



Saif Sporting Club players celebrate one of their three goals against Arambagh during their Walton Federation Cup fixture at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Saif SC see off Baridhara

SPORTS REPORTER



Title aspirant Saif SC began their Federation Cup campaign in fine fashion with an emphatic 3-0 win over lightweights Uttar Baridhara Club in the Group B opener at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Saif SC might posted what seemed an easy triumph based on the scoreline, but they faced a stiff challenge and they kept at bay for 48 minutes before a suicidal mistake from Baridhara -- perhaps a consequence of just 10 days of practice ahead of the tournament -- handed them the breakthrough.

The youthful Saif SC team, featuring three to four national players, dominated pre-season discussions after vibrant performances in warm-up matches against Sheikh Russel, Mohammedan and Bangladesh Police. However, they found the going tough in their first competitive match under Belgian coach Paul Put.

Saif SC, playing in a 4-1-2-3 formation, tried to penetrate from the flanks, with left-back Rahmat Mia and right-back Yeasin Arafat delivering numerous crosses that were fended

off effortlessly by Baridhara's Egyptian defender Abdel Rahim.

Coach Zahidur Rahman Milon saw his side go close to taking the lead twice in the first half but Saif SC goalkeeper Pappu Hossain denied Uzbek midfielder Evgeniy Kochnev in the 21st minute while Sujon Biswas tumbled inside the box after receiving a nice cut-back from Egypt's Abdel Khalek Hammad and let a scoring chance

SCORE	
ARAMBAGH 2-0 BROTHERS UNION	
CHIZOBA CHRISTOPHER 44	
MURAD HOSSAIN 90	
SAIF SC 3-0 UTTAR BARIDHARA CLUB	
ABDEL RAHIM (OG) 49	
KECHUKWU NGWOKE-63	
FAISAL AHMED FAHIM-68	

pass him by two minutes from the break.

"First of all, we could not maintain the tempo that we have seen during training session. So I found my players were not that good," Put said. "After the break, I briefed them to have patience and changed the tactics to expose the opponent's backline. We dominated the second half and had 70 to 75 per cent possession. We

were also a bit lucky to get an own goal from the opponents. Still we have a long way to go and it is always important to have a good start."

Saif SC gained a stranglehold in the second half and Abdel Rahim bundled into his own net while attempting to clear a low cross from Saif SC's Uzbek midfielder Sirojuddin Rakhmatullaev four minutes into the second half.

Instead of whipping in crosses as they had been doing, Saif SC employed crisp passing while inviting their opponents to press and effectively exploited the spaces left behind.

Nigeria's Ikechukwu Ngwoke collected the ball near the halfway line and made a daunting run into the box before firing a powerful shot past goalkeeper Azad Hossain in the 63rd minute before Faisal Ahmed Fahim ran into the box down the left and found the inside of the near post to ensure victory in the 68th minute.

In the day's second match, Arambagh posted a 2-0 win over Brothers Union, courtesy of strikes from Murad Hossain Chowdhury and Nigeria's Chizoba Christopher.

Brothers, who came into the tournament on the back of just two days of preparation, could have left the field with a point but the forwards squandered a few good chances.

Ronaldo, Bonucci apologise for 'worst' of season

AFP, MILAN



Cristiano Ronaldo and Leonardo Bonucci on Wednesday apologised to Juventus fans for the "worst" performance of the season as the Italian champions' fell to their first Serie A defeat this term against lowly Fiorentina.

The 'Bianconeri' played most of the match a man down after Juan Cuadrado was sent off after quarter of an hour in their Allianz Stadium, losing 3-0 to the Tuscan side who are 15th after ending an eight-match winless run.

"The worst Juventus of this first part of the season. I apologise to the fans in my name, first of all. There is nothing to add," defender Bonucci wrote on Instagram.

Ronaldo blasted "a far from acceptable result" as the Portuguese star failed to add to his Serie A-leading tally of 12 league goals so far. "Yesterday, with a poor performance and a far from acceptable result we closed our scheduled games for 2020, a special year in many ways," said the five-time Ballon d'Or winner

on Instagram. "Empty stadiums, COVID protocols, postponed games, long stoppages and a very tight calendar.

"But this is no excuse for anything. We know that we have to give more of ourselves, in order to play better and to win in a more consistent way. "We are Juventus! And we simply cannot accept anything less than excellence on the pitch!"

"I hope this short stoppage may help us to come back stronger and more united than ever, because the season is still far from over and in the end we believe that we will, once again, celebrate with our fans.

"Believe in us, trust our team as much as we trust you, and we will deliver! Fino Alla Fine!" The defeat came hours after the nine-time reigning Serie A champions learned they must play the match against Napoli which was cancelled on October 4 after the southerners decided not to travel to Turin because of coronavirus cases.

Napoli won their appeal to the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI) after being handed a 3-0 defeat and a one-point deduction.

Saifuddin hoping latest injury mends before WI series

SPORTS REPORTER



Injuries have become a regular feature of young Bangladesh pace-bowling all-rounder Mohammad Saifuddin's fledgling career, and the latest setback is a ligament injury from which he is currently recovering.

The 24-year-old suffered an ankle injury ahead of the Bangabandhu T20 Cup while training, but managed to make a comeback in the middle of the tournament for Minister Rajshahi.

However, the cricketer from Feni has been struggling with his ligament despite recovering from the ankle injury and an MRI showed that Saifuddin has injured the ligament on his right leg. The cricketer currently going through a rehabilitation programme will be under the

observation of the Bangladesh Cricket Board's medical team for three weeks.

"I was in the bio-secure bubble during the Bangabandhu T20 Cup which is the reason I couldn't do the MRI then. So, after doing the MRI it was found that there are some issues



in my ligament. Usually the pain [from an ankle injury] goes away after a week, but since I was still experiencing pain after that, I thought there may be some issues. I am doing my rehabilitation programme,"

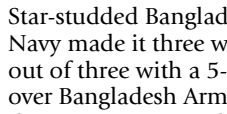
Saifuddin told reporters in Mirpur yesterday.

The cricketer, however, will have to undergo a fitness and bowling test ahead of the three-match ODI series against the West Indies, who are scheduled to arrive in Bangladesh on January 10. "Obviously I am hopeful of making it for the upcoming three-match ODI series against the West Indies. But I have to go through the fitness and bowling test and only if everything goes well, will I get the green signal to play the series," he added.

The pace-bowling all-rounder, who has been injury-prone from a very early age, looked for inspiration at the examples of Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Rubel Hossain, who managed to overcome numerous injury hurdles and represent Bangladesh for a long time in international cricket.

Navy ease into final

SPORTS REPORTER



Star-studded Bangladesh Navy made it three wins out of three with a 5-3 win over Bangladesh Army in the Victory Day Hockey tournament at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday.

The win eased Navy into the final with a match in hand against Sonali Bank, who also raised their hopes of qualifying for the final with a 4-0 win over Bangladesh Police.

Ashrafur Islam slotted a treble for Navy, who also saw Mahbub Hossain and Abed Uddin scoring one goal apiece. Abdul Malek, Ahsan Habib and Monoj Babu netted one goal each for Bangladesh Army.

Warner, Abbott out of 2nd Test

AFP, Sydney



Star Australian batsman David Warner will miss the Boxing Day Test against India after failing to shake off the groin injury that kept him out of the opening fixture, Cricket Australia said Wednesday.

The governing body said Warner and paceman Sean Abbott had also been excluded from the Australian team's bio-secure bubble in Melbourne as a precaution due to a Covid-19 outbreak in their hometown Sydney.

"While neither player has been in a specific hotspot as outlined by NSW Health, Cricket Australia's bio-security protocols do not allow them to rejoin the squad in time for the Boxing Day Test," it said.

The second Test against India starts at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on December 26 and the teams have been training in bio-secure bubbles.

Warner and Abbott flew to Melbourne on Saturday hoping to avoid quarantine issues arising from the Sydney Covid-19

outbreak.

But the team's Covid-19 protocols prevented them from joining the squad in time for the Test, and Cricket Australia said Warner would not have recovered from in time anyway..



No captaincy thoughts for Markram

REUTERS, JOHANNESBURG

Aiden Markram must first cement his place in the side before he can realise his dream of captaining South Africa, though the opening batsman feels refreshed ahead of a two-test home series against Sri Lanka that starts on Boxing Day.

Markram, 26, was earmarked early in his career as a future test captain, but the poor form in a turbulent 18 months where he lost his place in the side means he is back to square one and looking to reignite his career.

White-ball skipper Quinton de Kock has agreed to lead the test team for the 2020-21 international season until a long-term appointment can be made, and Markram is concentrating only on scoring runs before thinking of anything else.

"In terms of captaincy, it is something I really enjoy doing, but I have not put much focus on that," Markram told reporters on Wednesday.

"I am playing for my spot again, so for me to be thinking about the captaincy is certainly not on my radar. I haven't been good enough over the past 18 months."

The tall opener scored exactly 1,000 runs in his first 10 tests, averaging 55.55, but managed just 424 in the next 10 at 22.31 with no centuries.

"I played a lot of cricket where I was struggling, so I didn't have time to reflect on things that maybe worked in the past and just slow things down," he said.



Juventus defender Matthijs de Ligt is on the ground as Fiorentina players celebrate one of their three goals at the Allianz Stadium in Turin on Tuesday. PHOTO: TWITTER