

## Can Barishal finish with a flourish?

SPORTS REPORTER

Comilla Victorians' batting depth versus Fortune Barishal's bowling variations cleverly managed by their wily skipper Shakib Al Hasan could well be the defining feature of the two sides set to contest the final of the eighth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) in Mirpur today.

Barishal are on a roll, coming into the final on a seven-match winning streak. They will be further boosted by the fact that they got the better of Comilla two times in three encounters in the competition already.

Their strength clearly lies in their bowling, with Shakib ever consistent and mystery Afghan spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman offering variation, making Barishal one of the few BPL sides with the ability to defend modest totals. In fact, they defended 143 against Comilla in Qualifier 1 as they became the first team to advance to the final.

Another massive boon for Barishal has been Shakib's recent form. The champion all-rounder, who is usually impressive with the ball, has also been in red-hot form with the willow this season. The premier all-rounder has won a record five consecutive player-of-the-match awards for his all-round brilliance.

The tie today promises to be a real humdinger as Barishal's bowling variations will have to counter the batting depth of Imrul Kayes-led Comilla. The likes of Sunil Narine, Mahmudul Hasan Joy, Liton Das, Faf du Plessis and Moeen Ali have all been amongst the runs and have come up with match-winning performances. And even if the orthodox batters fail, Narine seems to provide the lusty blows they require as he did when he smashed the fastest fifty in BPL history against Chattogram Challengers in their last game to power Comilla to the final.

Comilla will also be taking heart from the fact that they were the team who last beat Barishal, by 63 runs in one of their group stage matches.



Fortune Barishal wicketkeeper-batter Nurul Hasan Sohan, who came to the captains' photo session with the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League trophy in absence of regular skipper Shakib Al Hasan yesterday, poses with Comilla Victorians captain Imrul Kayes. The two teams will meet in the final today at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

# Shakib dominates discussion ahead of final

SPORTS REPORTER

Fortune Barishal captain Shakib Al Hasan and Comilla Victorians skipper Imrul Kayes were scheduled to attend a photo session with the BPL trophy on Wednesday ahead of the final, but following Shakib's failure to attend, two different explanations surfaced regarding his absence.

Conspicuous by absence is a term that goes well with Shakib. Previously, it was a Bangladesh team photo session before the ODI World Cup in England where Shakib's absence created an uproar. Nurul Hasan Sohan, who came to the event yesterday in Shakib's stead, said: "We had optional practice yesterday and we participated. Maybe he did gym today and that's why he couldn't come."

Team management sources however relayed earlier that Shakib had an upset stomach. It was learned that he did not want to practice today and the management was informed of his decision. "He's not feeling well and I don't ever push Shakib. He knows his game very well," Barishal coach Khaled Mahmud told the media yesterday following their practice session.

"He likes working on his game in individual practice so when he told me he wouldn't practice, I said 'no problem,'" Khaled added.

However, even without being there, Shakib was major focus of the final because of what he has done so far in this tournament through captaincy alone. "Barishal's strength is Shakib. We



have to play against Shakib's head. He's captaining really well and utilising his resources," Comilla coach Mohammad Salahuddin said.

He added that there were 'tricks' Shakib was using that cause make batters misinterpret the situation. Barishal have been able to defend middling scores this tournament with bowling changes keeping them in the game. In one match against Khulna Tigers, Shakib bowled eight overs in tandem with Mujeeb Ur Rahman on the trot to eat up the Powerplay and squeeze the runs.

In his side's last game, he banked on young pacers Mehedi Hasan Rana and Shofiqul Islam in critical stages after drying up the runs following Comilla's effective start in Powerplay in chase of just 144. Banking on Nazmul Hossain as a bowler also created surprise for opponents.

"The vibe I get from Shakib is that he is not indecisive when it comes to taking bold decisions. Many may be a little uneasy when taking bold decisions, but Shakib can take such decisions without hesitation and with a straight face," Shakib's long-time mentor and Barishal's batting coach Nazmul Abedeen Fahim told The Daily Star yesterday.

He has been able to keep his team calm but excited to do well. Along with the think-tank of Mahmud and Fahim, Shakib has been able to shine in a captaincy role. "Our dressing room environment is good and it helps us on the field," Sohan had said during the photo session.

Despite performing with the bat and ball and picking up a record five player-of-the-match awards on the trot, it is Shakib's captaincy which can make the difference in the final.

Despite Comilla's obvious strength and overall balance, they are still wary of what comes out of the Barishal captain's head. Barishal's team jersey unveiling was initially scheduled to take place in Barishal but pandemic complications saw the event held in Dhaka. Shakib relayed a message to the people of Barishal saying that he wants to win the trophy for them. Now he is just one step away from his goal.

## Inter still dangerous, says Klopp

AGENCIES

Liverpool put one foot in the Champions League quarter-finals on Wednesday with a 2-0 win at Inter Milan which came after a hard-fought encounter at a bubbling San Siro.

Liverpool coach Jurgen Klopp, however, insists their tie against Inter Milan is far from over and their 2-0 victory in the first leg in Italy is a "dangerous" scoreline for the return encounter.

Liverpool were not at their very best in the San Siro on Wednesday, but goals from Roberto Firmino and Mohamed Salah put the Premier League side in a commanding position, but not one they should feel too comfortable with ahead of next month's return leg.



"It is still dangerous," Klopp said. "It is only halftime. 'We don't feel like we are halfway through and can cruise. We will have to be ready for them again. Inter are a good side. I don't say 'job done, put your feet on the table' in the past so

why should I think different about it now? "They are a very physical team. They played real smart balls. They have this deep last line and in the beginning we did very well. I was not surprised – they are good. We know that. We have to be ready for the second half."

The result was harsh on Italian champions Inter, who dominated the contest in front of a passionate home crowd for long periods after the break and struck the woodwork through Hakan Calhanoglu in the 16th minute.

## Coman rescues late draw for Bayern

REUTERS

Bayern Munich midfielder Kingsley Coman struck in the 90th minute to snatch a 1-1 draw at Salzburg in Wednesday's Champions League last-16 first leg.

It says a lot for Bayern's dominance of German and European football that the twin results of last Sunday's 4-2 defeat at Bochum and Wednesday's 1-1 Champions League round of 16 draw at Salzburg signalled their longest run without a win since April 2021.



The Austrian side took the lead midway through the first half with a goal on the counterattack from Chukwubuike Adamu.

But Frenchman Coman, who struck the winning goal for Bayern in the 2020 Champions League final, ensured the six-times winners left with a draw when he appeared at the far post to meet a Thomas Mueller header and tuck the ball into the net from close range.

Coman's equaliser meant Bayern have scored in 29 consecutive Champions League matches although Robert Lewandowski's record run of consecutive wins in the competition was halted.

The Polish striker had won his previous 22 Champions League games since Bayern's 3-1 loss against Liverpool in 2019, missing last season's quarter-final first-leg defeat to Paris St Germain through injury.

# Kings mark history with victory

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bashundhara Kings Arena made its momentous debut a fitting one as hosts and holders Bashundhara Kings clinched an emphatic 3-0 win against Bangladesh Police while the Sylhet District Stadium witnessed a thrilling 3-3 draw between Rahmatganj MFS and title contenders Sheikh Jamal DC in the Bangladesh Premier League fixtures yesterday.

Robson Da Silva's brace with Eleta Kingsley's strike meant Kings had marked a piece of history in domestic football by becoming the country's first-ever outfit to host their professional football league encounter at their own venue, located in Dhaka's Bashundhara Residential Area.

Around two thousand spectators, who could hardly socially distance themselves at the gallery, showed up to witness the keen contest, which saw Police brilliantly hold Kings till 65 minutes. Tempers frayed afterwards when Police's Brazilian defender Danilo Augusto kicked the ball towards Kings' coach Oscar Bruzon, leading to scuffles. The referee remained busy as Police's Romanian coach Aristica Cioaba was cautioned and a bench player saw a red.

On the greenish and even surface, Kings enjoyed the lion's share of possession. Kings, missing two of their foreign players, adopted a high-line defence and kept

pressing for the opener. But the two-time champions could not rattle the backline of Police, who kept counteracting with long balls after foiling Kings' efforts.

Second half saw Bruzon implement a couple of key changes, sending Eleta Kingsley and Mahdi Yusuf Khan, who made the difference by contributing in all three goals in the span of 22 minutes.

Mahdi, in the 66th minute, first penetrated from the right flank and assisted a cut-back for Robson da Silva, who drove a powerful shot home. Robson struck again, this time with a penalty, when Mahdi was brought down by Danilo in the 75th minute.

Twelve minutes later, Mahdi impacted again, releasing a through-ball to the right for Kingsley, who sealed the win for the defending champions as Kings tallied nine points from four matches while Police were stuck on two points.

In the day's other match in Sylhet, Sunday Chizoba and Lancine Toure struck two late goals for the home team Rahmatganj in the dying minutes of the game to gain their first point in the league by denying a victory to Sheikh Jamal, who would be gutted to leave the field with a draw and to find themselves in table's second position, with a point below Kings in four matches, despite cruising into half time at 2-0, courtesy of Solomon King's brace.



Robson Robinho (R) and Eleta Kingsley – the two goalscorers for Bashundhara Kings – celebrate during their 3-0 win over Bangladesh Police in a Bangladesh Premier League fixture at the Bashundha Kings Arena yesterday. (Inset) Spectators enjoy the match, which saw the debut of the venue in the top-tier professional football of the country.

PHOTO: STAR