

BPL set for climax with fans up close

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The Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League is about to reach its climax as the playoff stage begins at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today.

Chattogram Challengers take on Khulna Tigers in the Eliminator in the day's first fixture while Fortune Barishal and Comilla Victorians, the top two teams following the group stage, lock horns in the first Qualifier in the night game.

Meanwhile, some good news arrived for the local fans at last as the BPL authorities have allowed a limited number of spectators in the stands for the playoffs.

Barishal, with six consecutive wins, possess momentum leading into the game. They are led by Shakib Al Hasan, who has bagged a record five consecutive man-of-the-match awards in the BPL.

Comilla, on the other hand, also played clinical cricket with young Mahmudul Hasan Joy and overseas players Faf du Plessis and Moeen Ali in superb touch. Comilla's Mustafizur Rahman has taken the most number of wickets and is expected to play a decisive role for his side.

"It will be tough as we know they [Fortune Barishal] are a good team but we know their strengths and we have also played some good cricket lately," Comilla's technical advisor and the Tigers' former head coach Steve Rhodes told media yesterday.

The winner of the first Qualifier will reach the final while the losing team will get another chance and face the winners of the Eliminator.

Meanwhile, both Chattogram and Khulna have confirmed the play-off spot in their final group stage games and are expected to provide a good contest with both sides featuring players like Will Jacks and Andre Fletcher, respectively, who are in scintillating form with the bat.



Selectors have work cut out

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The eighth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) is nearing its end but as with any domestic cricket platform, especially of the T20 order, performances of local stars are significant for national selectors. Over the years, selectors have not found what they were looking for from the country's premier T20 tournament but this edition of the BPL have been able to throw in some names that give the selectors room to maneuver ahead of the Afghanistan series.



The performances of Munim Shahriar have garnered attention while Mahmudul Hasan Joy, having done well in the first New Zealand Test, has shown T20 merits. Youngsters such as Chattogram Challengers' Mrittunjoy flourished in his first BPL stint, bowling at the death while experienced domestic performer Nahidul Islam also made an impact so far.

Along with the performances of some of the more experienced names in the Tigers' T20I unit in Mohammad

Naim, Liton Das, Soumya Sarkar and Afif Hossain, combined with influence of veterans such as Shakib Al Hasan, Mahmudullah Riyad, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mustafizur Rahman, the team's think tank can draw a picture of what they need in the format.

Bangladesh have struggled with their opening slot at the T20 World Cup and before. With Tamim Iqbal opting out of the T20I setup for another six months, his Minister Group Dhaka teammate Naim Sheikh, who was a frontrunner to play in the Tigers T20 outfit before BPL began, looked out of sorts as his batting position flummoxed in the BPL while he could not take advantage when he played at number 3 or four.

On the other hand, Munim has shown his 'no-fear' approach at the top for Fortune Barishal. Despite having scored over 350 runs in the last Dhaka Premier League at a strike-rate fit for an opener, Munim was left unsold at the BPL draft before Barishal got him from outside the draft. Missing out on most matches this BPL due to contracting Covid-19, he has shown an ability to take on bowlers in the Powerplay, scoring 134 runs in four innings with a staggering strike-rate of 167.50.

Meanwhile, Soumya Sarkar, despite hitting one big knock -- an unbeaten 82 against Sylhet Sunrisers -- has not shown consistency after a poor run of games with the bat. And Liton Das, who did not play the Pakistan series at home, has shown

fluency after coming back from holiday and will be an automatic choice as opener in Afghanistan series. Joy, who has also been used as an opener by Comilla in the last few matches, impressed with 207 runs in the tournament, showing his ability to go deep into the innings or pick up quick runs. Another player in the national setup in Mahedi Hasan, impressed with his pinch-hitting abilities at the top in a high-pressure game to keep selectors' eyes on him.

Anamul Haque, too, has impressed again in the BPL, this time hitting 280 runs in nine innings, although his side Sylhet failed to make the top four.

Among bowlers, Mustafizur Rahman has flourished, being the top wicket-taker with 17 so far in eight matches. Mrittunjoy, having played only six games so far, has managed 13 wickets with impressive death-over skills while his Chattogram teammate Shoriful Islam, despite some expensive overs, bagged 12 wickets in 10 games with some good displays as well. Khulna Tigers' Khaled Ahmed has had decent spells with the new ball but also went for runs while Comilla off-spinner Nahidul has kept batters guessing all tournament in the Powerplays, bagging 11 wickets overall with important displays.

With the white-ball series against Afghanistan coming up, the performances of the young faces give selectors ample food for thought.

Aus beat Lanka after super over drama

AFP, Sydney

Australia scraped past Sri Lanka to take control of their five-match Twenty20 series Sunday after late fireworks from the visitors forced their second clash in Sydney to a rare super over after it ended in a tie.

The match appeared to be heading Australia's way after Josh Inglis' 48 spearheaded them to 164 for six, and the Sri Lankan top order again failed to fire. But Pathum Nissanka's 73 and a breezy 34 off 19 balls from Shanaka sent the game to the wire.

With Marcus Stoinis bowling, Sri Lanka needed 12 off the last three balls to win. Maheesh Theekshana hit a six, then a single before Dushmantha Chameera smacked a four to tie the match and send it into a nail-biting super over.

Josh Hazlewood bowled the over for Australia with Shanaka and Dinesh Chandimal facing. After two dot balls, Chandimal was run out and Sri Lanka managed just five runs.



Opelka outlasts Isner in 46-point tiebreak

REUTERS

John Isner and Reilly Opelka played out a marathon 46-point tiebreak, the longest in ATP Tour history, at the Dallas Open on Saturday as Opelka edged out his fellow American 7-6 (9/7), 7-6 (24/22) to reach the final.

Isner was involved in the longest match of all time against Frenchman Nicolas Mahut in the first round of Wimbledon in 2010. The pair days before Isner took the fifth set 70-68.

"The crowd was definitely behind me," said the 36-year-old Isner. "It's kind of extra disappointing to not be able to get over the line in my backyard... (Opelka) is serving just massive. I don't think anyone can break him out there."

The big-serving duo fired down 60 aces between them and did not face a single break point in a match lasting two hours three minutes.

"I lost track," said Opelka, the world number 23, who clinched victory on his eighth match point. "At one point it was 21-all... that's something I've never seen before, but if it was going to happen, it certainly would have been in this match."



Dorielton fires first hattrick

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Brazilian striker Dorielton Gomes struck the first hattrick of the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League during a span of only six minutes to steer title contenders Abahani to an emphatic 3-0 win over Rahmatganj MFS at the Shaheed Ahsan Ullah Master Stadium in Tongi, Gazipur yesterday.

With second win in three matches, Abahani joined league-leaders Sheikh Jamal DC on seven points, one point more than holders Bashundhara Kings and Saif Sporting Club, who suffered a 1-0 defeat to Sheikh Russel KC at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Flight Lt Matiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj yesterday.

The Brazilian forward, the top scorer of Independence Cup and Federation Cup, came out as the saviour for six-time champions Abahani in his typical fashion as the Sky Blues were under tremendous pressure from Fed Cup runners-up Rahmatganj.

Abahani took the lead against the run of play with Dorielton's glancing header off a Colindres corner in the 40th minute. Dorielton was then set up by Colindres to double the margin three minutes later. The Brazilian made no mistake to place the ball to the left-hand side of the goalkeeper Rakibul Hasan Tushar.

In the first minute of the first half's four-minute added time, the 31-year-old forward completed his hattrick, collecting a defence-split through-pass by Nurul Nayeem Faisal before dancing past goalkeeper Tushar. Dorielton celebrated his brilliant feat by taking off his jersey and spreading out towards the feet of Colindres.



Chelsea were crowned FIFA Club World Cup champions for the first time as Kai Havertz struck home a penalty deep into extra time to break the hearts of Brazilian club Palmeiras at the Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi on Saturday. Romelu Lukaku gave Chelsea a 55th-minute lead before Raphael Veiga equalised from the spot nine minutes later. Chelsea have now won every major club trophy since Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich took control in 2003.

PHOTO: TWITTER

Hockey gets new sponsor

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The Dhaka Mercantile Co-Operative Bank Limited has come forward to sponsor Bangladesh national hockey team for the upcoming AHF Cup, the qualifying tournament for Asia Cup 2022.

The tournament is scheduled to take place in Jakarta from March 11 to 20 with the top three teams joining the automatic qualifiers -- India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Pakistan -- in the Asia Cup.

"We thank the sponsors for coming forward to sponsor the national team," BHF's acting general secretary Mohammad Yousuf said at the cheque handover ceremony yesterday in presence of BHF president Air Chief Marshal Shaikh Abdul Hannan and DMCB chairman Abu Jafar Chowdhury.

The training camp with 28 players will start today at BKSP under interim coach Iman Gobinathan Krishnamurthy.