

Abahani falter at the start again

SPORTS REPORTER

Six-time champions Abahani started their Bangladesh Premier League campaign on the wrong foot yet again as they were held to a 1-1 draw by Rahmatganj MFS in their opening fixture in Gopalganj yesterday.

Brazilian midfielder Jonathan Fernandes gave Abahani a 21st-minute lead before Ghanaian forward Ernest Boateng's 67th-minute header forced Abahani to share the spoils.

This was the seventh occasion that Abahani started their league campaign with either a draw or a defeat since the start of the professional league in 2007. Rahmatganj have been responsible for three of those, having beaten the Sky Blues 2-1 on the opening day of the second edition in 2008 and holding them to a 2-2 draw in the eighth edition in 2014-15.

The four other occasions when Abahani either lost or drew an opening match were against Muktiyoddha Sangsad in 2007, Sheikh Jamal DC in 2010, Chittagong Abahani in 2015-16 and Fortis FC in 2022-23.

Defending champions Bashundhara Kings, meanwhile, began their title defence with an emphatic 5-2 win over promoted Brothers Union at the Bashundhara Kings Arena.

Four-time champions Bashundhara Kings, who won the Independence Cup title recently, made light work of Brothers, thanks to a brace from Dorielton Gomes and one goal apiece from Rakib Hossain, Robson Robinho and Mohammad Ibrahim.

Star-studded Kings did not make mistake like Abahani as they opened the scoring in the eighth minute with Rakib running down the left before driving powerful shot into the back of the net.

Then Dorielton scored in the 58th and 61st minutes to take the match away from Brothers, who reduced the margin with a 69th-minute strike from debutant Rabby Hossain Rahul. However, captain Robson widened the margin for Kings with a close-range shot in 89th minute. Two minutes into the stoppage time, Otabek Valijonov reduced the margin from the rebound for Brothers. Mohammad Ibrahim, however, ensured Kings ended the game with a three-goal cushion with a sliding finish on a pass from Mojibor Rahman Jony late in the game.

In Rajshahi, Independence Cup runners-up Mohammedan began their campaign with a hard-fought 2-1 win over Fortis FC, thanks to a last-gasp back header from Nigerian defender Emmanuel Tony after Fortis' Gambian forward Moar Sarr had cancelled out Shahriar Emon's 14th-minute goal in the 43rd minute.

In Munshiganj, Bangladesh Police handed a 2-0 defeat to Chittagong Abahani, with Colombian forward Edis Horacio scoring the goals in the 22nd and 43rd minutes.



Bashundhara Kings' Brazilian forward Robson Robinho shoots to score past a Brothers Union defender during the first match day of the Bangladesh Premier League season at the Bashundhara Kings Arena yesterday. The defending champions won 5-2 against the newly-promoted side.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Time to put POWERPLAY TO USE

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

For the past five years, New Zealand have been Bangladesh's most gracious hosts in international cricket.

While the Tigers have to wait for years on end for an invitation from other top teams like India, Australia, England, and South Africa, the Kiwis have hosted them for bilateral tours four times in the last five years.

Since 2019, Bangladesh have played 17 matches – four Tests, eight ODIs, and five T20Is – against the Black Caps in New Zealand and the tally will increase to 18 today with the third ODI of the three-match series in Napier.

For comparison, the Tigers have faced Zimbabwe, their most familiar foes in international cricket, in Zimbabwe 13 times across three formats in the same period.

Perhaps, it was these regular trips that aided Bangladesh in pulling off their historic win in Test cricket in Mount Maunganui in last year's January.

But in white-ball cricket, the Tigers are yet to solve the puzzle, at least until the third ODI begins today at 4:00 am Bangladesh time.

The seven-wicket defeat in the second ODI in Nelson on Wednesday stretched Bangladesh's losing streak to 18 in 50-over cricket against New Zealand in their backyard.

Following the defeat, which also ensured Bangladesh's sixth ODI series loss in



New Zealand, stand-in skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto gave a typical explanation behind this continued failure, specifically highlighting the lack of wicket-taking edge of the bowlers.

"It is a challenge for them [bowlers] as well. They do not bowl too much in such conditions. The quicker they learn, the better," Shanto told the media yesterday.

But his explanation falls flat, considering the number of matches Bangladesh have played in the country in the last few years.

A better explanation of the failure would be the team's failure to capitalise the first Powerplay in both their batting and bowling innings.

The Tigers have been guilty of losing too many wickets in the first 10 overs and of also not being able to take early wickets

with the ball.

Both of these failures occurred in the second ODI, where Bangladesh lost three wickets in 9.4 overs and could not make any breakthrough in the first Powerplay with the ball in hand, reducing Soumya Sarkar's record-breaking century to just another stat.

Bangladesh have occasionally gotten it right in one of these two phases, like in the first ODI of the series when pacer Shoriful Islam struck twice in the first over to have the hosts reeling at 5-2.

But in the batting innings, Bangladesh lost opener Soumya for a duck in the first over and lost the wicket of Shanto in the seventh over, right after the first Powerplay in that rain-curtailed 30-over-a-side match.

New Zealand also had a similar lean patch in ODIs against Bangladesh in Bangladesh. They were swept clean in two consecutive series, 4-0 in 2010 and 3-0 in 2013.

But in this year's September, the Kiwis redeemed themselves by beating Bangladesh 2-0 in an ODI series with a second-string team.

Today, Bangladesh will get a chance to end their losing streak. If they fail, the Tigers will have to add this series to their ever-growing list of bilateral engagements in New Zealand where the only thing they gain is experience, which proves useless by the time the next series comes along. And for it not to happen, the Powerplay issue needs to be solved.

A Herculean blow for Ajax

AFP, The Hague

Four-time European champions Ajax have "reached an historic low" following a shock 3-2 cup defeat at the hands of an amateur club, capping a horror season for the once-mighty Amsterdam powerhouse, pundits and fans said on Friday.

Ajax's loss against third division Utrecht-based Hercules on Thursday evening saw the Amsterdammers knocked out of the KNVB Cup by rank amateurs for the first time in its history.

Trailing 2-0, Ajax battled back to parity with late goals from Brian Brobbey and Chuba Akpom before defender Mats Grotenbreg found a winner for Hercules in the 92nd minute.

"Ajax has fallen into a crater of which the bottom seemingly has not yet been reached," said football writer Willem Visser.

"The word non-performance doesn't even start to describe it. The game was purely symbolic as the closure for a disastrous year," Visser wrote in De Volkskrant newspaper.

Founded in 1900, Ajax are far and away the most successful club in the Netherlands, with 36 league titles and 20 KNVB Cups as well as those four European championships, making this defeat even more humiliating.

"This is the greatest debacle in the history of Ajax," added Fabian Nagtzaam, director of the Ajax supporters association. "It feels like a building has toppled on me, like I've been driven over by a bus."

Once the club of legends like Johan Cruyff, Marco van Basten and Dennis Bergkamp, Ajax has seen its fortunes crash in 2023. In late October, the club slumped to an historic bottom place in the Eredivisie after rivals PSV Eindhoven dealt them a "painful" 5-2 defeat.

Elgar to end int'l career

AFP, Johannesburg

Former South Africa Test captain Dean Elgar announced Friday that he will retire from international cricket after a Test series against India next week.

The 36-year-old, who has hit more than 5,000 Test runs including 13 centuries, will play his last Test at the Newlands ground in Cape Town starting January 3.

"As they say, 'all good things come to an end', and the Indian home series will be my last, as I have made the decision to retire from our beautiful game," Elgar declared. "The Cape Town Test will be my last. My favourite stadium in the world. A place I scored my first Test run against New Zealand and hopefully my last too."

Media reports said his decision came after Elgar was told he was not part of coach Shukri Conrad's long-term plans.

Elgar made his debut against Australia 12 years ago, failing to score in each innings.

Since then he has become known as a stubborn batter, his 5,146 runs making him South Africa's eighth highest scorer. He hit a career best 199 against Bangladesh in 2017.

Elgar was captain from May 2021 until January this year, leading South Africa to third place in last year's World Test Championship with a notable 2-1 home series win over India.

Cricket South Africa chief executive Pholetsi Moseki said Elgar has "represented his country with honour".



Arsenal, Liverpool vie for Christmas No.1 spot

AGENCIES

Liverpool and Arsenal will battle for the Christmas number one spot when they meet on Saturday, each with a golden chance to open up a significant lead over absent champions Manchester City, who are on Club World Cup duty in Saudi Arabia.

If there is not a winner at Anfield, third-placed Aston Villa could be top at Christmas for the first time since 1999 should their phenomenal home form continue against bottom-of-the-table Sheffield United.

A win for the Gunners would be their first in the Premier League at Anfield in 11 years, and coach Mikel Arteta has challenged Arsenal to do so by learning from last year's bitter disappointment of throwing away a 2-0 lead.

The Gunners head to Liverpool on Saturday knowing victory would leave them top of the table at Christmas.

But the visitors would have to end a run of league results stretching back to September 2012 if they are to achieve that – winning 2-0 when Arteta was in the Arsenal midfield.

"It is always great to be in the highest position in this league and we will try to maintain that, but we have to be intelligent to manage the game," Arteta



"We have done it at Old Trafford, we have done it at Stamford Bridge and many other places where we haven't done it for years," Arteta added.

"This is the next challenge – go there and win. If you want to be at the top you have to go to those places and be dominant. That's what we're going to try to do."

Arsenal took a 2-0 lead at Anfield last year before they were pinned back



moment, really good position, really strong position. They are going to be well-placed to win it and to go for it. It's going to be an intense match.

"You have to play better than them. You will silence the crowd if you are dominant and better than them."

Arteta admitted there were aspects of last year's game that could be improved upon.

"The way we allowed them to run

especially, that we need to correct and be much better because when they have that momentum and space they are a really dangerous team.

"But we had some big, big situations when we could have killed the game and we didn't – when you have the opportunity to do that, you have to do it.

"They have experienced that for many years now. For this group of players now this is the third, fourth time that they have been there (Anfield).

"A few years ago, it was the first time for most of them and maybe you have to clarify and explain certain things. I don't think that is necessary now."

Meanwhile, after a disappointing 0-0 draw at home to Manchester United last weekend, Jurgen Klopp has called for an electric atmosphere to ensure Arsenal's wait for a win at Anfield since 2012 goes on.

"We need Anfield on their toes from the first second, without me having an argument with the opposition coach," Klopp said after a 5-1 thrashing of West Ham in the League Cup quarter-finals on Wednesday.

"If it is too much football in December, if you are not in the right shape, give your ticket to somebody else."



Federico Valverde, Toni Kroos, Jude Bellingham join in celebration with Lucas Vazquez, whose stoppage-time header earned 10-man Real Madrid a 1-0 victory at lowly Alaves in LaLiga on Thursday. After defender Nacho was shown red for a sliding tackle early in second-half, Real had to dig deep for the win that left them on top of the standings on goal difference, level on 45 points with surprise package Girona who were held to a 1-1 draw at Real Betis earlier.

PHOTO: REAL MADRID