

City on the brink of Premier League glory

AGENCIES

Manchester City are preparing for their Premier League coronation – the first leg of a potential treble that would write the club's name into the history books.

Victory at home for Pep Guardiola's side against Chelsea on Sunday would seal the deal and it could have been achieved the previous day if Arsenal lost to relegation-threatened Nottingham Forest.

Last season City were pushed to the limit by Liverpool, only sealing the title after a thrilling comeback from 2-0 down against Aston Villa on the final day of the season.

This year they are in a more comfortable position after winning their past 11 games to take a vice-like grip on the Premier League. City also find themselves hot on the heels of a stunning 5-1 win on aggregate against Europe's most successful club Real Madrid in the Champions League semifinal.

"We are satisfied to be able to play the Champions League final," City coach Pep Guardiola said in his press conference ahead of the game with Chelsea.

"It is non-stop and now comes the most difficult thing at the end. All the tennis players serve to win Wimbledon know it is the most difficult one.

"On Sunday, the game is in our hands to win the most important competition – the Premier League is the most important because for 11 months it's every week."

Arsenal, for so long front-runners, had to avoid defeat at Forest to keep the race alive but it is now a question of if, rather than when, for Guardiola's team.

Despite Arsenal's win at Forest, few would back against City beating Chelsea at the Etihad and becoming Premier League champions for a third straight year.

It would be their fifth title in six years, underlining their dominance in the richest league in the world.

Once they have lifted the trophy, City will have the luxury of focusing on the FA Cup final against Manchester United and the Champions League final against Inter Milan as they seek to emulate United's unique 1999 treble.



Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi may be crowned Ligue 1 champions on Sunday if PSG beat 16th-placed Auxerre, provided second-placed Lens drop points away to Lorient earlier on the day. If results go their way, PSG, who sit six points clear of Lens at the top of the standings, will become the most successful French team with 11 Ligue 1 titles to their name.

PHOTO: PSG

A new horizon for Bangladeshi cricketers

MAZHAR UDDIN

While top players around the world tend to test their skills and adjust to seam friendly English conditions by playing county cricket, not many from Bangladesh have historically taken part in the prestigious first-class competition.

Shakib Al Hasan, who made his presence felt during his stint for Worcestershire in the early stages of his career, and star opener Tamim Iqbal, who featured for Nottinghamshire, are the only two Bangladeshi cricketers who have featured in the top league.

Former Bangladesh captain Mohammad Ashraful and Enamul Haque Jr featured for minor counties in the past but there has been a rise in the lower-tier when it comes to the participation of the Bangladeshi cricketers recently.

The likes of Imrul Kayes, Shamsur Rahman, Junaid Siddique and Enamul are currently in England representing various minor counties and are reaping the rewards of playing in tough English conditions during the off-season in Bangladesh.

Imrul is featuring for Epping Cricket Club, owned by a Bangladeshi expat, in Division 1 this season. He opined that the facilities and conditions on the minor county circuit could be helpful for the Bangladeshi cricketers who are willing to work in the off-season.



"I must say the standard of cricket is pretty challenging even in the minor county. This is my first season here and the conditions and pitches offer a lot for the seamers, so it's not easy," Imrul told The Daily Star.

"Some of their county players also feature in division 1. It is a platform for the others to make it to a major county side. I think you need to have good batting technique to be successful here. So from that point of view, players from Bangladesh can certainly come here during the off-season and experience such conditions."

On the other hand, Enamul started his journey on the minor county circuit in 2008 and since

been a regular feature in England during the off-season. According to the left-arm spinner, minor counties can be a platform for young Bangladeshi players looking to gain experience.

"I think it's a great experience for players in Bangladesh to explore by playing minor county, especially young cricketers," said Enamul.

"I really feel if a youngster from Bangladesh comes here for at least one season, he will learn a lot about cricketing culture. I think there is a growing demand for Bangladeshi players in the UK, but we need good agents to communicate since we don't see our top stars playing county cricket."

Mission experience for U-12 tennis team

SPORTS REPORTER

Despite finishing second to India in the ITF Asia 12 & U team competition – South Asia regional qualifying event, Bangladesh boys' team will be travelling to Kazakhstan in September to take part in the final round alongside 11 other teams.

The Bangladesh boys' team lost against India 3-0 in the last match of the competition at the Sheikh Jamal National Tennis Complex in Ramna yesterday, finishing second among six nations.

Bangladesh's Rakeen Rahman lost 6-3, 6-1 against India's Sachin Undre, Kabbo Gayen lost 6-2, 6-1 against Vivaan Mridha while Rakeen and Kabbo pair lost 6-3, 6-3 against Hrishikesh Mane and Sachin Undre pair of India. Nevertheless, Bangladesh Tennis Federation's general secretary ASM Haider expressed his satisfaction over the team's performance.

"This is the first time since 2017 we have qualified for this stage. This is not a stage for us to win, instead we will go to Kazakhstan to gain experience as there is no world ranking at under-12 level. This experience will help them to play well when they graduate to the under-14 level," Haider told The Daily Star over phone last night.

The girls' team, however, finished fourth among five nations with India and Sri Lanka booking the two berths for the final round.

'We only participate for the sake of it'

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

A three-member weightlifting team accompanied by a coach and two officials made their way to South Korea to take part in the Asian Weightlifting Championships 2023 in Jinju on May 3 and made their way back on May 13 empty-handed and in the same manner that they had left; without a fuss.

The championships offered participants an opportunity to qualify for the Paris Olympics in 2024, but that held little significance for Bangladesh's weightlifters, spearheaded by 2016 South Asian Games gold medalist Mabia Akter.

She said it seemed that they had made the trip just for the sake of it, citing the lack of preparation and planning ahead of such major events.

"They (Bangladesh Weightlifting Federation) send us to such events just for the sake of it. We have no real preparation and there is no vision heading into these events," Mabia told The Daily Star on Saturday.

Mabia competed in the women's 64kg category while Ashikur Rahman Taj competed in the men's 55kg and Smrity Aktar in the women's 55kg events. Mabia finished sixth



after lifting 96kg, her highest in the competition, in the third round. But it was well off the 118 kilos hoisted by Ganzorig Annuin of Mongolia as she took home gold.

However, more important than the results is the lack of planning and preparation, which players often have to whip up on their own to take part in such competitions.

Mabia discussed feelings of inferiority that Bangladesh's weightlifters experience when they arrive for major competitions and brush shoulders with athletes who have years of preparation and planning to fuel their ambitions and goals while Mabia and Co. often lacking the basics like diet and nutrition, gym facilities and proper coaching.

"We feel ashamed to be there because we know, when it comes to preparations for such a stage, we are

inferior compared to other athletes," she said.

Mabia also revealed that training camps ahead of competitions were mere formalities, arranged loosely for just a few days. According to Mabia, the athletes tend to plan long-term if success in championships is in mind.

"We are just there for the sake of it. We have no proper diet, gym, or coaching. When we ask the federation for change, they come up with the same excuse: lack of funds. If there are no funds, then what's the point of sending us to such events with almost no preparation?" she said.

"If you look at athletes from India, you would see a large number of people who are invested in preparing athletes for a championship. Those athletes have two-three year plans," she added.

With no real vision nor hope, the federation continues to send these athletes into war with wooden guns. The demands of modern-day sport, particularly in a physical one such as weightlifting, are at an all-time high but the status quo of maintaining outdated and short-sighted methods simply to make up the numbers remains with no real initiative in sight.

CWAB top brass unchanged

SPORTS REPORTER

Naimur Rahman Durjoy and Debabrata Paul will continue to lead the Cricketers Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) for the next four years after no other candidates challenged their positions at CWAB's first AGM in 10 years, held at the BCB headquarters in Mirpur on Saturday.

Naimur will continue to be the president of the association while Debabrata will serve as the general secretary.

"No one is willing to take responsibility. Nobody wants to be the leader. It is unfortunate," said BCB director Mahbub Anam, who served as election commissioner, after the meeting.

Senior cricketers like Tamim Iqbal, Mushfiqur Rahim, Shakib Al Hasan, Mashrafe Bin Mortaza and Mahmudullah Riyad, all of whom had demanded change in the CWAB leadership during the players' protest in 2019, were absent, raising questions from different quarters.

However, it was learned that a handful of women cricketers would be included in the committee, which is expected to be announced in the coming two months.

Men's football team finally going to Asiad

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh men's football team has been taken onboard alongside the women's team for September's Asian Games in China following a voting at the Bangladesh Olympic Association.

The BOA, in an executive committee meeting on May 6, decided not to send the men's team citing poor performance. However, following a request from the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), the apex body of the country's sports decided to hold a vote among its members, with the result coming decisively (21 to 6) in favour of sending the team.

BOA's vice-president Sheikh Bashir Ahmed Mamun confirmed the development to The Daily Star on Saturday.

"Most members were against sending the men's team during the executive meeting on May 6, and there was no opposition to this sentiment from the two BFF members present there," Mamun said over phone.

"Later we discussed the issue and found out that their performance last time around was good. And we also got a request from the BFF in this regard, with our president asking us to hold a voting since there wasn't any executive committee meeting in the meantime.

"The result of the voting came out today, which decided in favour of sending the men's football team. There was another issue in voting and it came out against sending the e-sports team to the event," Mamun concluded.

With men's football team included, Bangladesh will be taking a 17-discipline contingent to Hangzhou, China where the multi-discipline event will take place from September 23 to October 8.

In the last edition of the Asian Games in 2018, the men in red and green reached the second round for the first time after beating Qatar in their last group match.



In his last appearance at Anfield before departing Liverpool, Roberto Firmino hit an 89th minute equaliser in their 1-1 draw against Aston Villa to keep Liverpool in contention for a top four spot in the Premier League. However, Manchester United's 1-0 win against Bournemouth made Liverpool's task infinitely harder.

PHOTO: REUTERS