

Bangladesh's obsession with age-level success

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

From being the centrepiece of first-ever historic achievements to gradually losing its sheen through frequent use – the open-top bus parade has undergone a noticeable devaluation in Bangladesh.

This mode of celebration was first introduced in the country in 2022, to welcome the country's maiden SAFF Women's Championship winning side.

It felt poetic to bring back the celebration when the girls retained their title in 2024. But when it returned in this year's January to felicitate the inaugural SAFF Women's Futsal Championship winners, it felt a bit repetitive.

Last Saturday, the open-top bus parade returned for the U-20 men's side for winning the SAFF U-20 Championship. But this time the celebration felt a bit over-the-top, considering this is not the first time Bangladesh have won this tournament.

In 2024, Bangladesh won the SAFF U-20 title for the first time, but no such grand celebrations had followed it back then.

In fact, Bangladesh is one of the most successful teams at the SAFF U-18/19/20 level, having finished in the top two in six of the eight editions so far.

Age-level tournaments are designed to uncover talents who can make it big in the future. But being great at this level hasn't yielded much success for Bangladesh at the senior level so far.



In 2024, Mirajul Islam from Bangladesh was adjudged the most valuable player of that edition. Since then, however, stats show that he has found life tough at the higher levels.

He has four goals in five matches at the U-20 level, one goal in five outings for the U-23 team and is yet to net his maiden goal for Bangladesh in three appearances.

It's still early days for the youngster, however, his performances for Abahani in the ongoing season of the Bangladesh Football League (BFL) don't paint an optimistic picture, with just one goal and one assist to his name after nine appearances.

Not all players who were successful at age-level find success at the senior level. But in Bangladesh, the number of prodigies failing to live up to their billing is unnaturally high.

Foysal Ahmed Fahim, a left winger of the national team, had also been considered an age-level prodigy, but has just one goal and two assists to his name after 32 appearances for Bangladesh.

In cricket, Anamul Haque is a popular example of an age-level prodigy falling short. The right-hander was the highest run-getter in the 2012 ICC U-19 World Cup, outscoring Pakistan's Babar Azam and South Africa's Quinton de Kock.

But while the latter two scaled to great heights in international cricket, Anamul has largely disappeared from the international scene.

The disparity in fortunes in age-level and international level is the most apparent in the current men's hockey scene.

Just last year, Bangladesh U-21 side qualified for the Hockey Men's Junior World Cup for the first time and put up a spirited showing in India.

Meanwhile, the national team failed to qualify for the final in the Men's AHF Cup, a second-tier Asian competition where they had become champions in the previous four editions, despite having many of the players from the U-21 side.

Similar scenes are unfolding in the ongoing Men's Asian Games Qualifier, with them losing to Sri Lanka and drawing against Uzbekistan, matches they were expected to win.

In one sense, Bangladeshi sports administration's over-fixation on age-level glories is quite acknowledgement that similar success at the next stage is still out of reach.

Until steps are taken to build on from age-level success, chances are that the open-top bus will keep appearing for lesser and lesser occasions.

Bangladesh hockey hits new nadir

SPORTS REPORTER

After failing to secure an Asia Cup berth for the first time last year – only to eventually participate following Pakistan's withdrawal – Bangladesh hockey hit a new low on Monday, missing out on the semifinals of the Asian Games Qualifiers after a 1-1 draw against Uzbekistan in Bangkok.

The result, Bangladesh's first-ever draw against the Central Asian side, coupled with a first defeat to Sri Lanka in two decades, has left them battling for a place in the top six through a playoff on Thursday – a stark contrast to a tournament they would once have been expected to dominate.

In the match against Uzbekistan, Bangladesh fell behind early after conceding a penalty corner in the sixth minute, which Mironshokh Ortikboev converted. Ashikuzzaman's men responded 30 minutes later, with Amirul Islam equalising from a penalty stroke.

Both teams created further opportunities but failed to make them count. Bangladesh, in particular, endured a frustrating outing from penalty corners, failing to convert any of their six attempts.

The men in red and green finished third in the four-team group with four points from three matches. Uzbekistan also collected four points but advanced to the semifinals as group runners-up due to a superior goal difference. Sri Lanka, despite losing their final match to



Chinese Taipei on Monday, topped the group, having earlier beaten Bangladesh 3-2.

Bangladesh had begun their campaign with a narrow 4-3 win over Chinese Taipei.

They will now face the fourth-placed team from Group A in Thursday's playoff, with their opponents to be determined among Hong Kong, Thailand and Kazakhstan. The top six teams from the II-team tournament – considered a second-tier competition in Asia – will qualify for the Asian Games, scheduled to be held in Japan later this year.

Regardless of whether Bangladesh ultimately secure a place in the Asian Games, their performances over the past year warrant serious scrutiny – particularly in areas such as team selection, the effectiveness of the coaching staff, and the overall competitiveness of the side in the absence of domestic competitions.

Bayern eye Real breakthrough

STAR SPORTS DESK

Vincent Kompany's Bayern Munich head to the Santiago Bernabeu on Tuesday for their Champions League quarterfinal first leg against Real Madrid, brimming with confidence and reinforced by the likely return of Harry Kane.

Bayern arrive as arguably Europe's most complete side. Their attacking output has been relentless, with 32 goals in 10 Champions League games this season, and only twice in their history have they averaged more per campaign. Much of that firepower stems from Kane, whose 48 goals in 40 appearances bring forth his transformative impact. The England striker is also the only player from his country to score 10 or more goals in consecutive Champions League seasons and has netted 29 times in 34 appearances since joining the German giants – the most by any player in the competition.

Real, by contrast, have endured an inconsistent season. Yet their affinity with this competition remains unmatched. Just when doubts surfaced, they produced arguably their performance of the season to dismantle Manchester City in the last 16.

The tie pits together the two most frequent quarterfinalists in Champions League history – Real for a 22nd time, Bayern a 24th. The Spanish side hold the edge at this stage, progressing 17 times, while Bayern have suffered elimination more often than any other club (10).

Despite Madrid's array of attacking talent – Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Jr, Jude Bellingham and Federico Valverde – Bayern's cohesion and intensity make them slight favourites. Kompany's side, driven by a high pressing system and supported by attackers like Michael Olise and Luis Diaz, dismantled Atalanta 10-2 on aggregate in the previous round and are unbeaten in 14 matches since January.

Yet history casts a long shadow. Bayern are winless in their last nine meetings with Real and have not eliminated them from a knockout tie

since 2012. Each of the last four times Madrid have knocked Bayern out, they have gone on to win the trophy.

Memories of Bernabeu heartbreak linger. From Sven Ulreich's costly error in 2018 to Joselu's late double in the 2024 semifinal – sparked by a rare Manuel Neuer mistake – Real have repeatedly found decisive moments when it mattered most.

No team has faced another more often in this competition, and Tuesday's clash – the 29th between the sides – adds another chapter to the mouthwatering clash amongst Europe's elites.

Form favours Bayern but against Real in the Champions League, history rarely follows the script.



In the other fixture of the evening, Premier League leader Arsenal travel to Sporting Lisbon aiming to halt a dip in form and reach a second straight semifinal. Sporting have never beaten the Gunners in seven attempts, though they famously knocked them out of the Europa League in 2023.

Mikel Arteta's side, recently beaten in both domestic cups, face a Sporting team buoyed by a remarkable comeback against Bodø/Glimt. All eyes, however, will be on Viktor Gyokeres, returning to face his former club after scoring 97 goals in 102 games, seeking to make an impact on familiar ground.

65 DAYS TO GO



Bigger than ever

From 1998 to 2022, every FIFA World Cup edition featured 32 teams and a total of 64 matches. However, with the tournament expanding to 48 teams for the upcoming 2026 edition, the competition will break new ground in its 96 year history by staging a 65th match for the first time. The World Cup, to be jointly hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada, will feature a total of 104 matches.

****Visit The Daily Star website to also read "The Debutant Hall of Fame: When first-timers showed what they're made of".**

BCB introduces spin bowling machine

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has introduced a spin bowling machine for the first time in the country, aiming to enhance players' preparation through modern training technology.

The machine, named Merlyn by BOLA, was used for the first time on Monday during the national team's skill camp at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur ahead of the New Zealand series.

Previously, bowling machines in Bangladesh were primarily used to simulate pace and short-pitched deliveries.

The introduction of a spin bowling machine addresses a long-standing need, as such devices are widely used in countries like England, Australia, and New Zealand to replicate quality spin bowling in training environments.

"This machine had been under discussion for a long time and was ordered recently," BCB cricket operations in-charge Shahriar Nafees told reporters in Mirpur.

"With this, you can play three types of deliveries – off spin, leg spin, and arm ball. The length of the ball can be adjusted, and the pace can be increased or decreased. It can be operated in both manual and automatic modes. In automatic mode, you can play 25-30 balls at a time."

According to the BCB official, the machine was purchased at a cost of approximately £10,000 (around Tk 16 lakh).

According to the manufacturer, Merlyn by BOLA is regarded as one of the most advanced and accurate spin bowling training aids in the world.

The machine received widespread praise from professional players and coaches when the ECB first introduced it in 2009.

BCL schedule hinges on April 8 DPL meeting

SPORTS REPORTER

A Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) official said yesterday that the board is awaiting the outcome of an April 8 meeting between the Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) and Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League (DPL) clubs before finalising the schedule for the longer-format Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL).

"There is a meeting with the Premier League clubs on April 8. If the DPL does not take place, the BCL will definitely start on April 21. If the tournament goes ahead, we will adjust the BCL schedule," BCB tournament committee in-charge AEM Kawser told The Daily Star.

"Since players' interests are involved in the DPL, we might have to give it priority. If players participate there, we naturally cannot involve them in the BCL," he added.

If the DPL is shelved, both matches of the BCL's opening round will be held in Sylhet, followed by the second round in Rajshahi and Bogura, and the third in Chattogram and Rajshahi.

The second round is expected to begin on April 28, with the final round set to start after a one-week break to accommodate national players joining a preparatory camp ahead of the Pakistan Tests.

Pakistan are scheduled to arrive in Bangladesh on May 4 for a two-Test series – part of the World Test Championship – with the first Test likely from May 8, according to a draft itinerary.

The last BCL four-day tournament was held in December 2023, while the one-day version took place earlier this year.

Last chance saloon for Bangladesh



PHOTO: BFF

Bangladesh players wear broad smiles in training on Monday ahead of Tuesday's final group fixture of the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup against Vietnam in Thailand. Despite losing their first two matches, Bangladesh could go into the quarterfinals of this 12-team competition as one of two best third-placed teams with a victory against the Vietnamese.