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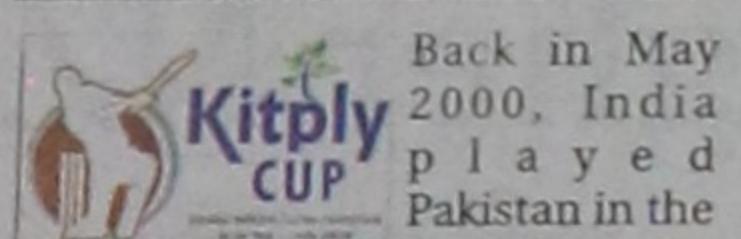
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JUNE 11, 2008, E-MAIL: sports@thelaststar.net



Indian opener Gautam Gambhir cuts one down to third-man as his illustrious partner-in-crime Virender Sehwag (L) looks on during their 155-run partnership in the second ODI of the Kitply Cup against Pakistan at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday.

Where is the craze?

SPORTS REPORTER



Back in May 2000, India played Pakistan in the Asia Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium. The bowl was not only packed but several hundred fans waited outside the stadium for a ticket and be a part of the frenzy.

The cricket-mad people in the country became as desperate as they could to make their presence felt at the ground during all six previous encounters between the two perennial foes because everyone felt proud of watching an India-Pakistan war on the cricket field.

Many believed it as a lifetime's achievement to share the experience with the others.

The traditional rivals once again locked horns in the city yesterday after seven years, though at a different venue at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur. But now a days the scenario has totally changed.

The craze in and out side the stadium was not as much as one could think even five years back.

The first evidence was that the big bowl was not jam-packed rather it was half-full. Has then the emotion vanished among the cricket lovers in the country?

If you take the explanation from any of the new generation, then you surely will believe that this generation is not as much emotional as their predecessors were with the match between India and Pakistan.

"I came here because I am free today. I would not mind if I missed the game. I think you guys are stuck with the emotion of India-Pakistan craze still. But we think in a different way as first of all we have our own team to support and we also support other teams like Australia and South Africa," was the explanation from Shahafayet, a college student residing in Mohammadpur in the city.

"I think crowd is okay if you consider all the things. But I must say the craze was not same as it was a few years back with the India-Pakistan match. I think the uncertain weather condition, examination in schools and colleges and the late night finish discouraged most of the fans," said Ahmed Sajadul Alam, BCB's media committee chairman and organising secretary of the tri-series.

One of his friends however had different view. He believes that the absence of superstars like Sachin Tendulkar and Shoaib Akhtar and the emergence of the Indian Premier League phenomena play a major part in the lack of enthusiasm.

Former national opener turned commentator Athar Ali Khan was

surprised by the response.

"We all were actually talking about the poor turn up because after a long gap, India and Pakistan are playing here. The absence of mega stars may be one of the reasons behind the poor turn up. But it is also true that these generation thinks in a different way, but let me tell you that I have seen people get crazy for a ticket of this match a decade ago," said former opener Athar.

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), which has considered the tournament as a big financial boost, however was satisfied with the turn up of more than 20,000 spectators in the big bowl as they believed that there were a number of reasons behind the issue.

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Pak embassy to handle Asif case

CRICINFO, undated

Mohammad Asif's fate remains in the balance with Nadeem Akram, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) official handling the case, set to return home from Dubai where the fast bowler has been detained since June 1 for the possession of an illegal substance.

Akram said an official from the Pakistan embassy in Abu Dhabi will handle the case and was optimistic about Asif's release.

"I am returning home tonight, but I am hopeful of an early release (for Asif)," Akram told PTI yesterday. Though Asif's lawyers are continuing to pursue the case, Akram said there was no word from the Dubai Attorney General or the public prosecutor's office on whether to press charges against Asif or deport him.

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Villa vanquishes Russia

INTERNET, undated



David Villa fired a terrific hat-trick as Spain opened their Euro 2008 campaign with an eye-catching 4-1 triumph over Russia in Group D.

Luis Aragones, who had the luxury of leaving Cesc Fabregas on the bench, watched on as his men carved the Russians open on countless occasions via some exemplary pass-and-move football.

Villa, currently contracted to Valencia, broke the deadlock on 20 minutes, tapping into an empty net after excellent work from Fernando Torres down the left channel.

Just before the break, Spain doubled their lead as Villa latched onto Andres Iniesta's perfectly timed through-ball to slip an effort under goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev.

Aragones' side took their foot off the gas in the early stages of the second half, but they soon upped their game with Villa completing an impressive hat-trick, bamboozling his marker to roll home in the 75th minute.

And while Roman Pavlyuchenko netted a late consolation for battling Russia with four minutes remaining, the night was Spain's to savour as Fabregas capped a marvellous evening with a diving header from close range.

Villa, whose position in the starting line-up was the cause of some debate in the build-up to the event, gave the Russian defence an early suggestion it could be a long evening when he had the first chance of the game.

A pinpoint cross-field pass from Sergio Ramos found Villa unmarked on the edge of the area, but after showing good chest control, the 26-year-old, under pressure from Aleksandr Aniukov, sliced his left-footed shot wide with

only goalkeeper Igor Akinfeev to beat.

Russia created their first decent opening soon after when Aniukov got in behind Spain full-back Joan Capdevila on the left, but his cross into the centre was drilled wide by Igor Semeshov, who will have felt the heat.

Pavlyuchenko also struck the Spain crossbar with a dipping volley later in the first half, but it was not counted as a goal.

Spain then took the lead with a goal from nothing. Torres picked up possession after Russia move had broken down and the Liverpool man, having raced goalwards got a lucky break of the ball against marker Denis Kolodin, before he unselfishly passed inside to Villa to slot into an empty net after Akinfeev had come out to meet Torres.

That was a blow for the Russians, who had not scored against Spain in their three previous meetings, but Guus Hiddink's men came within inches of an immediate riposte in the 22nd minute when Konstantin Zyryanov sliced his left-footed shot wide with the woodwork.

A low cross from Diniyar Bilyateldinov eluded a host of players as it skidded across the area before Zyryanov sent in a shot that rebounded back off the right-hand post with Iker Casillas well beaten.

Pavlyuchenko also struck the Spain crossbar with a dipping volley later in the first half, but it was not counted as a goal.

The Russia goalkeeper could do nothing to prevent Villa making it 2-0 in the 45th minute though, when Andres Iniesta's slide-rule

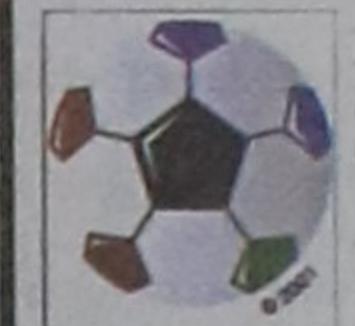
kick put the Spain number seven on goal and he coolly finished under the diving Akinfeev.

The Russians started the second

SEE PAGE 18 COL 5

It can't get any worse

AL MUSABBIR SADI



Flashback April 3, 2006: Bangladesh-Guam 3:0.

It happens to be Bangladesh national football team's last victory in an international. How long do we have to wait for the next win since beating world football's nobody Guam in the inaugural AFC Challenge Cup match at home?

Not that we had the chance to put an end to this 26-month long lean patch but unimpressive shows against not-so-fancied Hong Kong, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Bhutan and Sri Lanka failed.

Whose failure? It remains the biggest question to be answered.

While South Asia's weakest team Bhutan play defending champions India in one of the two semi-finals of the fifth SAFF Championship this afternoon, Maldives (co-hosts Sri Lanka and Maldives) play in other semi in the evening in Colombo, Bangladesh return home empty handed today from a winless campaign that takes the nation's football history to its lowest ebb.

The inaugural SAFF Championship in 1997 in Kathmandu saw Bangladesh bow out without a win and not making the semi but reaching the next three finals and winning in 2003 had established them as the second best team in South Asia behind India. That doesn't count anymore.

Making coach Abu Yusuf the scapegoat would be the easiest way to shrug off responsibility for the

newly elected Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) executive body, which has taken charge for just over a month, but the root of the failure lies in some members of the incumbent committee who handled the national team poorly during the tenure of the last committee.

They simply did not care. They also did not prepare the team for their most important football tournament properly.

In a face-saving move, the BFF had appointed Syed Nayeemuddin last year but as soon as the SAFF was put back a few months, the football officials suddenly found the India coach - who had his home side to win the 2005 SAFF Championship in Pakistan with a 2-0 victory over Bangladesh in the final - expensive.

Nayeemuddin was sacked in October 2007 after four Nehru Cup matches in India, where his side even failed to beat lowly Cambodia, and the World Cup pre-qualifying fixtures against Tajikistan, who drew 1-1 in Dhaka and triumphed 5-0 in Dushanbe.

Football-less ness continued and the BFF woke up just two months before the SAFF, naming Abu Yusuf the coach.

To get out-of-action footballers in shape in such a short time for international standard itself is a challenging job and Yusuf made it difficult by picking up a very young and experienced side - some of the players had not even played for top-level clubs in domestic football - for the AFC Challenge Cup qualifiers and the SAFF.

Without any homework on the opposition, Yusuf's boys left for Central Asia and got the first shock

when they survived a close call in a goalless draw against Afghanistan in the opening match of the Challenge Cup qualifiers.

Afghanistan did better by beating the hosts to reach the tournament proper while Bangladesh returned with a defeat to Kyrgyzstan, conceding two goals in the last seven minutes.

Although a highly ambitious Yusuf repeatedly claimed his side have the capability to play throughout the 90 minutes of a game in the same pace, no one was convinced. Without a playmaker or even a holding midfielder in the side, the team's young backline failed to cope with opposition pressure.

Perhaps he was building a team for future, ignoring the seniors over suspect fitness.

Under pressure, the former national defender picked up two senior players but even in the last group match, where Bangladesh needed to beat hosts Sri Lanka to reach the semifinals after frustrating draws against Bhutan (1-1) and Afghanistan (2-2), he ignored last season's top centre-back Nazrul. Besides Nazrul, Joy was also recalled and the midfielder, who got just 15 days to prepare for the event, proved in the first two matches that experience and skill do count.

Yusuf's nod rather went to Ariful, who deflected a harmless-looking shot into their own post to kill all hopes of Bangladesh against Sri Lanka. Not that Ariful is a bad player but he was responsible for conceding two goals against Syria and one against India in last year's Nehru Cup. He should have been given more time to mature for this level.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



VIVA LA VILLA: Spanish striker David Villa is ecstatic after netting the second of his three goals during their 4-1 rout of Russia in the Euro 2008 match at Innsbruck yesterday.

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