

Abahani knocked out by Kings again

SPORTS REPORTER



Traditional giants Abahani once again fell to new powerhouse Bashundhara Kings as the 11-time Federation Cup champions surrendered a lead to suffer a 1-3 defeat to the defending champions in a high-intensity second semifinal of the Walton Federation Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The triumph over Abahani meant Bashundhara Kings made it to the Federation Cup final for a third successive time and will square off with Saif Sporting Club in the decider on Sunday. Abahani, on the other hand, have been eliminated at the knockout stages in three successive tournaments -- two Fed Cups and one Independence Cup.

Bashundhara Kings have now twice ousted the Sky Blues, who were previously eliminated from the knockout stages of the Federation Cup thrice by the then new powerhouse Sheikh Jamal DC.

The football was high-voltage throughout the match, but intensity turned to chaos in the penultimate minute of the second half of extra time when Abahani appeared to have levelled the margin 2-2.

Nabib Newaj Jibon put one in the back of the Kings' net in the 119th minute but assistant referee Iqbal Alam raised his off-side flag, prompting vociferous protest from the Abahani players. A TV replay also showed that Jibon was off-side when Francisco Rodrigues fed him the ball with just goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico.

From the start Abahani were on

the back foot in the face of huge pressure from Kings, who twice came close to taking the lead. Abahani were lucky to not concede an early lead with Brazilian forward Robson Da Silver rattling the Abahani crossbar in the 12th minute.

Goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel then denied Argentine forward Raul Oscar Becerra with his outstretched hands before Abahani took the lead against the run of play with Brazilian forward Rodrigues finding the net with an angular shot inside the box in the 30th minute.

After taking the lead, Abahani grew in confidence and played comparatively better, coming close to doubling the lead in the 41st minute but Francisco was denied by Kings' keeper Anisur Rahman Zico.

After resumption, Kings brought two changes to reestablish control

over the midfield and levelled the margin six minutes into the second half with a powerful Jonathon Fernandes drive that crossed the goalline after hitting the inside of the crossbar.

Afterwards both sides tried to break down the opposition with attacks and counter attacks but none could find the goal and the match rolled into extra time. Kings took a lead five minutes into the second-half of extra time with a strike from Becerra after substitute Matin Mia fed the ball nicely over advancing goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel. In the stoppage-time of second-half extra time, following the chaos regarding the cancellation of goal, Bashundhara wrapped up victory over a tired Abahani with a smart interplay between two Brazilians and Fernandes, having been set up by Robson, driving home inside the box to the delight of Kings' fans.



Bashundhara Kings' Brazilian forward Jonathon Fernandes celebrates after scoring his second goal in extra time. (Top) Abahani players protest in assistant referee Iqbal Alam's face as Nabib Newaj's 119th-minute strike was ruled to have been off-side during the second semifinal of the Federation Cup at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

Bashundhara Kings	3
Jonathon Fernandes-51, 120+1	
Raul Becerra-110	
Abahani	1
Francisco Rodrigues-30	



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



STELLAR ALL-ROUNDER SET TO LIFT SPIRITS ALL AROUND

What could be more auspicious for Bangladesh cricket than to see its premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan back in training ahead of an international series? After more than 10 months, the Tigers are set to get back to the field through a three-ODI and two-Test series against West Indies, starting this month. The challenges for the Tigers are mighty stiff as Bangladesh will begin the year as the ninth-ranked Test side. It was Afghanistan who had thumped a Shakib-led Bangladesh by 224 runs back in September, 2019 -- the last Test Shakib played before his year-long cricketing exile due to an ICC-imposed ban. Now with Shakib on board, Bangladesh would surely be pumped up to get the year 2021 rolling with a favourable start to their ODI Super League Series, the qualification pathway for the 2023 World Cup -- and also make some amends, from improving position in ICC Test rankings to registering first points in the World Test Championship.

SHAKIB AL HASAN AGAINST WEST INDIES

	Venue	Played	Runs	Avg	50	HS	Wickets	Avg	BBI
ODI	Home	7	182	45.50	2	67*	9	22.33	4/16
	Away	7	325	46.42	4	97	5	53.40	2/45
TEST	Home	6	488	48.80	5	97	25	28.20	1/5/63
	Away	4	257	36.71	2	96*	21	19.42	2/6/33

*** Shakib played his last Test against Afghanistan in September, 2019 (Runs: 11 and 44, Wickets: 2-64 and 3-58) and played his last ODI against Pakistan in July, 2019 (Runs: 64, Wickets: 0-57)

Barca aim for three wins in a row

REUTERS, BARCELONA

Barcelona showed their true potential in an outstanding 3-2 midweek win over Athletic Bilbao but now face the hard task of following it up when they visit Granada on Saturday searching for an elusive third consecutive La Liga victory.

With Lionel Messi back to his best and linking superbly with teenage sensation Pedri, the Catalans were at times unplayable and recorded their most significant away victory of the season in the league with their first win in Bilbao in four games. Messi was at the heart of their play and, during a season in which he has often looked out of touch with his team mates, everything seemed to finally click.

"That's the way we need to continue. I felt like we controlled the game the whole time and there were barely any dips in our play," Ronald Koeman said after his side's 3-2 win.

REUTERS, SYDNEY



Australia's Will Pucovski waited a long time to make his Test debut but he delivered at the first time of asking with a half century in the third Test against India at Sydney Cricket Ground on Thursday.

The 22-year-old, his shaggy hair bulging out from beneath his helmet, certainly rode his luck but his 62 was the best return for an Australian opener in the series so far and helped his side into a strong position at the end of day one.

Pucovski was called up to the test squad on the back of two double centuries for Victoria in Sheffield Shield only to be struck with a ball to the helmet playing against the tourists for Australia A in December and suffering a concussion.

A series of concussions have plagued his career and, he believes, contributed to mental health issues that have twice forced him to take time off from the game when on the cusp of test selection.

After finally passing the health protocols, Pucovski received the cherished "baggy green" cap on Thursday morning, however, before being sent out to open.

"It was a pretty incredible experience, it meant everything to be

honest," he told reporters.

"It's been quite surreal, it's been a rollercoaster. I feel like I've seen about a million doctors but I got through the protocols and I'm very happy to be here."

He looked less comfortable facing Ravichandran Ashwin and looked set for an exit on 26 when edged the India spinner behind only for wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant to drop the ball cold.

"The way Ashwin used the seam and his variations was something I hadn't seen before," he said.

Pucovski had added another six runs to his tally when he got another life, gloving the ball behind to give Pant a chance to redeem himself.

Although the wicketkeeper scurried back and leapt high to reach the ball, he was adjudged by the third umpire to have trapped it on the ground and Pucovski was recalled to the crease.

"I thought he'd claimed it so I thought he caught it, maybe I have too much faith in people," Pucovski said, explaining why he had walked. "It was pretty cool to be called back."



Barty returns after 11-month hiatus

REUTERS, MELBOURNE

World number one Ash Barty will return to competitive tennis after a lengthy hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic when she headlines two WTA tournaments in Melbourne ahead of the Australian Open, organisers said on Thursday.

The 24-year-old Queenslander has not played a match since February, opting not to defend her French Open title and also skipping the U.S. Open in New York as the novel coronavirus wreaked havoc on global sport. The pandemic is still affecting the tennis calendar, with the year's first Grand Slam at Melbourne Park to start on Feb. 8, three weeks later than planned. Barty, who held on to the top women's singles ranking during last year's disrupted season, will play for the first time in 11 months at one of two WTA 500 events from Jan. 31-Feb. 6 as part of the Melbourne Summer Series.



'SOURAV CAN PARTICIPATE IN A MARATHON'

Indian cricket chief Sourav Ganguly left hospital yesterday. The former India captain Ganguly suffered a heart attack while working out in a gym on Saturday and was rushed to hospital where he underwent an angioplasty operation. "His heart today is as strong as it was when Sourav was 20 years old. Sourav can participate in a marathon, fly a plane, or even get back to cricket if he wants without this event being any setback," cardiac surgeon Devi Shetty told reporters.



Barcelona superstar Lionel Messi and teenage sensation Pedri (L) combined beautifully to earn a 3-2 win at Athletic Bilbao on Wednesday to move up to third in La Liga.

PHOTO: TWITTER

Juve end Milan's 27-match unbeaten run

AGENCIES



Federico Chiesa scored a brace as Juventus inflicted a first league defeat this season on Serie A leaders AC Milan, ending their 27-match unbeaten run with a 3-1 win on Wednesday. Stefano Pioli told his AC Milan players to have no regrets about their performance despite suffering their first Serie A defeat in 304 days.

"This defeat hurts," said Pioli. "If there is an opponent against whom we have suffered it is Juventus, who have won the Scudetto for nine years in a row. But understanding how bad you feel after a defeat will also help us grow," he added.

"I saw the spirit of a team that wants to lead and win," said Juventus coach Andrea Pirlo. "This match was crucial for us."

Milan retained top spot thanks to their rivals Inter Milan slipping up by losing 2-1 to Sampdoria earlier in the day, and Pioli insisted that he was proud of his team regardless of the result.

"It's been a long time since we've lived through the ugly sensation of a defeat," he told Sky Italia. "I gave the players a pat on the back, they deserved it. They shouldn't have regrets after a game like this, they should keep their heads up."

Milan's chances against the Italian champions were dealt a blow earlier on Wednesday when Ante Rebic and Rade Krunic tested positive for COVID-19 to take their tally of unavailable players to seven.

"Seven is a lot, but we didn't lose our identity," Pioli said. "The individual episodes and the quality of the opponent made the difference."



Juventus' Federico Chiesa (2nd from R) celebrates with his teammates after scoring his side's first goal against AC Milan on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS