

# Rangers rule after glam opening

MOHAMMAD ISAM

Naeem Islam sizzled on a balmy night to force a six-wicket win for Rajshahi Rangers over the Cyclones of Chittagong in the opening match of the National Cricket League (NCL) T20s at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Naeem's explosive innings was the only match to the spectacular pyrotechnics that took place earlier in the evening during the opening ceremony.

Rajshahi's Australian opener Aiden Blizard tore into Cyclones' marquee recruit Shoaib Akhtar from the first over as Rajshahi went to work in their chase of 133 runs and finished it in 17.1 overs. Chittagong had little say in the proceedings, especially with a lop-sided bowling attack. Akhtar suffered badly, giving away 31 runs from his three overs.

Blizard struck six boundaries in his 17-ball 25 and the rapid knock set the scene for Rajshahi's Icon Player Naeem to take his team home.

The right-handed batsman hacked and smote eight boundaries, being especially brutal to the left-arm spinners as he remained unbeaten on 56 off 37 balls. In one Faisal Hossain over, Naeem struck four consecutive boundaries.

Faisal, Nasir Hossain, Sharifullah and Enamul Haque all took a wicket each.

However, the big talking point of yesterday was the opening ceremony at the home of cricket, which overshadowed the game particularly with a sensational display of fireworks at the end. It was a long drawn out affair that was inaugurated by Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, who declared the NCL T20s open in a thick with atmosphere at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium. Models and luminaries added glamour to the occasion as ATN Records pulled out all the stops to make the event a success. The event was finely choreo-



HE IS DAMN SERIOUS ABOUT IT: Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (L) missed a few home and away series of the Tigers due to injury. Also he did not get a chance to show his worth for Kolkata Knight Riders in the billion-dollar Indian Premier League. However the pace spearhead of the country here looks adamant to make an impression in the National Cricket League Twenty20s that got off to a colourful start at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

graphed as the teams entered the stadium in the midst of fire spinners and dancers.

The game itself was drab in comparison to the opening ceremony that had preceded it, with only Uttam threatening to put the fireworks in the shade with a similarly spectacular display of hitting. He along with national opener Tamim Iqbal plundered 17 off the first over from Shafiqul Islam to give the tournament a dream start; which ultimately flattered to deceive.

This was because for the most part the Rajshahi left-arm spinners stifled the Chittagong batsmen's shot-making with big-hitters like Tamim, Aftab Ahmed and Pakistani recruit Khurram Manzoor all failing to make any headway.

Sohrawardi Shuvo and Nadif Chowdhury picked up two wickets each while Mukhtar Ali won the man-of-the-match award for his three-wicket haul. Shafiqul also chipped in with two wickets later on.

But it wasn't just the left-arm spinners who were the big force in the 20 overs. The Rangers' fielding was nothing short of brilliant with all chances being taken. Shuvo also affected a brilliant run-out from point and Sanjamul took an excellent diving catch to get rid of Nasir Hossain.

The spinners were brought in early after Uttam and Tamim's explosive start. But Tamim became the first opener to depart, caught at deep mid-wicket by Junaed Siddiqui off Shuvo.

Uttam and Aftab added 35 for the second wicket but soon after, Aftab missed a straight delivery from Shuvo for 6. Chittagong's foreign player Manzoor followed suit from a Nadif in-ducker.

Captain Nafis Iqbal held the innings together, with his sedate 24 before he too tried to blast Mukhtar Ali, only to hole out to cover where Aiden Blizard took a low catch.

Uttam smashed three sixes, including two off Shuvo -- one of them landing in the stands beyond mid-wicket. The right-hander from

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Crestfallen Pakistan speedster Shoaib Akhtar waves to the crowd at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium before the opening ceremony of the NCL T20s yesterday. Shoaib, out of the Pakistan team for a long time, is featuring for Cyclones of Chittagong in the competition.

PHOTO: STAR

## SANIA-SHOAIB SAGA Wedding now in 'fatwa' tangle

FIANS, Hyderabad

Tennis star Sania Mirza's marriage with Pakistani cricketer Shoaib Malik has sparked another row with some religious scholars issuing a 'fatwa' or religious edict against their living and mingling freely even before the marriage is solemnised.

Sunni Ulema Board, a group of religious scholars, said both the sportspersons were bringing disrepute to Islam and Muslim community through their actions.

The board issued a 'fatwa' terming their actions haram (forbidden) and asked Muslims to stay away from the April 15 marriage.

"The kind of actions the two are indulging in like living together and addressing media together are haram in Islam," said Moulana Haseebul Hasan Siddiqui, a religious scholar.

Shoaib has been staying at Sania's residence in Hyderabad for more than a week and television pictures showed them dancing and doing physical exercises together.

"Islam permits a man and woman to see each other only once before marriage and it does not allow them to live together and indulge in this sort of activities before marriage," he said.

He felt that all the actions of Sania and Shoaib were bringing a bad name to Islam and the Muslim community and advised invitees to stay away from their marriage as men and women would mingle freely there in total disregard of Islamic principles.

"Muslims should stay away from such gatherings where men and women mingle freely in violation of Islamic principles," he said.

The religious scholar had also issued a 'fatwa' against Sania Mirza for favouring pre-marital sex three years ago. He had opined that Sania committed a big sin by promoting 'zina' (fornication). The tennis ace, however, denied making the remarks.

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## Mumbai in semifinals

SPORTS REPORTER

Mumbai Indians became the first team to ensure a semifinal berth as they rode on captain Sachin Tendulkar's prolonged purple patch to beat Rajasthan Royals by 37 runs at the Sawai Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur last night.

The master batsman slammed 89 unbeaten runs off 59 balls with ten fours and two sixes as Mumbai posted 174-5. The home team never got going as they were restricted to 137-8 in 20 overs.

Aditya Dole scored 30 off 17 balls but that came too late as the Rajasthan chase fizzled in the face of some tight Mumbai bowling, led by Zaheer Khan's two wickets at the top.

This is the first time in three seasons that the Mumbai Indians have made it to the last four after two lacklustre campaigns.

BRIEF SCORES

MUMBAI INDIANS: 174-5 in 20 overs (Tendulkar 89\*, Duminy 31; Watson 3-37).

RAJASTHAN ROYALS: 137-8 in 20 overs (Dole 30, Voges 28; Zaheer 2-17).

Result: Mumbai won by 37 runs.

## Barisal's small target

SPORTS REPORTER

The Barisal Blazers are eagerly waiting to blaze in the National Cricket League T20s with their 'youthful but balanced side' after having set their sights on the last four in the latest version of the game.

"We don't have star players, but we have talented players alongside some experienced players, who all have individual target of securing a place in the National Academy, or Bangladesh A team or coming back to the national fold. It is a balanced side and we are hoping to provide a vibrant performance in the competition," Barisal Blazers captain and former Bangladesh team vice-captain Shahriar Nafees said during the official press conference of the franchise at a city hotel yesterday.

The Blazers will launch their campaign taking on Dhaka Dynamites in one of three matches at Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium today.

"We don't want to put pressure on the shoulders of the players by setting a big target of such as becoming champions or runners-up and that's why we first want to qualify for the semifinals and then think of the final," said Nafees. "All the players are committed to proving themselves to bring good results as well as return the faith which the owners of the franchise have laid in us," said the 24-year-old captain.

The Barisal Blazers are mainly consisted of under-19 players along with some experienced players like Nafees, Rokibul Hasan, Ziaur Rahman, Syed Rasel and Nazimuddin, who all

have experience of playing in the national team and Rokibul will be deputy for Nafees.

"Look back at the recent performances of our players, who all were at their peak form though they have not achieved a big name yet but already have been putting their signs of growing up," told the left-handed opener.

Nafees also believed team spirit will take them to their destination as they have been concentrating on team performance rather than individual feats.

Coach Minhazul Abedin Nannu was also hopeful about his charges and said that it was a right combination of youth and experience.

The Blazers were bought by a few number of cricket lovers, who have separate businesses, at the eleventh hour by Bangladesh Sports Consortium and one of its directors Sheikh Bashir Ahmed said that some likeminded persons bought the franchise for their love for the game of cricket.

"We might have made some mistakes because we hurriedly bought the side because of our love for cricket as well as desire to give something to cricket. No business motivation is involved," said Bashir.

He also urged the city dwellers who hail from Barisal to go to the venue to support the Blazers who will carry the heritage of the region.

Replying to a query, Bashir said that they had yet to confirm any foreign players, but been trying to rope in some cricketers who are on the sidelines of the Indian Premier League's franchises. He also informed that they had a talk with Sourav Ganguly, the captain of Kolkata Knight Riders, in a bid to rope in players from his side.

**What to WATCH**

**Max & SuperSport2**

Indian Premier League  
Deccan Chargers v  
Bangalore Royal Challengers  
Live from 8:30pm

**ATN Bangla**

NCL T20s  
Chittagong v Sylhet  
Live from 9:30am  
Dhaka v Barisal  
Live from 2:30pm

**DAY'S EVENT**

NCL T20s  
Chittagong v Sylhet  
Time: 9:30am  
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium  
Dhaka v Barisal  
Time: 2:30pm  
Venue: Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium

Rajshahi v Barisal  
Time: 10:30am  
Venue: BKSP-2  
Club Cup Hockey  
First Semifinal  
Mohammedan v Sonali Bank  
Time: 3:00pm  
Venue: Maulan Bhasani Hockey Stadium

## BARCA AT THE SUMMIT Real left in a Messi

THE GUARDIAN



This time Lionel Messi scored only once and it was not a particularly special goal, yet it could prove as significant as the four against Arsenal. The architect of Barcelona's victory was the peerless Xavi Hernández but it was Messi's 40th goal of a spectacular season that set Barcelona on the way to victory in the match that was declared the title decider.

Real Madrid's 14-game winning run at the Bernabeu came to an end and the feeling as disappointed fans left early was that so too did their chances of winning the league.

At full time Barcelona's players formed a huddle and bounced up and down celebrating, before saluting their fans high in the north end of the stadium. There are still seven games remaining but Pep Guardiola's side now have a three-point lead, plus an immovable head-to-head advantage having beaten Madrid twice. Such has been the dominance of Spain's two footballing behemoths, who between them had collected 67 of the last 72 points, that it is understandable that

most believe that the lead is unassailable.

For all the build-up, this was not a classic. Guardiola will not care. Absences and the ferocity of their rivalry make the victory more satisfying. With Zlatan Ibrahimovic ruled out with a torn muscle, Guardiola revolutionised his starting XI, with Dani Alves shifted out of position, pushed into an advance role as part of a front three with Messi and Pedro. It rarely worked and at the start of the second half the coach changed his mind, returning Alves to full-back, swapping Carles Puyol from right to left, and advancing Maxwell.

With Messi dropping off, linking up play, Barcelona were often effectively playing with no forward. It was a sadly eloquent comment on Guardiola's lack of faith in Thierry Henry. To start with, Barcelona looked toothless but ultimately the key to this game would be in the middle. And Messi was able expose Madrid. He should have had a penalty after 11 minutes, yet those minutes were difficult times for Barcelona. Madrid began with intensity, snapping into challenges, quick and direct. Barcelona were unable to settle into their normal rhythm of possession. For a while, they appeared incapable of escaping their own half. Even Victor Valdes was forced to hit long and the ball invariably came straight back.

### RESULTS

Malaga 1 (Caicedo 16)	Sevilla 2 (Cala 65, Lolo 84)
Tenerife 0	Valladolid 0
Villarreal 1 (Godin 16)	Sporting Gijon 0
Xerez 0	Getafe 1 (Rafa 60)
Real Madrid 0	Barcelona 2 (Messi 32, Pedro 55)

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WHO CAN STOP HIM? Barcelona sensation Lionel Messi (C) glides past the challenges of Real Madrid midfielders Xabi Alonso (R) and Fernando Gago during their El Clasico clash at the Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP