

Shakib finds some positives in BPL at last

SPORTS REPORTER

“Everything is on a break,” Bangladesh’s Test and T20I skipper Shakib Al Hasan said when asked about his reaction to umpiring in the BPL at an event organised by Yamaha, only a day after he had made headlines for getting into the field of play before his side Fortune Barishal’s innings.

The all-rounder has already made headlines for his criticism of the BPL since the ninth edition of the tournament began, stating he could do a better job than the current organisers if he were CEO. At another commercial event a little later, he said it would be better to be board president than CEO.

Shakib accepted the fine for a level 1 breach of the BCB’s code of conduct



for entering the field, but it remains to be seen whether the all-rounder has had enough of going after the BPL’s organisation.

Despite the shortcomings of the BPL this time around, Shakib found some positives from a cricketer’s perspective, not getting into the logistical challenges left unmet. Yet, he reminded of difficulty playing T20s in Mirpur.

“The pitch is very good this year. Getting such pitches in Mirpur is unexpected. You have to credit the curator for that. That’s why runs are being scored and games are going well. It’s exciting,” Shakib said.

While the night games have produced runs, it still remains a bit difficult during the afternoon games for batters. A few local batters, a majority from the Sylhet Strikers, have started the BPL on the right foot.

[Nazmul Hossain] Shanto, Towhid Hridoy and Zakir [Hasan] have done well. The best thing is that local batters are doing well and the pitch deserves credit,” he said.

However, Shakib also pointed out that local bowlers are yet to really make a case for themselves. “Bowlers are not doing well. We have to learn how to bowl on these pitches now,” he said.

While any fiery remarks have been put on hold, when the action takes to the field at Chattogram, it remains to be seen whether Shakib will go from ‘break’ to action again.



Rafael Nadal battled back from regular injuries to lift the Australia Open last year for a record 21st Grand Slam title before adding the French Open crown to his collection. Yet, there are concerns whether he has lost a step after losing six of his past seven matches. What he still has in spades, however, is his star power, with Maria Sakkari (L) and Marta Kostyuk rushing to take a selfie with the 36-year-old after a charity match yesterday ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne.

PHOTO: AFP

Chattogram leg promises greater entertainment

SPORTS REPORTER

The first Dhaka leg of the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) witnessed quite a bit of action both on and off the field before the tournament shifts to Chattogram for the second phase from Friday. There have been some highlighting aspects during the Dhaka leg from the teams and individuals that certainly promise for an exciting tournament moving forward.

Sylhet shine bright under inspirational Mashrafe

Although Mashrafe Bin Mortaza is no more in contention for the national team selection, the inspirational cricketer made his mark with his leadership quality as Sylhet Strikers completed the Dhaka leg with an unbeaten run, winning all four games to remain on top of points table. The 39-year-old led from the front and remained instrumental with his medium pace and is among the top wicket-takers in the tournament so far, with seven wickets at an economy of 7.46. The charismatic cricketer led the side with utmost authority right from the start of the BPL, and a mixture of youth and experience made Sylhet one of the biggest title contenders for this BPL edition. Also, the presence of another experienced cricketer in Mushfiqur Rahim has provided a lot of assurance in the batting line-up, and alongside some talented young local and foreign players,



Sylhet remain a balanced unit.

Locals make their presence felt

The BPL has always been expected to be a huge platform for the local cricketers to exhibit their skills and share the limelight, and the Dhaka leg has certainly proved fruitful from that aspect. This time, some of the uncapped local cricketers have displayed great consistency and caught the eye with their performances. Among them, Sylhet’s young Towhid Hridoy stands out. The member of the Bangladesh Under-19 World Cup-winning side has emerged as the revelation in the Dhaka leg of the BPL. The right-hander is currently the leading run-scorer of the tournament, with 194 runs in four games, where he struck three consecutive half centuries. More importantly, Hridoy seems to have

matured as a batter, which has already started to pay dividends for the 22-year-old, but he is likely to miss out the entire Chattogram leg due to finger injury. Apart from Hridoy, Sylhet’s Zakir Hasan, Najmul Hossain Shanto, pacer Rejaur Rahman Raja, and Jaker Ali from Comilla Victorians also impressed with their outings so far.

Entertaining cricket

Over the years, the lack of entertaining cricket especially in the first part of the BPL has always remained one of the major concerns, but the Dhaka leg of this edition has certainly provided a great start. However, the first two games of the days’ opening fixtures churned out low-scoring encounters, where the slow and low nature of Mirpur pitch yet again raised more than a few eyebrows, even though it was a different story with the night games offering some competitive totals on the board. The first leg has already witnessed the third-highest successful chase in the history of BPL as Sylhet chased down a huge total of 194 runs posted by Fortune Barishal. The tournament also featured two centuries in the same match. Pakistan’s Azam Khan struck the first ton for Khulna Tigers but it eventually went in vain after his fellow countryman and Chattogram’s opener Usman Khan smashed a blistering century to clinch the victory for his side. The Dhaka leg also witnessed a 200-plus total posted by Sylhet against Dhaka Dominators, and it is expected to be the first of many as the tournament shifts to Chattogram where the pitch historically offers big totals.

Bangladesh reach Junior AHF Cup final

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh U-21 national hockey team stormed into the final of the Men’s Junior AHF Cup with a 3-0 win over Thailand in the first semifinal at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat yesterday.

Bangladesh will feature in today’s final against the winners of the other semifinal between Uzbekistan and hosts Oman.

The margin of victory may paint the impression of an easy win for Bangladesh, who had qualified as Pool B champions with an all-win record. In reality, they faced a stiff challenge from Pool A runners-up Thailand, who had come into the semifinal on the back of one win and one draw.

Thailand kept Bangladesh at bay for the first three quarters with in-form scorers like Amirul Islam, Joy, Tahsin Ali and Rokibul Hasan Rocky struggling to break the deadlock.

However, they collapsed under the pressure of a brilliant performance from the boys in red and green in the fourth and final quarter.

Rashid Hasan Jibon broke the deadlock three minutes into the fourth quarter from open play before Huzaifa Hossain converted a penalty for his first goal of the tournament in the 56th minute.

With Bangladesh on the cusp of the final, Rokibul Hasan Rocky sealed the victory in the 56th minute with his sixth goal of the tournament.

‘The artist has arrived’

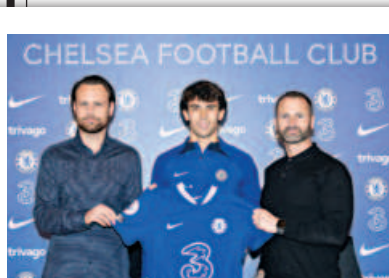
AFP, London

Atletico Madrid forward Joao Felix has joined Chelsea on loan for the rest of the season, the Premier League club announced on Wednesday.

The 23-year-old will bolster the attacking options for manager Graham Potter, whose squad is currently hard-hit by injuries and languishing in 10th spot in the table.

Chelsea tweeted “the artist has arrived”, welcoming the Portugal international, who had also been linked with Arsenal and Manchester United.

“Chelsea is one of the great teams in the world and I hope to help the team reach their objectives, so I am very, very happy to be here and very excited to play at Stamford Bridge,” Felix said in a club statement.



Felix joined Atletico from Benfica in 2019 for 126 million euros (\$135 million), making him one of the biggest transfers of all time, and has scored 34 goals in 131 appearances

for the club.

He also featured in Portugal’s run to the World Cup quarter-finals in Qatar last month, scoring in the 3-2 victory against Ghana in the group stage.

Atletico confirmed on Wednesday that Felix had extended his contract with them for one more season, until June 2027.

“From Atletico Madrid we wish Joao Felix every success in this new professional stage,” the Spanish club said in a statement.

Rashford hitting the right notes at the right time

REUTERS

While most players ease their way back into their club side after a gruelling World Cup, Manchester United’s Marcus Rashford has not wasted any time, scoring in every match since his return to take his season’s tally to 15 goals.

The 25-year-old has scored seven times in six games in three different competitions

to lead United back to the top four in the Premier League, the fourth round of the FA Cup and the semi-finals of the League Cup.

Rashford also became the first player since the club’s top scorer Wayne Rooney in 2010 to net in eight home games in a row for United with a late double in Tuesday’s 3-0 win over Charlton Athletic.

Not bad for a forward who was woefully out of form last season and scored only five times in all competitions.

“If he keeps the focus and keeps putting the effort in, he will keep on scoring,” coach Erik ten Hag said.

“What you see now with Rashy, that is quite obvious. It wasn’t at the start of the season, but now he is in the right moment.”

Rashford’s turnaround in form is no



coincidence and two major factors have contributed to his renaissance – the departure of hero-turned-villain Cristiano Ronaldo and the appointment of Ten Hag.

But even as Ronaldo added to his burgeoning goals tally with 24 strikes, the rest of the team suffered as United struggled to their worst-ever Premier League points total last season.

Enter Ten Hag, who laid down the law very early on and benched the ageing Ronaldo and changed their style of play to get the best out of all players on the pitch.

Disciplinary issues marked the end for Ronaldo, who left games early after being upset at being benched, but Rashford has graciously accepted punishment and come out the better for it.

Since losing 6-3 to Manchester City in October, United have won 15 of their 18 games, losing only once.

With games coming thick and fast, their eight-match winning streak will be put to the test when City visit Old Trafford on Saturday.

And in Rashford, Ten Hag has a determined and dependable forward as United look to consolidate a top-four spot and return to the Champions League.



Robert Lewandowski led the Barcelona contingent as they arrived in Riyadh ahead of their Spanish Super Cup semifinal against Real Betis at the King Fahd International Stadium tonight.

PHOTO: BARCELONA