

SPORT



Hosts march toward semis

Tapu's late header seals victory

SPORTS REPORTER

A late header from defender Tapu Barman powered Bangladesh to a hard fought 1-0 win over Pakistan in a Group A encounter of the SAFF Suzuki Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

With back-to-back wins, the hosts top the group with the maximum six points from two outings, three ahead of Pakistan and Nepal, who still have a chance to catch up by posting wins in their last matches of the group stage.

Bangladesh, however, need at least a draw in their final group match against Nepal to ensure a semifinal berth.

With five minutes plus stoppage time remaining, defender Tapu, who also scored against Bhutan, handed Bangladesh the crucial goal with a stunning header. Left-back Bishwanath Gosh's long throw seemed to be drifting away but Tapu emerged from nowhere to nod home from close range to send nearly 20,000 spectators into a wild frenzy.

After scoring, Tapu pulled off his jersey and jumped triumphantly in the air for which the tall defender was understandably booked by the Iranian referee. Bangladesh then held the slender lead for the final ten minutes, including the five minutes of added time, to leave the field with their second consecutive win, a rare feat for the national football team of late.

Following the final whistle, Tapu was paraded on the shoulders of his teammates as he helped keep the host's unbeaten record against Pakistan on home soil intact.

A lot of spectators stayed behind after the game to cheer the team as they left the field, chanting 'Bangladesh! Bangladesh!'. Some players were seen stopping to shake hands with their fans before heading to the dressing room.

Before the match, the Pakistani players' heights came into question when the hosts were discussing whether to break the opposition backline through the flanks. Hardly a single proper cross was whipped in throughout the first half and the midfielders and defenders' relentless balls over the top were also easily dealt with by the Pakistan defenders, marshalled by former Fulham academy defender Zeshan Rehman.

Instead of keeping the ball on the ground, Jamie Day's charges chose an aerial approach even down the middle but the boys in red and green were stopped time and again by Pakistan's supremacy in the air, which prevented the attacking third from penetrating the backline.

Bangladesh came close to conceding the lead in the eighth minute when Denmark-based striker Muhammad Ali struck a quick header off a Shabaz Younas cross from the right flank. However, goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel tipped the goal-bound shot over the crosspiece at the cost of corner. The home team attempted a few other attacks sporadically with Jamal Bhuiyan, Saad Uddin, Biplu Ahmed trying from a distance but hardly troubling Pakistan goalkeeper Yousaf Ijaz Butt.

The tension weighing on Bangladesh coach Jamie Day in the first half was visible as the 38-year-old coach lifted three fingers to the fourth referee, indicating that the three minutes of added time had ended.

After resumption, Bangladesh looked a bit more organised. The hosts survived a scare when defender Tutul Hossain Badsha fumbled, losing the ball to Muhammad Ali, who darted into the box from the left to drive a powerful shot in the 55th minute. However, goalkeeper Sohel brilliantly thwarted it with one hand. Tapu also squandered a good opportunity in the 82nd minute when he floated a shot from inside the six-yard box over the post, but the defender eventually made amends three minutes later by providing the decisive goal.



BANGLADESH 1 - 0 PAKISTAN
TAPU BARMAN 85'

Bangladesh defender Tapu Barman (2nd from R) has so far made the Suzuki SAFF Championship his own by scoring in the opening two group league fixtures of the home side, including yesterday's 85th-minute winner against Pakistan.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'A big win for our football'

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh centre-back Tapu Barman said the victory against Pakistan yesterday was a much-needed one for the country's football and football fans.

The 24-year-old centre-back, who scored the decisive goal against Pakistan after having scored the first of the two goals against Bhutan in the opening match, also credited the hard work put into the side in the build-up to this year's SAFF Championship.

"This victory was very important for us, for our football and for our football fans," an elated Tapu said at the post-match press conference.

"I am extremely delighted at scoring two important goals. We needed to get our football up from the

depths it was in and hopefully these victories will raise our football again. We have worked hard over the last few months and this victory is testament to that," said Tapu, who not only scored two important goals but has also marshalled the defence well throughout the 180 minutes of play so far. Although the hosts have the full six points from two matches, they are not yet assured of qualification for the semifinals, a stage Bangladesh failed to reach in the last three editions of this regional football tournament.

The last time Bangladesh made it to the semifinals was back in 2009 on home soil where they started with a win against Bhutan and a draw against Pakistan before a win against Sri Lanka saw them through.

Despite being in pole position with six points, Jamie Day's charges will need a draw against Nepal in

their last group match on Saturday unless Pakistan fail to beat Bhutan earlier that day. So the coach was certainly cautious about his side's chances no matter how relieved he was with the victory.

"I think this win is a very deserved one. The boys played extremely well. I won't single out any player because it was a complete team effort," the Englishman told media.

"Pakistan are a very strong side and we had to dig in and fight. We knew we would have more energy towards the end and that is what gave us the advantage," Day, who recently guided the under-23 side into the knockout rounds of the Asian Games for the first time, said.

"I will let the boys party tonight. But we are not through yet and tomorrow we will have to get back to work for the important game against Nepal," Day said.



Nepal forward Sunil Bal runs off to celebrate after scoring from a rebound in the 71st minute of their SAFF Suzuki Cup fixture against Bhutan at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

NEPAL 4 - 0 BHUTAN
ANANTA 20', SUNIL 70', BHARAT 79', NIRAJAN 88'

Nepal trounce 10-man Bhutan

SPORTS REPORTER



Nepal bounced back strongly to keep their hopes of a semifinal berth in the SAFF Suzuki Cup alive with a 4-0 thrashing of 10-man Bhutan in their Group A encounter at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Ananta Tamang headed Nepal into the lead in the first half before Sunil Bal and substitutes Bharat Khawas and Nirajan Khadka struck one goal each in the second half to help Nepal stay in the race despite the 2-1 defeat to Pakistan in their group opener.

Nepal and Bhutan came into the match after losing their respective openers. Nepal coach Bal Gopal Maharjan brought three changes to the

squad that lost to Pakistan, leading to their dominant performance yesterday.

With relentless support from the stands throughout the match, Nepal played some brilliant football, launching quick attacks from both flanks after some precise passing, to register a much deserved victory and send a strong message to the hosts.

Tamang opened the scoring with a fine header in the 20th minute after coming close to breaking the deadlock twice earlier in the game, but it was only after the break that the Nepalese came out all guns blazing.

The sending off of Bhutan defender Nima Wangdi in the 70th minute for a foul on Nirajan Khadka inside the box, gave the Nepalese the numerical advantage and, shortly after, a two-goal lead, with Sunil slotting home the rebound after

Bimal Charti Magar's initial shot was parried by Bhutan goalkeeper Tshering Dendup.

The second goal charged up the Nepalese further as Bharat and Nirajan added two fantastic goals in the 79th and 88th minutes respectively to complete the rout.

Nepal coach Maharjan said that this comprehensive victory was certainly a boost to the team ahead of their last group stage encounter against Bangladesh on Saturday.

"Although Bangladesh are a good team and it's always tough to beat a home team, if we play the way we did today I think we can win. I believe in my players and the motivation they got from today will hopefully be enough to keep the right combination in our next match," the Nepal coach said during the post match press briefing.

India keen to spoil Cook's farewell

Fifth and final Test starts today

AFP, London



Ravi Shastri has promised India "will not throw in the towel" when they face England in the fifth Test at The Oval starting Friday despite having already lost the series.

England's 60-run win in the fourth Test at Southampton gave them an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match contest.

It also meant India, for all they are the world's top-ranked Test side, had now won just one of their last nine series outside Asia.

The Oval clash has been given added significance by the fact it will be the last appearance before international retirement for Alastair Cook, England's all-time leading Test run-scorer.

But India coach Shastri, who helped his country to a 1986 series win in England, is determined the tourists spoil the party.

"This is a team that will not throw in the

towel," Shastri told reporters at The Oval on Wednesday.

"It will come out there and look to compete and not be on the first flight home, rest assured that's exactly what we will do."

"I think you have got to get tough mentally," said Shastri when asked how India could improve their away record.

"We have run teams close overseas and we have competed. But now it's not about competing. We have to win games from here."

"The scoreline says 3-1 which means India have lost the series, what the scoreline doesn't say is that India could have been 3-1 or it could have been 2-2. And my team knows it. They would have hurt and rightly so after the last game."

England, despite having won the series, face several awkward problems of their own, with uncertainty surrounding whether Jonny Bairstow, as is his wish, will keep wicket, rather than Jos Buttler and what that means for their respective batting positions.

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:

Isco welcomes Luis Enrique mobile phone ban

Spain midfielder Isco says he welcomes coach Luis Enrique's ban on mobile phones during team meals and has embraced the new manager's footballing ideas and team building exercises.

'FIFA award loses credibility due to Messi's absence'

While Atletico Madrid forward Antoine Griezmann said it was 'bizarre' that he did not make it in the top three of the Best FIFA Football Awards but for his teammate Filipe Luis, the award loses meaning if Lionel Messi is not winning it.



Neymar and his Brazil teammates were in jovial mood during training at the Red Bull Arena in New Jersey yesterday ahead of their FIFA friendly against USA on Saturday at 5:30am (BST).

PHOTO: COLLECTED