

SPORT

Fed Cup fiasco brings to fore myriad conflicts of interest

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The Federation Cup descended into farce on Friday after the defending champions Bashundhara Kings declined to participate, explaining their position to the game's local governing body 24 hours before the start of the tournament.

They found Muktiyoddha Sangsad as a spiritual ally and ahead of the scheduled kick-off, Uttar Baridhara and a number of other clubs joined the bandwagon of withdrawal as both the scheduled matches on Saturday -- Bashundhara Kings v Swadhinata KS and Uttar Baridhara v Abahani -- did not see the ball roll.

This was an embarrassment in waiting for the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) even though it probably did not anticipate the rebellion would come from one of its own -- the Bashundhara Kings, a club owned by the Bashundhara Group, title sponsors of the tournament, and helmed by Imrul Hasan, one of its vice-presidents.

The premise for withdrawal of the most glamorous club in current football scene was a valid one as their appeal to shift the venue from the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium, a venue which witnessed a number of serious injuries during the Independence Cup earlier this month, fell on deaf ears. What was more disturbing to Kings was the last-minute tweaking of the tournament fixtures, allegedly aimed at giving advantage to another club.

"We thought that the changes in fixture format was done to give advantage to a specific team. These sorts of events occurred many times before including in the Independence Cup. We had pent up grievance over time and our withdrawal was a reaction to that," Imrul told media, citing other issues where he felt the BFF was biased and hoping this 'jolt' would help make BFF and its competitions committee more professional and honest in future.

BFF's senior vice-president Abdus Salam Murshedy appeared at an impromptu press conference at the venue in the evening, making a brave face and appearing adamant not to bow

to the demands of the clubs.

"The Federation Cup will continue. If the scheduled matches don't take place tomorrow [Sunday], then we will see. Those who haven't come have made mistakes. Everything will go as per the bylaws of the tournament," Murshedy, also the chairman of the professional league committee, told reporters.

Whether Imrul and the revolting clubs had more weight in their arguments than the BFF is a matter of argument, but there is no denying that the points raised by the Kings exposed an age-old issue of our domestic football: conflict of interest. And that there are not just one or two cases of conflicts, in fact the structure of our domestic football is riddled with multiple such cases.

For a starter, there is a weird case of such conflict regarding this very tournament, namely the Bashundhara Group Federation Cup. Isn't this quite unheard of that a major group of companies of the country sponsors a tournament where one of its clubs are title contenders? Can we rule out any undue

partiality from some other clubs including Sheikh Jamal DC in the past and Police FC more recently -- are to be true. When the president of a top-tier club also acts as a vice-president of the federation, aren't such questions and suspicions obvious?

While Imrul did not take any names, it is not hard to imagine that he was pointing his finger at Abahani, the club purportedly the subject of the tweak in fixture and one that is helmed by one of his colleagues at the BFF.

These are some of the issues that have been swept under the carpet for far too long, stunting the growth of domestic football. In the past, we've seen cases of match-fixing proved, albeit after initially being denied by the federation and some small-time culprits bearing the brunt. However, almost never have the bigger beneficiaries been brought to book. To remind of the old adage, it takes two to tango.

Sadly, this chain of conflict of interest and power-mongering isn't just limited to club football, but also extends to the national team.

Despite repeated promises from the higher-



influence in course of the tournament, not just in results but also in case of decision-making?

It's like Banco Santander running Real Madrid in La Liga or TIM sponsoring Juventus in Serie A, for that matter, which obviously don't happen since those leagues are run in a truly professional manner.

While both Imrul and Murshedy rejected the idea that a conflict of interest could arise from such a situation, the power-mongering from Bashundhara Kings in this instance -- unilaterally walking out of the tournament and reportedly influencing a few other clubs to follow them -- only points in that direction.

The Kings president spoke of the injustice against his team and a bias towards another specific club. Interestingly, his club has been the beneficiary of such bias -- if allegations of

ups of the game's local governing body, we are yet to see a non-club-executive in the national team manager's post. When the manager or the coach of the national team comes from yielding his power in recruiting and managing/coaching players of a certain club, yielding substantial influence over the players and developing personal choices round the year, isn't there likely to be an impact when making decisions over picking and commanding the national team?

Now that the BFF has taken a strong stance and the clubs appearing adamant not to budge, it will be interesting to see what the revolt will lead to eventually. Even if the BFF accommodates some space and take steps to correct what is intrinsically a faulty system, then we could expect to see at least some of the mess in our domestic football cleaned up.



Can Siddons mould another batch?

SPORTS REPORTER



Over ten years after his departure as Bangladesh's head coach, Jamie Siddons' impact on improving Bangladesh's batting unit is still remembered by the likes of Tamim Iqbal, Shakib Al Hasan and others who benefited during the infancy of their international careers.

It was current ODI skipper Tamim who insisted the board rope in Siddons once again and the 52-year-old's inclusion as batting consultant is expected to help out a struggling batting order which remains the biggest areas of concern across the formats.

From working on Shakib's backlift to help him better tackle express fast bowlers to bringing consistency to a young stroke-maker like Tamim, Siddons had a significant impact in the batting unit during his tenure as head coach from 2007 to 2011.

But it will be a different role this time around for the Australian, with the board likely to utilise Siddons more in the developmental stages in order to improve the batting skills of upcoming national-side players.

"He came as head coach back in 2007 and it has been a long time since then but I am sure he has gained a lot of experience during this period. Although he was not successful as a head coach for Bangladesh during that time, players like Shakib, Tamim, Mushfiqur [Rahim] and others benefited hugely from him when it comes to batting," Mohammad Ashraful, who

captained Bangladesh during Siddons' tenure as head coach, said.

However, Bangladesh have been guilty of being unable to get the best from the coaching panel despite roping in big names in the past. According to Ashraful, it will be important for Siddons to work on mental aspects and more as a mentor to youngsters.

"Obviously he will work on the technique of the batters, but I feel that he should also work on the mental aspects a lot more. It is important to work on game situations and the various thought processes of a batsman in different scenarios," Ashraful added.

"How you read the situation as a batsman is very important and it will be important for him to work one-on-one with players. I think he needs to work as an individual mentor because it's not necessary to instill the same technique to everyone."

Known as a tough cricketer during his playing days and a strict character when it comes to professionalism, Siddons has a lot to offer in his second stint with the Tigers.

He may have been criticised for his outspoken nature, be it in the selection process or handling of superiors during the final stages of his tenure as head coach, but according to Ashraful, it is Siddons' immense interest in Bangladesh cricket that will help the Tigers most.

"Obviously Siddons has been following Bangladesh cricket for a long time now and his interest in working here prompted him to take up the job again. I think he will do well and his inclusion will surely benefit Bangladesh cricket," added Ashraful.

An error 'never seen' before

AGENCIES

On the penultimate ball of the Hobart Hurricanes' innings in the Big Bash League on Friday night in Hobart, Tim David knew he needed to get back on strike to face the final delivery.

He was the one with runs on the board compared to his partner Nathan Ellis, who was still stuck on nought.

David smacked a ball down to Stars skipper Glenn Maxwell who was fielding at deep mid-wicket, with the Victorian sprinting to pick up the ball and hurl it into the wicketkeeper.

Maxwell's throw didn't make it before David had returned to the crease but, much to Maxwell's confusion, the umpires then stopped to deliberate.

Upon review, David had been a little too

eager in his efforts to return to the striker's end and placed his bat well short of the crease at the other end of the wicket.

Maxwell continued to remain unaware as to what was happening until the commentary team of Adam Gilchrist and Michael Vaughan informed him of David's error.

The Victorian responded: "I thought I should have run him out!"

Gilchrist and Vaughan were perplexed at David's oversight, which ultimately cost the Hurricanes five runs and gifted the Stars that same value of

runs to begin their innings without facing a ball. Upon consulting the rule book, Gilchrist and Vaughan were in agreement of the umpire's decision. Gilchrist didn't think David's incident was a great look for the sport.



Organisers and sponsors speak at a press conference at the BFF House regarding the National Women's Football Championship, which began at six venues of the country yesterday with 47 district teams and Bangladesh Ansar taking part.

PHOTO: BFF

Mahfijul ton helps U-19s to massive win

SPORTS REPORTER



Another century, this time from opener Mahfijul Islam, helped Bangladesh Under-19 get a step closer to the semifinals of the ongoing ACC Under-19 Asia Cup with a thumping 222-run win against Kuwait at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium yesterday.

After Prantik Nawrose Nabil's unbeaten ton on Friday helped the young Tigers thrash Nepal in their opening game, Mahfijul's 119-ball 112 set Bangladesh on course for a massive total yesterday.

Mahfijul's ton and Meherob Hasan's quick-fire knock helped Bangladesh post 291 all out in 49.2 overs before they returned to bundle Kuwait out for a meagre 69 in just 25.3 overs.

With two consecutive wins, Bangladesh sit on top of the four-team table. A win for Sri Lanka in their game against Nepal today will confirm a semifinal spot for the young Tigers.

Yesterday, however, Bangladesh ran into some early trouble after being asked to bat. Opener Iftakher Hossain was removed by Mirza Ahmed for a cheap score early on before Mahfijul and Aich Mollah steadied the ship with an 84-run second-wicket stand.

Mahfijul brought up his fifty off as many deliveries before Aich was dismissed following a steady 20 in the 19th over. Mahfijul stayed firm at one end and stitched together stands of 53 and 44 runs Ariful Islam (23 off 24) and Tahjibul Islam (25 off 19) respectively.

However, Mahfijul could not stay on for long after bringing up his century in the 32nd over. The right-hander, who smashed four maximums and 12 fours, fell to Muhammad Umar in the 36th over.

Following his dismissal, Meherob never let the scoring rate dip, smashing five boundaries and a solitary maximum on way to a 24-ball 42. That knock, coupled with a run-a-ball 21 from skipper Rakibul Hasan, ensured the young Tigers would end with a formidable total.

The dominating batting performance was justly complemented by the bowlers. Led by pacer Ripon Mondol, who scalped three wickets for just 10 runs in an eight-over spell that featured three maidens, Bangladesh never gave Kuwait a chance.

Despite a 77-ball 43 from opener Meet Bhavsar, Kuwait were still bundled out for a low total.

