



STAR SPORTS DESK

There is a difference between facing an established champion and confronting a wounded giant hungry to reclaim lost ground.

While Bangladesh tested their mettle against defending nine-time champions China in their historic Women's Asian Cup debut, their next opponents, North Korea, are an altogether different beast.

The three-time champions have returned with a point to prove -- opening their campaign with a convincing 3-0 win over Uzbekistan -- having last featured in their runners-up finish in 2010. For much of the past decade, their senior team were sidelined from major tournaments such as the World Cup and Olympics during a turbulent spell marked by doping sanctions, near-miss qualifications and pandemic induced withdrawal.

That isolation, however, did not erode their footballing culture; it sharpened

it. The youth teams, meanwhile, kept delivering.

With an average age in the early 20s -- ranging from 19 to 26 -- this squad includes players already accustomed to winning on the global stage, which makes them particularly intimidating.

Over the past two years, North Korea lifted the FIFA Women's Under-17 World Cup in 2024 and 2025 -- the latter their fourth title -- and added a third Women's Under-20 World Cup trophy in 2024, ensuring a steady stream of talent into a senior side that have since returned to the top 10 of the FIFA rankings.

As seen against Uzbekistan, the Koreans move like clockwork, stretching the pitch with superior positioning and operating almost as a collective mind. For the 112 ranked Bangladesh on Friday, it will be another examination of growth. Against North Korea, they will face a brand of football they may aspire to replicate in the future.

Spirited Bangladesh dare to defy North Korea

SPORTS REPORTER

After going toe to toe against defending champions China in their AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 opener, Bangladesh are set to face another tournament favourites in North Korea in their second Group B match at the Western Sydney Stadium in Australia today, eyeing another bold showing.

Bangladesh, ranked 112th in the FIFA rankings, surpassed all expectations in their 2-0 defeat against China, but will arguably face an even tougher test against North Korea, currently ranked 9th in the world.

The three-time Asian Cup champions had recently clinched the FIFA Under-20 Women's World Cup 2024 and five players from that squad have been added in the Asian Cup contingent.

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler termed North Korea as the technically superior team but said his charges will not back down.

"We are here again to face a very strong North Korea. They are technically gifted, well-supported, and well-funded. Based on their FIFA ranking, they are likely one of the favorites for the



tournament. It is going to be a tall order to win, and we are under no illusions about that," said Butler at a pre-match conference in Sydney.

"However, it is about giving the best of oneself and being authentic. We won't be sitting back and parking the bus; we're going to have a go. We hope to win over the hearts and minds of the supporters, just as we did with the Chinese fans the other night," said the English coach.

Against China, Bangladesh kept a clean sheet for the first 43 minutes and did not concede in the second half. However, two

goals inside three minutes late in the first half decided the fate of the contest.

Butler was aware that a similar lapse against North Korea, who began their campaign with an easy 3-0 win over Uzbekistan, could also cost them dearly.

"Against teams like North Korea and China, they can hurt you in an instant, so you must track runners and stay on your feet. It's about finding that fine balance between being solid defensively and maintaining an offensive mindset."

Afeida Khandaker and Co impressed many with their spirited

97 DAYS TO GO

'An awesome force of nature'

In the 2022 final, Kylian Mbappe scored twice in just 97 seconds (79:41 to 81:18). France were trailing 2-0 before his stunning comeback levelled the match, prompting Peter Dury to label him as "an awesome force of nature" in the commentary box. Mbappe later completed his hat-trick -- only the second player after England's Geoff Hurst (against West Germany in 1966) to score a treble in a World Cup final. But France lost on penalties after a 3-3 draw, finishing runners-up to Argentina.

**** Read full story on The Daily Star's website**

Litton, Afif back to steady middle order

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh have brought Litton Das and Afif Hossain back into the ODI fold for the upcoming series against Pakistan, starting on March 11, as middle-order failures saw Jaker Ali Anik, Shamim Hossain and Nurul Hasan Sohan get dropped.

The Tigers named a 15-member squad yesterday, with T20I skipper Litton -- who last played an ODI in July last year -- slotted into the squad to fulfil a middle-order role. He was dropped after the first ODI against Sri Lanka owing to poor form while injuries saw him miss the Afghanistan and West Indies series.

In his last eight ODI innings, Litton



could not reach double digits and produced four ducks. In the recent Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL), he struck one fifty in three knocks.

"There may be questions about Litton's recent ODI form, but he has been working closely with the coaches on his game. We believe he can soon produce his best in this format and are considering him as an option to strengthen the middle order," BCB chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu was quoted as saying in the BCB media release on Thursday.

Afif struck a hundred in the BCL. Before that, the left-hander managed 317 runs in the last Dhaka Premier League (DPL) in 15 games, with one fifty at an average of 35.22.

Apparently, these numbers were

enough to convince the board bring back Afif into the middle-order.

It was also apparent that Jaker, Shamim and Sohan have not done enough with the opportunities they were provided. "We have provided opportunities to several players in the middle order, but unfortunately, some have not done enough to secure their places. With that in mind, Afif Hossain has been recalled. He brings valuable experience and currently appears to be in fine touch," Lipu said.

Meanwhile, pacer Hasan Mahmud, who is nursing a tennis elbow injury, has been left out of the squad. Tanzim Sakib, who is recovering from a back issue, was also left out as the BCB opted for precaution. Shoriful

Bangladesh squad: Mehidy Hasan Miraz (capt), Soumya Sarkar, Saif Hassan, Tanzid Hasan, Najmul Hossain Shanto, Tawhid Hridoy, Litton Das, Afif Hossain, Mahidul Islam Bhuiyan, Rishad Hossain, Tanvir Islam, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Shoriful Islam and Nahid Rana.

Islam and Nahid Rana came in as replacements for the duo.

Meanwhile, Nasum Ahmed, who had appeared in the last two ODIs against the Windies, has also been excluded from the squad.

The squad for the Pakistan series are set to play a practice match against BCL All Stars XI on March 7.

Independence Award for TT legend Linu

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh table tennis legend Zobera Rahman Linu has been selected for the Independence Award 2026, the country's highest state honour. The government yesterday decided to confer the award on 15 individuals and five institutions for their "glorious and outstanding contributions at the national level".

Linu becomes the 15th sportsperson to receive the honour, after Habibul Mostaq Ahmed (1977), Abbas Mirza (posthumously, 1981), M Mosharraf Hossain Khan (1986), Niaz Murshed (1989), Shah Alam (1991), Kazi Abdul Alem (1993), Atiqur Rahman (1994), Zakaria Pintu (1995), Kazi Salahuddin (1996), Sheikh Kamal (posthumously, 1998), Brojen Das (1999), Sultana Kamal (posthumously, 2000), ASM Rakibul Hasan (2023) and Firoza Khatun (2024).

Since the award's introduction in 1977, two organisations -- Bangladesh Cricket Board (2001) and Bangladesh Ansar and VDP (2004) -- have also been honoured.

A dominant force in her era, Linu won a record 16 national women's singles titles between 1979 and 2001 and represented Bangladesh at the Asian and World Table Tennis Championships.

She received the National Sports Award in 1999 and later served as president of the Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation and chairperson of the Athletes Commission of the Bangladesh Olympic Association from 2019 to 2023.



When Allen clicks, even the best crumble

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On Wednesday, New Zealand's Finn Allen produced an innings that showcased just how destructive the right-hander can be on his day. A closer look at his career, however, shows that such days have not been very common for the opener.

Chasing a 170-run target, Allen smashed the fastest century in the history of T20 World Cups -- an unbeaten 100 off just 33 deliveries -- to propel the Black Caps past South Africa in Kolkata and into the final of this edition.

South Africa coach Shukri Conrad dismissed the notion that it was another instance of the Proteas choking in the knockout stages of major global competitions, instead describing the nine-wicket thumping, with 43 balls to spare, as a "bloody walloping".

The main reason behind that "walloping" was Allen -- a player who does not produce staggering numbers consistently, but when he does, even the most in-form teams can look helpless in the face of his onslaught. South Africa were unbeaten heading into the semifinal but could do little to contain him.

Allen scored just 95 runs in five



matches at an average of 19 during the 2022 T20 World Cup. His numbers dipped further in the following edition in 2024, when he managed only 35 runs at an average of 8.75.

Even in this World Cup, before his swashbuckling century against the Proteas, he had struck an unbeaten 84 against lower-ranked UAE in the group stage but failed to cross the 30-run

mark in the other five matches.

Despite blowing hot and cold, Allen has never compromised on one aspect -- his strike rate. In this edition of the tournament, he has scored at a staggering strike rate of 203.52. It also reflects the freedom he has been given to play his natural game, rarely straying from his aggressive approach, with the Proteas the unfortunate side to bear the brunt of it this time.

Allen was also well supported by opening partner Tim Seifert, who struck a brisk fifty.

New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner also endorsed the approach taken by the openers, praising their intent.

"They (the openers) kind of just went out there and played their game and took it on, which was cool to see," Santner said after the match.

"Finny (Allen) just carried on and, I mean, 33 balls for 100, it's not bad. Not bad at all. It'd be nice if we could (repeat this in the final)," Santner added.

For New Zealand, Santner's words will reflect their main hope. Given Allen's nature as a batter, the Black Caps will simply hope he can fire once more and have another day of his own when they take the field for the final in Ahmedabad on Sunday.

GUNNERS 7 CLEAR AFTER CITY SLIP

Premier League leaders Arsenal struck first in the latest twist of the title race, edging Brighton 1-0 on Wednesday as Bukayo Saka marked his 300th appearance with a goal at the Amex Stadium. The result stretched the Gunners' lead to seven points after Manchester City were held to a costly 2-2 draw at home by relegation-threatened Nottingham Forest. City twice led through January signing Antoine Semenyo and a Rodri header but Morgan Gibbs-White and Elliot Anderson rescued a valuable point for Forest. Arsenal now have 67 points from 30 games, while second-placed City sit on 60 from 29 with a game in hand. The title race, however, still holds a decisive twist, with Mikel Arteta's side set to visit the Etihad on April 19.



PHOTOS: FACEBOOK

