

## A stark reminder of the quality gap

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's women's football team suffered a heavy 5-0 defeat to a dominant DPR Korea side in their second Group B match of the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 in Sydney on Friday. The loss was a harsh reminder of the vast gap between Bangladesh and Asia's top footballing nations, echoing a similar defeat nine years ago.

In 2017, during their debut at the AFC Women's U-16 Championship in Thailand, Bangladesh was overrun by DPR Korea in a 9-0 thrashing. The Koreans, led by forward Kim Kyong-yong, went on to win the tournament, with Kim scoring five goals in that match. Fast forward to Friday's encounter, and Kim again starred for her side, netting two goals in the 5-0 victory.

Though Bangladesh's women's football team has made considerable progress since 2017, most notably with their historic qualification for the AFC Women's Championship, the gap in technical and tactical quality remains glaring. The senior squad, largely consisting of players from that U-16 team, found themselves on the receiving end of another one-sided game.

The match at Western Sydney Stadium was always going to be a monumental challenge. DPR Korea, one of the most well-organised teams in Asian football, dictated play from the outset, just as they



had nearly a decade ago. Their precise use of the flanks and dangerous crosses kept the Bangladesh defense on constant alert, while the sharp finishing and fluid passing highlighted their superior level of play.

Under the intense Sydney sun, DPR Korea showcased world-class technical skills and fitness, outpacing Bangladesh with quick reactions, seamless one-touch

football, and high-intensity pressing. And Bangladesh could never match their opponents' pace and precision.

Bangladesh's lack of experience against top-tier Asian teams was evident throughout the match, underscoring the difficulties they face due to limited opportunities to compete at such high levels. While they showed resilience in their opening 2-0 loss to defending

champions China, that spirit was not evident against DPR Korea. The relentless pressure from the Koreans forced Bangladesh into multiple errors, disrupting their attacks and forcing them to defend almost throughout the match.

After the final whistle, coach Peter Butler acknowledged the disparity in quality. "I can't criticise the girls because we're just not at that level," he said in the post-match press conference. "But I'm proud of their efforts and what they've given us. They're a smashing group of girls."

"We played against an absolutely fantastic team today, probably one of the best, if not the best, in Asian football. In terms of strength and technical ability, they were streets ahead of us. Losing by five, six, or seven goals is no disgrace."

Butler also pointed out the impact of the intense heat. "We just couldn't contain them. It was a complete mismatch. Unfortunately, some of our girls struggled in the sun, and we didn't do ourselves justice," he added.

With DPR Korea and China already securing spots in the quarterfinals, Bangladesh's hopes now rest on their final group match against Uzbekistan on March 9 in Perth. As one of the two best third-place finishers, there is still a slim chance for Bangladesh to advance to the knockout stages.

However, to progress, Bangladesh will need a much stronger performance than the one shown against DPR Korea.

## WBPL EoI deadline extended after requests

SPORTS REPORTER

A Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) official on Friday said the board has extended the deadline to March 8 for submitting Expressions of Interest (EoI) for franchises of the upcoming Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL) following requests from interested parties.

"We have received requests from interested parties to extend the deadline for their preparation," WBPL governing council chairperson Rubaba Dowla told The Daily Star.

The BCB had invited EoIs from potential franchisees on February 18 for the three-team WBPL, which is scheduled to be held from April 4 to 14.

The initial deadline for submitting EoIs was March 4.

However, it was learnt that only two parties expressed interest in acquiring the franchise rights of the Rajshahi and Chattogram teams, prompting the board to extend the deadline.

Sources said the BCB wants to avoid a situation similar to the men's Bangladesh Premier League earlier this year, when the board had to take over the franchise rights of Chattogram Royals just a day before the tournament began.

The players' draft for the inaugural WBPL is scheduled to be held on March 14. If the franchise issue is not resolved soon, the draft date could also be rescheduled.



## Heavyweights sail as BFL resumes

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings and Abahani resumed the second phase of the Bangladesh Football League with victories as the league returned after a two-month break with matches held at four venues on Friday.

Kings, despite the absence of Raphael Augusto and Dorielton Gomes, beat a reinforced PWD 2-0 at Kings Arena, with Mohammad Ridoy and Emmanuel Sunday scoring either side of the break.

A first win after a defeat and two successive draws helped the five-time champions take solo lead with 21 points from 10 matches.

Abahani, meanwhile, climbed to third place in the 10-team table with 16 points from 10 matches after securing a convincing 4-1 win over Rahmatganj in Cumilla.

Abahani looked formidable after fielding all three of their foreign recruits for the first time. Brazilian forward Bruno Oliveira struck a brace in his first match of the season in Bangladesh, while Nigerian striker Emeke Ogburn also found the net in his debut appearance. Syed Shah Quazem added the fourth before Rahmatganj pulled one back through Solomon King. Meanwhile, Bangladesh Police and Brothers Union shared the spoils in a 1-1 draw in Gazipur while in Manikganj, relegation-threatened Arambagh earned a valuable point in a 1-1 draw against Fakirerpool Young Men's Club.

## Men's, Women's DPL uncertain as stagnation continues

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is yet to solve the ongoing club cricket crisis as both the men's and women's Dhaka Premier League (DPL) are facing uncertainty.

Last year, the 12-team men's DPL was played between March 3-April 29 while the nine-team women's league took place between February 19-March 13. This year, however, the BCB is yet to settle on a schedule for either List-A tournaments.

In a coordination meeting held on March 2 with Women's DPL teams, where six of the nine teams attended, three clubs wanted to play the league, while the others said that they will not participate without national team players' involvement.

This year, BCB has decided to bar women's national team players from the league keeping in mind their upcoming assignments, which includes the ICC Women's T20 World Cup, and the inaugural Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL).

"There is the World Cup in June and there is a Sri Lanka series coming up before that [in March-April]. The Women's BPL [probable dates in April] is there too. So, the women's wing has decided not to allow national team players to play the domestic league," a BCB women's wing official who attended the meeting told The Daily Star.



**Batter Afif Hossain appeared in good spirits after earning a recall to the national side as he prepares for a practice match against a BCL All Stars XI in Mirpur today ahead of the ODI series against Pakistan. While the national team will be occupied with the ODI series, it may be some time before the rest get game time given the uncertainty over the upcoming Dhaka Premier League.** PHOTO: STAR

"We haven't decided on the [women's] league yet, we will talk to the high-ups before taking a decision," the official said.

Meanwhile, many of the men's DPL clubs are still continuing their boycott

of domestic leagues over alleged irregularities in BCB elections which saw Aminul Islam Bulbul getting elected as the president in October last year.

"As clubs from the third division through to the premier division had collectively decided to boycott, we are sticking to it," Rafiqul Islam Babu, councillor from Indira Road Krira Chakra told The Daily Star.

The crux of the controversy surrounding the BCB election was a letter signed by the BCB president Bulbul sent on September 18 to regional associations that nominated councillors from outside of ad-hoc committees, instructing them to re-submit the list.

The High Court ordered a stay for 15 days on the letter, however, later Supreme Court chamber judge stayed the HC order.

Mohammedan SC councillor Masuduzzaman told The Daily Star, "As long as this illegal board is here, the clubs will not play any domestic leagues... We are waiting for a decision from the courts."

Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) officials said there is no hope of the league starting before Eid ul Fitr.

"We haven't been able to set a date for a coordination meeting. We had set dates of March 15 [to start DPL] but now nothing will happen before Eid," an official said yesterday.

96 DAYS TO GO



## Zidane's final act

The 2006 FIFA World Cup final in Berlin became the dramatic final chapter of Zinedine Zidane's legendary career. After returning from international retirement in 2005 to rescue France's struggling qualification campaign, the 34-year-old produced a series of dazzling performances in the tournament, including a masterclass against Brazil and a decisive semifinal penalty against Portugal. In the final against Italy, Zidane audaciously scored a Panenka penalty against Gianluigi Buffon, giving France an early lead. But in extra time, a brief exchange with Marco Materazzi ended in one of football's most infamous moments when Zidane headbutted the Italian defender. Referee Horacio Elizondo showed a red card, ending Zidane's career in controversy as he walked past the World Cup trophy he had hoped to lift once more.

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

## SAMSON'S MOMENT finally arrives

AGENCIES

After spending most of his international career lurking in the shadows of bigger stars and failing to fulfill his incredible talent, Sanju Samson has finally risen to the occasion in the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup.

Having made his T20I debut for India in 2015, he had to wait 11 years before playing his first match in an ICC T20 World Cup.

He was picked for the group-stage match against Namibia in Delhi, where he made a brisk eight-ball 22 but was then left out for the high-stakes match against Pakistan.

Picked in the side as the backup opener, Samson would have most likely spent the rest of the tournament warming the bench had not been for two factors -- India getting thrashed by South Africa in their first game in the Super Eights and opener Abhishek Sharma's monumental slump in form.

He returned for the match against Zimbabwe, making an unremarkable 15-ball 24 and then hit a potentially career-defining 97 not out off 50 deliveries to take India over the line in a virtual quarterfinal against West Indies.

Then in the semifinal in Mumbai, the 31-year-old right-hander delivered once



again with a 42-ball 89 that set up India for a massive 253-7, which proved to be seven runs out of England's reach even after a brilliant 48-ball 105 from Jacob Bethel.

Samson said his knock against England on Thursday was the product of years of quiet work and difficult stretches.

"I have been trying for a few years to

do something like this for my country... a lot of patience, inner work, training and practice," Samson told reporters after India set up a final showdown with New Zealand.

Samson, who was named the player-of-the-match in India's last two games, admitted the knock in the semifinal was shaped by the momentum he carried from his innings against West Indies in the previous match.

"The last innings definitely played a good role today [Thursday]. I knew I was timing the ball well and taking good decisions. If you're in form, you should definitely contribute again," he said.

Samson also said failure in the home series against New Zealand earlier in the year prompted a reset in both his technique and mindset.

"I was trying a bit too much in the New Zealand series. I wanted to make an impact and get into the XI of the World Cup here... I had to respect the game and come back to my basics," he said.

With India just one win away from securing back-to-back T20 World Cup titles, Samson is hoping to carry his form into the Sunday's final in Ahmedabad. "Definitely I feel grateful, but we have one more step to go. If we do that, then I think all the work, everything was worth it."



Lionel Messi presents a jeweled football to US President Donald Trump as Messi and his Inter Miami teammates were honored by Trump at the White House on Thursday in recognition of their 2025 MLS Cup championship. The players arrived bearing gifts, including a No. 47 jersey from the team's signature pink kit -- symbolising Trump's status as the 47th president. Meanwhile, Trump remarked that Messi "may be better than Pele."

PHOTO: AFP