DHAKA THURSDAY NOVEMBER 5, 2026, KARTIK 20, 1433 BS

SPORT



PHOTO: STAR

WHAT TO WATCH

T Sports
Bangladesh vs West Indies
2nd Test, Day 1
Live from 9:30 am
SAFF Championship
India vs Pakistan
Live from 4:30 pm
Bhutan vs Bangladesh
Live from 8:00 pm
Sony Sports 1,2,3,5
Europa League
Live from 11:45 pm

SIX SIDES, ONE CROWN

STAR SPORTS DESK

BANGLADESH | All in or nothing
Bangladesh are targeting their second SAFF Championship title after their triumph in 2003, with several overseas-based players giving new head coach Thomas Dooley a revamped squad. They reached the semifinals in 2023 but have struggled for consistency in recent editions. Considered favourites, the hosts will have to turn home support and heightened expectations into results.

BHUTAN | Underdogs with high hopes
In their 10th SAFF appearance, Bhutan have progressed beyond the group stage only once. A win and a draw in the third round of the Asian Cup Qualifiers offered encouragement, but four defeats in their last five matches underline the challenge ahead. Reaching the last four would be a major achievement.

SRI LANKA | The dark horses
Sri Lanka have strengthened considerably, with a large contingent of origin players based in England, France, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. They arrive on a five-match winning streak, having also won three games in the 2027 AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers third round.



MALDIVES | Former champions seeking revival
The Maldives have reached four finals and won two titles, including the 2018 edition in Bangladesh. However, they have exited the group stage in their last three appearances and lost all five of their latest matches. They are the only side without an overseas-based player in their squad.

INDIA | Perennial winners, youthful squad
The most successful team in SAFF history, India have reached 12 finals in 13 appearances. They will field a squad comprised of mostly players from their U-23s, as they did when winning the 2009 title, while their senior team continue with high-profile friendlies, including against New Zealand. Despite the youthful selection, their pedigree makes them a serious threat.

PAKISTAN | Overseas experience, uphill task
Pakistan have been eliminated in the group stage in six of the last seven editions and are the lowest-ranked side in the field. Most of their 28-member squad play abroad, while a spirited 2-2 comeback draw against the Philippines in the FIFA ASEAN Cup offered some encouragement. Their opening clash with India will be an early test.

FIFA RANKINGS
India 138 | Maldives 173 | Bangladesh 182 | Sri Lanka 184 | Bhutan 192 | Pakistan 197

Bangladesh have hope, now comes the hard part

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh vs Bhutan:
Matches: 13
Bangladesh won: 9
Draw: 2
Bhutan won: 2

India vs Pakistan:
Matches: 25
India won: 12
Draw: 3
Pakistan won: 10

- The two defeats for Bangladesh came in 2016 AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers and an international friendly in 2024, both in Thimphu
- The two draws came in 2008 in a SAFF Championship in Maldives and AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers in Dhaka in 2016.
- Bhutan are one of only two teams to have all homegrown players in their squad

Since reaching the final as defending champions in 2005, Bangladesh have managed only two semifinal appearances and suffered six group-stage exits in the eight subsequent editions of the SAFF Championship. They will now attempt to end their 23-year title drought on home soil, with Sheffield United midfielder Hamza Choudhury and several other overseas-based players raising hopes of a revival.

The diaspora players have already made an impression, helping Bangladesh hold India to an away draw before beating them at home in the Asian Cup Qualifiers. With the tournament getting underway today at the National Stadium, former players from the 2003 SAFF-winning and 2010 South Asian Games gold-medal-winning generations are also hoping to see the current side reclaim regional supremacy.

Those ex-internationals took part in Monday's friendly to send a message to the current squad: Bangladesh have won on home soil before and must make the most of another opportunity. They want the players to understand the significance of the occasion and the support behind them.

The challenge, however, will be considerable. Defeats against higher-ranked Indonesia and Malaysia in the FIFA ASEAN Cup, the delayed arrival of key overseas-based players ahead of the FIFA window on November 9, and injuries -- including the one that ruled out US-based forward Ronan Sullivan -- have complicated the build-up.

Although Bangladesh have been widely tipped as favourites by the participating nations, Thomas Dooley's side must find the consistency to justify that status. Their build-up bears little resemblance to that of the 2003 champions, who spent nearly two years under Hungarian coach George Kottan. Two international tournaments during that period also helped the players develop an understanding before they claimed their maiden title, having narrowly missed out in 1999 with a final defeat to India.

The emergence of diaspora footballers has offered a response to longstanding concerns about the shortage of talented players in the country, with their performances against stronger oppositions renewing optimism. Dooley believes his side have a genuine chance of winning the title, provided the players follow their plans and avoid unforced errors. Former internationals share his optimism but have warned that the path to the trophy will be difficult.

"SAFF is a different kind of tournament. Bangladesh can look like champions, but they haven't reached the final since 2005," former national striker Zahid Hasan Emily said. "They must rely less on individuals and work together as a team."

Former midfielder Arman Mia believes Hamza's presence should give the squad confidence. "A player [like Hamza] played in the world's best league... If the team cannot deliver, when will they?" he said.

Emily, however, is concerned about the lack of a recognised number nine following Sullivan's injury. "When we won the SAFF Championship in 2003 and the South Asian Games gold in 2010, our strikers scored 10 goals between them," he said. "It is very difficult to win a big title with players who score only occasionally."

Former forward Alfaz Ahmed, meanwhile, believes patriotism and home support can help the team overcome its shortcomings. "The anthem matters... and the spectators' support can change a match," said Alfaz, who scored the only goal against Nepal to give Bangladesh a winning start in the 2003 edition.

For Dooley and his players, today's Group A contest against Bhutan is the first opportunity to turn promise into results. India, who are in Group B and face Pakistan in the tournament opener earlier today, could provide a sterner test if Bangladesh progress. The real measure of the hosts' progress will come when the stakes intensify.

Looking beyond SAFF

While Bangladesh are focused on ending their 23-year SAFF title drought, neighbours India, Sri Lanka and Bhutan are looking beyond regional glory towards bigger international ambitions. Their approaches raise questions about Bangladesh's long-term football vision. With structural problems persisting across domestic football, winning SAFF could offer a confidence boost, but sustainable progress will require a broader roadmap.

Booters ready to seize home advantage

Bangladesh begin their SAFF Championship campaign against Bhutan in Dhaka today, hoping to capitalise on home advantage and end a 23-year wait for the regional title. Boosted by overseas-based players, including Hamza Choudhury, Thomas Dooley's side enter as favourites despite a disappointing FIFA ASEAN Cup outing.

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Caught between expectations, reality

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI *from Sylhet*

Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) head of turf management Tony Hemming was on his hands and knees, closely inspecting the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium pitch yesterday afternoon after Bangladesh's training session had ended. With the second Test against West Indies beginning today, much could depend on his final assessment.

The host's expectations of another spin-friendly surface, however, may have to give way to the reality of the conditions, which remain difficult to read.

Sources said the team management had requested a turning track, but the weather has not been conducive to that plan. Sylhet has been hot but also overcast, preventing the sun from baking the surface and encouraging cracks to develop. Around four millimetres of grass remained on the pitch yesterday evening, with a late decision on its preparation still possible.

Even within the Bangladesh camp, there was scepticism about relying heavily on spin, particularly after their



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

struggles in Mirpur. Head coach Phil Simmons hinted at a sporting surface.

"What I see from the wicket, the wicket looks good. I remember the Pakistan wicket last year or earlier this year, and it seems to be similar to that, so a good cricket wicket," Simmons said at Wednesday's press conference.

A three-pronged pace attack is now a possibility, although team management sources remained cautious.

"It's Bangladesh, so anything can happen," one source said.

Simmons also hinted at concerns over Taijul Islam's form. The left-arm spinner has managed just five wickets in his last four Tests. But Bangladesh's greater worry remains their batting, with Simmons suggesting a reshuffle in the top order following Mominul Haque's absence.

Captain Najmul Hossain Shanto is expected to move to number three, while Mushfiqur Rahim and Tawhid Hridoy could occupy the next two positions.

Litton Das, meanwhile, has struggled during training in recent days. He kept wickets briefly yesterday before leaving the field, with sources indicating that he is nursing a tennis elbow injury. His presence remains important, and he is expected to retain his place if fit.

The uncertainty surrounding the pitch was also reflected in the contrasting remarks of the two coaches.

West Indies head coach Darren Sammy said his team had prepared for the possibility of a pace-friendly surface, particularly after Bangladesh's fast bowlers impressed in Australia.

"We thought, well, probably with what happened in Australia, the way the pace bowlers bowled, we have the chance [to play pacers]... knowing uncle Phil [Simmons], you know I call him uncle Phil and knowing what he might prepare for us, we had to make sure the squad was balanced for that," Sammy said.

"If tomorrow comes, it seems like a seam-friendly wicket, we have Kemar Roach," he added.

Simmons, meanwhile, remained tight-lipped about Bangladesh's final combination.

But ahead of the game, expectations of spin or pace conduciveness will face reality as the Sylhet Test progresses. Early sighting of grass, may still confound but what is certain is Tigers must bat better to get anything out of the game.



We have the confidence that we can play, that we can fight, and that we can actually achieve that. All the goals you have in life have to be realistic, and I think this tournament is realistic, that this team can win after 23 years. It's going with hard work, playing with confidence, and fighting until the last minute. That's why we believe it's going to happen this year. We want to show everyone out there how much that means to us.

Bangladesh coach **Thomas Dooley**



I think now the whole football world has changed a lot. Now, not only like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka -- I think most of the countries, now even other countries like Indonesia, Thailand, they get many foreigners as citizens. I think only the Bhutan team is 100% Bhutanese. So, I'm very proud to represent with 100% Bhutanese playing for the national team.

Bhutan captain **Chencho Gyeltshen**



Bangladesh are the favourites, especially with their home ground, fans, and players like Hamza Choudhury and Farhaan (Ali Wahid) -- who I believe will be the best player in South Asia over the next 10 years. India's U-23 team have won this trophy twice before, so they are also favourites, alongside Pakistan.

Sri Lanka coach **Abdullah Al Mutairi**



There are a lot of players (in the Pakistan team) who are playing in Europe. Though they might be playing in the fourth division, fifth division, whatever, you know. They have a lot of players who are playing abroad. So they have a strong team.

India coach **Naushad Moosa**



No, the same goes for us (shaking hands with India players). It's not cricket, it's football. And that's why it's a beautiful game. So yeah, we'll do the same.

Pakistan captain **Alamgir Ghazi**