



**Abahani -3**  
Masih Saighani 41"  
Jewel Rana 45", 53"  
Mohammedan SC - 0

Abahani forward Jewel Rana jumps in the air to celebrate his first goal against Mohammedan Sporting Club during their Walton Federation Cup clash at Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

## Abahani put three past Mohammedan

SPORTS REPORTER



Title contenders Abahani had it all their own way in the Dhaka derby in the season curtain-raising Walton Federation Cup, inflicting a 3-0 defeat on archrivals Mohammedan in the Group D opener at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Having returned to the Sky Blues after spending the previous season at Indian Super League outfit Chennaiyin FC, Afghanistan's Masih Saighani once again played a key role behind an Abahani triumph. The 34-year-old first broke the deadlock before assisting Jewel Rana, who put the game to bed with Abahani's third goal soon after the break.

11-time champions Abahani, with seven national players, had the upper hand on 10-time champions Mohammedan on paper. But despite fielding a depleted side with hardly any recognised names, Mohammedan

reduced the talent gap with a team effort while a few hundred spectators livened up the atmosphere.

The excitement also spread out in the middle of the ground as the two sides fought equally and displayed attacking football before Abahani finally made inroads four minutes before the break.

Abahani wreaked havoc in Mohammedan's danger zone from long throw ins and the Sky Blues capitalised on two such throws after Mohammedan had twice come close to taking the lead inside 30 minutes. Malian striker Souleymane Diabate created a nice chance but Shamol Bepari headed agonisingly wide in the 27th minute. Three minutes later, Diabate again made space inside the box and cut back to Shahed Mia, who failed to finish despite being in good position inside the box.

Surviving the close calls, Abahani pressed for the lead but goalkeeper Hossain Sujon denied a close-flick

from Belfor Kervens in the 31st minute before Masih -- who played tremendously in the AFC Cup and helped Abahani reach the knockout stages for the first time -- put Abahani ahead in the 41st minute with a header from a long throw.

Four minutes later, Jewel Rana got a slight touch on Masih's goalbound bicycle-kick from a well-judged Nabib Newaj Jibon chip and beat Mohammedan goalkeeper Suzan.

After resumption, Mohammedan regrouped and began to press. They came close to pulling one goal back when Nigerian substitute Abiola Nurat rose high, but his powerful header went narrowly wide of the near post in the 52nd minute.

Abahani struck their third goal the next minute to ensure a comfortable start to the tournament against their archrivals when Jewel tapped-in a header from Belfort, who rose high and connected on another long throw from Raihan Hasan.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

## Foreigners shine for Sheikh Russel

SPORTS REPORTER

Sheikh Russel began their Walton Federation Cup campaign on a winning note as the former champions defeated Bangladesh Police 1-0 in the Group A opener at Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Tajik defender Siyovush Asrorov got the all-important goal five minutes into the second half with a clever tap-in, giving Sheikh Russel hope of making it out of the group stages after their failure to do so in the last edition of the tournament.

**Sheikh Russel KC 1**  
Asrorov 50"  
**Bangladesh Police FC 0**

Sheikh Russel followed the trend of most title contenders placing their faith on new foreign recruits by roping in three foreign players who have experience in Bangladesh and they repaid that through their performances.

Bangladesh Police, who had surprised everyone by reaching the semifinal of the tournament last edition, responded well after conceding but poor finishing denied them a share of the spoils.

The midfield duo of Obi Moneke and Baktyr Duisobekov, who previously played for Bashundhara Kings and Rahmatganj respectively, and former Rahmatganj defender Asrorov played key roles behind Sheikh Russel's winning start.

## Road to 2023 begins with Windies

NABID YEASIN



A fluke or just a good day at the office may see a minnow defeating a powerhouse once in a while but for a team to win any major trophy requires long-term planning and proper execution.

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) was in tatters prior to the 2015 World Cup. Just months before that edition, England sacked ODI skipper Alastair Cook and replaced him with his deputy Eoin Morgan. They also selected players from outside the ODI contingent with no explanation or logic behind it.

And that left Morgan sipping on wine and going through his diary -- which he kept throughout the World Cup to jot down points about how a good team would look like and the attributes needed -- while on his flight back from Australia after their 2015 World Cup debacle.

The woe of England being knocked out from the group stage after enduring losses to New Zealand, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in 2015 was only soothed after Morgan lifted England's maiden World Cup four years later in front of a home crowd at Lord's. But the turnaround from being knocked out in the group stage to being crowned champions was a lengthy process

Cup in February this year. The triumph of the cubs in South Africa in the biggest age-level competition was the result of the work put in by the think tank, led by the Chairman of the game development committee Khaled Mahmud, in the two years prior to the competition. From sketching out four plans to keeping the batch closely as a unit for two years, all had impacted the outcome.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) are probably now working on making a plan for the Tigers' West Indies series at home next month. The ODI series against Windies is especially important as it will see the Tigers kicking off their World Cup Super League series, the qualification pathway for the 2023 World Cup. The board that has a penchant for stop-gap solutions -- the plans for the Under-19 World Cup being a notable exception -- will be benefited if they make plans with a long-term goal in mind instead of formulating them for just one series.

All 13 teams -- 12 full members of the ICC and the Netherlands -- in the World Cup Super League will play eight ODI series, each comprising three matches, against any eight of the other 12 teams. Four of those series will be at home and the other four away.

Starting with the Windies series next month, Bangladesh are scheduled to play three more home series against



## Pochettino to replace Tuchel?

AGENCIES

Paris Saint Germain (PSG) will appoint Argentine Mauricio Pochettino, the former manager of London club Tottenham Hotspur, as its new coach following its decision to sack Thomas Tuchel, French sports paper L'Equipe reported on its website.

Pochettino had previously played for PSG as a defender in the early 2000s. Talks between PSG and Pochettino started at least two weeks ago. Pochettino, who led Spurs to the Champions League final in 2019 where they lost to Liverpool, has been without a job since leaving Spurs in November 2019.

French champions Paris St Germain have sacked German coach Thomas Tuchel, French sports daily L'Equipe and German newspaper Bild reported on Thursday. PSG were not immediately available to comment.

Former Borussia Dortmund coach Tuchel's contract was set to expire at the end of this season.

Tuchel, who guided PSG to the Champions League final in August which they lost to Bayern Munich, oversaw a 4-0 home win against Racing Strasbourg less than 24 hours ago as they moved within a point of Ligue 1 leaders Olympique Lyonnais.

The 47-year-old was appointed PSG head coach in 2018 and has won two Ligue 1 titles along with a domestic quadruple in his second season at the club.

While PSG are not dominating Ligue 1 this term as they have in previous years, Tuchel has steered them into the Champions League last 16 where they face Barcelona.

## BOXING DAY TEST

# Australia look to pile misery on India



AGENCIES

Pressure will be immense on Ajinkya Rahane as captain and batsman as India, trailing 0-1 in the 4-match series, get ready to face Australia in the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne from Saturday.

Australia coach Justin Langer said the mark of a great team was to keep winning as he threw down a challenge to Australia Thursday against a depleted India desperate to restore pride in the second Test this week.

"I've said that to become a great team

we have got to get better at winning after we win. Really good teams keep winning and winning ... it's an area that we have addressed," Langer said. "We need to start well on Boxing Day morning and then be consistent because India, we know, will fight back, as we saw in the first two days of the Test match in Adelaide."

Australia head into the Boxing Day clash on a high after crushing the visitors by eight wickets inside three days in the opening Test at Adelaide.

All the pressure is on the tourists coming into this second match without their talismanic skipper Virat Kohli.

## Pakistan face stiff challenge against hosts



AGENCIES

After New Zealand won the T20 series 2-1, they now face Pakistan in two-match Test series. The hosts will be extremely confident of continuing their fine form in the longest format of the game when two-match series kicks off at the Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui from Saturday. They now face a Pakistan side with

plenty of talent but somewhat weakened with Babar Azam and Imam-ul-Haq. After a dominant Test series against the West Indies, the Black Caps pace bowler Tim Southee believes his side are in for a sterner test this week when they take on Pakistan. "I think the Pakistan side is a quality side. They have an exciting bowling attack, they offer different challenges to what the West Indies did," he said.

## AUSTRALIAN OPEN Federer, Serena in entry list

APP, MELBOURNE

Roger Federer and Serena Williams were among the entries announced Thursday for the coronavirus-disrupted Australian Open, with tournament director Craig Tiley vowing a "happy Slam" after months of painstaking planning.

All the world's top players have signed on, led by Djokovic and Ashleigh Barty. There was a question mark over Swiss great Federer but was among those entered to play as he targets a seventh title. Williams is also committed as she once again attempts to pull level with Margaret Court as a 24-time Grand Slam champion."

including some bold, meaningful and effective decisions by the ECB.

Apart from Morgan's captaincy, a lot had changed between 2015 to 2019 for English cricket. That included putting right people at the helm and sticking to the decisions they took. A new director of cricket -- former England skipper Andrew Strauss -- and a new coach, Australian Trevor Bayliss, were hired. But most important of all was their change in mindset about how they wanted to play the game in the coming years -- an aggressive brand of cricket with specialists in the ODI format.

The result? England scored 350-plus runs on 16 occasions since then till the beginning of the 2019 World Cup with the highest-ever ODI total of 481 for six coming against Australia in 2018. The team had won 15 of their 19 bi-lateral series during that period and also replaced India as the number one ODI team in May 2018, which they carried into the 2019 World Cup.

How thoughtful planning culminates in great results can also be gauged from the journey of the Bangladesh Under-19 side that brought the country's first World

Sri Lanka, England and Afghanistan and away series against Ireland, New Zealand, Zimbabwe and South Africa as part of the newly formed ODI super league till the 2023 World Cup. And with seven top teams including hosts India gaining direct qualification to the next quadrennial event, the importance for Bangladesh to collect as many points from the 12 home matches in the league is paramount.

And ahead of the upcoming Windies series, the BCB, just like the England cricket board, would now need to decide how they want to play their cricket in the coming years if they want to fare any better in the upcoming edition of the World Cup than their eighth-place finish in the 2019 edition. The board could start by including and more importantly sticking with players who have shown potential in the recently concluded Bangabandhu T20 Cup and the BCB President's Cup earlier. It is time to plan for the future, and as England showed, that means taking the tough decisions and it will be interesting to see who the BCB entrusts with Bangladesh's long-term cricketing health.

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