



PHOTO: BFF

MSC down Sheikh Jamal

SPORTS REPORTER

Title challengers Mohammedan Sporting Club continued their winning run with a five-wicket victory over Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club at BKSP-4 yesterday. The win also brought an end to the winning run of Sheikh Jamal, who succumbed to their first loss in the ongoing Dhaka Premier League (DPL).

Nazmul Islam's spin caused early damage, removing opener Shykat Ali for naught in just the second delivery of the innings. Shuvagata Hom then picked up Saif Hassan and Imrul Kayes for low scores and Nazmul returned to action to pick up two more wickets, returning measly figures of nine runs conceded in six overs, as Sheikh Jamal slumped to 61 for 7. Rearguard innings from Taibur Rahman and Sunzamul Islam eventually saw Sheikh Jamal post 185 all out.

Mahmudullah Riyad, appearing in his first DPL game this season, managed 20 runs but fifties from Rony Talukdar

Brothers rallied behind Imtiaz Hossain's 106 from 114 deliveries but Qazi Onik, who picked up crucial wickets despite being expensive with the ball, defended 19 runs in the last over to give Gazi victory.

and Mohammad Hafeez saw Mohammedan coast to victory.

In a closely-fought contest at BKSP-3, Gazi Group overcame Brothers Union by six runs. Gazi batted around Farhad Hossain's 94-ball 92 before a 23-ball 42-run cameo from skipper Akbar Ali got them to 297 for eight. Brothers rallied behind Imtiaz Hossain's 106 from 114 deliveries but Qazi Onik, who picked up crucial wickets despite being expensive with the ball, defended 19 runs in the last over to give Gazi victory.

Meanwhile, Legends of Rupganj's Naeem Islam struck his second successive ton in the DPL, having gotten out in the 90s on three occasions this season. Naeem and Chirag Jani's 238-run stand for the third-wicket against Rupganj Tigers Cricket Club in chase of 295 at ULAB saw them pick up a 29-run win by D/L method after rain stopped play. Naeem remained unbeaten on 114 while Chirag struck a 109-ball 122 to offset Zakir Hasan's 91 for Rupganj Tigers earlier.

Can Cabrera conjure up a CONVINCING ACT?

ATIQUE ANAM FROM SYLHET

As Bangladesh take on Mongolia in a FIFA friendly match at the Sylhet District Stadium today, there will be a lot of focus on whether the team can bounce back from a 2-0 defeat against Maldives last week.

The match in Male wasn't available on TV in Bangladesh, so the team might have escaped some of the scrutiny it usually hogs. But when playing against Mongolia in front of a local crowd and the match being telecast live, there won't be any hiding for Javier Cabrera and his men.

Expectations from the locals will be no less than a victory against a side pretty similar in their world standing but obviously at a disadvantage of playing in conditions that are foreign to them.

When asked how crucial a win was for him to retain the backing of the federation, the Spaniard was rather diplomatic.

"It's always important (to win). Our goal and objective against Maldives was to win. But we need to do it the way we are working, we need to do it the way our game idea we are developing. It's important for the team" Cabrera said, emphasising on the process and style he wants to implement with the team, during the official pre-match press meet at the match venue.

Cabrera is still inexperienced at this level, having been in charge of academies in his native Spain apart from a spell as an assistant coach in an Indian club. He was kind of thrust with the responsibility of guiding Bangladesh as the temporary resorts by the Bangladesh Football Federation did not yield success since the termination of long-term coach Jamie Day towards the end of last year.

Day, too, was a rookie when he was handed the reins of Bangladesh in the middle of 2018. The team made noticeable improvements under the British coach in the first two years before results started to dwindle.

Cabrera, too, is a similar experiment by the BFF, although judging by the football philosophy, it's a different direction that Bangladesh wants to tread now.

Ditching the no-nonsense, tough-tackling physical football of Day, Bangladesh want to adopt the possession-based attacking football, espoused briefly by Oscar Bruzon.

Captain Jamal Bhuyan spoke of the similarities between the two Spaniards but did not want to elaborate on the gameplan or the coach's ideas.

"Each coach has their own style of

playing, each coach wants to implement their own style. It's up to the players to adapt to the style. His style and that of Oscar (Bruzon) is a bit similar," Jamal said.

While the Mongolia match will only be the second match under Cabrera, it will also be the last one that Bangladesh play before the crucial Asian Cup Qualifiers in June when they will meet Bahrain, Malaysia and Turkmenistan. The players will, after today, go back to their clubs and will be available to the coach only around 10 days ahead of the qualifiers.

Now fraught with having to choose between testing his ideas/personnel and winning the game, Cabrera said he wants to win for the country, but it was more important to be convinced at what they were doing.

That convincing, though, needs taking place not only inside the team, but also among the general people and the football federation.

Given that Bangladesh, as a team, is constantly losing ground to oppositions and losing appeal to its own people, the young Spaniard will need no less than a handsome victory – a victory with style and conviction – to convince everyone, at least for the time being.

‘This is not the Bangladesh side of old’

AFP, Durban

South African Test captain Dean Elgar said on Monday he was "comfortable" with the decision of key players to make themselves unavailable for a Test series against Bangladesh, which starts at Kingsmead in Durban on Thursday.

Earlier this month Elgar called for players contracted to the Indian Premier League to put country ahead of club. But all South Africa's IPL-linked players opted to play in the lucrative Indian franchise tournament, which started at the weekend.

South Africa will go into the Bangladesh series without their front-line fast bowling attack of Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi and



Marco Jansen, as well as the injured Anrich Nortje. They will also be without batsmen Aiden Markram and Rassie van der Dussen.

Elgar said it was time to move on. "They're not here with us and we have to make do with our next best in the

country, which I'm still very confident with. We've lost a few Test caps but it's a great opportunity for those guys to stand up and put those other players under pressure."

Elgar said that although he was not involved in South Africa's one-day series defeat against Bangladesh, he shared the hurt felt by the local players which he said would make them hungry to turn the tables in the Test matches.

"We know this is not the Bangladesh side of old," he said. "It's a new team with a westernised coaching staff who have obviously changed their mindset with regards to how to play cricket in South Africa. The contest is going to be a good one," said Elgar.

A nerve-wracking night in store

AGENCIES

Will Cristiano Ronaldo head to Qatar to play in his fifth and probably final World Cup or will it instead be North Macedonia, who eliminated Italy, the winners of four World Cup titles, from the running to secure a place in the 32-team tournament?

Also, can Robert Lewandowski break the Sweden jinx to take Poland to Qatar?

Tuesday night clashes in the World Cup qualifiers will provide answers to all these questions.

Ronaldo's Portugal side, who preceded Italy as European champions in 2016, might have been bracing themselves for the prospect of a decisive showdown with the Azzurri but instead North Macedonia will be the visitors to the Estadio do Dragao in Porto, with the winners going to Qatar.

For Portugal, failing to qualify for the World Cup would be little short of a scandal given the quality in their ranks – Atletico Madrid's Joao Felix was only on the bench against Turkey, for example. For Ronaldo, the all-time leading international goal-scorer at the age of 37, this will surely be his last World Cup if Portugal do get there. The other World Cup qualifying play-off final in Europe on Tuesday sees Poland host Sweden in the southern Polish city of Chorzow, with the Poles looking to end a run of six straight defeats against their opponents.



Meanwhile, it's still all up for grabs when it comes to African nations qualifying as 10 teams have begun the third – and last – round of qualifying. The most riveting of all the five African nations clashes will certainly be the one between Egypt and Senegal as it pits Liverpool stars Mohamed Salah of Egypt and Sadio Mane of Senegal against each other with Egypt protecting a 1-0 lead over their opponents.

Hand-timing again for National Swimming Championships

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangabandhu 31st National Swimming, Diving and Water Polo Championships is set to get underway at the Syed Nazrul Islam National Swimming Complex in Mirpur today.

The competition will, however, not feature the electronic board, yet again, since a part of the newly-installed electronic device has been malfunctioning, according to BM Saif, general secretary of the Bangladesh Swimming Federation. Thus, several records are likely to tumble, much like how the championships' last edition had popped 11 national records in the swimming category, all registered by hand-timing.

"The electronic board was officially not yet handed over to us by the national sports council. So, we can't use the electronic board, which has some problems with generating accurate time, thus we are forced to opt for hand-timing," informed Saif at a press conference yesterday.

Saif further informed that as many as 21 players, who have been in the national camps for the upcoming South Asian Games, will participate in the 38-event competition, featuring a total of 580 participants, alongside 42 swimmers, who have been scouted for advanced training.

Selectors face sweet dilemma before SA Tests

SPORTS REPORTER

The surface at the Kingsmead in Durban will play a major role in Bangladesh forming the team combination for their first of the two-match Test series against South Africa on March 31.

Following the historic Test win in Mount Maunganui against New Zealand earlier this year, the Tigers' pace unit comprising the likes of Ebadot Hossain, Shoriful Islam and Taskin Ahmed – all of whom were instrumental in the win over Kiwis – have been in formidable rhythm.

Alongside the aforementioned pace trio, off-spinner Mehedi Hasan Miraz was the lone spinner in that game as the team management opted for a pace-heavy lineup with only four specialist bowlers, keeping in mind the pace-friendly condition in New Zealand.

For the upcoming series, it is almost certain that the hosts, who lost the ODI series, will come up with an aggressive intent and would probably bank on their seamers to exploit the pace-friendly conditions in Durban.

However, with pacers in top-notch form and Bangladesh having formed a settled eleven over the past few months, the



Bangladesh selectors now face the sweet headache ahead of deciding on an eleven for their South Africa challenge.

"Look it will be very difficult to comment on who will be in the playing eleven or what will be our team combination for the first Test. We all know the South African conditions suit pacers and it won't be surprising if they come up with a green top against us. So, we have to wait until the day before the Test match to assess the pitch," chief selector Minhajul Abedin told The Daily Star yesterday.

In absence of star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, it will probably be Miraz who would once again have to play the role of the only specialist spinner in the side. Like in New Zealand, skipper Mominul Haque and Najmul Hossain Shanto, however, could also chip in with a few overs against the Proteas at times.

Also, Miraz's recent all-round showings in the fifty-over format also give him the edge over more experienced left-arm spinner Taijul Islam in getting a nod for the eleven.

Despite bagging thirty wickets and remaining the highest wicket-taker for the Tigers in 2021, Taijul had to sit out both the Tests in New Zealand mainly because of the team combination and the seaming

conditions.

And even if Bangladesh's think tank wants to accommodate Taijul as a second spinning option alongside Miraz, they may have to drop middle-order batter Yasir Ali who showed great promise since making his Test debut against Pakistan last year. Hence, it is only likely that Taijul will have to sit out the South Africa Test series despite being in good touch. However, according to Minhajul, the competition among the players within the team is something the team management is taking positively.

"Obviously, Taijul has been a top performer for us last year but the fact is we also need to have the right combination keeping the conditions in mind. It won't be wise to have two spinners if the condition offers seam and bounce.

"However, it's a healthy competition within the team. If Taijul is eventually not picked in the playing eleven it's not because he is not doing well, rather it's because we are having to prioritise to keep the team's interest," he said.

With the team performing and reaching new heights almost constantly, the selectors probably won't mind such headaches before any tours or series.