivia Smith from Liverpool for one million pounds, making her the first female footballer to cross the seven-figure barrier.

## RECORD CROWDS REDEFINE WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Attendance records fell dramatically in

2025, most notably at the Women's Rugby World Cup in England. More than 440,000 tickets were sold – three times the number from the 2021 edition – culminating in a final at Twickenham watched by 81,885 fans, the largest crowd ever for a women's rugby match.

More than half of the spectators were female, with 50 percent attending their first women's rugby match. The tournament also generated a peak UK television audience of 5.8 million.

## WNBA AND NEW LEAGUES CARRY THE MOMENTUM FORWARD

The WNBA closed the year with further signs of expansion and influence. The league grew to 13 teams with plans to reach 15 teams in 2026 and 18 by 2030.

A'ja Wilson delivered a dominant season, becoming the first four-time WNBA MVP while also winning her third defensive player of the year award, Finals MVP and leading the Las Vegas Aces to their third title in four seasons. Her season was capped by a Time Magazine cover and a Nike campaign that underscored her impact.

Beyond the WNBA, 2025 saw the launch of several new leagues, including the Unrivaled 3x3 women's basketball league, the Women's Professional Baseball League, League One Volleyball and Canada's Northern Super League. Together, they reflected a year in which women's sport not only reached new heights, but expanded its footprint, visibility and future potential.