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Can Arambagh break final jinx?

Take on defending champions Chittagong Abahani in final today

SPORTS REPORTER



Lightweights Arambagh will look to break their tournament final jinx when they square off against defending champions Chittagong Abahani in the final of the Walton Independence Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

Since the establishment of the club in 1958, Arambagh have never won any silverware despite playing in four finals so far -- finals of the Federation Cup in 1997, 2001 and 2016 and the final of Victory Day Football tournament organised by Mohammedan in 2008. Interestingly, Arambagh lost three of those four finals against Abahani except for the 2001 Federation Cup final where they lost against Muktiyoddha Sangsad.

The youthful Arambagh side are now up against another Abahani -- one from Chittagong, who won the tournament last year. The question is whether the Motijheel-based outfit can break their final jinx, with high expectations on them following victories over heavyweights Dhaka Abahani and Sheikh Jamal in the quarterfinal and semifinal respectively.

The charges of UEFA A licensed coach Maruful Haque were not up to the mark at the start of the season, but they started playing well from the second leg of the premier league,



Chittagong Abahani captain Ashraf Islam Rana (L) and his Arambagh counterpart Abu Sufian Sufil hold the trophy of the Walton Independence Cup on the eve of the final at the BFF House yesterday.

eventually finishing eighth in the 12-team table. They have now reached the final of the season-ending tournament playing some enterprising football. Now they are seemingly upbeat about breaking the final jinx to win the first silverware in club history.

"The boys took time to understand my coaching but they have now adapted to the system and we are getting the results in the

Independence Cup," Maruful said. "If we can implement the system we have developed and the strategy we have applied in the final match, we can become champions."

Maruful also tipped his side as favourites and believes the lacking his side have will be overcome through fitness and confidence.

The veteran coach Maruful has been playing his youthful side in

counter-attacking system, keeping the defence solid and players like winger Arif, striking duo of Abu Sufian Sufil and Mohammad Jewel and midfielder Shahriar Bappy are playing key roles in this system.

Maruful's counterpart, Zulfiker Mahmud Mintu -- who once worked as his deputy -- is also confident about defending the title as consolation after missing out on the Federation Cup and Bangladesh Premier League titles.

"Arambagh are a good and spirited side. They have good players, plan and strategy but we know all about those. We have also worked on those points in the practice sessions and we know what we have to do to stop them in the final," said Mintu, who is seemingly a bit worried over the fatigue of his players following their action round the year.

Both Arambagh and Chittagong Abahani were in the same group of the tournament and the port-city outfit came from a goal down to secure a 1-1 draw during the group stage to ensure their last eight berth. The team's captain-cum-goalkeeper Ashraf Islam Rana considered Arambagh as the favourites for the final.

"Arambagh have been playing good football as they came to this stage by beating two big teams. They also dominated us in the group stage match. Tomorrow's final will be a fifty-fifty affair, so it is not going to be an easy encounter for either side. I think the best side on the pitch will come out victorious," said the national team's goalkeeper.

Coutinho opens his Barcelona account

AFP, Madrid



Philippe Coutinho came off the bench to score his first goal for Barcelona in a 2-0 win at Valencia on Thursday that saw his new club ease into another

Copa del Rey final.

Coutinho broke the deadlock in the 49th minute of the semifinal, second leg at Mestalla, having only come on at the start of the second half.

It was the first time the Brazilian had found the net since his blockbuster 160 million-euro move from Liverpool in January.

Ivan Rakitic then swept home the second goal eight minutes from the end as holders Barcelona secured a place in the final for the fifth season running, becoming the first side to achieve such a feat.

Winners of the trophy in each of the last three campaigns, the Catalans will face Sevilla in the final set for the weekend of April 21 and 22. Sevilla beat Leganes 2-0 on Wednesday to go through 3-1 on aggregate.

"For me it is my first final, so it is a very special moment," Coutinho told Spanish TV station Gol. "I am very happy. I had been searching for this goal in my first few matches. Today I got it and it helped the team get through to the final."

Valencia had been hoping to reach the final for the first time since they won the trophy under Ronald Koeman in 2008, beating Barcelona in the last four on the way.

"Barca have been used to playing finals in recent years, but not so much in my case," said Barcelona coach Ernesto Valverde, for whom the win came on the eve of his 54th birthday.

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:

No problem with Pogba: Mourinho

Jose Mourinho says his relationship with Paul Pogba remains rock solid despite having dropped his star midfielder, hitting back at pundits who questioned whether the Frenchman is being used in his best position.

Isco Madrid exit rumours all lies: Zidane

Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane has branded a report saying he wants to sell Spain midfielder Isco as lies at a press conference in the Spanish capital.

Auba arrival has Mkh dream big

Henrikh Mkhitaryan is living a dream at Arsenal after being reunited with close friend and "the best team-mate" he's shared a dressing room with in Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang.

Winter Olympics begin

AGENCIES, Pyeongchang



The opening ceremony of the 23rd Winter Olympics unfurled in frigid temperatures and high spirits on Friday, as athletes from the two Koreas marched into the stadium together less than 50 miles from the heavily-fortified border between their nations, offering hope of a breakthrough in a tense, geopolitical standoff that has stirred fears of nuclear conflict.

The festivities started what organizers say is the largest Winter Olympics yet, with 92 countries participating. The North and South Korean delegations, marching under one flag, embodied the hopes of a peninsula divided by history and ideology.

Kim Yu-na, South Korea's former gold medal-winning figure skater, wore skates as she lit the Olympic cauldron, after being handed the torch by two members of the joint Korean women's ice hockey team -- one player from the North and one from the South.

Lee Hee-beom, head of the Games organising committee, said "the North and South have become one through the Olympics".

"Pyeongchang Olympics will become the hope and light for everyone that hopes for peace, not only on the Korean peninsula but in northeast Asia and the entire world," said Lee.

In contrast, Russia's athletes entered the ceremony behind a neutral flag after their team was suspended over a doping scandal. Despite the ban, 168 "Olympic Athletes from Russia" will compete in Pyeongchang.

Just hours earlier, 47 Russians lost a court bid to take part in the Games after they were left off the list of athletes deemed clean from doping.

Shivering athletes and spectators are bracing for one of the coldest Winter Olympics on record, with real-feel temperatures plumb

minus 10C at the opening ceremony.

Japan's speed skaters are among the athletes who decided it was too cold to brave the open-air ceremony, while organisers handed out heat packs, blankets and hats to keep spectators warm.

But Tonga's Pita Taufatofua, echoing his eye-catching entrance at the Rio Olympics, happily braved the chill as he appeared stripped to the waist and with his chest heavily oiled.

Expectations are sky-high for an array of stars at Pyeongchang, including American skiers Mikaela Shiffrin and Lindsey Vonn, while the drama in figure skating centres on whether Japan's "Ice Prince" Yuzuru Hanyu can recover from injury to retain his crown.

Potential winners also include French flag-bearer Martin Fourcade in biathlon, hoping to add to his two gold medals in Sochi in 2014.

Alpine giant slalom great Marcel Hirscher of Austria is also among the gold medal hunters.

The sensational 15-year-old Alina Zagitova of Russia will take the spotlight in women's figure skating, where a showdown is expected with her fellow Russian teen, Evgenia Medvedeva.

Another teenage breakout star could be Chloe Kim, 17, the American whose parents are Korean and who is tipped for gold in snowboard as well as adulation by the host nation.

For the South Koreans, major home hopes rest on the slender shoulders of yet another teenage girl. In short-track speed skating, 19-year-old Choi Min-jeong is among the favourites for a gold-medal sweep of all four races.

Competition gets into full swing on Saturday with five gold medals available, in ski jumping, cross country skiing, biathlon, speed skating and short-track speed skating.



Philippe Coutinho scored his first goal as a Barcelona player as the Blaugrana defeated Valencia 2-0 in their Copa del Rey semifinal second leg on Thursday. Interestingly, it was Luis Suarez who assisted the Brazilian, five years after he had assisted Coutinho's first goal for Liverpool.

PHOTO: AFP



South Korea's bobsledder Won Yunjong (L) and North Korea's ice hockey player Hwang Chung Gum hoist the flag as they lead out a Unified Korea delegation in a show of togetherness in the opening ceremony of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

All eyes on Wembley

AFP, London



Tottenham host Arsenal at Wembley this weekend aiming to crush the optimism created by the Gunners' new-look forward line while the looming absence of Riyad Mahrez will be missed by both teams at the Etihad.

Elsewhere, Antonio Conte's Chelsea welcome West Brom with the Italian manager's job looking precarious following embarrassing back-to-back defeats to Bournemouth and Watford. Leaders Manchester City host Leicester while Manchester United travel to Newcastle and Southampton welcome back Virgil van Dijk in a Liverpool shirt.

Excitement coursed around the Emirates last weekend as Arsenal's club-record signing Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang scored on his debut and Henrikh Mkhitaryan conjured three assists in a 5-1 demolition of Everton.

A tougher task awaits at Wembley on Saturday against a high-flying Tottenham side, who have not lost in 11 games.

Spurs are currently in fifth but would climb into third -- at least temporarily -- with victory and move seven points ahead of sixth-placed Arsenal.

Mauricio Pochettino's squad looks in fine shape to handle the demands of three competitions in the coming months with the return of Erik Lamela, Victor Wanyama, Harry Winks

and Serge Aurier from injury to complement the arrival of Lucas Moura from PSG.

"Now we are 24 players and it will be tough to find a place in the starting XI for everyone -- 24 players that fight to be on the starting XI every single game," said the upbeat Spurs boss.

Antonio Conte said he would not lose sleep over the possibility of losing his job following a 4-1 defeat at Watford and he has a great chance to turn the corner with a match against bottom club West Brom at Stamford Bridge on Monday.

With a series of ominous-looking ties looming, failure to win could see a new boss put in charge for the business end of the season at a club used to dispensing with their managers just months after winning silverware.

FIXTURES

(1500 GMT unless stated otherwise)

Saturday: Tottenham Hotspur v Arsenal (1230 GMT), Everton v Crystal Palace, Swansea v Burnley, West Ham v Watford, Manchester City v Leicester City (1730 GMT)

Sunday: Huddersfield Town v Bournemouth (1200 GMT), Newcastle United v Manchester United (1415 GMT), Southampton v Liverpool (1630 GMT)

Monday: Chelsea v West Brom (2000 GMT)

Afg thump Zim in 1st ODI

AFP, Sharjah

Rahmat Shah hit a career-best 114 while leg-spin wizard Rashid Khan took four wickets as Afghanistan trounced Zimbabwe by 154 runs in the first one-day international on Friday in a huge boost ahead of next month's World Cup qualifiers.

Rahmat smashed his runs off just 110 balls with eight boundaries and four sixes as Afghanistan piled up 333-5 off 50 overs with opener Ihsanullah hitting a confident half century.

Zimbabwe were then dismissed for just 179 in the 35th over with 19-year-old Rashid Khan claiming 4-26 to steer Afghanistan to victory.

SCORES IN BRIEF

AFGHANISTAN: 333-5 in 50 overs (Rahmat Shah 114, Ihsanullah 54)

ZIMBABWE: 179 all out in 34.4 overs (Rashid Khan 4-26)

Result: Afghanistan won by 154 runs