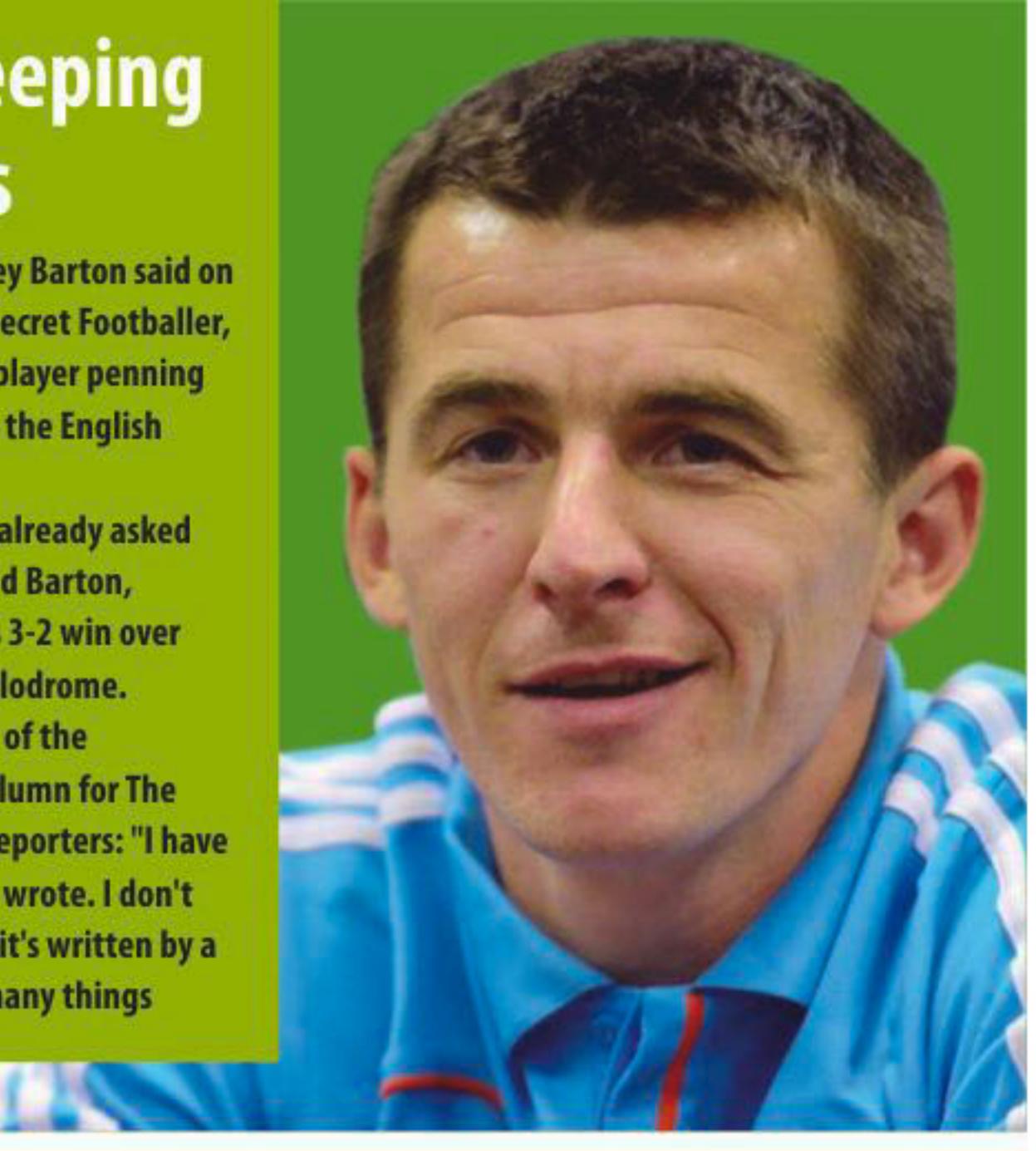


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Barton keeping no secrets

Marseille midfielder Joey Barton said on Saturday he is not the Secret Footballer, the nom de plume of a player penning an irreverent column in the English media.

"Many journalists have already asked me, but no, I'm not," said Barton, following his new side's 3-2 win over Montpellier at Stade Velodrome. Asked what he thought of the unidentified player's column for The Guardian, Barton told reporters: "I have never read anything he wrote. I don't believe it's real, maybe it's written by a journalist who knows many things."



'One more go at the Ashes'

SPORTS REPORTER

Australia batsman Brad Hodge began his stint in the second edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) on a positive note as his half-century propelled the Barisal Burners to an eight-wicket victory over the Khulna Royal Bengal yesterday. Hodge, who had a good run in the recently concluded Big Bash League in Australia, has been in a rolicking form in the shortest format of the game for a while now.

However, the 38-year-old who last played Test cricket in 2008 and appeared to have made a steady career in T20 cricket, expressed his desire to represent Australia in the Ashes. "I probably deserved to a play a little bit more (at

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Australian Brad Hodge plays one over mid-wicket during his match-winning knock of 53 for Barisal Burners against Khulna Royal Bengal in a BPL match at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Easy win for Burners

SPORTS REPORTER

It was a cracking straight drive by Azhar Mahmood that brought the curtains down on a one-sided Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) game at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium, where the Barisal Burners comfortably beat Khulna Royal Bengal by eight wickets yesterday.

Chasing a target of 143, Barisal's victory was based on an aggressive opening partnership worth 73 in 8.5 overs between Phil Mustard and Brad Hodge. Hodge, in his first game for Barisal this year, played a captain's innings as he scored a composed 53 off just 40 balls. Mustard provided ample support with his 35.

The highlight of Hodge's innings came

SCORES IN BRIEF

KHULNA ROYAL BENGALS: 142 for eight (Wessels 48, Nafees 43; Sunny 1-19, Kapali 1-18).

BARISAL BURNERS: 146 for 2 in 18.3 overs (Hodge 53, Mustard 35; Sanjamul 1-

in the seventh over when he upped the tempo with two fours and a six against slow-left armer Sanjamul Islam. Sanjamul however got his revenge when he bowled the batsman in the 13th over. The runs continued to flow despite the wickets as Barisal's foreign recruits Joe Denly and Azhar Mahmood almost immediately took a liking to Khulna's bowling attack. Denly finished with a fluent 30 off 28 balls while Mahmood scored 21.

Earlier, Khulna, after deciding to bat first rode on a 58-run partnership between Shahriar Nafees and Ricky Wessels for the second wicket to reach 88 for 2 at the end of 11 overs.

Nafees began the onslaught by smacking Nazmul Islam Apu for four boundaries in the 10th over. That particular over saw the ball disappear in almost all the corners of the park as Nafees began with a straight hit, followed by fours through long off, mid-wicket and a cut through point. Wessels joined the party in the 12th over smacking two sixes of pacer Kabir Ali.

Khulna's momentum though came to a halt after Nafees was run out in the 12th over, off a Sabbir Rahman throw, as the

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Niaz regains Chennai lead

SPORTS REPORTER

GM Niaz Murshed regained the lead with 6.5 points, along with 8 other players, at the end of the 8th round of the Chennai Super Kings 5th International Grandmasters Chess Tournament in India yesterday. Another Bangladeshi GM Ziaur Rahman was in joint second position with 6 points. In the 8th round, Niaz beat IM Rahul Shetty of India while Zia beat FM Maheswaran of the same country.

Kazi Taherul Islam and Anisuzzaman Jewel earned 4 points each while Saif Uddin, Jamal Uddin of Titas and Rana Chowdhury earned 3.5 points each. Taher lost to Uma Maheswaran, Jewel lost to Satra Hardik, Lavli lost to Aniruddh Aiyenger, Jamal lost to Audi Ameyya, and Rana lost to M B Senbabu.

Cagers tame Pakistan

SPORTS REPORTER



The Bangladesh basketball team defeated Pakistan for the first time in its history to take a giant step towards claiming the 2nd South Asian Basketball Association (SABA) Championship yesterday. The hosts beat Pakistan by 77-68 points in a keenly contested and action-filled league match at the Dhanmondi Basketball Gymnasium yesterday.

Bangladesh, the runners-up of the first edition of the championship held in India in 2002, raised the roof of the gymnasium with a rousing victory over favourites Pakistan, thanks to a dazzling performance from Mithun Kumar Biswas, who scored the match-high 31 points.

Mithun was an absolute rage throughout the game as he hardly put a step wrong. He dodged the Pakistan players with utmost ease, hardly missed a penalty conversion and scored numerous two-pointers to consistently prop up the Bangladesh team whenever they were under pressure. The Navy man was happy with his match-winning performance and more for contrib-

uting to the team's success.

"It was my first match against Pakistan. We never beat them before, so I'm happy beyond words. Everyone played brilliantly, not only me," said the Navy man who plied his trade for Gregarious in the last premier league.

The man-of-the-match's namesake Mithun Kumar Sarker was the second-highest scorer with 17 points while Ahmed Jaan was the top-scorer for Pakistan with 25 points.

The match between the two favourites started cordially as both sides exchanged souvenirs, but soon the friendly atmosphere gave way to action as both sets of players played feverishly to stamp authority. Pakistan held the upper hand early taking a 20-17 lead in the first quarter, but the hosts hit back in the second by gaining a 36-29 advantage. The game swung back again as Pakistan staged a comeback, cutting down the lead to two points, but in the end it was the hosts and their superior technical display that outsmarted the physically superior Pakistanis.

Pakistan grumbled about the refereeing throughout and after the match, with their manager Colonel Butt being the

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Royals back from dead

SPORTS REPORTER

A brilliant all-round performance by Elton Chigumbura snatched a four-wicket victory for the Sylhet Royals in a game that had seemed headed towards Duranta Rajshahi for most parts of the match.

Chasing Rajshahi's 147, Sylhet looked dead and buried at 80 for 6 at the end of the 14th over. But inspired batting from Chigumbura and Nazmul Hossain Milon saw them home with five balls to spare.

The duo associated in the fastest fifty partnership of the game and was particularly harsh on Sean Ervine who bowled the decisive 17th over that yielded 18 runs. It changed the complexion of the game and with 27 needed of three overs, even Tamim Iqbal's bowling changes bought no results.

With two needed off the last over, Milon drove the winning runs through mid-wicket to bring home an improbable victory for the Royals.

It had looked different for Duronto Rajshahi whose young spinning quartet had bowled spectacularly, checking both the run rate and taking wickets at regular intervals. Rajshahi's spinners bowled a total of 14 overs and took six wickets but still failed to bring home the victory as Milon and Chigumbura picked their overs well to rack up the score in style.

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World number one Novak Djokovic (R) embraces his worthy opponent Swiss Stanislas Wawrinka who fought magnificently before losing the titanic five-setter 1-6, 7-5, 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 12-10 at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Abahani's futile return

ANISUR RAHMAN from Gopalganj



Thirty-five years ago, in 1978, Abahani's eleven starting players were hired to be part of the Jubilant Rangers Association team as they lined up in a title-deciding game against a local side from Gopalganj -- Friends Eleven.

But on that day, the country's most illustrious footballers came to Gopalganj and had to return home empty-handed after failing to get the better of the local side. Yesterday, Abahani returned to Gopalganj again, but still failed to get that elusive result; ending on a goalless draw against Muktijoddha Sangsada in their Grameenphone Bangladesh Premier League encounter at the Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni Football Stadium.

Despite an entertaining game

Abahani return to Gopalganj after 35 years but fail to get a victory



The last first-leg match of this year's Grameenphone Bangladesh Premier League between holders Abahani and Muktijoddha ended in a goalless draw at Gopalganj yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

in front of a packed house in the under-construction stadium, the game ended without a goal. But what was noteworthy was the vocal support rendered to a depleted Muktijoddha Sangsada. Some 5,000 spectators, who even took the rooftop of buildings and boundary walls, roared time and again when Muktijoddha launched attacks and when their players fell victims to tackles from the Sky Blues.

Abahani's playing eleven in yesterday's match was not as illus-

trious as the one which was hired by the Jubilant Rangers Association that comprised players like Salahuddin, Amal Sen, Chunnu, Rokib, Nannu, Ashraf, Khurshid Babul and Anwar. But they still had seven current national players as well as four foreign recruits and dominated the game against Muktijoddha, who lost their strength this season after losing 16 national players.

Despite this, Abahani could not

find the back of Muktijoddha net, thanks to some superb saves from

Muktijoddha's goalkeeper Ziaur Rahman and the failure of Abahani striker Sakhawat Hossain Rony.

Muktijoddha Sangsada could have won the game had their Brazilian Tyson Silva's curving shot not rattled the crosspiece and Abahani were pleased to secure a point and maintain their unbeaten run against Muktijoddha, in the professional football league since its introduction in 2007. The freedom fighters side held Abahani to a draw five times in a row in the professional football league and it was overall sixth draw for Muktijoddha, who have however suffered five defeats against Abahani in their 11 matches.

Having made Gopalganj their home venue, Muktijoddha Sangsada put up an impressive show and they are still unbeaten at home after winning against Mohammedan 3-1 and 1-0 against Arambagh as well drawing goalless against Team BJMC and Abahani.

"I thank the inhabitants of Gopalganj for supporting us whole-heartedly in every match and our consistent performance drew their attention," said

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AFP, Melbourne

Australian Open

The Grand Slam of Asia/Pacific

Novak Djokovic lived on in the fight to defend his Australian Open crown with an extraordinary five-hour, five-set win over Swiss Stanislas Wawrinka to reach the quarterfinals early Monday.

The Serb world number one had to dig deep to see off 15th-seeded Wawrinka's brave challenge before prevailing 1-6, 7-5, 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 12-10 in a draining 5hr 2min match that finished at 1:41 am local time.

Djokovic somehow has to regroup for his quarter-final on Tuesday against Czech fifth seed Tomas Berdych.

Wawrinka, the Swiss Davis Cup partner of Roger Federer, produced arguably his finest match to take the three-time Australian Open champion Djokovic to the brink in a desperately-fought 104-minute final set.

Wawrinka had lost his last 10 encounters with Djokovic going back to 2006 but he produced 69 winners and seven service breaks to have the Serb in deep trouble at times during the epic match.

But Djokovic was ultimately able to reach his 15th consecutive Grand Slam quarter-final and take his career five-set record to 18-6.

Wawrinka stunned the world number one with three service breaks to capture the opening set in just 25 minutes.

Djokovic broke Wawrinka's opening service in the second set but the shocks

continued when the top seed was broken for the fourth consecutive service game to level.

The Swiss, serving powerfully, fought off a break point to crucially hold serve in the third game and keep the pressure on Djokovic.

Djokovic, who had trouble keeping his footing during rallies, changed his shoes, but it mattered little as Wawrinka broke serve for the fifth straight time with a rippling backhand.

The Swiss was in the zone at 4-1 and could do little wrong as Djokovic probed for a way back into the match.

But the first chinks appeared when Wawrinka was broken serving for the second set as Djokovic began to get more into the play.

Wawrinka lost his serve for the third time in the set with a netted forehand and Djokovic served out to level the match.

Djokovic played an unbelievable point to break Wawrinka's first serve of the third set and the Serb celebrated extravagantly on the way back to his courtside chair.

The Swiss broke back in the next game but was broken in the ninth game with a powerful forehand and Djokovic served out for a two sets to one advantage with the tide turning his way.

But Wawrinka, troubled by groin and hamstring soreness, again rallied and slugged it out with the top seed without a break in serve as the fourth set went to a tiebreaker.

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