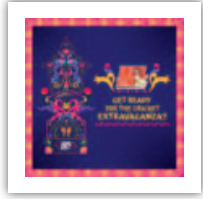


BPL begins on Jan 19

SPORTS REPORTER

The 10th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League will start on January 19, with defending champions Comilla Victorians taking on Durdanto Dhaka at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka, Bangladesh Cricket Board announced the fixtures yesterday.



The first matchday will see a double-header on Friday, with Sylhet Strikers and Chattogram Challengers facing off in the second match of the day.

On weekday and Saturday fixtures, the day match will start at 1:30 pm, while the night fixture is set to begin at 6:30 pm. The Friday fixtures will start at 2:00 pm and 7:00 pm, respectively.

Following eight matches, the last of which will be on January 23, the action shifts from Dhaka to Sylhet. The Sylhet phase, involving 12 matches, will come to a close on February 3 before proceedings move back to Dhaka for eight matches, running till February 10.

Starting on February 13, the port city of Chattogram will host a total of 12 matches before teams travel to Dhaka for the final two group-stage matches followed by the knockout phase.

The Eliminator will be held on February 25 followed by Qualifier-1 on the same day. After a rest day, the second Qualifier will take place to determine the other finalist. The curtains will close on the tournament on March 1.

Inspirational Nahida's journey to the top

ASHAQ-UL-ALAM

From a young girl living in a fourth class government employee quarters with her family, dreaming of playing international cricket, to becoming the national team's most reliable spinner, Nahida Akter's cricketing journey so far has been nothing short of inspirational.

Nahida yesterday added another exciting chapter in her career when she carved out a special place for herself in the list of 'firsts' in Bangladesh cricket by becoming the country's first woman cricketer to be recognised as ICC's player of the month.

The left-arm spinner won the title on the back of her player-of-the-series performance against Pakistan in November, where she bagged seven wickets in three games and played a pivotal role in Bangladesh's 2-1 series triumph at home.

On paper, Nahida bested two other contenders -- compatriot Fargana Hoque and Pakistan's Sadia Iqbal -- to win the award.

But in reality, this award was a testament to Nahida's years of hardships against financial constraints and people's ridicule, which almost crushed the 23-year-old's cricketing journey 11 years ago.

Back in 2012, Nahida's dreams of



becoming a cricketer were dangling by a thread after she was denied admission to BKSP, the country's oldest and biggest sports educational institute.

"I went for a BKSP trial in 2012 but I

was not selected. Then my brother Nazim Ahmed told my mother that I should focus on my studies and give up cricket. I broke down in tears," Nahida had told The Daily Star in October, 2020.

When other family members had lost hope, Nahida said her mother still believed in her dream and supported her. The prayers of her mother were answered the following year as Nahida got admission in BKSP.

The attitude of the rest of the family also changed soon enough as her brother later bought her cricket equipment and her father Hamdu Miah took great pride in being addressed as 'Nahida's father'.

Nahida's story of struggle, however, is not an aberration but the trend in the country's women's cricket.

Many of Nahida's teammates have similar stories and had to fight against great adversities to make it to international cricket.

And even after reaching the highest level, their hardships don't end as the women's team has to achieve significantly more with much fewer resources to earn a fraction of the adulation the national men's team receives.

Still, an ever-growing number of young girls, many from underprivileged backgrounds, from all across the country are striving to don the red and green jersey, just like Nahida.

For those girls, Nahida's story of triumph will stand true as an inspiration because just like Nahida, sky is the limit for all of them.

Watcher Ravindra's key is team 'ENVIRONMENT'

New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra did not exactly hit the ground running on his international breakout but went on to become one of the standout performers in his debut World Cup, setting records in his own way. The 24-year-old had a quiet tour of Bangladesh, not getting a game in the Test series but he has been keeping a keen eye on things. As he spoke with Abdullah Al Mehdi of The Daily Star after the recently concluded second Test, he discussed the Kiwi side's atmosphere, a terrific maiden World Cup, the Mirpur wicket and more.

DS: You've played in Bangladesh before. Tell us of your overall experience.

RR: I guess it's pretty contrasting. Being able to play in different formats in conditions so different from home has been quite cool. Obviously, it's tough cricket, but I think that develops your game and makes you a better cricketer at the end of the day. I think it's nice to have a drawn series. It was a reflection of the way the two games went. So, yeah, it's always cool to visit Bangladesh.

DS: Your approach to a controversial wicket like Mirpur?

RR: I always think that in Test cricket, you want results and you want to be given the opportunity to win or lose a game of cricket.

In terms of criticism, I think it's good for us as players. Yeah, you might not get the runs you wanted, and maybe a good score isn't 150-180 in Test matches. For me, 50 or 60 [individually] is a really good score. So, I think bringing back your expectation on that [is required]. And, hey, as an international cricketer, you have to play on different surfaces around the world.

DS: The secret to your confidence shown in the India World Cup?

RR: I guess it was pretty surreal. The way it all happened, the freedom came from the environment, being able to express myself

as a cricketer. That, too, with guys who are so reliable. Obviously better with Devon [Conway] in that first game [England]. He's a world-class cricketer. I've spent a lot of time with him; one of my closest mates. That's what's been important here in terms of our New Zealand environment. Everyone's kind of 'be yourself and play the game' that you believe is going to help the team. During that World Cup, I guess I was lucky enough to be in situations where I could take the game on, and it all sort of worked out luckily.

DS: Does a sense of community separates the New Zealand team from others?

RR: It's hard to speak for different international sides, obviously. Speaking for the New Zealand one, I guess we're all sort of good mates; we enjoy sharing the field, enjoy each other's company off the field. We always like to have a laugh and a joke and stuff. But I guess at the end of the day, we all understand what the common goal and objective is: being able to push the team forward. All the personal accolades, runs, wickets etc., will come as part of that.

DS: You talked about Conway. How about Williamson or Southee as mentors?

RR: I've spent time with Timmy [Tim Southee] and Kano [Kane Williamson] the last couple of years, but obviously not as much as I have with Dev [Devon Conway] and [Tom] Blundell. But they're all such great mentors.

The way they carry themselves on and off the field, how level they are, and how competitive they are and how they go about their processes. There's a reason why they've played international cricket for the better part of a decade and had so much success with this team. So, I think you do whatever you can to learn from them. They're like awesome teammates to share the field with. Amazing mentors and such great students of the game, they teach you the game.

DS: During your formative years, have you looked up to someone like Shakib Al Hasan?

RR: Yeah obviously, Shakib's done a lot of his time. [Ravindra] Jadeja too. People who bowl left-arm spin and bat left-handed are always ones you're gonna have a little affinity towards, but personally I didn't necessarily follow around as I wanted to be like [Daniel] Vettori, and really wanted to bat like Sachin [Tendulkar], [Rahul] Dravid, [Ricky] Ponting, [Brian] Lara, all those guys.



I guess from New Zealand, I really loved watching Ross Taylor bat. He was my favourite growing up. And then, obviously, through teenage years you see what Kane sort of did and you want to be like Kane.

DS: Where do you see yourself as an all-format all-rounder?

RR: I guess if you ask most people around me, they'd probably say, 'he shows maybe a little more interest in his batting or is more of a batting all-rounder', which I think is true right now, but I want to continue trying to be a genuine all-rounder [across formats] in the future.

DS: Disappointing at not making the Test eleven?

RR: I think the thing with the Black Caps Test side at the moment is there's a lot of guys in front of me who have done it for a number of years, who have amassed great records and have contributed so much to the team. For me it's about not being impatient.

I'm young enough and will end up playing a lot of cricket, whatever might happen. But I think it's understanding that the guy in front of me is a very, very good cricketer, so it's just the nature of the beast. It's so good to see someone like Glenn [Phillips] come back in and gets a man of the match. Yeah, definitely watching them here was about a learning curve whether you're playing or not.

ICC UNDER-19 WORLD CUP Bangladesh face India in first hurdle

STAR SPORTS DESK

Bangladesh Under-19 team will play the final of the 2020 ICC U-19 World Cup in their opening fixture of the 2024 edition when they take on defending champions India in their Group A match in Bloemfontein on January 20.

The ICC released the schedule for next year's U-19 World Cup yesterday which will kick-start on January 19 with the match between hosts South Africa and the West Indies.

A total of 16 teams will compete in the event divided into four groups. Other than India, Ireland and the USA are the other two teams alongside Bangladesh in Group A.

After the India match, the young Tigers will face Ireland and the USA on January 22 and 26 respectively at the same ground.

Kings suffer AFC Cup exit

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh champions Bashundhara Kings missed out on qualifying for the knockout stage of the AFC Cup when 10-men Kings lost 1-0 against hosts Odisha FC at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar, India yesterday.

Odisha defender Serigne Fall netted the decisive goal in the 66th minute after Kings were reduced to 10 men in the first half stoppage time when Asror Gafurov was shown red.

This was Kings' fourth attempt at getting to the next round of the competition.

The visitors needed just a point to write a piece of history to become the country's second club to advance to the inter-zonal semifinal after Abahani.

Man Utd fight for CL survival

AFP, MANCHESTER

Manchester United's future in this season's Champions League hangs by a thread ahead of Bayern Munich's visit to Old Trafford, with an early exit in Europe sure to put more scrutiny on manager Erik ten Hag.

The Dutchman tried to argue after victory over Chelsea last week that United's season has not reached crisis-mode.

But Ten Hag's hopes that a turning point had been reached were short-lived as a 3-0 defeat at home to Bournemouth on Saturday saw a troubled campaign reach a new low.

The Red Devils sit sixth in the Premier League after seven defeats in their opening 16 games.

Yet, while there may be time to recover a place in the top four domestically, their need in the Champions League is urgent.

Only victory against the German champions on Tuesday will give United any chance of progress to the last 16 and even then, they need FC Copenhagen and Galatasaray to draw in their final Group A match.

Bayern may already be assured of their place in the last 16 as group winners but have a point to prove themselves after being thrashed 5-1 by Eintracht Frankfurt on Saturday.

And the last time Bayern lost a Champions League group game was six years ago.

U19 ASIA CUP Bangladesh blow away Japan

SPORTS DESK

Bangladesh made quick work of their Japanese counterparts, completing a comprehensive nine-wicket victory in their group stage fixture of the ACC Under-19 Asia Cup in Dubai yesterday.

Bowling first, the young Tigers bundled out Japan for 99 in 47.1 overs, with all seven bowlers getting in the wickets' column.

In reply, player-of-the-match Ashique Rahman Shibli's unbeaten 55 off 45 balls and fellow opener Jishan Alam's quickfire 16-ball 29 helped Bangladesh reach target in just 11.2 overs.

Two successive wins for Bangladesh put them at the top of the four-team Group B table. Come Wednesday, the young Tigers face Sri Lanka in their third and final group-stage match.

The top two teams of the group will progress to the semifinal of the eight-team tournament.

Girona 'are able to beat any opponent'

AFP, Barcelona

Shock Spanish title contenders Girona earned a historic 4-2 win over rivals Barcelona on Sunday to move top of La Liga, with coach Michel saying he believes his team can beat any opponent.

Girona defeated their Catalan rivals for the first time ever in the top flight in a pulsating battle to rise two points above Real Madrid, second, after their 1-1 draw at Real Betis on Saturday.

Champions Barcelona are fourth after Atletico Madrid, third, beat Almeria earlier on, and Xavi's side trail Girona by seven points. Artem Dovbyk sent Girona ahead and after Robert Lewandowski pulled Barcelona level, Miguel Gutierrez slammed home again for the visitors.

Valery Fernandez extended Girona's lead with 10 minutes remaining, before Ilkay Gundogan netted to set up a frantic finale.

Veteran striker Cristhian Stuani struck from close range in stoppage time to wrap up a stunning victory which reaffirms the minnows' title dream.

"We're enjoying the moment, we're in a hugely positive dynamic," Michel told reporters. "I don't know if we have the ability to win La Liga, but we are able to beat any opponent."

Defeat leaves Barcelona's title defence badly dented.

"They deserved it, they've got a lot of merit, they're seven points ahead of us," Xavi told DAZN. "We want to cut down the gap, this is our reality -- this is a Barca under construction, although they have criticised me for (saying) it. You take one step back to be able to take two steps forwards."

Girona, part-owned by the City Football Group, were without injured key midfielder Yangel Herrera, whom they signed from Manchester City, but did not let it set them back.

In La Liga for only the fourth season in their history, they played without any fear

of their more illustrious neighbours and took the lead early on as the game sawed deliciously from end to end. Michel said beforehand that a win would send his team into a new dimension and there can be little doubt now they are genuine title contenders this season.

Barcelona's title defence, however, is on the ropes.

"We're seven points behind, which is a lot, but there's more than half a season to go," De Jong told DAZN.

"There's time, but we have a lot to come back from."

