

SPORT



FRIENDS TODAY, FOES TOMORROW: Kalabagan KC captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (R) and his Abahani counterpart Tamim Iqbal enjoy a friendly chat during practice at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday, however they will take to the field on opposite sides in the Dhaka Premier League opener today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Lots to look forward to

Premier domestic competition begins today

SPORTS REPORTER

"Life becomes easy when you get a person like Mashrafe Bin Mortaza in your side." This was how veteran coach Jalal Ahmed Chowdhury cherished the presence of Mashrafe in Kalabagan Krira Chakra, who will take on giants Abahani in one of today's opening day fixtures of the Dhaka Premier Cricket League at the Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium in Fatullah. Kalabagan Krira Chakra may not be a big name in the fray but still their battle against Abahani will hog the spotlight on the opening day even though holders Prime Bank Cricket Club will face Gazi Group Cricketers at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur and Prime Doleshwar Sporting Club meet Cricket Coaching School at BKSP in the other matches.

The Tamim Iqbal-led Abahani is a stronger side on paper but when one camp possesses a man like Mashrafe, their chances cannot be dismissed. "He [Mashrafe] has nothing to prove. He is not only a good player and motivator but also a good human being. He needed very little time to gel the team. He has the ability to not only bring the best out of a player but extract more than hundred per cent from a player, so

we have hope," said Chowdhury.

The left-handed Tamim is also a fan of Mashrafe's captaincy, which is why he said that one man can change the whole team and he was ready to take the positives from watching Mashrafe's captaincy up close, having played under him in the national side. While Tamim was talking to the media yesterday, Mashrafe suddenly appeared as a journalist to ask a question about how he enjoys the captaincy. After saying many things, Tamim said: "The more matches I win the better my captaincy will be."

Thus, a positive ambience has been created around this season's most coveted 50-over competition, especially when players like Mashrafe and Tamim rated the league highly.

The availability of the national cricketers, except Shakib Al Hasan and Mustafizur Rahman, lent added flair to this season. Clubs already confirmed some foreign players but the focus will definitely be on the local heroes. Bangladesh's cricket fans are now more interested on their own heroes following last few years' international successes. Ask shrewd tactician Khaled Mahmud, coach of Abahani, and he will tell you from his vast experience that it is a different ball game in league cricket where even an average player can make a

big difference.

But everybody will be looking forward to see what kind of magic Mashrafe performs with a relatively ordinary side, whether Tamim can continue his good international form, whether Mushfiqur Rahim and Soumya Sarkar can regain theirs. Can the in-form Mahmudullah Riyad add more flair to the newfound belief in his batting, and can Sabbir Rahman enhance his reputation even further to fulfil his dream of being established as the number three Bangladesh batsman in all formats.

Another question that may be answered is whether Mominul Haque and Anamul Haque will be able to put pressure on the selectors or if any young player like Mossadek Hossain, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Nazmul Hossain can provide further food for thought.

How Taskin Ahmed, Arafat Sunny and Sanjit Saha bowls following their suspensions will also be another point of interest in the league as well as the extent of the Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB's) sincerity on their stated intention of cracking down on illegal bowling actions.

So this is not just a league to crown a champion, but also to get numerous answers that will shape Bangladesh cricket in the days to come.

Fizz keeps on rolling

STAR SPORT DESK

Mustafizur Rahman picking up wickets in every Indian Premier League match he has so far played is now a routine occurrence, but yesterday's performance was a little special.

Bangladesh's pace sensation and now Sunrisers Hyderabad's prized possession Mustafizur recorded his most stingy IPL figures to date, conceding just 19 runs in his four overs while picking up the wicket of Gujarat Lions all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja.

While his reputation as arguably the most promising youngster in the international circuit blossoms, his ability to read the batsman and execute last-second changes to his delivery has moved from the uncanny to the downright brilliant. He kept no less a swashbuckler than former New Zealand skipper Brendon McCullum to just one run off five balls in the first over he bowled, the fourth of the innings.

McCullum, who is uncompromising in his intent to punish every bowler who dares to run in while he has bat in hand, could not decipher the Fizz mystery. He was beaten twice by the cutter and by the end of the over, even McCullum would have been happy to have just survived.

In his third over -- the 17th of the innings, in line with skipper David Warner's plans to bowl him in the slog overs -- Mustafizur had his customary reward, bowling Jadeja with none other than the off-cutter. Jadeja, looking to slog on the leg side, was through his shot early and the rest was predictable.

In his last over he seemed to have found the answer every bowler must have been searching for when confronted with a batsman going down on one knee to scoop the ball. Mustafizur bowled a fast full toss at Akshdeep Nath's head and self-preservation took over, resulting in a dot ball.

Bhuvneshwar Kumar, who had figures of four for 29, will rightly get a lot of credit for keeping Gujarat to 135 for eight, but after the 10-wicket win Warner was equally grateful to the one he affectionately calls 'Fizzy' for being the ever-dependable death bowler.

'Those days are unforgettable'

Minhajul Abedin reminisces on DPL heyday

BISHWAJIT ROY



"It was a time when, in our hearts, we actually wanted to lose the toss so that we could escape the wrath of the supporters if we ultimately lost the match," recounted former national batsman Minhajul Abedin fondly. He was the quintessence of the Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League not only for his performances but also for his involvement in the drama that seemed to unfold every season, and yesterday he took a trip down memory lane while talking about the excitement, drama and suspense that once characterised the country's premier 50-over competition.

"It's simply impossible to forget those golden days when for the cricketers in the country the ultimate target was to perform in the Dhaka Premier Cricket League and play for the biggest club in the league. You know, we spent sleepless nights ahead of any crucial game in those days. Tension was all around the league from the players' transfers to the end of the league.

"The pressure from the supporters and club officials was such that this generation of cricketers simply can't imagine. Supporters threw stones and abused the players for a loss and on the other hand we got royal receptions from them [after victories]. I can still remember we needed three hours to reach Shapla Chattar from Bangabandhu National Stadium as the supporters welcomed us at the streets after my club Mohammedan Sporting Club won the match against bitter rivals Abahani in the 90s," Minhajul became nostalgic and added that there were countless such instances in the 1980s and 1990s.

Those sweet memories always come back to Minhajul, popularly known by his nickname Nannu, before the start of the league. But those days are gone. "In our day cricket fans were waiting for this competition. Undoubtedly this is not the case now," said one of the finest batsmen produced by the country. When this season's league commences today, the presence of the national cricketers will definitely create interest among cricket lovers but one cannot expect

the frenzy of old.

Minhajul identified a few things behind the lack of enthusiasm surrounding the league nowadays. "Yes, international cricket and our success in the international circuit has played a role, but the league's lustre was lost because it shifted to Mirpur from the more popular Bangabandhu National Stadium, where old-town residents as well as Motijheel office workers regularly filled up the seats. Suddenly we also took the league matches outside Dhaka and disrupted the calendar. November-December is the best season for the league. All these things combined



MINHAJUL ABEDIN NANNU

played the role behind the fall of interest," explained Minhajul.

Still he believes that the Dhaka Premier League is the backbone of Bangladesh cricket. "I think it's still an important tournament. The highest number of cricketers is taking part in this league and they earn money from here. It does still generate huge interest if it is well-planned."

"Club cricket is totally different from any other competition in the country and even from international cricket. Those days might be gone but still there is pressure in league cricket so a player can learn from here about playing under pressure," ended the former national skipper turned selector.

Brothers send MSC packing

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Mohammedan SC were eliminated from the group stages of the KFC Independence Cup after suffering a 3-2 defeat to Brothers Union in the final group match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

After a third defeat in five matches, Mohammedan have finished fourth in Group A with just six points, leaving both Chittagong Abahani and Muktiyoddha Sangsad a chance to progress to the semifinals. Sheikh Jamal DC Sheikh Jamal DC on the other hand have already advanced to the last four as group champions.

Both Chittagong Abahani and Muktiyoddha have nine points but Chittagong Abahani, who have a match against Sheikh Jamal DC today, need only a draw against the group leaders to confirm their semifinal berth.

The port-city outfit can also progress to the semifinals even if lose by a one-goal margin due to their superior goal difference against Muktiyoddha.

On the back of morale boosting 5-0 win over Chittagong Abahani in the previous match, the Black and Whites put up dismal performance against Brothers, who looked bright on the pitch, especially after the break.

Brothers took a deserved lead five minutes into the second half as

Mannaf Rabbi headed in a cross from Awudu Ibrahim. He doubled the lead two minutes with a tap-in after capitalizing on a pass from Nkowcha Kingsley.

Mohammedan hit back in the 54th minute as Towhidul Alam Sabuj intercepted a back-pass to the goalkeeper and fired home from inside the box, before Biplu Ahmed scored the equaliser in the 66th minute with a well-placed shot.

Awudhu Ibrahim, a former striker of Abahani, wrapped up the victory in the 75th minute with a curled shot from a tight angle inside the six-yard box and in doing so killed Mohammedan's slim hopes of progressing to the semifinals.



Legends of Rugganj players (From L) Abu Hider, Mosharraf Hossain, Taijul Islam and Mohammad Mithun pose with their brand new jerseys for the Dhaka Premier League at the BSEC in Karwan Bazar yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

ICC to mull points-based system

ESPNCRINFO



The ICC is set to discuss the possibility of a points-based structure for international cricket at its forthcoming board meeting in Dubai.

The idea of giving points for each victory in a bilateral tour across all formats -- as pioneered in the Women's Ashes since 2013 -- then translating the overall winner into a "championship" table will be one of the options debated amid wider discussions on how to bring greater context to bilateral series.

It has recently emerged that the ECB is in discussions with the PCB and SLC over adding the additional dimension of awarding an overall winner across formats to the upcoming series during the English season. Earlier this week, SLC confirmed to ESPNcricinfo that it would discuss the proposal at a board meeting later this month.

Although the discussions at ICC level remain at an early stage, the governing body is aware that the international game faces increasing pressures from the expansion of T20 leagues and the lack of relevance to some bilateral series - especially outside of marquee contests such as the Ashes - is a key issue. A previous attempt to launch a World Test Championship fell by the wayside and was replaced by the return of the Champions Trophy.

Warner, Kumar crush Gujarat

STAR SPORT DESK

Skipper David Warner hit a blistering, unbeaten 74 after Bhuvneshwar Kumar bowled a superb death-over spells to lead Sunrisers Hyderabad to a 10-wicket victory over the Gujarat Lions in their Indian Premier League match in Rajkot yesterday.

Shikhar Dhawan (53) partnered Warner in an unbeaten opening stand of 137 after Hyderabad won the toss and restricted Gujarat to 135 for eight, thanks to Kumar's four for 29.

Earlier, Gujarat skipper Suresh Raina hit a 51-ball 75, but the late strikes from Kumar and the stingy partnership he formed with Mustafizur Rahman kept Gujarat to a below-par score.

SCORES IN BRIEF
GUJARAT: 135 for 8 (Raina 75, McCullum 18; Bhuvneshwar 4-29, Mustafizur 1-19)
HYDERABAD: 137 for no loss in 14.5 overs (Warner 74 not out, Dhawan 53 not out) **Result:** Hyderabad won by 10 wickets.

COUNTDOWN TO RIO BEGINS

Actress Katerina Lechou, performing as the high priestess, holds a torch with the Olympic flame at the Temple of Hera yesterday during the lighting of the Olympic flame in Ancient Olympia, the sanctuary where the Olympic Games were born in 776 BC.

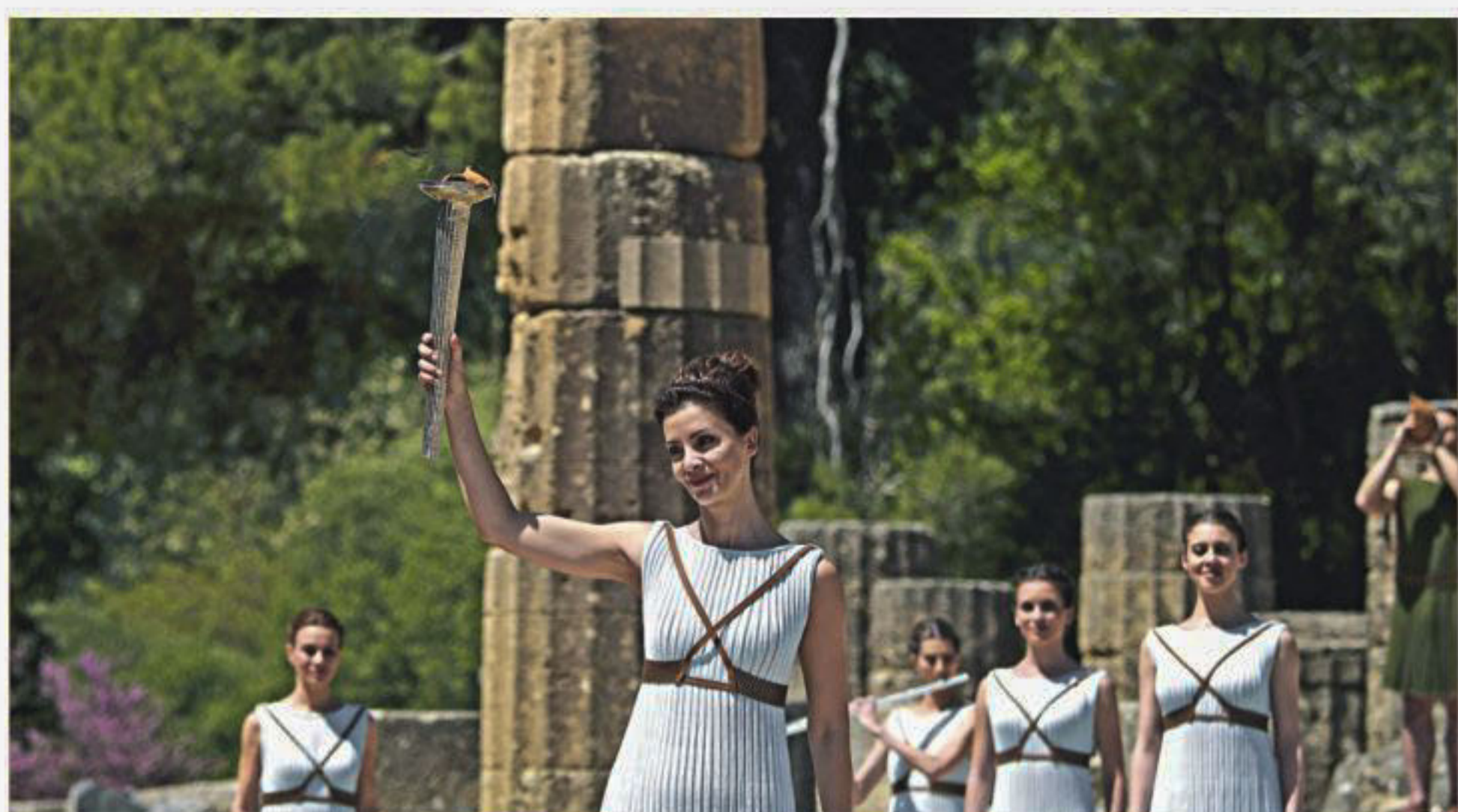


PHOTO: AFP