

Bashar urges Tigers to focus on performance

SPORTS REPORTER

With Bangladesh's participation in the upcoming T20 World Cup clouded by uncertainty, former selector and Chattogram Royals mentor Habibul Bashar has urged the players to focus on confidence gained from recent performances rather than dwelling on off-field issues.

Test captain Najmul Hossain Shanto had earlier remarked during the Sylhet phase of the Bangladesh Premier League that some form of disruption seems to arise before every World Cup, often affecting the team's focus. Bangladesh are currently in talks with the International Cricket Council (ICC) after the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) decided not to play its World Cup matches in India, a situation that has inevitably shifted attention while players continue to feature in the BPL.

"You'll notice that before every World Cup, there's always some incident that takes place," Shanto had said in Sylhet. "As a player who has played one or two of these tournaments, I can tell you it affects us. But we act as if nothing affects us because we are professional cricketers."

Addressing the media after Chattogram's practice session on Tuesday, Bashar said the uncertainty should not distract the players.

"This situation is not in the hands of the players. If I were a player, I would focus on performing well in the BPL. While players naturally discuss these things among themselves -- talking about the present and the future is normal -- they are all professionals," Bashar said.

Bangladesh have played 24 T20Is since July last year, winning 14, and Bashar believes those performances should be the team's reference point heading into the World Cup. With the squad already announced and only limited scope for changes by January 31, the BPL remains the final platform for building confidence and pushing for any last-minute inclusion.

"While these are setbacks, we should be confident about how we have played over the last six months. We understand our brand of T20 cricket and our roles as a team. Instead of making excuses, we should focus on doing well in the World Cup," Bashar said.

Although he admitted such situations are undesirable before a major event, Bashar stressed that using them as excuses would only hurt the team's campaign.



Bangladesh usher in SAFF futsal era

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh begin their campaign in the inaugural SAFF Futsal Championship 2026 today against India in one of three opening-day matches at the Nonthaburi Stadium in Bangkok, Thailand.

The match will kick off at 4:00pm (Bangladesh time), a few hours after the Sri Lanka-Bhutan fixture opens the seven-team tournament, which will be streamed live on the Sportzworkz YouTube channel.

The encounter comes at a time of growing diplomatic unease between the two neighbours, adding an extra layer of intrigue to what is already a historic meeting in a new format of the game for both sides.

With traditional 11-a-side football still dominating fan culture across South Asia, the South Asian Football Federation have taken their first step towards promoting futsal in the region by launching separate competitions for men and women.

In the men's tournament, all teams will play each other once, with the table-toppers at the end being crowned champions.

None of the participating teams are established forces in futsal, but Nepal, Maldives and India are viewed as comparatively stronger sides than Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, largely due to their earlier exposure to the format.

For Bangladesh, this will be their second international futsal tournament, following their appearance in the AFC Futsal Asian Cup qualifiers last September. India, Maldives and Pakistan were also part of that competition, but none of them managed to progress.



India recorded a solitary win over Mongolia, while Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan lost all their group-stage matches.

Under Iranian coach Saeed Khodarahmi, Bangladesh remain in a learning phase, but the team believe they have taken steps forward after an extended preparation period. Their build-up included a one-and-a-half-month training camp, capped by a 10-day stint on a proper futsal court in Thailand.

"We are getting better every day," said Bangladesh captain Rahbar Wahed Khan at a pre-tournament briefing. "Futsal has just started in South Asia, and I want people in Bangladesh to keep supporting us."

Coach Khodarahmi, however, was keen to stress that the challenge is not unique to Bangladesh.

"Not only for Bangladesh, it is a challenge for every nation," he said.

"If you don't have futsal coaches, referees and stadiums, it becomes really difficult for everyone."

The Bangladesh-India clash also offers an interesting subplot, with both teams being coached by Iranians. India are led by Reza Kordi, who has set measured objectives for his side.

"Our main objective is to show clear progress in our playing style and establish ourselves as a strong emerging team in South Asian futsal," Kordi said, adding that his "players now have a better understanding of the demands of futsal".

Meanwhile, the SAFF Women's Futsal Championship got under way at the same venue yesterday. Bangladesh women's team, led by former national captain Sabina Khatun, will begin their campaign on Thursday against India, who opened with an emphatic 11-1 win over Maldives, while Pakistan and Bhutan played out a 1-1 draw.



Mane, Salah battle for AFCON glory

AGENCIES

Three years after they last shared a pitch, former Liverpool teammates Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah face each other again as Senegal meet Egypt in the Africa Cup of Nations semifinal in Tangiers on Wednesday.

It will be their first encounter since Liverpool's defeat to Real Madrid in the 2022 Champions League final, shortly before Mane left the club.

Mane has since moved from Bayern Munich to Al-Nassr in Saudi Arabia, while Salah remains at Liverpool despite speculation over a move to Saudi Arabia and reports of tension with coach Arne Slot before AFCON...

In Morocco, Salah has rediscovered form, scoring four goals in four matches as Egypt chase an eighth continental title.

However, time is not on his side. Approaching 34, the Egypt captain has twice lost the AFCON final, including the 2022 defeat to Senegal where Mane scored the decisive penalty in the shoot-out after missing earlier in normal time.

Egypt also lost to Senegal in a World Cup qualifying play-off soon after.

Senegal, defending champions, are aiming for a third final in four editions, while Egypt are desperate to reclaim supremacy after missing the 2022 World Cup and failing to lift AFCON since 2010.

Mane has acknowledged that the pressure is lighter on him now that he has already achieved continental success, while Salah openly admits this trophy remains the one major honour he is determined to win with his country.

The pair arrive in Tangiers with contrasting pressures: Mane defending Senegal's status as champions, Salah seeking redemption and a final chance at international glory.



Paris FC's Otavio and Timothee Kolodziejczak celebrate as PSG's Ousmane Dembele cuts a dejected figure after the French champions' shock 1-0 defeat to their capital rivals in the French Cup round of 32 on Monday. PSG midfielder Senny Mayulu described the loss as a "slap in the face" as they were knocked out just four days after winning their fourth consecutive French Super Cup. Newly promoted Paris FC, back in the top flight after a 46-year absence, stunned PSG at the Parc des Princes, with former PSG player Jonathan Ikone scoring the decisive goal in the 74th minute.

PHOTO: AFP

Alonso's swift Real exit: What went wrong?

STAR SPORTS DESK

Xabi Alonso departed Real Madrid saying he was "grateful to the club, players and fans", but the outcome appeared inevitable, waiting for it to be triggered by another fall.

That moment arrived on Sunday, when Real lost 3-2 to Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final in Jeddah -- a narrow defeat that was enough to end the reign of a coach appointed just seven and a half months earlier.

Even the scenes after the final whistle seemed to reflect the brevity and tension of Alonso's tenure at one of the most demanding clubs in the world, where the names on the team sheet often carry greater weight than the coach himself.

Kylian Mbappe, the club's top

scorer last season and again so far this term, was seen gesturing to his teammates to head straight down the tunnel instead of offering Barcelona the traditional guard of honour at the King Abdullah Sports City. Alonso appeared to urge him to stay, but eventually relented as Real left the pitch without any sporting gesture to their archrivals, who lead second-placed Los Blancos by four points in LaLiga.

The episode underlined the growing perception that Alonso did not have total control of the dressing room, as reports suggested a rift between him and several of the top players. Speculation about his future had been rife since Real endured a turbulent spell towards the end of 2025, when they lost three, drew three, and won only two of eight

matches. The team later recovered with five consecutive victories, including a Spanish Super Cup semifinal win over Atletico Madrid, before falling to Barcelona in the final.

Alonso had been backed with new signings after taking charge, yet a long list of injuries complicated his task -- a familiar challenge in recent times due to a congested football calendar.

The former Real midfielder was also unable to fully replicate the high-pressing, high-tempo style that had brought him success at Bayer Leverkusen. His players struggled to meet the demands of that system, a factor that ultimately contributed to his departure.

In pure numbers, Alonso's Real recorded 24 wins, six defeats, and four draws from 34 matches -- a return that would not normally prompt such a swift exit, were it not for the wider issues that continued to work against him.





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