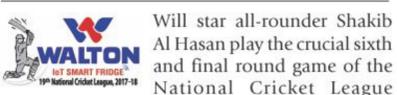


SPORT

Test captain absent, deputy too

SPORTS REPORTER



Will star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan play the crucial sixth and final round game of the National Cricket League (NCL) for Khulna Division?

If we go by the information from Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury, the new Bangladesh Test captain will feature for his side against Dhaka Division at BKSP as only three nationally contracted players, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Tamim Iqbal and Imrul Kayes, have officially applied for a break. Khulna skipper Abdur Razzak however informed over phone from BKSP that Shakib is not going to play the match starting today.

"We already reached BKSP. Among the national players Soumya [Sarkar], Mustafizur [Rahman], [Mehedi Hasan] Miraz and Rubel [Hossain] will play the match; Shakib is not playing this match and so far I have not had any communication with him," informed Razzak, whose side Khulna sit on top of the Tier-1 table with 16 points while Dhaka Division are in second place on 10 points.

As per the board's directive, the national players have to play the last round of the four-day competition as the Tigers are going to return to the Test arena in the first month of the New Year against Sri Lanka at home, and if a contracted player is unable to do so he has to submit his plea for a break to the BCB CEO.

"The instruction has been given to every national player to appear in the last round of NCL because it's a great opportunity for the players to gain some longer-version practice ahead of the home series against Sri Lanka. Mahmudullah

Riyad rang me from Bangkok and informed that he will not be available as he got the instruction when he was already in Bangkok," said chief selector Minhajul Abedin.

While Mahmudullah called from Bangkok to be excused from the match, Shakib, whose T10



New Bangladesh Test captain Shakib Al Hasan is not expected to play today's NCL sixth-round match for Khulna Division, but he has not sought a leave of absence despite a BCB directive requiring nationally contracted players to do so.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

Cricket League commitments in Sharjah ended on Sunday night, has apparently not taken the same step.

Selector Habibul Bashar also placed emphasis on the participation of the national players and hoped all will take the opportunity ahead of the home series against Sri Lanka. "As far as I know there is no injury concern, so I hope everybody will take this opportunity and we have to prove in practice that we are really serious about our first-class cricket," said Bashar.

Interestingly, since 2011 Shakib has played two domestic first-class matches, Tamim has featured in nine, former Test captain Mushfiqur Rahim 13 and Mahmudullah 15 domestic first-class matches. Only Mushfiqur has played at least one match every year since 2011; Tamim had a barren 2011 and 2013, Riyad played no matches in 2013 while Shakib just played a match each in 2012 and 2015.

When asked about Shakib's current condition, BCB's cricket operations committee chairman Akram Khan said: "I don't know [whether Shakib will play or not]. As far as I know Imrul [Kayes] will not be available as he went to Makkah to perform umrah while Tamim [Iqbal] requested for a break for treatment abroad."

The above information is enough to gain an understanding of the professionalism in our 'professional' board.

Whenever there is a Test debacle, the lack of professionalism and competitiveness in domestic first-class competitions comes to the spotlight but the way the participation of the national players in the last round of the NCL has been handled by the board only shows a glimpse of how serious we are with our first-class commitments.



PHOTO: STAR

Shaiqul Islam Bipul (2nd from L) is the toast of his teammates as his goal gave Muktiyoddha Sangsad the lead against leaders Chittagong Abahani in their Bangladesh Premier League match at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Ctg Abahani stunned

Muktiyoddha blow title race wide open

SPORTS REPORTER



Struggling Muktiyoddha Sangsad stunned the country's football fraternity by beating league leaders Chittagong Abahani in their Bangladesh Premier League encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The All Reds, who were reduced to 10 men in the 83rd minute, took the lead early in the second half and wrapped up the victory in the second last minute of regulation time to hand Chittagong Abahani the biggest upset of this edition of the second leg.

The defeat means that though the port city outfit remain on top of the 12-team table with 42 points from 18 matches, they now share the spot with Abahani, who overcame Arambagh 1-0 earlier in the day to extend their winning streak to six matches.

Meanwhile, the win lifted Muktiyoddha Sangsad to 10th with 14 points.

During the match, Muktiyoddha Sangsad were comparatively the better side in the first half as they created a number of chances, none of which the forwards succeeded in utilising.

After resumption, Muktiyoddha Sangsad kept pressing the title contenders and eventually snatched the lead through a superb header from Shafiqul Islam Bipul.

Shamol Ahmed Rony took a corner from the right-hand side which, after taking a deflection, fell to defender Bipul who headed the ball into the far post to get his team's noses in front.

Chittagong Abahani then reorganised, pressing hard for an equaliser and creating a couple of scoring opportunities. However, it was Muktiyoddha Sangsad who scored the second goal from a counter attack.

Nigerian defender Magalan Awala won a clearance in Chittagong Abahani's half and beat goalkeeper Ashraf Islam Rana with a powerful drive from 30 yards out with two minutes of regulation time remaining.

Meanwhile, Abahani continued to draw from their rich vein of form, thanks to their prolific Nigerian marksman Sunday Chizoba. The 28-year-old scored seven goals from as many matches to hand the Dhanmondi-based outfit a chance to win their sixth professional football league trophy.

Although Abahani had better ball possession and created good chances to break the deadlock, a spirited Arambagh kept their superior opposition at bay.

The Sky Blues came close to ending the stalemate in the 35th minute but Arambagh goalkeeper Azam Khan denied them by foiling a goal-bound header from Sunday.

Abahani finally found the back of the net though in the 42nd minute when Sunday broke the off-side trap to receive a through-pass from Emon Babu and danced past the onrushing Azam to score.

Abahani could have doubled the lead had another header from Sunday not come off the far post in the 70th minute. This was Abahani's 13th win from 17 matches.

| | | |
|-------------|-------|--------------------|
| CTG ABAHANI | 0 - 2 | MUKTIJODDHA |
| | | BIPUL 55, AWALA 88 |
| ARAMBAGH | 0 - 1 | ABAHANI |
| | | SUNDAY 42 |

De Villiers & Steyn back for 4-day Test

REUTERS, Cape Town

AB de Villiers, Dale Steyn and Vernon Philander will all make long-awaited returns for South Africa at Test level after being named in the 14-man squad for next week's day-night, inaugural four-day contest against Zimbabwe in Port Elizabeth.

It means South Africa are back to full strength for the first time in almost two years for the Dec 26-29 match at St George's Park which serves as a warm-up for three home Tests against India in January and a series against Australia straight after that.

De Villiers's last Test was against England in Pretoria in January 2016 after which he asked for time out from the long format of the game while Steyn has been recovering from a serious shoulder injury suffered against Australia at Perth just over a year ago.

Philander missed the 2-0 series win over Bangladesh in September and October following an injury on tour to England in mid-year.

Faf du Plessis, who initially looked uncertain with a back injury, will lead the side.

Squad: Faf du Plessis (captain), Hashim Amla, Temba Bavuma, Quinton de Kock, Theunis de Bruyn, AB de Villiers, Dean Elgar, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, Morne Morkel, Andile Phehlukwayo, Vernon Philander, Kagiso Rabada, Dale Steyn.

Ind-SL first T20I today

PTI, Cuttack

The bench strength is expected to be tested but India are unlikely to lower the intensity when they take on Sri Lanka in a three-match Twenty20 series starting here on Wednesday, aiming to extend their dominance in the shortest format as well.

The Test series in pocket, India, without inspirational skipper Virat Kohli, hardly broke a sweat to clinch the one-day series 2-1 and Rohit Sharma and Co. will look to polish off the T20I series on a perfect note.

'Trying to start DPL on Jan 20'

'Players by choice' system to return

SPORTS REPORTER



The prestigious Dhaka Premier League, the lone 50-over domestic tournament in the country, is expected to start from January 20

informed new Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) chairman Kazi Inam Ahmed yesterday.

There was a lot of criticism during the previous season of the league, which concluded in June this year, as it was played during the monsoon and forced players to cope with hot and humid weather conditions.

"Once again we want to return the Premier League to January-February and we are trying to start the tournament on January 20," Inam told media yesterday.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) also backtracked on their statements that the 'players by choice' would not be used again and had even reverted to the traditional players' transfer during the previous season. However, the BCB has decided to

return to the controversial 'players by choice' system for the league's upcoming iteration.

"8-10 days before [the tournament] we are looking to arrange the 'players by choice' draft and we have already talked about this with the club officials," Inam said.

He added that the decision was taken in line with the demands of the clubs. "We have decided to go with the 'players by choice' system as we received requests from a lot of clubs. At the same time we have considered the fact that our national players will not be available during the league as the tournament will be from January to March. Each club can retain four players from the previous season. According to the clubs there is a lot of demand which is not possible for the clubs to fulfil and even to sustain which was the reason for the return of the players by choice."

However according to the CCDM chairman they were also looking at it from the players' perspective as the Dhaka league is the main source of

income for many domestic players. Inam also informed that he had asked the selectors to finalise the players' wages according to their grade.

Meanwhile Inam also added they were considering hosting the Dhaka league matches inside the capital unlike the previous few seasons which were staged in BKSP and Fatullah.

There were a lot of questions regarding the standards of umpiring in the league and Inam also emphasised better umpiring standards in the upcoming season.

"These things have come in the media as there were questions over the umpiring and our board president also urged [us] to improve the standards of umpiring in the Premier league along with other leagues and we are trying to make it better," he added.

According to Inam the First Division League will start after the Premier League while the Second Division League will start alongside the Premier League. The Third Division League will be held at the same venues once the Second division concludes.

Smith edges closer to Bradman

| ICC TEST BATSMEN RANKINGS | | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|--------|-----|
| Rank | Player | Rating | Pts |
| 1 | Steve Smith (Aus) | 945 | |
| 2 | Virat Kohli (Ind) | 893 | |
| 3 | C Pujara (Ind) | 873 | |
| 4 | K Williamson (NZ) | 855 | |
| 5 | Joe Root (Eng) | 852 | |

AAP

Steve Smith has moved closer to Don Bradman as the ICC's highest-ever rated cricketer after his match-winning double-century in the third Test against England in Perth.

The Australian captain's innings of 239, which helped his team regain the Ashes by taking an unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match series, has seen him reach a tally of 945 rankings points.

That took him to joint second position in the all-time ICC ranking list alongside former England opener Len Hutton.

Smith had reached 941 points after the first Test in Adelaide before dropping briefly to 938 after the Brisbane Test.

He overtook England batsman Peter May and Jack Hobbs as well as former teammate Ricky Ponting, closing within 16 points of Bradman's tally of 961 points in the process.

Smith's batting average of 62.32 is second only to Bradman in terms of batsmen with at least 20 Test innings and by the time the fourth Test of the series starts on Boxing Day, he would have been at the top of the rankings for two years.

Veni, Vidi, Vici for Bengal

Continue debutants' triumphant streak

SPORTS REPORTER



Newcomers Bengal Chess Club became unbeaten champions of the SA Group Premier Division Chess League, beating a stiff challenge from holders Saif Sporting Club, following their final round victory over Fire Services team yesterday.

Bengal won the 11th and final round by 3.5-0.5 points to finish with 19 points as Saif SC ended with 18 points from 11 rounds. This is the second top-tier title in their second appearance for Bengal, who had won the First Division title in 1985, the then top-tier competition, in their maiden appearance before moving out of the game.

Niaz Murshed, the first grandmaster of the sub-continent who was behind bringing the team back to chess, said the title was a bit unexpected as Saif SC were the favourites.

"We didn't form a team with the target of becoming champions. We just wanted to form a spirited team," Niaz said. "Our

PREMIER LEAGUE ROLL OF HONOUR

| Year | Champions | Runners-up |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 2011 | Mohammedan SC | Bangladesh Biman |
| 2012 | Mohammedan SC | Duronto Rajshahi |
| 2013 | Mohammedan SC | Bangladesh Navy |
| 2014 | Bangladesh Navy | Mohammedan SC |
| 2015 | Sheikh Russel MSC | Bangladesh Navy |
| 2016 | Saif SC | Sheikh Russel MSC |
| 2017 | Bengal Chess Club | Saif SC |



Niaz Murshed and his teammates receive the winners' trophy and cheque from the organisers and sponsors at the end of the Premier Division Chess League at the NSC Auditorium yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

target was to win the third and fourth boards, which we did successfully. The two Georgian GMs played really well.

"Saif Sporting were the favourites as the players of that team had 100 rating points more than our players on average. But our tactics worked well," added Niaz, who has been in the winning team in six of the seven premier league editions.

Bengal's debut success in the premier league continues an interesting trend of debutant champions. Saif SC had become champions on their debut season last year following on footsteps of Sheikh Russel MSC, who took the

Zim want to play winning cricket

AFF, Paarl

Zimbabwe cricket coach Heath Streak said on Tuesday he wanted his players to play "winning cricket" when they meet South Africa in a one-off day-night Test next week.

"We'd rather lose trying to play a winning brand of cricket than just compete," said Streak of a Test South Africa are expected to win comfortably.

"The main thing is belief and shaking off that underdog mentality we had," he said in Paarl, the western Cape town where Zimbabwe begin a three-day warm-up match against a South African Invitation team on Wednesday.

Zimbabwe have played just ten Tests since they last met South Africa in Harare in August 2014, losing nine and drawing one.

"It's well documented how little Test cricket we play," said Streak. "I think for us it's less about the type of cricket than about playing at international level."

"Whether it's playing Tests or one-day internationals, it's the gaps in between that are the biggest challenge for us."

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