



A large crowd had gathered at a local hotel on Saturday and given the BFF elections a festive mood, which was a stark contrast to the game's decline on the field. The festive mood was palpable among the huge crowd but the question remains whether the game's governing body will be able to create same kind of euphoria when it comes to matches.

PHOTO: STAR

I'm not responsible for district leagues, says Salahuddin



KAZI SALAHUDDIN

SPORTS REPORTER



After being elected Bangladesh Football Federation president for a fourth successive term, Kazi Salahuddin promised to hold three national championships with the participation of all 64 districts but refused to take responsibility for holding district leagues.

"First, we want to start all the leagues on time and do not want to hear anything from any party. If we want to reach the next level, both the clubs and federation must have discipline in this regard," Salahuddin said at his office yesterday.

"The second thing is that the delegates spoke time and again about youth development and we will do it. We also want to hold three tournaments -- Bangabandhu senior home-and-away, Sheikh Kamal U-18 Championship and Sheikh Russel U-12 tournament -- with the participation of all districts. If we can hold these three tournaments at the district level, it will cover everything," said the 66-year-old, adding that he was not responsible for district football.

"District Football Associations (DFAs) are responsible for holding district leagues but you blame us. It is not my responsibility to hold district leagues. Why don't you ask the president of DFA about the district league? Holding the professional football league is a duty of the BFF, not FIFA. If the DFA can't hold their respective league, then I think three national championships at the district level will cover everything," said Salahuddin.

He added that he wanted to take measures to ensure DFAs would hold district league. "We want to make a formula similar to FIFA and AFC's. If a DFA can't hold two successive leagues, they will not be BFF delegates.

Salahuddin also said: "I have kept football rolling for the past 12 years when the play stopped. I am repeating it time and again because the teams will come if football is on the ground. Football will still remain on the ground with high spirit and more energy because it has turned into a habit."

A fourth false dawn?

ATIQUE ANAM



In the late hours of Saturday, following an exhausting-yet-satisfying BFF Elective Congress when Kazi Salahuddin, surrounded by his jubilant panel members, announced to media that he "would work together with those from the opposition panel for the love and betterment of football", one could not help wonder whether he was speaking from a script from 12 years ago or, for that matter, eight or even four years ago.

Salahuddin usually is a very good speaker, not that he speaks too much in front of media but when he does, he makes his point eloquently and precisely. Unfortunately, his actions often fall way short of his words, for we have seen, time and again, his committees not working together, at least not in harmony and with consensus.

Over the last 12 years that the iconic footballer has been leading Bangladesh football, we have seen a number of seasoned organisers either leave his side or being disposed of over difference of opinion. There is a long list of powerful names in the unwanted list, the last of which is Badal Roy.

Saturday night saw Salahuddin winning the election for the hot seat for an unprecedented fourth time, each victory more convincing than the preceding one,

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yet there is little conviction among the masses and even less so among the football fraternity that there will be any paradigm shift in the ways the game is run in the country.

This latest victory is perhaps one of the easiest ones that the 66-year-old organiser had to navigate. There never was any competition there since Tarafder Ruhul Amin, an industrialist-turned-organiser and one-time ally of Salahuddin, left the scene at the latter stage of his campaign following four years of investment and politicking. What prompted the shrewd businessman to make an abrupt exit following years of investment? It is anybody's guess.

And Tarafder's was not the first late exit from the election scene.

Coming back to Badal Roy, the iconic midfielder of a great Mohammedan side is still a very popular figure in footballing circles, and he could still make a great candidate for the president's post, except that he was never meant to be a candidate. It was out of sheer frustration at the powers that be and the absence of a willing candidate that the long-time ally of Salahuddin chose to be his rival. His constant change of stance due to "pressure from some quarters" compromised his chances to a great extent.

The third candidate, Shafiqul Islam Manik, the coach who wished to be the president, did not have any organisational credentials to begin with. He was just a "dummy candidate" as one would expect to see in any election so highly politicised and influenced by financial muscle.

What is gone is gone, though, and what happens next is of greater importance to those who care about the game and are frustrated at the state of affairs. It was not supposed to be like this.

When Salahuddin came to power at the BFF, winning a popular mandate in 2008, it was a transitional point in time, not just for football but for the nation as a whole. Football was at one of its lowest points due to years of poor governance and lack of vision; hence there were obviously lots of expectations surrounding Salahuddin. His

iconic image and promises of a new dawn had the corporates running to the corridors of the once-shabby Motijheel building with bags of money. But that dawn never came, thanks to the lack of a proper plan and cohesiveness within the team. Salahuddin's personal charm was working no more, fading to a degree that the corporates dared not even think of football anymore.

Thanks to the fund provided by the world bodies of football, the game at the national and club level is still functional, but the dream of revival of its popularity still remains distant.

The beautiful game as we call it, after all, is a team game, both on and off the field. One may win an odd game due to individual brilliance, but to make winning a habit a team needs to have a well-drilled squad, marshalled by an astute manager. Great tacticians often fail in their pursuits if they cannot ensure a cohesive work environment.

And that is probably one oft-overlooked aspect which Salahuddin, a great player in his day and a decent manager too, has failed to ensure, leading to false dawns over the last three terms.

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Sinner downs Zverev to set Nadal clash

REUTERS, Paris

Italian teenager Jannik Sinner became the first debutant to reach the French Open quarter-finals since Rafael Nadal in 2005 when he downed German sixth seed Alexander Zverev 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 6-3 on Sunday.

The 19-year-old, who will also be the youngest male player since Novak Djokovic in 2006 to feature in the last eight at Roland Garros, will face 12-times champion Nadal for a place in the semifinals.

The South Tyrolian, winner of last year's NextGen ATP Finals, dropped a set for the first



time in the tournament but he never lost his composure. Sinner ended it on a windswept Court Suzanne Lenglen with a booming forehand that Zverev could only return into the net.

Frenchman Hugo Gaston, who plays later on Sunday, and German Daniel Altmaier, on court on Monday, are other debutants looking to reach the last eight in Paris.

Earlier in the day, Nadal blew away American qualifier Sebastian Korda 6-1, 6-1, 6-2 and close in on a record-extending 13th title. It always looked like mission impossible for the 213th-ranked Korda and so it proved in a one-sided fourth round match.



Polish teenager Iga Swiatek booted top seed Simona Halep out of the French Open on Sunday with a crushing 6-1, 6-2 victory to make her maiden Grand Slam quarterfinal. Halep came into the game on a 17-match unbeaten streak, having defeated 19-year-old Swiatek, ranked 54th in the world, 6-1, 6-0 in 45 minutes at the same stage last year at Roland Garros. "All the credit to her, she played unbelievable today and she was everywhere and she hit all the balls in very strong, very powerful," said Halep.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Pacers hit the ground running

SPORTS REPORTER



Even during short breaks, it is a big challenge for fast bowlers to maintain their fitness levels, so when the Bangladesh national players played a two-day practice game among themselves after seven months away from the game, the challenge was a big one for the fast men.

And happily for the Tigers, while the game between Ottis Gibson XI and Ryan Cook XI ended in a draw at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, it was a win of sorts for the fast bowlers.

Initially seamers like Mustafizur Rahman, Al Amin Hossain and Khaled Ahmed got off to a rusty start but the likes of Taskin Ahmed, Ebadot Hossain and Hasan Mahmud provided head coach Russell Domingo much to be positive about after such a long break.

Taskin was the brightest of the lot, picking up three wickets for Ryan Cook XI and more importantly, the tall pacer looked in a fine shape throughout the practice match.

"It was indeed a great feeling to be able to play a game after a long gap. Obviously, we have been working on our fitness for quite some time now but it is always a different challenge when you play a game. I felt in good rhythm with the ball and tried to utilise the opportunity," said Taskin.

It is also important to prepare pitches at home that suit pacers and that was seen during the practice game as the Mirpur deck offered both bounce and carry.

Players are 'terrified' of new handball rule, Dier says

REUTERS



Tottenham Hotspur's Eric Dier has said the new handball law has made things more difficult for defenders who now second guess themselves before going in for a challenge in the box.

Dier's handball last weekend - when he rose to challenge in the air with Newcastle's Andy Carroll who headed the ball, at close range, against the raised arm of the Spurs player - has raised questions about what constitutes a handball offence.

The Premier League wants to change the handball law and is in talks with rule-making body IFAB after players and managers across teams stood united in their scathing criticism of how referees interpreted the new rule.

"You're terrified in and around the box with the new rule," Dier said. "You don't feel free to act, to try to play in a normal way. Sometimes it's difficult because it's something that can come back to bite you and is still an opinion."

"The fact that everyone seems to be of the same opinion, which is a rarity in football, makes it clear that things aren't right. If the opposition manager



is saying ... that he doesn't think it's a penalty, which is also a rarity, it's very clear."

Dier said that there were also conflicting rules that "make no sense" with respect to how referees view handball offences.

The 26-year-old added that referees should award a penalty only if the offence was intentional or if the arm was in an unnatural position.

"If you're too close, if you're in close proximity and the ball hits your arm, it's not a handball. If it hits a certain part of your arm, it's not a handball. And if your arm is in a certain position, it is a handball," Dier added.

"For me, it's very clear. Is it intentional? Is an arm in a position it shouldn't be? Those are the two questions you need to ask."



Young seamer Mahmud was also impressive. He had only one wicket to show for his efforts, but that one wicket was precious for the gem of a delivery that produced it and the batsman it sent back - the solid and experienced Mushfiqur Rahim, who had his stumps uprooted with a length ball.

Domingo said during the virtual press conference on Friday that the team management is focused on developing a group of six to seven good fast bowlers who could play across all formats and, more importantly, perform abroad.

"If we can have fast bowlers who put pressure on opposition batsmen away from home, that's going to help us become a lot more competitive. At the moment, I think we are on the right track with that group of bowlers," said Domingo on Saturday.

It is also important to prepare pitches at home that suit pacers and that was seen during the practice game as the Mirpur deck offered both bounce and carry.

With no international matches in the near future, Domingo will surely keep a close eye on the seamers in the upcoming practice games, as well as the domestic circuit in the coming days.