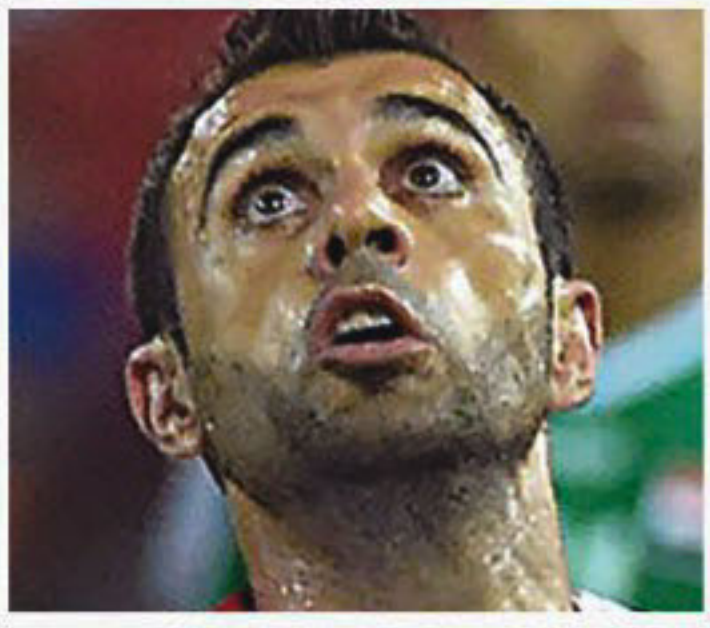


SPORT

DRINKING UNTO SEMI-COMA!

Ever drunk so much water you developed hypothermia and slipped into a sort of semi-coma? That's exactly what is alleged to have happened to Jordan striker Ahmad Hayel after their Asian Cup game against Iran, which Jordan lost 1-0. According to a Jordanian FA general secretary, doping testers demanded that Hayel drink "several litres of water" to help him produce a urine sample and the procedure left him in a "semi-coma and with hypothermia". He also claims Hayel was "unconscious" when he arrived at the team hotel after his test.

— INTERNET



TIGERS DOWN UNDER

Time for another comeback?

NAIMUL KARIM

Nasir Hossain's reaction to the news that he had been left out of Bangladesh's Test team, for the first time in his career, was quite a bitter one. "Let's distribute some sweets," a sarcastic Nasir quipped last October after the selectors decided to include him in Bangladesh's second-string squad for an invitational tour of India instead of the Zimbabwe series.

After remarkably making the World Cup squad earlier this month, the player admitted that he had gone through an immense struggle following his exclusion. While his teammates were busy cruising their way to a thumping series win over Zimbabwe, all Nasir could do was sit in one of the enclosed offices of the BCB and watch them in anguish.



NASIR HOSSAIN

The media played their role and caught on to the news with synchronised headlines. Titles such as 'The end of the Finisher' and 'Finisher's finished' were pasted across several columns. Nasir's comeback seemed a lot more improbable after Sabbir Rahman put in a few good performances, highlighted by his mighty sixes, against Zimbabwe.

A series of good performances in the Super Six round of the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) however, changed his fortunes. In a clash between Abahani and Mohammedan, Nasir smacked three consecutive sixes when Abahani required 50-odd from their last four overs, changing the

complexion of the game and finishing with a brilliant 81.

He followed that performance with a century a match later. He eventually became the only player in the World Cup squad who wasn't present during the Zimbabwe series.

According to Abahani coach Sarwar Imran, Nasir worked extremely hard to change his luck.

"When he was initially dropped from the national side and came to play in the league, he was really down. But when the Super Sixes began he took it upon himself to do well. As a coach you can't do much to motivate a player who has come this far. He needs to realise it himself and the fact that he did shows his calibre," said Sarwar, who was also Nasir's coach in different age-level teams.

Imran believed that it was the 'finisher's' tag, given to Nasir by the media, that led to his downfall in 2014 and eventual exclusion from the Zimbabwe series.

"When he entered the national team, he was all smiles. There was little pressure on him. When nobody expected him to perform, he played well and gradually everyone started calling him a finisher. I personally feel that's what led to his downfall. He could not live up to that expectation," said Sarwar.

Sarwar's statement stems from the fact that Nasir's batting average fell dramatically last year.

Between 2011 and 2013, Nasir's average of 43.1 surpassed every other player who played at least 10 matches in the same period. On the contrary, last year, he scored just 99 runs in four Tests, while averaging 20 in ODIs.

Having returned to the national team, Nasir remained cautiously optimistic.

"I performed in the DPL but there is a difference between that and international matches. I can only give the answer to your question when I perform in international matches," said Nasir yesterday, when asked if he was confident of returning to his role as 'finisher' in the side.

"It was difficult before and it still is. To consistently perform at that position is not possible. If you play well in one or two games you will become a hero. There's a 50-50 chance for you to play well there. You have to get down and immediately score runs. It's good if you do, but if you can't... you understand how it works," smiled Nasir.



With bouncy pitches awaiting the Tigers down under, a lot will depend on skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's opening spell. For the last three days the Tigers have been training in Mirpur in simulated conditions resembling that of Australia and New Zealand.

PHOTO: STAR

BANGABANDHU GOLD CUP

Draw, logo unveiling today

SPORTS REPORTER



Even though there is still a lot of work left, the Bangabandhu Gold Cup international football tournament will start gathering genuine pace from today when the groupings of the six-nation tournament will be held together with the unveiling of the tournament logo.

The long-awaited third edition of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup, which was last held in 1999 involving 12 teams, is scheduled to be held from January 29 to February 8 in Dhaka and Sylhet.

Out of the six teams, Bahrain and Singapore have confirmed that they would send their Olympic teams while Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and hosts Bangladesh are expected to field their senior national teams.

The game's governing body in Bangladesh is working out ways as to how the host side can get an easier passage to last four while at the same time hinting that they might either hold an open draw or make an announcement of grouping of the participating teams.

Whatever groupings are made today, make no mistake, the hosts will not have an easy task as they are just seven steps ahead of Sri Lanka in the latest FIFA rankings while Bahrain (110), Thailand (144), Malaysia (154), and Singapore (157) are believed to be much stronger opponents.

The Singapore U-23 team will be coming here after finishing fourth out of six teams in the OFC President's Cup and on the back of a 3-3 draw against Oman U-23 team and a 2-1 win over their Palestinian counterparts.

Bahrain U-23 will also come here with a good preparation after having played the U-23 Gulf Cup. They have already played two matches against Kuwait U-23 side, drawing one and losing the other.

Thailand and Malaysia are considered strongest teams of the tournament, with the former winning seven matches, losing three and drawing twice in 12 international matches they played last year against Singapore, Myanmar, Malaysia and Philippines.

Malaysia's record last year is good too as they managed to beat Vietnam 4-2 and Thailand 3-2. Altogether they have played 15 international matches with five wins, four draws and six defeats.

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are, on paper at least, similar in strength even though Bangladesh will enjoy the obvious home advantage against their oppositions.

WC training hartal-hit

SPORTS REPORTER

The Tigers got a two-day unscheduled break for the prevailing political situation in the country.

As per the original schedule the players were scheduled to practise today and tomorrow, but the team management has decided to keep them away from any kind of risk following the call for today's country-wide hartal.

The players will resume practice from Saturday.

The preparation camp for the ICC World Cup started last Monday and it will continue till January 22. After a day's break, the team is scheduled to fly for Brisbane on January 24.

Meanwhile, opener Tamim Iqbal was expected to return home last night after an operation on his injured left-knee.

The left-hander had a successful surgery on December 29 under the supervision of Australian surgeon David Young and after that he started his rehabilitation programme in Australia.

"We will check him and all his reports and the details of his rehab programme on Saturday and then decide the next course of action," said BCB's sports physician Debashish Chowdhury yesterday.

Ajmal action corrected?

AFP, Karachi

Suspended Pakistan spinner Saeed Ajmal on Wednesday claimed to have cleared a private bowling action test, but it remains uncertain whether he will feature in next month's World Cup.

The private test was conducted in a laboratory in Edgbaston in England and Ajmal now needs to clear an official reassessment in an International Cricket Council (ICC) accredited laboratory in Chennai, India on January 24.

The 37-year-old was suspended over illegal bowling action in September last year and last month withdrew from the World Cup to be held in Australia and New Zealand in February-March.

His withdrawal came after remedial work carried out under former Pakistan spinner Saqlain Mushtaq to alter his bowling action fell short.

Ajmal said he is confident he can clear the official test after success in the private assessment.

Eng keep winning

AFP, Canberra

Opener Ian Bell plundered 187 off 145 balls and Stuart Broad captured four wickets as England crushed the Prime Minister's XI by 60 runs in Canberra on Wednesday.

Bell starred in England's imposing 391 for six to set the PM XI a run chase of almost eight runs an over at Manuka Oval.

Bell was out on the penultimate ball of the innings, caught by Australian Test batsman and PM XI skipper Chris Rogers off paceman Jason Behrendorff as England made full use of winning the toss.

England then bowled out the home side for 331 off 48.1 overs in an encouraging hit out ahead of Friday's opening tri-series one-day international against Australia in Sydney.

Paceman Broad snaffled four for 40 off 8.1 overs, including two wickets in two balls and was denied a hat-trick late in the PM XI innings.

There were plenty of positives for England, working towards next month's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, with opener Moeen Ali and number three James Taylor both contributing 71.

Bell and Ali put on 113 for the first wicket before Bell combined with Taylor in a stand of 141 for the second.

Bell hit 20 fours and three sixes in the highest score by a batsman for England in a 50-over match.

Winner is anybody's guess

AFP, Sydney



The countdown is on for the 11th Cricket World Cup and the likely winner is still guesswork a month out in one of the most evenly-matched and security-conscious tournaments staged.

Australia will share the hosting of next month's cricket showpiece with New Zealand, 23 years after they co-hosted the event when Pakistan beat England in the final at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Hosts Australia and defending champions India may be the top two ranked teams but any of a half-dozen sides could lift the trophy on March 29 at the MCG.

The Australians, under the aggressive coaching of Darren Lehmann, are gunning for their fifth World Cup, while India stopped the Aussies from winning

a fourth straight title in the quarterfinals of the last tournament in India in 2011 and have winning recent ODI form.

There may be fitness doubts over skipper Michael Clarke, with an imposed deadline of February 21, but the Australians possess some of the biggest names in world cricket -- David Warner, Steve Smith, Brad Haddin and Mitchell Johnson.

It will be how the team handle the external pressures as the host nation that will decide their winning chances. The Australians didn't cope in 1992 and they missed out on the semifinals.

Sri Lanka, the 1996 champions, have by far the most experienced squad with Mahela Jayawardene, Kumar Sangakkara and Tillakaratne Dilshan all playing more than 300 ODIs.

South Africa, who have come close but have yet to win the World Cup, are always a threat under the captaincy of

AB de Villiers, while New Zealand and Pakistan have the firepower to cause problems in this format.

The jury is out on England's chances after they stripped Alastair Cook of the captaincy less than two months out from the World Cup and installed Eoin Morgan in his place.

But former Australia Test batsman Mike Hussey rates England as a 'dark horse.'

"They'll fly under the radar a little bit, no one's really giving them a lot of chance," Hussey said.

"They've got some really experienced, quality players but they've also got some really good underrated players, guys like Moeen Ali and Chris Woakes, very underrated and if they can just get their confidence up and move through the tournament, they can be a bit of a dark horse."



Juan Martin del Potro of Argentina pumps his fist to celebrate his victory against Fabio Fognini of Italy in the Sydney International tournament yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Del Potro ousts top seed

REUTERS, Sydney

Former US Open champion Juan Martin del Potro stepped up his comeback from another wrist surgery by toppling top seed Fabio Fognini at the Sydney International on Wednesday.

The 4-6, 6-2, 6-2 victory was only the second match the towering Argentine had played in 11 months since surgery to fix an issue with his left wrist and he felt the burn.

He will face qualifier Mikhail Kukushkin in the quarterfinals after the Kazak overcame sixth seed Pablo Cuevas of Uruguay 7-5, 7-5.



Rubel free to fly down under

COURT CORRESPONDENT



Pacer Rubel Hossain has no legal bar to fly to Australia to play the ICC World Cup which starts from February 14.

A Dhaka court yesterday cleared the way for the right-arm paceman after he was implicated in a case filed over sexual abuse by actress Naznin Akter Happy.

The court also exempted him from appearing before it for further proceedings and granted him leave to play abroad.

Metropolitan Magistrate Rashed Talukder passed the order after Rubel's lawyer Moniruzzam Asad submitted two petitions -- one for allowing him to go abroad to play in the upcoming ICC World Cup and the other for exempting him from appearing before the court in person until the completion of the competition.

Rubel was present at the court during yesterday's hearing. He landed in jail on January 8 and walked out of Dhaka Central Jail three days later on January 11.

Happy had tried to move the High Court to remove Rubel from Bangladesh's World Cup squad and seize his passport until settlement of the case, but the HC rejected her petition, finding no cogent grounds.

Happy filed the case under the Women and Child Repression Prevention Act on December 13, accusing Rubel of luring her into an affair with false promises of marriage. The act registered the fraudulence as a rape charge.