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(Left) Abahani train with new Pakistani arrival Kashif Ali (back) while Usha players jog at the Maulana Bhasani National Hockey Stadium on the eve of today's Premier Hockey League finale.



PHOTO: STAR

Usha or Abahani? Premier hockey league title decider today

Hockey

SPORTS REPORTER

Last year, Abahani threw away a five-point lead in the last two matches to share the Premier Hockey League title with Usha Krira Chakra.

Both Abahani and Usha were level after the first leg but as the organisers failed to complete the Super League, they announced the two joint-champions on the basis of the first-leg points.

This time around, Usha - on 33 points after 12 rounds -- are stepping in the shoes of Abahani, who are two points adrift. Having started the Super League with a 5-point advantage, Usha look uncertain to retain the title before today's clash against Abahani in the league finale.

Usha, whose 3-2 defeat to Mohammedan -- the old-Dhaka outfit's first loss in the competition after 11 straight wins -- put Abahani back in the title race, are in a slightly better position though as they can afford a draw.

For Abahani, it's a must win situation.

Still, the two teams will go for the maximum as soon as the virtual final kicks off at the Maulana Bhasani National Stadium at 4 pm.

Usha's Pakistani coach Rana Jahir, who has already earned fame as a master tactician, knows that thoughts of a draw can bring disaster.

"Hockey is such a game where two goals can be scored in one minute. No one can go to the pitch with a target of draw, especially in a big match," said Jahir on the eve of the match.

"I feel that the loss to Mohammedan has made a negative impact on the team and I have been trying to inspire them. They must believe that they have the capability to beat Abahani twice," said Jahir whose side defeated Abahani 4-2 in the first-leg.

"Our only headache is our defensive weaknesses. The only option for us to make up is to utilise the chances we get."

Abahani have similar trouble and their leaky backline, after the defeat to Usha, conceded five goals

to Mohammedan in their last match before winning by the minimum margin.

With ace defender Khokon still injured, the sky-blues flew in Pakistani international back Kashif Ali for the game. He will form a trio of defence with Khokon and penalty corner specialist Chayan, the league top-scorer with 14 goals including three against Mohammedan earlier this week.

The key to Abahani would be neutralising Usha's Pakistani playmaker Akhter Ali, who shaped their victory against Abahani single-handed but never looked comfortable under Mohammedan's man-marking.

"Yes, we have a plan for Akhter. We will not give him space, like we blocked Mohammedan's Sabbir," said Abahani coach Mahub Harun.

"Kashif has played in the Asia and his presence will give us defensive solidity. Still, we have to give our 100 percent to utilise the chance created for us after Usha's defeat to Mohammedan and our win against the same side," added the former national captain.



Did U Know?

In 1997, Belgian Filip Dewulf made it all the way through from the qualifying round to the semifinals of the main draw of the French Open Tennis Championships.



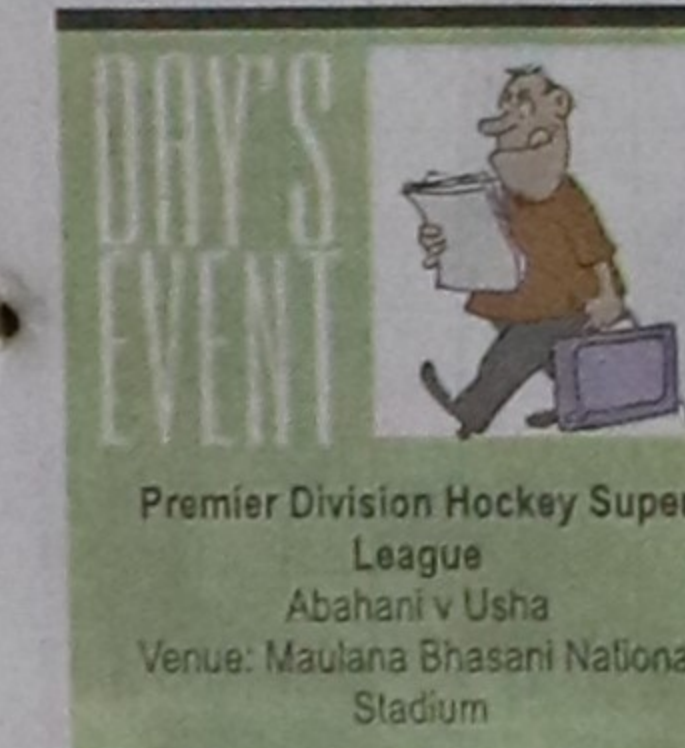
Manmohan Singh
(Indian Prime Minister)
"I do believe that to the ordinary people of our country, games like hockey and football have more significance than the world of cricket."



STAR Cricket
England v New Zealand
Third Test, Day Two
Live from 3:58pm

STAR Sports
French Open Tennis
Women & Men's Singles Semifinals
Live from 5:00pm

ESPN
Sportscenter India
Sports News
Live at 8:30pm



Pakistan want to leave Asif issue behind

Pakistan are hoping that the last-minute withdrawal of Mohammad Asif will not affect their team's title chances in a tri-nation tournament, starting in Dhaka on Sunday. The selectors are now looking to Umar Gul, the most experienced fast bowler available, to guide a young yet potent pace attack in

Bangladesh's acid test

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will have to do better than 'just making promises' to improve their game in a bid to avoid a premature exit from the fifth SAFF Football Championship.

After a shocking 1-1 draw with South Asia's whipping boys Bhutan on Wednesday, Bangladesh must beat Afghanistan in today's Group B match in Colombo to stay alive in the competition.

Otherwise, Bangladesh might revisit their fate in the inaugural SAFF Championship in 1997 when they failed to make the semifinals in Kathmandu.

Afghanistan's 2-2 draw against co-hosts Sri Lanka late on Wednesday night complicated situations for Abu Yusuf's boys, who will be under pressure to pull off at least a draw -- provided they beat Afghanistan today -- against the home side in the group finale on Sunday.

Yusuf's trust on young and untested players -- the coach did not even call the experienced footballers to the national camp -- proved to be a disaster as

Bangladesh failed to make any impact on Bhutan, who capitalised on a late defensive error to cancel debutant Arup Baidya's lucky half-lead at the Sugathadasa Stadium.

A draw against Bhutan will never be accepted by the football fans, who saw the national team rise from the inaugural tournament's failure by reaching three successive finals including winning the trophy in 2003 at home.

Runners-up in the last edition in 2005, Bangladesh used four new faces with the senior players against Bhutan but reportedly, only captain Aminul at the goal and former skipper Joy in the midfield had been impressive.

Players and management were unhappy after the result, let alone their poor show and Yusuf commented that the performance was unacceptable, adding that his players were only half the men they used to be.

Yusuf, who blamed the midfield for failing to take control, was criticised for keeping injured Emily on the pitch throughout the game. Not that the coach had many options. He took just two specialised strikers to Colombo and debutant Komol substituted Ujjal with neither making any impact.

Yusuf, who still rates the war-torn Afghanistan lesser opponents,

must find a way to beat the Afghans' pressing game and speed, which he failed to do when the two sides drew goalless in the AFC Challenge Cup qualifier in Kyrgyzstan last month.

Before that, Bangladesh beat Afghanistan 4-1 and drew 2-2 -- both in the 1979 Asian Cup qualifiers -- in Dhaka.

Afghanistan, rapidly improving under German coach Klaus Staerk, were unlucky not to collect full points against Sri Lanka. Garez Arian Habib put the side ahead twice but the home side survived with goals from skipper Chatura Maduranga and EB Channa's late penalty.

Meanwhile, India all but confirmed a semifinal berth when the defending champions edged sporting rivals Pakistan in Male yesterday.

MN Pradip and Steven Dias scored in the first half for India, who now have maximum six points from two matches in Group A. For Pakistan, crashed out after successive defeats, Adnan Farooq reduced the arrears two minutes from time with a header.

Maldives were pitted against Nepal late yesterday and the home side needed a win to make it to the last four. A Maldives win or a draw will confirm India's place in the semis.

Sonali end on a high

SPORTS REPORTER

Mohammedan Sporting Club hung on to third place despite finishing their Green Delta Insurance Premier Hockey League campaign with a defeat to Sonali Bank yesterday.

Down 2-0 till 47 minutes, Sonali Bank rode on three-goal Iqbal Nader Prince to win the match 4-2 at the Maulana Bhasani National Hockey Stadium.

Syed Al Masum put Mohammedan ahead after 13 minutes and doubled the lead in the 42nd but the black and whites gave in to an eight-minute madness, conceding three goals.

Prince, who scored Sonali Bank's first goal in the 47th minute, added two more in the 55 and 68 after Krishna Kumar had levelled the score in the 51st.

Mohammedan's tally remained 26 points after their third league defeat in 13 outings while Bank finished fourth on 25 points following their eighth victory.

Moeen greets GM Rajib

UNB, Dhaka

Chairman of the National Sports Council and Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed and the officers and staffs of NSC have congratulated chess talent Enamul Hossain Rajib for getting approval from World Chess Federation (FIDE) as a Grand Master.

The FIDE, in its third quarter presidential board meeting in Athens on Monday, approved the GM title of Rajib and conveyed the message to Bangladesh Chess Federation on Wednesday.

Rajib, who completed his third and final GM norm from the national chess championship last month, emerged as the fifth Grand Master of the country after Niaz Murshed, Ziaur Rahman, Abdullah Al Rakib and Reefat Bin Sattar.

In a statement, NSC hoped that the country's youngest GM would be able to bring more laurels for the country maintaining his success with consistent performances.

Rajib earned his first GM norm from the Chess Olympiad in Slovenia in 2002 and won his second in Abu Dhabi last year.

Rajib is the first Bangladeshi chess player who qualified for the second round of the World Cup Chess held in Russia in November last year beating world number 19 Pavel Eljanov of Ukraine in the first round.

Officials for Asia Cup named

PTI, Dubai

The International Cricket Council (ICC) yesterday announced the names of umpire and referee to officiate in the Asia Cup from June 24 in Pakistan.

Mike Procter of the Emirates Elite Panel of ICC Match Referees will oversee the matches staged in Lahore while Alan Hurst, also of the Elite Panel, will supervise the matches to be played in Karachi.

The ICC-appointed on-field umpires will be Simon Taufel and Brian Jerling of Elite Panel, and Ian Gould and Tony Hill of the Emirates International Panel of ICC Umpires.

Appointments for the second round matches will be announced in due course.

Asia Cup Match Referees Mike Procter (Lahore) and Alan Hurst (Karachi) June 24 Bangladesh v UAE, Lahore ODI Simon Taufel, Ian Gould; Pakistan v Hong Kong, SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

Mirpur gets ready

SPORTS REPORTER

While Mehrib Hossain batted fluently, the rest of the Bangladesh A batsmen floundered spectacularly in the second practice game between the national side and the second string at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Bangladesh A were only good enough to post 175 in 46 overs and when the news was last filed, Bangladesh were 94 for two at the end of 27 overs with captain Mohammad Ashraf and Rokibul Hasan at the crease after both openers Tamim Iqbal and Shahriar Nafees fell early.

But even for a practice match, the atmosphere around the ground was much relaxed than usual, maybe because of the nearness of the tri-series, now known as the Kityly Cup. While most of the squad took part in the warm-up game, a few were in the indoor facilities while coach Jamie Siddons made his way to the middle during the match to have small discussions on field placings with captain Mohammad Ashraf and his deputy Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. The fast men, led by Mashrafe, bowled in short spells throughout the innings and it seemed that Shahadat Hossain has not lost his rhythm as he knifed through the batting line-up with his pace and aggression. He finished the game with figures of five for 27.

While Shahadat blossomed, it was quite different for left-arm spinner Abdur Razzak who struggled with his length, evident enough of his three-week stint during which he played only a single match while his colleagues slugged it out in the Premier League last month. Razzak had a hard time bowling to the left-handers particularly but it seemed that A team captain for the day Zunaed Siddiqui (37 off 63 balls) matched his struggle. The discarded left-hander found it very hard to pierce the gaps while playing the spinners, especially off the back-foot. So when he offered a

simple catch at short mid-wicket to the highly underrated leg-spin of Alok Kapali, it was no surprise.

But at the other end, Mehrib made sure he remains in the reckoning of selection in the tri-series. The left-hander batted with a lot of ease, stroking the ball straight and through the covers. Mehrib stroked to 66 off 112 balls that included just four boundaries and a six over long-on.

Right-hander Nayeem Islam (19 off 26 balls) also showed composure for a while but failed to produce the goods on the day, as he skied off-spinner Mahmudullah Riyad while trying to slog-sweep him over mid-wicket where Tamim Iqbal pounced it. Nadif Chowdhury

(12), Dhiman Ghosh (2) and Suharwardi Shuvo (14) followed Nayeem in quick succession before Mehrib's stint at the crease was ended from a Shahadat in-ducker that smashed into his stumps.

Surprisingly, the A team's management decided to send batsman Farhad Hossain at number nine. Predictably, the right-hander made little difference from that position as he meekly surrendered for five. Apart from Shahadat's five-for, Riyad took two wickets while Mashrafe, Abdur Razzak and Kapali took one each.

But the match seemed to be tedious compared to the work that went on outside. Workers put in the

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Aftab Ahmed caresses his daughter as his wife looks on prior to the cavalier batsman's departure to Mumbai yesterday for an operation on the ring finger of his right hand which he injured during practice last week.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Asif goes on record

Decision not before Sunday

Cricket

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan pacesman Mohammad Asif appeared before a Dubai prosecutor Thursday on charges of possessing an illegal substance and will remain in detention until at least Sunday, an official said.

The 25-year-old Asif, who has protested his innocence, was seized at Dubai airport on Sunday while returning home from India after featuring in a domestic cricket event.

"Asif appeared before the prosecutor today [Thursday] and recorded a statement in which he said the drug found in his possession was a medicine given to him by a hakim (herbal medicine man) in Pakistan," a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) official told AFP.

"Since Friday and Saturday are holidays here in Dubai, so we expect a decision on Sunday," the official, who asked to remain anonymous, said by telephone from the Gulf emirate.

PCB chief operating officer Shafiqat Naghmi said the board had received medical reports on Asif ordered by Dubai authorities "but it is not proper for us to disclose their nature."

"Asif has earlier said he had been getting some herbal medicines. I have heard these reports. Sometimes hakims give medicines in which sometimes there are substances which are banned," Naghmi told reporters.

"But this is not the issue. The main issue is to get his release. We respect their (Dubai authorities') procedure. We are confident the truth will come out and there will be justice."

Opening bowler Asif was dropped from the Pakistan squad for next week's tri-series in Bangladesh and replaced by Sohail Khan on Wednesday.

Pakistan captain Shoaib Malik said the team was praying for Asif.

"Our prayers are with Asif, he is a very good bowler, but right now we are concentrating on cricket and the new series which we will see in Bangladesh. I will not comment on this issue because the PCB is handling it," he said.

Asif was banned for one year after he tested positive for the steroid nandrolone in October 2006. Fellow pacesman Shoaib Akhtar was banned for two years on the same charge.

The bans were however lifted on appeal two months later. Akhtar meanwhile is appealing a lifetime ban imposed in April for repeated disciplinary problems.



Iain O'Brien of New Zealand leaps for joy after casting England captain Michael Vaughan on the first day of the third and final Test against England at Trent Bridge in Nottingham yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

KP holds Eng together

Cricket

AFP, Nottingham

Kevin Pietersen's unbeaten 71 rallied England after they collapsed on the first day of the third and final Test against New Zealand at Trent Bridge here Thursday.

England slumped to 86 for five soon after lunch as three wickets went for two runs in 13 balls with the out-of-form Ian Bell and Paul Collingwood both dismissed for naught.

At tea, England were still far from out of trouble at 180 for five. But an unbroken sixth-wicket stand of 94 between Pietersen and wicket-keeper Tim Ambrose (36 not out) kept New Zealand at bay in a match the tourists had to win to level the series at 1-1.

Andrew Strauss, England's century hero in their six-wicket second Test victory at Old Trafford, was still on his lunch score of 37 when he drove loosely at a wide delivery from pace bowler Kyle

Mills and was well-caught at first slip by Ross Taylor.

Then 84 for three became 85 for four when Bell, hitting across the line, was clearly lbw to Iain O'Brien.

England then lost their third wicket off the last ball of an over when Collingwood was drawn into playing outside off-stump by Mills and edged to Taylor, the hosts struggling at 86 for five.

Bell, often accused of not scoring runs when England really need them, had now managed just 45 runs in the series and Collingwood 32.

All-rounder Collingwood's exit made it 23 innings without a Test hundred since his 128 against the West Indies on his Durham home ground in June last year -- the last time England managed the benchmark first innings total of 400.

Ambrose, whose maiden century in the second Test against New Zealand in Hamilton in March came after England had collapsed to 136 for five, now found himself facing another rescue mission.

South Africa-born Pietersen, who began his English county career here for Nottinghamshire before moving to Hampshire three years ago, may have made his name as a flamboyant shotmaker but, recently, he has shown himself capable of batting patiently.

He did allow himself a rare moment of extravagance when sweeping New Zealand captain Daniel Vettori to complete a 104-ball fifty after 'fetching' an off-stump delivery from the left-arm spinner.

That boundary was only Pietersen's fourth but few could argue with the expert way in which the 27-year-old paced his innings.

Earlier, New Zealand opening bowlers Chris Martin and Mills both quickly justified Vettori's decision to field first on a soft, green-tinted pitch as they made the ball move away off the seam. Mills bowled opener Alastair Cook off an inside edge for six.

Next ball Mills produced a near unplayable delivery to Michael Vaughan which cut away and bounced steeply.

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