

Stage set for an intriguing finale

Abahani-Muktijoddha title decider today

SPORTS REPORTER



The excitement of the just-concluded European Championships is set to spill over to the domestic front today where all is poised for a mouthwatering finish to the Grameenphone Bangladesh Premier League when three-time champions Abahani and star-studded Muktijoddha Sangsad battle it out in the virtual championship-deciding match.

The last day of this year's professional league will produce a new champions if the Reds beat the Sky Blues, who however require only a draw to lift the title for a fourth time after a success-lorn year.

Abahani have won the first three of the four professional league titles so far, but never have been pushed to the brink to decide the title on the last day. Muktijoddha, on the other hand, have come close to winning the title last year when they pushed Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club before finishing second a point behind the eventual winners. Today's match has all the ingredients to make it the most entertaining and intriguing clash in domestic football in recent history. The potential mouthwatering

clash takes place at the Bangabandhu National Stadium from 5:30pm and will be telecast live on BTv.

Abahani have a slight advantage as they start the title-decider on 44 points, one ahead of Muktijoddha and a draw would suffice them for the silverware. However, the Sky Blues are not taking the defensive route as they want to end the season as deserved winners with win over their rivals.

The Dhanmondi-based outfit started the second leg with a three-point lead over Muktijoddha and once went six points clear of their nearest rivals, had a few hiccups in the latter part of the league which saw them drop seven points while Muktijoddha kept up the charge and closed the gap to a single point.

"If the team had been consistent in the second leg, the title could have been decided much earlier but we don't want to look at the past rather we want to win in the final match against Muktijoddha," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

Abahani's Iranian coach Ali Akbar also echoed the sentiment of Rupu saying, "When you want to become champions, you should play like a champion. Our fans want to see us win in style. Our only target is to win

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PHOTOS: STAR

Abahani (top) and Muktijoddha Sangsad (bottom) players train on Monday at the Abahani ground and Military Museum ground respectively, on the eve of today's title-deciding match of the Grameenphone Bangladesh Premier League.



HISTORY MAKERS: Spanish players celebrate with the Henri Delaunay Trophy after becoming the first country to successfully defend the European title at the Olympic Stadium in Kiev on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

The best-ever by now?

THE GUARDIAN



It is only right that a unique team, as Spain are, should stand alone in the pantheon. No international side has won three major tournaments in a row before, unless you count the Olympics in the 1920s and 1930s. Since Euro 2008 they have exerted a numbing superiority over every team they have played and even those who advocate Satan for a living might struggle to argue that Spain are not the strongest international side of all.

Spain's miracle has been drastically to minimise the variables of knockout football and make themselves near to unbeatable. Even a more talented Barcelona side could not come close to such invincibility. Spain have not conceded a goal in a knockout game since 2006. Iker Casillas's net has been untouched for sixteen and a half hours.

Before Sunday night Spain had not been so spectacular at the other end, with only eight goals in seven games at the 2010 World Cup and eight in five here, yet their method of killing teams softly has an irresistible logic. The level of sustained concentration required to defend against them is almost indecent, a game of Tetris that can end only one way. If such demands were evident in an ordinary job, the Health and Safety office would have a field

day.

The side generally perceived as the greatest of all, Brazil 1970, were the antithesis of Spain; their defence was hopeless and their attack peerless. They cannot match Spain's longevity. With no Copa America staged between 1967 and 1975, Brazil won just one trophy. At the 1974 World Cup they had turned into a thuggish rabble.

Spain have evolved significantly over the last four years, although their game can still be explained in one phonetically pleasing phrase: tiki-taka. Few sides have had such a concise identity, with Holland's Total Football in 1974 perhaps the only equivalent. Not since that team has football been so dramatically redefined.

Teams who win multiple tournaments usually add stars to their shirt, just above the badge. Some will feel Spain should add an asterisk. It is a strange thing on which to reflect after such a joyous, unfettered performance, yet Spain's display vindicated only the naysayers. Discussion about the B-word has become boring in itself -- it is surely more relevant to discuss whether Spain's matches are boring, a different point entirely -- even if it is interesting to note that the team's heartbeat and rhetorician, Xavi Hernandez, said "of course we were boring" at the 2010 World Cup, citing defensive opponents as the reason.

Spain's football is without prece-

dent in its velvet grace but it is difficult to argue persuasively that their matches have satisfied conventional notions of football entertainment -- goals, shots, engaging the viscera; that kind of thing.

Their play at Euro 2012 had felt cynical and clinical, in a different sense of the word from that usually used in football; a kind of extreme tiki-taka, or tiki-takanaccio. For much of the tournament the only excitement came from the partnership of Jordi Alba and the divine Andrés Iniesta, simply the most beautiful player in football history.

Italy's relatively aggressive tactics were influential, yet the way Spain subjected them to death by silk suggested a team that had been hiding some of their light under a bushel. For plenty, rightly or wrongly, Spain will be remembered as a side who engaged the brain more than the soul and who could, with their talent, have won three consecutive titles even more impressively than they did, a binary team whose games, before the final at least, had been so predictable as to be a bookmaker's nightmare.

That Spain are great is palpably not in question, not in sentient circles; whether they are one of the immortal sides remains open to debate. On Sunday night they supplied a signature performance, even if it was not quite up there with the greatest, like

EUROPE TOUR Anamul makes way for Shakib

SPORTS REPORTER

Young batsman Anamul Haque has made way for Shakib Al Hasan in one of two changes made by the selectors for the Tigers' tour to Europe later this month. Bangladesh Cricket Board yesterday made the announcement of the 15-member squad for the Twenty20 matches to be played against Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands.

Chief selector Akram Khan informed yesterday that Anamul will concentrate on the Under-19s World Cup campaign to be held in Australia next month. "He [Anamul Haque] has a lot of time in hand and I think if he plays in the age-level World Cup, it will bring more maturity to his game," said the former national captain.

The other change in the team is the return of pace-man Shafiqul Islam, who was out since the middle of the Asia Cup in March due to a shoulder injury. He replaces all-rounder Forhad Reza.

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Fed crawls into qtrs

AFP, London

Six-time Wimbledon champion Roger Federer shrugged off a rare medical time-out to defeat Xavier Malisse 7-6 (7/1), 6-1, 4-6, 6-3 on Monday to reach a 33rd successive Grand Slam quarterfinal.

The Swiss great, who goes on to face either Russian 26th seed Mikhail Youzhny or Denis Istomin of Uzbekistan for a place in the semifinals, had to come from two sets to love down to see off France's Julien Benneteau in the last round.

The 30-year-old appeared to be in serious trouble again after taking a 4-3 lead in the first set against Malisse, having to leave Centre Court to take a medical time-out where pain-killers were dispensed. After the resumption, he

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Lisicki stuns Sharapova

AFP, London



World number one Maria Sharapova crashed out of Wimbledon on Monday, while four-time winner Serena Williams and defending champion Petra Kvitova survived major scares to reach the quarterfinals.

Sharapova had been a finalist in three of the last four Grand Slams, and arrived at Wimbledon on a high after winning the French Open for the first time last month.

But the top seed came back down to earth with a bump on Court One as German 15th seed Sabine Lisicki avenged last year's Wimbledon semifinal defeat against the Russian with a 6-4, 6-3 fourth round victory. Lisicki had lost in the first round of her last four tournaments, but she has hit form at the right time and the 22-year-old's reward is a last eight meeting with compatriot and eighth seed Angelique Kerber.

Kerber demolished Kim Clijsters 6-1, 6-1 to reach the quarterfinals for the first time.

Such a humbling defeat was a cruel way for Belgium's Clijsters to say her Wimbledon farewell as the four-time Grand Slam winner prepares to retire after the US Open.

American sixth seed Williams narrowly avoided the same fate as Sharapova as she dug deep to defeat Yaroslava Shvedova 6-1, 2-6, 7-5 on Court Two.

Kvitova, who defeated Sharapova in last year's Wimbledon final to clinch her first Grand Slam title, had romped through the first week, dropping just 13 games.

But she had cause for concern in a 4-6, 7-5, 6-1 win over Italian 24th seed Francesca Schiavone.

Schiavone, a former French Open champion, was in control after taking the first set, but lost her cool when the match was allowed to continue despite rain causing both players to slip.

Kvitova, 22, took full advantage, snatching the second set and then sweeping to victory in the decider to book her place in the last eight for the third time.

Unseeded Austrian Tamira Paszek, winner of the grasscourt event at Eastbourne two weeks ago, beat Italy's Roberto Vinci, the 23rd seed, 6-2, 6-2 to book her place in the quarterfinals for the second successive year.

Paszek, who shocked former world number one Carolone Wozniacki in the first round, will

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Russia's Maria Sharapova is in dismay upon losing a point to Sabine Lisicki of Germany during their Wimbledon fourth round women's singles match at the All England Club in Wimbledon yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP