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SPORT



"I want to have a great day. I'm happy to be here for the start of this wonderful story. The president dreams of something big for Ravenna, and being a part of it makes me happy."

Ronaldinho on his return to professional football



Bangladesh's wait for a second SAFF Championship title continues after the hosts lost 1-0 to Pakistan in a closely fought semifinal at the National Stadium in Dhaka yesterday. Forward Abdul Samad Arshad struck in the 86th minute to send Pakistan into their first final, where holders India await.

Fans with drums and tifos brought colour, excitement and anticipation to the National Stadium in Dhaka for yesterday's second SAFF Championship semifinal between Bangladesh and Pakistan. PHOTO: **FIROZ AHMED**

Football is worth the wait and expense

TANVIR AHMED PRANTO

"Bangladesh! Bangladesh! Bangladesh!"

The roar began as soon as Hamza Choudhury and his teammates walked into the National Stadium on Saturday evening. Drums beat, flags waved and the upper galleries shook with chants of support. The upper stands were already packed, while the lower tiers still had plenty of empty seats. But as kick-off approached to the semifinal between Bangladesh and Pakistan, more and more supporters found their way in, through both online bookings and sales at the gates.

For many, getting there had been an effort in itself. Tickets were expensive, the wait was long and the facilities left plenty to be desired. Yet, none of that was enough to keep them away. They came after closing their shops, travelling from outside Dhaka or simply making room in their day for a few hours of football.

Ahmed Jamil Rasel, an entrepreneur who shut his shop on a working day to watch Bangladesh, believes the price of tickets is keeping many supporters away from the lower galleries.

"The main reason the lower gallery doesn't fill instantly is the price," he said. "For a student, Tk 1,000 is a week or two of pocket money. Then you come here, and the seats are filthy. Rainwater and garbage are everywhere. They could have easily cleaned these this morning."

His frustration was understandable. But he had still made the trip, as had thousands of others. For supporters, the chance to watch the national team in a major match still carries a pull that ticket prices and uncomfortable surroundings cannot entirely diminish.

Mohammad Roisuddin travelled all the way from Tangail in a rented microbus with 11 friends and his young son, Morsalin Mahi. The journey and the long wait became part of their matchday experience, with stadium khichuri, friends and the anticipation of seeing the men in red and green providing plenty to talk about.

"The ticket price is high, but being here with everyone makes it worth it," Roisuddin said.

Beside him, first-grader Mahi proudly showed off his new football boots. His favourite player is Lionel Messi, he said, but Hamza Choudhury is not far behind. For a young fan, getting to see the national team in person was an occasion in itself.

The excitement around Hamza has also reached supporters who have followed Bangladesh football for decades. Kamruddin, who passionately supported Abahani during the 1980s, believes the current buzz has brought back memories of a different time.

"For 15 years, people bypassed football for cricket," he said. "But Hamza brings a smartness, a craze we haven't seen since Monem Munna. When he plays, people finally believe there will be a goal."

There was a large tifo of Monem Munna proudly visible in the galleries.

That connection across generations was visible in the stands. Young children along with their families arrived in their first football shirts, older supporters returned with memories of past heroes, and groups of friends made the journey together. They had different reasons for coming, but shared the same desire to see Bangladesh play.

The ticket prices remain steep, the facilities need attention and the long wait between matches tests supporters' patience. Those are concerns the organisers cannot afford to ignore.

Batting key to ending Proteas jinx

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's batting will be under the microscope when the visitors face South Africa in the opening Test of the two-match series at Johannesburg's Wanderers Stadium today.

Despite a formidable pace attack that has brought them success at home and abroad -- most recently in Darwin against Australia a few months ago -- the Tigers remain vulnerable with the bat.

Their recent 1-0 home series defeat to West Indies exposed the problem. Bangladesh were bowled out for 272 and 142 in Mirpur, losing the first Test by nine wickets, while Tawhid Hridoy's unbeaten 242 and 82 in Sylhet helped them salvage a draw in the second.

Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto said in the pre-match presser that Bangladesh were considering an extra batter but had yet to decide between that option and a second spinner, with the pitch likely to dictate the final combination.

He reckons that "three pacers will definitely be in the team" alongside a spinner in Bangladesh's maiden Test at the Wanderers, with Mehidy Hasan Miraz's recent performances in Australia strengthening the case for spin.

Shanto said the entire batting unit needed to deliver, particularly those who "get set at the crease". A big first-innings total, he added, would give Bangladesh's bowlers a chance to compete as the Tigers aim for their first win over the Proteas in the longest format.



Bangladesh are set to play a Test at Johannesburg's Wanderers Stadium for the first time.

They have lost all eight Tests in South Africa, five by an innings. Overall, they have lost 14 of their 16 Tests against the Proteas, with the other two ending in rain-affected draws.

The two-match series will form part of the ICC World Test Championship (WTC) cycle. Reigning champions South Africa are second in the standings with 71.43 percentage points, while Bangladesh are fifth with 45.83.

Bangladesh beat Australia and New Zealand on their most recent Test tours, in 2026 and 2022 respectively. However, they are yet to win a Test away to either South Africa or England among the SENA nations.

South Africa, meanwhile, have named four fast bowlers and a spinner in a pace-heavy eleven. Zubayr Hamza returns to address their troublesome № 3 position, while veteran pacer Dane Paterson also comes in. David Bedingham and Gerald Coetzee make way from the Proteas who beat Australia by 176 runs to clinch their preceding series 2-1.

Skipper Temba Bavuma said Hamza "scored runs in domestic cricket in all the formats" and more aggressive approach had earned him a recall. Paterson, meanwhile, offered greater variety and a different challenge for batters.

"He comes with a little bit more skill with the ball, a different kind of challenge for the batters. It's a case of who we felt was the better bowler for these conditions," Bavuma added.

Moosa hopes not to 'hate VAR' in final

SPORTS REPORTER

India coach Naushad Moosa hopes to benefit from Video Assistant Referee (VAR) decisions in the SAFF Championship final after two calls went against his side in their 2-1 win over Bhutan in the first semifinal at the National Stadium yesterday.

The defending champions led 2-0 at half-time but came under pressure after the break. Bhutan's first goal was initially ruled out for offside before the Indonesian referee overturned the decision. India were then awarded a penalty, only for the referee to reverse that call with the help of VAR. The technology, being used for the first time in the regional tournament, is operated from Thailand.

Asked about the decisions, Moosa laughed before remarking: "Somehow I didn't like it. One goal and one penalty [went against India]... I hate VAR."



Asked about the benefits of VAR for the game, Moosa struck a more positive note. "It's good, it's good... Maybe an advantage for me for the next game, hopefully," said the India coach, a member of the country's 1997 SAFF-winning team.

The victory took the nine-time champions to their 14th final in 15 editions of the tournament and their 10th in succession.

Asked about India's second-half struggles -- they conceded twice against Pakistan after leading 3-0 and also faltered against Maldives -- Moosa said his players had failed to replicate their first-half performance. "Let me take it in a positive way -- I think we defended well in the second half."





ARGENTINA, BRAZIL STUTTER

Uruguay players celebrate their 2-1 win over Argentina in an international friendly at Estadio La Bombonera in Buenos Aires yesterday, as the Albiceleste began the post-Messi era with a defeat. Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni, however, urged patience with the country's emerging talents, pointing to several positives from the game. (Inset) Meanwhile, Brazil's indifferent form continued as they suffered a 3-2 defeat to Japan in a feisty encounter in Singapore, despite a brace from Vinicius Jr. PHOTO: **REUTERS**

WHAT TO WATCH

T Sports
South Africa vs Bangladesh
1st Test, Day 1
Live from 2:00 pm

Sony Sports 1
New Zealand vs India
5th ODI
Live from 8:00 am

Sony Sports 2
UEFA Nations League
Belarus vs Albania
Live from 11:00 pm

Spain vs England
Live from 1:45 am (Monday)

Sony Sports 5
UEFA Nations League
Belgium vs Italy
Live from 1:45 am (Monday)

