

A clash of contrasting styles

Bashundhara Kings' fluent attack up against defensive masterclass of Sheikh Russel

ATIQUE ANAM



Just over a month ago, Bangladesh football's new powerhouse Bashundhara Kings had stormed into the final of their maiden topflight tournament, the Walton Federation Cup, with some scintillating and free-scoring football. They had

scored a whopping 13 goals in five matches leading up to the final, but when it mattered most, their fire was doused. Despite having the best team on paper with enough quality in the eleven and plenty of options to call upon at the reserve bench, Oscar Bruzon's charges were stripped of their style and finesse by a seasoned Abahani side.

Today, Bashundhara Kings have an opportunity to redeem themselves when they take on Sheikh Russel in the final of the Independence Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium. The situation, though, is a bit different this time.

Two of the key players of the side -- defender Shushanto Tripura and striker Tawhidul Alam Sabuj -- are still unavailable due to the suspensions they received for their part in the fracas of the Federation Cup final. Furthermore, their in-form forward Bakhtiyar Duyshobekov's participation is under the cloud owing to his scheduled appearance for Kyrgyzstan in an international friendly against Qatar last night.

The troubles off the pitch was reflected in their on-field performance as the Championship League winners of last season struggled throughout the tournament since beating Sheikh Jamal 2-0 in the opening game. They were held by Sheikh Russel to a draw in the last group game before riding on the heroics of young

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Bashundhara Kings and Sheikh Russel KC met twice in competitive matches this season - with the first meeting won by the newcomers, thanks to an extra-time goal from Tawhidul Alam Sabuj in the semifinals of the Federation Cup. The second meeting, though, was a goalless draw in the group stages of the Independence Cup.

ROAD TO FINAL

BASHUNDHARA KINGS Group: 2 – 0 Sheikh Jamal Group: 0 – 0 Sheikh Russel QF: 2 (3) – 2 (2) Rahmatganj SF: 1 (7) –1 (6) Abahani

W: 1, D: 3, GF: 5, GA: 3

SHEIKH RUSSEL

Group: 0 – 0 Bashundhara Kings Group: 0 – 0 Sheikh Jamal QF: 2 – 0 Chittagong Abahani SF: 2 — 0 Brothers Union

W: 2, D: 2, GF: 4, GA: 0



The captains and coaches of Bashundhara Kings and Sheikh Russel KC pose with the coveted Walton Independence Cup trophy in the pre-final press conference at the Bangladesh Football Federation House yesterday. PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico for two penalty shootout victories over Chittagong Abahani in quarterfinals and Brothers Union in semifinals.

However, coach Bruzon knows that the unavailability of a few of players will not be a good enough excuse in case his side comes second best for the second time in a month.

"The moment Bashundhara Kings contracted me, they wanted trophies. We want to be in the final of every tournament we play, but finishing second does not mean anything," said the Spaniard during his pre-final assessment yesterday.

Attacking play is the biggest weapon of this side, with the likes of Daniel Colindres, Marcos Vinicius and Bakhtiyar Duyshobekov and a few young local talents making Bashundhara Kings a formidable force, but defence remains their weakest link, exacerbated by the absence of versatile fullback Tripura.

"We have trouble with injuries and suspension, but we cannot control that and I am not thinking about them. I have players who can stand in for them in the final," Bruzon added.

Sheikh Russel, on the other hand, are at the opposite end of the spectrum. They are a very strong unit defensively, so much so that

they are yet to concede a single goal during the Independence Cup. The compact defence and counter-attacking style reflects the philosophy of their coach Saiful Bari Titu, who has taken Sheikh Russel to the final of a tournament for the first time since the club's historic treble-winning 2012-13 season.

Titu will undoubtedly bank on his tried and tested philosophy of maintaining a compact defence, trying to deny space to the opposition forwards while looking for breaks on the counter. "We need to maintain a high level of concentration. We will

have to maintain a compact defence," the former Bangladesh coach said in his pre-final analysis. "I think the team that will make less number of mistakes will come out on top in the final."

However, Titu's side is not just about defence; their forward line is coming into form just at the right time. After having gone goalless in the group stages, Sheikh Russel forwards have hit form just at the right time, with Uzbek forward Alisher Azizov bagging three goals in the last two matches and his strike partner Raphael Odoyin also getting amongst the goals.

In the final reckoning it might come down to the small margins and the ability to absorb pressure that decides which side comes out on top in the clash between contrasting styles.

We have lost one final. So no Christmas celebration for us now. We will only celebrate Christmas and New Year from 27th, after we win the title.

> **OSCAR BRUZON** BASHUNDHARA KINGS COACH

The final is a match for winning, not just qualifying for. We are making lesser mistakes and scoring goals compared to group stages. We would like to continue

> SAIFUL BARI TITU SHEIKH RUSSEL COACH

the upward graph of performance.

We are fully prepared for the final. We want to win your hearts and become champions.

> **EMON BABU BASHUNDHARA KINGS CAPTAIN**

We have this plan that if we become champions, we will dedicate this title to the family of our teammate Sohel Rana [whose wife and son were killed in a tragic road accident last month].

> **ASHRAFUL ISLAM RANA** SHEIKH RUSSEL CAPTAIN

Don't need to explain who I am: Kohli

AGENCIES, Melbourne

Virat Kohli is not interested in fighting perceptions about his public persona, something that has been debated endlessly over the years across various platforms. Asked about his take on

how he has been perceived over the years, Kohli seemed nonchalant.

"What I do or how I think, I am not going to take a banner outside to the world and explain that this is who I am and you need to like me or stuff like that. These are things that happen on the outside," the skipper said on the eve of 'Boxing Day'

"I have no control over that. It's an individual choice, what you want to focus on. My focus is on the Test match, winning the Test match and doing well for the team. That's all it is," the outspoken India captain added.

South and East wrest initiative

SPORTS REPORTER



Taijul Islam's six-wicket haul and hundreds from Anamul Haque and Al-Amin hogged the spotlight on the second day of the final round of the Bangladesh Cricket League at two

different venues yesterday. Taijul was not at his best in the previous two rounds after finishing the international calendar on a high note, but the left-arm spinner rediscov-

ered his mastery on the second day at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium. The 26-year-old bagged six wickets for 92

runs, his 20th five-for in 63 first-class matches,

SCORES IN BRIEF

(Mominul 82, Imrul 78, Mahmudul 94, Zakir 57, Taijul 32;

Hider 2-85, Taskin 4-96, Mosaddek 2-97, Mosharraf 2-91)

CENTRAL ZONE: 224 all out in 72.1 overs (Saif 22, Pinak

and Second innings 2 for 0 in 1 over (Rony 1 not out,

51, Mazid 24, Mosaddek 57, Jaker 24; Taijul 6-92,

SOUTH ZONE: First innings 407 for 5 in 95.2 overs

84, Nahidul 26; Ebadat 2-59, Sunzamul 2-118)

(Anamul 155 not out, Al-Amin 110 retired hurt, Mahedi

EAST ZONE: First innings 425 all out in 88.5 overs

EAST ZONE V CENTRAL ZONE

NORTH ZONE V SOUTH ZONE

NORTH ZONE: First innings 293.

Imrul 1 not out)

Nayeem 2-44)



TAIJUL... 6 for 92



ANAMUL... 155 not out



AL-AMIN... 110 retired hurt

as East Zone managed a mammoth 201-run first-innings lead by wrapping up Central Zone for 224 runs. East did not enforce the follow-on and finished the day on two for no loss in their second innings. Half-centuries from Pinak Ghosh and

Mosaddek Hossain, who was dismissed by young off-spinner Nayeem Hasan, were the highlights of Central's innings as Taijul tore apart the top order before wrapping up the tail.

Taijul provided the first breakthrough, trapping Saif Hasan in front, and then took two more top-order wickets of Nazmul Hossain and Abdul Mazid. He also removed the last recognised batsman in Jaker Ali.

Earlier, Taijul's 32-run knock helped East to extend their first innings score to 425 after resuming the day on 380 for eight.

At the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram, it was a tale of two batsmen. Anamul and Al-Amin helped South Zone score 407 for five after recovering from 57 for three. South, after bundling out North Zone for 293 runs on the first days, have already raced away to a 114-run lead with five wickets in hand.

Left-arm spinner Sunzamul Islam claimed two wickets and pacer Ebadat Hossain took one to give North a good start but Al-Amin joined Anamul to seize the initiative with a 295-run fourth wicket stand before Al-Amin retired hurt because of cramps on 110 off 119 balls, which featured 11 fours and three sixes.

Mahedi Hasan was the other notable scorer with a 76-ball 84 that contained seven fours and three sixes.

Anamul was unbeaten on 155.

Smith & Warner's return from bans in 'planning phase'

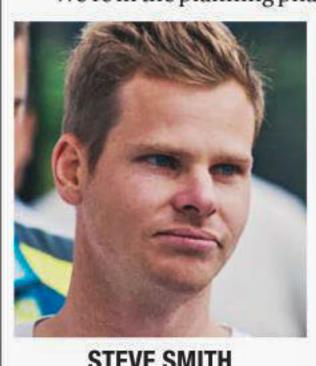


Cricket Australia (CA) have entered the 'planning phase' about whether to bring back banned Australian cricketers Steve Smith and David Warner in the last two ODIs of the five-match series against Pakistan in late March, which is when their one-year suspensions expire.

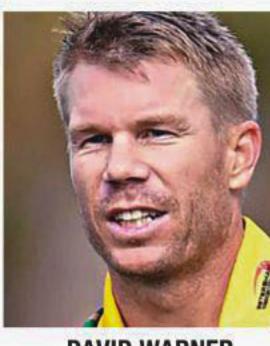
Then captain Smith and deputy David Warner were the masterminds in a ball-tampering scandal during the third Test in South Africa on March 25, 2018, that disgraced Australian cricket. The duo were banned for a year on March 29, which means that their bans will also end on that day in 2019.

"We've had some good early discussions. We're also conscious that we've got a bit over three months to prepare," CA chief executive Kevin Roberts told AAP yesterday.

"We're in the planning phase.



STEVE SMITH



DAVID WARNER

"If the draft dates of the Pakistan series remain as they are then it's possible the players will be eligible for selection for the final two matches," Roberts said. "That [whether Smith and Warner return mid-series] is something we need to consider over these coming weeks."

There have been rumours that Pakistan would shift the date of the games, which would allow Warner and Smith to play the entire series if picked, but Roberts confirmed CA's "working assumption is the dates will remain as they are".

Australia coach Justin Langer said on Christmas Eve that there is "definitely potential" that Smith and Warner could return against Pakistan.

"They're very determined to get back into the Australian

cricket team," Langer said. Smith said last week that his participation in the Indian Premier League for Rajasthan Royals would be good preparation for the one-day games, with the most important assignment of the year for any team being the 50-over World Cup in England next summer. He will also be playing in the Pakistan Super League. Warner will play in the Bangladesh Premier League for Sylhet Sixers and will also participate in IPL for Sunrisers Hyderabad.

"These days, the way the one-day game is played it's almost an extended T20 so T20 cricket is a good way to prepare," Smith told reporters last week. "The IPL is one of the best tournaments around the world and from what I've heard about the Pakistan league, it's high quality, so I think that will be adequate preparation," the former Australian captain said.



The 4th Marcel Cup Bodybuilding Championship got underway on Monday with over 160 bodybuilders aiming to flex their way to fame. Six competitors from each of the 40 participating clubs were selected at the NSC Tower auditorium yesterday to vie for the title in six different categories of the three-day meet today. PHOTO: COLLECTED