



Zaki's final day at field ends in mourning

SPORTS REPORTER

Cricket in the country took a backseat on Saturday after a heart-wrenching incident on the field left everyone in utter disbelief, shock, and grief.

Mahbub Ali Zaki, a renowned local coach and a respected figure in Bangladeshi cricket, passed away at the age of 59 after suffering a cardiac arrest. The assistant coach of Dhaka Capitals in the ongoing 12th Bangladesh Premier League, Zaki collapsed while supervising his team's warm-up session ahead of their match against Rajshahi Warriors.

He was given CPR and rushed to a nearby hospital, but doctors later confirmed that he had died on the way.

Although the two scheduled matches of the day went ahead, the results felt irrelevant. Cricket seemed insignificant, and the matches felt like professional obligations, with the loss of someone who was deeply admired across the country's cricketing circles.

Several national cricketers, including Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Shoriful Islam, and Hasan Mahmud, along with Zaki's colleagues and Bangladesh Cricket Board president Aminul Islam Bulbul, rushed to the hospital, where confirmation of his death led to emotional scenes as grief overwhelmed those present.

Within hours, Zaki was back at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium – this time for his namaz-e-janaza, where BCB officials, local and foreign players, BPL authorities, journalists and well-wishers gathered to pay their final respects. His body was later taken to his hometown Cumilla, where he will be laid to rest.

A former fast bowler, Zaki represented Cumilla in the National Cricket Championship and played for top clubs such as Abahani and Dhammadri. After retiring, he devoted his life to coaching and joined the BCB in 2008 as a High Performance coach, playing a major role in the development of pace bowling in the country.

He was part of the coaching staff of Bangladesh's historic Under-19 World Cup-winning team in 2020 and was serving as the Specialist Pace Bowling Coach of BCB Game Development at the time of his death.

Many leading fast bowlers, including Taskin Ahmed and Mustafizur Rahman, were scouted and groomed by him. For countless cricketers dealing with technical or physical issues, "Zaki sir" was the first person they turned to.

Former pupils from different generations took to social media to express their grief. Mustafizur thanked him for "helping me numerous times in my career", while Shakib Al Hasan recalled "fond memories" and reflected on how "his last moments were at a cricket ground doing the work he loved most."

Mashrafe Bin Mortaza wrote that Zaki "probably understood the biomechanics of bowling better than anyone in Bangladesh", a view shared widely across the cricketing community.

Equally admired by even the foreign coaches he had worked with, Zaki was remembered as a "mentor, a guide, and a constant source of belief during our journey to winning the 2020 U-19 World Cup in South Africa" by U-19 head coach Naved Nawaz.

The emotional outpouring witnessed since Saturday underlines the lasting impact Zaki had on Bangladesh cricket. While his absence leaves a void in the country's coaching landscape, especially in pace bowling, the legacy he built will certainly endure beyond his passing.



STAR SPORTS DESK

A 15-year, 18-Test wait for success on Australian soil finally ended as England survived a treacherous two-day contest yesterday, emerging from what many described as an MCG snake pit with resilience and reward.

England's bold Bazball philosophy finally delivered a defining overseas moment. Refusing to retreat into defensive cricket, the visitors attacked from the outset of the modest run chase. Jacob Bethell's fluent 40 set the tempo, while Zak Crawley's assured 37 and Ben Duckett's lively 34 ensured momentum never slipped away. The victory was sealed in front of a packed Boxing Day crowd of 92,045, though many spectators later discovered their tickets for the remaining days were void after the Test ended far earlier than expected.

Despite the celebrations, discomfort surrounded the spectacle. England captain Ben Stokes and Australian skipper Steve Smith both admitted a Test finishing inside two days was far from desirable, echoing criticism from across the cricketing world. The MCG pitch, heavily grassed and offering excessive seam movement,



became the central talking point of the match.

The signs were evident from the opening exchanges. On day one of the fourth Test, 20 wickets fell as Australia were dismissed for 152 before England collapsed to 110 in reply. Batters struggled to survive, let alone build innings, as bowlers dominated proceedings under overcast skies.

The second day offered little change in pattern. Australia were bowled out for 132 shortly after lunch, leaving England a target of 175. Calmness prevailed amid pressure, with Harry Brook unbeaten on 18 and Jamie Smith contributing

three as England reached the target for the loss of six wickets, prompting loud celebrations from the travelling Barmy Army.

"When you go out there and you're faced with those conditions, you've got to crack on and deal with it," said Stokes after the four-wicket victory ended England's long wait for success Down Under.

"But being brutally honest, that's not really what you want. You know, Boxing Day Test match, you don't want a game finishing in less than two days. It's not ideal, but you can't change it once you start the game and you've just got to play what's in front of you," he added.

Smith pointed to the 10 millimetres of grass as a major factor.

"It was tricky. No one could really get in. I think when you see 36 wickets across two days, that's probably too much," he said.

Cricket Australia chief Todd Greenberg was blunt: "Short Tests are bad for business."

A host of former greats have been critical of the Melbourne pitch with former England captain Michael Vaughan on Saturday calling it "a joke" while another ex-England skipper Alastair Cook branded it "an unfair contest".

BY THE NUMBERS

5,468 – Days since England's last Test win in Australia, dating back to the New Year's Test of 2011 (won by an innings and 83 runs).

4 – Men's two-day Tests played in Australia: Melbourne 1931, Brisbane 2022, and two in this series (Perth and Melbourne).

15.08 – Runs per wicket across the two days: the 14th lowest in Ashes history, and the lowest since 1950.

24.3 – Balls per wicket: the second-lowest in all Ashes Tests, behind only Lord's 1888 (20.8).

92,045 – Fans at the MCG on day two, the second-largest single-day crowd in the venue's history, behind the day one crowd of 94,199.

Morocco's 19-match winning streak ends

AGENCIES

Hosts Morocco were held to a 1-1 draw by Mali at the Africa Cup of Nations on Friday, ending their world record run of wins and leaving them still needing to secure progress to the next stage.

Midfielder Brahim Diaz tucked away a penalty in stoppage time at the end of the first half, but Mali equalised from the spot midway through the second half through Lassine Sinayoko.

Both penalties were awarded after VAR reviews in a tempestuous clash at the end of a busy day of action at the tournament.

Morocco top the Group A standings with four points, while Zambia, who they meet next on Monday, have two points, along with Mali, while the Comoros are bottom of the group with a single point.

Morocco had won a record 19 successive internationals ahead of the Boxing Day clash, but the draw brings that run to an end and leaves them still looking unconvincing despite their status as runaway favourites.

Morocco captain Achraf Hakimi's former PSG teammate Kylian Mbappe, the current Real Madrid superstar and France skipper, was among the spectators in the crowd of 63,844 and appeared to be wearing a Morocco shirt with Hakimi's number two on it.



DIABATE DOUBLE PEGS KINGS BACK

Souleymane Diabate sends Bashundhara Kings goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico the wrong way as Abahani fought back from two goals down to hold Kings to a 2-2 draw in their Bangladesh Football League fixture at the Kings Arena yesterday. Zico, however, saved a late penalty against Diabate to keep Kings top of the table. Meanwhile, neither Fortis FC nor Rahmatganj MFS were able to cash in on Kings' dropping points as the former drew against Brothers while the latter were held by defending champions Mohammedan.

PHOTO: BFF

A LOOK BACK AT 2025

A year of hope, hype and disappointment

ATIQUE ANAM

Not too long ago, finding a Bangladesh national football team jersey in Dhaka felt like a scavenger hunt. European club jerseys dominated shop displays, while cricket shirts filled whatever space remained. Bangladesh football team jerseys, if available at all, were tucked away in corners.

Fast forward to the end of 2025, and the scene has changed dramatically. The unmistakable white shirt with green patches and red trim now hangs proudly across sports shops and footpath stalls alike, often outnumbering cricket and European club jerseys.

For perhaps the first time in many years, football reclaimed centre stage in Bangladesh's sporting consciousness, briefly unseating cricket from its long-held throne. Crowded galleries at men's international matches, relentless social media buzz and renewed mainstream media attention all pointed towards a revival long craved by supporters.

The spark behind this resurgence was unmistakable. The arrival of Leicester City midfielder Hamza Choudhury electrified



the football landscape, followed by a steady influx of overseas-based players such as Cavalry FC's Shamit Shome and promising youngsters Fahamedul Islam, Zayan Hakim and Cuba Mitchell. With these additions came belief – belief that Bangladesh football was finally turning a corner.

Expectations soared. The national team became more marketable, sponsorship interest grew, merchandise sales increased and the National Stadium once again echoed with genuine footballing passion. Yet,

as the year unfolded, a familiar and frustrating reality resurfaced: the hype was rarely matched by performances on the pitch.

Bangladesh were handed what many described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to qualify for the AFC Asian Cup finals for the first time since their maiden appearance in 1980. Drawn in Group C alongside India, Hong Kong and Singapore in an expanded 24-team tournament, Javier Cabrera and his squad had every reason to believe that qualification was within reach.

The campaign began promisingly with a goalless draw away to India in Shillong – a match Bangladesh arguably should have won comfortably. Yet, it felt like a statement performance, one that could have set the tone for the rest of the qualifiers. Instead, it proved to be a false dawn.

Rather than building on that result, Cabrera's men stumbled badly at home, suffering back-to-back defeats against Singapore and Hong Kong. Those losses, both by narrow one-goal margins, effectively extinguished Bangladesh's qualification hopes before the campaign had truly gathered momentum.

While the scorelines suggested close contests, the reality was harsher: Bangladesh were second best for large stretches, even with a partisan crowd roaring them on at the renovated National Stadium.

As results faltered, scrutiny intensified. Questions were raised repeatedly about the head coach's tactical choices, squad selections and the frequent reshuffling of players into unfamiliar positions. However, such criticisms rarely

translated into accountability, as the Bangladesh Football Federation continued to back the Spaniard, who ended the year as the longest-serving head coach in the national team's history.

The sense of underachievement lingered until the year's final act provided a moment of redemption. Bangladesh closed 2025 with a memorable 1-0 victory over India at home – a result that ended a 22-year winless run against their neighbours and delivered a night of unfiltered joy to millions of fans. It was a win rich in symbolism and emotion, one that will be remembered fondly.

But even that triumph could not entirely mask the broader truth.

Despite an influx of quality players, unprecedented public engagement and renewed belief, the Bangladesh men's football team failed to deliver when it mattered most. The year became a familiar cycle of hope followed by heartbreak, of promise undone by poor execution and missed opportunities. The long-awaited win over India arrived, but it came too late to alter the bigger picture.



INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL 2025: GLORY, HEARTBREAK AND HISTORY

2025 was unforgettable in international football. PSG dominated Europe with a 5-0 Champions League final win over Inter Milan, while Inter stunned Barcelona with a last-minute semi-final comeback. Cristiano Ronaldo led Portugal to a second UEFA Nations League title. Chelsea won the first revamped Club World Cup, and Liverpool broke the British transfer record signing Alexander Isak. Ousmane Dembele's incredible comeback earned him the Ballon d'Or. Tragedy struck with Diogo Jota's and Tottenham claimed their first major trophy.

Read the full story on The Daily Star website