SPORT



"I am really happy about this. 100 wins, it's great. When we started, we hoped we would have 100 games for Barca, so 100 victories is a great achievement."

HANSI FLICK
after recording his 100th victory as Barcelona manager, following Saturday's 6-1 win over Alaves.



With Ronan Sullivan ruled out due to injury, the focus will be on Mahe Khan and what he can bring to Thomas Dooley's Bangladesh side in the upcoming SAFF Championship. PHOTO: BFF

SHAMIT confident despite Ronan setback

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh are hoping to end their 23-year wait for a SAFF Championship title when the next edition kicks off in Dhaka on November 5. Much of the optimism surrounding Thomas Dooley's side stems from the growing presence of overseas-based players, particularly in attack, where the team have long struggled for goals.

Dooley included US-based Ronan Sullivan and UK-based Mohammad Mahe Khan in his 28-member squad to address that shortage. However, a knee injury to Sullivan dealt a blow to those plans yesterday, with the forward pulling out just days before Bangladesh's opening match against Bhutan.

"He [Sullivan] told me last Thursday that he wouldn't be able to come and sincerely apologised," BFF vice-president Fahad Karim, who usually communicates with overseas players, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Sullivan was scheduled to arrive in Dhaka on Tuesday after departing the United States on Sunday.

Canada-based midfielder Shamit Shome, however, believes Bangladesh have enough attacking options to cope with the setback.

"It's too bad, you know, he is a good player, a good young talent. But anyway, we have a lot more quality, more attacking options. We have to try and adjust with that," Shamit told reporters at an event in the capital yesterday.

The midfielder also felt Sullivan's absence might not be too difficult to manage.

"He hasn't even arrived yet, so we haven't really got that chemistry, we haven't been able to build that understanding. We still have people in the team who can contribute, so hopefully we won't miss Sullivan that much. I have confidence that the team we have now will be able to adapt," he added.

Shamit himself is returning from an injury that kept him out of action for the last four to five weeks, a period he described as challenging.

"Today [Sunday] in training, everything felt more or less okay. So now the main thing is to build up the fitness. We have two-three more days before the Bhutan game to increase the load. But I feel good. And it's SAFF, right? Everyone can have a little bit of pain, but you have to play, right?" he said.

Bangladesh will also miss Hamza Chowdhury and Farhaan Ali Wahid for their opener, but Shamit insisted the squad had enough depth to cope with their absence.

"Obviously we are missing Hamza and Farhaan, who are very big players who help us. But still, the way I see it, it's the same as Ronan not coming. We have players, I trust in those players," he said.

WHAT TO WATCH

T Sports
NCL GT20
Semifinal
Live from 6:00 am
LaLiga
Deportivo vs Osasuna
Live from 2:00 am (Tuesday)

Star Sports Select HD1
Premier League
Newcastle vs Everton
Live from 2:00 am
(Tuesday)

INDIA'S U-23 MOVE
Priorities beyond SAFF

ANISUR RAHMAN

The All India Football Federation's (AIFF) decision to send an U-23 developmental squad to the upcoming SAFF Championship raises a pertinent question: are India undermining South Asia's premier football competition, or simply prioritising their long-term ambitions?

While other participating nations are expected to field their senior sides, India's approach has sparked debate over the championship's competitiveness. Former national footballer and coach Shafiqul Islam Manik, however, believes the absence of India's senior stars does not necessarily lower the standard.

"To be honest, when India send their U-23 squad, it seems the standard of the championship will fall, but the past record does not suggest so. It is psychological," Manik said.

"However, the participation of India's main team changes everything in the SAFF Championship because every participant dreams of clinching the title by beating India."

History lends weight to part of Manik's argument. India fielded developmental squads in the 2009 and 2018 editions, winning the 2009 title in Dhaka by defeating Maldives before finishing runners-up in 2018 after losing to the same opponents in a penalty shootout.

India's dominance is undeniable. Of the championship's 14 editions, they have won nine titles, while Maldives have triumphed twice. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have won once each, leaving Nepal, Pakistan and Bhutan still searching for their maiden crowns.

Yet, India's decision cannot be viewed solely through the lens of regional competition. Ranked considerably higher than their South Asian rivals, India have ambitions beyond SAFF. Their primary structural objective is to break into the FIFA top 100 and improve their seeding in Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Asian Cup qualifiers and FIFA World Cup qualifying draws.

From that perspective, the championship presents a complicated equation. Wins against lower-ranked opponents offer relatively modest FIFA ranking points, while a draw or defeat could prove costly. For a team seeking to establish itself



more firmly in Asian football, the risk-reward calculation differs from that facing its regional rivals.

There are practical considerations, too. Reports suggest India are considering two international friendlies against New Zealand during the November 9-17 FIFA window, which overlaps with the SAFF Championship schedule from November 5-17.

The timing also creates complications for the Indian Super League (ISL), where clubs may be reluctant to release their first-choice players for a two-week regional tournament. Sending an U-23 squad therefore offers AIFF a compromise: honouring regional commitments without disrupting the domestic calendar or sacrificing opportunities for the senior team to face stronger opposition.

More importantly, the approach serves India's player-development strategy. The transition from age-group football to senior international competition is difficult, and domestic league performances cannot replicate the pressure of international knockouts, hostile away crowds and regional rivalries.

India's 2018 campaign demonstrated the potential benefits. Under coach Stephen Constantine, emerging players such as Anirudh Thapa, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Ashique Kuruniyan and Subhasish Bose gained valuable tournament experience, while established figures including Sunil Chhetri, Sandesh Jhingan and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu were left out. Several of those youngsters subsequently became important members of India's senior setup.

India may therefore have sound reasons for taking this route. But a decision that makes sense for Indian football does not necessarily serve the interests of the SAFF Championship.

For the region's other contenders, beating India remains a major ambition. Their absence of senior stars may not make the tournament uncompetitive, but it undeniably changes the stakes. India may see SAFF as a platform for developing its next generation; for the rest of the region, it remains a chance to measure themselves against the best.



Ahead of the SAFF Championship on November 5, Bangladesh's 2003 SAFF-winning and 2010 SA Games gold-winning squads played a nostalgic friendly match at the National Stadium yesterday to inspire the current team. Aminul Haque, who guarded the goal in both histoirc campaigns, also laced up his boots to play alongside his former teammates, including Alfaz Ahmed, Arman Mia, and Mamunul Islam. PHOTO: BFF

Time to rethink home formula

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Bangladesh's eight-wicket defeat to West Indies in the first of the two-Test series in Mirpur on Saturday once again exposed the batters' inability to handle spin, raising a pertinent question: what should the Tigers' approach to home conditions be?

"Our biggest problem is our batters. We must pay attention to which wickets our batters feel comfortable playing on," former national captain Akram Khan said bluntly.

"Focusing solely on what to do to win shouldn't be the approach right now, because Bangladeshi batters are unable to score consistently on any wicket," Akram added.

Bangladesh enjoyed home success between 2014 and 2018 on spin-friendly pitches, recording memorable Test victories against England and Australia. However, Akram believes reverting to that formula is no longer working because the team lacks both capable batters and quality spinners.

"In the past, we always prepared spinning wickets at home because we had two advantages: first, our batters could score runs on those wickets, which they cannot do now. Second, we had top-quality spinners like Shakib [Al Hasan], and we currently lack spinners of that calibre. That is why the issue stands out much more now," Akram said.

Before the Mirpur Test, Bangladesh had won five consecutive home Tests since April 2025, all on sporting surfaces where their batters made significant contributions.

Between December 2023 and April 2025, however, they lost six consecutive Tests, repeatedly struggling against spin-friendly conditions.

The warning signs were already there in November 2023, when Bangladesh, having won the opening Test against New Zealand in Sylhet on a decent surface, opted for a turning track in Mirpur for the second Test. The visitors' spin trio of Ajaz Patel, Mitchell Santner and Glenn Phillips shared 17 wickets to secure a four-wicket victory.

South Africa's Keshav Maharaj and Senuran Muthusamy claimed 18 wickets between them across two Tests the following year, outplaying Bangladesh in both matches.

Even Zimbabwe's Wellington Masakadza and Wesley Madhevere played significant roles with eight wickets between them in their side's opening-Test victory in Sylhet last year, although pacer Blessing Muzarabani was the chief architect with nine scalps.

The pattern was also evident during West Indies' 2-0 Test series win in Bangladesh in 2021, when Jomel Warrican and Rahkeem Cornwall shared 24 wickets.

Against that backdrop, Bangladesh's decision to return to the same formula in Mirpur was baffling. The defeat has also all but ended their prospects of qualifying for next year's ICC World Test Championship final at The Oval.



Bangladesh's best result in the current WTC cycle came with their away victory over Australia in Darwin, where a sporting surface and strong batting performances proved decisive. Akram believes that should be the way forward.

"At this point, we shouldn't focus on the opponent's strengths or weaknesses. Our core problem is our batters scoring runs. After all, we defeated Australia because our batters performed well. Our pace attack is also in a solid position," Akram added.

Bangladesh travel to Sylhet today for the second Test, starting on November 5. With little time left, the Tigers must decide whether to persist with a formula that has repeatedly backfired or prepare a sporting surface.

SAFF tickets fail to fly

TANVIR AHMED PRANTO

Bangladesh have waited 23 years to reclaim the SAFF Championship title they last won in 2003. With arguably their strongest squad since that triumph, the tournament should have sparked huge demand. Instead, sluggish sales raise questions over whether high ticket prices are alienating supporters.

The contrast with last year is stark. When Bangladesh hosted AFC qualifiers, tickets reportedly sold out within six minutes, overwhelming the online platform as fans scrambled for seats.

Sales for opening matchday, featuring Bangladesh against Bhutan and India against Pakistan, began last Thursday. One ticket covers both matches. Prices start at Tk 999, or Tk 1,070 including VAT, rising to Tk 3,999 for Club House and Tk 6,999 for VIP galleries, before VAT.

A check of selected sections on the Tickify website found that an estimated 85 percent of



tickets remained unsold, with just three days before kick-off. The figures were particularly stark in several sections.

In the Southwest Gallery's lower tier, only 15 of more than 1,000 seats across blocks C and D had been sold. In the Northwest Gallery, all 275 seats in lower F block remained available. The East Gallery also saw little demand, with no tickets sold in E block and just four of 539 sold in lower C block.

Organisers might argue that one ticket covers two matches. But how attractive is that proposition? The weekday fixtures require supporters to spend more than eight hours at the stadium. How many working fans can sacrifice an entire day to watch both matches, particularly when Bangladesh feature only in the evening fixture?

Supporters' groups protested the prices yesterday, demanding affordable access to the stands. Rafi Iqbal, founder of Red & Green Army and Voice of BD, said ordinary fans were being priced out and called for tickets to be reduced to Tk 300-500.

"A middle-class person in Bangladesh earns, at most, Tk 20,000 to Tk 30,000 a month. That means their daily income is less than Tk 1,000, around Tk 800. Is someone supposed to work an entire day just to buy a ticket for one match?" he asked.

He also warned: "A ticket is just a piece of paper. A ticket cannot stop us. We will break through the gates and enter the stadium."

The BFF previously said ticketing arrangements were entirely in SAFF's hands. However, as the host federation, questions remain over whether it did enough to push for prices local supporters could afford. With the tournament approaching, the prospect of empty stands is an uncomfortable one for a country hoping to reclaim the title on home soil.