

## Comilla set up qualifier vs Sylhet

SPORTS REPORTER

Comilla Victorians defeated Rangpur Riders by a big margin of 70 runs to ensure a playoff qualification spot courtesy of finishing in second place after the Bangladesh Premier League's (BPL) league phase. Both Comilla and Rangpur were vying for a playoff qualification spot after Sylhet Sixers had already qualified by finishing top of the table.

Fortune Barishal will now play against Rangpur Riders in the Eliminator on Sunday, in what will be a knockout game. Sylhet will take on Comilla in the first qualifier game in the evening match on the same day, with the losing side playing the winner of the Eliminator on February 14.

Liton Das breezed to 47 off 33 deliveries before Jaker Ali's 23-ball 34 and Khushdil Shah's 20-ball 40 saw Comilla post 177 for five yesterday.

Spinner Tanvir Islam, who has impressed this BPL, then dented Rangpur's chase, picking up two early wickets before Mustafizur Rahman scalped three wickets in three overs as Rangpur slumped to 107 all out.

The likes of Mohammad Rizwan and Khushdil Shah will depart from the BPL, having played their last game. Rangpur too will have to think of replacements for the likes of Rahmanullah Gurbaz, who has been signed by a Pakistan Super League franchise.

With chops and changes coming in frequently in all the teams, Rangpur coach Sohail Islam was asked whether the challenge had become more difficult than usual.

He admitted to the difficulties faced in planning for matches when it was unclear which players would feature.

"In this BPL, the most challenging aspect for the coaches is due to the shuffling of foreign players and their availability. Often we can't find players for a particular position. If two foreign players are changed, it turns out that the whole team combination is changing so this is pretty challenging," Sohail said.

"It's also difficult to analyse teams due to the chopping and changing. We have to make plans when we get to the field since we often can't stick to plans due to changes. But we have to sort out such things and quickly," he added.



Left-arm spinner Tanvir Islam put on a show on Friday, scalping two wickets and taking a stunning catch, to earn his first player of the match award in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League. Tanvir's exploits helped Comilla Victorians to a commanding 70-run win over Rangpur Riders.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## SAFF U-20 CHAMPS set for sterner test

SPORTS REPORTER

Having clinched the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship on Thursday, head coach Golam Rabbani Choton vowed to translate such performances onto bigger stages. The platform for that is set, with the AFC U-20 Women's Asia Cup Qualifiers slated to start next month, but the task will be far from easy.

Bangladesh will host the fixtures of Group H, also featuring Iran and Turkmenistan from March 8, with eight group champions advancing to the second round of the championship.

Choton may be eyeing better performances beyond South Asian borders after standing tall in the just concluded four-team SAFF U-20 Women's Championship, but performing against teams like Iran and Turkmenistan has proved challenging in the past, when the squad was in an even better state than it is now.

During the AFC U-19 Women's Championship Qualifiers in 2019, Bangladesh boasted the likes of Monica Chakma, Maria Manda, Krishna Rani, Masura Parveen, Israt Jahan Swapna, Rupna Chakma and many others but failed to perform when pitted against

South Korea and Chinese Taipei, losing the matches 0-7 and 0-2, before thrashing Tajikistan 5-1 in the last match.

The current team only has a couple of players with that level of talent, so they are expected to face a tougher challenge against physically and tactically superior Iran and Turkmenistan.



"Obviously, there are more challenges in the AFC U-20 Women's Championship Qualifiers than in the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship. But I think the players have a good opportunity to improve their performance and get out of the group stage," Choton told The Daily Star yesterday.

"They may have an advantage in terms

of physique, but I think that problem can be overcome if we can improve the fitness of our team," Choton opined.

Asked whether the strategy of playing long balls would work in upcoming tournament, Choton said: "We only played the long ball against Nepal in the final considering the weaknesses in their defence, but we played different in other games. I think all our players, including midfielders Swapna Rani and Shohagi Kisku, have the ability to play possession-based football against any opponent."

The successful coach also believed the boost from winning the title would inspire the girls to put up their best showing in the AFC campaign.

"Becoming champions is always something and I think the triumph of the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship will give a good boost and more confidence to the players ahead of the AFC campaign," Choton said, adding there were still areas to work on.

"There were some improvements in the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship but we also observed some things we need to work on. We have to work on finishing and improve fitness levels, but mostly we have to work on tactical aspects since we have to play against Iran and Turkmenistan."

## Real eye fifth CWC title

AGENCIES

Real Madrid have proven they can find the net even if they must take the field without talisman Karim Benzema in Saturday's Club World Cup final against Saudi Arabia's Al-Hilal in Morocco.

Carlo Ancelotti's side, reigning European and Spanish champions, are aiming to win the competition for a fifth time and build confidence after a shaky start to 2023.

If they win, this will be the second trophy of the season for Real, who lost the Spanish Super Cup against Barcelona in January and have fallen eight points behind their rivals in the La Liga title race. Real lifted the European Super Cup in August.

"We're very close to winning a trophy. It's been extremely difficult to get here and we've made a lot of sacrifices. I urge the team to enjoy this match and to do their best, while desiring to win," Ancelotti, on Friday, urged his team to give their all for the title.

Los Blancos are already the record four-time winners and are firm favourites to beat Al-Hilal after their 4-1 semifinal victory over Egyptian outfit Al Ahly on Wednesday.

Madrid won the competition under Ancelotti in 2014 during his first stint in charge, as well as in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

Madrid captain Benzema missed the semifinal with a thigh injury but is set to train with the squad on Friday before the final.

Several other Madrid players have also been sidelined, including Thibaut Courtois, Ferland Mendy, Lucas Vazquez and Eden Hazard, who will not make the final, while Eder Militao is another doubt.

Also, Ancelotti refused to take Al-Hilal lightly, who stunned Flamengo in the semifinal and are aiming to win the trophy for the first time.

"We have great respect for them, and they showed their quality by knocking out Flamengo in the semifinals," Ancelotti added.

However after their goal glut against Al Ahly, Ancelotti will be confident his strikers can get the job done and make history on Saturday.



Cristiano Ronaldo hits his trademark celebration after scoring one of his four goals in Al Nassr's commanding 4-0 victory over hosts Al Wehda in the Saudi Pro League on Thursday. Ronaldo, who celebrated his 38th birthday last Sunday, reached a career milestone of 500 club goals, taking his tally to 503 league goals for five clubs in five different top-flight leagues.

PHOTO: AL NASSR

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“We hope for some good news, we hope he's OK, but we're really concerned for him and his welfare this week.”  
Newcastle coach **Eddie Howe** about the club's former player Christian Atsu, who is missing following Turkey earthquake.

## MSC hit Azampur for six

SPORTS REPORTER

Souleymane Diabate scored a hatrick as Mohammedan Sporting Club smashed bottom-placed Azampur FC 6-0 yesterday in the biggest victory of the Bangladesh Premier League season in Mymensingh.

The Malian striker opened the scoring from the spot in the 21st minute before doubling the Black and Whites' lead 14 minutes later. Daniel Febles made it 3-0 18 minutes after the break before Diabate completed his hatrick in the 70th minute.

Arif Hossain and Sazzad Hossain scored in the 80th and 87th minutes respectively as the Motijheel outfit moved up to sixth place with nine points from eight matches.

Meanwhile, Jean Charles Didier scored the only goal as Sheikh Russel KC beat Fortis FC 1-0 in the other match of the day in Rajshahi yesterday. The win took the former champions to third position with 13 points while Fortis FC remained seventh with eight points.

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