



FARIHA STARS ON OPENING DAY

Fariha Islam was the star performer in the opening match of the 9th Bangabandhu Bangladesh Games cricket event, which got underway at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday. The left-arm pacer picked up six wickets for 14 runs in her 10-over spell as Bangladesh Blue defeated Bangladesh Red by 10 wickets. The National team, Under-19 and the Emerging team players have been divided into three teams -- Bangladesh Red, Bangladesh Blue and Bangladesh Green -- to take part in this round-robin league format tournament.

PHOTO: BCB

March window solved, what about May?

Booters set for Nepal tourney as Afghanistan fixture all but postponed

ATIQUE ANAM



On Friday night, the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) issued a press release saying it will organise a tri-nation tournament involving Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan Olympic team and the host country.

This should have come as good tidings at any other time, but in the current context it is not so as it means that Bangladesh have all but given up hope of hosting Afghanistan on March 25 in a crucial World Cup/Asian Cup qualifying fixture in Sylhet.

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has not officially ruled out the possibility yet but the postponement looked imminent ever since Asian football's governing body, AFC, passed the buck on to Bangladesh and Afghanistan to come to a settlement over the issue.

Last Wednesday when BFF president Kazi Salahuddin was asked whether they were intent on playing in Nepal or still hopeful about hosting Afghanistan in March, he claimed the issue with Afghanistan was still in the balance and that they were focusing on that match. "There is Plan A, B and C. Let's say we are still sticking to Plan A (playing at home against Afghanistan)," he said.

But with ANFA officially confirming Bangladesh's participation in the three-nation tournament, it seems the fate of the Bangladesh-Afghanistan match was already sealed and Bangladesh were indeed pursuing Plan B.

The bottom line is that Bangladesh will not get to host Afghanistan in March and that all the seven remaining qualifying matches of Group E, including the three featuring Bangladesh, will be played between May 31 and June 15 at a centralised venue.

While the consensus is to have these matches in either Qatar or Oman, technically there is still the opportunity to stage all the matches in Bangladesh. All five teams are eligible to bid for the hosting rights, and despite the hurdles facing Bangladesh in winning the bid -- the facilities or lack thereof in Bangladesh, the

expenses involved and the consensus of majority -- the BFF should desperately seek to preserve its home advantage.

Losing the right to host the matches, especially the one against Afghanistan, could be a massive blow as far as progressing to the next stage of Asian Cup qualifiers is concerned. A win in this fixture could have drastically altered the equation in Bangladesh's favour.

All is not lost though. The players can still turn this seemingly uphill task in their favour with some rousing performances in June. But in order to achieve that there needs to be well-laid plans in place -- Plan A, Plan B, Plan C -- any number of plans needed to succeed.

It is commendable that the BFF was quick to pounce on the opportunity to have some much-needed match practice in the now-vacated March FIFA window, but plans should already be in place for May too.

Although the fixtures of the seven matches of Group E have not been revealed by AFC yet, it is believed that the matches will be held on June 3, 7, 11 and 15.

Bangladesh will likely play their three matches on any of those four days. If Bangladesh are to play their first match on June 3, coach Jamie Day will not have all his players at his disposal for more than 10 days because the AFC Cup South Zone group stage runs from May 14 to 20 in Maldives.

Bangladesh champions Bashundhara Kings, who boast close to half of the players of the national team, will play in the AFC Cup. Runners-up Abahani, too, will join them if they qualify through playoffs.

Taking into consideration the traveling time to and from Maldives and the quarantine protocols both in Maldives and the proposed centralised venue, majority of the players of the national team might be left with very little time for team training, let alone playing practice matches ahead of those three matches.

Hence it will be of paramount importance to first negotiate for the hosting rights, and if that effort fails, then negotiate with the scheduling of the June matches so that the team gets a considerable amount of time together to prepare for the challenge.

Not just about adjusting to conditions

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan had earlier expressed his concern over Tigers' lack of preparation time for the New Zealand tour keeping the difficult seaming conditions in mind.

Adapting to tough conditions in New Zealand always remains the prime topic of discussion whenever Bangladesh tour New Zealand.

New Zealand have always produced fast and bouncy pitches and it's their seam-friendly weather and the windy conditions that play a big role in troubling the visiting batters.

Bangladesh's record in New Zealand clearly indicates how difficult it has been for the Tigers in the past. Bangladesh are yet to register a single win in 26 international games in New



Zealand.

However, it was not just about adjusting to conditions as the Tigers had failed to execute their game plan on their previous tours. Especially the batsmen failed to produce good scores even when the pitch played sportingly, demanding proper application.

Much like in the past, Bangladesh on their current tour of New Zealand will get enough time to adjust to the conditions. The Tigers

are scheduled to conduct a five-day training camp in Queenstown after completing their 14-day quarantine in Christchurch.

Tamim Iqbal's side will take on New Zealand in their first of the three-match ODI series on March 20 in Dunedin. And according to national selector Habibul Bashar, the Tigers will be able to utilise the extra time for preparing better and to adjust to the condition and pitch before the series commences.

"Whenever you are in New Zealand, it is very important how quickly you can adjust with the conditions here. So far, after having a look at the pitch, it seems pretty normal as the pitch has remained the same in New Zealand in the past.

"We will conduct a camp in Queenstown for a few days. So, I think the amount of hard work we have put in to come a bit early here in New Zealand will be utilised well. It will be very important to adjust to the condition here as it is totally different from our condition. It may be a bit colder in Dunedin but I think the wicket will remain similar to the one we have been practicing in," Bashar told BCB through a video message from Christchurch yesterday.

Aside from adjusting to overhead conditions and other external factors in New Zealand, the Tigers will also require to make mental adjustments in order to be ready for typical Kiwi challenges.

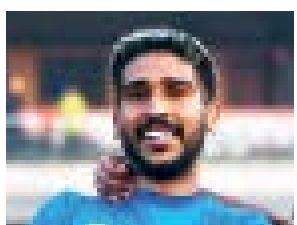
Ctg Abahani edge past Muktiyoddha

SPORTS REPORTER

Chattogram Abahani finished the first phase of the Bangladesh Premier League yesterday in seventh position following a 1-0 victory over Muktiyoddha Sangsad KC, taking their tally to 19 points from 12 matches.

Nixon Guyllherme scored the decisive goal in the 77th minute at the Bangabandhu National Stadium as the port city side registered their fifth win alongside three defeats and four draws to stay 15 points behind runaway leaders Bashundhara Kings.

The match offered very little goalmouth action, with Mannaf Rabbi's miscued attempt on 54



minutes the first real chance for the winners.

The visitors took the lead when Nixon slammed home a loose ball inside the six-yard box after Rakib Hossain's header on a cross from Kawsar Ali Rabbi had bounced off the back of Muktiyoddha defender Sujon Mia.

Maruful Haque's charges could have got a second goal in the 87th minute, but substitute Shakhawat Hossain Rony's effort on Rakib's cutback came off the post, with Nixon shooting the rebound wide of target.

The defeat saw troubled Muktiyoddha remain in ninth position with nine points from 12 matches.

Spain braces for Madrid derby

AGENCIES



Atletico Madrid's bid for a first La Liga title since 2014 hits a pivotal point as it hosts city rival Real Madrid tonight.

La Liga leader Atletico Madrid has an opportunity to deal a hammer blow to Real's attempts to retain the league title in a potentially decisive Madrid derby.

Zinedine Zidane's Madrid is in third, level with Barcelona but five points behind Atletico thanks to its 1-1 draw with Real Sociedad last Monday, and defeat on Sunday would leave it eight behind having played a game more.

Barca will be waiting in the wings to consolidate second place with its trip to Osasuna on Sunday, one day after the presidential elections which will beckon in a new era for a team in turmoil off the pitch but showing signs of life on it.

Defeat at the Wanda Metropolitano for Atletico would likely leave it with not just Madrid but also Barca breathing down its necks as the season moves towards its final straight.

"We need to remain calm and show patience, too," Zidane said. "This (Sociedad) result won't affect how we prepare for the derby. We need to go there and play a really good game.

"All sides are losing points, and we know that we have to go there and get something. There's still a long way to go in the title race."

Atletico, without a Liga derby win since 2016, welcome Kieran Trippier back

to the first team squad after a 10-week suspension for violating betting rules in England.

Yannick Carrasco also returns after a leg injury, while Jose Maria Gimenez and Thomas Lemar will face late fitness tests.

Zidane has said French forward Karim Benzema could be fit, however captain Sergio Ramos, Eden Hazard and Dani Carvajal will all miss the trip across the Spanish capital.

Barcelona, meanwhile, can put the pressure on both Madrid outfits when they visit Osasuna in Saturday's late game.

Fresh from a dramatic Copa del Rey semi-final comeback win over Sevilla, the Catalans, who have not lost in La Liga since December, will be full of confidence that they can mount a challenge in the title race.

HIGHLIGHTS

Last 6 Competitive Meetings: 3 Real Madrid Wins, 3 Draws.

Atletico haven't won a competitive Madrid derby since the 2018 UEFA Super Cup which they won 4-2 after extra-time.

2 of the 3 meetings at the Wanda Metropolitano have ended goalless. The exception was a 3-1 Real Madrid win in February 2019.

Atletico haven't tasted a single win in their last 9 La Liga clashes against Real.



Atletico Madrid striker Luis Suarez vies for the ball with his teammates during a practice session ahead of tonight's La Liga encounter against Real Madrid.

PHOTO: TWITTER



PHOTO: AFP

India captain Virat Kohli is ecstatic while spinner Axar Patel and wicketkeeper batsman Rishabh Pant pose with the trophy after winning the fourth and final Test against England inside three days in Ahmedabad yesterday.

India inflict innings defeat on England

The comeback was very heartening, says Kohli

AFP, Ahmedabad



Spinners Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel took all 10 wickets on

Saturday as India crushed England inside three days to win the fourth Test and seal the series 3-1.

After the latest emphatic innings and 25-run victory, India captain Virat Kohli hailed the way his side came back from a game down to dominate the series and book their place in the World Test Championship final against New Zealand.

India completed three victories in only nine of the 15 days available. "The comeback in Chennai (the 2nd Test) pleased me the most. The first game was an aberration and England outplayed us," Kohli said.

"We bowled and fielded with more intensity and so the comeback was very heartening. Our bench strength is extremely strong and that's a good sign for Indian cricket."

England captain Joe Root admitted his side, who suffered a two-day humiliation in the third Test, had been "outplayed" again. "There are a few key areas of the games where

India managed to grab them and we didn't," he said.

Ashwin bowled Dan Lawrence for 50 and ended England's second innings on 135 to seal the match, in the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad. Ashwin, who was named player of the series, led the bowling chart with 32 wickets followed by Patel, who played one game fewer, on 27.

England spinner Jack Leach was

HIGHLIGHTS

India's 13th consecutive Test series victory at home secured their place in the June final of the World Test Championship against New Zealand. India finished the league phase with 520 points, which includes 12 wins, four losses, and one draw. New Zealand finished in the second spot with 420 points, including seven wins and four losses.

Rishabh Pant was awarded the man-of-the-match for his belligerent 101, while Ravichandran Ashwin's series haul of 32 wickets, along with a century in the second Test, earned him the player-of-the-series award. This is Ashwin's eighth man-of-the-Series award and only two players -- Muttiah Muralitharan (11) and Jacques Kallis (9) -- have won more such awards.

third with 18 scalps. Kohli praised Rohit Sharma for his 161 which proved decisive in the second Test in Chennai and Ashwin, who he described as India's "most bankable player over the years".

This win was set up by wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant, who made 101 on day two, and Washington Sundar, who hit an unbeaten 96 as India made a commanding 365.

Pant scored his third Test ton in a 113-run stand with Sundar to lift India from a precarious 146-6 in response to England's first innings of 205.

India coach Ravi Shastri singled out Pant's performance with the bat and behind the wickets as "magnificent". "He was told in no uncertain terms that he has got to respect the game a little more. He's got to lose a bit of weight and work hard on his keeping," said Shastri.

"Yesterday's innings was the best counter-attacking innings I have seen in India. He built a partnership with Rohit playing against his nature - to do that is not easy."

The two teams now head into five Twenty20 internationals starting March 12 at the same Ahmedabad venue.