

## Hurting Bangladesh brace for China test

SPORTS REPORTER

Smarting from a heartbreaking 3-2 defeat to hosts Thailand, Bangladesh will be hoping to put up an improved performance when they square off against Group A favourites China in their second match at the AFC Women's Under-20 Asian Cup at Rajmangala Stadium in Bangkok, Thailand today.

The girls in red and green had gotten off to a fantastic start against Thailand on Wednesday, taking a two-goal lead thanks to a brace from forward Mosammat Sagorika.

But the charges of Peter Butler surrendered the lead in the second half, conceding three goals in 10 minutes, as the match slipped out of their grasp.

Bangladesh first gifted two penalties to Thailand through defensive blunders and then Pichayatida Manowang scored the decisive third goal in the 79th minute.

China, who have won the tournament once before in 2006, are shaping up to be a tougher opponent. Still, Bangladesh are determined to rectify their mistakes and put up a better show.

Coach Butler emphasised on defending set-pieces as well as obtaining set-pieces in the 75-minute training session yesterday ahead of the match against China.

"The coach worked on the mistakes we made against Thailand by showing us the players' positions and how to shape up. We also worked on finishing," said captain Arpita Biswas in a video message sent by Bangladesh Football Federation.

"We are going to play our second match against a strong China and we believe we can offer a good fight to China. We are also ready for that fight," said the defender.

China currently sit on the top of the four-team Group A with three points after beating Vietnam 3-0. Bangladesh, meanwhile, are third with no points to show for.



**Bangladesh striker Mosammat Sagorika sharpens her focus during team training at the Alpine Training Camp in Bangkok yesterday, ahead of today's daunting AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup clash against former champions China. She was on the verge of owning every headline on Wednesday, after her clinical double -- the country's first-ever goals in Asia's premier competition at any level -- gave Bangladesh a dream 2-0 lead over hosts Thailand in their Group A opener. Yet, a fairytale finish was not to be, as a 10-minute defensive meltdown led to a heartbreaking 3-2 defeat. Now, with focus shifting to the continental giants -- a much bigger test -- the rising star from Thakurgaon remains central to Bangladesh's hopes of keeping their knockout dream alive.**

PHOTO: BFF

## SHORT CORNER

### Spain not racist, says Real coach Arbeloa

Real Madrid coach Alvaro Arbeloa said Friday that Spain was a tolerant country and not racist, despite Islamophobic chanting during a national team match this week. Sections of the crowd at Spain's friendly against Egypt on Tuesday sang "whoever doesn't jump is Muslim" during the game at Espanyol's RCDE Stadium in Cornellà. Spain and Barcelona forward Lamine Yamal, who is Muslim, criticised those chanting as "ignorant and racist".

### FIFA World Cup final ticket prices jump 587 percent

FIFA has sharply increased ticket prices for the upcoming World Cup final, with the most expensive seats now listed at \$10,990 (approximately Tk 13,49,600), according to the latest sales phase released on Wednesday. The new pricing marks a steep rise from the 2022 World Cup final, where top tickets were around \$1,600 (about Tk 1,96,500), which means an increase of 586.82% this time around.

### 'Line crossed': Chelsea's Fernandez dropped for two matches

Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez will miss Chelsea's next two matches after he "crossed a line" with comments that cast doubt on his future at Stamford Bridge. The 25-year-old, linked with Real Madrid, fuelled speculation by telling a podcast he would like to live in the Spanish capital.

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

## Gattuso resigns as Italy coach after WC flop

AFP, Rome

Gennaro Gattuso quit as Italy coach on Friday as the Azzurri failing to reach a third straight World Cup continued to send shockwaves through Italian football.

A World Cup winner in 2006, Gattuso leaves after less than a year in charge of Italy, a team which has fallen far behind historic rivals like France and Spain in the last two decades.

Defeat on penalties to Bosnia and Herzegovina in Tuesday's qualification playoff final ended up costing Gattuso his job, as Gabriele Gravina, the man who hired him, also stepped down as president of the Italian Football Federation (FIGC).

Gabriele Gravina had asked Gattuso to stay on immediately after elimination in Zenica but his departure, and that of national team general manager Gianluigi Buffon, paved the way for the 48-year-old to resign.

Gattuso took charge of Italy in June last year following the sacking of Luciano Spalletti, himself a victim of a dismal title defence at Euro 2024 and a 3-0 hammering at the hands of Erling Haaland's Norway in their first World Cup qualifier.

His record, however, is impressive on paper, with six wins, one defeat, and one draw in eight matches with 22 goals scored and 10 conceded.

## Selectors juggle choices in hunt for stability

SPORTS REPORTER

The new national selection panel led by former captain Habibul Bashar have been entrusted to build a team for the 2027 ICC ODI World Cup, and one of the first challenges they will have to tackle to make it happen is to create a solid batting order.

To do that, the selectors will have to nurture a batting unit that has all its bases covered, has fixed starters and ideal backups waiting in the dressing room.

But in the Bangladesh batting line-up, especially in the ODI format, stability has been in short supply for a while now.

A big indicator of the lack of solidity is the fact that Bangladesh have used 22 different opening pairs in ODIs in the last five years. And the biggest victim of this constant chopping and changing has been Soumya Sarkar.

Soumya has featured in four separate opening pairs during this period, symptomatic of his own lack of traction in the setup since debuting in 2014.

Despite a match-winning 91 off 86 balls against the West Indies at home in October last year, he did not get a game in the Pakistan series last month.

Saif Hassan and Tanzid Hasan Tamim opened in all three matches. Although Saif did not score many runs, as Bangladesh won the series 2-1 and there is always an aversion to breaking a winning combination, Soumya's chances in the upcoming series against New Zealand



don't look too great.

Chances have come and gone for the 33-year-old in the national team, akin to a game of musical chairs. There was a time when he was even tried out at No.7.

However, a member of the selection panel feels that Soumya too needs to make his chances count.

"Soumya is such a good player, he should have been the main batter. Considering the calibre he had as a player, the thought of forming the team without

him should not even arise. But he couldn't hold onto it," one of the four members of the selection panel rued.

But playing someone so grossly out of position like Soumya at seven suggests a deeper problem in Bangladesh cricket.

"What were they thinking when playing an opening batter at No.7... I think it absolutely effects players. If you want to destroy a career, you can easily do it like this. But he [Soumya] should have had the guts to say he won't be a No. 7," a team official said on conditions of anonymity.

The 'Tigers' dearth of middle-order options is also apparent after veterans Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah stepped aside.

After the struggles of Jaker Ali, Mahidul Islam and Shamim Hossain, as there are no new, exciting batters sitting in the reserves, the management has no choice but to bring back tried and discarded names.

Ahif Hossain made a comeback in ODIs in the Pakistan ODIs and ahead of the New Zealand series, Mosaddek Hossain, who has not played for Bangladesh in any format since 2022, was asked to join the national team camp recently on head coach Phil Simmons' request.

The selectors are also keeping an eye on the 30-year-old.

"I have asked him to get in shape to be able to play well till 2027 and he looks good so far," a member of the selection panel said.



## Seven editions, nine regulars

From 1998 to 2022, the World Cup featured 32 teams in each edition. Across those seven tournaments, a total of 68 different nations took part. Among them, nine teams appeared in every single edition: Argentina, Brazil, England, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and Spain.

\*\* Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Gazza's tears: A 'child's' dream spilled on the grass of Turin'

## 'Never thought of losing to Sri Lanka'

SPORTS REPORTER

Seeing Bangladesh's hockey team slump to a shocking 3-2 defeat against Sri Lanka in a Pool B match of the Men's Asian Games Qualifiers in Bangkok yesterday must have felt like cruel déjà vu for head coach Mohammad Ashiquzzaman.

The loss marked Bangladesh's first defeat to Sri Lanka in 20 years. Incidentally, Ashiquzzaman himself had been part of the side that suffered a 2-0 loss in the bronze-deciding match of the South Asian Games hockey event in Colombo in 2006.

"We never thought of losing to Sri Lanka," Ashiquzzaman told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

"We simply could not play well. We had problems in the left-side midfield and in man marking in deep defence, while the hot and humid weather [above 40 degrees] might have been one of the reasons for the poor performance," he added.

Ashiquzzaman also felt the absence of midfielder Shohanur



Rahman Sabuj -- who was withdrawn from the camp by his service team on disciplinary grounds -- might have affected the outcome. However, the Bangladesh coach vowed to bounce back with a win over Uzbekistan in their final Pool B match on Monday, which would secure a place in the semifinals and confirm their berth in September's Asian Games.

"All the players and I are confident that we will bounce back against Uzbekistan to qualify for the semifinals and compete for the trophy," he said.

With one win from two matches, Bangladesh currently sit third in the group, behind table-toppers Sri Lanka and second-placed Uzbekistan. While Bangladesh must beat the Uzbeks in their final

group game to ensure a semifinal spot, the men in red and green only need to finish among the top three in the group, as the top six teams from the two groups in the qualifiers will make it to the Asian Games.

Regardless of the permutations, the defeat to Sri Lanka has prompted reflection on the issues plaguing the sport in Bangladesh.

"You know well that Bangladesh have had no domestic competitions for a long time, and the boys came here to play the qualifiers without any warm-up matches," Ashiquzzaman explained. "Meanwhile, Sri Lanka introduced a franchise-based hockey league alongside their premier league, and they also played a tri-nation tournament in Hong Kong before arriving in Thailand four days ahead of the competition."

Ashiquzzaman also mentioned that luck did not favour his side. Despite earning more circle penetrations and penalty corners, Bangladesh failed to capitalise, while the Sri Lankan goalkeeper denied them on several occasions.



PHOTO: MANCHESTER CITY

## CITY HOST LIVERPOOL IN FA CUP QUARTERS

Manchester City welcome Liverpool to the Etihad in Saturday's high-voltage FA Cup quarterfinal, aiming for a swift Wembley return after their Carabao Cup triumph, where the Citizens beat Arsenal 2-0. Despite trailing the Gunners by nine points in the league, Pep Guardiola's side have momentum and are chasing a record 18th straight home FA Cup win. In Guardiola's 10th season, City have reached at least this stage in all but one campaign and are targeting an eighth successive semifinal, with their run of seven straight semifinals already a competition record. Liverpool have a reputation in this stage as they progressed from 17 of their last 19 quarterfinals. City, however, have already beaten the Reds twice in the Premier League this season.