

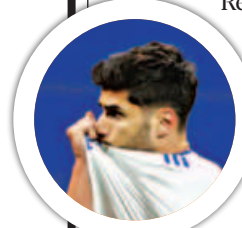


Experienced campaigner Mushfiqur Rahim was seen having a chat with all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz during Bangladesh's first training session at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram yesterday ahead of their upcoming three-match ODI series against Afghanistan. [Inset] Afghanistan also enjoyed a fruitful practice session under their interim head coach Stuart Law.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Real extend lead

REUTERS, Madrid



Real Madrid dug deep in a 3-0 home win against lowly Alaves, scoring all three in the last 27 minutes of the game after the visitors gave them a few scares early on and threatened to pull off an upset at the Bernabeu stadium on Saturday.

Marcos Asensio roused the Bernabeu in the 63rd minute with a brilliant curled shot into the top right corner from outside the box.

Vinicius Jr extended the lead in the 80th minute, and Karim Benzema added one more with a stoppage time penalty kick.

The LaLiga leaders moved up to 57 points from 25 games, seven ahead of Sevilla and 14 clear of Real Betis - both of whom have a game in hand over Real. Champions Atletico Madrid are fourth with 42 points, three more than Barcelona.

"Our fans ask us to win always and we have to deliver it, we are used to the pressure, and in the second half they gave us the support we needed to win," Dani Carvajal told reporters.

"I understand the fans being upset, in Real Madrid the highest level is a must," Carvajal said, referring to booing from the stands after a goalless first half against the second from bottom side.

While the result may have looked comfortable, Real looked tired and sluggish from the start, managing only two shots on target in the first half. The win may give Real a bit of breathing room at the top of the table - but not enough to lower the pressure or expectations they face from their fans.

SL deny Aussies perfect summer

REUTERS

Opener Kusal Mendis struck an unbeaten 69 off 58 balls to help secure a consolation five-wicket victory for Sri Lanka, who fired with both bat and ball against Australia in the fifth and final T20I on Sunday.

The hosts posted a middling 154-6 after opting to bat in Melbourne, but the Sri Lankan batsmen finally found their feet to reach 155-5 with one ball remaining, ending the series 4-1 in Australia's favour, although they were hurt by a first loss in any format since losing to England in the Super 12 stage of the T20 World Cup on October 30, 2021.

Mendis batted positively, but sensibly, with captain Dasun Shanaka (35) in an 83-run partnership which powered Sri Lanka to their first win against Australia in any format since 2017.

Aaron Finch said: "Sri Lanka are a very dangerous side and to win four games in a row was really good."

Tigers looking to counter spin threat

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will take on Afghanistan in the first of three ODIs on February 23 and the visitors' spin threat will be the key component around which the Tigers base their strategies.

Despite Afghanistan's dominant spin attack, national selector Habibur Bashar said that the Tigers, having gotten back key players, are confident going into the series.

"Afghanistan have world-class spinners in their side like Rashid Khan and Mujeeb Ur Rahman alongside others like Qais [Ahmad] who have quality. Afghanistan are also a good side in the white-ball format but we have a stable side at the moment and ODI is a format that experienced players in the side find more favourable. Every side has a key option to rely on and such players can make the difference. But when it comes to international cricket, you have to have the ability to come up with answers to such challenges," Bashar told The Daily Star yesterday.

Bangladesh last played an ODI in July last year during a three-match ODI series against Zimbabwe. Although the core remains intact for the Afghanistan series, there are quite a few changes to the squad.

"Our best players are in the side. Although there may have been some issues with batting previously, batters are finding their rhythm. We expect to

do well with these players. We have been out of ODI cricket for a while and the pressure of doing well at home only adds to the challenge. But I feel the players are confident enough to bring out good performances," Bashar stated.

The wickets will be in focus at Chattogram but the recently-concluded



BPL has seen high scores. "The tracks at Chattogram have been batting-friendly. We will know more when we get there," he concluded.

The Bangladesh squad reached Chattogram yesterday and took part in their first practice session, albeit without two key stars in Shakib Al Hasan and Mustafizur Rahman. It was learned that

both would arrive in Chattogram today.

Squad members alongside staff tested negative for Covid-19 after the latest round of tests on Saturday before entering the bio-secure bubble, but batting coach Jamie Siddons tested positive yet again. Jamie, who initially tested positive on February 12, will have to isolate in Dhaka. However, under current guidelines, he will be able to join the side in a few days without any further tests.

"Siddons returned a positive test once again. But it has been eight days since he initially tested positive. According to the Tokyo 2020 Guidebook, he can join the team without undergoing any test 10 days after returning a positive for the first time. He is also doing well," Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) physician Monzur Hossain Chowdhury informed The Daily Star yesterday.

Afghanistan also underwent their first practice session in Chattogram following a week-long preparation camp in Sylhet. Former Bangladesh coach Stuart Law, who was named interim head coach by Afghanistan on Saturday, oversaw the practice session.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Cricket Board is trying to convince concerned authorities to permit the stadium to operate at 50 per cent capacity during the upcoming series. The full version of DRS was not available during the BPL, but will be available for the series against Afghanistan, BCB confirmed.



Nantes stun wasteful PSG

REUTERS, Paris

Nantes stormed into a three-goal halftime lead and then rode their luck to win 3-1 at home on Saturday and hand runaway leaders Paris St Germain their second Ligue 1 loss of the season.

Nantes saw little of the possession, had a player sent off only to see the red card overturned on VAR review and then watched as Neymar squandered a penalty in a thrill-a-minute clash at the Stade de la Beaujoire.

PSG, who started the game 13 points clear of second-placed Olympique de Marseille, pulled a goal back a minute into the second half as Lionel Messi set up Neymar for a clinical finish.

The Brazilian, back in the starting line-up for the first time since November, then had a chance to further reduce the deficit when Apiah again brought down Mbappe, but Neymar's penalty was a weak effort straight at Alban Lafont.

Mbappe then produced an uncharacteristic miss from point-blank range in the final 20 minutes as PSG kept up the pressure but were unable to make use of their numerous chances.

The win saw Nantes leap from 10th to fifth in the Ligue 1 standings as they push for a spot in next season's European club competition.

Conte masterminds 'perfect game'

REUTERS, Manchester

Antonio Conte praised his Tottenham Hotspur side's ability to turn defence into attack as they shrugged off a dreadful recent run to stun Premier League leaders Manchester City with a Harry Kane-inspired 3-2 win at the Etihad Stadium on Saturday.

After three successive league defeats, Tottenham's top-four ambitions but the Italian, who has been under the spotlight all week after an interview in which he appeared to suggest Tottenham had been left weakened in the transfer window, masterminded the "perfect game" to stop the Man City juggernaut.

Tottenham only had 28% of possession against City, but defended diligently and somehow always looked a threat on the counter-attack with Kane, who scored twice including the 96th minute winner, linking superbly with Son Heung-min.

City had made it 2-2 in stoppage time through Riyad Mahrez's penalty, and it looked likely that the leaders would even snatch a last-gasp win, but Tottenham had other ideas as they revived their hopes of challenging for



the top four. "You know when you play Manchester City you will concede 70% of possession. But I say to my players that when you are defending, in your mind you must always be attacking. In your mind you want to win the ball and attack," Conte said.

"To have this thought, in the final minutes, their goal could have killed you. Instead my players wanted to win. I think in every moment of the game my team wanted to attack them. Every time we had the ball I was thinking we could hurt them." The surprise win lifted Tottenham back into seventh spot.



Beijing doused its Olympic flame on Sunday night, closing a Games that will be remembered as much for the extremes of its anti-Covid-19 measures as the performances on display. Chinese President Xi Jinping was on hand for the snowflake-themed ceremony at the Bird's Nest stadium, where IOC President Thomas Bach described the Beijing Games as "truly exceptional" before declaring them closed.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Sports Clinic to begin activities

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Association of Sports Medicine (BASM) has decided to begin activities of the Sports Medicine Clinic to ensure modern treatments to athletes.

The decision was made at the first meeting of the newly-formed BASM executive committee on Saturday, chaired by its president and BSSMU vice-chancellor professor Dr. Md. Sharfuddin Ahmed. "The BASM, along with the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, will begin activities of the Sports Medicine Clinic immediately with the help of experts to ensure the modern and contemporary health service and treatments to sportspersons and the individuals related to the sports," said a BASM statement today.

The establishment of a Sports Medicine Institute at the BSSMU was also finalised.