

Abahani almost there

SPORTS REPORTER



Abahani remained on course for their second successive B. League title when they crushed Brothers Union 3-0 yesterday to take an unassailable lead in the points table.

Emeka Christian struck a brace and Abul Hossain scored his second league goal as the defending champions also took sweet revenge of a 2-0 defeat to Brothers in the first leg.

Amalesh Sen's league leaders now have 44 points after 14 wins from 18 games and they need just one point from their last two games to seal the championship.

Even if the Sky-Blues lose both their matches, they would remain atop and set play-offs for the title, only if nearest rivals Sheikh Russel and Mohammadan -- now trailing by nine points -- win their remaining three matches.

The match between the table-toppers and the fourth-placed side at the Bangabandhu National Stadium attracted a very scanty crowd but Abahani began brighter against the Oranges, who failed to keep their promise to put the fellow giants to the test.

Abahani won four corners in the first ten minutes and Nigerian midfielder Emeka, now joint top scorer with Russel's Alfaz, came close twice to open the scoring. However, the 14-goal

marksman failed to control a centre by Emily inside the box and saw his scorching first-time volley on an Ibrahim cross shielded by rival defender Mishu from the face of the goal.

Brothers, who have now suffered their third loss to remain on 28 points, raised hopes from a counter attack by Aurup at the right wing but Abahani's Ghanaian centre-back Samad cleared the low cross for a corner before it could reach a rushing Henry Quaye.

Emeka was then denied by Zia's superb save at the near post on the half hour after the Nigerian headed Ibrahim's looping cross from close.

The pressure told in the 35th minute with the indefatigable Ibrahim initiating the move in the middle. The Ghanaian lost possession but won it back to send the ball to Waly Faisal, who escaped down the left, crossed the ball waist high for Emeka to storm into the box with long strides and stab a header into the far post.

Abahani went into the break with a two-goal cushion as Abul beat an offside trap, latched on to a through by Ibrahim down the middle and drove a right-footer into the roof of the net from 15 yards in the stoppage time. It was the midfielder's first goal of the league at their home ground after he had scored against Farashganj in Narshingdi in their second match.

With the championship bout against Russel just three days away, the Sky-Blues did not push hard for a third goal and coach Amalesh pulled

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PHOTO: STAR

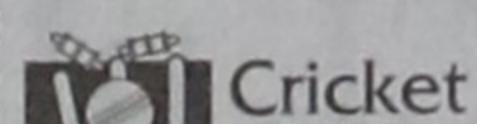
Abahani's Nigerian midfielder Emeka shoots past Brothers goalkeeper Shakil (C) for his second goal as Joy (L) looks on during their Citycell B. League match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

DIV I T20

Khelaghbar clinch title

SPORTS REPORTER

Premier T20 semis today



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Bangladesh captain Mohammad Ashraful and his deputy Mashrafe Bin Mortaza lock horns today when the first semifinal of the Premier Division Twenty20 tournament takes place at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

Ashraful will face a tough task against his national team sidekick when his side Gazi Tank meet defending champions Abahani, who stormed into the last four with an unbeaten note, in the first semifinal starting at 9:30am.

The second semifinal between Biman and Mohammadan starts at the same venue from 1:30pm.

The tournament so far failed to produce any real flavour of the latest version of the game due to lack of run riots in the group stage but both Ashraful and Mashrafe hoped there would be fireworks today.

"Hope it would be a good match. Abahani have been playing good and are unbeaten but we also played some impressive cricket on way to semis. We lost only one match against Biman but it was because of poor fielding, so we are looking forward to reach the final," said Ashraful, who returned among runs in the tournament after poor showing in the international scene.

Earlier, Khelaghbar put their opponents to bat first and Shawon gave a perfect start by removing two openers with the scoreboard reading 26 runs. Kalabagan failed to recover from the early hiccup and were bundled out for 90 in 18.3 overs.

Enamul Haque was the other successful bowler with two for 21.

The highest 18 runs came from number eight Shehab Ahmed.

In reply, Khelaghbar also made a poor start when they lost three wickets for 20 but a 36-run fourth wicket partnership between Aslam and Zakaria consolidated their position.

Zakaria made 18 off 21 balls with the help of two boundaries.

BRIEF SCORES

KALABAGAN: 90 all out in 18.3 overs (Imteazur 12, Kalim 13, Shehab 18, extras 7; Shawon 2-15, Enamul 2-21, Aslam 2-8).

KHELAGHAR: 91-6 in 20 overs (Aslam 49 not, Zakaria 18, extras 5; Shehab 2-11, Rokibul 2-11).

Result: Khelaghbar won by four wickets.

Balaji's return

AFF, New Delhi

Seamer Lakshmpathy Balaji was on Monday drafted into the Indian team for the rest of the Sri Lanka tour, marking the bowler's return to international cricket after nearly four years.

Balaji, 27, will replace seamer Munaf Patel, who is suffering from a groin injury, for the remaining three one-day matches and a Twenty20 international, the Indian cricket board said in a statement.

Balaji last played for India in a one-day match against Sri Lanka in August 2005, before his career was interrupted by a stress fracture in his back.

The right-arm seamer returned to domestic cricket this season and bowled well enough to force the selectors to recall him as Patel's replacement.

Patel will return home for rehabilitation and is expected to be out of action for seven to 10 days, the statement said.

Balaji, who made his India

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PHOTO: STAR

The Pakistan women's cricket team pose for photos after arriving at the ZIA International Airport in Dhaka yesterday. The Pakistani women are on a two-week tour of the country to take part in a tri-nation tournament involving Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

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