

## 'Hard-working' Nahida's effort recognised

MAZHAR UDDIN

Unaware of the news that she was named in the ICC Women's ODI Team of the Year for 2023, Bangladesh spinner Nahida Akter yesterday was mourning the demise of her grandmother who passed away just a day ago.

When congratulated for being the first-ever woman cricketer to be named in the ODI TOY, the grieving cricketer was taken aback and could not express her emotions properly due to a loss in the family. Rumana Ahmed is the only other Bangladeshi woman cricketer to have been included in an ICC TOY but in a different format -- in T20Is in 2018.

"Honestly, I got the news first from you but I really don't know how to react. My grandmother just passed away yesterday (Monday) and I am here in my hometown for her last rites. I am not in a position to say anything," were the words that a mourning Nahida could utter when contacted over the phone by The Daily Star yesterday.

While it was understandable that Nahida was overwhelmed by distress, this achievement will surely motivate the left-arm spinner in the coming days.

Just a month ago, Nahida became the first Bangladeshi to be named in the ICC Women's Player of the Month for December last year, and her inclusion in the ODI TOY is a testament to her consistent performance in 2023.

The left-arm spinner took 20 wickets last year, the second-most in women's ODIs in 2023. Nahida shone in Bangladesh's series victory over Pakistan at home, picking



"He came, played, and won," Rangpur Riders were spot on with their Facebook post, describing Babar Azam's match-winning unbeaten fifty against Sylhet Strikers at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. Babar, who had joined the franchise just the day before, saw Rangpur to a four-wicket win following a horrible top-order meltdown. Sylhet's innings, earlier, stuttered from the beginning, with skipper Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, who brought himself up to one-down position, running himself out following a casual stroll for a single.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## 'NOT AN IDEAL SITUATION'

“Actually, he [Mashrafe] didn't want to play but the owners wanted his presence on the field. I feel it's belittling the tournament, where we'll see our future stars. There is a World Cup in six months and they have Rejaur Rahman Raja in the side, who is sitting in the sidelines.

Former national cricketer Mohammad Ashraful on Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's BPL performance.

“It's not an ideal situation for me... It depends on the team about whom they consider [for line-up].

Mashrafe's own assessment of the issue.



up seven wickets. In the second ODI of the series, Nahida was handed the responsibility to bowl in the Super Over after the game had ended in a draw, and the 23-year-old conceded only seven in that over as Bangladesh bounced back in the series with a thrilling win.

"Nahida has always been a crucial member of the team and she has performed consistently over the past few years. This recognition justifies her hard work," Rashed Iqbal, Bangladesh women's team performance analyst, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"She is someone who always wants to improve her game and asks questions all the time to work on her weaknesses. I think her ability to bowl at a tight line and length consistently makes her special as a bowler and she has been instrumental behind Bangladesh's win most of the time," Rashed added.

Last year has been a memorable one for the Bangladesh women's team, with the Tigresses clinching series over Pakistan at home, drawing a series against a strong Indian side before capping off the year with a maiden T20I win in South Africa.

"Players like Nahida and others are improving because we are now playing regularly against big teams -- both home and away. It's not that we will get results immediately; the recent successes have come due to our long-term planning. I think it's just the start for our girls and I can assure you that there will be many more players from Bangladesh who will feature in the ICC team of the year in the coming days," Rashed said.

## Babar gives what franchises want

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Babar Azam had only arrived in the country on the eve of his side Rangpur Riders' match against Sylhet Strikers yesterday. However, in his first appearance in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), the former Pakistan captain neither showed any sign of traveling tiredness nor did he let Rangpur feel the absence of Shakib Al Hasan.

The 29-year-old batting maestro also demonstrated why franchises seek such high-quality cricketers in T20 leagues. Players like Babar provide the type of quality that franchises can bank upon, simply because they know just how to provide.

In the match, Rangpur were in sixes and sevens in chase of a meagre Sylhet score of 120 for eight. Once Rony Talukdar fell, a collapse soon ensued as Rangpur slumped to 39 for six in seven overs.

From then on, Babar, who had opened the innings with Rony, shared the burden of staging a recovery act along with Azmatullah Omarzai. The duo produced an 86-run stand off 68 deliveries as Rangpur romped to a win without losing any more wickets.

Having struck four fifties in the five-match T20I series against hosts New Zealand, the in-form batter had promised to deliver and he went on to do that in typical Babar



Azam fashion.

"I had to take two very long flights to reach here. The expectation is always high when we are playing. I will try my best to win this match," Babar said before the game during an interview with T-Sports yesterday.

Much has been made of the wickets in BPL so far and afternoon games usually are low-scoring affairs. At the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, Babar showed game awareness and his prowess in handling spin, while local players such as Najmul Hossain Shanto, Nurul Hasan or Shamim Hossain failed to apply themselves. Babar said he is well

aware of the spin threat in Mirpur.

"I think the biggest challenge here is spin. There are good spin tracks here and everyone here is a quality spinner," he had said when asked about the difference between BPL and other leagues.

"We have played lots of matches here but... every time it's different," he addressed the nature of wicket before the game.

With only 14 dots in his innings, Babar was busy in the middle and was content on rotating strike after Sri Lankan leg-spinner Dushan Hemantha wreaked havoc, scalping three wickets in an over.

Opposition captain Mashrafe Bin Mortaza felt that the poor score was mostly due to poor batting. While both Ben Cutting and Benny Howell had made important contributions, nothing of note came from Sylhet's local stars either.

"If you look at our foreigners, they play pace well and the way they adapted to spin, we [locals] didn't in the same way. We could have since we are used to playing here," Mashrafe said.

The former Bangladesh captain also felt that it was an "ideal" match for Babar to show how to win as "he's a master at these kinds of matches".

Some of the local players have already shown glimpses of impact but the ability to adapt quickly sets someone like Babar Azam apart.

## Fahim ends goal drought

SPORTS REPORTER

National forward Faisal Ahmed Fahim scored for the first time this season to guide Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club to the quarterfinals of the Federation Cup as they cruised to a 4-1 victory over Rahmatganj MFS in Dhaka yesterday.

Fahim, who had not scored in three Independence Cup and four Premier League matches since his international strike against Maldives during the World Cup pre-qualifying match, doubled the lead for the former champions in the 32nd minute after Nigerian Augustine Dimgba headed on target to give Sheikh Jamal a 19-minute lead at the Bashundhara Kings Arena.

Afterwards, national discard Sazzad Hossain put the game to bed with a tidy finish in the 86th minute before Gambian Dawda Ceasay reduced the margin with a successful penalty conversion two minutes into second-half stoppage time.



However, Fahim displayed his finishing skills once again as he found the near post in the final minute of stoppage time.

The last match of the three-team Group A will next see Jamal play against Bangladesh Police, who must avoid a heavy defeat to progress to the next round.

Meanwhile in Munshiganj, Fortis FC kept their hope of a second-round berth alive with a convincing 3-1 win over Sheikh Russel Krira Chakra in a Group C encounter.

Gambian Pa Omar Babou netted a brace while Amir Hakim Bappy scored once before Burundian Selemani Landry reduced the margin for Sheikh Russel, who are set for a must-win game against hot-favourites Bashundhara Kings.

## The thunderclap who stayed true to his Sardinian 'family'

AFP, Milan

Sardinia was mourning the loss of a sporting deity on Monday after the death of former Italy striker Luigi "Gigi" Riva, who did more than anyone else to put the Italian island on the footballing map.

One of the greatest strikers of all time, Riva, who passed away aged 79, used his uncommonly powerful left foot to fire tiny Cagliari to the Serie A title in 1970, and earned himself the nickname "Roar of Thunder" after renowned journalist Gianni Brera saw him destroy Inter Milan at the San Siro that same year.

Riva stayed with Cagliari almost his entire professional career -- despite being persistently courted by Juventus -- topping the Serie A goal charts three times between 1967 and 1970 and hitting the net over 200 times for the club.

Taken to Sardinia as a callow teen from lower league side Legnano in 1963, Riva's early life was tough. He was born to a poor family in the small town of Leggiuno, which overlooks Lago Maggiore in Lombardy.



Born in November 1944, Riva lost his father Ugo, who had come through three wars unscathed, to a gruesome factory accident in early 1953, a piece of metal flying from a machine and tearing through his stomach.

Ugo's death forced his wife Edris into work in a textile factory and as a household cleaner, while the young Riva was sent to a severe religious boarding school. Cancer took his mother when he was 16, leaving his elder sister Fausta, who died in March 2020, to see him through the remainder of his teenage years.

Speaking to Italy's public broadcaster Rai in 2010, an emotional Riva reflected on the pain of his deprived, tragic upbringing, saying that he would give up some of his football success "to change my childhood".

In Sardinia he found a family, and the young Riva quickly repaid Cagliari's faith in him, scoring eight goals in his first season as Cagliari finally reached Serie A after 44 years in the wilderness.

His nine goals the following season helped the Sards stay up and made him a totemic figure for not just Cagliari fans but the

whole island, which in the 1960s -- far from being the oligarchs' holiday hotspot it is today -- was a largely forgotten, mysterious place of which mainlanders were deeply suspicious.

"Fisherman would invite me to dinner and they would treat me like one of them. I realised that not just a city, but an entire region was supporting me like a second family," Riva said.

"You'd go into the most insignificant rural backwater in the Sardinian interior and people would have a picture of me in their houses."

Still Italy's all-time top goalscorer with 35 goals in just 42 appearances, Riva's international career was hampered by two serious injuries, including a broken leg in 1970 which also ended Cagliari's bid for a second straight league title.

Nonetheless he won the 1968 European Championship (scoring in his only appearance, the replay of the final against Yugoslavia) and reached the final of the World Cup two years later, only to have to watch on as Pele's Brazil swept the Azzurri aside.

## 'Trapped' Djokovic feels heat

AFP, Melbourne

Novak Djokovic said he felt "trapped" in the heat during his battling quarterfinal win against Taylor Fritz on Tuesday.

The Serbian world number one struggled with the conditions early in the contest but came through 7-6 (7/3), 4-6, 6-2, 6-3.

The top seed used towels and ice packs in a desperate bid to cool himself down on a hot summer's day in Melbourne.

"I tried everything I possibly can in the very short amount of time in the changeovers," Djokovic said after the clash at Rod Laver Arena.

"But, you know, I think we both felt the effect of the heat. When you're playing on a hard court, the heat is absorbed in the surface. So down there for us players, we feel probably even more heat than you would feel in the stands."



Captains of the Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka teams pose with the trophy ahead of the Women's U19 Tri-nation T20 Cricket Tournament at the Sheikh Kamal International Cricket Stadium in Cox's Bazar yesterday. Hosts Bangladesh will take on Sri Lanka in the opening match today. The three teams will face each other twice before the top two teams play in the final February 2.

PHOTO: BCB