



Players of Chattogram Abahani and Saif Sporting Club go through their drills yesterday, ahead of their Federation Cup semifinal clash at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Saif take on Chattogram Abahani in first semifinal

SPORTS REPORTER



Big-spending Saif Sporting Club, who are yet to make a mark in the country's top-flight football after their arrival in the professional circuit three seasons ago, will be hoping to make it to their maiden domestic final when they take on Chattogram Abahani in the first semifinal of the Walton Federation Cup today.

The match will kick off at 4:00pm with private satellite channel T-Sports telecasting the match live from the venue.

Saif SC, who were eliminated from the quarterfinals in the previous two editions after failing to clear the group stages in their debut season, reached the semifinal for the first time.

Saif SC, a side with a wonderful blend of youths and experienced campaigners including five national players, have turned into an unstoppable force this season under

the guidance of Belgian coach Paul Joseph Put. They stormed into the quarterfinals, winning all three group stage matches and having scored 10 goals. Saif SC then edged past Mohammedan SC through a penalty shootout in the semifinal following a 2-2 draw.

When other title contenders have been struggling to score goals, it is a big advantage for Paul Put that as many as 10 players have already struck in their last four matches with Nigerian striker Ikechukwu Kenneth Ngwoke leading the way with four goals.

On the other hand, Chattogram Abahani, who were defeated by Dhaka Abahani in the final of the 2017 edition, also reached the semifinals after two seasons. Unlike Saif SC, Chattogram Abahani had to take on a more defensive approach on their way to confirming the semifinal spot. So far, the charges of Maruful Haq scored only three goals but conceded a solitary goal against Bashundhara Kings in the group stage.

Nevertheless, Maruf, who has won the

Federation Cup with Mohammedan SC and Sheikh Russel KC, will be preferring to play more tactically against Saif SC. As evident from the other matches, Chattogram Abahani might prefer to defend for the most part of the game with occasional attacks on the break.

Maruf will however be missing the services of forwards Shakhawat Hossain Rony, Sohel Rana and Brazilian Nixon Guyllhemre for the game.

"We are not worried over the low scoring rate because we did not have the resources from the start. But I think, we need only one goal to win the match," said Maruful, who will be boosted with the return of Nigerian striker Chinedu Mathew for today's match.

Meanwhile, Paul Put emphasized on the importance of playing as a unit in order to win.

"For me, everyone is a star and everyone is important because everyone has to complete his job on the pitch. Even the best performer can sit on the bench and the other players have to play for the team and win together."

Time to decide on a Test gloveman

MAZHAR UDDIN



With the selectors now moving forward with a long-term strategy in both limited-overs and Test cricket, it is imperative that it involves proper utilisation of resources to form balanced units across formats.

The inclusion of wicketkeeper-batsman Nurul Hasan in the 20-member Test squad for the two-match Test series against the West Indies indicates that the selectors are now looking to create more options behind the wicket in the longest format.

Mushfiqur Rahim has served the Test side as a wicketkeeper-batsman for a long time and is the most successful one too. But there was always a concern over not getting the most from Mushfiqur the batsman due to his heavy load as a keeper.

Many had opined that Mushfiqur, one of the most assured and technically correct batsman in the Tigers' side with the ability to tackle world-class bowling in any condition, should bat up the order.

While two of Mushfiqur's three double hundreds in Tests came as a wicketkeeper-batsman, there are also questions over his wicketkeeping skills, which also put extra pressure on him.

It was in the home series against Zimbabwe in March last year when Mushfiqur smashed his third Test ton and became the only Bangladeshi to achieve the feat. In that match, he played as a specialist batsman while Liton Das kept wicket.

Liton, a highly-rated batsman and swift behind the stumps, has got all the ability to replace Mushfiqur as a wicketkeeper in the longest format.

Despite Mushfiqur previously stating that wicketkeeping helps him as a batsman, as the experienced cricketer is in his 30s now, the time has also come to prepare for the future.

The team management would also want to fully utilise the huge potential of Liton the batsman and the class he displays every now and then.

His statistics in Test cricket are not as impressive as he would want them to be - he averages in the mid-twenties with five fifties from 20 Tests.

However, Liton, whose main identity is as an opening batsman, has mostly played at number seven and eight in his brief Test career. In this regard, the team management can also promote him to open the innings with Tamim Iqbal.

On the other hand, Nurul, another wicketkeeper-batsman, could feel a touch unlucky as he was dropped from the Test side after playing just three Tests despite making a good impression.

Nurul made his Test debut against New Zealand in 2017 at Christchurch and scored 47 runs in the first innings and also had three dismissals behind the stumps.

But he was dropped and later selected in 2018 during the series in West Indies. Nurul scored 68 runs in the second innings in the match in which the Tigers were bundled out for just 43 runs in the first innings in Antigua.

The 27-year-old was eventually dropped again after the West Indies tour but Nurul has always been on the scene in the domestic circuit and is rated one of the most skilful keepers in the country.

The importance of a highly skilled keeper in Test cricket cannot be overstated as wickets are at a premium, and so any long-term plan must involve the presence of such a gloveman.



South Africa whitewash Sri Lanka

REUTERS, JOHANNESBURG

South Africa completed a sweep of their two match series against Sri Lanka as they strolled to a 10-wicket win on the third day of the second Test on Tuesday.

South Africa knocked off a target of 67 runs without loss as openers Dean Elgar (31 not out) and Aiden Markram (36 not out) saw them to victory at the Wanderers Stadium - with two and a half days of the contest still remaining.

Success in Johannesburg followed a convincing innings and 45-run triumph in the first test in Pretoria last week and turns around a poor run of test form over the last year.

Sri Lanka were bowled out for 211 in their second innings, surviving only 95 minutes of Tuesday's morning session. They resumed their second innings at 150-4 overnight with a tenuous five-run lead but with captain Dimuth Karunaratne not out on 91 and hoping to set the home side an imposing target to chase in the fourth innings.

Karunaratne reached his 10th Test century off 123 balls as the visitors began in aggressive fashion, but a misjudged pull shot saw the Sri Lanka skipper top edge Anrich Nortje to be caught by Wiaan Mulder in a major blow to their hopes, just 20 minutes into the day's play. He was dismissed for 103.

"We wanted to get the new year off to a good start, and it was good to see our experienced batsmen among the runs as well as our young bowling line-up putting up their hands," said winning captain Quinton de Kock.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka hope to have at least three key players back after an injury-hampered test series defeat to South Africa, their captain said, as they look ahead to hosting England later this month.

"We are hopeful they will be back. We think there is good news around their injuries," Karunaratne said.



'A true role model'

WILLIAMSON REWRITES RECORD BOOKS

➤ Kane Williamson became only the third and also the fastest New Zealand batsman to score 7000 Test runs. He sits behind only Stephen Fleming (7172) and Ross Taylor (7379).

➤ Williamson took only 144 innings to reach the landmark in the longest format of the game. Ross Taylor is currently the highest run-scorer for the Black Caps in Test cricket and scored the same amount of runs in 169 innings.

➤ The New Zealand captain slammed his fourth double-century in the Test. He now has the joint-highest double-tens in the format among the Kiwi players alongside Brendon McCullum.

➤ Williamson now has the most number of Test hundreds (13) on home soil. Previously, the record was jointly held by him and Taylor.

➤ Williamson is only the fourth batsman to score a century in three straight Test matches for the Kiwis, with the other three being Mark Burgess (1969-72), Ross Taylor (2013), and Tom Latham (2018-19).

➤ Since 2016, he is only the second captain to score more than 10 Test hundreds. He presently sits on 11, behind India's Virat Kohli, who has 16 Test tons.

➤ The 30-year-old now has the highest average, which is 65.74, in Test cricket in the last three years when it comes to batters who have scored a minimum of 1000 runs.

AGENCIES



Kane Williamson is still finding new and interesting ways to score runs, even if the rest of us are running out of superlatives to describe them.

Williamson was extraordinary in Christchurch, first pulling New Zealand through a difficult phase in partnership with Henry Nicholls, going on to his first century on this ground and then adding splashes of vivid colour as he surged to his fourth Test double century, a figure matched only by the man who has just anointed him the best batsman in the world, Brendon McCullum.

McCullum Williamson as an "absolute genius".

The 30-year-old Williamson added a second double-century to his preposterous summer CV that now reads 238, 21, 129 and the 251 he scored in his only bat against the West Indies.

"Not at all surprised to see the consistency of Kane Williamson," tweeted former India great VVS

Laxman. "Unbelievable work ethics and attention to detail while preparing for any match are the reasons behind his success. A true role model for any youngster to emulate."

Daryl Mitchell, who has described getting his maiden Test century as "surreal", after he stroked 102 at his adopted hometown in Christchurch, credited Williamson's sublime double-century for putting the hosts in such a commanding position.

"Obviously Kane's 238 .. that's pretty amazing and he has set us up for a chance to win this Test match," Mitchell said. "He is a freak, isn't he? He's amazing. He makes the game look so easy at the moment and the way he's going about things, it's cool to see him doing so well. For me I've played against Kane when I was about 14 years old and now to be playing test cricket with him as well. He's a very special player and probably will easily go down as New Zealand's greatest."

Williamson has commanded the crease for nearly nine hours since going to the middle in the 20th over.

India look to ride momentum

AGENCIES



A Test series featuring moments of high drama on and off the field will lurch forward under the threat of COVID-19 on Thursday, with India's bowlers aiming to strike a decisive blow as Australia's misfiring batsmen attempt to regroup.

With a coronavirus outbreak still smouldering in Australia's largest city, the Sydney Cricket Ground will host a socially distanced crowd capped at 10,000 per day for what would usually be a packed New Year's test.

The series is level at 1-1, but India head into the third instalment with momentum after dampening Australia's Christmas cheer with a dominant eight-wicket win in Melbourne.

Victory would ensure India retain the Border-Gavaskar Trophy contested between the nations, two years after their breakthrough 2-1 win in the 2018/19 series.

Not all is well with the India camp, though, and the strains of a long, "biosecure" tour have started to show. Five of India's players are under the microscope for allegedly breaching health protocols when out for a meal.

Media reports have said the tourists might boycott the fourth and final test in Brisbane if forced into more stringent quarantine. The team has declined to hose down the speculation, leaving the Australian cricket board to affirm India's support for the tour.

A rising injury count has also created headaches, forcing Ajinkya Rahane's side to tweak its pace attack for a third successive match.

Shardul Thakur is expected to replace Umesh Yadav but the uncapped left-arter T. Natarajan, called up after Umesh's calf strain, sent social media abuzz on Tuesday by tweeting a picture of himself in test whites.



Batsman Lokesh Rahu's wrist injury has also robbed India of a potential replacement for struggling opener Mayank Agarwal, though experienced batsman Rohit Sharma is available after recovering from a hamstring injury.

A 'warrior' that he is, David Warner has done everything to be ready and is likely to compete in the third Test against India, Australia head coach Justin Langer said on Tuesday and assured that lack of four-day cricket for the opener in the last few months

is not a concern.

Langer also announced that young batsman Will Pucovski will make his Test debut on Thursday. Both Warner and Pucovski, who was primed for Test debut in Adelaide, missed the first two Tests of the series due to a groin injury and concussion-related issues respectively.

"Very hopeful that David will be ready to go (for the third Test),

he is a bit of a warrior, isn't he? I have said this since day one that he is doing everything possible to be ready," Langer said at a virtual media conference.

"He is moving pretty well. He is very determined to play. He loves the competition and he loves playing Test cricket. We will get some final eyes on him at training this afternoon and we will make a discussion on that. But I would say, he (Warner) is looking very likely to play the Test match," he added.

HASENHUETTL CRIES TEARS OF JOY



PHOTO: REUTERS

Southampton coach Ralph Hasenhuettl shed tears of joy and collapsed to his knees at the final whistle after an early Danny Ings strike secured the Saints a shock 1-0 Premier League win over champions Liverpool on Monday. "When you see our guys fighting with everything they have, it makes me really proud. You need to have the perfect game against Liverpool and I think we did have that," Hasenhuettl said.

Southampton became the first Premier League team to beat all seven winners of the competition in the season following a title win. The Saints have now beaten Liverpool, Manchester United, Manchester City, Blackburn Rovers, Leicester City, Chelsea, and Arsenal in the campaign following a title triumph.