

Just Shakib THINGS

MAZHAR UDDIN from Chattogram

There were tense faces in the Comilla Victorians dugout prior to the start of the game as they searched for a first win in the Bangladesh Premier League and, at the other end of the spectrum, was the skipper of Fortune Barishal. Shakib Al Hasan was quietly sitting in a corner, observing proceedings.

From time to time, the 35-year-old, who has been suffering from a cold for the past few days, sipped on an electrolyte drink. A little while later, the southpaw returned after his second-best BPL knock, scoring 81 off just 45 balls with four sixes and eight fours.

The 35-year-old has been in fine form since the start of the BPL, striking a blistering 67 in the opening game against Sylhet Strikers. He took off again yesterday after coming to bat in the seventh over against Comilla with his side on 50 for two after being asked to bat.

Before the start of the BPL, Shakib had worked on his batting in solitude with his mentor, Nazmul Abedeen Fahim, and the results were evident in his trigger movements and how he used the crease to find the perfect balance.

Shakib opened his account with a square cut to a rather good delivery just outside off stump from left-arm spinner Khushdil Shah and it was a reflection of what he had worked on in the nets a few days ago.

The left hander's presence of mind and game sense, especially when it comes to anticipating bowlers, has been instrumental to Shakib's success as a batter, but he also used every corner of the ground effectively during his knock yesterday.



Bangladesh players walk off the ground elated after romping to a seven-wicket win against title aspirants Australia in the ICC Women's Under-19 T20 World Cup opener at the Willowmoore Park in Benoni on Saturday. Dilara Akter starred with a team-high 42-ball 40 before Shorna Akter and Sumaiya Akter stitched an unbeaten 61-run fourth-wicket stand to chase down the 130-run target with two overs to spare.

PHOTO: ICC



From flicks towards the midwicket region off pacer Hasan Ali to his clean swing of the bat for a hit down the ground over the head of Mosaddek Hossain, it was a true batting masterclass from Shakib.

The experienced campaigner kept the tempo high during the middle overs after the Powerplay, hitting a six and two fours to off-spinner Nayeem Hasan in an eighth over that yielded 16 runs.

Despite losing partners, Shakib continued to play his natural 'fearless cricket' and went on to reach his fifty off just 31 balls as Barishal reached 133 for four in 16 overs.

After reaching his fifty, Shakib geared up for more and scored his next 23 runs off just nine deliveries between the 16th and 18th overs as Barishal began to eye another 200-plus total.

But Comilla's left-arm spinner Tanvir Islam dented those plans, picking up the important wickets of in-form Iftekhar Ahmed and Mahmudullah Riyad in the 19th over while conceding just five runs.

Shakib remained unbeaten after striking four sixes and eight fours and led Barishal to a total of 177 for six, a total that helped them win by 12 runs.

After the game, Soumya Sarkar and Nasir Hossain were taking tips from Shakib, with the veteran advising: "You have to get the proper backlift with the shoulders in the line of the delivery and wait with perfect balance. Since the pitch is good, all you need is swing the bat in line with the ball and watch what happens."

To listeners, it seemed all too easy, it seemed like just another day at the office for Shakib.

Djokovic hunts 22nd on return to Australia

REUTERS, Melbourne

Novak Djokovic resumes his Grand Slam title race with Rafa Nadal on Monday at the Australian Open, returning to what was his happiest hunting ground before the ugly controversy which led to his absence last year.

Having arrived in Australia unvaccinated 12 months ago, the nine-times Melbourne champion was deported amid a backlash from angry Australians who had endured some of the world's toughest lockdowns as COVID-19 infections surged.

Nadal pounced on the opportunity, vanquishing Daniil Medvedev in an epic final to capture his second title at Melbourne Park, and more importantly his 21st at Grand Slams, before adding one more major trophy to his tally at the French Open.

While Roland Garros has been Nadal's domain for nearly two decades, Melbourne Park is almost as much for Djokovic, with the world number five capturing nine titles and holding an 82-6 record since 2007.

Djokovic has also proven to be unbeatable in Australian Open semifinals and finals with 9-0 records in both, making him the automatic favourite anytime he enjoys a deep run.

Back in Australia after his three-year visa ban was waived, Djokovic



has slowly won over fans and he soaked up the adulation en route to the Adelaide title -- his 11th trophy in the country -- but a more hostile reception could await in Melbourne.

If the seedings hold, Djokovic would not lock horns with Nadal until the final but he could take on Nick Kyrgios in a blockbuster rematch of last year's Wimbledon final, when the Serb won his 21st major.

Defending champion Nadal also admitted he felt vulnerable heading into the Australian Open after two straight defeats against Cameron Norrie and Alex de Minaur in the build-up and said that Novak Djokovic was clear favourite.

"Djokovic seems to be very well

prepared. He got great results at the end of the year, he has also started the year winning. It is a tournament that has always been good to him," Nadal said.

"If we talk about favourites, on Saturday before the start of the tournament, there is no doubt that he is the top favourite to win the title.

Nadal's hopes of staying ahead of Djokovic will hinge on his recovery from an injury-plagued end to last year and a slow start to this season.

The top seed faces an early test of his fitness against British young gun Jack Draper with likely clashes against Frances Tiafoe and Medvedev lying ahead.

Swiatek the favourite

Meanwhile, in women's draw, Iga Swiatek is the strong favourite to land her fourth Grand Slam title, but the picture is considerably less clear if the world number one fails to live up to her top seeding.

With Ash Barty and Serena Williams having hung up their rackets and Naomi Osaka pregnant with her first child, Melbourne Park will almost certainly usher in a new era by crowning a first-time champion on Jan. 29.

The race to fill the void left by the absence of the likes of last year's home-grown champion Barty and seven-times winner Williams should be spearheaded by Swiatek, who looked unbeatable at times last season.

Facing Real in final 'huge motivation' for Barcelona

AFP, Riyadh

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said his team are still hungry for success as Barcelona find motivation in facing their arch-rivals in a Spanish Super Cup final showdown on Sunday.

The Catalans failed to win a trophy last season and are looking for their first since coach Xavi arrived in November 2021, while Real Madrid won a Champions League and La Liga double.

The sides meet in a Clasico at the King Fahd International Stadium in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Ancelotti thinks his players will be equally motivated, despite their success.

"We are talking about players that started winning in 2013, have kept winning and have never filled their stomachs and they never will fill them," Ancelotti told reporters Saturday.

Madrid are the record 14 time-Champions League winners, with five of those trophies arriving from 2014 onwards.

Ancelotti has a fine record in finals, having lost just one of the last 10 in which his teams have competed in -- against Atletico Madrid in the 2014 Spanish Super Cup.

"Statistics are there to be changed," Barcelona coach Xavi told a news conference.

"It is a difficult game but I want to think positively. We have to take stock of where we are, that we have Real Madrid in front of us is a huge motivation."

Xavi said winning in the final would mean more to Barcelona because the opponent was Madrid.

"We have not won a trophy for a long time, we have to show that we want it, that is non-negotiable," added the coach.

Sheikh Jamal edge Russel

SPORTS REPORTER

Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club bounced back from the disappointment of a 3-0 defeat against Rahmatganj MFS in the Federation Cup in midweek with a 3-2 win over Sheikh Russel KC in their Bangladesh Premier League fixture at the Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni Stadium in Gopalganj yesterday.

Cornelius Stewart gave Sheikh Jamal the lead in the 34th minute, much against the run of play, converting from the spot after he was brought down by Yasin Khan inside the box.

Mannaf Rabbi scored four minutes after restart, smashing home Stewart's pass to double the Dhanmondi giants' lead, but former champions Sheikh Russel hit back, thanks to Timur Talipov's brilliant freekick on 70 minutes.

Nodir Mavlonov reinstated Sheikh Jamal's two-goal cushion with a fine finish from goalmouth melee four minutes later. Sheikh Russel, though, hit back again with Mfon Udoh profiting from Sheikh Jamal keeper Rasel Mahmud's mistake to make it 3-2 in the next minute.

However, Sheikh Jamal held on to the slender lead to bag all three points from the match, taking their tally to 11 points from five matches, four behind leaders Bashundhara Kings and equal with Abahani in second position. Sheikh Russel were on six points from four matches.

The other match of the day between Rahmatganj MFS and Fortis FC ended in a goalless draw at the Muktijuddho Smriti Stadium in Rajshahi. Both teams remained on five points, although Fortis played four to Rahmatganj's five.



Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford (L) congratulates Bruno Fernandes (R) after the Portuguese midfielder's equalising goal in their Premier League fixture against Manchester City at Old Trafford on Saturday. Rashford later scored one as the Red Devils won 2-1 to move within a point of their city rivals.

PHOTO: AFP

MU fight back to beat City

REUTERS, Manchester

In-form Marcus Rashford scored a late winner as Manchester United came from behind to beat rivals Manchester City 2-1 on Saturday, a victory that moves them to within a point of the champions in the Premier League standings.

Jack Grealish stepped off the bench to head City into the lead in the 61st minute, on the end of a superb cross from the ever-reliable assist-maker Kevin De Bruyne.

There was an element of controversy about United's equaliser in the 78th minute, with Rashford initially flagged offside as Bruno Fernandes swept the ball home, with the goal given following a VAR review.

Rashford was the hero again, snatching a thrilling late win for the hosts, who made it nine victories in a row in all competitions.