

'WE'VE GOT TO WIN IT ALL'

Ronan Sullivan (2nd from L) sprints away in celebration after scoring a stunning free-kick to give Bangladesh the lead in the opening SAFF U-20 Championship fixture against Pakistan in Male yesterday. After a barren first half during which Bangladesh dominated their opposition but failed to find the target, Ronan picked the right spot with a curling 25-yard free-kick in the 54th minute. The Philadelphia Union Academy prodigy, playing his first match for Bangladesh, doubled the lead with a guiding header on a cross from Sheikh Sangram 13 minutes later. "It was amazing. It was great to win. On to the next, we've got to beat India and then win it all," the 18-year-old after the 2-0 victory. Bangladesh will play against India in their final Group B match on Saturday.

PHOTO: SAFF



PSL-bound players leave Dhaka

Among the six Bangladesh players called up for the upcoming 11th edition of the Pakistan Super League (PSL), opener Tanzid Tamim (Peshawar Zalmi) and leg-spinner Rishad Hossain (Rawalpindi Pindiz) were the last two to depart for Pakistan yesterday. Mustafizur Rahman and Parvez Hossain Emon (Lahore Qalandars), as well as Shoriful Islam and Nahid Rana (Peshawar Zalmi), had left the country for Pakistan a day earlier after receiving clearance from the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) to participate in the PSL, following consultations with government authorities and security assurances from Islamabad. The PSL, set to begin on March 26, will proceed as scheduled but under significant restrictions due to Pakistan's ongoing fuel crisis. Mohsin Naqvi, chairman of the Pakistan Cricket Board, confirmed that the tournament will be held without spectators and limited to just two venues. Matches will only be held in Lahore and Karachi, with cities such as Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Peshawar removed from the hosting list to minimize travel and resource usage.

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

Bashar eyes bigger player pool

SPORTS REPORTER

With Bangladesh set for a hectic schedule in the coming months, newly appointed Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) chief selector Habibul Bashar said he aims to expand the player pool.

2026 is a crucial year for Bangladesh's World Cup qualification campaign. The national team is also continuing its transition period, with a majority of senior players making way for others in the white-ball formats.

Thus, Bashar, who will take over responsibilities from current chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu next month, is not solely focused on securing victories but on achieving them by introducing new faces to strengthen a compact player pool.

"Our primary target is [ODI World Cup] qualification, but what's more important is consistency in performance," Bashar told reporters during a media briefing in Mirpur yesterday.

Following the Eid-ul-Fitr vacation, a few players returned to Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium for gym sessions yesterday. After the conclusion of the Pakistan ODIs earlier this month,



Bangladesh players will regroup -- except those participating in the Pakistan Super League (PSL), which is set to begin on March 26 -- for a white-ball camp on March 27. The camp will serve as preparation for the upcoming ODI and T20I series against New Zealand, a series significant in terms of the points required for direct qualification to the 2027 ODI World Cup.

"Since we have a lot of matches this

year, we have to work with a large group. With several series lined up, our player pool must be expanded. For sustained performance, it's important to work with around 10 additional players outside the core group of 14-15 players [in the national side]," Bashar added.

Speaking about the scope of the new four-member selection panel, Bashar said players outside the national team who are performing in domestic cricket will be closely monitored.

"Players in the national team are visible, and we follow up on them. But beyond this group, it's important to closely track performers in domestic cricket," Bashar said, adding that the domestic experience of Naeem Islam and Nadif Chowdhury -- new inclusions in the selection panel -- will be valuable in this aspect.

While Bashar will take over the selection process next month, the squad for the New Zealand series will be announced by the current selection panel. However, Bashar's panel is expected to face key challenges this year, including meeting qualification targets and building a strong player pool that will benefit the Tigers in the long run.

U-20 women to play against India today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh U-20 women's national football team will take on India in a closed-door friendly today as part of their ongoing preparations for the AFC Women's U-20 Asian Cup in Bangkok.

Ahead of the match, the team completed their third training session on Tuesday morning at Boonyachinda Stadium. The 90-minute session featured warm-up routines, technical passing drills and a 30-minute high-intensity intra-squad match, according to the

Bangladesh Football Federation.

The coaching staff put special focus on tactical discipline and fine-tuning the game plan for the India match, while also working on the individual roles and responsibilities of the players.

Goalkeeping coach Masud Ahamad Uzzal said the session was centred on preparing for tomorrow's game and addressing areas that need improvement following the Asian Cup.

"The players were shown which areas we did well in the Asian Cup and which areas needed further improvement. We

tried to minimise those mistakes," Uzzal said in a video message shared by the BFF.

"The girls are fine. One or two have slight discomfort," Uzzal said. "They are getting habituated. It's too hot in here which is a bit difficult for us, but I hope the players can fully acclimatise within the next seven days that we have."

Following the India game, Bangladesh will play against Jordan before starting their U-20 Women's Asian Cup campaign where they will play against Thailand on April 1, China on April 4 and Vietnam on April 7.



Hamza Choudhury is in deep conversation with Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera during a training session of the team in Hanoi on Tuesday, hours after the Leicester City midfielder joined the rest of the squad. Although Hamza skipped the physical drill, he said he was ready to go against Vietnam in the FIFA friendly on Thursday and the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture against Singapore five days later.

PHOTO: BFF

78 DAYS TO GO



Fontaine's 13-goal WORLD CUP

At the 1958 World Cup in Sweden, Just Fontaine produced one of football's most remarkable feats, scoring a record 13 goals in a single tournament -- a milestone that still stands. His journey, however, began with adversity when his boots were torn before the competition. With no replacements available, teammate Stephane Bruy lent him a pair that fit perfectly. Wearing those borrowed boots, Fontaine dominated the tournament, scoring freely and leading France to a third-place finish, including four goals in the playoff match. Despite France's semifinal loss to Brazil, his brilliance never faded. Fontaine's record remains unmatched, surpassing even legends like Pele, Lionel Messi and Miroslav Klose.

*Read full story on The Daily Star website

'Performance must be first priority'

In December last year, Naeem Islam was still playing for Rangpur Division in the National Cricket League. Four months on, he is part of the four-member national selection panel, contracted until the 2027 ICC World Cup -- a transition that brought an unannounced end to his playing career. One of the country's most consistent domestic performers, with over 11,000 first-class runs to his credit, the 39-year-old spoke to *The Daily Star's* Samsul Arefin Khan about his shift to selection, his goals in the new role, and the need for greater transparency. Excerpts follow:

The Daily Star (DS): Normally, after a playing career, players divert towards coaching or other roles. How would you describe this shift from player to selector?

Naeem Islam (NI): It has been an unexpected journey, but if this hadn't worked out, I would have tried to enter the coaching line, having completed Level 1.

I was toward the end of my playing days, with perhaps another year left, when I saw this opportunity to work with the board. I felt that if I became a selector, I would try to achieve things for Bangladesh that I couldn't quite achieve as a player.

DS: You've also experienced being a 'victim' of the system, where you performed but weren't selected. What is your vision for this big role?

NI: It was very difficult to keep yourself motivated for years while performing and not getting a call-up. I want to ensure that if a player performs, he gets an opportunity.

One thing I felt was lacking during our time was



communication. I don't remember ever receiving a phone call to clarify why I was dropped or what I needed to improve. While I can only pick a 15-man squad and must drop others, I believe we should discuss these decisions. If a player asks why they aren't in the team, we should tell them what they need to improve or do in domestic cricket to make a comeback. This keeps them motivated.

DS: Will you bring more transparency to domestic team selections, where teams

are sometimes put together haphazardly?

NI: I have been a captain in the NCL and have sat with selectors. In this digital age, all the data -- runs, strike rates, performance over the years -- are available online. If I am being paid for this job, I must use my head. If management or a captain wants a player who hasn't performed for three years, I will ask for a valid reason. If they can't provide one, I won't agree. Performance must be the first priority.

DS: In the past, players have been

picked for Tests based on white-ball performance. Will you focus on format-specific consistency?

NI: We used to discuss this as players too. For example, [Anamul Haque] Bijoy scored thousand runs in the Premier League (DPL) and was then picked for a Test match in the West Indies [in 2022]. It's very tough for a player to jump into international red-ball cricket when they've been performing in white-ball cricket. Their preparation time is reduced, and it becomes hard to survive.

We are human and will make mistakes, but we will try to minimize decisions that make players wonder how someone got into the team.

DS: Since you are now a selector and won't return to the field, do you have any regrets about your playing days?

NI: I played qualifying in 2001-02 and played until 2026. It has been a very long journey, and I am grateful for it. I don't want to think about what I didn't get; I am satisfied with what I have.

Ex-England players hit out as ECB backs McCullum, Stokes

AGENCIES

Brendon McCullum will continue as England's head coach across all three formats, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) confirmed on Monday, despite poor results and concerns over team culture.

Ben Stokes will remain Test captain with Harry Brook as his deputy, while Rob Key continues as managing director following a review triggered by England's 4-1 Ashes defeat in Australia.

The series drew criticism for England's casual preparations. They also lost to eventual champions India in the T20 World Cup semifinals this month, a side led by Brook. His off-field altercation with a nightclub bouncer in New Zealand last year remained a distraction.

ECB chief executive Richard Gould defended the leadership group, saying: "I've seen the driving ambition and determination... to take the lessons from the Ashes and move forward."

McCullum remains contracted until the 50-over World Cup in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia next year. England host New Zealand for a three-Test series in June before eight limited-overs matches against India.

Stokes admitted the past three months had been his toughest as captain but backed the leadership to improve. "Baz, Rob and myself have the passion



and desire to take this team forward... you learn more from failure than success," he said on social media.

Key, whose role was also under scrutiny, told Sky Sports McCullum was still the right man. "It was a winter that did not go well... but that doesn't mean they're bad leaders."

On England's ultra-aggressive 'Bazball' approach, Key said it needed evolution rather than abandonment. "If you lose authenticity... you're done. Brendon has not done that."

Former England opener Geoffrey Boycott criticised the lack of accountability, saying McCullum and Key had "sabotaged" the Ashes campaign. He argued the team had become complacent, with limited competition for places.

Former captains Michael Vaughan and Mike Atherton also questioned the decision to retain the leadership, with Atherton saying fans would find the "lack of accountability hard to stomach."