

A first-class bonus

MOHAMMAD ISAM



When Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) ambitiously planned a mid-October start to this season's local cricket, some believed it could not go through. And they had their reasons: seasonal rain wasn't receding and the different grounds across the country were not up to scratch. Today,

They can be confident of a fixed schedule, deserving financial package and more importantly, opportunity to play regularly. In previous years, numerous talented cricketers preferred other options because of domestic cricket's uncertainty.

The ninth edition of National Cricket League was refurbished with healthy money, a revamped points system and more importantly, availability of national players in the six divisions. Dhaka,

were shown live on television. Here we take a look at some of the highs and lows of NCL 2007-08.

SAJID'S RISE

Sajidul Islam, born in Rangpur and bred at BKSP, was sent to Barisal to try his luck last season. He was erratic and had a slight weight issue going at that time but manage to string together some good spells at the fagend.

This season, the young left-arm had fire in his belly. Along

New Zealand, Sajid was hurried off and since then, the 19-year-old has been a revelation.

MASHRAFE'S WEEK

Khulna gave an early indication of their dominance with their brilliant start against defending champions Dhaka during the first round. After the hosts snuck a draw in the four-day affair, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza put together a stunning show with the new and old ball in the one-dayer, taking three for 25.

His hostile pace and swing was eye-catching and it gave everyone a window into Khulna's mindset this season after they had a wretched time in 2006-07 when they finished at the bottom of NCL.

DOLLAR COSTLY FOR RAJSHAH

Rajshahi, with a mediocre team and Khaled Mashud's assertive leadership, were the NCL forerunners before they ran into Dollar Mahmud. The under-19 paceman took the first-ever hat-trick (wickets of Zunaed Siddiqui, Nayeem Islam and Mushfiqur Rahman in successive balls) in Bangladesh's first-class history during that crucial fourth round match between the two top sides. And then Dollar's hit to the boundary off the penultimate ball of the match made sure his earlier heroics wouldn't go to waste. Khulna's first win and Rajshahi's first defeat meant that

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MOSHARRAF HOSSAIN



SAJIDUL ISLAM



NAZIMUDDIN

after National Cricket League's resounding success, dynamics of domestic cricket, it seems, is going to be changed for the good.

Cricketers now believe that they don't have to think twice to go ahead in their respective careers.

Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Barisal had their strengths balanced out by the national selectors.

What followed was a fascinating three months of first-class and one-day cricket, some of which

with a revived Talha Jubair, he gave Barisal the much-required firepower. It is no coincidence that Barisal's good form and Sajid's rise have gone hand in hand. So much was his impact that when Syed Rasel dislocated his shoulder in

Wright bats for Indians

PTI, Christchurch

Former India coach John Wright suspects there was an Australian provocation behind Harbhajan Singh's on-field outburst during the Sydney Test and said the outrage against the three-Test ban on the off-spinner stems from a sense of injustice.

"I don't believe Harbhajan was talking in a vacuum out there, knowing how the Australians play the game in the middle," he said.

Wright said he knew both Harbhajan and Symonds from his time as the Kent coach and he said both are lively players but "good boys".

"But it's not a church out there and I can't believe there was silence," he said.

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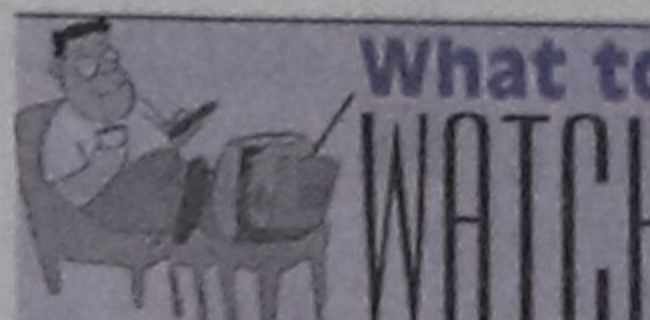
Did U Know?

Carlos Caszely of Chile was the first player red carded in a FIFA World Cup tournament. He faced this ignominy on June 14, 1974.



Sourav Ganguly

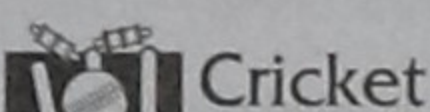
(Star India batsman)
"He's a competitor, he's got a lot of quality in him, quality players will always produce their best under pressure."
On Harbhajan Singh.



TEN Sports
South Africa v West Indies
Third Test, Day One
Live from 2:00pm
ESPN
Sportscentre India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm

Proteas think pace

Third & final Test against WI from today



REUTERS, Durban

South Africa are considering fielding an all-seam attack in the third Test against West Indies, captain Graeme Smith said on Wednesday.

The series, tied at 1-1, will be decided in the match, which starts in Durban on Thursday.

"The thought of playing another seamer is on our minds," Smith told a news conference.

"These days we always want to play a spinner, but spinners haven't had much success here over the years."

Left-arm spinner Paul Harris will miss his first Test of the season if he is not selected.

Harris could be replaced by medium pacer Shaun Pollock, who has not played in any of South Africa's six Tests this season.

Fast bowler Dale Steyn is battling a hamstring strain he sustained in the second Test in Cape Town, which South Africa won by seven wickets on Saturday to square the series. If Steyn is not fit, fast bowler Monde Zondeki will win his sixth cap.

West Indies captain Chris Gayle, who broke a thumb while batting in the second Test, ruled himself out of the match on Monday.

However, coach John Dyson suggested that Gayle might play.

"It's up to Chris, but medical advice is for him not to think about playing," Dyson told a news conference on Wednesday. "We have-

n't talked about him playing or not playing."

Windies spearhead Fidel Edwards is also trying to bounce back from a hamstring injury.

Smith said he had been impressed by the performance of the West Indians, who won their first Test in South Africa in the opening match of the series in Port Elizabeth.

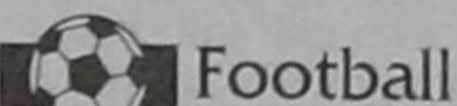
"They've shown a lot of discipline and a lot of patience, and their fast bowlers have bowled well and in the right areas," Smith said.

"Some of their batsmen have shown real patience, and we had to work hard in Cape Town even though we won it in four days."

South Africa could be vulnerable at the top of the order, where

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Jatrabari's 2nd win



SPORTS REPORTER

After a series of goalless affairs, the Senior Division Football League clubs seemed to go on the right track as they began to find goals.

Jatrabari, having started the campaign with a loss, recorded their second successive win when they edged Wari 1-0 in yesterday's second match at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur.

Both the sides looked set for a draw but Robin broke the deadlock after 85 minutes to give Jatrabari six points after three rounds.

Agrani Bank defeated Dhaka Wanderers 2-1 earlier with Pashbon slamming both the goals for the winners, who have four points after two matches.

Pashbon shot Agrani ahead one minute before halftime and sealed the victory with a 74th minute strike. Wanderers, who drew goalless with Purbachal in their first encounter, reduced the arrears through Monir five minutes from time.

Meanwhile, today's scheduled match between Arambagh and City Club has been postponed, as the league will be halted for four days due to the NSC's (National Sports Council) decision to allot the venue

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TOO LITTLE TOO LATE: Wanderers striker Monir (C) scores the consolation goal against Agrani Bank in their Senior Division Football League match at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Kamalapur yesterday. The bankers won the match 2-1.



ON A VICTORY LAP! India captain Anil Kumble (2nd from L) leads his team to a fitness drill during a training session at the Manuka Oval ground in Canberra yesterday, a day after their crisis-hit tour of Australia got back on track following the withdrawal of controversial umpire Steve Bucknor from the third Test, starting in Perth on January 16.

Dhoni captain for tour match

PTI, Canberra

With Anil Kumble opting out, Mahendra Singh Dhoni will lead India against the Australian Capital Territory XI in a warm-up match starting at the Manuka Oval here today.

Apart from Kumble, veterans Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly are also set to skip the match to pave way for the likes of Virender Sehwag.

After all the controversies and the bad blood in the wake of the tumultuous Sydney Test, Kumble said his team was now eager to get a taste of the real action.

"It's important we get the best out of this game," he said.

Their focus back on cricket again, the visitors sweated for about a couple of hours in the nets on the eve of the three-day game.

Apart from Sehwag, Dinesh Karthick, Irfan Pathan, Pankaj Singh and VRV Singh would get a chance to impress the think-tank in the match to bolster their case for a berth in Perth, venue of the third Test.

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NZ judge to hear Bhajji appeal

AFP, Dubai

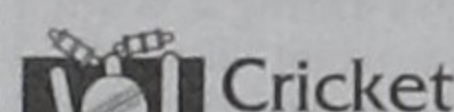
New Zealand judge John Hansen has been appointed as commissioner for the appeal of Indian spinner Harbhajan Singh against the finding that he made racist comments during the second Test against Australia.

Justice Hansen is a High Court judge in his native New Zealand and is New Zealand Cricket's appointment on the International

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India resume tour

CA defends players' attitude



AFP, Sydney

India resumed their crisis-hit cricket tour Wednesday as Australian officials brushed aside criticism of the national team, saying the world's top side plays tough Test cricket -- "not tiddlywinks".

After staying put in Sydney in protest at spinner Harbhajan Singh's three-match ban for racism following the explosive second Test, the Indian team finally travelled to Canberra to prepare for a scheduled tour match.

Their move followed frantic efforts by the International Cricket Council (ICC) to save the tour, including dumping West Indian

umpire Steve Bucknor from a Test series soured by bitter disputes between the two sides.

The Australian players have been hit by a barrage of criticism from the Indians, Australian sporting heroes, local media and the public for arrogance and unsporting behaviour during the Test that ended Sunday.

But Cricket Australia chief executive James Sutherland on Wednesday defended the team, saying their uncompromising play was what the public demanded.

"The Australian cricket team plays the game tough, tough and uncompromising," he told reporters.

"Test cricket is what is being played here. It's not tiddlywinks."

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said it decided to go ahead with the tour after the ICC's

intervention, although it still wanted the "unjustified and patently illegal ban" on Harbhajan dropped.

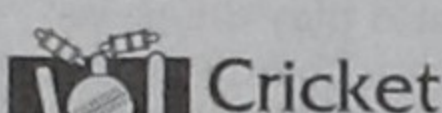
In a sign that tensions could again flare, secretary Niranjan Shah warned the board would "review the tour and all other developments continuously".

Harbhajan allegedly called Australia's only black player Andrew Symonds a "monkey" but the Indians say the accusation, reported by Australian captain Ricky Ponting during the second Test in Sydney, is "obnoxious and baseless".

The ICC has said Harbhajan will be allowed to play the final two Tests in Perth and Adelaide pending a ruling on his appeal against the three-Test ban.

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'Choose best umpires'



AFP, Karachi

Pakistan greats Wednesday urged the cricket world to axe the tradition of choosing neutral umpires in favour of those considered the best at the job, in the aftermath of the crisis-hit Australia-India series.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) was forced to dump veteran West Indian umpire Steve Bucknor from the third Test in Australia following Indian complaints over his performance in last week's Sydney Test.

"I would recommend the best umpires on the rankings established by the ICC and not neutral ones. What is the use of a neutral umpire when he is not the best?" Wasim Bari, a former Pakistan captain and ex-chief of selectors,

said.

"Pakistan takes the credit for introducing neutral umpires but now the idea is not neutrality but the right decision," said Bari, who played 81 Tests for Pakistan.

Another former Pakistan captain, Rameez Raja, said the controversy should not be allowed to do any more harm to Australia-India team relations, and would not have happened in the first place if umpiring standards were higher.

"I sincerely hope that the matter is not used as a source of confrontation, but to develop better umpires to overcome such problems in future," the widely travelled television commentator told AFP.

India claimed it lost the Sydney Test, won in dramatic fashion in the final minutes of the fifth day, because of poor decisions from Bucknor.

The series descended into

acrimony after Indian captain Anil Kumble accused the Australians of bad sportsmanship and Indian spinner Harbhajan Singh received a three-Test suspension for racially abusing an Australian player.

Raja said the incidents at Sydney were "deplorable" for the game.

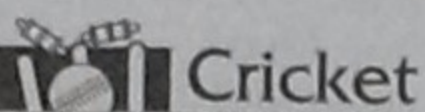
"What happened at Sydney was sad but I think good sense prevailed after the ICC took some steps and I don't see it as a victory for India or a defeat for the ICC," said Raja, who played 57 Tests for Pakistan.

Pakistan was at the centre of an umpiring row during the Oval Test against England two years ago when they forfeited the match after Australian umpire Darrell Hair accused them of ball tampering.

Hair's penalty incensed then-Pakistan captain Inzamam-ul-Haq.

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'King Off The Field'



AFP, New Delhi

India, whose controversy-scarred cricket tour of Australia is back on after numerous disputes, is the undisputed powerhouse in the sport off the field, and has been acknowledged as such by the International Cricket Council (ICC).

It's hardly surprising then that the ICC acceded to India's request to remove umpire Steve Bucknor from the series to ensure the tour continues.

And there is a distinct feeling within the game that, given the power it wields in the sport, what India wants, India gets.

"India has the biggest cricket-watching population and it's the financial powerhouse," ICC chief executive Malcolm Speed told reporters in Mumbai late last year.

Clearly then, the ICC has good

reason to keep India happy. The cricket-mad country, with a population of 1.1 billion, a growing middle class and booming economy, has carried the sport on its shoulders for more than a decade.

India may not have the most powerful cricket team on the field, but its clout off it is peerless because of its financial power.

The television industry estimates that an international cricket match featuring India draws 60 percent of the Indian viewing audience, almost 450 million people.

The pan-Asian ESPN-Star Sports television network, owned jointly by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp and Disney, ensured itself a financial bonanza by bringing cricket to Indian audiences around the world.

ESPN-Star paid an astonishing 1.1 billion dollars last year for rights to ICC events like the World Cup till 2015 -- double the previous deal with Murdoch's Global Cricket

Corp. The network even launched a 24-hour cricket channel, STAR Cricket, to satisfy India's seemingly unquenchable thirst for the game.

"I did not know how to fulfil the demand for cricket with just two channels," ESPN-Star chief Jamie Davis said in a recent interview.

"Forty-eight hours of cricket a day is not enough."

The ICC's main sponsors like Pepsi, Hero Honda, Reliance and Emirates are looking at the Indian market to get returns from the big bucks they pay to join the bandwagon.

The ICC has acknowledged in the past that India accounts for 70 percent of the game's worldwide revenues.

Delhi-based advertising executive Rajmohan Singh said brands that associate themselves with cricket are assured of high-profile returns.

"Nothing unites India's millions

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