

Saif cruise to maiden final

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Saif Sporting Club finally justified their journey in the country's top-flight football as they made it to their maiden Federation Cup final following a convincing 3-0 victory over Chattogram Abahani in the tournament's first semifinal at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

In-form Nigerian forward Emmanuel Ariwachukwu gave Saif SC an early lead and the tournament's current top-scorer - Ikechukwu Kenneth Ngwoke - widened the margin in the second half before defender Yeasin Arafat wrapped up the victory in the dying minutes to help Saif make it to the final of any tournament for the first time since starting their journey in 2017.

Saif SC, a side with a wonderful blend of youths and experienced players, were the clear favorites yesterday as they scored a whopping 12 goals in four matches on their way to the semifinal.

The charges of Belgian coach Paul Joseph Put chose to attack on the counter against Chattogram Abahani, finalists of the 2017 edition. Chattogram Abahani looked very energetic with the return of forward Chinedu Mathew. However, the Nigerian striker, who returned after recovering from Covid-19, could not compliment the energy shown by his troops as the forward had hardly any impacts on the ground yesterday.

Maruful Haque's Chattogram Abahani pressed hard from the start but a fumble from captain Charles Didier cost the port city side. Moreover, some poor



Saif Sporting Club's Nigerian forward Emmanuel Ariwachukwu scores his side's first goal during their 3-0 win over Chattogram Abahani in the first semifinal of the Federation Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

finishing from the forwards meant that a comeback was never on the cards for Chattogram Abahani.

Didier was to be blamed the early goal conceded by Chattogram Abahani. The defender failed to clear an Uzbek defender Sirojuddin Rakhmatullaev free kick from inside the box and an unmarked Ariwachukwu pounced on the opportunity, volleying it home in the eighth minute.

Both sides then came close to scoring in the next few minutes but poor finishing upfront from

national players and foreign recruits of both the sides left them frustrated.

After resumption, Chattogram Abahani once again came close to levelling the score. It was once again captain Didier at fault -- this time squandering an easy opportunity from the six-yard box on the hour mark.

Minutes later, adding to the woes of Chattogram Abahani and their skipper Didier, Ngwoke widened the margin for Saif SC by scoring his fifth goal of the tournament in the 71st minute.

Chattogram Abahani's hope of returning to the match was further diminished when Didier was shown a red card following his dangerous foul on Saif SC's Al Amin in the 75th minute. Al Amin had to leave the ground with a broken leg.

With Abahani a man short, Saif SC put the game to bed in the 90th minute with Yeasin placing the ball to the far post after entering into the box from the left flank.

"We took a different tactical approach to play. We decided to attack on the counter today

after playing deep in the previous match. I think we had quite an easy game. I told the boys, if you score an early goal, you can control the game. I think we have been doing tactically well and finishing well. We also showed guile against an experienced and matured side," said Saif coach Paul Put.

"The way we were playing was all right but conceding an early goal destroyed everything. The boys could not apply the zonal marking system and had to pay a high price," said Chattogram Abahani Maruful Haque.

Abahani face Kings' hurdle in semi

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Crowd-pullers Abahani will desperately be hoping to overcome the hurdle of new powerhouse Bashundhara Kings when the 11-time champions square off against the defending champions in the second semifinal of the Walton Federation Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium today.

The Sky Blues was able to overcome Bashundhara in the ill-tempered final of the season's curtain-raising Federation Cup during Bashundhara's debut season in 2018, but had gone on to lose two league matches and the quarterfinal of the season-closing Independence Cup in December 2018.

Even before Bashundhara Kings emergence, Abahani has had a bitter experience in the professional era since 2008 whenever the Dhanmondi outfit was faced with big-spending newcomers. In 2010, debutants Sheikh Jamal did lose 3-5 to Abahani in the Federation Cup final but then turned into the bogey team for the Sky Blues, eliminating them from the Fed Cup semifinal or quarterfinal stages from 2011 to 2014.

With three-time Fed Cup champions Sheikh Jamal reducing their spending, Abahani again stood tall to win three consecutive tournaments from 2016 to 2018, but this time around, the Sky Blues are again set to face a huge challenge from the new powerhouse Bashundhara Kings, who have reached this season's semifinal on the back of some solid performances, scoring six goals and conceding none.

The Kings may have the slight edge in terms of preparation time and also having many national players, but Abahani have seven national players and cannot be called a weaker side as they beat Mohammedan and Muktiyoddha Sangad convincingly before toiling hard against Uttar Baridhara Club in their 1-0 quarterfinal win.

Their history has virtually turned the match into a final before the final, which the winners will play against Saif SC.

"Perhaps they are ahead of us in terms of preparation, a strong reserve bench and on-song foreigners but the performance on the ground will determine everything," Abahani's Portuguese coach Mario Lemos told reporters.

Kings' Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon said, "We know we have a tough opponent in the semifinal, whose playing style is radically different from ours but we will try to impose our game and qualify for the final."



Black Caps on top of the world

AGENCIES

New Zealand stood on the shoulders of a giant to complete an emphatic clean sweep of their Test summer and make official their No 1 ranking in the world.

Kyle Jamieson took his second five-wicket haul of the match as the Black Caps beat Pakistan by an innings and 176 runs in the second Test on Wednesday to sweep the series 2-0. At home they remained almost unstoppable as they also secured 2-0 victories against India and West Indies.

Their only remaining mountain to climb is a place in the world,

"The most noticeable thing is height. Coming from that trajectory and getting that extra bounce is a real asset, but the most impressive thing is his attitude. His ability to run in and hit the wicket hard for long spells -- that's something that Tim [Southee], Trent [Boult], Neil [Wagner] and Matt Henry have prided themselves on. That's not an easy job but Kyle's come in and he's done that and done it extremely well. He's a really special talent but the way he's come in just tried to add to the group, whether that's on the field or off the field, has been the most impressive thing."

NEW ZEALAND CAPTAIN KANE WILLIAMSON, IN EXPLANING 2.03M QUICK KYLE JAMIESON'S THREAT.

ahead of them. New Zealand are enjoying a golden period in their cricketing history. After having made to two successive ICC Men's Cricket World Cup finals, they have now climbed to the top of the ICC Test Team Rankings for the first time ever.

Their Test team has been a truly dominant force in recent years, achieving noteworthy victories both overseas and at home. In an era of flashy superstars, Kane Williamson is a throwback to the old-fashioned copybook cricketer who oozes class every time he takes the crease. Such is the brilliance of Williamson that not only is he the captain and fulcrum of the New Zealand batting order, but also the current No.1 Test batsman in the

world, upstaging Virat Kohli and Steve Smith in the final ICC Rankings update for 2020. Williamson leapfrogged that formidable duo with three centuries, including two double centuries in his last six innings.

The meteoric rise of Kyle Jamieson as the fourth pillar of the New Zealand bowling unit has added a new dimension and strength to this already talented attack. The opposition knew full well the threat the 2.03m quick possessed. "Jamieson bowled very well. He was the only difference between the two teams," Pakistan captain Mohammad Rizwan said. "Conditions favoured the bowlers but he bowled very well and took too many wickets in this series."

Jamieson insisted he was very much of the "fourth prong" in New Zealand's formidable pace attack.

"We've got the four-prong attack and I consider myself very much the fourth prong. I just try and sit back and learn what these world class guys (Trent Boult, Tim Southee and Matt Henry) have done for many years," the 26-year-old said.

New Zealand have ended their World Test Championship campaign with a percentage of .700. Australia and India sit at .767 and .722 but are halfway through a series that will alter those numbers.

"I'll watch some of it when I'm perhaps feeding my baby girl or changing nappies," captain Kane Williamson said with a smile. "We can't control that [series], but it'd be nice if things fell our way."

Test challenge continues for Tigers in new year

BCB appoints Jon Lewis as batting coach

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In 2021, Bangladesh will step into its 21st year of Test cricket with the challenge of changing fortunes in cricket's most elite format.

The Tigers will begin the year as the 10th-ranked side, lower even than newest Test-playing nation Afghanistan, according to the ICC's Test team rankings.

Bangladesh will return to international cricket after 10 months with the upcoming home series against the West Indies, who will play a three-match ODI series starting this month, followed by a two-match Test series.

There has been a lot of talk about developing a good cricketing culture and placing greater emphasis on the longest version -- a format to which the Tigers are yet to fully adapt.

With the selectors having said they are heading for a long-term plan keeping the ICC Test Championship in mind, it will be important for the Bangladesh team management and head coach Russell Domingo to work accordingly.

Mominul Haque and his troops may be up against a rather inexperienced West Indies side to resume the race in the Test championship with the two-match Test series, but it will also be a new beginning for the Tigers to reform their Test culture.

The ICC's team rankings are updated after every game and Bangladesh now has 55 rating points. A win in the Test series against the West Indies would take the Tigers above Afghanistan, who are currently at number nine with 57 rating points.

A win in the series and the resultant climb up to nine from 10 would not be expected to mark a drastic change in the Tigers' Test culture, but it will be important for them to start working on

a gradual process to improve their skills and resources to become a better Test unit both at home and away.

On the other hand, if the Tigers lose a Test match against the West Indies it will cost them badly in the rating points and more importantly, it will hamper their progress in the ICC Test championship race.

With an aim to resume afresh, the Tigers will enter another bio-secure bubble from today -- part of the new normal amid the pandemic. The cricketers will undergo the coronavirus test and check in to the team hotel today ahead of the home series against the West Indies, who are scheduled to arrive on January 10.

The selectors had already announced the preliminary 24-member ODI and 20-member Test squad. The players are scheduled to take part in two practice matches among themselves on January 14 and 15 before the three-match ODI series begins from January 20.

Bangladesh's coaching staff, including head coach Domingo, bowling coach Otis Gibson, fielding coach Ryan Cook and analyst Shrinivas Chandrasekaran are expected to arrive in the country by tomorrow.

Meanwhile, The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has appointed Jon Lewis as the national team batting coach for the home series against the West Indies and the tour of New Zealand. The fifty-year-old former county opening batsman has been in coaching since 2007 and has recent experience of working with England's ODI side as its batting coach. He has also been in the same role for Sri Lanka in 2018-2019.

Lewis is expected to reach Dhaka ahead of the National Team's preliminary ODI squad's camp which starts on 10 January.

Bangladesh team will fly for New Zealand in the last week of February for three ODIs and three T20Is.



'Hard to stay in a bubble for a long time'

AFP, JOHANNESBURG

South African captain Quinton de Kock has questioned the sustainability of 'bubble' life in the age of Covid-19 as he contemplated an upcoming tour of Pakistan - another series in which players are likely to be confined to cricket grounds and their hotel rooms.

Speaking in a virtual press conference to review South Africa's Test series win against Sri Lanka, De Kock elaborated on comments he made during the post-match presentation after the second Test on Tuesday when he said he had mixed feelings about the tour of Pakistan because of the frustrations of being in a bio-secure environment.

"There are a lot of nerves when it comes to the bubble, lots of small



things get into your mind, things that you're not used to," he told journalists later. "Bubbles just make tours longer because of the quarantine period. You stay in your room for a certain amount of time. You get out when we are declared safe. It's very unsettling. I don't know how long it can last."

De Kock's concerns echoed those of Sri Lankan captain Dimuth Karunaratne, who said his players would face a test of mental strength as they went from one 'bubble' to another, flying home from South Africa but going into quarantine immediately ahead of a series against England which starts on January 14. "It's really hard to stay in a bubble for a long time," he said. The South African players will have a week at home before leaving for Pakistan.

Test Championship final scheduled for Lord's in June, but they can do nothing but sit back and wait to see if India and/or Australia can remain