

AFC asks Abahani to play in India

SPORTS REPORTER


The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) has asked six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Abahani to check whether they can play their AFC Cup play-off match against Eagles Club of Maldives in India.

Abahani were scheduled to host Eagles Club on April 14 at the Bangabandhu National Stadium but the countrywide lockdown due to Covid-19 forced Abahani to suspend the match.

The Sky Blues initially wanted to play the match in Kathmandu on April 21 but travel restrictions have also forced them to rethink those plans. Meanwhile, Indian outfit Bengaluru FC thrashed 5-0 Nepal Army team in another play-off match in Goa on Wednesday.

"We had a three-party meeting among Abahani, AFC and BFF today [Wednesday]. We let the AFC know about the lockdown and the travel restrictions as well as informing them about Abahani's inability to travel to a neutral venue in Kathmandu due to travel restrictions," Abahani manager Satyjit Das Rupu said in a video message yesterday.

"We have now been asked [by AFC] whether to play the match in India on April 25, just three days before the final play-off match where Bengaluru FC will play against the winners between Abahani and Eagles Club. We were asked to communicate with the AIFF and Bengaluru," said Rupu, adding that if it is not possible to play in India, the match is likely to be held in Maldives in May before the start of the Group D matches in Maldives.



TEST STATS

OVERALL						
M	Inns	R	Avg	100s	50s	HS
22	38	1059	28.62	0	7	94

AGAINST SRI LANKA						
M	Inns	R	Avg	100s	50s	HS
3	6	171	28.50	0	1	94

IN SRI LANKA						
M	Inns	R	Avg	100s	50s	HS
1	2	40	20.00	0	0	35

Six years of potential

BISHWAJIT ROY



Liton Das has been around in national colours for almost six years now, but everybody is still hoping that the 26-year old batsman grabs his chances as best as he can.

The right-hander is one of those select few that have shown tremendous potential and one could not fault former Bangladesh ODI skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza for saying in March last year after a magnificent knock from the batsman in Sylhet: "Whenever Virat Kohli and Liton Das are at the crease it is a treat to watch."

Liton has shown his ability previously -- like in the Asia Cup final where he dominated India's bowling in scoring 121 before Bangladesh went down off the last ball -- but those scattered occurrences have hardly justified his calibre. Instead, he has made many pull at their hair due to his inconsistency.

The right-hander's frustrating inconsistency in his international career so far is reflected in his averages, which belie his talent.

His Test performances have been far off from those of a quality batsman. In 22 Tests, the three-digit

figure has eluded him. Seven fifties in 38 innings and good number of 30-odd-run knocks show that his main problem lies with converting starts into a big knock.

Liton had made a good statement in his first ODI game of 2020 but is yet to find his footing since

"The practice match [an inter-squad warm-up match at Katunayake] that we have is very important as that is our way to adapt to the weather here. We will also get an idea about the wicket through this practice match."

Bangladesh opener Saif Hassan said after the first practice session at Katunayake yesterday following completion of their mandatory three-day room-quarantine in Negombo.

returning to international cricket after the Covid-19 enforced break. He has continued to face the same problems, scoring 19, 0, and 21 in the three ODIs and 4, 6 and 0 in three T20Is during Bangladesh's latest tour in New Zealand, which gives enough indication that he is not in good touch.

Although Liton is known for his wonderful strokeplay, his career has never reached heady heights. When a batsman gets out after scoring 38, 69, 71 and 22 against the West Indies at home, it is hardly a reflection of good temperament.

In 2017, Liton scored 5 and 35 runs in the only Test he has played in Galle so far. A rib injury had ruled him out of the second Test in Colombo, Bangladesh's 100th Test that the Tigers marked with a remarkable win. Will he be able to convert a start into anything substantial when he plays the upcoming two-match Test series in Sri Lanka?

A talented batsman like Liton can take a leaf out of the success story of Pakistan captain Babar Azam, who has also been in national colours for six years. But while Liton continues searching for a permanent spot in the side, Azam has been in search of fulfilling one dream after another.

Shooting finds renewed vigour

ANISUR RAHMAN



Shooting was one of the major goldmines for Bangladesh in the South Asian Games, but the country saw its shooters return home with only wooden spoons from the last edition of the SA Games in Nepal -- only the second times in Bangladesh's shooting history that they ended the regional showpiece without a gold medal in the discipline.

It was widely believed that a lack of talented shooters in the Bangladesh squad was a major reason behind the debacle and one of the underlying reasons for that was the Bangladesh Shooting Sports Federation's (BSSF) insistence on focusing on existing shooters that were seen as finished products instead of paying

The ASA has been hunting talent from the grassroots level, nurturing talents and holding inter-formation competitions regularly to unearth potential shooters.

"We are hunting talent from the school level and inter-formation competitions regularly. We initially pick 20 to 25 shooters before trimming the number to 5 to 7 after providing them with two-to-four weeks of training. Afterwards, we offer contracts to those who have good potential at the national and international level," said ASA coach Mohammad Jalaluddin, who took the charges of ASA in January, 2019.

Jalaluddin also informed that they were recruiting shooters from junior level competitions. From there, they have picked up national shooter Atkia Hasan Disha, Sakibul Alam, Nafisa Tabassum and Tamjid Bin Alam.

SA Games gold medalist and



attention to the grassroots level and grooming new shooters as the pipeline dried up at the club level.

However, the Bangabandhu 9th Bangladesh Games proved to be an eye-opener for all and sundry after the Army Shooting Association (ASA) presented a number of promising shooters who outshone all the experienced hands, including Abdullah Hel Baki and Shakil Ahmed, and dominated the Gulshan Shooting Range by winning eight of 16 golds.

The emergence of shooters like Yousuf Ali, Nafisa Tabassum, Anjila Amjad, Sabbir Al Amin, Abdur Razzak, Nasiruddin Chowdhury Fahim, Mehnaj Sharmin Mim and Turing Dewan in the 10m air rifle and 10m air pistol events provided renewed hope to Bangladeshi shooting while shooters like Amira Hamid, Arnab Shahrar Ladid and Fardin Mohammad Arnab once again proved their worth by finishing on top in their respective events.

Commonwealth Games silver medalist shooter Shakil is an ASA product. He was found in 2014 during an inter-formation competition before bursting into the limelight in 2016 by winning a gold medal in the SA Games in Guwahati. Now, others are waiting to follow in those footsteps.

BSSF secretary general Intekhabul Hamid Apu has already said that they are thinking of bringing all potential shooters for long-term training under foreign coaches and that they were looking for a suitable coach.

National shooting coach Golam Shafiuddin Khan Shiplu also believes the emergence of new shooters from the Games will also put some pressure on experienced shooters.

"They are good shooters and they proved that by winning gold medals. However, they must be brought into the national camp for further improvement because there is no alternative to practicing and taking part in international tournaments regularly," Shiplu said.

Babar eyes more consistency

AGENCIES



Having climbed to the top of the ICC's men's ODI batting rankings, Babar Azam has his eyes set on doing the same in Test cricket.

Babar dethroned Indian maestro Virat Kohli as the world's top batsman in one-day cricket and then gave a batting masterclass to lead Pakistan to a nine-wicket win in the third Twenty20 international against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion on Wednesday.

Babar hit 122, his first T20 international century, with 15 fours and four sixes in an exhibition of superb timing and placement as Pakistan took a 2-1 lead in the four-match series.

"I feel privileged and honored to have joined the company of stalwarts like Zaheer Abbas, Javed Miandad, and Mohammad Yousuf, who will always be the shining stars of Pakistan cricket. This is another milestone in my career, which will now require even more hard work and absolute consistency with the bat in order for me to hold on to the ranking for an extended period of time, like Sir Vivian Richards from January 1984 to October 1988 and Virat Kohli for 1,258 days," Babar said in a statement after climbing number one in ODI rankings.

"I have also previously topped the T20I rankings, but the ultimate ambition and goal are to lead the Test rankings, which are the real testament and reward to a batsman's caliber, reputation, and skills. I understand to achieve this objective, I will not only have to perform consistently but more importantly, against the top sides," he added.

"I had been waiting for this for a long time, I had planned for a long time, and today Allah has given me a chance to finish it. I stick to my strengths and play according to them, and the team's requirements. I struggled hard, there was a lot of hard work that went into it. I keep trying to learn and add new things to my game, and I will keep trying to do the same," he said after making maiden T20 hundred.



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMIFINALS

Madrid stand alone against the new order

AFF, Paris



UEFA is set to announce major changes to the Champions League next week but the make-up of this season's semi-finalists confirms the extent to which elite club football in Europe has already been transformed over the last decade.

Manchester City have gone beyond the quarter-finals for the first time since Pep Guardiola's appointment as coach in 2016 and their reward is a last-four clash with Paris Saint-Germain.

It is a blockbuster tie and a rare meeting of the two clubs who have led that transformation of European football under the ownership of Abu Dhabi and Qatar respectively.

State wealth from the Middle East has allowed PSG and City to upset football's old order just as Chelsea to an extent did after being bought by Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich in 2003.

The London club are also into the semi-finals, where they face Real Madrid, the 13-time European champions who are the last ones standing this season among the continent's grand old clubs.

Real have dominated the Champions League over the last decade along with Barcelona and Bayern Munich. They have won nine of the last 12 European Cups between them. Madrid were practically level with Barcelona as the club with the highest revenue in the world last season according to analysts Deloitte, and yet there is an argument that they are now the outsiders among the semi-finalists.

Zinedine Zidane has worked wonders with what a few months ago was a tired-looking team in need of an overhaul, their spine



Manchester City's Phil Foden celebrates with manager Pep Guardiola and Kyle Walker after scoring their second goal during a 2-1 victory over Borussia Dortmund on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

"In the end, we're through and we're very happy. We're all united and the team always turns up and wants more. We haven't won anything yet, but we're still alive in two competitions. We're going to rest a bit because we still have matches before [the Chelsea tie]."

ZINEDINE ZIDANE

"Semi-final, Champions League. For the second time in our history, we are there with the real elite of Europe. Now, I don't want to think for one second about PSG. I want to celebrate. Dinner with the staff and the team. I don't know which wine, it will be with wine for sure."

PEP GUARDIOLA

comprised of two 35-year-olds in Sergio Ramos and Luka Modric and a 33-year-old Karim Benzema. "I am proud of what we are doing but we have won nothing yet," said Zidane on Wednesday.

Despite seeing off Liverpool in the quarter-finals, Real have been handicapped by a 575 million-euro (\$688m) revamp of their stadium while the pandemic has slashed revenues.

Chelsea, meanwhile, defied the economic impact of the pandemic to make the biggest investment in the transfer market of any club

last summer, spending close to an estimated 250 million euros on new signings including German stars Kai Havertz and Timo Werner.

Now they are in a first semi-final since 2014 as they look to win the trophy for the second time after 2012. Chelsea and Real have never before met in the Champions League, which is what makes the tie so exciting.

Yet those behind the plans to create a new format for the competition want to change that. Juventus chairman Andrea

Agnelli has, in his role as head of the European Club Association, talked of the desire for the biggest teams to play each other more often. Nevertheless, the changes UEFA is expected to ratify at a meeting next Monday mainly concern the group stage, increasing the number of clubs and radically altering the format.

From the last 16, at least, the tournament is set to be unchanged.

In any case there are only likely to be more meetings in future in the knockout rounds between PSG and City, whose only previous Champions League encounter came in the 2016 quarter-finals. City won then and reached the semi-finals for what remains the only time since being bought by Sheikh Mansour of Abu Dhabi's royal family in 2008. As they cruise towards a third Premier League title in four seasons, PSG stand in their way in Europe. Bought by the state-funded Qatar Sports Investments in 2011, PSG reached their first final last season and are

"After three months working here we're enjoying the moment and if you qualify for the semi-finals then this is an amazing moment for us. When you're on the touchline, close to the pitch, it's not easy to enjoy it but I try to be calm on the outside, but just inside you are dealing with the stress - that's the adrenaline of it that you love to feel."

MAURICIO POCHETTINO

"We're in the competition and in the semi-final, it is anyone's competition. In the semi-final, you need players fit, momentum, luck in the games. It is a very big achievement. You see when Chelsea was last in the semi-final. We are not used to being there. Once you are there, you play for the final. This is clear."

THOMAS TUCHEL

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SEMIFINALS

FIRST LEGS

Real Madrid vs Chelsea (April 28, 1am BST)
PSG vs Manchester City (April 29, 1am BST)

SECOND LEGS

Manchester City vs PSG (May 5, 1m BST)
Chelsea vs Real Madrid (May 6, 1am BST)

determined to go one better with a team built around the two most expensive signings in history, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe.

"We are a top team now, with all respect for the other teams out there," PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi warned this week, responding to suggestions the duo could leave rather than extend contracts which expire next year. Only one of these clubs will make the final this time, but they will keep coming back, and it might only get harder even for the likes of Real to stop them.