

SPORT



Abahani players go wild in celebration of their title triumph as the referee blows the final whistle at the end of the Bangladesh Premier League fixture against Sheikh Jamal DC at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. The Sky Blues won the match 2-0 to secure their sixth professional football league title with a game in hand.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Title dedicated to Amalesh Sen

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Abahani dedicated their sixth Bangladesh Premier League title to former coach Amalesh Sen, who died of cardiac arrest in October last year at the club premises soon after completing a training session.

"We are missing Amalesh dada at the moment," Abahani's team manager Satyajit Das Rupu said. "He would have been really happy to see Abahani win the trophy. The boys played the whole league for him and we are dedicating the trophy to him."

Abahani, who finished the first leg at third position with 24 points from 11 matches, had a miserable beginning to the second leg having lost the first match against newcomers Saif SC. But since then they have not looked back, winning nine matches on the trot to confirm the title with a game in hand.

"After the defeat against Saif SC, all the players were instructed to take more responsibility. They were also told that they would have a good chance to win the title if they could win the next eight matches and they did it successfully before taking on Sheikh Jamal today [Friday]," said Rupu adding that the players were again told before the match that the trophy was for them to grab or throw away.

"The boys once again proved that Abahani are the best in the country even though we had some problems in the starting eleven due to the suspension of Wali Faisal, Rubel

POINTS TABLE

Team	MP	W	D	L	GD	P
Abahani	21	16	3	2	+22	51
Sheikh Jamal Ctg Abahani	21	14	5	2	+24	47
Saif SC	20	13	4	3	+17	43
Mohammedan	20	10	8	2	+13	38
Brothers	20	8	5	7	+5	29
Team BJMC	20	6	7	7	+0	25
Arambagh	21	4	7	10	-11	19
Muktijoddha	20	4	7	9	-11	19
Rahmatganj	20	4	5	11	-11	17
Farashganj	20	5	2	13	-14	17
	20	2	8	10	-13	14
	21	3	5	13	-21	14

Abahani extend record title-haul

Beat rivals Sheikh Jamal 2-0 to win sixth premier league trophy

ANISUR RAHMAN

Abahani confirmed their sixth title of the Bangladesh Premier League with a game in hand following a 2-0 victory over fellow title-aspirants Sheikh Jamal DC in their penultimate round fixture at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Nasiruddin Chowdhury gave Abahani the lead in the first half before Sunday Chizoba scored deep into stoppage time of the second half to help the Sky Blues take an unassailable lead at the top of the league table. The Dhanmondi giants have 51 points from 21 matches while their neighbours and nearest rivals Sheikh Jamal have 47 points from the same number of matches.

The title-triumph is all the more praiseworthy for the Sky Blues, who have forged a nine-match winning streak, having ended the first leg of the league in third position.

The Abahani team management had to make some alterations to their starting

eleven due to the suspensions of defender Wali Faisal and winger Rubel Mia. They opted to field striker Emeka Darlington alongside Sunday while sacrificing defender Samad Yussif while reserve-bench player Atiqur Rahman Fahad took Wali's place as the defensive midfielder.

However, it was their close-door neighbours Sheikh Jamal who launched the first few attacks through the right flank, with attacking duo Raphael Odoyin and Solomon King playing up front. Javed Khan initially put threatening crosses from the right for the striking duo, who shared 30 goals between them so far, but they could not expose Abahani's solid defence marshalled by Nasir, Tutul Hossain Badsha, Raihan Hasan and makeshift defender Saad Uddin.

Abahani, however, grew in confidence to take control of the midfield as Sunday and Emeka threatened with their daunting runs around the opposition box. The Sky Blues finally broke the deadlock in the 23rd minute after a nice exchange of passes between Emon Babu and Sohel Rana, with the latter dancing past a defender before chipping one from outside the box for Nasir to head

ABA HANI 2 - 0 SK JAMAL
(NASIR 23, SUNDAY 90+5)

home at near post.

Sheikh Jamal looked dead and buried with Odoyin, who had taken the club towards title contention with 15 goals in the last 10 matches, looking off-colour in face of tough marking from Abahani defenders.

The three-time champions almost conceded a second goal in the 28th minute

ROLL OF HONOUR

Season	Champions	Runners-up
2006-07	Abahani	Mohammedan
2008	Abahani	Mohammedan
2009	Abahani	Mohammedan
2010	Sheikh Jamal	Muktijoddha
2011-12	Abahani	Muktijoddha
2012-13	Sheikh Russel	Sheikh Jamal
2013-14	Sheikh Jamal	Abahani
2015	Sheikh Jamal	Sheikh Russel
2016	Abahani	Ctg Abahani
2017-18	Abahani	TBD

when Emeka played on Saad on the right and the left-back whipped in a low cross which narrowly missed the target after having taken a deflection off defender Khan Mohammad Tara.

Sheikh Jamal built up an attack in the 39th minute when Javed Khan ran down the right flank to release a low cross for Odoyin, who back-heeled it to Solomon inside the box but the Gambian attacker saw his close-range shot blocked by Saad.

After resumption, it was Abahani who created two good opportunities to widen the margin but Emeka drove wide of the target from inside the six-yard box while Sunday floated one over the crossbar inside the box in the 57th minute.

The Nigerian marksman however, made amends five minutes into stoppage time with the second goal of the game, having exchanged passes with Emeka and Sohel before dancing past Tara to curl home from inside the box.

The Abahani fans rushed in jumping over the boundary walls after the goal as referee Mizanur Rahman had to take a minute off to restart the game before bowing the final whistle.

Who will be number 2?

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The quest for a consistent opening partner for Tamim Iqbal will continue for the Bangladesh team management in the upcoming home series as there has been a lack of consistency from the players tried in that slot for quite some time now.

Tamim has been the only consistent opener in all the three formats for the Tigers over the years, with Imrul Kayes and Soumya Sarkar alternating as his partner, but both southpaws were unable to cement their spot in the opening position despite getting enough opportunities.

It was an open secret that Soumya was one of former coach Chandika Hathurusingha's favourites, with the left-hander receiving extended opportunities during the Sri Lankan's three-year tenure. Interestingly, the upcoming series will also be Hathurusingha's first assignment as Sri Lanka coach, setting up a tantalising battle between his former and current charges.

The 24-year-old batsman from Satkhira has been inconsistent in recent times, often throwing his wicket away after getting set. Soumya scored 15, 33, 9, 9 and 3 in his last five Test innings and was dropped from the second Test against South Africa while he also failed in the ODIs, scoring 28, 3, 3, 0 and 8 in his last five matches.

He was also unable to shine in the recently concluded Bangladesh Premier League fifth edition, scoring just 169 runs in 11 games at an average of 15.36. Although the left hander might be included in the squad for the tri-series comprising Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka along with the hosts starting from January 15, but Soumya will have to prove his worth to make it to the Test squad for the two-match Test series against the Lankans after the tri-series.

The experienced Imrul scored 189 runs in six Tests with a top score of 36 and an average of 17.18 in 2017 while his performance in ODIs was also disappointing - 125 runs in five games with a solitary fifty which came in the second ODI against South Africa last October.

However, when asked whether Imrul is thinking about his place in the team and how confident he is about his batting, the left-hander said, "I am actually not thinking of these things and as long as I play I will have to work on my batting because no batsman can reach perfection. So we have to work as long we play," Imrul told reporters after a training session at the Sher-e-Bangla National stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Both southpaws will face stiff competition as the selectors also cannot overlook the performances of discards like Anamul Haque and Mohammad Mithun as both wicketkeeper-batsmen have been scoring heavily in the domestic circuit.

Anamul is perhaps the strongest contender to make a comeback to the team after the right-hander smashed two double hundreds in the recently concluded National Cricket League and was the highest run-getter of the season, scoring 619 runs in six games at an average of 77.37.

On current form the 25-year-old, who played his last Test in 2014 against the West Indies, he will certainly force the selectors to give him a second thought, at least for the upcoming Test series against Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, Mithun also played a vital role with the bat to help Rangpur Riders clinch the BPL title.

The right-hander, who played just two ODIs since making his debut in 2014, has also featured in 12 T20Is.

The 27-year-old was among the top five run-getters in the fifth edition of the BPL during which he scored 329 runs in 15 games, including a fifty. Although he batted in the middle order it was learned that the selectors are considering him as one of the contenders in the opening slot for the upcoming home series.



As if the biting cold was not bad enough, three Bangladesh batsmen - (From L-R) Imrul Kayes, Soumya Sarkar and Sabbir Rahman - were dealt painful blows to their fingers during practice at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. It was learnt that none of the injuries were serious and that the trio should be fit for today's intra-squad practice match.

PHOTOS: STAR

Brothers safe, Farashganj facing relegation

SPORTS REPORTER



Brothers Union moved out of the drop zone while condemning Farashganj SC to the threat of relegation after a 1-0 win over the latter in their penultimate round fixture of the Bangladesh Premier League at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The fourth win helped the Gopibagh-based outfit move to 19 points from 21 matches while Farashganj SC remained rooted to the bottom alongside Rahmatganj MFS with 14 points from 21 matches. Rahmatganj, however, have played a game less.

Farashganj, who came into the top-tier league this season after serving a one-year suspension, have a tough task at hand as they would face title-aspirants Sheikh Jamal DC in their last match on

January 11.

However, Farashganj may still avoid relegation if they secure a point against Sheikh Jamal DC while neighbours Rahmatganj lose their next two matches against Sheikh Russel KC and Saif SC. If more than one team finishes on the bottom of the table with equal points, playoff matches will decide which team goes down.

Yesterday's match was, meanwhile, decided by a 39th-minute strike from Congolese striker Siyo Zunapio, who volleyed home a cross from the right by Masud Rana.

Farashganj played comparatively better after the break, but failed to find the equaliser despite creating three scoring chances. Brothers Union goalkeeper Sujjan Chowdhury stood tall to deny Mathew Mendy and Zahirul Islam before brilliantly tipping over a dipping free-kick from 30 yards by Farashganj goalkeeper Alif in the 90th minute.

Kohli to earn \$2.7m from IPL

AFP, New Delhi

Batting star Virat Kohli will pick up the Indian Premier League's largest-ever salary - \$2.7 million - in this year's tournament, with a host of big foreign names including Australian captain Steve Smith also cashing in.

Kohli will stay with Royal Challengers Bangalore alongside South Africa's AB de Villiers, who will earn \$1.7 million in the cash-rich event started by the Indian cricket board in 2008.

The Indian captain's salary for the eight-team, 20-over tournament spread over two months beats the \$2.5 million earned by all-rounder Yuvraj Singh with Delhi in 2015.

Delhi Daredevils announced Ricky Ponting as head coach for the 2018 season. The batting legend coached Mumbai Indians to the 2015 title during a two-year stint.