



Sabbir Rahman enjoys a weight training session at the Mirpur Gymnasium yesterday. However his loyal fans would appreciate him using his muscles for hitting the ball harder instead of wasting it somewhere else. PHOTO: STAR

Title race still wide open

Sheikh Jamal face Chittagong Abahani as three-horse race heats up

SPORTS REPORTER



Three-time champions Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club will take on title-aspirants Chittagong Abahani as the title race in the Bangladesh Premier League reaches its climax with a competition that has never been seen in the past nine editions of the professional football league.

The top three teams -- defending champions Abahani, Sheikh Jamal and Chittagong Abahani -- are separated by just two points with three rounds of the league remaining. Interestingly all three teams left in the race will play against each other over these three rounds; hence any slip-up at this stage might prove fatal.

Five time champions Abahani had looked out of the race, but turned their fortunes with seven straight victories and now sit on top with 45 points. They have an easier outing today against Brothers Union and can take a commanding lead. But it is the big game of the day, between Sheikh Jamal, who are on 44 points, and Chittagong Abahani who are on 43 points, that may decide which of these two teams stay in the title race.

Chittagong Abahani coach Saiful Bari Titu, who has seen his side relinquish the lead by dropping five points in the last two matches, thinks it is still all there for the taking.

"All three teams will play against each other over the last three rounds, so all the three games are crucial," he told The Daily Star.

The former national team coach believes that although these three teams have different strengths and weaknesses, they are very close in terms of strength and hence small mistakes at the business end of the league may shape their fate.

"There was a time when it looked like we would win the title with a game in hand. But we made mistakes and other teams have taken advantage of that. This can't happen in the remaining matches if we have to become champions," Titu opined.

His opposite number Mahbub Hossain Roxy took charge of Sheikh Jamal midway

through the league after Joseph Afusi left for London. The young coach and former national player believes losing is not an option in any of the three remaining matches.

"If we can win tomorrow's [Sunday] match, we will be in an advantageous position since the other two teams will face each other in the league's last match," Roxy said last night. "We can't afford to slip up at this stage. Losing is no option, and I guess seven points from the last three matches will be needed to ensure the title."

The successful coach with age-group sides also feels that the reduction in the number of foreign players in the playing eleven as well as a serious approach from

POINTS TABLE

Team	M	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Abahani	19	14	3	2	+18	45
Sk Jamal	19	13	5	1	+24	44
Ctg Abahani	19	13	4	2	+19	43
Saif SC	19	9	8	2	+12	35
Mohammedan	19	8	4	7	+5	28
Sk Russel	19	6	7	6	+1	25
Team BJMC	19	4	6	9	-11	18
Brothers	19	3	7	9	-10	16
Arambagh	19	4	4	11	-11	16
Muktijoddha	19	4	2	13	-15	14
Farashganj	19	3	5	11	-19	14
Rahmatganj	19	2	7	10	-13	13

coaches and clubs to the league has resulted in a heightened level of competition this year.

That competition is not only confined to within the top three sides though. In fact the relegation battle is even more intense than the title fight, with six teams still mathematically in danger of going down. Rahmatganj MFS, who were the revelations of last year, find themselves at the bottom of the 12-team table on 13 points, with Farashganj SC and Muktijoddha Sangsad KS a point above. Arambagh KS and Brother Union are two points above them with 16 points each while team BJMC look relatively secure on 18 points.

Too much tolerance?

SPORTS REPORTER



Will Sabbir Rahman be considered for the upcoming home assignments after the batsman allegedly assaulted a young fan during the final-round match of the National Cricket League

in Rajshahi? The question has been surfacing within the cricket fraternity as, according to sources, there was no dispute among the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) officials about Sabbir deserving the sternest punishment for his deeds on December 21.

There was agreement about the notion that just financial penalties will not be enough to prevent further wrongdoings from Sabbir and it was reflected in the comments of BCB's disciplinary committee chairman Sheikh Sohel, who said: "We will sit on Monday regarding the issue. So far we didn't get any good result after imposing financial penalty on this player, so it's a matter to be considered before taking a decision. He committed two indiscretions this time as he assaulted a young fan and was aggressive with the match officials."

Sabbir's short career has been dotted with a

number of disciplinary issues and the 26-year-old batsman had earlier faced heavy financial penalties.

The match referee's report has already been submitted to the disciplinary committee for their suggestions and recommendations. "He should be punished, there is no doubt about it but we are considering a number of options -- like just imposing a financial penalty again, a six-month ban from all cricket, banning him only from domestic cricket for a long period of time so that he faces the consequences of missing the Dhaka Premier League and the BPL," said an official on condition of anonymity.

A question has also come to the fore about whether it will be wise to ban him ahead of such an important home series in the New Year when there are no ready replacements. If this is part of the considerations, it is unfortunate because it carries on a tradition of leniency that is at odds with a board and a board president who have often touted their zero-tolerance policy when it comes to disciplinary issues.

The culture of tolerating misbehavior if the perpetrator is a good player becomes plain to see when one remembers that player assaults on spectators is not a new thing in Bangladesh. Shakib Al Hasan was banned when he assaulted

a spectator during an international match in 2014, but soon afterwards the then coach Shane Jurgensen, captain Mushfiqur Rahim and Mashrafe Bin Mortaza had gone to BCB boss Nazmul Hassan to plead his case, because he is an important player in the team.

It stood Bangladesh cricket in good stead that Hassan did not acquiesce to that request because it set an example of stern punishment for disciplinary breaches and that in turn translated to a healthier team culture. But just as Bangladesh's cricket has declined since the heady days of 2015 and 2016, this standard has also fallen, judging by the current pussyfooting over Sabbir's punishment and the inaction about the three cricketers who broke curfew after a 200-run loss in South Africa.

England's star all-rounder Ben Stokes was banned from the all-important Ashes because of a Bristol street brawl, without a thought being given to how England will suffer without them.

And the acts of Stokes and Shakib, while abhorrent, did not victimise a minor as did Sabbir's. And if the board were truly professional, it should be completely beside the point how important Sabbir is as a player. In reality however, the board's approach is anything but zero-tolerance.

QUICK SINGLES

The following are a few samples of stories that did not make the print edition. However, if they pique your interest, you can always read them online on The Daily Star website by simply scanning the QR codes listed below:

Barca not a good place for Brazilians: Ronaldo

Ronaldo has warned Liverpool star Philippe Coutinho to carefully consider a move to Barcelona following his own experiences. The Brazilian legend spent the 1996/97 season with the Catalan club, scoring 40 goals in 46 appearances before leaving for Inter Milan.

Djokovic doubtful for Australian Open

Former world number one Novak Djokovic withdrew from next week's Qatar Open, casting doubt on his participation at the Australian Open. Qatar is the second tournament Djokovic has pulled out in as many days due to a nagging elbow injury.

When action betrays words

MAZHAR UDDIN



Before every series in 2017, Taskin Ahmed spoke about his bowling, about how he is improving his skills and about how he looks forward to executing these traits.

However even though Taskin is consistent in his pre-series ruminations, the speedster consistently fails to deliver those ideals on the pitch when the time comes.

Therefore it comes as no surprise that the speedster once again informed reporters yesterday about what he hopes to accomplish in the upcoming ODI tri-series followed by Sri Lanka that will feature two Tests and two T20Is at home next year in January.

"We are doing drills on our skill such as keeping the seam position right and are working according to our individual skill like in-swing, out-swing and in-cut. We are working on improving the skills along with the accuracy," the fast-bowler said.

If this statement raises hopes of a turnaround though it should be noted that these utterances are nothing new, the following are some of his previous assertions:

Ahead of his Test debut against New Zealand earlier this year:

"The BCB support staff and coaches really helped me get to this stage. I trained in a specific programme, which included building my bowling workload for the last 18-24 months. I am in the Test squad because I became fitter, and I don't want to stop after just one game. I want a regular place in the team."

Taskin picked up two wickets in the two Tests at an average of 143 and also scalped four in the three ODIs with an economy rate of well over six runs in the ODI series.

Before the one-off Test against India:

"We are not thinking whether it is a flat or bouncy wicket, rather we are focusing on how to bowl on different wickets. It's important because we have played in New Zealand while the pitch here is different. In New Zealand the ball carried to the keeper in good height from the length delivery but here it is a bit slow. The practice match will help us to adapt."

He picked up three wickets at an average of 56.66 in the Test match where he bagged 2 for 43 from seven overs in the second innings.

Ahead of South Africa series:

"The pacers have to step up and take responsibility, because I believe if the pacers don't bowl well here, then it will be impossible to even fight in the match. Consistency and patience is important along with swing bowling to get success in Test cricket."

Taskin remained wicketless in the first Test and was dropped from the second but scalped two in the three ODIs with an economy of 8.25. He also remained wicketless in two T20I with an economy of 12.40.

Ahead of the home series against Australia:

"Courtney Walsh is a legend and if we cannot learn from him, then there is some failure on our part. He has 519 wickets in Tests and that is something which is more than a dream. He tries to teach us new things in every practice session. I am trying to take as much from him as possible and that is our responsibility," he said while adding that he has been trying out new techniques without compromising on pace.

Taskin was not included in either Test.

Only time will tell if the pacer stays true to his words this time around.



TASKIN AHMED

Smith England's Ashes bane

AFP, Melbourne



Steve Smith says he has been adapting his quirky batting to keep ahead of England's bowlers and is working on getting even better after a stellar Ashes series.

The Australia skipper has dominated England's bowlers so far, amassing 604 runs in six innings at an astonishing average of 151.

He again proved the bane of England when he batted out the entire last day to secure a draw in the fourth Test, denying the tourists -- who have lost the first three Tests and the Ashes -- a face-saving win.

Smith has shown immense levels of concentration and application, facing a total of 1,258 balls for his two unbeaten centuries in Brisbane and Melbourne, and his Test-best 239 in Perth.

"I've had to work really hard but I feel like my game's in really good order," Smith said.

"I'm adapting to each of the bowlers, I'm changing my plans to them and how they're trying to get me out," he added.

"Hopefully, I can just keep working and keep getting better as well."

Smith's career Test average of 63.55 is second only to the legendary Don Bradman's pinnacle 99.94, and he again emulated another record of "The Don" with a fourth consecutive century in a Melbourne Test match.

"I think playing this game you can never be satisfied and think you're too good for the game or anything, the game can come back to bite you pretty quickly," the Australia captain said.

"I just love batting... I feel like I'm hitting the ball really well at the moment and hopefully I can end the series really well in Sydney as well."

England opener Alastair Cook, who was man-of-the-match in Melbourne with his marathon unbeaten 244, said Smith has set a "new benchmark".

"Probably, when we first saw him, we didn't think he'd turn out to be the player he's become but you have to give him a lot of credit for the way he's obviously worked out his game," Cook said.

England captain Joe Root said his team had to keep believing they can get Smith out.

"Fair play to him and he played extremely well," Root said.

"Even when it is a bat-friendly pitch like that, he was under the pressure of knowing he would have to bat all day to try and get a draw and that is quite difficult."

Root said England would look to next week's final Sydney Test to have the last word on Smith in the series.



Australia captain Steve Smith kisses his helmet after a match-saving century on the fifth and final day of the fourth Ashes Test against England at the Melbourne Cricket Ground yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS