



Comilla Victorians players rush to embrace Johnson Charles, whose unbeaten 79 off 52 helped Comilla defend the Bangladesh Premier League title with a seven-wicket win over Mashrafe Bin Mortaza-led Sylhet Strikers in the final at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. [Bottom] It was yet another impressive performance from Sylhet's Najmul Hossain Shanto, who struck his fourth fifty of the tournament in the final. Shanto ended as the top run getter of BPL, with 516 runs in 15 matches at 39.69 average, and was also named the player of the tournament for his efforts.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Vision and brand value work in Comilla's favour

SPORTS REPORTER

Comilla Victorians had the firepower while Sylhet Sixers had the exuberance of local players, but in the end the T20 mettle that Comilla possessed had overpowered Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's Sylhet as Comilla became Bangladesh Premier League champions for the fourth time -- the most by a BPL franchise -- with a seven-wicket win in Mirpur yesterday.

Imrul Kayes, who captained the side in what was his third BPL title, was ecstatic after the win.

"It has been a fantastic journey for us throughout the tournament. We are champions four times and as captain, I won for the third time," Imrul said at the post-match presentation ceremony.

With a little bit more time to reflect on their fourth title, the Comilla skipper later came to the press conference and relayed that his side, unlike the other franchises, have been able to build themselves up as a brand that allows them to have a different kind of vision when heading into the tournament.

"Comilla is a brand. Many franchises come and play well or badly but then they don't come next year. But Comilla had a different vision," said Imrul, echoing his coach Mohammad Salahuddin's sentiments.

Salahuddin, who is a highly-regarded coach in Bangladesh's cricket fraternity, won his fourth BPL with Comilla. The franchise have appeared in every BPL since 2015.

In yesterday's final, Comilla dropped as



many as four catches with a few misfields, leading to a healthier score by Sylhet.

"The way we fielded today, it appeared that the day did not belong to us. But I felt they didn't score enough runs in the end and should have gotten 200. The wicket was good but since their score was 180, we felt we might win since they have less bowling options. Our vision was different, and when we take the field we go to become champions," the Comilla coach said.

Johnson Charles was the hero of the match with an unbeaten 52-ball 79, picking up 23 runs in the 17th over bowled by Rubel Hossain. Initially Charles had found going difficult but that Rubel over essentially turned the game in Comilla's favour. His 70-run stand with Liton Das, who struck 55, effectively laid the platform for strong finishers such as Moeen Ali and Charles, and the likes of Andre Russell, Jaker Ai and

Mosaddek Hossain were not required in the end.

"I enjoyed it. Honestly, I thought it was a good pitch. It was a 200 pitch but they only got 175, so I thought if we take it to the last over, we will win. Once you stick to your plans, you do well. I am glad that I could take my team over the line and win it for Comilla Victorians," Charles said at post-match presentations.

"Liton has been superb, he is such a joy to watch, he is a classic player with touch and skill," the West Indian commented on Liton's contribution in the final.

Sylhet skipper Mashrafe led a team, built on a budget, to the finals and was happy with what the young side had achieved.

Rubel had picked up two wickets before that 17th over but him conceding 23 runs saw the game slip away.

"We are pretty much happy, we are a good team. It was a bad day today, maybe in patches we didn't do well but we batted well. We lost two-three wickets in those patches, we were 10-15 runs short," Mashrafe said.

"Rubel had gotten us back in the game today but in one or two overs, things didn't go our way. They needed 52 in four overs and it was important to execute our plan.

"We are built on a budget and we used local players at the top-order, who played with freedom. They took responsibility so we can't ask for anything more than that," Mashrafe concluded.

ROLL OF HONOUR

YEAR	CHAMPIONS
2012	Dhaka Gladiators
2013	Dhaka Gladiators
2015	Comilla Victorians
2016	Dhaka Dynamites
2017	Rangpur Riders
2018	Comilla Victorians
2019	Rajshahi Royals
2022	Comilla Victorians
2023	Comilla Victorians

WHO WON WHAT

Champions: Comilla Victorians (Tk 2 crore)

Runners-up: Sylhet Strikers (Tk 1 crore)

Player of the Tournament: Najmul Hossain Shanto (Tk10 lakh)

Player of the Final: Johnson Charles (5 lakh)

Most runs: Najmul Hossain Shanto (5 lakh)

Most wickets: Tanvir Islam and Hasan Mahmud (Tk 5 lakh each)

Best fielder of the Tournament: Mushfiquir Rahim (Tk 3 lakh)

SCORES IN BRIEF

Sylhet Strikers: 175-7 in 20 overs (Shanto 64, Mushfiquir 74 not out, Burl 13; Russell 1-31, Tanvir 1-21, Narine 1-33, Mustafizur 2-31, Moeen 1-31)

Comilla Victorians: 176-3 in 19.2 overs (Liton 55, Charles 79 not out, Moeen 25 not out; Rubel 2-39, Linde 1-14)

Result: Comilla Victorians won by 7 wickets.

City back in business

AGENCIES

Written off at times during an unusually erratic season, resurgent Manchester City delivered a resounding statement as they moved to the top of the Premier League with a 3-1 victory at title rivals Arsenal on Wednesday.

As City's players celebrated in front of their travelling fans in one corner of the Emirates Stadium at the final whistle, Pep Guardiola's face was wreathed in smiles, and perhaps tinged with a little relief.

Kevin De Bruyne had given City the lead and even Bukayo Saka's controversial penalty equaliser wasn't enough to shake the champions' equilibrium once they rode Arsenal's first half storm on a rainy night in north London.

Having trailed Arsenal by eight points just a month ago, City are now firmly in contention to retain the title.

Arsenal might have a game in hand but it was City who finished a frenetic encounter with all the momentum in the title race.

Defeats at Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham, as well as a home loss to Brentford and a surprise League Cup exit at Southampton, had given the impression that all was not well in the City camp.

Even Erling Haaland's barrage of goals came with the caveat that the Norway



striker's style of play might not be best suited to Guardiola's philosophy.

But as the critics sharpened their knives, Guardiola saw signs in training ahead of their seismic showdown at Arsenal that his squad were about to make their point to the doubters.

Guardiola admitted his tactics against Arsenal -- which included starting midfielder Bernardo Silva at left-back -- had to be altered at half-time but it was an attitude change among his players that was just as important.

"In the first half, they were much better than us. My tactics were horrible. Second half, we were much, much better,"

Guardiola added.

To rub salt on the wounds of Arsenal, who seem to have lost the momentum that could extend their 19-year wait for the title further, Grealish said: "If I'm being honest I thought Arsenal were the better team, but to win titles you've got to come to places like this and win even when you are not at your best."

Haaland urged City to now go all the way and win the title.

"I'm so happy," Haaland told Amazon Prime. "We needed this one and now we need to start going on a run because that's what Man City do."

Even though they are sitting pretty at

the top, Guardiola refused to label City as title favourites.

"We won against Arsenal at the Emirates. They have one game in hand so I consider they are still top of the league. There are still so many games to play, the Champions League is coming as well," he said.

"If we had come here eight or nine points behind and lost it would have been almost over. But we had a chance to be close and we took it.

"If you want the crown, fight for it. We still want it."

Meanwhile, Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta was left rueing the mistakes that he believed decided the fate of the crucial tie.

De Bruyne's opener came from an awful Takehiro Tomiyasu back-pass, while Gabriel Magalhaes was robbed of possession high up the pitch before City broke to restore their lead through Grealish in the second half after Bukayo Saka had equalised from the penalty spot.

"It's exceptionally difficult to play at the level they require you to play to have a chance to win. I thought in many moments we did and we had them, but if you give three goals the way we did and don't put away the big chances we had, then the margin for error is almost zero. It's a shame because we really had them," Arteta said.

Uncapped Hridoy called up for Eng ODIs

SPORTS REPORTER

Young Towhud Hridoy got the reward of his brilliant performance in the Bangladesh Premier League as the uncapped cricketer earned his maiden call-up to the national team on Thursday when the selectors announced a 14-member squad for the first two ODIs of the three-match home series against England.

The 22-year-old right hander showed great consistency throughout the BPL for Sylhet Strikers, scoring 403 runs in 13 games at a healthy strike rate of 140.41. He also struck three fifties in the tournament.

Meanwhile, skipper Tamim Iqbal also makes a comeback to the side after missing out the last home series against India in December last year due to a groin injury. Another experienced left-arm spinner Taijul Islam also returns to the ODI team after missing out in the last India series.

Wicketkeeper batters Anamul Haque and Nurul Hasan Sohan, alongside batter Yasir Ali, and left-arm spinner Nasum Ahmed were dropped due to poor performances.

England are scheduled to arrive in Bangladesh on February 24 to take part in the three-match ODI series, part of the ODI Super League, and three-match T20I series.

Squad : Tamim Iqbal (Captain), Liton Das, Najmul Hossain Shanto, Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiquir Rahim, Afif Hossain, Mahmudullah Riyad, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud, Ebadot Hossain Chowdhury, Taijul Islam, Towhid Hridoy.

Abahani meet Kings in season-defining clash

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Bashundhara Kings will be looking to consolidate their lead at the top of the Bangladesh Premier League when the visitors take on Abahani in a crucial encounter at the Shaheed Dhirendhranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla today.

Three-time champions Kings are on top of the 11-team table with 27 points from nine matches, nine points ahead of closet rivals Abahani, who however have a game in hand.

Kings have been in fantastic rhythm this season, staying undefeated while winning 17 of their 18 games in all competitions. A win today would put a fourth successive BPL title squarely in focus.

Abahani, on the other hand, have struggled at times, drawing three of their eight league games. Although they are also undefeated, anything short of a win would see their title hopes in disarray.

However, it is going to be a tough task for the six-time champions, who have never beaten Kings in the professional football league, drawing twice and losing on four occasions.

Abahani only recorded two wins against Kings, first in the Federation Cup final in 2018 and then in the Independence Cup final in December, 2021.

"I have confidence but I also respect Bashundhara. They have been perfect this season -- eight matches, 8 wins [actually nine wins from nine matches] -- so we have to be perfect tomorrow [Friday]," Abahani coach Mario Lemos told The Daily Star.

Despite being in superb form and ahead in the head-to-head battle, Bashun dhara Kings coach Oscar Bruzon afforded Abahani the same respect.

"Abahani are always title contenders. They have been performing well and finding stability in their ideas. They reach this game in top form, so we will have to be at our best," Oscar told The Daily Star.