

An MSC-Abahani final

Mohammedan 1: Brothers 0

SPORTS REPORTER



Mo h a m m e d a n Sporting Club set up a final clash against arch-rivals Abahani in the Nitol-Tata Fifth National Football League when they knocked holders Brothers Union out of the competition with a solitary goal victory yesterday.

Nigerian midfielder Emeka Christiani separated the two sides with a spectacular strike at the Bangabandhu National Stadium early into the second half to take the Black and Whites into their first final of what has been an ordinary season.

However, like the previous day's first semifinal in which Abahani won 2-1 over Mukti Joddha Sangsad tempers also were lost and Brothers midfielder Liton was sent off in the second-half stoppage time for assaulting referee Tayab Hassan and the assistant referee, sparking more violence as officials joined in the attack.

Meanwhile, for the two local giants tomorrow's final would be their last shot to wrap up the season with a trophy and an attempt to give something to cheer about for their huge fans. Also, it would be the first Abahani-Mohammedan final since the two sides met in a title decider way back in the 2001 National Football League.

There will be more for the winners apart from lucrative prize-money and rewards as the NFL

champions will represent Bangladesh in this year's AFC Cup. Brothers have already qualified for the Asian club competition as Federation Cup champions.

The victory in front of a 15,000-strong holiday crowd also came as

a sweet revenge for Mohammedan, who were shrugged off by Brothers in the Premiership title deciding play-off after both sides finished level on the points table.

However, it seemed at the start that the Oranges -- who had won

two out of five meetings with the remaining games being drawn -- were on course to maintain their impressive record over Mohammedan this season. They were the overall superior side and national midfielder Abul saw his scorching drive from 25 yards skim the Mohammedan crossbar after 20 minutes.

A lapse by Arman Aziz in the middle then saw Brothers' Nigerian recruit Felix snatch the ball and set up Abul again outside the box. But Abul's powerful right-footer was punched away for a corner by an airborne Biplob, the Mohammedan goalkeeper who went full-stretched to save his side. The flagkick, ten minutes from the break, almost broke the deadlock but Brothers' Cameroonian medio Gilson struck the sidebar from six yards to waste a golden chance.

The curly-haired Emeka, who got the only chance for the Black and Whites in the first half but shot straight to goalkeeper Mohammad Ali, put Mohammedan ahead in the very first minute of the second half with a sublime volley from 30 yards. Skipper Alifaz back-headed a long ball from their own area to Emeka and the man-of-the-match unleashed a first-time right-footer into the top left corner, giving the diminutive Ali no time to react.

Mohammedan, who lost key defender Peter Odaf due to injury at the break, packed their defence in a bid to hold the slim lead when Brothers mounted heavy pressure

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Mohammedan hero Emeka (L) fights for possession with Brothers' midfielder Abul during the second semifinal of the Nitol-Tata Fifth National Football League at the Bangabandhu National Stadium on Friday.

PHOTO: STAR



IS IT ANY BOXING BOUT? Brothers Union's football committee secretary Sabir Ahmed Arif (R) hits assistant referee Shahidul Islam Lalu as referee Tayab Hassan shows red card to Liton (not in picture) just before the end of Friday's NFL semifinal.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Dravid says India ready

Cricket



Arif Khan Joy

(Abahani and national football captain)
"I am happy that I have contributed in the team's win as a captain. I think we have given our fans something to cheer about after a long time. Now we want to win the title." After beating Mukti Joddha Sangsad in the semifinal of the Nitol-Tata Fifth National Football League on Thursday.

Cricket

AFP, Lahore

Skipper Rahul Dravid Friday said India were ready for a tough Pakistan challenge and wanted to take one step further towards becoming one of the best teams in the world.

"We have the firepower and the balance to counter anything and I am confident that we are up to the Pakistan challenge," Dravid told reporters a day after his team arrived here to play three Tests and five one-dayers.

"This series will be a step towards the destination of becoming one of the best teams in the world and to test our skills against a tough opponent," said Dravid.

India are second behind Australia in the official Test rankings.

The 12-member team and 10 support staff arrived amidst tight security late Thursday.

Four members of the team --

former captain Sourav Ganguly, leg-spinner Anil Kumble, opener Virender Sehwag and wicketkeeper Parthiv Patel -- will arrive in Pakistan on Saturday.

The series will be the third between the arch-rivals since New Delhi lifted a four-year-bilateral ban in 2004 which cleared the way for the resumption of sporting ties.

India toured Pakistan two years ago for their first series across the border since 1989-90, while Pakistan paid a return trip early last year.

Dravid said three series in two years have relaxed the enormous public pressure the two teams go through when playing against each other.

Dravid suggested an Indo-Pakistani series on an Ashes format between the traditional rivals and bitter political foes.

India won 2-1 in Tests and 3-2 in the preceding one-day series on their last tour, their first wins in Pakistan since 1952.

Dravid, who led India to 2-0 home series win against Sri Lanka

last month, said there were no favourites in the series.

"The pre-series talk of who is favourite and who is underdog is for the press and it's the team which performs well on the day is what matters and both teams are very balanced," said Dravid.

When asked how would they handle an in-form Shoaib Akhtar, who took 17 wickets in Pakistan's 2-0 series win against England last month, Dravid replied: "They have a very good attack, so we would not focus on any one bowler."

India's Australian coach Greg Chappell predicted his side would fare well against Pakistan.

It is a contest between two emerging teams. For me my whole group and solidarity is our trump card and we are not relying on any one player," said Chappell, who took over as coach from New Zealander John Wright last year.

Chappell, who lost 1-0 as Australian captain when the team visited Pakistan in 1979, said

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Lanka to send 'A' team later this month?

SPORTS REPORTER

The Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) expressed their desire to send their "A" team in Bangladesh later this month.

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Ali Asghar informed it yesterday after returning from the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) meeting in India.

"During the ACC meeting, SLC president (Mohan de Silva) showed his interest to send their A team. We are also interested to invite them but you know our general secretary (Mahbubul Anam) is now abroad for treatment and that's why it will only be finalised after his return," said Asghar.

Asghar said Sharad Pawar, the BCCI Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) president, reiterated that Indian cricket team would visit Bangladesh after the World Cup in 2007.

"India has agreed to play a triangular series besides two Test matches during that tour," he added.

He also informed that Roshan Mahanama, the former Sri Lankan opener, will arrive in Bangladesh on January 15 to give a report to International Cricket Council (ICC) about the country's new venues.

Div I cricket

SPORTS REPORTER

Salahuddin struck 78 as Partex Sporting Club registered a four-wicket victory against Cricket Coaching School (CCS) in the First Division Cricket League at the Dhaka University ground yesterday.

With their 11th victory, Partex remained in second spot in the 18-team fray with 22 points from 12 matches to breathe under the neck of leaders Young Pegasus, who have 24 points from same number of outings.

Salahuddin, who belted six boundaries in his 100-ball innings, helped Partex post 199-6 in 46.3 overs in reply to CCS's 195 all out in 49.4 overs.

Munna was the other notable scorer with a 60-ball 53.

Div I h'ball

SPORTS REPORTER

The lone Super Four match of the Bactrol First Division Men's Handball League between Prime Sporting Club and Mansoor Sporting Club ended in a 23-23 draw at the Outer Stadium handball ground yesterday.

Mansoor were leading the first half 12-9 but Liton's 13-goal feat helped Prime draw level.

Rabib shot highest nine goals for Mansoor.

The title will be decided today when Menjus KC take on Bhratitro SKS in the league final.

Ugly scenes again

Brothers official, players assault refs

SPORTS REPORTER

The burly organiser's action stunned everybody in the big bowl as he not only physically assaulted assistant referee Shahidul Islam Lalu but also kicked referee Tayab Hassan just outside the playing area.

The atrocity started following the sending-off of Brothers' midfielder Liton, who attacked the referee after being booked for a second time and shown the red card immediately.

After the match, dejected Brothers' manager Amer Khan conceded that it was not acceptable the way the match officials were assaulted but he said that there were reasons behind the incident.

"I must say that such an act is not acceptable but you should consider the fact behind this kind of incident. The way the officials conducted the match was also unacceptable. It was most unfortunate that the assistant referee

hurled abusive language toward our players and officials," explained the former footballer.

Amer admitted that a stroke of a magic-touch from Emeka was the fate of the match.

"There is no doubt that we dominated the game but Emeka separated the teams with a brilliant goal. You can't do anything when this kind of extraordinary thing happens in a match," said Amer.

Coach Wajed Gazi also echoed the same sentiment and said that luck also betrayed them.

"It was a fantastic goal otherwise my team dominated the proceedings. What can you do if you are deprived by the woodwork. We also missed some close chances," said the veteran coach, who guided the Oranges to two titles earlier this season.

On the other hand, Mohammedan coach Shafiqul Islam Manik was satisfied with his team's performance.

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Ponting beats Proteas

Cricket

AFP, Sydney

Ricky Ponting completed back-to-back centuries to crush South Africa's hopes of squaring the series as Australia came from behind to win the third and final Test by eight wickets at the Sydney Cricket Ground Friday.

The Australian skipper, in the richest scoring form of his career and playing his 100th Test, cashed in on a declaration gamble by South Africa's Graeme Smith to propel his team to victory with 153 overs to spare on the final day.

Australia finished on 288 for two after being set 287 off 76 overs. It was the highest winning chase in the last innings at the SCG, bettering Australia's 276 for four against England in February 1998.

The milestones kept crashing for 31-year-old Ponting in the Test, following up his 120 in the first innings with an unconquered 143 off 159 balls with 16 fours for his 28th Test hundred.

It gave Australia a 2-0 win in the three-match series after winning the second Melbourne Test by 184 runs, but Friday's victory was only possible after Smith's declaration in the rain-affected match.

Man-of-the-series Ponting said Smith had no alternative but to set Australia a run chase to revive the Test that had looked destined for a draw after South Africa's first innings declaration of 451 for nine over 11 hours.

"There was no other way he (Smith) could have gone," Ponting said. "That was the only chance they had of winning the Test match. The longer they batted this morning the shorter the run chase, the easier it was going to be for us."

"It was the way the game was going and with the loss of all the time yesterday with the weather,

Graeme was pretty much forced into doing it that way this morning."



REACHING HIGHER: Australia skipper Ricky Ponting jumps for joy after scoring the winning runs in the third and final Test against South Africa at the SCG on Friday.

Sourav can't compare it

PTI, Kolkata

Former Indian captain Sourav Ganguly on Friday said that he was not sure whether being relieved of captaincy had helped him play better.

"For the last five-six months, I have been making runs in both domestic and Test cricket. I also scored runs as the captain in Zimbabwe, so I don't know whether I am playing better because I am no longer the Indian captain," Ganguly said at the Eden Gardens after compiling a well-made 89 for Bengal in the Ranji trophy encounter against Tamil Nadu.

However, he admitted that captaincy involved a lot more pressure.

"But yes, it's a different phase. The responsibility is less because as a captain you have to do many other things. But it is the same for all other captains," Ganguly said.

Asked whether he was looking forward to the Test series in Pakistan, Ganguly said, "Not just me, but the entire team should do well there." The left-handed batsman said that the Test series would witness some gruelling contests. "It will be a series between two good teams. Whoever plays well, will win."



PHOTO: AFP

India superstar Sachin Tendulkar (L) boards a bus while his teammate Zaheer Khan (R) follows him after their arrival at Lahore's airport amid tight security early Friday.

PHOTO: AFP