

## Shakib 'quietly' immersed as BPL swings in

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Ace all-rounder and Fortune Barishal skipper Shakib Al Hasan may have taken centre-stage ahead of the start of the tournament with his scathing criticism of the BPL organisers on Wednesday, but by the time the tournament began yesterday, he was fully immersed in cricketing rituals.

The southpaw had shown interest in getting his own franchise into the BPL prior to the season, a BCB official claimed on conditions of anonymity. However, the board did not receive the required clearances from the required agencies to give the go ahead.

Instead, Shakib, having claimed he could fix the BPL in less than two months as CEO, was getting into the grind of things in his own way.

The 35-year-old, who found some form with the bowl during India's recent tour of Bangladesh, had been troubled by injury but yesterday bowled in the nets after a long time. There was no wincing in pain as he bowled before he went to the indoor nets for a session with the bat.

During the last T20 World Cup, Shakib did not create the impact that was expected of him as T20I skipper, bagging five wickets in six matches including a decent



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

After the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League commenced with a dull low-scoring affair between Sylhet Strikers and Chattogram Challengers in the day game in Mirpur, Rangpur Riders' Rony Talukder set the stage alight with a blistering 19-ball 50 against Comilla Victorians in the following game at the same venue. Thanks to Rony's 31-ball 67, laced with 11 boundaries and a maximum, Rangpur posted a 176-run total.

## Raja hits T20 'line, length and variation'

SPORTS REPORTER

The ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) may not have the same aura as the top franchise-based T20 leagues around the globe as it does not feature T20 cricket's big names, but that only makes the tournament a great platform for local cricketers to showcase their talent even more than before.

And Sylhet Strikers' Rejaur Rahman Raja certainly came through in that regard as the young pacer set the stage alight with his career-best T20 figures of four for 14 from four overs to propel his side to a thumping eight-wicket victory over Chattogram Challengers in the tournament opener at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Courtesy of Raja's impressive bowling, Sylhet restricted Chattogram to a meagre 89 for nine before cruising to victory with eight wickets and 45 balls to spare.

The right-arm seamer has been on the national team's radar for some time now and proved to be a prolific wicket-taker in the domestic circuit, especially in the red ball format.

The 23-year-old, however, managed to successfully carry his form into the shortest format as well as he impressed with his line and length since being introduced into the attack by Sylhet skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza. He began

by picking up the crucial wicket of Chattogram skipper Shuvagata Hom almost immediately in the seventh over of the innings.

"To be honest, there is not much of a difference in the two formats as line, length and variation play big roles in both versions of the game. For me, it doesn't matter as I tried



to bowl according to the demand of the situation," the player of the match Raja told the media after the game yesterday.

The cricketer was picked ahead of the experienced seamer Rubel Hossain in the lineup and the pacer was able to justify the team management's decision with a very impressive outing.

Unafraid of mixing up the pace and often bold enough to bowl

quickly and hit the deck hard, Raja picked up the wickets of Usman Khan, Unmukht Chand, and Nihaduzzaman in the latter stage of the innings to help Sylhet restrict Chattogram to the lowest total ever in an opening game of the BPL.

"I feel great and I tried to maintain a process. At the same time, there was a plan from the team management and I tried to execute that. I think it will boost me and the team and when you are able to start a tournament on a high note, it helps you to go forward as a player," he added.

Raja, who hails from Sylhet just like national team pacers Ebadot Hossain, Khaled Ahmed, and Abu Jayed, seems to be heading towards a similar trajectory, and his natural ability to bowl fast and read the batters well only bodes well for the pacer who is still in the early stage of his career.

"I don't think the pitch was that bowling friendly, and you might have noticed that our batters were able to do well. Our bowlers tried to maintain a good channel and we were successful," said a confident Raja.

Although the tournament has just started, for someone like Raja it will be important to continue his impressive run in order to catch the eyes of the national selectors to make his case stronger for being considered for the shortest format in the current Bangladesh squad.



showing against India. However, his performance with the bat in the showpiece event was concerning as he managed just 44 runs in five matches at an average below nine.

However, at the nets he had a pattern of going through his routine. First, it was just middling the ball as he batted to throw downs for the entire session.

A well-played on drive was followed by an inside edge. He did not seem to bother as he followed up with a very comfortable cover drive. On middling a few, the flashy drive square of the wicket came into view. Having gotten a feel of things, he started going for more T20-like aerial shots.

He failed to connect on some and when it appeared it was not quite coming together, he changed the glove that stays inside the batting glove. A few haywire shots later, he found a stable base for the hitting position he was seeking and then one hit the roof of the net, indicating it could have gone all the way over the bowler's head. On finding his sweet spot, the all-rounder finished the session.

Fortune Barishal coach Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, also a mentor to the player, said that Shakib's rustiness with the bat was definitely not an issue ahead of his side's first game.

"You may think he is rusty but when he takes the field, most of the times he makes good connection. Maybe he didn't connect with a few but maybe he was trying something new," he said.

Shakib was one of the top-scorers in the BPL last season with 284 runs for Barishal. Asked what was being discussed before Shakib moved to the nets, the coach said: "It's mostly regular discussion. Since he has played for so many years, it's not about always being excited.

"He does his thing quietly," he added on Shakib's excitement for the tournament.

While the all-rounder had once previously noted that his work went unnoticed because he did things privately, ahead of the first match, his preparations on Thursday at Masco and the session at Mirpur gave the impression that he is once again focused on a good showing.

## Junior hockey team off to a flyer

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh hockey team began their Men's Junior AHF Cup campaign on a winning note as they handed a convincing 4-0 defeat to Hong Kong in a Pool B encounter at the Sultan Qaboos Complex in Muscat yesterday.

Although there might have been some concerns regarding competing well against 'fittest' Hong Kong, especially after a two-week preparation, the charges of Mamunur Rashid shrugged off all apprehensions as Bangladesh got off to a flying start.

The boys in red and green went ahead in the very second minute with forward Tahsin Ali scoring from open play before defender Rahid Hasan Jibon doubled the margin, from open play again, in the final minute of first quarter.

Bangladesh kept their dominance over Hong Kong intact in the next quarter as defender Amirul Islam made it 3-0 by converting a penalty corner in the 18th minute.

The third quarter remained goalless but Bangladesh sealed off the victory in the fourth and final quarter when Tahsin Ali struck his second and team's fourth from open play in the 57th minute.

Bangladesh will play their second match against Sri Lanka today.

## Clubbable gentleman off the pitch, deadly on it

AFP, Rome

Gianluca Vialli's death on Friday robbed Italian football of an iconic figure of its golden era, a powerful yet studious centre-forward who won almost every honour and was one of the English Premier League's first big-name foreign imports.

Vialli, who had battled pancreatic cancer since 2017 before finally succumbing to what he called "an unwanted guest" at the age of 58, was the archetypal Italian 'signore', a well-dressed, well-spoken gentleman who nonetheless thrived in the bruising world of Italian football.

His glittering club career saw him at one point become the world's most expensive player when Juventus paid Sampdoria 16.5 million euros in 1992 and he ended his career with one final successful spell at Chelsea.

The son of a self-made millionaire, Vialli grew up in a 60-room castle in his native Cremona.

His bustling style of forward play belied his comfortable upbringing and led him to the greatest heights at club level.

During most of the 1980s and early 1990s he was part of a devastating strike partnership at Sampdoria with Roberto Mancini, one of Italy's most naturally gifted players of the era, which carried the Genoa-based team to unprecedented levels of success and led to them being nicknamed "the goal twins".

In eight years at Sampdoria, Vialli won the club's only Serie A title in 1991, the previous



GIANLUCA VIALLI: 1964-2023

year's Cup Winner's Cup and three Italian Cups.

They also came within a hair's breadth of winning the European Cup in 1992, being narrowly beaten by Johan Cruyff's Barcelona 'Dream Team'.

LONDON CALLING

Vialli was one of the first leading players to leave a club on a free transfer thanks to the Bosman ruling, departing Juventus after he won the Champions League in 1996 to link up with fellow former Serie A star Ruud Gullit

at resurgent Chelsea.

By then 31, Vialli was among the first wave of foreign stars who would soon flood the Premier League and alongside compatriots Roberto Di Matteo and Gianfranco Zola turned Chelsea into trophy and title contenders after a long silverware drought.

"It was a club that had exciting plans... even if this was before (Roman) Abramovich. There was already the idea within the club of winning the league," Vialli said in 2016.

"Gullit was there and I had the chance to

## BPL council 'welcomes' Shakib as CEO

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Premier League's (BPL) governing council yesterday invited all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan to take up the challenge to improve the standard of the country's premier franchise-based T20 tournament.

At a press conference alongside BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury, governing council members explained some of the limitations in response to criticisms of the ninth edition of the tournament. Things had come to a head when ace all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan opined that the BPL had failed to build a brand and that he would have done a better job as CEO.

"I welcome Shakib and thank him. If he wants to come as CEO of BPL, he has shown that interest. From the governing council, we welcome him. If he wants, he can come and take responsibility as CEO," said BPL governing council chairman Sheikh Sohel.

Shakib had referred to a movie and said that it would not take him even two months to bring the BPL up to standard. "Cinema isn't reality," Sohel added. Sohel also responded to Shakib saying that the Dhaka Premier League was better run than the BPL. "Shakib doesn't often play in the premier division (Dhaka Premier League) matches. But till now he hasn't missed a BPL fixture. I don't think that is a valid argument."

## Kings keep flying, MSC crushed

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Bashundhara Kings continued their winning ways to lead the way in the Bangladesh Premier League but Mohammedan fell to their first defeat of the season in an away fixture yesterday.

Independence Cup champions Kings came from behind to hand hosts Muktiyoddha Sangsad a 3-1 defeat at the Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni Stadium in Gopalganj while Mohammedan surrendered to Sheikh Russel after three seasons, falling to a 0-2 loss at the Bashundhara Kings Arena.

At the Shaheed Birshreshtha Flight Lt Matiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj, title contenders Sheikh Jamal came from one goal down to play out a 1-1 draw against Chittagong Abahani. Cornelius Stewart cancelled out a 53rd minute strike from David Ifegwu by converting as expected from the spot in the 76th minute.

Star-studded Bashundhara Kings dominated proceedings, but Muktiyoddha stunned the visitors by taking a lead against the run of play through Burundi forward Selemene Landry, who superbly drove a lob from Soma Otali in the 10th minute.

Despite conceding, Kings maintained their stranglehold and Brazilian Dorielton Gomes, the top scorer of the Independence Cup with nine goals, equalised with a header in the 35th minute before striking his fourth goal of the league season with another header in stoppage time of the first half.

Kings then ensured a fourth league victory while extending their unbeaten run to 11 matches when substitute Matin Mia availing a defense-splitting through ball from Robson before dancing past Mukti goalkeeper Mehedi Hasan to wrap up the win in the 88th minute.

live in London. You put that all together and I couldn't have said no."

In 1997 he helped Chelsea to the FA Cup, the club's first major honour in 26 years, and the following year won the League Cup and Cup Winner's Cup after taking over as player manager from the sacked Gullit.

In his final campaign as a player he led Chelsea on a title challenge that only faded in late April, and in 2000 won a second FA Cup before being replaced by Claudio Ranieri in the following season.

A humbling spell at Watford followed before Vialli decided to leave the game to become a pundit on Italian TV.

ITALY BLUES

He scored 16 goals in 59 matches for Italy but failed to recreate his often exceptional club form on the international stage.

At the height of his powers he flopped at the 1990 World Cup on home soil, shoved aside early on to make space for Roberto Baggio and Toto Schillaci, and his Italy career never recovered.

At one point he went over two years without scoring for Italy, and his final match for the national team came in 1992 when he was still in his late 20s, surprisingly early in a career that was still to bring another Serie A title and the Champions League with Juve.

However he remained a popular figure and in 2019 became Italy's delegation chief, providing support to old friend and head coach Mancini.