

## A NEW BEGINNING OR FALSE PROMISES?



ATIQUE ANAM

Those who are aware of the local hockey scene are quite familiar with the gung-ho approach taken by the players and administrators on and off the pitch on a regular basis. So, it came as bit of a surprise when the April 29 elections of the Bangladesh Hockey Federation (BHF) were completed peacefully and the transition of power took place without an incident, especially after a considerable war of words and arm-twisting ahead of the polls.

The elections were long-awaited, coming some 21 months after the previous committee had run its course and 16 months since an ad-hoc committee had taken over charge following months of bitter

new committee would be to hold the Premier League, First Division and Second Division regularly so that a regular stream of players is found for the national team. Unfortunately, the top leagues have become increasingly irregular in recent times, mostly due to factions in the hockey fraternity.

We all know, Bangladesh had a culture of hockey even before independence as the game was played in and around the old town of Dhaka. The popularity of the game reached an all-time high, only rivalled by football in those days, after the second Asia Cup was held in Dhaka in 1985. The game spread out from Old Dhaka to the new town and across other district towns. The matches between Abahani, Mohammedan, USha, Mariners, etc started to draw thousands of spectators to the stadium. Even some of the world's best players from South Asia and beyond started to appear in the First Division League, which was the top-tier of hockey at that time. However, due to continuous infighting between clubs and federation officials, the game's organisers failed to tap in on its promise, resulting in a steep fall in its popularity since the turn of the century. Things have reached such a pitiful state at present that the production of players is now only confined to within



PHOTO: STAR FILE

(L) The golden days of Bangladesh hockey when superstars like Dhanraj Pillay of India played in the local league. (R) Outgoing general secretary Abdus Sadeque heartily congratulated the newly-elected general secretary Mominul Haque Shaeed who promised to bring back the golden days.

wrangling between two forces. So, it was a welcome scene when the outgoing general secretary Abdus Sadeque, a legendary hockey player and a man known for his charming personality and well-maintained connections, heartily congratulated the newly-elected general secretary Mominul Haque Shaeed, a young and energetic political-activist-turned-sports-organiser. It was also a relief to hear both panels speaking of 'working together for the betterment of hockey' as the new office bearers took charge.

So far so good for the federation; so far so good for Mr. Shaeed, who came to power backed by popular support of the clubs and with the promise of fulfilling a lofty manifesto. But it is needless to say that there are enormous challenges that lie ahead for the new committee; the hardest of which may come in the form of non-cooperation from the opposing panel, no matter how much camaraderie is reflected in their words at the moment.

While the Shaeed-led panel won the most important position, the opposing panel outnumbered the winning panel in number of posts, leading to what could be a very mixed executive committee, or in other words, a consensus committee. And there is reason to doubt that the two opposing panels will so easily put aside their long-held rivalry, which had previously set our hockey back time and again.

The rivalries aside, challenges may also come in the form of meeting the lofty promises made in the manifesto by the Shaeed-led panel, with the most ambitious one of taking Bangladesh to the World Cup for the first time in 2026.

Qualification for the World Cup in seven years' time seems like a far-fetched idea at this stage. The reason is simple: The top teams of each continent plus the semifinalists of Hockey World League - 16 teams in total unless the format is changed - will play the World Cup in 2026. Bangladesh is currently ranked 34th in world hockey and they have been languishing below 30 for over a decade now. And the best effort of the team in the Hockey World League was a 19th-place finish during the inaugural edition in 2013, and all three times they failed to move past the second round.

Getting the World Cup thing out of the way, the Shaeed-led panel would do well if it can fulfil the other promises, such as setting up two AstroTurf in two divisional venues, forming five commissions or units to run the federation's activities from grassroots to national level smoothly, starting indoor hockey.

However, the most important challenge for the

BKSP.

From 1974 to 1997, the top league, which was then called the First Division, was held 19 times, but since the introduction of the premier league, the top league has been held only 12 times in 21 years. The First Division, which became the second tier with the introduction of the Premier League, was only held 11 times in this period while the Second Division was only held 12 times between 1974 and 2016.

The irregularity of the top league has had a debilitating impact on the hockey players and the hockey scene overall as main source of income for the top-level players are these leagues. The national team players may sustain livelihood due to having jobs with services teams, but there is no such opportunity for most hockey players who cannot come into reckoning for the national team. As a result many

COMPETITION	TIME SPAN	EDITIONS	LAST HELD
First Division (Top tier)	1974-1997	19	
Premier League (Top tier)	1998-2018	12	2018
First Division (2nd tier)	1998-2018	11	2018
Second Division	1974-2017	12	2016
Club Cup	1997-2018	12	2018
Independence Day	1973-2012	12	2012
Victory Day	1981-2018	14	2018
National/BD Games	1981-2017	31	2017
National Youth Championship	1975-2017	26	2017

budding hockey players, and in cases established ones too, are hanging up their sticks in search of a better livelihood.

We must remember that hockey is not a money-spinning sport. Despite being an Olympic sport and being played all over the world, this sport does not lure the financial riches through marketing and television rights. And unlike football and cricket, the national federations do not get any funding or revenue share from the game's world governing body, FIH.

Hence the sport is mostly sustained by corporate sponsorship, and sponsors will only be attracted when there is a healthy environment, a following among mass, and a promise of doing well at international level. So the onus is on the newly elected committee at the BHF to make a fresh start, forgetting the old divisions and club allegiances and plan things in a way so that money is flown into hockey and the hockey players can make a decent life out of playing it.

on the main sponsors of the UEFA Champions League to return a proportion of the tickets they have received for the Champions League final to the pot for supporters of both clubs," said a joint statement.

"We ask Nissan, PlayStation, Gazprom, PepsiCo, Banco Santander, Mastercard, Heineken and Expedia Group to help redress the balance in the current unfair allocation that means fans of both competing clubs receive less than 25 percent of available tickets.

## Fans demand more tickets

AFP, London

Liverpool and Tottenham fans are calling on sponsors to return a portion of their Champions League ticket allocations so more supporters can attend next month's all-English final in Madrid.

Both clubs have received around 16,600 tickets apiece for the June 1 meeting at the Wanda Metropolitan, which has a capacity of 63,500 for the final, meaning demand will far outweigh supply.

About 22,300 tickets have been made available to the local organising committee, UEFA and national associations, commercial partners and broadcasters, and to serve the corporate hospitality programme.

Liverpool group Spirit of Shankly (SOS) and the Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust (THST) have asked for sponsors to consider giving some of their allocation to fans who will miss out.

"Spirit of Shankly and Tottenham Hotspur Supporters' Trust are calling

## PORTO WANT TO KEEP CASILLAS

FC Porto want to keep goalkeeper Iker Casillas on staff despite the Spanish veteran suffering a heart attack in training. "Casillas still has a year left on his contract and we want him to remain part of FC Porto's structure, and not only for one year," club president Jorge Nuno Pinto da Costa told Thursday's sports daily O Jogo. "Casillas is one of us and he will always have a place at FC Porto." The former Real Madrid and Spain star, who will celebrate his 38th birthday on Monday, was taken to hospital and had surgery on May 1 after collapsing during training. --AFP



Sheikh Jamal defender Shawkat Russel challenges Muktiyoddha Sangsad's Ivory Coast striker Ballo Samoussa (R) during their Bangladesh Premier League tie at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## New signings fire Saif SC

SPORTS REPORTER

Newly-signed striking duo Otabek Zokirov and Alessandro Celin both found the back of net in their second match of the Bangladesh Premier League as Saif Sporting Club notched an emphatic 3-0 win over visiting Team BJMC at the Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium in Mymensingh yesterday.

Fresh from a 2-1 away win over Rahmatganj in their previous match, Saif SC dominated from the start against bottom-placed BJMC and took the lead in the fourth minute as Uzbek forward Otabek found the net from a free-kick. Colombian defender Deiner Cordoba headed home in the 34th minute to double the lead.

Brazilian forward Celin fired home a glancing header to ensure Saif SC's ninth win from 14 matches.

Fourth-placed Saif SC raised their points tally to 30 and are seven points behind leaders Bashundhara Kings, who have a game in hand. Meanwhile BJMC -- who defeated Saif 1-0 in their first meeting in Noakhali -- suffered a tenth defeat from 14 matches and are

bottom with four points.

### SHEIKH JAMAL VS MUKTIJODDHA SANGSAD

At the Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS), Sheikh Jamal restored some pride after playing out a 1-1 draw at home against Muktiyoddha Sangsad, who humiliated the three-time champions 3-0 in Gopalganj.

Gambia's Solomon King put Sheikh Jamal ahead with a header in the eighth minute before Muktiyoddha levelled through a volley from Japanese midfielder Yousuke Kato in the 34th minute. After the battle between the two mid-table sides, Muktiyoddha Sangsad and Sheikh Jamal remain in their previous seventh and eighth positions with 16 and 15 points respectively.

CTG ABAHANI VS RAHMATGANJ In another game at the BNS, Rahmatganj surprised Chittagong Abahani 2-1 to notch their third win from 14 games. Their previous meeting in Dhaka had ended in a draw.

The triumph helped the Old Dhaka outfit raise their points tally to 15 but they remain ninth while Chittagong Abahani remain seventh with 17 points from 14 matches.

Nigeria's Kingsley Kingsley converted a penalty in the 24th minute to give Rahmatganj the lead, but it lasted only two minutes before Sohel Rana found the back of Rahmatganj's net with a powerful drive from inside the box. Landing Darboe struck the winning goal in the 72nd minute after Siyo Zunapio chested down a cross from the right.

Sheikh Russel vs Brothers Union Sheikh Russel closed the gap with leaders Bashundhara Kings after notching a 3-1 win over struggling Brothers Union at the Sylhet District Stadium. The Blues now have 33 points from 15 matches, equal with Abahani and three behind the leaders, although the latter two have a game in hand. Sheikh Russel had beaten Brothers 3-2 in the reverse fixture.

New-signing Valerii Hrysher gave Sheikh Russel a lead in the 37th minute with a placed shot before Raphael Odoyin struck twice in the 47th and 78th minutes to ensure a 10th victory from 14 matches. Minhajul Abedin Ballu reduced the margin in the 82nd minute but Brothers could not avert an eighth defeat from 13 matches.

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