

## Survival in focus on final day

AFP

The battle for Premier League survival is the main event of Sunday's final day of the season as Everton, Leicester and Leeds face a nerve-wracking scrap to avoid relegation.

The two clubs who join already-relegated Southampton in the second tier will be pushed to the financial precipice.

Everton are the one side in full control of their own fate as victory at home to Bournemouth will prevent them from being relegated for first time in history.

If fourth bottom Everton fail to win, third bottom Leicester, who just seven years ago won the league, can survive by beating West Ham at home thanks to their superior goal difference.

Meanwhile, second bottom Leeds need a miracle to avoid the end of their three-season stay in the top-flight. Victory over Tottenham at Elland Road will only be enough for Leeds boss Sam Allardyce to pull off another great escape if Everton lose and Leicester fail to win.

Should Everton manage even a draw, Leeds will need to beat Tottenham by three goals.



**It was agony at the Signal Iduna Park while ecstasy prevailed in Cologne on the final matchday of the Bundesliga on Saturday. [Inset] Substitute Jamal Musiala's strike in the dying minutes ensured Bayern Munich come out 2-1 winners against FC Koln to clinch their 11th consecutive title as Borussia Dortmund, who had a two-point cushion at the top of the table even hours ago, stumbled to a 2-2 draw against Mainz at home. Both Bayern and Dortmund ended on equal 71 points with Bayern piped Dortmund by goal difference in the tightest German league race in years.**

PHOTO: REUTERS

## WHEELS FINALLY FALL OFF

ATIQUE ANAM

Golam Rabbani Choton probably cannot remember the last time he was sitting at home while his charges were training at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) astroturf, a place he had known to be home for more than a decade-and-a-half.

The 53-year-old has been replying to constantly queries from journalists ever since he dropped the bombshell announcement on Friday that he would be leaving the BFF at the end of this month.

There has not been an official announcement yet, but the veteran coach is adamant about sticking to his decision. While Choton is using 'physical fatigue' as the reason, it is widely believed, and apparent from his recent remarks, that he is tired of not getting much-deserved recognition and reward from the BFF nor enjoying the work environment in the federation.

Choton's announcement came hours after prolific striker Sirat Jahan Swapna announced her retirement from the women's football team, which itself came on the heels of the retirement of two other members of the SAFF-winning team. All those incidents are interlinked and a result of the deprivation from the BFF.

Women's football has been propping up the image of Bangladesh's sinking football scene over the last decade, winning a number of trophies at age-group level in South Asia before finally clinching the SAFF Women's Championship for the first time in September last year.

It is the hard work of Choton and his deputies -- Mahbubur Rahman Litu and Ananya -- and the effort of Sabina Khutun, Swapna, Sajeda Khutun and many more, who have overcome many hurdles and sacrificed being with their families to earn

accolades for the country.

Unfortunately, players are the least rewarded, with the monthly salary of a majority of the 70 players in the camp ranging from Tk 5,000 to Tk 10,000 and the best getting close to Tk 20,000.

The players have staged two walkouts from the camp in recent times demanding better salaries and facilities, but their



event is far from seeing the light of day.

Since the SAFF triumph, the senior team players have only been training, without assurances of playing competitive football and without any sign of a financial windfall.

The coaches are not well paid either. Choton currently receives Tk 1,50,000 -- increased from Tk 1,00,000 in November last year -- despite the fact that he has to look after all the women's teams under the BFF, starting from the lowest age-group team to the senior team. The two other assistant coaches receive a lot less than that.

Ironically, the lion's share of salary in the BFF goes into another account belonging to its technical director, reportedly close to Tk 20 lakh.

The man in question, Paul Smalley, handles a lot of other things, but his role with the women's teams is where the troubles are most pronounced. The Englishman is a regular fixture with all the women's teams, so much so that he takes a front seat in the dugout when the team is playing a competitive match.

The coaching staff have often expressed their displeasure about Smalley's meddling in aspects of the team, starting from their training regime to food charts and game plans. The players have often put the blame on him for blocking their path to foreign leagues.

Yet, Smalley reigns supreme in the BFF's corridors, having recently negotiated a pay rise of Tk 5 lakh to extend his contract.

While the likes of Swapna, Choton and many more leave the edifice of glory that they had built over years with their sweat and tears, Smalley remains an immovable force. And with a section of the BFF top-brass behind him, he continues to sell women's football at the expense of the footballers.

## History in store for Djokovic, Swiatek

AFP, Paris

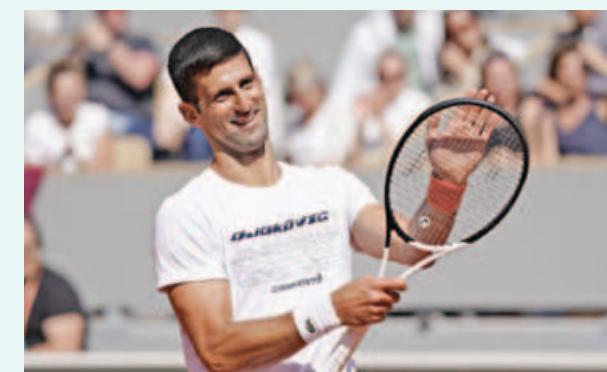
Novak Djokovic will bid for a record-breaking 23rd Grand Slam title at the French Open without his old rival Rafael Nadal, while Iga Swiatek attempts to become the first woman to defend the title in 16 years.

The French Open gets underway today without injured 14-time champion Nadal, who is absent for the first time since 2004. Djokovic today takes on world number 114 Aleksandar Kovacevic, a player who idolises the veteran Serbian.

Despite the absence of Nadal, who won the previous edition of the year's second Grand Slam, two-time Roland Garros winner Djokovic will not be the favourite for the title after having struggled with an elbow injury so far this season.

Carlos Alcaraz won the Barcelona and Madrid Opens en route to taking over from Djokovic as world number one, while Daniil Medvedev is seeded second for Roland Garros after his maiden clay triumph in Rome.

Meanwhile, the winner of the women's singles is expected to be one of the trio of reigning champion Swiatek, Australian Open winner Aryna Sabalenka and Elena Rybalkina, who have won the last four Grand Slam titles between them.



Iga Swiatek has won the French Open in two of the last three editions, boasting a win percentage of 91.3%. Only Margaret Court (95.2%) and Chris Evert (92.3%) have a higher win rate in the women's main draw.

Swiatek has also won 30 of her 33 matches on clay surfaces since 2022.

Four men can leave Roland Garros as World No. 1 -- Carlos Alcaraz, Daniil Medvedev, Novak Djokovic and Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Men's World No. 1 Carlos Alcaraz is the only player with a win percentage above 85% on clay surfaces this year, with a record of 20-2 (90.9%).

Alcaraz and Holger Rune both have seven wins against the world's top five players before the age of 21, level with one other player since 2000: Djokovic.

## 'Eager to express myself in every condition'

Shoriful Islam has been a part of Bangladesh's confident pace-bowling unit that has been improving leaps and bounds in recent years. The left-arm seamer has emerged as a multi-format pacer for the Tigers since making his debut in 2021 and spoke to The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin about his bowling and a few other topics during an exclusive interview. The excerpts are below:

**The Daily Star (DS):** Did the ODI series against Ireland go as per your expectations?

**Shoriful Islam (SI):** To be honest, no. I think it was a good experience for me since it was my first time in English conditions. There is always something for seamers in those conditions and it was a good lesson. As a bowler, it is important to contribute and I always try to do that.

**DS:** How are you preparing yourself for the upcoming Test series against Afghanistan at home?

**SI:** I am here in Sylhet with the Bangladesh team to play the third four-day game against West Indies A. I think it's a good opportunity for me to get game preparation ahead of the Test. I will look to prepare myself and utilise my opportunities.

**DS:** There is growing belief among the Bangladesh pace unit. Does healthy

competition serve as a motivation to do even better?

**SI:** Definitely. As a bowler, you always think about your game and try to become the best version of yourself. Taskin Bhai, Mustafizur Bhai, Ebadot Bhai and Hasan Mahmud, all of us try to contribute and always want to win matches for Bangladesh. We are a confident bowling unit that is eager to express themselves in every condition with our positive mindset. At times, we may fail, but if we follow the right process, it will come out positive most of the times. We talk to each other and have discussions before and after every game.

**DS:** Tell us about your experience working with Allan Donald?

**SI:** I have been working on my wrist position with Allan Donald. We also talk about how we should apply ourselves in different situations. He is always very vocal and keep reminding us of our plans, which is very motivating.

**DS:** What is your strength as a pace bowler?

**SI:** I think my strength is pace and swing. However, injuries can hamper a fast bowler's rhythm. Since I recovered from my last injury, it has not been easy to increase my pace overnight, but I am working on it and I am willing to become a consistent bowler across all formats.