

Rajshahi first-class first

Riyad's fourth ton dashes Barisal's dream

MOHAMMAD ISAM

Rajshahi became National Cricket League champions after the most dramatic finale in the competition's history. Despite falling short in their valiant run chase by 28 runs against Khulna at their home ground yesterday, Rajshahi pipped title-contenders Barisal by virtue of more outright victories after both teams finished on 101 points each. This is Rajshahi's second first-class triumph after their maiden success in 2005-06 season when they also won the one-day competition.

And the finish could have been ten times more interesting had Barisal defended 215 runs but Mahmudullah Riyad's fourth century was their kiss of death, as Dhaka narrowly won by two wickets at the Fatullah Cricket Stadium.

In the end, Rajshahi's 'better' defeat counted in their favour as they collected five points from the game while Barisal gathered four.

Rajshahi's senior statesman Khaled Mashud tried to sound modest but credited the victory to the youngsters.

"I had very little to do with

it but the youngsters played very well. Boys like (Hamidul Islam) Himel and (Sabbir Rahman) Rumman stood out. And (Suharwardi) Shuvo always contributed to the team," said the former national captain who was excited by the dramatic finish that saw the first-class trophy hanging in the balance till the final hour on the final day.

Mashud, who retired from international cricket earlier this year but did not leave his beloved Rajshahi, said that his side's away wins and strong reserve bench helped.

"We missed (Zunaid Siddiqui) Imrose and Nayeem (Islam) but we did not cry about them. Rather we tried to get over it and play our own game," said Mashud.

Barisal's captain Imran Ahmed lamented two missed chances off Riyad that ended their hopes. "We could have finished it just after lunch but Talha hurt his ribs and Riyad got two lives too. It was heart-breaking that we couldn't take the last two wickets," said a forlorn Imran.

Meanwhile, last year's champions Khulna finished third, five points ahead of Dhaka while Chittagong avoided the bottom position as it went to Sylhet after an interesting drawn game in Sylhet where Lablur Rahman took six catches.

DHAKA-BARISAL

The match was at Barisal's behest only a few minutes after lunch. Dhaka's chase looked all but over when they were reduced to 95 for eight, chasing 216 to win.

Dhaka began the day teetering on 14 for three and in no time they went four down: Shamsur Rahman caught behind for five off paceman Monowar Hossain.

Riyad walked in and he saw more carnage at the other end.

Monowar struck six overs later, removing nightwatchman Humayun Kabir for six and the sixth wicket fell in the 19th over when Nadif Chowdhury nicked Arafat Salahuddin. In between, Riyad survived a dropped catch at gully where Nasir Hossain dropped the all-rounder off Arafat Salahuddin on just three.

Despite that let off, Dhaka's long batting line-up started falling apart as Arafat Sunny was next man out, making it 81 for seven. Riyad and Anamul Haque avoided further damages, but six balls after the 40-minute break Monowar removed the young wicketkeeper.

The second session gave Dhaka a lifeline as both Riyad and Elias Sunny added 71 runs for the ninth wicket. During this period, two things went against Barisal. First it was the injury to Talha Jubair who hurt his rib cage after bowling just two balls. The second incident hurt them more as Riyad was again thought to have gone, but was caught at slip by Imran Ahmed off a no-ball from Tariqul Islam.

Man-of-the-match Riyad, who missed the Tigers squad for the upcoming Test series against Sri Lanka, reached his fifty off 106 balls and then sailed to his fourth hundred in 195 balls. By then he had struck a dozen boundaries while the stubborn Sunny, used sometimes as a makeshift opener, rotated the strike manfully.

In Tariq's twelfth and Dhaka's 77th over, Riyad took the winning runs that sealed one of the most unbelievable comeback victories in recent memory. The two added 124 runs for the tenth wicket with Sunny making 37 off 138 balls

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PHOTO: STAR

MAKING A STATEMENT! Dhaka's middle-order batsman Mahmudullah Riyad punches the air after guiding his side to a fantastic win over Barisal on the final day of the National Cricket League in Fatullah yesterday. His unbeaten 116 not only shattered Barisal's dream of lifting the title for the first time but put the national selectors in a spot of bother for ignoring him despite him being one of the leading run-getters in the domestic scene.



PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh captain Mohammad Ashraful (R) sets off for his turn while the spinning trio of Enamul Haq (L), Mehrab Hossain (C) and Shakib Al Hasan (2nd from R) look on during the net session at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

A test of tweakers

SPORTS REPORTER



Shakib Al Hasan played just one Test against Sri Lanka and that too, as a batsman. He scored a total of 24 runs and took just one wicket with his left-arm spin.

After taking 21 wickets in his last two Tests and the suspension of Abdur Razzak, Shakib has been quickly elevated from a bit-part left-arm to the team's premier spinner and will be playing as that when the Tigers face Sri Lanka in the first Test at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur tomorrow.

But Shakib is aware of the challenges facing him when he takes on a batting line-up that plays orthodox spin as a matter of course. Sri Lanka boasts the likes of Muttiah Muralidaran and Ajantha Mendis, spinners who defy definition and make life difficult even for their own batsmen in the nets.

"They are a top side in any case but they are especially good against spin," said the 21-year-old Shakib.

"I have bowled well against New Zealand and South Africa but Sri Lanka are a different proposition. I was a part-timer when I faced

them last time," he admitted, adding that he is still working hard on his batting.

Fellow left-arm spinner Enamul Haque, who is playing his first-class cricket this season in the Ranji Trophy after being roped in by Maharashtra, might as well partner him and Shakib believes the Sylheti is as good as Razzak.

"Enamul is a good replacement and I think his experience from India will help him," said Shakib.

The man in question also believes that he has gained a lot mentally during his stint in western India.

"You know the level of cricket I have played in India recently will really help me because it is almost of international standard. Preparing for those matches have made me mentally strong and I believe I can now handle pressure better," said Enamul, who has played twelve Tests till date and comes into the Tigers squad on the back of five wickets he picked up in the Super League match against Karnataka that ended on December 21.

While Bangladesh's spin stock is in transition, the same cannot be said of the opponents although the 'mysterious' Mendis is missing.

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ROLL OF HONOUR

Season	Champions
1999-00	Chittagong
2000-01	Biman
2001-02	Dhaka
2002-03	Khulna
2003-04	Dhaka
2004-05	Dhaka
2005-06	Rajshahi
2006-07	Dhaka
2007-08	Khulna

POINTS TABLE

Team	M	W	L	D	Pts
Rajshahi	10	5	2	3	101
Barisal	10	4	1	5	101
Khulna	10	4	3	3	90
Dhaka	10	3	3	4	85
Chittagong	10	1	3	6	73
Sylhet	10	0	5	5	64



In football the World Club Cup was first contested in 1960 with Real Madrid being crowned world champions.



Ehsan Mani

(Former ICC president)
"What I fear is that Pakistan is being pushed to the brink of isolation and Pakistan will have to do something about it."



STAR Cricket

Australia v South Africa
Second Test, Day One
Live from 5:30am (Friday)



Citycell B. League
Mohammedan v Arambagh
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Time: 4:30pm

Reds ride on Walid

SPORTS REPORTER



Muktijoddha Sangsad showed signs of putting an end to their struggle in the Citycell B. League when the limping giants recorded their second victory in the competition yesterday.

Walid Khan slammed a 40-minute winner as the Reds defeated Chittagong Abahani by a solitary goal at the Bangabandhu National Stadium to open up a four-point gap with bottom-table Khulna Abahani.

Still at second from bottom with seven points -- one adrift of Arambagh -- the victory would inspire the club to put behind their eight defeats so far in 11 encounters.

Muktijoddha fielded four new players, enrolled during the mid-season transfer window, in their first match of the second leg and although former national striker Saifur Rahman Moni appeared just two minutes from time, Ugandan defender Michael Dbumba, centre-back Deen Mohammed and Dhaka Mohammedan's former Nigerian keeper Paul James made their impacts.

It was Dbumba who opened the up the rival

defence during a brilliant run from the midfield. After taking a pass from Biddut, the Ugandan weaved his way through three Chittagong defenders and switched the ball to an unmarked Walid who shot the ball into the near post to separate the two sides five minutes from halftime.

Walid had also orchestrated Muktijoddha's first league win, scoring in their 1-0 victory against Rahmatganj in the first leg.

Chittagong Abahani, who won their home match against the Reds 1-0, enjoyed superior ball possession after the break and Sakawat Rony, scorer of the first-leg match, created two chances for his attacking partners.

However, Mithun fluffed a great chance in the 66th minute when the young striker lost control after receiving the ball in front of lone keeper James. Five minutes later, Rony picked up Ismail whose header went inches above the crossbar. There was no respite for Muktijoddha but the visitors failed to get an equaliser when Rony himself put his header on a cross wide four minutes from the final whistle.

It was Chittagong Abahani's fourth loss in 11 matches that saw the port city side stick to 13 points at seventh place.



PHOTO: STAR

Muktijoddha striker Rokonzaman Kanchan is under pressure as he heads the ball during his side's B. League match against Chittagong Abahani at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. The Reds won 1-0.

Gambhir jumps into Test top 10

PTI, Dubai

Opener Gautam Gambhir's stupendous year with the willow helped him jump 10 spots to 10th in the ICC Test Rankings Wednesday, making him the highest-ranked Indian batsman in the list.

The diminutive Delhi batsman has scored more than 1,000 runs this calendar year, including three hundreds in his last four Tests.

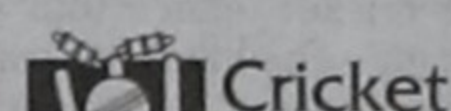
Gambhir, who made 179 and 97 in the second and final Test against England at Mohali, amassed 361 runs in the two-match series against England at an average of 90.25.

The 27-year-old was in 37th place in October but had rocketed 27 places since then after scoring 824 runs in five Tests at an average of 82.4.

However, it is downside for his more famous teammates. Virender Sehwag (13th) and

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2008: S Africa, Stanford and decline of Aussies



AFP, London

South Africa had every reason to look back fondly on 2008, a year in which Allen Stanford became a name known to all cricket fans and the once all-conquering Australia came back to the pack.

Even before the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne started, the Proteas had arguably completed their best year since the end of their apartheid-induced exile in 1991.

Their six-wicket win against Australia in the Perth series opener, where South Africa chased down 414 to record the second-highest fourth innings winning total in Test history, was the latest of several impressive results on the road this year.

They shared the spoils in India and then enjoyed a first series win in England since 1965 as the Proteas, led from the front by batsman Graeme Smith, began to rid themselves of their unwanted tag of 'chokers'.

With India, inspired by Virender Sehwag and Sachin Tendulkar, getting 387 to beat England at Chennai, the question, as the year ended with a dearth of truly great bowlers, was what now constituted an unassailable target?

Here perhaps was a sign of the beneficial effect of Twenty20 on Test cricket -- teams were chasing totals that would have

overawed their predecessors.

How beneficial the Stanford Twenty20 was to anyone but the Caribbean Superstars who thrashed England by 10 wickets to claim the million dollars-a-man winner-takes-all prize, was a much-debated point.

In a year which saw the launch of the Indian Premier League, it was hard to think cricket could engage in a more nakedly commercial enterprise.

Yet from the moment Stanford arrived at Lord's in June with a box full of millions of

dollars and proclaiming his Twenty20 'Super Series' could crack the US television market, the Texan billionaire's intentions were clear.

Stanford -- who freely admitted he found Tests 'boring' -- was slammed for bouncing the wife of one of the England players on his knee during the Antigua matches and by the end of the year he was reviewing his cricket commitments.

In the Test arena, Australia looked what they were: a team without two of the best bowlers cricket had known in the now retired duo of Shane Warne and Glenn McGrath.

That made life tricky enough for Australia captain Ricky Ponting who endured a difficult 2008.

First Ponting, still a superb batsman, was a leading figure in the row over whether India's Harbhajan Singh, ultimately cleared of the charge, had racially abused Andrew Symonds.

Then, as if losing 2-0 in India -- themselves beaten at home by Sri Lanka -- wasn't bad enough, Ponting was accused of putting himself before the team by employing part-time bowlers in the fourth Test at Nagpur so as to avoid a slow over-rate induced suspension from the ensuing first Test against New Zealand.

Elsewhere Smith, who as a 22-year-old skipper saw off one England captain in Nasser Hussain, saw off another in Michael Vaughan. England's Ashes-winning leader of 2005

had struggled for fitness and, latterly, form in the intervening three years.

Meanwhile, in 2008, England couldn't beat anyone in a Test series other than New Zealand, one of the five-day game's weakest teams, who saw John Bracewell quit as their coach.

Kevin Pietersen took over from Vaughan and led England to five straight wins over South Africa (one Test and four one-dayers), the land of his birth.

Even more importantly, he helped persuade England to return to India after

the Mumbai attacks -- a reminder that India, cricket's commercial powerhouse, and the world game need one another.

New Zealand's series with the West Indies would have been forgettable but for the Black Caps' Daniel Flynn, on 95 and in sight of a maiden Test hundred, becoming the first cricketer to be given out leg before by television replay in a Test.

Neither team were fans of a system open to abuse as players, not officials, initiated the referral process.

Pakistan became a no-go area for top sides on security grounds while Zimbabwe, despite their ongoing absence from Tests, sparked the early departure of International Cricket Council chief executive Malcolm Speed.

The Australian exited following the global governing body's failure to take significant action after an audit questioned Zimbabwe Cricket's finances.

Speed saved one of his most interesting comments for when he was out of office, saying India should not be regarded as cricket's bogeyman.

"Cricket is the most popular sport by a factor of about 30 in the second-most populous country in the world.

"The game needs to find ways to use that unique selling point. There is too much fear of an Indian takeover and the power of the Indian administrators."



GRAEME SMITH



RICKY PONTING