



Mustafizur Rahman (L) will be eager to continue his good run of form with the ball while ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan will try to get back among the runs when Chattogram take on Khulna in the first qualifier of the Bangabandhu T20 Cup in Mirpur today.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Crunch time for top four as playoffs begin

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangabandhu T20 Cup has chugged along to the business end as the top four teams will battle it out in the playoffs from today.

As far as the quality of cricket in the tournament is concerned, it has been a mixed bag with Gazi Group Chattogram setting themselves apart, excelling as a unit as well as in terms of individual performance.

Chattogram will be up against star-studded Gemcon Khulna in the first qualifier in the days' second fixture today. Led by Mahmudullah Riyad, Khulna are yet to truly come into their own despite having star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan in the side.

The inclusion of Mashrafe Bin Mortaza made Khulna a powerful force with all the experience in the side, but they are still lacking in consistency.

Khulna lost both group games against Chattogram. In the first they were bowled for a paltry 87 to be hammered by nine wickets, while the next game was a closer affair, which Chattogram won by three wickets.

Part of Khulna's problem is that Shakib, who returned to competitive

cricket with this tournamnlent after a one-year ban, has not been his normal, impactful self.

All eyes will still be on the ace all-rounder, who has been doing a decent job with the ball but remained sub-par with the bat, falling to soft dismissals in all eight group games. With nearly a decade and a half spent exceeding expectations, however, it will still be Shakib that the team will look to.

Khulna however will have to play out of their skins against Mohammad Mithun's Chattogram who have been clinical throughout the group stage, winning seven out of eight games.

Liton Das has been phenomenal with the bat as the elegant opener is the highest run-getter in the tournament so far with 306 runs, including three fifties.

His opening partner Soumya Sarkar also been consistent as the Chattogram opening pair has played a crucial role in their success so far.

In the bowling department, Mustafizur Rahman is perhaps the most potent element for Chattogram, and also Bangladesh, as the left-arm seamer seemed to have rediscovered some of his old venom.

He has been exceptional with his cutters along with the line and length and is the top wicket-taker of the

tournament with 16 wickets. Apart from Mustafizur another young left-arm seamer, Shoriful Islam, and off-spinner Nahidul Islam also hold the key for Chattogram.

In the day's first game, Mushfiqur Rahim's Beximco Dhaka will take on Fortune Barishal in the eliminator. Tamim Iqbal's Barishal secured their playoff spot, beating the same opponent in the last group stage game on Saturday.

For Barishal, there is still some concern over the availability of skipper Tamim who has been isolated after experiencing coronavirus-like symptoms during the previous game. His participation will depend on the result of his coronavirus test.

However, the likes of Parvez Hossain, who struck the fastest T20 ton by a Bangladeshi off just 42 balls against Rajshahi, and Afif Hossain, Towhid Hridoy, Taskin Ahmed, and Kamrul Islam will need to step up on the big occasion.

Dhaka, on the other hand, after losing the first three games on the trot made a brilliant comeback courtesy of Mushfiqur to win their next four games. The likes of Naim Sheikh, who struck a hundred against Barishal, Yasir Ali and young Akbar Ali have also played crucial roles.

Sean Lane's Abahani wish fulfilled

SPORTS REPORTER



Perennial rivals Abahani and Mohammedan were placed in the same group after seven years when the draw for the upcoming Walton Federation Cup, the season's curtain raising tournament featuring 13 teams, was held at the BFF House yesterday.

Muktijoddha Sangsad, too, were placed in the same group even though their participation in this 13-team tournament, beginning on December 22, is still uncertain.

Even though Abahani and Mohammedan have won Federation title 21 times, Mohammedan have not won a title since 2009. The Black and Whites have 10 titles in their cabinet against Abahani's 11.

The two teams have been placed in the

Lane's wish fulfilled. The British coach, who saw his side pitted in Group D, picked Abahani's name from the drawing pot.

"I wanted Abahani for two reasons. Firstly, they are a good team and it will be a good test for us. Secondly, it will be exciting for both the clubs, fans and the competition itself to have these two teams in the same group," Lane said after the draw.

Asked about the grouping, Lane said, "Every game will be tough because it is a pre-season and it depends on the local players, depends on the adaptation of foreign players into the system. No game will be easy but we have good opportunity to qualify and we will have to play well."

Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu was also excited to get Mohammedan in the same group.

by match because the boys have been out of action for nearly eight months," said Rupu.

Despite the draw, there is still uncertainty over the participation of Muktijoddha Sangsad, who are going through financial crisis. If they fail to participate, Uttar Baridhara Club will take their place in Group D.

"As we haven't got anything written from Muktijoddha Sangsad, our stance till now is that they are playing in the Federation Cup. We are trying to convince the club management. But the federation cannot provide money, it can only provide logistical and technical support," said BFF's senior vice-president Abdus Salam Murshedy.

Meanwhile, defending champions Bashundhara Kings, runners-up Rahmatganj MFS and rejuvenated Chattogram Abahani were pitted in Group C. Group A will feature



same group for the first time since the 2013-14 season, when Mohammedan made it to the quarterfinals and Abahani the semifinals. Last year though Abahani were eliminated in the quarterfinals while Mohammedan went one better.

The draw saw Mohammedan coach Sean

"It is exciting and charming to be placed in same group because the expectation of fans revolves around the Abahani-Mohammedan match, which is termed as the Dhaka derby. Though our ultimate target is to win the title, we want to become group champions first and progress match

Sheikh Russel KC, Sheikh Jamal DC and Bangladesh Police while Group B consists of Saif SC, Arambagh KS, Brothers Union and Uttar Baridhara Club.

Murshedy also said that they will follow health guidelines and Covid-19 will be made mandatory for players and officials.



Real Madrid midfielder Casemiro (L) celebrates after scoring the opening goal against Atletico Madrid on Saturday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Real complete a remarkable week

AGENCIES



Real Madrid showed why they are Liga champions with a convincing 2-0 home win over Atletico Madrid in the derby on Saturday to end the pacesetter's unbeaten start to the league season.

The win completed a remarkable week for Real after beating Sevilla in La Liga and Borussia Moenchengladbach to reach the Champions League last 16 and will further ease the pressure on Zidane after his side's relatively poor start to the campaign.

Less than two weeks ago, Real had been smarting from shock defeats by Alaves and Shakhtar Donetsk and faced a triple whammy of tough looking fixtures, with Zidane's future on the line.

But they won all three matches, returning to the form they showed in the latter stage of last season when they stormed to the title. They are now in third place, three points behind league leaders Atleti albeit having played a game more.

Real Madrid's coach Zinedine Zidane said they used the criticism thrown at them in recent weeks to their advantage in an emphatic 2-0 La Liga win over city rivals Atletico Madrid.

"We have been hurt by some of the things that have been said but they have made us stronger," Zidane told a news conference after his side beat their neighbours with a Casemiro header and an own goal from Jan Oblak.

"Criticism is part of football and you have to learn how to cope with it. But the most important thing is that we believe in what we are doing. And today we proved that Real Madrid know how to play."

The Frenchman was in euphoric mood and praised many of his players, with a special mention to midfield duo Toni Kroos and Luka Modric who he said were in the same form as when they led Madrid to three consecutive Champions League titles.

But he emphasised that Real still had a lot of work to do to maintain consistency.

"I'm happy with everything we did in the game. We pressed them all over the pitch and didn't let Atletico into the game. It's been a great week, I'm so glad for the players because they believe in themselves," he added.

"We built on what we had done in the last two games and competed very well for the majority of the game. But there's nothing to celebrate because we haven't won anything yet.



Players of six teams participating in Ispahani Pink City Victory Day sports carnival pose with former national captain and Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) Director Akram Khan, who was present as chief guest to witness the final match between Team Blue and Team Lime. Team Lime came out victorious. The six-a-side cricket tournament, organised by Pink City Sporting Club, was held on December 11 and 12 to celebrate the 49th Victory Day.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

'431 would be quite nice'

AGENCIES



New Zealand's bowlers again ripped through West Indies' batting lineup to push them to the brink of a comprehensive victory in the second and final Test as they reduced the tourists to 244-6 in their second innings at the end of the third day on Sunday.

Trent Boult and Tim Southee Both starred on a truncated day three. Southee cleaned up the final two wickets of the West Indies first innings to bag his 11th five-wicket haul in Tests, while Boult, wicketless and luckless in the first innings, has three of in the second.

Southee sits on 294 Test scalps, while Boult has 272.

Boult has all but conceded his great mate and new-ball partner Southee will get to 300 Test wickets before him.

"I haven't really thought about [300]," Boult said, not altogether convincingly.

"If there's a race to 431 it'd be quite nice," he said of overhauling Sir Richard Hadlee's

long-standing New Zealand record.

"I just thoroughly enjoy bowling with him. We've been good mates for a number of years now and we complement each other very nicely."



New Zealand's pacers ripped through the West Indies batting order again on the third day, first taking the two wickets needed to enforce a follow on and then reducing the visitors to 244 for six in their second essay at stumps in Wellington yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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