

# SPORT



(Inset) The Abahani dug out -- joined by Mahmudullah Riyad and Taskin Ahmed -- was a very happy one as they watched Jahurul Islam hit some mesmerising shots in an unbeaten 91 which helped his side register a four-wicket win against Prime Doleshwar in Mirpur yesterday. Soumya Sarkar might have been relaxed after his unusual exploits with the ball earlier. However, Taskin's happiness might be because the pacer bowled in the nets for five overs with short run-up without facing any sort of problems for the first time since his injury in February.



PHOTO: BCB

## Bangladesh move up in FIFA ranking

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Bangladesh moved from 192nd position to 188th after the latest FIFA rankings were published yesterday.

They climbed four spots and gained two points to make the jump to 188th and have 909 rating points thanks to their 1-0 win over Cambodia in a FIFA friendly match on March 9. The latest rankings meant that the men in red and green overtook Guam (on 907 points) in the AFC standings to move into 41st position from 42nd.

The rankings also meant that Bangladesh will be one of six unseeded teams from among 46 in the Asian zone when the draw for the first round of the joint qualifiers for the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the Asian Cup 2023 are made on April 17th.

Coach Jaime Day was pleased with the move and was not all too worried about being in the joint World Cup and Asian Cup Qualifiers' unseeded pot. "Really pleased for all the staff and players following their ranking," he said. "We knew that was going to be a possibility so we will now just look forward to the challenge ahead."

They will face either of Malaysia, Cambodia, Macau, Laos, Bhutan or Mongolia -- ranked 35th through to 40th respectively in AFC rankings -- in a double legged qualifier match for the 2022 FIFA World Cup and the Asian Cup 2023.

**BELGIUM KEEP TOP RANKING SPOT**



## Jahurul, Soumya script Abahani's eighth

SPORTS REPORTER

Jahurul Islam smashed an unbeaten 127-ball 91 to help Abahani Limited chase down Prime Doleshwar Sporting Club's sub-par 224 for nine and win by four wickets during their Dhaka Premier League (DPL) encounter at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Before Jahurul's magnificent knock, Soumya Sarkar's four for 34 helped Abahani's cause. Doleshwar had the chance to ensure a Super League spot with a win yesterday but it was a resilient Abahani who got their eighth win of the tournament.

At the Khan Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium in Fatullah, it was Mahidul Islam Ankon's unbeaten 77 off 80 balls that helped Khelaghar Samaj Kallyan Samity register a 39-run victory -- their second of the tournament from nine games -- against bottom-placed Uttara Sporting Club.

Meanwhile, a low-scoring contest played out at the BKSP-3 ground where Legends of Rugganj bundled Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club for a paltry 141-run total and romped to an easy eight-wicket victory, courtesy of left-arm spinner Nabil Samad's economical figures of three for 30.

Back in Mirpur, a failure to capitalise on starts could have been the main reason

behind Doleshwar's failure on the day. Players like Farhad Hossain (47 off 60), Marshal Auyub (40 off 50) and Taibur Rahman (41 off 43) had started brilliantly but could not convert their scores into big ones. However, Abahani could thank Soumya -- a part-time bowler -- as he scalped the wickets of all three of the aforementioned players to set the tone for the win.

After the exchange, Jahurul continued his good run of form as he strung together an unbeaten 92-run seventh-wicket stand with Mohammad Saifuddin (55 off 69) to help Abahani cross the mark after the defending champions had struggled initially. Jahurul's unbeaten knock sees him to the top of the run-getters' list in the tournament with 522 runs and two centuries to his name.

In Fatullah, Uttara Sporting's Mohimenu Khan's 93 runs off 127 balls went in vain as he lacked support from other batsmen while chasing Khelaghar's 257 for four. Earlier, Mahidul's unbeaten knock was accompanied by Shahriar Komol's 56 and skipper Amit Majumder's 41 to help Khelaghar post a challenging total.

In the other game, after Nabil ran riot with the ball, a 96-run second-wicket partnership between Mohammad Naim (63 off 69) and Mominul Haque (60 not out) ensured Rugganj's eight-wicket victory with 128 balls to spare.

**SCORES IN BRIEF**

**DOLESHWAR V ABAHANI**  
Doleshwar: 224 for 9 in 50 overs (Farhad 47, Taibur 41, Marshall 40; Soumya 4-32, Mashrafe 2-48)  
Abahani: 227 for 6 in 48.5 overs (Jahurul 91 not out, Saifuddin 55 not out; Jayed 2-47)  
Result: Abahani won by 4 wickets.  
Player-of-the-match: Jahurul Islam.

Mominul 60 not out, Mehedi 12; Enamul 1-32)  
Result: Rugganj won by 8 wickets.  
Player-of-the-match: Nabil Samad.  
**KHELAGHAR SKS V UTTARA SC**  
Khelaghar: 257 for 4 in 50 overs (Mahidul 77 not out, Shahriar 56, Majumder 41; Humayun 2-40, Mohimenu 2-40)  
Uttara: 218 for 8 in 50 overs (Mohimenu 93, Minhajul 37; Robiul 2-18, Tanvir 2-39, Robiul 2-46)  
Result: Khelaghar won by 39 runs.  
Player-of-the-match: Mahidul Islam Ankon.



**Former Bangladesh cricket coach Gordon Greenidge returned to the country to promote an Asian Tour event at the Kurmitola Golf Club yesterday.** PHOTO: STAR

**HOME AWAY FROM HOME FOR ME: GREENIDGE**



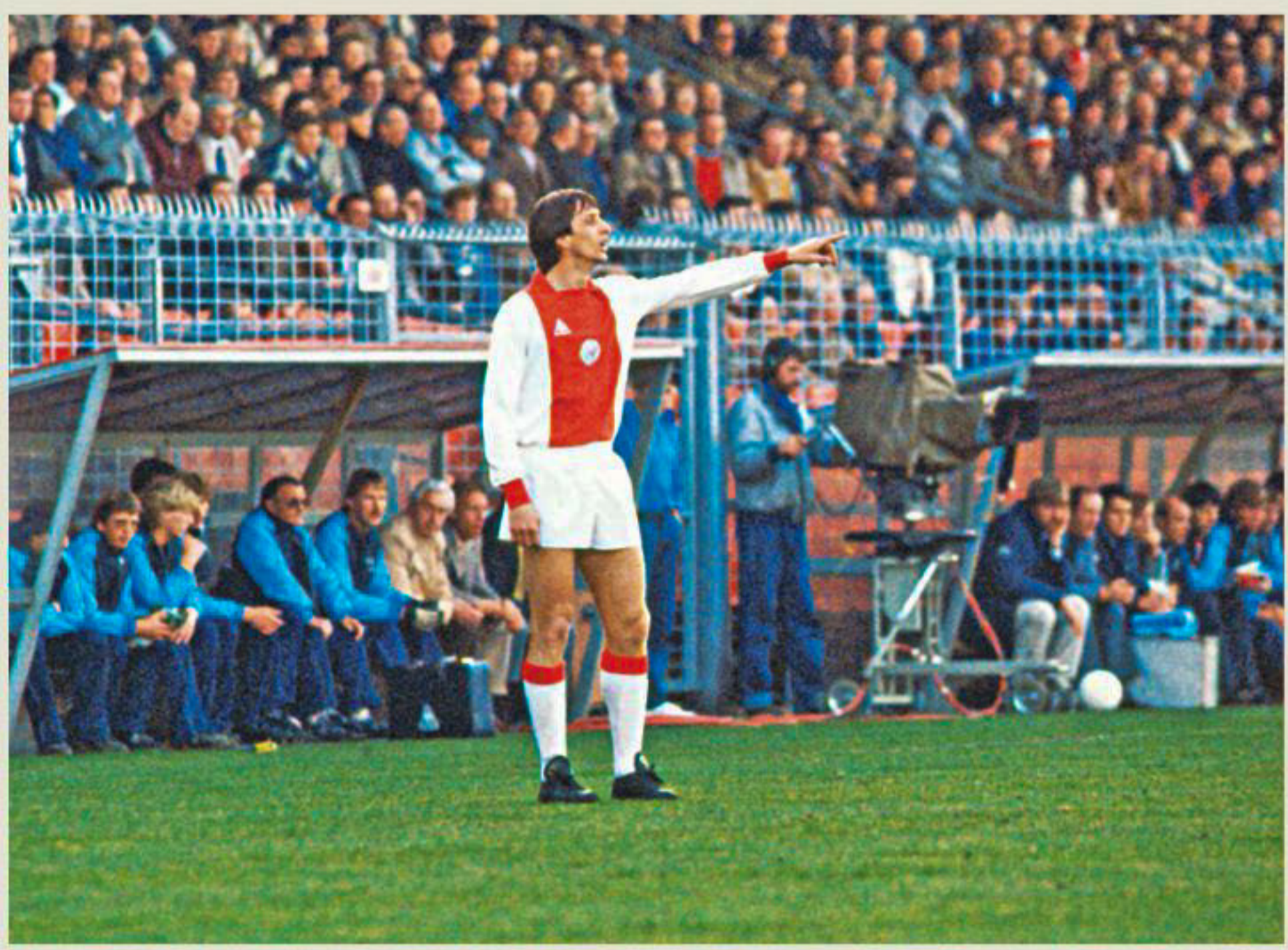
## Gravitating towards a Cruyffian theme amidst the 'constants'

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

One usually associates high-calibre football and excitement-inducing matchups -- both in terms of individual players and team-game levels -- with the UEFA Champions League. But over the last few seasons, while the quality was there, the excitement was not as prevalent -- a facet undoubtedly compounded by Real Madrid's three back-to-back titles as the real giants of the competition kept the dramatic effect to a minimum while also creating some spectacles.

However, the recent round of 16 ties threw up some unexpected results to break the pattern. Some balance was achieved through the slaying of giants and then there were a few worthy constants and a glimpse at the fantasia that the upcoming matches can produce.

For drama to unfold, the right ingredients need to be there and this time around the Champions League held the right cards in its deck. Old patterns emerged in new ways and there was late drama, historical comebacks and moments that harkened back to the competitive nature of football itself even amidst the structural financial



**Johan Cruyff (1947-2016) passed away three years ago at the age of 68 but his ideas continue to shape the world of football.** PHOTO: TWITTER

more impressive than the last. When it mattered, a young Ajax side showed collective superiority and maturity beyond their years, invoked their Cruyffista spirit; fast and incisive against a top team who had prevailed so many times in the past. Madrid had prevailed in the first leg too, winning 2-1 even as Ajax dominated, but the Dutch side's 4-1 victory meant they had won at the Spanish giants' home for the third time in history after 1973 and 1995. The last two times it happened, they had won the competition and although it might be an idea 'too far out there', the composure and flair shown by a young side against a star-studded Real outfit means that the romantic notion might not be too misplaced.

Spectacle was ensured elsewhere too as Manchester United pulled off the impossible under dramatic circumstances at the Parc des Princes against Paris Saint-Germain. No team in the history of the coveted competition had gone through after a 2-0 defeat at home but United did it with an entire first-choice lineup absent in Nemanja Matic, Ander Herrera and Paul Pogba along with the absences of Juan Mata, Jesse Lingard, Alexis Sanchez and

Anthony Martial. By the time Marcus Rashford had scored from the penalty spot after a debatable penalty decision to send United into ecstasy, the Red Devils had academy products Mason Greenwood (making his debut) and Tahith Chong on the field -- a case in point for clubs building their legacy through youth structure, a hallmark of their glory days under Sir Alex Ferguson when 'The Class of '92' used to reserve the telling blow for the end. For PSG and all their lavish spending around a project to compete with the best in the business, they are yet to make it past the quarterfinals stage this decade. Florentino Perez and Nasser Al-Khelaifi may have been left scratching their heads because money simply does not buy ideas. It was also telling how differently the two matches in consecutive nights panned out, but where they converged was the use of youth structure to usurp better, more experienced opponents. In a way, the round of 16 was paying homage to one of Cruyff's footballing ideologies' key tenets -- clubs bringing through academy products. The round of 16 had surprises up its sleeve the following weekend too when Juventus resurrected themselves by over-

turning a 2-0 first-leg deficit against a staunch Atletico Madrid defence in the return leg.

Over the past few seasons, the Champions League had seen some major turnarounds. Barca overturned a 4-0 deficit in 2016 against PSG and Roma did it against the Catalans last season, overcoming a 4-1 deficit. The frequency of turnarounds in this season's round of 16 phase was however unprecedented. It was almost surreal for a tournament known for its caution and caginess.

There was a signature to these games. From Atletico, PSG and Real through to Barca last season -- some of the biggest names in the competition were ceding control of tight matches. It was once again Cruyff's principles towering over the modern game. The great man, whose Ajax and Barcelona sides -- where he both thrived as player and coach, always, in layman's term, talked about suffocating the opponent by 'controlling the ball'. What he and his mentor Rinus Michels however did -- the key facet of the modern game -- was to reimagine football as a highly skilled spatial contest.



**Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi continued their decade-long dominance in the UCL. Their egregious talent and ravenous hunger once again lit up football.** PHOTO: AFP

Diego Simeone's Atletico follow some of those Total Footballing traits of counter-pressing and controlling space too but they gave up control when they failed to use the ball well and suffered greatly for it. You protect space, you conserve space, you use the ball to control the space you

need and you concede space you do not need at given phases, and a most importantly, Cruyff's idea was controlling that space in relation to the position of the ball along with positional superiority of the players.

The modern game, while driven by money and power-football through physical attributes, has also attained a more technical level both in terms of how coaches and players think about the game.

In its chess-like qualities, modern football is more a 'coach's game'. The structure, forms and stylistic elements that run through all of football but especially in the cautiously-approached Champions League ties have to do with the broader spectrum of effective coaching in the modern game. Total football has not completely changed the landscape but with a greater degree of managerial pedigree coming through with the likes of Jurgen Klopp, Diego Simeone, Mauricio Pochettino and Pep Guardiola setting new standards, its impact on football is gaining prominence, in fact shaping it.

But even amidst the governing managerial doctrines shaping football, there existed a familiarity in the shape of 'constants'. Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi remained the constants amidst this chaotic round of 16 results. The duo keep evolving, adapting to waning physical capabilities and changes in their footballing environment. Ronaldo hit a hat-trick to take Juve through and Messi swept aside Lyon with two goals and two assists. They define this era like no other. The prospect of a mouth-watering face-off between the two can only happen in the final but before that they have business to attend to in the quarterfinals.

This round was rich in excitement and amidst the opposing ideas grinding it out, a breath of fresh air was found with the return to a more competitive norm, gravitating towards a more Utopian Cruyffian theme. The Dutch master passed away three years ago but in its own way, the game continues to pay its respect. A true master lives in the heart of his pupils and Europe's top club competition continued to show his overarching influence. A right to fight, to battle, no matter who the opponent. A return to the spirit of competitiveness no matter what means you have. The vision of a collective game was thriving. "In a way I'm probably immortal," he had said. Of course the father of modern football was right as always.



foothold that the top clubs have achieved in recent years.

An age old saying came to be true this time around in the form of Johan Cruyff: "Why couldn't you beat a richer club? I've never seen a bag of money score a goal". And it came to fruition in the most tremendous of ways as Ajax slayed the proverbial dragon of the Champions League -- 13-time winners and the victors in four of the past five editions, Real Madrid. For a club from a less powerful domestic competition, it was easily their greatest night in recent memory.

The vast disparity in financial muscle between the sides can be fathomed from the mere fact that Real Madrid's Gareth Bale was earning the same wage package as the entire Ajax side. In the end though, when it mattered, Ajax tore the reigning champions to bits at their impregnable fortress, the Santiago Bernabeu, scoring four goals, each