

First international success

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Bangladesh clinched the title of the Bangabandhu Asian Senior Men's Central Zone International Volleyball Championship with a 3-0 sets victory after pre-tournament favourites Kyrgyzstan pulled out of the third set of the final at the Shaheed Suhrawardi Indoor Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

It was the first ever international volleyball trophy for Bangladesh at any level. Bangladesh's previous best result was a runners-up finish in the World Cup's Asian Zonal Qualifying round where they lost the final against the same opposition two months ago.

The hosts, who had also suffered a 2-3 sets defeat in the group-stage match against Kyrgyzstan, won the first two sets 25-22, 25-23. The hosts were leading the third set 7-6 when Kyrgyzstan pulled out after

one of their players -- Toktoev Nurmuhammad -- picked up a knee injury and there was no replacement available due to shortage of players.

Iranian referee Masoud Zandapanah declared the hosts as the winners of the third set with a score of 25-6 to allow Bangladesh their maiden triumph at international level.

A mouth-watering clash was expected in the final despite the fact that Bangladesh have never previously beaten Kyrgyzstan. The hosts got off to a fine start and took a 6-4 lead before Kyrgyzstan bounced back and led by 13-8 points at one stage. However, Bangladesh took two time-outs and, inspired by tips from their Iranian coach Ali Pour Arosi, surged ahead to take first set 25-22. Man-of-the-tournament Horosit Biswas, man-of-the-final Sayed Al Zabir and Imran Haider executed some brilliant smashes while

Rashed Khan Menon blocked some of the smashes from Kyrgyzstan to give Bangladesh the edge.

In the second set, Kyrgyzstan made a rousing start with powerful serves and led the way 12-9 at one stage before Bangladesh scored five consecutive points to wrestle back the lead. Both sides fought neck-and-neck, but it was Bangladesh again who took the second set 25-23.

"It is not only a win for a volleyball team rather a win for the whole nation. We are really happy that Bangladesh won its first international trophy through us. Before the championship, we said our target is to clinch the title and we had to toil hard for this," said captain Zabir, who played a key role in taking Bangladesh to the final after being adjudged the man-of-the-match in three out of five matches.

"I am very happy to beat Kyrgyzstan who came here with a good preparation," said Bangladesh

coach Ali Pour. "The boys need some time for further development and you need to keep supporting them financially and technically so that they improve more."

Kyrgyzstan's key player Sarbaghysh Kylychbek, who is also assistant coach of the team and general secretary of their federation, was upset with the defeat.

"It was bad luck that we lost two players in last two days after we came here with a shortage of three to four players. We apologise that we could not finish the match. I would have been happy had we lost properly but I want to say Bangladesh team is very good. They have been improving and they are now strong," said Kylychbek.

Bangladesh Volleyball Federation's president Atiqul Islam informed that the team would be awarded Tk 10 lakh, to be given by Alif Group, while Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina would invite the team within a short period of time.



Champion Bangladesh team show victory sign after beating Kyrgyzstan in the final of the Bangabandhu Asian Senior Men's Central Zone International Volleyball Championship at the Shaheed Suhrawardi Indoor Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Feni facing relegation

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Feni Soccer Club moved ever so close to relegation while ensuring safety for Mohammedan SC after losing their penultimate match of the JB Bangladesh Premier League against Team BJMC by 2-1 goals at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

The defeat kept the outfit from the country's south eastern region rooted to the bottom of the table with 15 points from 21 matches, with only one game remaining. To avoid relegation, Feni Soccer will need to win their last match while pray that Uttar Baridhara, who are two points above them, do not win their last match.

Meanwhile, the result meant Mohammedan SC, who are in tenth position and four points above Feni Soccer, are safe and secured for the next season.

Needing a win to move off the bottom

TEAM BJMC 2-1 FENI SOCCER
BROTHERS 3-2 RAHMATGANJ

of the table, Feni Soccer made a positive start to the match, taking the lead through Shahran Halder in the 13th minute and managing to hold on to the lead till the end of the half. But Samson Ilyasu equalised seven minutes after restart before Baybeck scored an 88th minute winner to condemn Feni Soccer to relegation. The win took Team BJMC to joint eighth position on 24 points.

In the day's second match, Brothers Union edged Rahmatganj MFS 3-2 to move up to joint fourth position on 30 points, leaving Rahmatganj in sixth position with 27 points.

Syo Zunapio opened the scoring for Rahmatganj in the third minute, but Brothers equalised through Jitu in the 26th minute and took the lead through Abbas Inusah eight minutes later. Zunapio scored from the spot at the stoppage time of the first half but Mannaf Rabbi's 58th minute strike secured all three points for Brothers.

'Scorpion' volley was instinctive

AFP, Manchester



Henrikh Mkhitaryan said his spectacular 'scorpion kick' volley in Manchester United's 3-1 victory over Sunderland on Monday had been a matter of instinct taking over.

The Armenian playmaker sealed victory at Old Trafford by diving beneath Zlatan Ibrahimovic's right-wing cross and flicking the ball past goalkeeper Jordan Pickford with his right heel.

The goal, reminiscent of former Colombia goalkeeper Rene Higuita's famous 'scorpion kick' save against England in 1995, was allowed to stand despite an apparent offside.

"I was expecting the ball in front of me, but I was already in front, so I got it behind me," Mkhitaryan told MUTV.

"So the only thing I could do, it was a chance to hit it with the back-heel. I did it and I succeeded."

Mkhitaryan came on as a second-half substitute, having previously spent two games on the sidelines with an ankle injury sustained during United's 1-0 win over Tottenham Hotspur.

His injury came just as he was establishing himself in United's first team and manager Jose Mourinho was delighted to see the former Borussia Dortmund star back in action.

"I have to watch back on TV because I didn't yet, but it looked for me phenomenal," said Mourinho, whose side drew level on points with fifth-place Tottenham in the Premier League table.

Stones injury 'just a kick'

AFP, Kingston Upon Hull

Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola offered a reassuring prognosis on the injury that curtailed John Stones's involvement in his side's 3-0 win at Hull City on Monday.

Back in the starting XI following two games on the bench, Stones was forced off after just 17 minutes at the KCOM Stadium.

But Guardiola said the England international had simply taken a kick to the knee and would "hopefully" be fit for City's trip to Premier League title rivals Liverpool on New Year's Eve.

"We were a little bit worried about that, but it is just a kick," Guardiola told the BBC.

"Hopefully OK for Liverpool. A kick, not ligaments or something like that."

City's win, courtesy of second-half goals by Yaya Toure and Kelechi Iheanacho and an injury-time Curtis Davies own goal, left them in second place, seven points below leaders Chelsea.

Neymar not obsessed with Ballon d'Or

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona's Brazilian star Neymar says winning the Ballon d'Or is one of his goals but he will not lose any sleep if he never takes home football's top individual award.

"If I don't win the Ballon d'Or, it's okay," he said in an interview posted on the La Liga website on Monday when asked if he was disappointed that he was not named as one of three finalists for the prize this year.

"I don't play football to win the Ballon d'Or, I play football to be happy because I love it, because I want to play football. Unfortunately only one person can win it," he added.

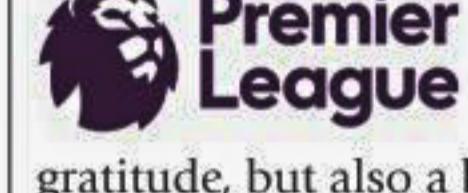
"Of course it is one of my goals winning the Ballon d'Or but I won't die if I don't."

The Ballon d'Or has passed back and forth between Real Madrid's Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo and Barcelona's Argentine playmaker Lionel Messi for the last nine years since Brazilian Kaka won the 2007 award.



Poche relishes Saints return

AFP, Southampton



Tottenham Hotspur manager Mauricio Pochettino returns to former club Southampton on Wednesday with a feeling of gratitude, but also a burning desire for a return to form on the road.

The north Londoners have not claimed an away victory since September, a run that has left them outside of the Premier League top four.

But they have won four of their last five games overall, which Pochettino, who left Southampton for White Hart Lane in 2014, believes can be the springboard to a title challenge.

"It's always special to go back," said the Argentine, who joined the south coast club in January 2013 before leaving 16 months later.

"It was a special place for me and my family to have the possibility to start my career in the Premier League."

"It will always be a special place for me and a lot of people I still have a relationship with. It will be a good opportunity to see all the friends there."

"(Southampton manager) Claude Puel has done a fantastic job, I know him well from France. He's a great coach, doing a fantastic job. They're playing very well, with good results."

Spurs go into the game a mammoth 13 points below leaders Chelsea, having played a game more, but Pochettino refuses to give up on the title.

"We can fight for the title at the end of the season. It's up to us to fight and be ambitious and try to be our best," he said.

"With 17 games played, we have more than half the season ahead. All is possible in football."

"We are confident. We are working hard. We are focused on trying to win points. This is a very important period."

"We want to attack the last three or four months with the possibility to try to fight for the top four."

Pochettino still keeps in contact with former player Jay Rodriguez, who scored twice against Bournemouth last week to signal his return to form after over a year out with a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament.

"I'm very happy for him," the Spurs manager said.

"I sent the text. I was happy to see him on the pitch again. He suffered a very bad injury and I remember, fresh in our minds, that day at Man City."

"He's a top player, a top man and we were happy to see him score against Bournemouth. Now we will suffer him because he will be our enemy and our opponent."

"I'm happy he's back to his level. He's a top person."

Ladymatic
NICOLE KIDMAN'S CHOICE

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