

Abahani, Gazi notch big wins

SPORTS REPORTER

Anamul Haque Bijoy continued from where he had left off in the Dhaka Premier League last season, hitting a ton in his very first game this season for his new side Abahani Limited during their resounding 124-run win over Brothers Union at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

Bijoy and out of favour national team T20I opener Mohammad Naim put on 157 for the opening stand to set up a big score of 372 for six.

Naim missed out on a ton, departing in the 26th over after a 74-ball 85 but Bijoy carried on and hit a 118-ball 123, laced with six fours and as many maximums. Bijoy also starred in a 101-run stand with Afif Hossain before Mohor Sheikh bagged his scalp in the 40th over.

Ahif's 47-ball 65 and Mosaddek's 27-ball 46 helped Abahani to a big total before bowlers contained Brothers to 258 for six despite a 116-ball 102 from skipper Mizanur Rahman and Myshukur Rahaman's 73.

Gazi Group also notched a high score as they romped to a 128-run victory against Mohammedan Sporting Club at Fatullah's Khan



Shaheb Osman Ali Stadium. After a fast start, Ravi Teja's 79-ball 66 along with fifties from Akbar Ali and Meherob Hasan propelled Gazi to 349 for 7. Khaled Ahmed bagged three for 75 for Mohammedan.

In reply, Soumya Sarkar, another who has fallen out of national team contention like Bijoy and Naim, was still finding form hard to come by. While Rony Talukdar, who got into the national team T20I setup in the England series, continued his form with a smashing 61-ball 80, hitting 12 fours and a six in chase of the big total, Soumya departed for 16. The left-hander's disappointment was apparent as he left his bat on the ground and sat in despair after a particularly low delivery from spinner Anamul Haque disturbed his woodwork.

While all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan was unavailable for Mohammedan, Mahmudullah Riyad, rested from England ODIs, hit 57-ball 58 but did not have much impact in chasing the big target as Mohammedan were bundled out for 221.

In the other game of the day, fifties from Sangeeth Malundu and Aminul Islam, and Farhad Reza's 36 helped Shinepukur Cricket Club chase down Rupganj Tigers' 216 for six in a four-wicket win at the BKSP ground three.



In-form batters Najmul Hossain Shanto and Liton Das make their way out of the Osmani International Airport as Bangladesh team reach Sylhet on Thursday ahead of a full series against Ireland. A high-flying Bangladesh, brimming with confidence following a T20I series sweep over world champions England, will hope to carry their form into the ODI format when they begin the three-match ODI series tomorrow.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

ODI side lacked T20 unit's 'dynamics'

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Bangladesh had a lot of ambition going into the recently-concluded ODI series against England. Given their form at home and having secured a series win against India in their prior home series, there was a serious chance to thwart the world champions. But, as the ODI series showed, the game has been evolving and the Tigers were left with too many gaps to plug even in their strongest format.

On the other hand, T20Is have always been a thorn in Bangladesh's side and that a young crop would bring such vitality to record a 3-0 series sweep against the current T20I world champions was not exactly expected. Reporter Simon Burton of The Guardian was in Bangladesh to cover both the white-ball series and he opined that the T20I side had a dynamic that was missing in the ODI set-up.

"The T20 side appeared to have a bit more in terms of team dynamics but I guess there are lots of variables that are hard to quantify. Liton Das, for example, was abysmal in the ODI series and got out for two ducks. But in the third T20I, he played quite a magnificent innings. I think England have a better side in ODIs, stronger batting, so there's been a less impressive opponent in the T20 series," Simon told The Daily Star during the third T20I at Mirpur.

In the first ODI, the Tigers put up a fight and pushed England but a Dawid Malan ton denied them before Jason Roy left his mark on the second ODI. The batting approach from the hosts in the

second ODI lacked conviction as no one, bar Shakib Al Hasan, showed intent after a top-order collapse.

When it came to the T20Is, however, there was significant improvement in the batting approach compared to past T20 performances and the effort in fielding was a cut above the ODI unit. The squad also rallied around Shakib, who kept



England guessing throughout the T20Is.

Was the ODI side more traditional? "That's certainly what we are seeing," Simon said. "There is less energy. Lots of potential reasons for that."

The likes of Mahmudullah Riyad and Mushfiqur Rahim have been mainstays of the middle-order in the ODI team, but with them already out of the T20 set-up, new batters are showing the way. Were older

names responsible for fragile dynamics? "That's the key question isn't it? Younger batters coming into the T20 side played well and batting in all the matches has been excellent. There have been very few disappointing performances and Shanto has been the one throughout both series who looked really strong. Whether you lay the blame on the older players is difficult to say. But clearly there is talent coming through," Simon opined.

For Simon, the conditions were not conducive to going for more runs in ODIs, which ends up as an issue away from home on better batting surfaces.

"I think that's maybe the issue with playing in these conditions when there are often low-scoring matches and you defend low scores. It doesn't encourage a team to be as aggressive as they need to be to become a force on the global stage. Obviously, you want to win games against big names on the international stage. But what you end up with is a kind of team with two faces – different as a prospect to face in home conditions than when away," he said.

Simon also watched both captains at work and when asked if Shakib was making a statement with his captaincy in terms of being more aggressive, he replied: "I think that's probably a fair comment. It's hard to judge over a short period and the England ODI side was stronger."

The England series has now made way for the Ireland series, slated to begin from March 18. With new faces like Rony Talukdar, Towhid Hridoy and the return of Yasir Ali to the ODI set-up, a change in dynamics is expected going forward.

Bangladesh get one foot in semis

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Bangladesh recorded a third successive win in the Bangabandhu Cup International Kabaddi tournament with a 40-24 win against Nepal in a Group A encounter at the Shaheed Noor Hossain Volleyball Stadium in Paltan yesterday.

A third win takes the defending champions to the cusp of the semifinal. They currently have six points from three games, equal with Iraq. A win in either of their next two matches – against England and Iraq – would seal a last-four spot for Bangladesh.

The hosts toyed with Poland and Argentina in their first two matches, notching 50 and 72 points respectively, but faced a challenge from the Himalayan nation.

The hosts appeared cheerful to have kept their winning streak intact in the 12-team tournament on a day that also saw two-time runners-up Kenya taste their first victory after defeat in their first two matches.



Re-elected Infantino 'loves' his critics

AFP, Kigali

Gianni Infantino has been re-elected as president of FIFA until 2027 after standing unopposed at the congress of world football's governing body on Thursday.

The 52-year-old Swiss lawyer, who succeeded the disgraced Sepp Blatter in 2016, was waved in for a third term by acclamation, just as he was four years ago, by delegates from the 211 member federations.

"To all those who love me, and I know there are so many, and also those who hate me, I know there are a few: I love you all," Infantino told delegates in the Rwandan capital, where the voting system did not register the number of dissident voices.

While FIFA statutes currently limit a president to a maximum three four-year terms, Infantino has already prepared the ground to stay until 2031, declaring in December that his first three years at the helm did not count as a full term.

His re-election followed a long speech in which he triumphantly listed his achievements since taking office, alternating smoothly between English, French, Spanish and German.

"There is a lot to be looking forward to," Infantino said as he turned thoughts to the next four years and declared the 2026 World Cup, the first edition to be enlarged to 48 teams, will be "the most inclusive World Cup ever".

FIFA announced on Tuesday that the tournament in North America will feature 104 matches, a huge increase from the 64 at the most recent World Cup, as it will start with 12 groups of four teams.

The upcoming Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand later this year will be the first to feature 32 teams, up from 24 at the last edition in 2019.

It will also see overall prize money for participating teams increased to \$150 million, up sharply from \$50 million in 2019 and a huge rise on the \$15 million contributions in 2015.

Infantino has also announced projected income of \$1.1 billion in the four years to 2026, compared to \$7.5 billion in the last four-year cycle ending in 2022.

'Napoli will keep on dreaming'

AFP, Naples

Victor Osimhen says Napoli are dreaming of Champions League glory after his brace shot the Serie A leaders to a 3-0 win over Eintracht Frankfurt and into the quarterfinals for the first time in their history on Wednesday.

With Napoli confirming their maiden Champions League quarters, it marks the first time in 17 years that three Serie A sides – also AC Milan and Inter Milan – have made it to the last eight of the competition.

Nigeria striker Osimhen struck either side of half-time to ensure no slip-ups in Naples and help his team secure a straightforward, and deserved, 5-0 aggregate win.

Piotr Zielinski added Napoli's third from the penalty spot on a perfect night for southern Italy's biggest club, who Osimhen believes can go all the way.

"It's amazing to make history with this win," said Osimhen to Amazon Prime.

"We will keep on dreaming, we have the squad to do so (win the Champions League). I think we are on the right path. We have a great coach. We will see what the future holds for us, I think we have a good chance."

Luciano Spalletti's side are close to securing their first Serie A title in over three decades and an already remarkable season got even better with a place in Friday's draw for the last eight of Europe's top club competition.

They have been powered to an almost certain domestic triumph and a deep run in Europe by the red-hot Osimhen, who has now netted 23 times in all competitions for possibly the

continent's most exciting team.

However Spalletti was less bullish about Napoli's chances than Osimhen, replying with a curt "no" when asked if he was flattered by Pep Guardiola saying his side were the best in Europe.



Teams qualified for Champions League quarterfinals:

Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Manchester City, Chelsea, Napoli, AC Milan, Inter Milan, Benfica

** The draw for Champions League quarterfinals will be held in Nyon, Switzerland today.

"It's a game that people play to put pressure on other teams, it's a game that everyone knows by now," said an irritated Spalletti.

Eintracht were without suspended France forward Randal Kolo Muani following his sending off in the first leg and the Bundesliga outfit did very little to trouble Napoli.

Oliver Glasner's side head out of the

competition on a night in which their fans were involved in serious disorder after travelling to Naples despite no tickets for away fans being put on sale.

Eintracht had decided to not take up their ticket allocation for the match after Italian authorities produced two separate bans in a matter of days, fearing a repeat of the trouble in Frankfurt before the first leg.

That didn't stop the German club's hardcore fans however, who clashed with local police on a tense evening in Naples.

Three German football fans and five locals were arrested.

Around the stadium the atmosphere was less fraught as Napoli got through without any trouble.

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia almost scored his second wonder goal in less than a week in the 19th minute after a brilliant tackle from Zielinski sent him charging towards goal.

But he was forced wide just as he looked for a shooting chance and ended up being denied smartly by Kevin Trapp, who did well again two minutes before the break to denied the Georgian.

However Trapp could do nothing to stop Osimhen putting Napoli ahead moments later, the Nigeria international showing why he is one of the most highly-rated strikers in the world with a perfectly timed leap and header from Matteo Politano's hanging cross.

And Osimhen struck again seven minutes after the break with a simpler finish, this time tapping in Giovanni Di Lorenzo's low cross after more good play from Politano and Kvaratskhelia.



Even though it was end-to-end stuff at the Santiago Bernabeu on Thursday, with Real Madrid posing the most threat, the only goal came from Karim Benzema that saw Los Blancos advance to the Champions League quarterfinals by sealing a 1-0 victory in the round of 16 second leg to wrap up a resounding 6-2 win on aggregate against Liverpool.

PHOTO: AFP