



TOP-SCORERS	
Robson Da Silva (B. Kings)	21
Pa Omar Jobe (Sk Jamal)	19
John Okoli (Saif SC)	18
Kervens Belfort (Abahani)	17
Raul Becerra (B. Kings)	16

# KINGS STAY AHEAD OF THE CURVE

SPORTS REPORTER

The 38th minute of the first half saw Topu Barman jump in the air with both of his fists clenched with a sheer adrenaline rush that one might associate with a footballer who had just scored a late second-half injury-time winner. Although it wasn't a match winning goal, however, the central defender's towering header which had levelled the score-line, meant more than that in more ways than one.

Not only did he manage to redeem himself from his blunder earlier at the 28th minute, where he struck his own net, he also ensured his side, the already-crowned champions Bashundhara Kings, came back into the match and ultimately avoided ending their record-breaking campaign on a low.

And thus, Kings rounded off their Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) campaign by playing out a 1-1 draw against Abahani in the last match of the league at the Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday.

The stalemate left Abahani to avoid a defeat against Kings, who

## FINAL STANDING OF 13TH BPL

	M	W	D	L	A/F	Points
Bashundhara Kings	24	21	1	1	59/9	65
Sheikh Jamal	24	15	7	2	53/28	52
Abahani	24	13	7	3	64/28	47
Saif SC	24	14	2	8	48/37	44
Ctg Abahani	24	13	5	6	38/28	44
Mohammedan	24	12	7	5	36/25	43
Sheikh Russel	24	11	3	10	36/31	36
Rahmatganj	24	6	7	11	23/31	25
Police FC	24	6	7	11	26/39	25
Muktijoddha	24	4	7	13	18/34	19
Uttar Baridhara	24	4	7	13	33/63	19



had beaten their main rivals four successive times earlier – thrice in league and once in Federation Cup – since Abahani beat

Bashundhara Kings in the maiden meeting between two sides in 2018. Kings secured 65 points from 24 matches while Abahani

finished third with 47 points from 24 matches.

Kings, who seized a back-to-back professional football league title with four matches in hands before going to play their maiden AFC Cup in Maldives earlier, celebrated their triumph in small scale in the last match of the league, whose fixtures had stretched to nearly eight-and-a-half month due to frequent breaks following the pandemic-induced lockdowns, the national team's engagements, unplayable grounds and the AFC Cup engagement of Kings.

The professional football league so far saw for the first time that the title race turned into a one-horse race with Kings maintaining an unstoppable status, in stark contrast to other title contenders like Abahani, Sheikh Jamal, Chattogram Abahani, Saif SC and Sheikh Russel KC.

There was a huge difference of 13 points between the champions and runners-up, who ended up closer to the sixth-placed one on the points table.

"Except the table-topper, the league was overall good and competitive among the rest of the six teams, which I really want to appreciate," country's lone UEFA

A license coach Maruful Haque said. "The league could've been more fruitful and competitive had the league not been interrupted frequently."

Maruf believes the interruptions gave champions Bashundhara Kings an edge to keep the momentum of their performance going.

"To be honest, all clubs don't have that standard of coaching who can maintain the same rhythm or tempo of his team's performance following frequent breaks.

"It was a really big challenge. So if the clubs could've that standard of coach, champions Bashundhara could've lost one or two more matches," said Chattogram Abahani coach, whose charges only beat Kings in the league.

Maruf was overwhelmed with the performance of some promising players but not pleased with most of the national players.

To make the professional football league more competitive in the upcoming season, Maruful reckons the federation should disclose a fixed league fixture, come out of traditional match allocation and improve the standard of the refereeing.

## 'Let me completely enjoy this trophy'

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings coach Oscar Bruzon, who will take over the reign of the Bangladesh national team today after leading his club to a second Bangladesh Premier League title yesterday, said he wants to celebrate the moment with his players and management before turning his focus to national duty.

The Spaniard, roped in temporarily by the Bangladesh Football Federation, saw champions elect Kings end the campaign with a 1-1 draw against Abahani last night.

"Let me lift the trophy of the BPL which is what I'm fighting together with our management and our boys for 13 months," Bruzon said before the trophy ceremony.

"Let me completely enjoy this trophy because there is a lot of sacrifice, effort and things going into it. Now it's time to be with my group," the Spaniard said, brushing aside questions on his upcoming task.

The 44-year-old coach said that despite the massive difference in points between the champions and the rest, it was not an easy task.

"We need to give importance to the BPL. I've said this two years before too that BPL is one of the toughest leagues in the subcontinent. It's very very difficult. It seems watching the points table that Bashundhara had an easy league but I can tell you that we have very strong rivals in Sheikh Jamal, Ctg Abahani, Sheikh Russel, Saif," Bruzon said.

The coach also praised young and up-and-coming players for the contribution in this journey, adding that he would have been happier with a win in the season's last match.



## CAN SOUMYA REDEEM HIMSELF AT THE T20 WORLD CUP?

Despite Soumya Sarkar scoring in the double digits just once in his past six appearances, all in Mirpur, the Bangladesh team management kept faith in him as it overlooked his recent showing at home and included the left-hander in the 15-member squad for the upcoming T20 World Cup starting next month. Soumya, who is on a mission to redeem himself at the T20 extravaganza in Oman and the UAE, practised at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium yesterday. The 28-year-old, with more than seven years of experience in the international arena, might not find many opportunities like this to finally cement his place in the Tigers' squad.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## 'Only 11 can play, we can't play more'

AGENCIES



Paris St Germain manager Mauricio Pochettino has defended his decision to substitute forward Lionel Messi in Sunday's 2-1 win over Olympique Lyonnais in the French Ligue 1 and said the Argentine was okay with being taken off.

Messi outshone his teammates in PSG's all-star attack for much of the game at the Parc des Princes but he had been -- slightly controversially -- taken off by the time substitute Icardi headed in a cross from the left to secure the win.

Three games into his Paris career Messi is still looking for his first goal, but he was unfortunate not to find the net in the first half when everything PSG did went through the six-time Ballon d'Or winner.

Neymar, Kylian Mbappe and



Angel di Maria were all on the field too but -- unfortunately for such a superstar attack -- there is only one ball and it seemed to be drawn to Messi's feet.

He was set up by Mbappe for a shot that was saved by Anthony Lopes in the 17th minute. Then he combined with Neymar for another effort that was turned

behind, and soon after the Argentine cracked a free-kick from almost 30 metres off the junction of bar and post.

The 34-year-old former Barcelona player looked puzzled when he was replaced with fullback Achraf Hakimi and exchanged words with Pochettino as he walked off the pitch.

"I think we all know we have great players in this 35-man squad. Only 11 can play, we can't play more. The decisions in the game are made for the good of the team and each player," Pochettino told reporters.

"Every coach thinks about that. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes players like it and sometimes they don't. At the end of the day, that's why we're here.

"These are decisions that have to be made by the coach. As for his reaction, I asked him how he was, he said he was okay. That was it. That was our exchange."



PHOTO: AFP

Real Madrid forwards Vinicius Jr and Karim Benzema scored within the space of three minutes deep in the second half to propel their side to a 2-1 win at Valencia in La Liga on Sunday. Benzema has six goals already this season, indicating he is having an outstanding run in front of goal and he has become the first player since Lionel Messi in 2011-12 to be directly involved in 11 or more goals in the first five games of a La Liga campaign (six goals, five assists). This season has seen Vinicius very much come to the party too, bagging five goals from as many matches, also outperforming expectations substantially, and added a first assist.

## Sonali Bank make a splash on Day 2

SPORTS REPORTER



two players in a special arrangement at a city restaurant yesterday.

With Abahani stealing the show on the first day, Sonali Bank stepped up and signed 15 players so far, including the likes of – talented goalkeeper Shakib Mahmud Ovi, a product of BKSP, and former national midfielder Kamruzzaman -- and other young players, while Mohammedan SC, Azad SC, Bangladesh SC, Wari Club and Ajax SC roped in some 15 players as well.

Following the loggerheads between Mohammedan and Dhaka Mariner Youngs Club, hinging on a controversy over a player, defending champions Mohammedan signed up Sarwar Murshed and Tahmid Haque in a special arrangement in the presence of two Bangladesh Hockey Federation officials to oversee the registration.

Although Mohammedan were supposed to sign up Ashraful Islam, Mainul Islam Koushik, Sarwar Hossain, Ashim Ghope from the national colours on the same day.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### India to start home season with NZ series

New Zealand will return to the sub-continent in November to play three Twenty20 Internationals and two Test matches in India, two months after abandoning their tour of Pakistan over safety concerns. The series against New Zealand will kick-start India's 2021-22 home season which includes four Tests, three one-dayers and 14 Twenty20 Internationals, the Indian cricket board said in a statement on Monday. West Indies will arrive in India in February to play six limited-overs matches, followed by Sri Lanka who will face their hosts in two tests and three Twenty20 Internationals. South Africa will tour India in June to play six Twenty20 matches.

### Pakistan's bumper home season looks in disarray

After a decade spent trying to woo back cricket's international elite, Pakistan is facing the prospect of being declared the game's no-go area again, and the anger is palpable. A sense of deja vu swept the country on Friday when New Zealand abruptly pulled the plug on their first Pakistan tour in 18 years, citing a security alert. With England's board yet to make up its mind about, Pakistan's bumper home season looks in disarray. Cricket Australia said it was monitoring the situation.