



AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP

'Playing catch-up', booters brace for big debut

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh have been thrown into a challenging debut at the AFC Women's Asian Cup, with substandard preparation leaving coach Peter Butler warning against suffering a "cricket-score" margin against powerhouses China and North Korea.

The women in red and green, who were scheduled to leave for Sydney in the wee hours today, have a golden opportunity to secure direct qualification for the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup with a top-six finish among the 12 participants, split into three groups, while seventh or eighth place would earn a play-off berth. A top-eight finish would also advance them to the 2028 Summer Olympics qualifiers.

SQUAD

Rupna Chakma, Mile Akter, Swarna Rani Mandal, Afeida Khandakar, Kohati Kisku, Nabiran Khatun, Sheuli Azim, Shamsunnar Sr, Halima Khatun, Surovi Akter Afrin, Sapna Rani, Munki Akter, Airin Khatun, Shaheda Akter Ripa, Umehla Marma, Ritu Parna Chakma, Monika Chakma, Maria Manda, Anika Rania Siddique, Unnoti Khatun, Alpi Akter, Saurvai Akanda Prity, Most Sultana, Tohura Khatun, Most Sagorika, Shamsunnahar Jr

"Anyone who thinks we are currently qualifying for World Cups needs to wake up and smell the roses," Butler said at a crowded press conference yesterday at BFF House, where he announced a 26 member squad -- featuring new faces Alpi Akter, Surovi Akter Afrin, and Sweden-based Anika Rania Siddique.

"While I don't mind answering questions, the truth is that we haven't had the best preparation," added the former Liberia and Botswana coach.

After qualifying for Asia's top-flight competition in July last year, Bangladesh Football Federation had planned six international matches and an overseas camp, but the buoyant booters ended up playing only four matches -- against Thailand, Malaysia and Azerbaijan -- relying on intensive training at KEPZ in Chattogram instead. The players also got a maximum 10-match experience in the month-long Women's Football League.

"I am not pointing fingers, but we came in with a plan that has not worked, and we are now playing catch-up... Sometimes reality smacks you in the face. The fact of the matter is that we didn't properly anticipate or invest in the necessary fixtures and camps," Butler reiterated.

Bangladesh now gear up for six days of training, including a practice match against Australian side Western Sydney Wanderers on February 26 before the Asian Cup proper.

The Bangladesh coach warned that even the group's least stronger opposition Uzbekistan, who have previously played the Asian Cup five times, are "technically and physically far superior."

"Let's take it one step at a time rather than having visions of grandeur."

Lack of top-tier stars laid bare

SPORTS REPORTER

In a recent interview with The Daily Star, England's World Cup-winning all-rounder Moeen Ali had said that while Bangladesh currently have several good cricketers, the country is lacking genuine top-tier performers.

Interestingly, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) appeared to have echoed the same sentiment on Thursday, when it announced a 28 member national players' contract list for 2026 but left the highest Grade, A+, vacant.

Last year, Taskin Ahmed was the sole cricketer in the top bracket, earning Tk 10 lakh per month. However, he is now believed to be unavailable across all formats due to fitness issues and thus, has been moved down to Grade A this year alongside the captains in three formats -- Litton Das, Mehidy Hasan Miraz and Najmul Hossain Shanto.

Former Bangladesh skipper and current national batting coach Mohammad Ashraful believed the absence of multi-format regulars may have influenced the BCB's decision to leave the A+ category vacant.

"To be in A+, you have to be the best performer across all formats, right? At the moment, none of our players are playing all formats regularly. Litton is not consistent in ODIs, Shanto is not in T20s, and Miraz is also out of T20s. Similarly, Taskin is not currently part of the Test side," he said.

In the heydays of the 'Fab Five' in



National Players' Contract 2026

GRADE A (TK 8 LAKH)

Najmul Hossain Shanto, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Litton Das, and Taskin Ahmed

GRADE B (TK 6 LAKH)

Mushfiqur Rahim, Mominul Haque, Taijul Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, Tawhid Hridoy, Shadman Islam, Tanzid Hasan Tamim, Rishad Hossain, Mahedi Hasan, Hasan Mahmud, and Nahid Rana

GRADE C (TK 4 LAKH)

Soumya Sarkar, Jaker Ali Anik, Shoriful Islam, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Nasum Ahmed, and Syed Khaled Ahmed

GRADE D (TK 2 LAKH)

Saif Hassan, Parvez Hossain Emon, Tanvir Islam, Nayeem Hasan, Hasan Murad, Shamim Hossain, and Nurul Hasan Sohan

** All Grade D players are new inclusions this year.
** No players were included in the A+ category, which stipulates a monthly salary of Tk 10 lakh.

Bangladesh cricket, the Tigers had a core set of players who would feature across formats.

Three of the five have already retired. All-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who has shown interest to return but his future with the Bangladesh team is still clouded with uncertainty, has been left out of the national contract for the second consecutive year.

Mushfiqur Rahim -- who now only plays Tests -- is the only one of the 'Fab Five' to get a deal in the latest contracts, being placed in Grade B alongside 10 others.

The 2026 national contract is another reflection of how the current crop of players have thus far failed to ascend to the levels of Shakib or Tamim Iqbal, something Moeen had spoken about at length in his interview in January.

"Initially, I saw Bangladesh evolving nicely with players like Tamim and Shakib, but I also feel it has not improved enough recently. While there are many good players now, there are no top players," Moeen told The Daily Star during his stint with the Sylhet Titans in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

"The current players seem to be struggling, perhaps due to coaching, facilities, or the system. In the BPL, some of the shot selection is very poor. The problem is that people have become used to seeing the same mistakes repeatedly. I have been here for a few seasons and I still see the same errors. It feels like the players are slow at learning," he added.

When sport opens the classroom door

ANISUR RAHMAN

"If I hadn't played table tennis, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to graduate from a private university."

Refat Mahmud Sabbir says it without embellishment. Years of training in a sport that offers little financial certainty have brought him to the verge of something far more lasting than a medal. A South Asian Games bronze medallist, he is now close to completing his Media and Communication degree at Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), on a full scholarship earned through performances on the table.

"If IUB did not provide the full scholarship, maybe I could not complete my graduation," he said. "Because of table tennis, I got the opportunity to study, and now I hope I can find a job after finishing."

His journey reflects the reality for many athletes in Bangladesh outside cricket and football. They represent the country with dedication, yet financial stability remains uncertain. Education becomes the bridge to a future beyond competition.

Rahim Lian Bawm knows that path well. The men's number two is studying Anthropology at the same university, also on a full scholarship.

"If I can graduate, I hope to stay in sports, even as a sports teacher," Ramhim said, stressing the challenge of managing tuition fees that can reach around Tk 10 lakh.

Recently, Sabbir and Ramhim helped their university win the men's team title at the inaugural Inter-University Table Tennis Fest at Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium. The tournament brought together national players and student-athletes, many balancing



ambition with uncertainty. Among them were the country's top-ranked male player Muhtasin Ahmed Ridoy, national runner up Sadia Rahman Mou, and ninth-ranked Samantha Hossen Tushi, all representing Dhaka University.

Mou, who studies Nutrition and Food Science, went on to win the women's singles title. Her priorities extend beyond results on the table.

"A sports career can end at any time. With education, we have something to rely on," she said.

Across Bangladesh, universities have increasingly stepped forward to support athletes through scholarships and quota-based admissions. Private institutions such as IUB, Daffodil International University, American International University-Bangladesh, and Northern University have offered financial assistance, while public



PHOTO: X

Zimbabwe stun SL to top group

Skipper Sikandar Raza and opener Brian Bennett shared a brisk 69-run third-wicket stand to propel Zimbabwe to a convincing six-wicket win over co-hosts Sri Lanka in Colombo yesterday, finishing as Group B toppers in the T20 World Cup. Having restricted Sri Lanka to 178/7, Zimbabwe got over the line in 19.3 overs, with Raza smashing a whirlwind 26-ball 45 and Bennett remaining unbeaten on 63 off 48 deliveries, sealing their maiden win over Sri Lanka in T20 World Cups. The Chevrons, who could not qualify for the tournament's last edition in 2024, made heads turn this year -- beating and eventually knocking out the mighty Australians earlier. They also defeated Oman and saw their match against Ireland washed out due to rain.

Can Arsenal hold nerves to avoid familiar fate?

AGENCIES

The question refuses to go away: do Arsenal have the mental fortitude to cross the final hurdle?

Mikel Arteta admitted his side deserve criticism for the self-inflicted wounds threatening to derail their Premier League title bid after the leaders squandered a two-goal advantage in Wednesday's 2-2 draw at Wolverhampton Wanderers, handing second-placed Manchester City renewed belief in the race.

For the second successive league match, the Gunners failed to protect a lead, having been held to a 1-1 draw by Brentford last Thursday.

City sit five points behind Arsenal with a game in hand, and they still have a home fixture against the Gunners in April -- a clash that could prove decisive.

The warning signs are unmistakable. Arsenal's players look tense. The pressure is etched across their performances, and even the coaching staff appear to feel the weight of expectation. They have finished as runners-up three times before, each time falling short when it mattered most.

This campaign had felt different.



Pep Guardiola's City have not seemed as imperious as in previous years. Defensive vulnerabilities have surfaced, and their attack has not always displayed its usual ruthlessness. Yet Guardiola remains -- and that alone shifts the balance. He is relentless. Winning, for him, never loses its appeal.

On paper, Arsenal boast the squad depth and quality required to lift the title. Their first half of the season was impressive. But the Premier League is a marathon, not a sprint -- it rewards those who finish strongest. If they falter again, the narrative will harden, and rival fans will not be kind. That looming fear of ridicule may already be creeping into performances. Winning a league demands more than talent; it

requires formidable mental resilience. The north London side have dropped 11 points in eight league matches in 2026.

They grew increasingly anxious as the clock wound down against Wolves, a clear indication that the strain of pursuing a first English title since 2004 is mounting.

Now they must regroup quickly before Sunday's north London derby against Tottenham Hotspur, followed by a pivotal home encounter with Chelsea on March 1.

Arsenal have 58 points from 27 matches -- five more than Manchester City, having played a game more. Wolves have just 10 points from 27 games, one short of Derby County's record-low total of 11.



PHOTO: REUTERS



Champions League debutants Bodo/Glimt continued their dream run by adding Inter to their growing list of heavyweight casualties -- including Manchester City and Atletico Madrid -- with a stunning 3-1 home victory in the first leg of their knockout play-off yesterday. Norwegian forward Kasper Hogn was the architect of the upset, delivering two assists and scoring once as the hosts put one foot in the last 16. Meanwhile, Newcastle United all but booked their place in the last 16 with a crushing 6-1 demolition of Qarabag away. Winger Anthony Gordon struck four times in the first-half to take his Champions League tally to 10 this season -- more than Harry Kane (8) and Erling Haaland (7), with only Kylian Mbappe (13) ahead of him.