

'Assessing tacky BPL pitches is key'

SPORTS REPORTER

Low totals and slow pitches have hogged the spotlight right from the start of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), especially in the day games.

After ending on the losing side following a low-scoring thriller against Comilla Victorians in their opening game, Sylhet Sunrisers are eyeing a comeback against Minister Dhaka in today's first game.

Sylhet's Caribbean wicket-keeper batter Lendl Simmons, who missed out on the first game but expected to return to the side, informed that assessing the pitch will be the key for the teams in the ongoing eighth edition of the



Shakib Al Hasan (C), Andre Russell (L) and Dwayne Bravo enjoy their time in the middle during Barishal Fortune's BPL match against Minister Group Dhaka in Mirpur yesterday. They had reason to be jolly – Shakib getting into the 400-wicket club in T20s while Russell and Bravo both making their mark both with bat and ball. (Bottom) Andre Fletcher's nasty injury though, during the second match of the day between Chattogram Challengers and Khulna Tigers, left everyone concerned.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



Dhaka off the mark

SPORTS REPORTER

BPL. "I'm not injured, just a little bit jet lagged. Just wanted to rest for the first game. It's a long tournament so I wanted to keep myself fresh. From watching a couple of games, I think the wicket is a little tacky. The ball isn't coming on as much. These aren't really high-scoring games. I think it's just about assessing and seeing how things go," Simmons told the media yesterday.

Meanwhile, Shakib Al Hasan's Fortune Barishal faced their first defeat of the tournament by four wickets in their second game against Dhaka after posting a modest total of 129 runs yesterday.

While the pitch remains at the heart of discussion as Comilla takes on Barishal in today's second fixture, South African Cameron Delport of Comilla is hopeful that the surface will play better as the tournament progresses.

"I'm sure it [pitch] will improve as it's early in the tournament. We can't choose what wickets we get," said Delport.

Mahmudullah Riyad's Minister Group Dhaka, touted as one of the favourites to win the tournament, lost their first two matches but were able to grind through a difficult match. All of their bowlers chipped in to restrict title aspirants Fortune Barishal to a lowly total. Mahmudullah played a captain's knock, ably supported by Shuvagata Hom's resilient 29, to get the team out of trouble before Andre Russell's carnage late on saw Dhaka notch their first win of the tournament.

Shafiqul shows promise

Left-arm seamer Shafiqul Islam had impressed in domestic tournaments such as the Dhaka Premier and the National Cricket League. The 24-year-old did not disappoint after being given an opportunity by Barishal to play his first-ever BPL match.

While the surface did not provide seam movement, Shafiqul used the conditions well to get the ball to talk. An outswinger beat Tamim Iqbal in the first over and made the left-hander ponder over the length and he went down the pitch next delivery only to get castled for a duck. Then the young pacer got one to tail in to Mohammad Shahzad, as the ball swung in air before disturbing the off stump. Barishal head coach Khaled Mahmud was impressed.

"I'm very impressed with that boy. Last year when I was with Khulna, he was there and I have seen him improve a lot over the last five-six years. He did well at the nets and I wanted to play him in the first match but due to the combination it didn't happen. He bowled really well but a long way to go for him. A good prospect for Bangladesh



cricket in the future," Mahmud said.

Shakib in 400-wicket club

Bangladesh's star performer Shakib Al Hasan scaled yet another record, becoming only the fifth bowler in history to bag 400 T20 wickets, only behind his Fortune Barishal teammate Dwayne Bravo, South Africa's Imran Tahir, Windies T20 star Sunil Narine and Afghan leggie Rashid Khan.

Shakib notched his 400th scalp by picking up the wicket of his counterpart Mahmudullah Riyad. The dismissal came too late for Shakib and Barishal as Mahmudullah's run-a-ball 47 had already seen the scores levelled before Dhaka notched a four-wicket win. The all-rounder accomplished the feat in 352 matches, at an

average of 21.17 and a strike rate of 18.6.

Shuvo's unwanted record

The match between Chattogram Challengers and Khulna Tigers saw the latter's left-arm spinner Sohrawordi Shuvo attain an unwanted record, conceding the most expensive first over of an innings in a BPL match. Chattogram's Kennar Lewis and Will Jacks tore into the spinner, picking up two fours and two sixes in a 23-run over. The record previously belonged to Kamrul Islam Rabbi, who conceded 22 in a BPL game in 2019 while playing for Rajshahi Kings against Chittagong Vikings.

Chattogram went on to post 190 for seven before restricting Khulna to 165 for nine for a 25-run victory.

Papal gift for Messi

AFP, VATICAN CITY

Football superstar Lionel Messi has bagged himself a shirt signed by fellow Argentine soccer fanatic Pope Francis, the Vatican's sports association said Monday.

Paris Saint-Germain forward Messi, who returned to action on Sunday after a bout of Covid, had given the pontiff a signed piece of kit in October, via French Prime Minister Jean Castex.

In an unusual shirt swap, the yellow jersey of the Athletica Vaticana – the tiny state's multi-sport team – was then given to Messi by French bishop Emmanuel Gobilliard.

"A man of faith, Messi told me how important this step was for him. We prayed together," Gobilliard, who will be the Holy See's delegate to the Olympic Games in Paris in 2024, said on Twitter.

The scrawled signature in black pen by the 85-year-old head of the Roman Catholic church was a "blessing" for the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner, Athletica Vaticana said on Facebook.

Francis – a huge fan of the Buenos Aires team, San Lorenzo – first met Messi in 2013, shortly after being elected



pope.

The pontiff shared memories last year of playing football as a child in the streets with makeshift balls, which he said sufficed to bring him and his childhood friends pleasure.

TIGRESSES fall short

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh women's cricket team failed to cross the final hurdle on road to 2022 Commonwealth Games as they lost the final match of the Commonwealth Games Qualifiers by 22 runs against Sri Lanka at the Kimrara Academy Oval in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

In the virtual knockout game for qualification with both teams on equal points and aiming for the top position in the group, Sri Lanka rode on an all-round show from captain Chamari Athapaththu to land on the winning side. Athapaththu first struck a 28-ball 48 as an opener to set the tone for a strong total of 136 for six in 20 overs.

Athapaththu went on to demonstrate brilliance with the ball as well, picking up three wickets which included the key dismissals of Murshida Khatun and Nigar Sultana as Bangladesh faltered in their chase of 137 and ended up on 114 for five after 20 overs.

The Tigresses finished second in the five-team points table with 6 points, two points fewer than Sri Lanka, and will not be taking part in next year's tournament in Birmingham.

'Not gonna stop now'

AFP, Melbourne

French veteran Alize Cornet declared "I'm not gonna stop now" after upsetting Simona Halep in brutal heat at the Australian Open Monday to make her first Grand Slam quarter-final on her 63rd attempt.

Both players struggled as the temperatures hit 33 Celsius (91 Fahrenheit) on Rod Laver Arena, but it was the 32-year-old who prevailed 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 in a gruelling 2hr 33min. She will now play 27th-seeded Danielle Collins for a place in the semis after the American outlasted Elise Mertens 4-6, 6-4, 6-4 in a near three-hour epic.

The breakthrough has been a long time coming for Cornet, who made her Grand Slam debut at the French Open in 2005 but had never been past the fourth round before.

Thailand's Tamarine Tanasugarn previously held the record for most appearances before reaching a quarter-final at this level, achieving the feat on her 45th try at Wimbledon in 2008.

"After 16 years on the tour, I never give up. Today I realised this goal that was very important to me for a while," said Cornet, who upset world number three Garbine Muguruza in round two.

"After beating a few big names, Muguruza, today Halep, they are all players that I admire a lot. I don't know what happened in the past, and really, honestly, right now I don't care."

Asked what her goals were now after reaching a first quarter-final, Cornet replied:

"Going further."

"I mean, I'm not gonna stop now.

"I'm still ambitious. I just have to soak it in, you know, take time to appreciate the moment and be proud of what I did today.

"But definitely from tomorrow I will have to think about my next match and how I can go farther in the tournament.

"The sky's the limit. For the first time of my life, I really believe I can go till the end."

The pair traded breaks in an attritional opening set before Cornet sealed it in 48 minutes that took their toll.

She needed an ice bag on her head, drank as much fluid as she could at the changeover and her hand appeared to be shaking.

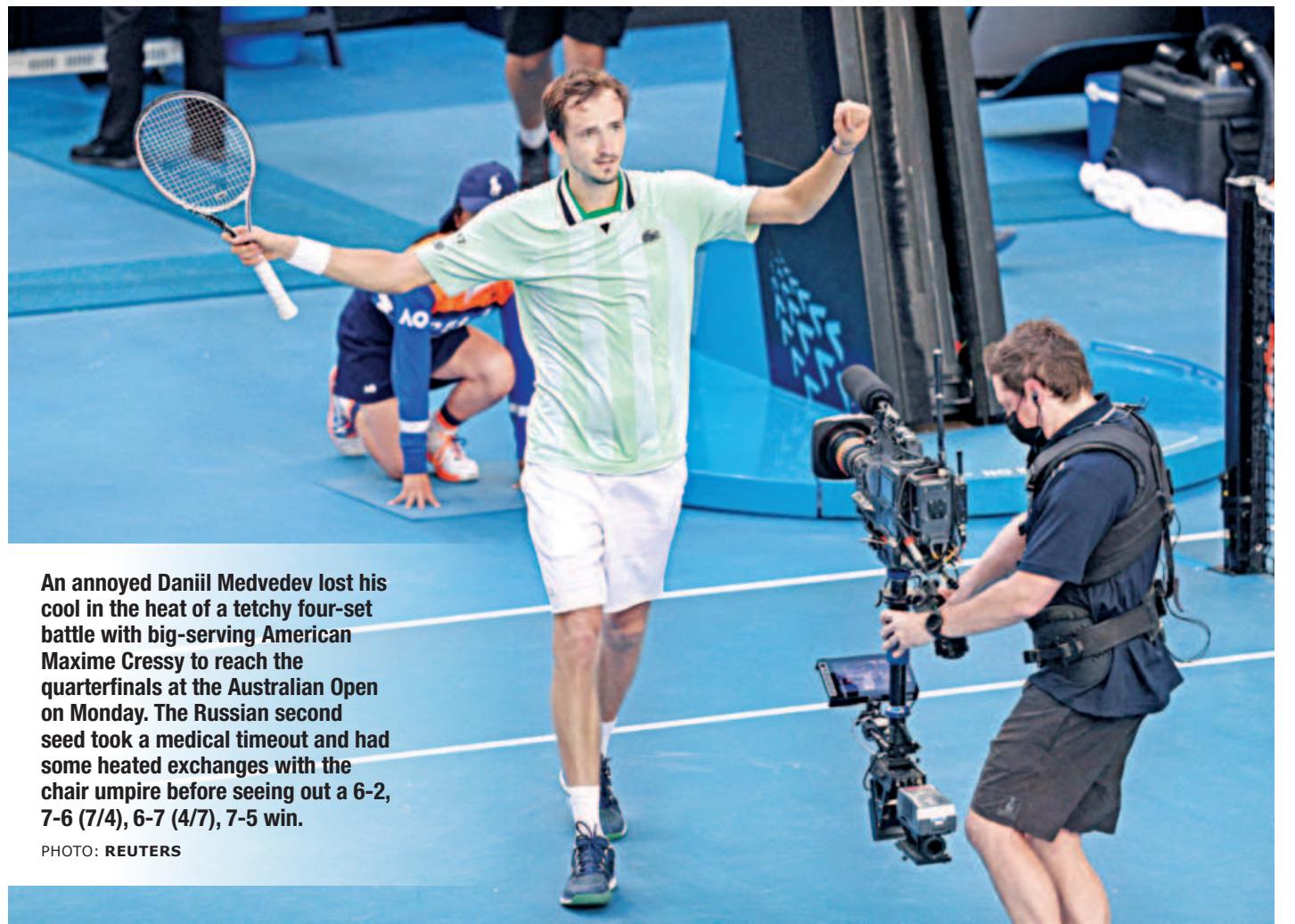
Halep was also distressed in the heat, constantly bending over to catch her breath, but somehow persevered to take the second set as Cornet berated the umpire: "It's insane, it's inhuman."

The Romanian worked a break point at 3-2 in the final set but failed to convert and tossed her racquet away in disgust.

Instead it was Cornet who struck to move a break up at 4-3 as Halep netted a backhand with the Frenchwoman dropping to her knees in exhaustion three games later after clinching victory.

"It was definitely very hard conditions to play. I could see that Simona was also struggling, like me," said Cornet.

"We were both fighters on the court out there, and really giving everything we had."



An annoyed Daniil Medvedev lost his cool in the heat of a tetchy four-set battle with big-serving American Maxime Cressy to reach the quarterfinals at the Australian Open on Monday. The Russian second seed took a medical timeout and had some heated exchanges with the chair umpire before seeing out a 6-2, 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (4/7), 7-5 win.

PHOTO: REUTERS