

Babar, Sciver scoop top ICC awards

STAR SPORT DESK

The International Cricket Council (ICC) on Thursday recognised the star performers for the year 2022, and it was Pakistan skipper Babar Azam who won the most noteworthy accolades, bagging the Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy for the ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year and also the ICC Men's ODI Cricketer of the Year Award for a second consecutive year for outstanding performances across the formats.

"It's a matter of great honour for me. My family members' blessings and my teammates helped me a lot with their services," Babar was quoted as saying in a video by the ICC.

Babar further elevated his game in 2022 as the inspirational skipper broke more individual records. The right-hander amassed a whopping 2598 runs at a staggering average of 54.12 across formats in the calendar year, becoming the only player to breach the 2000-run mark in 2022.

A total of eight hundreds and 17 fifties was also Babar's career-best showing in a calendar year. The Pakistan skipper, however, picked two innings to highlight from an incredible 2022.

"I want to highlight two performances from the previous year. One was my 196 against Australia [in a Test in Karachi], and the other one was in white-ball cricket, a hundred against England [110* off 66 in a T20I in Karachi]. I think these two innings were the two best knocks of mine



last year. Mainly because I played both these innings on my home ground, in front of my home crowd," Babar added.

Babar's 425-ball 196 not only fetched him his first Test century in two years but also his highest Test score, which almost saw Pakistan pull off an incredible victory from the jaws of an inevitable defeat.

Babar enjoyed a tremendous year in Test cricket, despite team results not always going his way. He accumulated 1184 runs from just nine matches and did the bulk of the heavy lifting for Pakistan in the longer format.

The winner of the 2021 ODI Player of the Year continued to rule in the 50-over format, scoring 679 runs in nine matches. It is a testament to his consistency that he registered scores of 50 or more in eight of those innings.

Nat Sciver wins Women's Cricketer of the Year Meanwhile, jaw-dropping knocks and being a non-stop threat with the ball helped England's Nat Sciver claim the Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy for the ICC Women's Cricketer of the Year.

In total, Sciver hit 1346 runs and took 22 wickets in 33 matches in the year, captaining England for much of her side's home summer.

Stokes and Suryakumar recognised

England all-rounder Ben Stokes defined the year of Test cricket more than any other in 2022 and was deservedly named the winner of the ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year award. In 15 Tests played in 2022, Stokes scored 870 runs, including two centuries, at 36.25 average and scalped 26 wickets.

Meanwhile, India's Suryakumar Yadav was named the T20I Cricketer of the Year as he became only the second batter to score more than 1000 runs in a calendar year in the format and ended the year as the highest run-getter, scoring 1164 runs at a ridiculous strike-rate of 187.43.



Pakistan pacer Mohammad Wasim Jr. could not help but pause his training to take a snap of the picturesque Sylhet International Cricket Stadium on Thursday. Wasim's Fortune Barishal will take on Chattogram Challengers in today's second fixture as the Sylhet phase of the Bangladesh Premier League commences.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'All I have is love for Bangladesh cricket'

SPORTS REPORTER

Sylhet Strikers skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Bangladesh's most successful captain, has a way of making things tick for his sides, even in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

Sylhet have never won a BPL title before, but under Mashrafe's leadership, the team built on a balanced budget are banking on the confidence of youngsters such as Towhid Hridoy, Nazmul Hossain Shanto and Rezaul Rahman Raza and dreaming of something special.

The 39-year-old spoke to the media yesterday, poignantly answering questions about issues such as social media attacks, local stars needing time to settle into international cricket and even speaking about dignified exits from the national team although he had no expectations for himself in that regard.

The Narail native has a way with words and brought the difficulty players face in Bangladesh's national team compared to other countries under the spotlight. He also compared the abuse that someone like Liton Das or Shanto gets on social media to players in the past, relating it to the point he wanted to make about settling down in the international circuit.

"There are only a few players, maybe two or three, who have not been attacked on social media

despite playing international cricket for a long time. If social media was similar to the present back then [when his batch was coming through], Tamim [Iqbal] may not have become Tamim. In these kinds of tournaments, someone plays well in one or two editions and plays in the national side. But that doesn't mean they have a strong base. Even those who play in [India's] Ranji Trophy or



[Australia's] Sheffield Shield or English county cricket can struggle when it comes to international cricket. Since our base is not as strong, it's normal to take four-five years to settle," Mashrafe reflected.

He not only talked about youngsters such as Shanto, who he claimed was one for the long haul, but also his national teammates that are nearing the end of their time on the international stage.

Only Barishal captain Shakib is reaching new peaks in this BPL with the bat. Mash, who spoke positively about this edition of the BPL because it allowed local players to be gauged against good bowling attacks, told The Daily Star that Shakib was 'finding his way as world-class stars do'.

"He changed his stance and is now playing all around the wicket. What you expect from Shakib is that he will come like a king and perform like a king," he told The Daily Star after the presser.

Mash bore no expectations that his international career would end on a positive note with a final game on the field. He reserved that expectation for other stalwarts.

"Those that are playing, such as Shakib, Tamim, Musfiqur [Rahim] and [Mahmudullah] Riyad, are legends of Bangladesh even if someone doesn't want to admit it. I wish people get the opportunity, so that these players can leave the field with the deserved respect. People often count how much money they got, but they don't look at the sacrifice.

"I hope they get respect so that young and middle-aged players can have faith that they will at least get that respect when they leave the game. That's it. But I don't have any anger [about how my chapter closed]. All I have is love for Bangladesh cricket," the skipper concluded.

Bashundhara windfall for women's football

SPORTS REPORTER

The women's football structure received another welcome boost as Bashundhara Group signed a three-year sponsorship agreement with the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) to further the development of women's football yesterday.

"Bashundhara are our elite sponsors. We will use one-fourth of the sponsorship money for the women's football league and the rest will be spent to develop women's football teams," stated BFF women's committee chairman Mahfuza Akter Kiran, who signed the contract with Bashundhara Group managing director Sayem Sobhan Anvir.

The FIFA executive member added: "Bashundhara Group is a real sports loving group. If they weren't, we could not have signed this deal. We hope women's will go further."

Although neither party disclosed details of the contract, it was learnt that Bashundhara -- who also have a team in the Bangladesh Women's Football League aside from three clubs in the top-tier Bangladesh Premier League -- would provide one crore taka per year.

Dhaka Bank have been sponsoring the national women's teams for a quite a while, but with their contract set to expire in 2024, Kiran believes the new agreement will not clash with their deal with Dhaka Bank.

"We did not come here for exposure. We have become associated with them with a view to improve the standard of women's football. Women's football has had comparatively more successes than the men's team, so if we can support the women in every way, I believe they can bring more glory," Bashundhara Kings deputy managing director and BFF vice president Imrul Hasana said.

Rybakina, Sabalenka set up final showdown

REUTERS, Melbourne

Elena Rybakina stormed to her first Australian Open final with a 7-6(4), 6-3 victory over twice champion Victoria Azarenka on Thursday and the Russian-born Kazakh will face Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka after the fifth seed beat Magda Linette 7-6(1), 6-2.

Wimbledon champion Rybakina wore down Azarenka in a contest that was cagey early on and had some wild momentum swings before she dominated her opponent on Rod Laver Arena to prevail.

Rybakina held her nerve as 24th seed Azarenka foundered in a messy first set tiebreak then dropped serve twice to fall 5-2 behind in the second.

The Kazakh was broken as she served for the set but Azarenka double-faulted to concede three match points in the next game, allowing Rybakina to close out an emphatic win.

"I'm super happy and proud. Without my team it would be difficult to be here so thanks a lot to them," Moscow-born Rybakina, Kazakhstan's first Grand Slam champion, said on court.

"It was an incredible atmosphere and I'm super happy to be in the final and play again here.

"It was difficult conditions, I couldn't play offensive tennis but I'm happy I managed to win."

Sabalenka joined the 22nd seed in the final after dismissing Linette following a cold start on a chilly evening on the main



showcourt, as the 24-year-old reached her first Grand Slam final after three previous semi-final defeats.

The victory also extended Sabalenka's winning run this year to 10 matches following her successful march to the Adelaide title which warmed her up nicely for the season's first major.

"I'm super happy that I was able to get this win and she's an unbelievable player," Sabalenka said of Linette. "She played really great tennis. The atmosphere was unbelievable.

"Just being in the final in this kind of atmosphere, to play on this court it's a great experience for me and I hope it's going to help tomorrow. Sorry, Saturday."

Rybakina's serve has propelled her through the tournament, and she clubbed nine aces earlier against Azarenka.

But she double-faulted on the first point of the match, raising a low gasp from the terraces.

They needn't have worried. She thumped down three consecutive aces to hold then served out to love in her next effort.

After that start, it was a surprise when Azarenka picked her off at the net to break her in the fifth game.

Rybakina shrugged it off then broke Azarenka twice, repeatedly outtrailing the powerful Belarusian.

Azarenka responded with her own firepower.

Running full tilt, she saved a set point with a forehand passing shot and put the pressure back on Rybakina.

The Kazakh cracked, hitting a backhand long, and Azarenka yelled "Let's go!" as she put the match back on serve.

Though failing to land a first serve 11 times in succession, Rybakina saved three break points at 5-5 before momentum shifted again when Azarenka tightened up in the tiebreak.

The Belarusian double-faulted to fall 4-2 behind, punched a backhand long to concede two set points, then slapped a forehand well wide as she failed to deal with Rybakina's aggression.

Having lost the tiebreak, the errors piled up for Azarenka as she dropped serve again in the second set and all but surrendered with a wild forehand to fall 5-2 behind.

Rybakina wobbled when serving out the match, a double-fault coughing up three break points and opening the door for Azarenka.

But any hopes of a comeback slipped away as Azarenka imploded on serve.

Though she saved a match point, her bid for a third title at Melbourne Park ended flatly, with a backhand hammered into the net, one of 27 unforced errors.

"It's kind of hard to digest, obviously," a gloomy Azarenka told reporters, wearing sunglasses at her post-match media conference.

"Obviously I had quite a few chances that I gave myself. I cannot really say I'm really proud of how I played."

Proteas seek WC qualification points

AFP, Bloemfontein

South Africa go into a one-day international series against England in Bloemfontein on Friday needing a strong performance to ensure automatic qualification for the Cricket World Cup later this year.

The three-match series is part of the International Cricket Council's World Cup Super League, from which the top eight teams will qualify for the World Cup in India in October and November.

South Africa need to win at least three of their remaining five fixtures -- they also have to play two matches against the Netherlands -- to climb above West Indies, who are currently in eighth place after completing their programme.

But Sri Lanka could also leapfrog the West Indies if they win at least two matches in their final series in New Zealand in March. South Africa can guarantee qualification by winning all five of their remaining games.

Teams that fail to win a World Cup place automatically will have to play in a qualifying tournament in Zimbabwe in June and July.

The England ODI series comes at a time of transition for South Africa, following the resignation of Mark Boucher as head coach.

Eight of England's squad have been playing in the SA20 competition, including captain Jos Buttler, who is the leading run-scorer, and fast bowler Jofra Archer, who has shown good form in five matches for the MI Cape Town team.

Injuries have prevented Archer from playing for England for almost two years.