

# Will the spark reignite Mohammedan?

ATIQUE ANAM

Mohammedan have done the seemingly impossible, beating heavily-favoured Abahani in the final of the Federation Cup on Tuesday to end a barren run stretching nine years. It has evoked widespread euphoria among the club's supporters and former players, with some referring to the success as a turning point in the fortunes of the most decorated football club in the country.

Ever since Kamrul Islam scored the winning spot-kick at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Dutta Stadium in Cumilla, a festive vibe has engulfed the club. Players and coaching staff returned to the capital late that night to a heroes' welcome from the club officials, who arranged a small party, which continued well into Wednesday afternoon.

Despite the financial trouble dragging Mohammedan back in recent times, the club's management announced a Tk 40 lakh bonus for the team while its football committee chairman Ghulam Mohammad Alamgir announced an added bonus of Tk five lakh for captain Souleymane Diabate and Tk two lakh each for the two goalkeepers -- Sujon Hossain and Ahsan Habib.

Imtiaz Sultan Jonny, a famed defender for the Black and Whites in the '80s, reflected on how big the achievement is, after the victory. "We ended Bashundhara



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Kings' unbeaten streak and then became champions by beating Abahani, so it's a big deal," Jonny told reporters. "We will have to win the league now and this title will surely motivate."

The victory is evidence of the progress that the club has made under the new committee following the casino scandal in 2019. Rumman Bin Wali Sabbir, a magical playmaker during the '80s and '90s, recalled the resurgence: "After the casino scandal, the ex-players have taken the responsibility of the club under late Badal Roy's leadership and we are moving

ahead step by step."

While Alfaz Ahmed has turned the tide since taking over as coach midway through the season, continuing the good work may prove to be a far more difficult task.

It may be noted that although Mohammedan failed to win a single league title since the start of the professional league in 2007, they won a number of cup titles, including two out of the three Super Cups between 2007 and 2014. Even lesser clubs like Arambagh and Farashganj have won Independence Cup during that time, but a league triumph is

a different ball game altogether.

To challenge for the league title against big spenders such as Bashundhara Kings and Abahani, the team will need long-term investment, depth and quality in its squad, a good environment and other facilities, many of which Mohammedan may be lacking at present.

Alfaz, who has steered the team to fourth position in the league with four games remaining, said he needed reinforcements to turn this team into a force that could challenge for the league title next year.

"I haven't signed a new contract with the club yet. If the club wants to keep me and if I stay with the club, I'll definitely want to have a squad capable of putting up a title fight," the former national forward told The Daily Star yesterday.

"I hope the club management realises that too and forms a strong squad for next season. There will need to be more investment and planning and I will need a few new players too," the 49-year-old added.

Despite losing much of its relevance in the recent past, the latest Abahani-Mohammedan derby showed that it can still reignite the passion among fans like the good old days. And fans of both clubs along with the neutrals will hope that Mohammedan do return as a force in domestic football once again to bring back the appeal of domestic football.

# Hosts in disarray against Windies A

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh A were in a state of disarray in Sylhet as they slumped to 157 for seven at the close of the second day in the third four-day game against West Indies A in response to the visitors' first-innings total of 445.

There were ominous signs ahead of the one-off Test against Afghanistan next month, with batters such as Mominul Haque, Yasir Ali and Nurul Hasan Sohan failing to make their presence felt.

The home side's bowlers did not have the best of outings either, finding little help in the wicket. Despite the lack of turn on offer, Nasum Ahmed scalped a filer while pacers Mushfik Hasan and Shoriful Islam bagged two each.

Following the exchange, openers Mahmudul Hasan Joy and Zakir Hasan negotiated eight overs before the former was caught behind after making nine off 27 balls.

From there, the slump began. Mominul departed after scoring five before Zakir was run out for 29. Saif Hassan's innings lasted 68 deliveries during a team-high 32 while Sohan produced 28.

It took some rear-guard action from pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib and Nasum, unbeaten on 17 and seven respectively, to get through to the end of play with the A side now staring a defeat, still 228 runs behind.

"We haven't batted well at all. The wicket is good and did not offer much help [to the bowlers] with little seam movement on offer. We just didn't bat well," selector Habibul Bashar told The Daily Star yesterday.

# NZC delegates visit prospective venue SICS

SPORTS REPORTER

Representatives from New Zealand Cricket (NZC) arrived in the country and visited Sylhet yesterday to examine facilities for both the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium and the Outer Stadium where Bangladesh A are playing West Indies A.

New Zealand will play an ODI series in Bangladesh before the World Cup and talks are going on between the two boards on the scheduling and logistics. Security consultant Reg Dickason, Head of security Greg Mann, Evan Jones of Players' Association and the team's logistics manager Riaan Muller for the upcoming tour, were part of the NZC delegation.

Crick Operations deputy chairman Shahriar Nafees accommodated the visitors in Sylhet. The picturesque city recently hosted Ireland and could get more action going forward.

"We haven't finalised a venue yet but Sylhet might be one of the venues. Since there are no doubts about Chattogram and Dhaka venues, and as there is a prospect of venue addition, they visited Sylhet. We haven't decided which format it may host," Shahriar told The Daily Star yesterday.

Sylhet had been bargaining for more exposure and hosting New Zealand would see a big international men's team play in the city for the first time.

# 'I believe attack is the best defence'

After playing domestic football for 25 years before calling time on his career in 2013, Alfaz Ahmed remains one of the most recognisable names in Bangladesh football. The former national forward has returned to the spotlight after masterminding Mohammedan's epic triumph against archrivals Abahani in the Federation Cup final on Tuesday. The 49-year-old, who has been with Mohammedan for three seasons, spoke to **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman** about the final and other topics. The excerpts are below:

**The Daily Star (DS):** You were seen running with the players during the victory lap after the Federation Cup final, reminiscent of your playing days at Mohammedan...

**Alfaz Ahmed (AA):** I could not control myself [laughs] because I was also so excited after the nerve-wracking final. I could not stop myself. I was really happy after winning such an exciting final.

**DS:** After the final, you said the substitutions in the second half made the difference. What was lacking in the first half?

**AA:** In the first half, Abahani's wingbacks put pressure on our defence by overlapping at every opportunity. So, I sent on three fresh players, including two wingers in an attempt to stop their wingbacks and those changes worked well. Midfielder Alamgir Rana also did his job very well by building up from the back. Some good moves changed the direction of the final.

**DS:** What is your coaching philosophy?

**AA:** My philosophy is to play attacking football because I believe attack is the best defence. In the attacking third, you can beat the opposing defenders if it is three-on-three or four-on-four. I try to keep more attackers in the attacking third. Former Mohammedan coach Sean Lane is



my coaching idol.

**DS:** This squad hardly impressed before you took charge. How did transform a mediocre team into champions?

**AA:** In the first leg of the BPL, Mohammedan played a 4-3-3 with three defensive midfielders, with the idea being to not concede and attack on the break. But since I took the responsibility, I made some changes to the formation, with three types of midfielders -- defensive, playmaking and attacking. We also tried to keep our wingers engaged in both attack and defence throughout the match.

**DS:** Do you believe the exciting final can lead to a revival in the Mohammedan-Abahani rivalry?

**AA:** Of course, it is possible. Mohammedan were performing well and gained steam after beating Bashundhara Kings. I think if the management forms a good squad in the coming days, then the rivalry between Mohammedan and Abahani can be revived.

**DS:** It is being said that the difference between national players and those outside the national set-up is negligible. What do you think about that?

**AA:** It is true that there is hardly any difference between national players and those outside the national team. Foreign players usually make the difference in matches in Bangladesh.

**DS:** Did you get an opportunity to work independently?

**AA:** I made decisions independently, but I want to thank manager Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib and goalkeeping coach Sayed Hasan Kanon bhai, who provided me with good observations. The inclusion of assistant coach Abdul Kaiyum Sentu ahead of the second leg also boosted the coaching staff.

**DS:** What are your future plans?

**AA:** I am Mohammedan's coach for now, but I haven't been promised anything about next season. If I am given the responsibility, then I will place my plan to the management.

# 'Strength of Navy SEAL needed to win French Open'

AFP, Paris

Stefanos Tsitsipas believes he'll need to have the mental and physical strength of an elite, battle-hardened special forces commando to break through to a maiden Grand Slam title.

The Greek world number five came agonisingly close to winning the French Open in 2021 when he surrendered a two-sets lead to lose in five to Novak Djokovic.

It's a memory which still haunts him, especially after losing to the Serbian superstar again in January in the final of the Australian Open.

"There are a few guys that can play good under pressure, especially in big, tight moments, and you have to have the mental strength of a Navy SEAL to pull it through," said Tsitsipas, hailing the crack US special forces unit.

Tsitsipas made the French Open last 32 for the fourth year in succession on Wednesday with a 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 victory over Spain's Roberto Carballes Baena.

As well as making two Grand Slam finals, the 24-year-old has fallen at the semi-finals on four occasions -- twice to bitter rival Daniil Medvedev (2020 and 2021 Australian Open) and to Djokovic (2020 French Open) and Rafael Nadal (2019 Australian Open).

In his quest, he has resorted to consulting Rafael's Nadal autobiography because he "kind of shows you that anyone can do it". "You have to have the physique of a marathon runner, the lungs of a marathon runner. You have to have the power of a football player," added Tsitsipas when asked what constitutes a Grand Slam champion.



# 'Kohli is the first to arrive in training and the last to leave'



AGENCIES

Australia fast bowler Josh Hazlewood has put India batter Virat Kohli in high acclaim revealing how the 34-year-old helps set examples for the others through his work ethic.

The fierce rivalry between India and Australia has produced some stellar cricket over the years but the spirit of the game often is brought out when both sides acknowledge the pedigree of the stars they have at their disposal.

India and Australia will face each other in the final of the World Test Championship 2021-23 at The Oval in England on June 7 as fans eagerly wait for five days of pulsating red-ball cricket.

Hazlewood, whose IPL campaign was cut short due to a side injury, is hoping to bowl in full tilt as Australia gear up for the final.

"I think it's probably how hard he works (that stands out)," Hazlewood told the ICC.

"His fitness first of all - and then his skill work and batting and fielding in particular.

"He is always out there (training) first and leaves last ... and the intensity he trains at all the time is at such a high level it drags everyone else along for the ride. That can leak on to the other players and improve them as well."

The Australian, whose IPL campaign has more five-wicket hauls in Tests against India (five) than any other nation and his record in England is just as impressive with a total of 36 wickets from eight matches at an imposing average of 23.58.

Hazlewood also made his Test debut against India - at The Gabba in Brisbane in 2014 - and has played more Tests against the Asian side (15) than any other team.



England batting stalwart Joe Root plays football with teammates during a training session yesterday ahead of the one-off Test against Ireland, starting today at Lord's. With a home Ashes series fast approaching, England will be looking to use this Test as a vital part of their preparations for the clash against Australia.

PHOTO: REUTERS