



SAFF Football returns to Bangladesh

The Bangabandhu SAFF Championship 2009 comes to Bangladesh, the first country to host the regional biennial football extravaganza for the second time.

It is also the first time that the tournament is being named after one of the greatest leaders of the world, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 and is also dubbed Father of the Nation.

After successful co-hosting of the 5th SAFF Championship in 2008 by Sri Lanka and Maldives, the 6th SAFF Championship was billed to be held in India. Bangladesh finally got the nod from South Asian Football Federation. Bangladesh also hosted the 3rd edition of the competition in 2003 in Dhaka. but

There has been a championship to determine the top footballing nations in South Asia since 1993 under the title "SAARC Championship". The championship was played under the same guise in 1993 and 1995. The inaugural SAARC Championship was staged in Lahore, Pakistan and India lifted the trophy beating Sri Lanka. There was a big surprise two years later when hosts Sri Lanka edged India in the final.

The SAFF era began in the year 1997 and the first edition of the SAFF Championship was played in Katmandu, Nepal when India resumed their winning ways in the first two editions of the championship played in Nepal and India (Goa).

India crushed Maldives in a one-sided final in Kathmandu and went on to retain the title in the 2nd edition, beating Bangladesh 2–0.

However, Bangladesh tasted sweet revenge when they hosted the 3rd edition. They beat India 2–1 in the semifinals before going on to win their first title with a 5-3 penalty shootout victory over Maldives after the pulsating final before a jam-packed stadium ended 1-1 after extra time.

Both Afghanistan and Bhutan made commendable debuts in the Championship in the same edition, but neither of the new members of the family managed to score a single goal against more experienced oppositions.

India reasserted their superiority in 2005 when the 4th SAFF Championship played in Karachi, Pakistan. India after drawing with Bangladesh in the group stage, beat defending champions Bangladesh 2-0 in the final with an 81st minute goal from celebrated striker Baichung Bhutia sealing the match.

An ace footballer of South Asia and India's skipper Bhutia became the first player to win a SAFF Championship gold medal for the third time after playing a key role in India's triumphs in 1997, 1999 and 2005. He was also named the MVP.

The Maldives always had a reputation of punching above their weight in the SAARC and SAFF Championships and finally made their mark in the 5th SAFF Championship, beating India, the undisputed football kings of South Asia 1-0 in the Colombo final.

Within a very short space of time after making their SAFF debut, Bhutan gained remarkable strength, lifting them to reach the semifinals (first time ever) of the 5th SAFF Championship before going down to a last-minute winner from India.

Holder Maldives will come into the Bangabandhu SAFF Championship 2009 eager to retain their status in the region but will have to face seven other hungry contenders.

However, it promises to be an exciting competition this time with Bangladesh keen to take full advantage of home territory and three-time winners India, hungry to regain regional supremacy.

Roll of Honour of SAFF Championship

Year

Champions

Runners-up

Venue

1997

India

Maldives

Kathmandu, Nepal

1999

India

Bangladesh

Goa, India

2003

Bangladesh

Maldives

Dhaka, Bangladesh

2005

India

Bangladesh

Karachi, Pakistan

2008

Maldives

India

Colombo, Sri Lanka