



(Clockwise) Bashundhara Kings players and officials celebrate with the Walton Federation Cup trophy following their 1-0 win against Saif SC in an entertaining final at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday. Coach Oscar Bruzon was lifted in the air by the players following the win, which came courtesy of a solitary goal from Argentine striker Raul Becerra.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

'I felt confident about who would be champions'

SPORTS REPORTER



As the replacement for countryman Herman Barcos, who sensationally bagged four goals in his Bashundhara Kings debut AFC Cup match, Argentine striker Raul Oscar Becerra initially failed to convince for the defending Federation Cup champions. But, with all said and done, the 33-year-old hogged the spotlight after scoring the decisive goal in a 1-0 win in the final against Saif SC yesterday. He also finished as the tournament's joint-top scorer alongside Saif SC's Nigerian striker Kenneth Ngwoke, with the latter adjudged the Most Valuable Player of the tournament.

Becerra scored five goals in as many matches as Bashundhara Kings retained the Federation Cup and the Argentine expressed happiness that he was able to contribute.

"I worked for goals. I worked hard for the team after joining as the coach decided whether I would stay in the eleven. Whatever the team needed, I gave it to the team. My colleagues helped me score because I came here to help Bashundhara. I also became the highest scorer in America, but it was my first experience in the sub-continent and I am happy to have scored the highest number of goals in the tournament," Becerra, his body draped in an Argentine flag, told The Daily Star after the match.

"We were confident of winning the title because we have been a champion team. It is a strong side with many national players and the experience of playing in finals before," Becerra said. "The message from

our coach was to play, enjoy the final and win it."

However, Becerra opined that their semifinal against Abahani was tougher than yesterday's tie against Saif SC.

"I think the semifinal was very tough because there were big players, Brazilian players. The long ball was difficult to defend and it took extra time to win the match but today I felt confident about who would be champions," said Becerra, whose focus now turns to the Bangladesh Premier League and Independence Cup.

Bashundhara Kings captain Tapu Barman was also excited to have claimed the title after coming into action following the lengthy layoff due to Covid-19.

"We performed well from the beginning of the tournament and our confidence grew match-by-match on the back of four months of pre-season preparations. We were also excited to play football after a long gap due to the coronavirus. That's why every player was very serious and active to show themselves on the ground," national defender Tapu said.

Tapu's Saif SC counterpart, Riyadul Hasan Rafi, was disappointed by the result but wanted to look forward to performing well in the coming days and drawing inspiration from this Federation Cup performance.

"It was bad luck that we could not avail the opportunities while the opponents cashed in on one chance to win the match. I think we could have taken the match away from Bashundhara Kings had Fahim availed a one-on-one chance in the first half," Rafi said. "But becoming runners-up is also big achievement for Saif SC and we will try to play better in the upcoming Bangladesh Premier League and Independence Cup."

Kings win 2nd title on the trot

ANISUR RAHMAN



The Toyota accelerated at top speed but fell short of the Ferrari in the final of the Walton Federation Cup final yesterday as Bashundhara Kings beat Saif Sporting Club 1-0 at Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday to lift the season's curtain-raising tournament.

Argentinian striker Raul Oscar Becerra separated the sides with a 52nd-minute strike that delivered back-to-back Federation Cup titles for Bashundhara. Saif SC, meanwhile, were denied the chance to write their name in history alongside Muktijoddha Sangsad and Sheikh Russel as the teams to win the tournament on their maiden appearance in the final since its introduction in 1980. Saif SC, the 13th team to play the Federation Cup final, had no such luck.

Before the final, Belgian coach Paul Joseph Put compared his Saif SC side and Bashundhara Kings to a Toyota and a Ferrari respectively.

But although the latter eventually emerged as the superior force, Bashundhara faced a tough challenge from Saif SC, who delivered a brilliant performance in the second half and got within touching distance of the defending champions.

Buoyed by the vibrant presence of their supporters in the gallery, the final got off to a decent start with both sides attacking with intent. It did not appear that Saif SC were playing in their maiden final, that too against the star-studded Kings, who also lost their maiden Federation Cup final on debut but have not lost any of their three finals (2x Federation Cup, 1x Independence Cup) since.

Left-back Bishwanath Gosh and Becerra came close to giving Bashundhara Kings the lead within the first 20 minutes but opposing goalkeeper Pappu Hossain and defender Riyadul Islam Rafi kept Saif SC in the hunt by thwarting both efforts. National goalkeeper Anisur Rahman Zico was also solid under the Bashundhara sticks and made a brilliant save to tip over a dipping shot from Rahmat Mia in

the 19th minute before again denying him in stoppage time of the first half.

After resumption, Saif began to exert tremendous pressure as they sought to break the deadlock, with right-back Rahmat watching another dipping shot from 30 yards brilliantly tipped over by Zico three minutes into the second half before Bashundhara took the lead against the run of play in the 52nd minute.

Breaking on the counter, Brazil's Robson Da Silva played a long ball behind the Saif SC backline and Becerra controlled nicely before driving the ball to the far post from the right-hand side to give Bashundhara an expected lead.

Becerra came close to doubling the lead but Saif SC but the ball was stunningly snatched from his feet by the Pappu before Saif SC's Nigerian striker Kenneth Ngwoke sent shivers down Bashundhara's spine by mustering three driving efforts which either went narrowly wide or were forced out for corners by Zico, who ensured that Kings would have yet another occasion to cheer.



Shakib Al Hasan and Mushfiqur Rahim, the two stalwarts of the Bangladesh cricket team, were in jovial mood during the first day of training at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday ahead of the West Indies series.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

A subdued yet auspicious return

MAZHAR UDDIN



The scenes at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday were unusual because there were no supporters such as Shoab Ali Bukhari, better known as "Tiger Shoab" for his body paint, screaming their support during the national team's practice session.

The stands were empty and the home of cricket was quiet due to the obvious reason of maintaining health protocols set by the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), but the intensity among the cricketers was high and for good reason.

After over 10 months, the Tigers are all set to return to international cricket with the upcoming home series against the West Indies. The first practice session of the preliminary squad for both the ODI and Test squads took place under head coach Russell Domingo yesterday.

The Tigers' coaching staff - including head coach Domingo, fielding coach Ryan Cook and interim spin bowling coach Sohel Islam - were busy conducting the training sessions of cricketers divided into several groups.

"Obviously, we are all excited as we joined the national camp after a long time and we had a good practice session," Nazmul Hossain Shanto told the media after the training session in Mirpur yesterday. "Although we were together during the Bangabandhu T20 Cup, it's a different feeling to share the national dressing room together."

"We will be playing international cricket after over ten months and we are discussing areas to work on during the

training sessions. Hopefully we will be able to do well in the upcoming series." Domingo was seen observing his charges in the outer nets and gave some batting tips to Shakib Al Hasan, who will be making a comeback to international cricket after completing a one-year ban from international cricket in October last year.

A festive mood prevailed among the cricketers who were finally returning to their natural state and looking forward to getting into the groove since last playing international cricket in March 2020.

However, Bangladesh's pace bowling coach Ottis Gibson and the newly appointed batting consultant Jon Lewis were quarantining at the hotel following their arrival to the country on Saturday. Both coaches are awaiting clearance from the health ministry to join the camp as they are UK passport holders, who have to go on a mandatory 14-day quarantine protocol set by the government.

The BCB however had already requested the authorities to relax the quarantine protocols for the national coaching staff and the visiting West Indies side, who also had a stopover in the UK before arriving in Dhaka yesterday.

The West Indies side reached Bangladesh yesterday morning and went straight to the team hotel where they will be isolated in their room for the next three days.

The 24-member Bangladesh preliminary squad had also checked into the hotel after the training session and they will be kept inside a bio-secure bubble during the series. The members of the Test squad, who are staying at the Academy complex, are also expected to check in to the hotel soon.

'Sad to see it happen in Australia'

AGENCIES



India were battling to avoid defeat against Australia after losing two wickets before the close of play Sunday in a third Test marred by allegations of racist abuse from the Sydney crowd.

Cricket Australia apologised to the India team on Sunday and launched a probe into allegations visiting players were subjected to racial abuse by part of the crowd.

The Indian team lodged an official complaint after play on Saturday after bowlers Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj complained of hearing racist slurs while fielding near the boundary rope. On Sunday, Siraj approached the umpire pointing towards the stands and the action was paused as police ejected six fans from the ground.

CA launched a parallel investigation with New South Wales Police, promising to take the "strongest measures" against anyone found guilty of vilification.

Australia coach Justin Langer joined the condemnation. "It's upsetting and it's disappointing," he said. "It's one of my greatest pet hates in life that people think they can come

to a sporting event and abuse or say whatever they like. I hated it as a player and I hate it as a coach. It's really sad to see it happen in Australia."

The International Cricket Council said the Indian team had informed match referee David Boon of the alleged racial abuse on Saturday and the governing body was "incredibly disappointed" with the incidents at the SCG.

Under the ICC's anti-discrimination policy,



it falls to CA to investigate the incident and submit a report to the Dubai-headquartered body within two weeks.

"We will provide Cricket Australia and the relevant authorities with our full support in any ensuing investigation as we will not tolerate any

racism in our sport," ICC Chief Executive Manu Sawhney said in a statement.

India's Ravichandran Ashwin said the team had been insulted by Sydney spectators in the past but the racial abuse had crossed a line during the ongoing match, which is being played in front of a reduced crowd of less than 10,000.

"It is definitely not acceptable in this day and age. This must definitely be dealt with iron-fist and we must make sure it doesn't happen again," the bowler said.

India's regular captain Virat Kohli was fined half of his match fee in 2012 for responding to barracking from the SCG crowd by gesturing at them with his middle finger.

Kohli, who returned home after playing in the first test to attend the birth of his first child, said racial abuse was completely unacceptable.

"Having gone through many incidents of really pathetic things said on the boundary lines, this is the absolute peak of rowdy behaviour," Kohli said on Twitter. "It's sad to see this happen on the field."

"The incident needs to be looked at with absolute urgency and seriousness and strict action against the offenders should set things straight for once."

'We're not puppets'



REUTERS, PAMPLONA



Real Madrid coach Zinedine Zidane said his side's match Osasuna should have been postponed due to the snowy conditions after the La Liga champions could only draw 0-0 on Saturday with the second-from-bottom side.

The snowstorm that blitzed northern Spain and the Spanish capital forced Real to make the journey to Pamplona a day earlier than originally planned, while they were made to wait on the icy runway at Barajas airport for over four hours.

Zidane's side struggled on the icy pitch as snow continued to fall throughout the game. They failed to have a shot on target in the first half.

"That was not a football match, it should have been called off," an angry Zidane told reporters. Real Madrid goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois joined coach Zidane in criticising organisers La Liga for not postponing his side's game at Osasuna.

"We do what we are asked. We knew that if we didn't come here we could lose the points but all you need to do is take a look and the roads."

"We also have families and we're not puppets who have to play all the time," Courtois said.

Erling Braut Haaland scored twice to give Borussia Dortmund a valuable 3-1 win away to RB Leipzig on Saturday.



PHOTO: TWITTER



Lionel Messi (R) was on target twice and so was Antoine Griezmann as Barcelona thrashed Granada 4-0 in a La Liga fixture at Los Cármenes Stadium on Saturday.

PHOTO: TWITTER