

No top players in Bangladesh now: Moeen Ali

Despite having stepped away from international cricket in 2024, Moeen Ali remains a familiar presence in franchise leagues worldwide. A long-time observer of Bangladesh cricket -- tracing back to his age-level playing days, stints in the country's domestic circuit, and personal ties to Sylhet -- the 38-year-old is back in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), representing Sylhet Titans this edition. In a conversation with The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan, the former England all-rounder spoke about Bangladesh cricket's development gaps, the BPL's reputation issues, the politics shaping the modern game, and more. The excerpts follow:

The Daily Star (DS): How do you assess Bangladesh cricket's evolution?

Moeen Ali (MA): Initially, I saw Bangladesh evolving nicely with players like Tamim [Iqbal] and Shakib [Al Hasan], but I also feel it has not improved enough recently. While there are many good players now, there are no top players. And that's where Bangladesh cricket is struggling... In the BPL, some of the shot selection the players do is so silly; the

problem is that people have become used to seeing the same mistakes constantly. I've been here for a few seasons, and I still see them making the same mistakes. It feels like the players here are very slow at learning.

DS: Why hasn't Bangladesh produced match-winners of late?

MA: You guys talk about the top five, but I actually believe it's two -- Tamim and Shakib -- who were outstanding... The difference is that those top players singlehandedly won games for many years on their own.

DS: Do you think Bangladesh were unlucky with Tamim and Shakib's recent absences?

MA: I think Tamim sticks to what he believes is right and does what he feels is best for him. I admire that he says when he feels something is wrong, regardless of politics. Generally, the mindset in Bangladesh regarding journalism, punditry, coaching, and facilities needs to improve.

DS: Apart from Rishad [Hossain] and Mustafizur [Rahman], who else has global potential?

MA: Litton Das, Najmul Hossain Shanto, and Tawhid Hridoy are good players with ability. Hridoy is one of the most



talented players in Bangladesh, but I haven't seen his improvement continue since I played with him a few years ago. Players must challenge themselves in practice by working on things they aren't good at, rather than just practising their strengths.

DS: Why hasn't the BPL reached the

level of newer franchise leagues?

MA: It is a matter of reputation regarding payments... Players talk to each other; if someone doesn't get paid, they won't return and will tell others not to risk coming. New franchises have to deal with the negative reputation that existed before them.

DS: Why would you encourage players to come to the BPL?

MA: Because it is good for the game. I would tell young players it is very good for their development because the conditions are difficult.

DS: What's your view on the BCB ICC situation after Mustafizur's IPL snub?

MA: I'm sad for Mustafizur. It is a shame that politics is mixed with sport, and often politicians are the ones running the cricket. Even if you see Gautam Gambhir, he becomes a politician after retiring and then becomes coach of India.

DS: Is the "Big Three" becoming a "Big One" with India dominating?

MA: I don't blame India -- one of my favourite places. But they are only doing what Australia and England did before them: making sure they are okay. Other boards often remain silent because their own teams and finances are fine, so no one stands up for what is actually right.

BFL 2nd phase from Feb 6 to Apr 29

SPORTS REPORTER

As per a detailed fixtures list released by the Bangladesh Football Federation on Saturday, the second phase of the Bangladesh Football League will resume on February 6 and conclude on April 29.

The first phase of the league ended on January 3, immediately followed by the mid-term transfer window. With the window set to close on January 31, domestic football will return on February 3 with two Federation Cup fixtures -- Brothers Union facing PWD at the Bashundhara Kings Arena in Dhaka, and Rahmatganj taking on Abahani at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla.

The Federation Cup group-stage matches will continue until March 10, all to be held at the same two venues, before an eliminator and a qualifier scheduled for March 17. The second qualifier will be played on April 7, while the final is set for April 17.

Meanwhile, the league's resumption on February 6 will feature two matches on the opening day, followed by three more fixtures the next day. The competition will then pause for a 12-day break due to the national elections slated for February 12. Another major break will follow from March 15 to April 9 for Eid-ul-Fitr.

After the Eid recess, the league will run smoothly into its final stretch, culminating in the 18th and last round on April 28, when five matches are scheduled to be played on the final matchday.

Biggest ever FA Cup shock



PHOTO: AFP

Crystal Palace's FA Cup defence ended in humiliation as sixth-tier Macclesfield beat the holders 2-1, overturning a record 117-place gap -- the biggest in the competition's history. Captain Paul Dawson headed the underdogs ahead just before half-time, before Isaac Buckley-Ricketts bundled in a second after the break. Jeremy Pino pulled one back for Palace with a free-kick in the 90th minute, but it could not save them from going down in history for the wrong reasons. The victory was all the more emotional for a club reformed in 2020 after unpaid debts and still grieving the death of 21-year-old forward Euan McLeod. Stunned, Palace manager Oliver Glasner admitted: "I have no explanation for what I have seen today."

Clasico clash for the first crown



PHOTO: REAL MADRID

The first Clasico of the year, a chance to lift the season's first trophy, and a battle of ego and revenge -- the Spanish Super Cup final between Real Madrid and Barcelona at the King Abdullah Sport City Stadium in Jeddah on Sunday already has plenty at stake, alongside the usual hype that accompanies this historic rivalry.

» This will be the fourth consecutive time that Real Madrid and Barcelona face off in the final of the competition.

» The two sides have met 18 times in the Spanish Super Cup, with Real winning 10 matches, Barca claiming six victories, and two ending in draws.

» After a tumultuous period near the end of 2025 that left Real coach Xabi Alonso on the brink of the sack, Los Blancos have turned things around with five consecutive victories, the latest a 2-1 win over city rivals Atletico Madrid in the semifinals.

» A win in the final would hand Xabi Alonso his first trophy as Real coach and provide him some breathing room.

» Xabi's Real won the first Clasico of the season with a 2-1 LaLiga victory last year. But before his arrival, the side were hammered 5-2 at the same stage last season, also at the same venue in Jeddah.

» Real will be boosted by the return of Kylian Mbappe, who missed the semifinal due to a knee sprain suffered in late December, although Xabi said he would be cautious about including the club's top scorer, who has 29 goals in 24 matches across all competitions this season.

» In each of the last three seasons, the Super Cup winners also went on to win LaLiga.

» The final offers Barcelona added incentive, as they have the chance to retain the title for a second consecutive year -- something no side has managed in the past 15 years.

» Should Barcelona lift the trophy, the Blaugrana would also end another notable trend, as it has been eight years since the reigning league champions went on to win the Super Cup the following season.

Batters' dip in form deepens Tigers' worries

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Sylhet

(ICC).

Yet the scorecards tell a clearer story. Other than Sylhet Titans opener Parvez Hossain Emon, who is second on the tournament's run-getters' list with 236 runs in eight innings, including two half-centuries, none of the other batters from Bangladesh's World Cup squad feature in the top 10. Bangladesh captain Litton Das is next among the squad members with 129 runs from six matches for Rangpur Riders. Dhaka Capitals' Shamim Hossain, one of the options for the Tigers' fragile middle order, has scored 114 runs in five innings -- 81 of which came in a single knock against Sylhet that still ended in defeat.

Rangpur's Tawhid Hridoy, who began with a fifty against Rajshahi Warriors in the second match, has struggled since, managing 106 runs in six games. Rajshahi opener Tanzid Tamim has 87 runs from six matches, failing to convert starts, while Saif Hassan has scored just 48 runs in five matches and was even rested by Dhaka after four games. Rangpur skipper Nurul Hasan has only 20 runs from four innings, and Dhaka all-rounder Saifuddin 41 from three -- figures well below expectations.

Rajshahi head coach Hannan Sakar



PHOTO: FACEBOOK

attempted to explain the slump.

"Form in T20 cricket depends a lot on batting position, team strategy, and environment," Hannan told reporters in Sylhet on Saturday. "In franchise cricket, players have to fit into the team's plan. Ideally, World Cup players want to play in their natural roles and carry confidence forward, but in the BPL that isn't always possible."

In contrast, Bangladesh's bowlers have been impressive. Chattogram Royals pacer Shoriful Islam leads the wicket-takers' list with 13 wickets from seven matches at an economy rate of 6.92. Rangpur's Mustafizur Rahman has 12 wickets from six games at 6.52. Among the spinners, Rajshahi's Nasum has nine wickets in eight matches, including a stunning 5-7 -- the best bowling figure by a spinner in BPL history -- while Chattogram's Mahedi Hasan has seven wickets from as many games.

Rishad Hossain, the only World Cup-bound Bangladeshi currently playing in the Big Bash League, also claimed 11 wickets in eight matches and earned the 'world-class' tag from Hobart Hurricanes captain Nathan Ellis. However, Taskin Ahmed and Saifuddin remain concerns, with low wicket tallies and economy rates above eight.

Hannan repeated the familiar line that "one or two good innings can change everything" for batters. But with Bangladesh's World Cup participation still uncertain, the batters' form could at least have offered some reassurance -- and for now, that much-needed relief remains nowhere in sight.



Morocco forward Brahim Diaz celebrates in trademark fashion after scoring the opening goal in a 2-0 victory over Cameroon in the quarterfinals of the Africa Cup of Nations in Rabat on Friday night. The Real Madrid star is currently the top-scorer in the tournament with five goals, leading Ademola Lookman of Nigeria and Amad Diallo of Ivory Coast by two goals. Morocco have made it to the last four for the first time in 22 years.

PHOTO: AFP