

A league in a hurry

WFL returns today

SPORTS REPORTER

The much-awaited Bangladesh Women's Football League [WFL] kicks off on Monday with 11 teams, but serious doubts persist over whether the competition will provide any meaningful sporting value amid uneven team formation, logistical shortcomings and the absence of commercial backing.

Bangladesh Police take on Bangladesh Army in the opening match before defending champions Nasrin Academy face BKSP at the Birsreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur – the league's sole venue.

Organised after a gap of one and a half years, the league appears hurried and procedural, raising concerns that it is being staged largely to satisfy Asian Football Confederation (AFC) requirements rather than to nurture competitive women's football. AFC statutes demand a minimum of 10 matches per team, a condition the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has met by enrolling exactly 11 teams in a single-leg round-robin format.



As many as 55 matches will be crammed into just 33 days, with up to five matches scheduled on most match days. Limited floodlight facilities, the lack of alternative venues and an intense match calendar threaten to compromise player welfare and match quality.

In an effort to create balance, the BFF placed 36 players in a central pool, allowing clubs to sign five senior players from Pot-1, five age-group players from Pot-2 and one goalkeeper from Pot-3. However, the results have been starkly uneven.

Newcomers Rajshahi Stars, bankrolled by Nabil Group, have assembled a formidable squad featuring 11 national team players, while Farashganj have recruited six. In contrast, five teams will compete without a single national team player, relying largely on academy footballers or personnel from services teams.

Defending champions Nasrin Academy have also been hit by the imbalance. Club owner Nasrin Begum said she was able to sign only one age-group national team player, highlighting the financial constraints faced by most teams.

"Funding and sponsorship are the main issues. Most clubs are depending on academy players because there is no financial support," she said.

The league itself does not have a title sponsor.

Foreign participation is equally limited. Although each team is allowed to sign four overseas players and field two in a match, only Farashganj have recruited two Nepalese footballers, while Nasrin Academy are trying to rope in one Australian-Bangladeshi player.

The scheduling also mirrors earlier contradictions in planning. National team coach Peter Butler had previously criticised the decision to allow players to compete in the Bhutan Women's League, warning that a lack of competitive fixtures would harm fitness and sharpness. His concerns appeared justified after heavy national team defeats against Thailand and during last month's Tri-Nation series. Similar risks now loom over a league squeezed into a short window with minimal recovery time.

BFF women's wing chairman Mahfuzza Akter Kiron acknowledged the organisational challenges.

"Organising multiple matches on a single day is definitely challenging. However, we have to finish the league within one month, so we don't have any alternatives," she said, citing limitations in floodlights and facilities.

She also confirmed a lack of interest from established clubs.

"We sent invitation letters to everyone. Ataur Rahman Bhuiyan Academy did not submit an entry. Abahani said they would form a team next year."

Adding to the sense of disarray, the BFF failed to provide a complete list of team registrations less than 24 hours before the league's opening day.

KHALID HOSSAIN

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It began with whispers that became shouts, with footsteps that hesitated, with hearts that doubted. It ended with a quiet rewriting of history, the kind that does not announce itself loudly, but lingers.

Context matters. The men's national team have qualified for Asia's premier competition just once – back in 1979, a moment preserved like an old photograph. The women this year went further than any Bangladesh side had managed in nearly half a century. They qualified for the AFC Women's Asian Cup for the first time, doing so as the lowest-ranked team (128) ever to enter the tournament. Rankings – which rose to a record 24 spots afterwards – like expectations, were politely ignored.

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public view, with press conferences as tense as any monsoon-soaked district cup final. The team that had delivered back-to-back SAFF titles seemed to unravel in real time.

Butler remained unmoved, though, like a lighthouse amid storm and flood. The federation chose continuity. Contracts were honoured, compromises reached, and the noise gradually receded. However, some familiar faces did not return, leaving an unmistakable reminder that every rebellion carries its casualties.

What followed was a quiet revolution as the English coach continued to trust youth, demand discipline, and insist on a game that thought before it ran. May-June's friendly draws against superior-ranked Indonesia and Jordan offered clues for what was in store.

In July, in Myanmar, the lessons were tested. Victories over Bahrain and Turkmenistan came with assurance, but in the decisive match against the hosts, Ritu Porna Chakma appeared as though conjured by the spirits of the riverbanks. She scored

twice, with the lightness of a dancer and the precision of a hunter. Bangladesh qualified and did it with style: tactically sophisticated, emotionally resonant, and quietly audacious.

Ritu Porna's year came to symbolise the shift. Both Ritu Porna and the national women's team were rewarded with two of the nation's highest civilian honours, with the forward earning the Rokeya Padak and the team being awarded the Ekushey Padak.

More subtly, the team's thoughtful playing style began to change language itself. They were spoken of less as "women footballers" and more simply as footballers, practitioners of a shared craft.

The momentum ran deeper. The U-20 side lifted the SAFF Championship at home and qualified for their Asian finals, like their seniors. The U-17s, even in defeat, added their notes to a swelling chorus.

Success brought attention, sometimes in unexpected forms. A men's youth team coach admitted on record that the women's achievements were putting pressure on the men – an unintended but telling compliment.

Yet setbacks remained. While Bangladesh played more international matches than in any recent year, straight losses to Thailand, Malaysia, and Azerbaijan underlined the distance still to be travelled before next year's

main event in Australia. Domestic structures lagged behind ambition, pushing players to seek minutes abroad, in Bhutan or on futsal courts. Eventually, the Women's Football League saw daylight – starting on December 29 after nearly a one-and-a-half-year gap.

Butler spoke openly of the need to rise beyond South Asia, a standard he described as "terrible", and towards Asia proper. It was clear that this team had stopped measuring themselves against neighbours, setting their sights on what was previously out of reach – like the Olympics and the World Cup.

The reception after qualification captured the paradox. There was pride, yes, but also insistence. Captain Afeida Khandokar spoke of the need for much better nutrition, facilities, and preparation. It was the language of a team that had outgrown novelty and begun to negotiate with the future.

2025 began in rebellion. It ended in belief. Amid limited facilities and modest coverage, Bangladeshi women's football became the country's most successful national team of the year. They proved that progress does not always arrive with trumpets. Sometimes it comes quietly, like water finding its way through stone, reshaping the landscape without asking permission.

Will Emon's 'courageous' move to No. 4 work in the long run?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Parvez Hossain Emon has batted mostly as an opener in Bangladesh's T20I side, but with an opener-heavy top order at the moment, Emon could be seen at a new position in the upcoming T20 World Cup.

Sylhet Titans have handed him the number-four role in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), and the 23-year-old made an immediate impact in his two outings so far. However, whether his natural instincts align with the position going forward remains a question.

In his first match for Sylhet, Emon struck an unbeaten 65 off 33 balls. His changed role saw him come to the crease in the ninth over against a softer ball, not always a comfortable prospect for an opener. However, the way he adapted – batting in the daytime with the ball gripping the surface and then adjusting again

Warriors that, with the World Cup approaching, Emon was being "given an opportunity" to bat at four for the franchise.

Out of his 30 T20Is for Bangladesh, Emon has opened the innings 28 times. His only T20I appearance at number four came in the final match of the last series against Ireland. With Tanzid Tamim and Saif Hassan also in the opening mix, there was discussion about utilising openers in different roles, which was reflected in that final game.

"We had a plan that since he [Emon] can bat at four, if Saif Hassan opens, he will be able to bat at four easily because I thought Saif wasn't that comfortable at four," selector Hasibul Hossain Shanto told The Daily Star yesterday.

Hasibul also said that he had spoken to Emon about the number-four role he is currently playing for his franchise.

"Everyone is seeing it [his comfort at four]. I told Parvez, 'Look, you are scoring runs in T20s



under lights in Sylhet's next match -- was viewed positively.

"When you start something, you don't get comfortable immediately," BCB chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu told The Daily Star on Sunday when asked about Emon.

"Especially batting during the day and at night, there is a difference in application, and being able to adapt was good. I am happy that he showed the courage to sacrifice his own position and bat elsewhere," Lipu added.

After his fifty-plus knock in the first game, Emon said he was ready for any role, explaining that batting at number four allows him to "test and prove" himself, even though opening the innings is where he is "most comfortable".

Sylhet captain Mehidy Hasan Miraz suggested after the opening match against Rajshahi

at four, and he agreed. He will play at four, and if he is successful, he won't need to go back to opening," Hasibul said.

However, Hasibul insisted that the national selectors did not ask Sylhet Titans to play Emon at number four, although he mentioned that "maybe someone from the board did". He also made it clear that the role is not set in stone for the batter.

Emon's ability to adapt could see him continue at number four, depending on how many innings he gets there for Sylhet. Whether he develops the softer hands required to negotiate spin in the middle overs may define his success both in the BPL and in upcoming events, but whether this adaptation takes something away from his natural game remains to be seen.

A LOOK BACK AT 2025

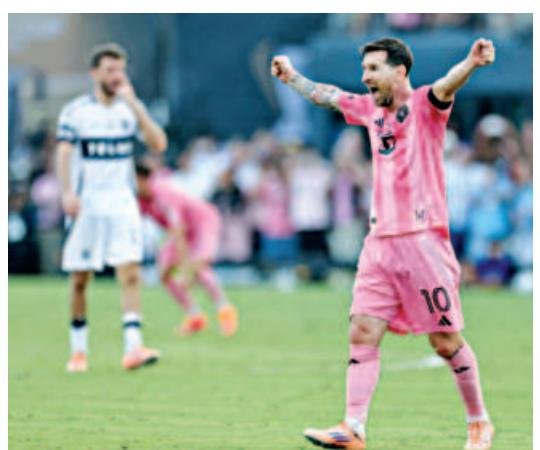
Miles apart, yet redefining football

The year 2025 unfolded like an epilogue written by destiny itself – one more chapter where football refused to let its greatest rivalry fade quietly into history. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, the two superstars who defined a generation, spent the year thousands of miles apart, in different leagues, cultures, and systems. Yet, once again, they ended the year doing what they have always done best: winning, inspiring, and redefining what longevity looks like at the very top of sport.

Messi starred for Inter Miami, winning the MLS Golden Boot and was named MLS MVP for the second straight year. The Argentine superstar helped Miami win their first MLS Cup, earning MLS Cup MVP with two assists in the final. Across all competitions in the calendar year he totaled 46 goals and 28 assists in 54 appearances.

Ronaldo, at 40, continued to score prolifically for Al-Nassr and Portugal, finishing the year with 38 goals and 4 assists in 44 appearances, including key strikes as Portugal won the UEFA Nations League, and remained a dominant scoring force in the Saudi Pro League.

**Read full story on The Daily Star website



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