



Arsenal midfielder Granit Khaka (R) scores the opening goal against Fulham during their Premier League encounter at the Emirates Stadium yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

PANT THE 'BEST BABYSITTER'

Tim Paine's wife has labelled Indian cricketer Rishabh Pant the "best babysitter" in a light-hearted viral social media post that shows there is no animosity between the Australian skipper and his opposition wicketkeeper. The two glovemen, Paine and Pant, have exchanged some humorous banter throughout the series and perhaps the best example was when the Australian skipper tried to lure India's keeper to sign with the Hobart Hurricanes. "Big MS [Dhoni] is back in the one-day squad too, we might get him [Pant] down to the Hurricanes... we need a batter," Paine was heard saying over the stump microphone during the Boxing Day Test. "Fancy that, Pansy? Extend your little Aussie holiday. Beautiful town Hobart too. I'll get you a nice apartment on the waterfront. "[I'll] have him over for dinner. Can you babysit? I'll take the wife to the movies one night and you'll look after the kids?"

—AGENCIES



Arsenal thrash Fulham

AFP, London



Premier League

Arsenal responded to their thrashing by Liverpool in the best possible manner reeling off a routine 4-1 humbling of struggling Fulham in their Premier League clash on Tuesday.

Swiss midfielder Granit Khaka had set Arsenal on their way with his fourth goal of the season. Alexandre Lacazette added the second after 55 minutes with their momentum temporarily halted as Aoubakar Kamara pulled one back after 69 minutes.

However, Welshman Aaron Ramsey came off the bench to make it 3-1 eleven minutes from time and Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang added a fourth.

Arsenal have yet to keep a clean sheet since beating Huddersfield Town on December 8, but a second win in six matches saw them move on to 41 points two points off the Champions League places.

Fulham have shown little sign of a recovery under Claudio Ranieri since he took over from the sacked Slavisa Jokanovic and are second from bottom.

The visitors did have their chances early on to break the deadlock.

First Fulham captain Tom Cairney sent Ryan Sessegnon clear of defenders with the simplest of passes only for the England under-21 star to sidefoot his shot wide of Bernd Leno's goal.

Then Andre Schurrle hit a dangerous low cross from the left and Sessegnon ran in behind Sead Kolacinac only to miskick with the goal at his mercy.

Fulham paid dearly for that miss in the 25th minute as Arsenal exposed the defensive frailties that have blighted their season.

Alex Iwobi spotted Khaka advancing unmarked into the penalty area and flighted the ball into his path.

The midfielder had all the time he needed to control the ball and poke it past Fulham goalkeeper Sergio Rico.

Good news for Warner

AFP, Sydney

The wife of disgraced cricketer David Warner has revealed she is pregnant again after suffering a miscarriage in the aftermath of her husband's part in a ball-tampering scandal that rocked the game.

Candice Warner took to Twitter on Monday evening to make the announcement, ending a horror 2018 for the couple on a bright note.

"We are so grateful for all the love and support everyone has shown us this year. It is with a full heart that we would like to share with you that in 2019 our family of 4 will become a family of 5," she said.

They already have two young children, Ivy Mae and Indi Rae.

Candice Warner revealed in May that she lost a baby a week after her husband's tearful press conference in Sydney in late March after he was sent home from Australia's tour of South Africa and banned for a year.

She attributed the loss to stress and an arduous flight home, describing the couple's devastation at realising she was miscarrying.

'National teams my priority'

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Football Federation president Kazi Salahuddin wants to give priority to the national teams this year too and wants to send them abroad for training camps ahead of international assignments.

"The national team is my first priority. We will play the World Cup Qualifiers in the latter part of this year and will take maximum preparation for the qualifiers," Salahuddin said yesterday while talking to media regarding his plans for 2019. "I want to send the teams to Japan, South Korea and Qatar, who are ready to provide us training facilities."

The BFF boss, however, wanted help from the clubs regarding release of players for national duty.

"I can send teams to those three countries anytime, but it depends on the decision of clubs as to how many days they will release their players because I can't stop the league. I want at least two weeks for the national teams for preparation," said Salahuddin.

Bangladesh under-23 team is supposed to take part in AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers from March 18 to 26 in Bahrain while the Olympic team is expected to take part in football event of the SA Games this year. The national team will play World Cup qualifiers, also in the latter part of the year.

Salahuddin also said that they are planning to stage Bangamata (U-19) International Football tournament in April with the participation of six women's teams while the 11th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League will get underway from January 18.



KAZI SALAHUDDIN

SPORTS REPORTER



Country's downward-spiralling football saw a ray of hope in 2018 by entering into the second round of the Asian Games for the first time in history as well as through spirited performances in the SAFF Championship and Bangabandhu Gold Cup, and it was made possible due to the emergence of some young players who are expected to carry the torch of hope this year too.

The lowest point of the downward-spiral had come in October, 2016 when the national team lost to Bhutan in pre-qualifiers for Russia World Cup before young guns like Mahabubur Rahman Sufil, Tutul Hossain Badsha, Biswanath Gosh, Biplu Ahmed, Saad Uddin and a couple of others burst into the scene to start the revival.

The booters are set to be involved in three international assignments this year – AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers, South Asian Games and 2022 World Cup Qualifiers – and the young players are seemingly optimistic about taking their 2018 performance into 2019.

"The mentality of every footballer at the moment is they want to lift the country's football in 2019 because everyone is still maintaining discipline and doing their club training properly. Everyone wants to take country's football to a good position by transforming the performance of 2018 to 2019," promising centre-back Tutul Hossain Badsha said yesterday.



Youngsters were the backbone of revival of the country's football last year and they are expected to carry the torch in the new year too. PHOTO: STAR FILE

"If we look back, our football at international level took a good shape in the latter part of 2018. The reason is there was discipline and unity among the players while some young players such as Biplu, Sufil, Biswanath and others came to the main fold. We all strictly followed discipline and toiled hard to adapt to the formation of the coach," said the 20-year-old defender.

Even though Bangladesh Olympic team created a small piece of history by advancing to the second round of the Asian Games, the senior side were eliminated from the group stages of the SAFF Championship for the fourth consecutive time despite winning the first two matches. Badsha has his own explanation regarding the success and the failure. "The reason behind the good results of

the under-23 team in Asian Games was that we had been together for a long period and played some warm-up matches which helped us have a good understanding. However, before the SAFF Championship, the senior team did not get such practice matches," said Badsha, who made his debut for the senior side against Laos in a friendly in March, 2018.

The defender, who captained the under-23 team in the 2017 AFC U-23 Championship Qualifiers in Palestine, said that more young players are in the pipeline and some of them put up good performances in the Federation Cup and Independence Cup, scoring a few spectacular goals which was not seen in domestic competitions in the last four or five years.

Coach Jamie Day is planning to blood more youngsters in the age-group team by pinning hopes on the young guns who have already proved themselves in the last three international tournaments.

"I think most of the players who were involved in the Asian games will stay but we will add new players to the squad," Day told Daily Star in an email reply from England.

The Englishman, whose contract is likely to be extended in May, has set a target of taking Bangladesh's FIFA ranking to 180 by this year.

"It's going to be difficult for a nation like Bangladesh in the World Cup Qualifiers because of the opposition we will play against, but we will work hard and try our best to get as far as possible. The aim is to try to get into the 180 of the rankings this year," said the 38-year-old coach.

SA, Pakistan face selection dilemma

AFP, Cape Town



South Africa and Pakistan must resolve selection headaches ahead of the second Test starting at Newlands on Thursday.

South Africa's six-wicket win in the first Test at Centurion was set up by the bowling of Duanne Olivier, who had match figures of 11 for 96.

Olivier got his chance because of an injury to Vernon Philander, who is fit again and will "definitely come back" to play at his home ground, according to captain Faf du Plessis. Philander has taken 49 wickets in nine Tests at Newlands at an average of 16.55.

Despite his performance at Centurion, Olivier is unlikely to be picked ahead of Kagiso Rabada, who finished 2018 as the world's top-ranked Test bowler, or Dale Steyn, South Africa's all-time leading wicket-taker.

Nor are South Africa likely to risk going into a Test at Newlands without spinner Keshav Maharaj. Which means Olivier will only play at the expense of a specialist batsman, with Theunis de Bruyn the most likely to make way.

The case for South Africa picking five bowlers is strengthened by Philander's status as a reasonably reliable lower order batsman, who has scored 730 runs at an

average of 27.03 in his last 21 Tests, going back to November 2016. His batting average at Newlands is 33.14.

Pakistan will also be welcoming back a first-choice fast bowler in Mohammad Abbas, with captain Sarfraz Ahmed saying after Centurion that Abbas had fully recovered from a shoulder injury.

Pakistan's bowlers were impressive in the first Test but the touring team's batting frailty is such that they will almost certainly have to drop a bowler, probably the talented but inexperienced Shaheen Shah Afridi, to accommodate Abbas.

Also fit after missing the first Test is batsman Haris Sohail, who seems certain to return. Shan Masood, who came into the side when fellow left-hander Sohail injured a knee during the pre-match warm-up, made an impressive 65 in the second innings in Centurion.

Masood batted at number three, but is normally an opening batsman. That means flamboyant Fakhar Zaman, who looked vulnerable against South Africa's fast bowlers, could be in danger.

Bowlers dominated at Centurion, with the match finishing before tea on the third day. There is again likely to be assistance for the fast bowlers at Newlands but without the uneven bounce which was a feature in the first Test.



STARS ON NEW YEAR

(Clockwise from L) Cristiano Ronaldo, his son, and girlfriend took a spectacular picture with the Dubai fireworks. Lionel Messi posed for a family photo before returning to Barcelona training. Rafael Nadal, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, Andy Murray, Kei Nishikori and Nick Kyrgios celebrated the New Year in Brisbane. Kylian Mbappe reflected on a remarkable 2018.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

