



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## An India-Pakistan showdown today

SPORTS REPORTER

In what is anticipated to be a thrilling contest between the archrivals, two Asian heavyweights India and Pakistan will square off against each other in a crucial fixture of the Asian Champions Trophy men's hockey tournament at the Maulana Bhashani Hockey Stadium today.

India lead the five-team table with four points from two matches while Pakistan are second from the bottom with one point from as many matches. The encounter between seven-time Olympic gold-medallist India and four-time World Cup winner Pakistan

once promised a fierce battle but somehow it has turned into one-way traffic with India beating Pakistan convincingly on a few occasions in the recent past. The contest, however, still stands out due to the age-old rivalry between the two neighbouring countries.

Pakistan could not beat India in the Champions Trophy since their thrilling 5-4 win in 2013. In fact, Pakistan suffered defeats - 3-2, 3-2 and 3-1 - in their last three meetings in this tournament between 2016 to 2018.

Pakistan were also handed two defeats by India in Dhaka during the Asia Cup in 2017 with India notching up an emphatic 3-1 win in the group stage before

registering a thumping 4-0 victory in the Super Fours.

Despite the recent success of India, Pakistan still have an edge in overall wins between the two sides.

"We can't disrespect any team because every team came here to give their best. So, Pakistan will not offer us an easy match. I think it will be a really good match tomorrow [Friday] and that's what we are expecting," said Indian captain Manpreet Singh. "It is all about how we are going to play the match. If we do our basic and other things well, we will win the match."

Singh's counterpart Omar Butta, skipper of Pakistan, promised not to give up till the last whistle

against India. "It is like another game and Pakistan and India are just opponents in a hockey match and that's all," said Bhutto. "As you know they played in the Olympics recently and got the bronze, so they are a good team but we will try our best."

Meanwhile, hosts Bangladesh will be hoping to avert another humiliation when they take on South Korea at the same venue after the tie between India and Pakistan.

Bangladesh played comparatively better in the first two quarters against India but collapsed afterward, suffering a humiliating 0-9 defeat in their opening match.

## Relief apparent following negative results

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Bangladesh team breathed a sigh of relief yesterday after a panicky situation had unfolded following spin bowling coach Rangana Herath returning positive for Covid-19 a day earlier. Nine members of the Bangladesh contingent, that included Herath, were quarantined as per New Zealand's protocols.

There was anxiety among the team management about what would happen in case any more players returned positive after everyone went through another round of testing the day before. The results were due yesterday and the Bangladesh team management received the best possible news in the morning as everyone returned negative for the novel coronavirus.

"We have very good news from here today. We have all returned negative for Covid-19 and after the reports arrived, we were given the chance to train," team director Khaled Mahmud told the media over a video message yesterday.

"Yesterday, me and team manager Nafis Iqbal talked to them [New Zealand Cricket] about what will happen. They gave us very positive news today and we went for a practice session, although we didn't manage to practice since it rained. We will undergo gym sessions today," Mahmud added.

Herath and eight other members of the

Bangladesh contingent had been isolated as they boarded the same flight to New Zealand alongside a person who had tested positive for the virus. Thus, the Bangladesh team, bar the nine members in isolation, went for a practice session yesterday and took to the field in Christchurch amidst the rain to sing Bangladesh's national anthem 'Amar Shonar Bangla'.

Even as rain spoiled the practice session, the relief of the players was apparent as they sang heartily in the rain. On a day where Australia's captain Pat Cummins got ruled out of the second Ashes Test for being in close proximity with a person who tested positive for the virus, the Bangladesh players counted themselves lucky to get out and about following a few days of anxiety.

Hence the contingent of quarantined players and support staff will move to the team hotel a few days later than the rest; but it is a reality all teams must face during pandemic times.

"Tomorrow we will depart from here [managed isolation] and move into isolation in another hotel. Those who wear yellow bands will however have to stay here till the 20th [December]. After we leave, they'll be able to partake in gym sessions from tomorrow and will be able to check in at the hotel on the 21st.

"Everyone is in good health and doing well. Rangana Herath has been taken to the quarantine centre and the rest have all returned negative for the virus," a relieved Mahmud concluded.



## Quality of foreign recruits rub off on local booters



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Country's spectators once flocked to stadiums to not only watch glittering performances of the local stars but also to enjoy the scintillating displays of foreign recruits in domestic competitions.

However, the standard of the foreign players gradually descended with most clubs having had signed foreign footballers prioritising physical profiles under the low salary structure but scenario have transformed in the last few years since the mandatory inclusion of Asian-based foreign recruits in squads. With Dhaka Abahani, six-time professional football league champions, almost always retaining the services of their proven campaigners including foreign players every season, Sheikh Jamal DC and Sheikh Russel KC effectively brought quality foreign players to break Abahani's dominance in the domestic league before newcomers Bashundhara Kings apparently took the issue of foreign players a few notches higher by signing up Hernan Barcos, a FIFA World Cup campaigner and former Argentina International, as it paid dividends in last three seasons.

This time around, it was seen that Abahani emulated their own selves by signing up three new foreign players while at least five clubs - Saif SC, Sheikh Russel, Bangladesh Police, Swadhinata KS and Chittagong Abahani - out of 12 professional clubs roped in four new quality foreign players to set the stage for level-pegging fights. And interestingly, it all transpired under much improved salary structure compared to a few seasons back.

With each club eligible to a maximum of four foreign recruits, as much as 48 players have been registered and, out of

which, 30 foreign players are featuring in Bangladesh's domestic competition for the first time this season.

"Of 30 new foreign players, 20 to 25 players are really quality players because they have solid academy-based backgrounds while 18 other foreigners are proven campaigners, I think," said country's lone UEFA A license coach Maruful Haque while hoping that those players would shine further as the season progresses.

It is often said that there is hardly any difference between national team's players with the ones outside and thus, the foreign players are set to make a major difference in the domestic matches. The notion has been proven many times in the past including the ongoing Riviera Independence Cup football tournament being held at Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium.

With the final of Independence Cup between Bashundhara Kings and Abahani left to play, 27 matches of the 15-team tournament have already been completed with 72 goals scored with an average of 2.66 goals per match. Interestingly, 72 goals were equally divided by 24 foreigners and 31 local players, including four own-goals struck by local players.

"The local players are getting goals because of those quality foreign players who are really selfless and provide the ball to teammates rather than scoring themselves while the coaches are also playing build-up game with many passes. Therefore, the teams haven't depended only on number nine and other local players are also getting goals," explained Maruful.

Kings' midfielder Jonathan Da Fernandes has been the top scorer with four goals followed by Abahani's Conlindres and Muktijoddha Sangsad's Tetsuaki with three goals apiece.



Led by Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan, members of the cricket board, staff and cricketers present at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur joined Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday when the premier administered oath to the nation to build the country as a developed, prosperous and non-communal "Sonar Bangla" -- imbued with the ideology of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Before that, a traditional Victory Day exhibition match between Shaheed Mushtaque XI and Shaheed Jewel XI was held in Mirpur. Athar Ali Khan, playing for Shaheed Mushtaque XI, struck a 55-ball 60 to help beat Shaheed Jewel XI by 42 runs in a 20-over contest.

PHOTO: STAR



Bangladesh will be desperate to get at least a point from their SAFF Under-19 Women's Championship when they take on India in their third group-stage match in Kamlapur today. The hosts are tied with Nepal for second place with four points while India lead the five-team table with six points. The top two teams will advance and face off in the final.

PHOTO: BFF

## Windies tour of Pakistan in doubt

AGENCIES

West Indies captain Nicholas Pooran won the toss and opted to bat against Pakistan in the Covid-disrupted third and final Twenty20 international in Karachi yesterday.

The match was nearly called off after five more members of the touring squad -- including three players -- tested positive for Covid-19.

Six players were ruled out overall, but the West Indies agreed to play after the remaining 14 players tested negative.

West Indies' cricket board (CWI) is meeting with its Pakistan counterpart on Thursday to discuss whether to call off the rest of the ongoing tour after five more members of the touring party, including three players, tested positive for COVID-19.

CWI said in a statement just hours before the third Twenty20 International is scheduled to begin in Karachi that the boards were meeting to "determine whether the tour can continue".

West Indies are also scheduled to play three one-day international matches in Pakistan.

Wicketkeeper Shai Hope, spinner Akeal Hosein and all-rounder Justin Greaves, along with assistant coach Roddy Estwick and physician Akshai Mansingh, were found to be positive after Wednesday's tests.

"All three players will therefore miss the upcoming matches and all five individuals will remain isolated from the rest of the West Indies squad..." the CWI statement read.

"They will remain in isolation for 10 days or until they return negative PCR test results."