DHAKA SATURDAY OCTOBER 17, 2026, KARTIK 1, 1433 BS

SPORT



Emmanuel Sunday played a key role as title contenders Mohammedan SC moved to the joint top of the Bangladesh Football League standings after securing their third straight win with a 2-0 victory over PWD SC in Manikganj yesterday.

Read full story on The Daily Star's website

Flaw in the flat-track code

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI



Spin has contributed to Bangladesh's gains in the Test circuit, but its impact on flatter surfaces has left a lot to be desired.

Bangladesh's love affair with spin took shape during the 2015-2018 period, when spinners not only claimed plenty of wickets but also contributed to notable wins, particularly at home against England and Australia. The trend was reflected in the National Cricket League, where Abdur Razzak, Nayeem Hasan, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Taijul Islam and Hasan Murad have featured among the top wicket-takers across several seasons.

Pace, however, has gained prominence at home and away in recent years. With batting performances weighing Bangladesh down in major multinational white-ball events, the Tigers have also sought to move away from low, slow, spin-friendly tracks. Yet spin remains a go-to weapon for subcontinental sides, particularly on docile or flat surfaces, where Bangladesh's spinners have often lagged behind.

Since Mushtaq Ahmed became spin coach, Bangladesh's Test spinners have taken 177 wickets in 20 matches over two-and-a-half years, compared with 151 in the preceding period. Their average has improved from 32.41 to 28.77 and their strike rate from 68 to 55.8, despite Shakib Al Hasan's absence since the 2024 Kanpur Test. The 14 five-wicket hauls under Mushtaq, double the previous period's seven, further attest to the improvement.

Spin has also supported pace, but flat tracks pose a different challenge when spinners must do the heavy lifting.

The Chennai Test against India in September 2024 offers a case in point. In overcast conditions, Hasan Mahmud and fellow fast bowlers reduced India to 144 for five, but once conditions stopped favouring pace, Mehidy took just one wicket for 77 as Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja added 199. Shakib, nursing an injury, conceded 50 in eight wicketless overs. Bangladesh's two key spinners combined to average 103 across the Test, while Ashwin and Jadeja accounted for nine of Bangladesh's 10 second-innings dismissals, Ashwin taking a six-for.

Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium has long been a spin paradise. Yet, when South Africa's Kagiso Rabada and Co. took control of the October 2024 Test, Bangladesh had picked only one seamer, Hasan Mahmud, making spin central to their plans. Taijul claimed a first-innings five-for, taking five for 122 in 36 overs, but he, Miraz and Nayeem managed only 10 wickets between them in the match. Their average of 33.4 in the first innings fell short of the expectations from the team management.

The following Test in Chattogram saw Rabada and spinner Keshav Maharaj combine to dismantle Bangladesh with pace and spin. South Africa needed to bat only once, declaring at 575 for six, while Miraz and Taijul -- who claimed another five-for -- averaged 73.8 per wicket.

The problem persisted in Colombo in June 2025. Sri Lanka's spinners averaged 17.14 across two innings, while Bangladesh's Taijul, Miraz and Naim averaged 36.6 in their only bowling innings as Sri Lanka made 458 and won by an innings and 78 runs. Similar struggles have surfaced on unsuitable surfaces, including West Indies all-rounder Kyle Mayers' onslaught in Chattogram in 2021.

Mushtaq believes flat pitches test a spinner's technique, a view he has conveyed during spin camps involving bowlers from the HP and Game Development programmes. Under his tutelage, Rishad Hossain became one of the leading wicket-takers at the 2024 T20 World Cup in the USA, where the slow, dull drop-in pitches tested bowlers. Rishad's recent progress, however, has stalled as white-ball surfaces have become more batting-friendly.

Team management sources say Mushtaq's contribution extends beyond spin to "improving team environment, communication and working with mentality of the individual and the group". The BCB also assesses players' mentality in difficult situations and statistical improvement when evaluating a coach.

Flat wickets remain a challenge for Taijul and Miraz, despite each having taken more than 200 Test wickets. Helping them extract more from such surfaces could define Mushtaq's legacy.

There have been occasional bright spots. Against Pakistan in Mirpur this year, Bangladesh's spinners delivered despite little turn for much of the Test. Replicating that performance could help turn missed opportunities into victories, as the drawn Abu Dhabi Test against Afghanistan -- which the Tigers could have won had their spinners risen to the occasion – illustrated of late.

New captain, bigger challenge

SPORTS REPORTER

Litton Das took over as Bangladesh's ODI captain at the end of July, but his first test as skipper since replacing Mehidy Hasan Miraz comes almost three months later, with the tri-series involving Zimbabwe and Afghanistan beginning today.

Bangladesh are set to face Zimbabwe in the opening match of a tournament that will test not only Litton's leadership but also his side's ability to handle the pressure of a multi-nation event.

Bangladesh had won four consecutive ODI series, including a home series against Australia, before losing away to Zimbabwe in July. Yet the results alone did not determine the captaincy decision, as Litton was handed the reins despite Miraz's success. The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) appeared to place greater emphasis on how the team achieved the results, with the 2027 ODI World Cup in sight.

A captain's individual performance can also influence how a team is perceived, and this was one area that worked against Miraz during his tenure. Litton, meanwhile, struck a fifty and a century in this month's one-off Test against Afghanistan in the UAE, bouncing back from a lean patch that included three ducks in the Tests against Australia in August and September and another in the Asian Games in Japan.

Litton also has experience of leading the ODI side, notably when Bangladesh beat India 2-1 in a home series in 2022. Overall, he has won three and lost three of his seven matches as stand-in captain, with one abandoned.

He also made a strong impression as T20I captain, with his tactical acumen, field placements, bowling changes and ability to read the game earning him the ODI captaincy. That tactical nous will be crucial if Bangladesh are to take the next step at ICC World Cup events.

The tri-series also brings into focus Litton and his side's biggest assignment ahead: the 2027 ODI World Cup in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia. The Bangladesh teams at the 2019 and 2023 editions had potential but ultimately failed to change the country's fortunes on the global stage. Ahead of the 2023 tournament, a captaincy change unsettled the side and was followed by a disappointing campaign in India. This time, Litton has a year to prepare his team mentally and physically before the World Cup begins in October 2027.

Bangladesh will have the Asia Cup in June next year, which will offer a measure of their progress ahead of the World Cup. Focus will also be on the ODI series in South Africa later this year, giving the Tigers an opportunity to assess conditions well in advance.

Meanwhile, after today's match, Bangladesh will face Afghanistan on Wednesday in the tri-series, with the final scheduled for Friday. Litton will hope to make a positive start to his ODI captaincy and establish the clarity and confidence his side will need for the major assignments ahead.





PHOTO: FACEBOOK

Barca face Betis test; City aim to stay perfect

STAR SPORTS DESK

Barcelona face their toughest LaLiga test tonight against third-placed Real Betis at La Cartuja, seeking to extend their flawless start ahead of a daunting fixture run.

Hansi Flick's side boast 10 wins from 10 across all competitions, netting 43 goals. They lead the league with 24 points from eight games. Betis, meanwhile, sit on 19 points, five behind Barca and one ahead of Real Madrid.

Lamine Yamal, 19, remains central to Barca's attack with eight goals and nine assists in 10 games, recently providing two assists in Wednesday's 4-1 Champions League win at Galatasaray to earn player-of-the-match. Yet Barcelona's depth has also been key; Gabriel Jesus has stepped in seamlessly for Raphinha, supported by a versatile midfield.

Manuel Pellegrini's Betis pose a serious threat. Fresh off a 3-2 Champions League victory over Porto and a 5-2 league win over Osasuna, they have five wins and a draw in their last six, with their only league loss coming against Levante in August.

History favors the Catalans, who beat Betis twice last season, including a 5-3 away win, and remain unbeaten away in this fixture since January 2011. Raphinha and Frenkie de Jong return to training and could feature off the bench before Barca faces PSG and the October 25 Clasico against Real Madrid.

In the Premier League, leaders Manchester City look to ignore off-field uncertainty and extend their perfect start hosting Ipswich Town tonight. Meanwhile, struggling Liverpool (two wins in six) visit fourth-placed Brentford. Chelsea travel to Everton eyeing the top four, while bottom-dwelling Fulham -- winless in six -- host Hull City, as manager Alvaro Arbeloa aims to ease some pressure. Finally, Newcastle and Aston Villa meet for a high-voltage clash at St. James' Park.

WHAT TO WATCH

T SPORTS

Bangladesh Football League
Abahani vs Chattogram City
Live from 2:45 pm

UAE ODI Tri-Series
Bangladesh vs Zimbabwe
1st ODI
Live from 5:30 pm

LaLiga
Valencia vs Athletic Club
Live from 1:00 am (Sunday)

STAR SPORTS SELECT HD1/ HD2

Premier League
Everton vs Chelsea
Live from 5:30 pm
Man City vs Ipswich
Live from 8:00 pm
Brentford vs Liverpool
Live from 8:00 pm
Newcastle vs Aston Villa
Live from 10:30 pm



Cisse the lone Italian bright spot

Italian football endured a miserable week in Europe, with all four Serie A clubs suffering defeats in the Champions League. But amid the gloom, teenager Alphadjo Cisse offered a rare moment of cheer with a historic individual milestone in the Europa League yesterday. The 19-year-old became the youngest Italian to score a hattrick in European club competition, inspiring AC Milan to a thumping 4-0 victory over Austrian hosts RB Salzburg. His treble was also the first by a Milan player in a continental fixture since Filippo Inzaghi achieved the feat 24 years ago. Cisse struck all three goals within the first 49 minutes, rewarding coach Ruben Amorim's faith in him as Milan bounced back from an opening-round home defeat to Benfica, despite finishing the match with 10 men.

PHOTO: AFP

Challenge accepted as Fortis eye opening-day upset

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football League side Fortis FC are eyeing an opening-day upset when they face Kuwaiti heavyweights Al Qadsia SC in their AFC Challenge League Group C debut at the Mohammed Al-Hamad Stadium today.

The match kicks off at 5:30pm (Bangladesh Time).

After reaching the group stage of Asia's third-tier club tournament with a 1-0 preliminary win over Kyrgyzstan's Muras United, Fortis, last season's third-place finishers in the BFL, are aiming big, eyeing a place in the knockouts – a feat achieved by only Abahani during the 2019 AFC Cup. Fortis, who are in the West region, will have to battle it out to advance either as group winners or as the best runners-up among the three groups in the region.

To acclimate to the sweltering heat, the squad arrived in Kuwait on Tuesday and completed three training sessions. They face a daunting task against Al Qadsia, currently second in the Kuwaiti top flight and boasting talents from Morocco, Egypt, Oman, and Ivory Coast.

Despite the hosts being firm favorites on paper, Fortis head coach Masud Parvez Kaiser is targeting a victory.

"The first two matches are crucial if we want to progress to the quarterfinals," Kaiser told The Daily Star from Kuwait. "We are playing for all three points. Leaving empty-handed will make the remaining matches very difficult."

Kaiser, who is mulling fielding all nine foreign players, added: "Al-Qadsia are a good opponent, but they are not unbeatable. Our players are convinced they can secure the points if we minimise our own mistakes and capitalise on our chances."



While the weather is a hurdle, Kaiser believes it won't severely impact his side, expecting temperatures to drop drastically by the 8:30 pm local kick-off. He is also banking on a lively atmosphere, noting that Bangladeshi expats have shown immense interest in backing Fortis from the stands.