



Chattoqram Abahani captain Jamal Bhuiyan (C), who has become a hot topic as of late due to his superb performances for the national team, ran at the front of the pack during training in Chattoqram on the eve of their Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup match with TC Sports Club today.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Former champions lock horns on opening day

ATIQUE ANAM from Chattoqram



Despite a big setback at the eleventh hour in the form of Abahani pulling out, the third edition of the Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup is set to get underway as scheduled when defending champions TC Sports Club of Maldives take on first edition winners and hosts Chattoqram Abahani in the opening match today.

The match will get underway at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chattoqram at 7:00pm.

Abahani's withdrawal was thought to have dented interest in the tournament, but the other participating teams feel that this edition will be the most competitive of the three editions.

"There are good teams from different countries this time. We have had lots of changes since we won this title. However, we are under no pressure. We come here as defending champions and we came here to win the title," TC Sports Club coach Afia Mohamed Hamid told a pre-tournament press conference at the MA Aziz Stadium yesterday.

Even though the TC Sports coach sounded confident about his team's chances, he will have a tall ask with a team featuring only one foreign player and only two Maldives internationals.

The challenge may come in the very first game in the form of Chattoqram Abahani, who have six Bangladesh internationals including captain Jamal Bhuiyan and three foreign players with Europa League experience and one with World Cup experience.

Tournament hosts Chattoqram Abahani won the first edition with eleven players borrowed from other clubs and current coach Maruf Haque, who is in charge for

this tournament, believes his team can do the same with a group of players mostly roped in for this assignment.

"Even though our ultimate target is to regain the title, we are eyeing the semifinal stage at the moment. But it won't be easy as the other teams are very strong," Maruf said.

Captain Jamal, who has been loaned out by Saif Sporting Club, felt getting the team to gel in short time is no issue.

"As professional footballers, you cannot always eat biscuits and drink tea with the others all the time. How we play with each other is the most important thing. Our coach has told us what we should do. And my target is to win with Chittagong Abahani and to make my fans more fanatic for me," Jamal said.

Group A, which features Chattoqram Abahani and TC Sports Club, is believed to be the easier of the two groups, with Mohun Bagan and Young Elephants being the other two teams.

Group B features Bashundhara Kings, Chennai City FC, Terengganu FC and Gokulam Kerala, the latter one expected to replace Dhaka Abahani.

Captains and coaches of four other teams talked about their teams and targets, while Chennai City FC and Gokulam Kerala are yet to arrive in the country.

Meanwhile, even though there has been a bit of mismanagement regarding the scheduling and other such issues, preparations for the game on the field looked on target as the ground was prepared well, with one of the coaches praising the ground conditions openly. The gallery tickets will be sold for Tk 10 and 20 while the tournament will have a short opening ceremony where Information Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud is expected to be present as the chief guest.

PLAYERS TO WATCH



JAMAL BHUIYAN (Ctg Abahani): The Bangladesh national team captain is arguably one of the most popular sporting figures in the country right now. A constant fixture of the national team for the past seven years, this Denmark-born midfielder has perhaps reached the peak of his form and maturity as his assured ball-play in the midfield helped the Red and Greens assert control over oppositions like Qatar and India recently. On loan from Saif Sporting Club, the 29-year-old will certainly be at the centre of attention for Chattoqram Abahani during this tournament.

PRINCE TAGOE (Ctg Abahani): Prince Tagoe may not be a very familiar name to Bangladesh football fans but he is one of the two players playing in this tournament with the distinction of representing their national team at the FIFA World Cup. The now 32-year-old striker played in all three group matches for Ghana during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. He scored seven times in 36 appearances for his national team. Signed by Chattoqram Abahani for this tournament, Tagoe has previously played in some of the reputed clubs in Asia, Africa and Europe.



DANIEL COLINDRES (Bashundhara Kings): For many, the Costa Rican World Cupper was the key driving force for Bashundhara Kings in their successful debut season in Bangladesh's top-flight football this year.

The 34-year-old, who donned the Costa Rican jersey in the most recent World Cup in Russia, scored 11 goals and set up countless others for his teammates as Bashundhara Kings made it to the final of all three domestic completions, winning two out of those. It won't be a surprise if Bashundhara Kings and Colindres add a third trophy to their cabinet in two weeks.



PEDRO MANZI (Chennai City FC): Although this Espanyol youth product spent the most part of his career in Spanish lower leagues, Pedro Manzi proved to be a revelation for Chennai City FC, guiding the club to

the Indian League title in his debut season last year, scoring 25 goals in 21 games. He scored a hat-trick on his debut and followed up with three more trebles.

DANIEL CYRUS (Mohun Bagan):

Mohun Bagan may not be the force they once were but they are still competing with pride in the I-League and will probably be playing in the ISL this season. With their big plans, the team has roped in Trinidad veteran Daniel Cyrus, who is a towering figure at the heart of defence and has 93 caps for his national team along with Major League Soccer experience.



GROUPINGS

Group A: TC Sports Club, Mohun Bagan, Young Elephants FC, Chattoqram Abahani
Group B: Bashundhara Kings, Chennai City FC, Terengganu FC, Gokulam Kerala (not yet confirmed)



Chattoqram Abahani coach Maruf Haque (2nd from L) and captain Jamal Bhuiyan (2nd from R) are pictured alongside TC Sports Club Coach Afia Mohamed Hamid (R) and manager Abeer during a pre-match press conference at the MA Aziz Stadium in Chattoqram, where the sides will face off today.

PHOTO: STAR

Lee Tuck interested in return to BD

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattoqram



Andrew Lee Tuck has not forgotten Bangladesh. In fact the English midfielder, who became a sensation in the Dhaka football scene with just one season's exploits, is so impressed by the recent improvements in Bangladesh football -- both club and country -- that he is eager to move back from Malaysia if offered a lucrative deal.

The 31-year-old midfielder, who is currently the captain of Malaysian Super League side Terengganu FC, caught the imagination of Bangladeshi football fans with his skills and goals for Abahani during the 2015-16 season. He helped Abahani win a double that season, but left for Malaysia for a new challenge, where he is proving to be equally successful.

Since then, Bangladesh has seen unarguable improvement in competitiveness of the league and a resurgence in the form of the national team. While talking to reporters at Chattoqram yesterday, the eve of the Sheikh Kamal International Club Cup, Lee Tuck made no attempt to hide his affection for Bangladesh.

"I think now more than before it would interest me to come play here. You can see that the teams are serious, bringing in quality foreign players, the training facilities are getting better. It's exciting to see these teams like Bashundhara Kings come in. They've taken football to the next level. Bangladesh teams are starting to get in the AFC [competitions more]," the Englishman said.

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ANDREW LEE TUCK
TERENGGANU FC CAPTAIN

Lee Tuck was sorry that he could not be a part of this progress in Bangladesh club football but he was under no illusion that his move to Malaysia at the time helped him become a better player.

"It's been three years now. A lot has changed, I've got married, I have a baby. I've become more experienced as a football player, and I'm just happy to be back here.

"I went on to play in Malaysia. I was better in the last three years for making that move," Lee Tuck said with conviction.

The jolly English midfielder, in a lighter vein, attributed something entirely different as another reason behind his improvement as a footballer.

"My wife doesn't like the beard, but I like it. Ever since I grew it I've been playing good. It's part of me now, it's my lucky charm" he said with a grin.

Saif's best puts Dhaka in control

SPORTS REPORTER



A magnificent unbeaten double hundred from right-handed opener Saif Hassan put Dhaka Division in the driving seat against Rangpur Division on the second day of a second-round National Cricket League match at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattoqram yesterday.

Dhaka had restricted Rangpur to 71 for two in 18 overs at the close after having declared on 556 for eight after tea. Saif, who retired hurt on 120 on Day One and came back yesterday to register his highest first-class score, said that he had to work hard for his 329-ball 220 yesterday. "No specific plans [regarding a double hundred]. The team plan was to bat till after tea, so I played keeping that in mind. And when I went out there today, it was hard to score runs. All the fielders were placed deep and easy runs were not coming, so I had to proceed by taking singles. Almost 70 runs out of the hundred I scored today came from singles," said Saif.

Saif, who has been in impressive form since Bangladesh A's tour of Sri Lanka earlier this month, also said that he wanted to score a double ton after seeing Imrul Kayes score one in the first round.

"This year, I scored five centuries in one-day matches. I went to Sri Lanka with Bangladesh A, and I scored one there. There was also one against the Sri Lanka Emerging team. And in first-class matches, I had scored a double-century [204] two years ago. And I also saw Imrul bhai's score and I thought it was an opportunity for me and that I should make it count," said Saif, who harbours hopes of representing the national side one day.

After Saif's heroics, Liton Das, who missed the first round of the NCL due to his Caribbean Premier League commitments, remained unbeaten on 51 off 64 as Rangpur finished the

day with 71 for two.

In Bogura, Dhaka Metropolis quick Abu Hider bagged a fiver to help his side bundle Sylhet Division out for 319 runs after they had started the day on five for one and trailing by 241 runs. Hider, who returned figures of five for 55, scalped four wickets on the day. Dhaka Metropolis ended the day on nine for no loss in seven overs.

Meanwhile Khulna Division batsman Imrul came close to another landmark score but fell short by seven runs when he was out for a patient 190-ball 93 in the 63rd over in the match against Rajshahi Division in Khulna. Khulna managed 227 for six in 90 overs at the close.

In Fatullah, Mahidul Islam's 158-ball 91 saw Chittagong Division score 356 all out in 134.3 overs after starting the day on 261 for four against Barishal Division. Following the exchange, Barishal could manage 104 for four in 43 overs before stumps.

SCORES IN BRIEF

DHAKA V RANGPUR
DHAKA: First Innings 556 for 8 declared in 160 overs (Saif 220 not out, Rony 65; Shuvo 3-134, Sanjit 3-89)
RANGPUR: First Innings 71 for 2 in 18 overs (Liton 51 not out; Sakil 2-16)
RAJSHAHI V KHULNA
RAJSHAHI: First Innings 261 all out in 85.3 overs
KHULNA: First Innings 227 for six in 90 overs (Imrul 93; Tajjul 2-75, Shaiful 2-55)
CHITTAGONG V BARISHAL
CHITTAGONG: First Innings 356 all out in 134.3 overs (Mahidul 91; Monir 4-99, Mosaddek 2-29)
BARISHAL: 104 for four in 43 overs (Rafsan 49, Ashrafur 4 not out; Nayeem 2-23)
DHAKA METRO V SYLHET
DHAKA METROPOLIS: First Innings 246 all out and second Innings 9 for no loss in seven overs (Naim 8 not out)
SYLHET: First Innings 319 all out in 84.5 overs (Zakir 71, Jaker 71; Hider 5 for 55)



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SAIF HASSAN
DHAKA DIVISION OPENER