

## Last shake-up for local stars before int'l assignments

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Premier League's (BPL) last day's round robin fixtures would settle the eliminator line-up as the tournament gears towards climax. But for local stars, the focus would very much turn to Bangladesh's upcoming series against Sri Lanka in March.

Of particular attention is the case of Sylhet Strikers batter Najmul Hossain Shanto, who will lead the Tigers in all three formats from the upcoming series. Shanto had found going difficult in this BPL so far, despite having flourished at the international scene in recent times. BCB, however, were keeping their faith in the captain, given that circumstances in international circuit would be different to franchise's environment.

"Cricket is such a game that you play one season badly, then you play the next season well. This fluctuation of form would be there. So, I don't believe that someone doing badly means they will do badly going forward too," cricket operations chairman Jalal Yunus told the media yesterday.

"You see, Shanto is not doing well but he is a class player. When our international series begins, you will see that he is back in form. That is very much possible," he added.

In the ongoing BPL, top-order stars such as Liton Das, Anamul Haque, Mohammad Naim Sheikh, and Soumya Sarkar scored runs, and more importantly, as did middle-



**Barring two unbeaten knocks of 108 and 91 in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League, Comilla Victorians batter Towhid Hridoy has largely struggled to deliver consistently with the bat. With Comilla having already guaranteed a place in the qualifiers, Hridoy -- the tournament's second-highest run-getter so far -- would hope to come forth with a few more match-winning knocks in the business end of the tournament to help his side to a third straight title victory.**

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## Dhoni, Kohli face off in IPL 2024 opener

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian Premier League will likely begin its next season on March 22 but will keep its fixtures flexible to accommodate the country's general election, the national cricket board announced Thursday.

Defending champions Chennai Super Kings, led by 42-year-old former India captain M.S. Dhoni, will face Virat Kohli's Royal Challengers Bangalore in the first match.

But the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) only announced the season's first 21 matches, tentatively scheduled through to April 7, and said in a statement the schedule could be revised post-election.

"The BCCI will work in tandem with local authorities to finalise the schedule for the remainder of the season, taking into account the polling dates," the statement said.

All fixtures announced so far will take place on Indian soil despite earlier seasons being played outside the country when they clashed with elections.



order batters Mushfiqur Rahim, Towhid Hridoy, and Mahmudullah Riyad.

Since only Mahmudullah and Hridoy were picked as middle-order batters in the T20I series, it remains to be seen how Bangladesh solve their dilemma at number six and seven in the batting order. Without Shakib Al Hasan, who had been rested for the whole Sri Lanka series, the T20I side's task would be a lot more challenging in the coming series.

Mehedi Hasan Miraz has played cameo knocks on quite a few occasions but had to make way for Sheikh Mahedi Hasan in the T20I squad as the latter made his case with the ball, picking up 15 wickets so far as the third-highest wicket-taker of the tournament.

The bowlers have mostly turned up. Shoriful Islam ended his tournament as the highest wicket-taker so far with 22 wickets. Taskin, however, was not able to reach his peak form but yet got wickets under his belt. Youngster Tanzim Shakib, too, has managed some contributions and for all pacers, death bowling skills would be the highlight during the white-ball series.

The fresh inclusion of Alistair Hogg, who was rewarded for his BPL performances with a place in the T20 squad, would be the mystery bowling option that the Tigers can work around.

With this year's T20 World Cup in mind, Jalal Yunus said, "The way we are heading to the T20 World Cup, we have five T20s against Zimbabwe [after Sri Lanka series] and the BPL is ongoing. So we are going through preparations. We are also planning for a series with USA teams [as preparation for World Cup] so all those fall under preparation."

## England wary of the unknown India eye series win

AGENCIES

"I've never seen something like that before. I don't know what could happen," England captain Ben Stokes told the British media after seeing the pitch for their fourth Test against India at the JSCA International Stadium Complex in Ranchi, which begins today.

England head into the match trailing the series 2-1, having lost the second and third Test following their 28-run win in the opener in Hyderabad.

The hosts hammered the visitors in the third Test in particular, winning by 434 runs - their biggest ever win in Tests in terms of runs.

A victory will seal India's 17th straight series win in home Tests, being undefeated since losing a series to England in 2012.

The surface for the fourth Test appears to be perfect for India's lethal spin attack as it has deep cracks down one side but looks flat on the other, something that perplexed Stokes.

"It looked green and grassy up in the changing rooms but then you go out there it looked different; very dark and crumbly and quite a few cracks in it," Stokes said.

The Indian camp, on the other hand, said that they

expect a 'typical Indian wicket' and are primed for whatever the pitch has in store.

"It's a typical Indian wicket, there are cracks, this wicket always had cracks," batting coach Vikram Rathour said.

"It will turn, but how much it will turn and from when we are not sure. We have enough balance in our team to go whichever way we want to go."

Indian batting line-up has been short of experience with Virat Kohli opting out of the series for the birth of his second child while KL Rahul has been out of the squad since the first Test owing to a thigh injury.

But young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal, who hit double-hundreds in the second and third Test, and debutant Sarfaraz Ahmed, who scored half-centuries in both innings of the third Test, have stepped up to fill the vacuum.

"We are missing some key players but a home series is always a good opportunity for the young talents to play in familiar conditions and establish themselves in the side," said Rathour.

England announced their XI yesterday, replacing pacer Mark Wood and Rehan Ahmed for Ollie Robinson and Shoaib Bashir respectively.



**A win in the fourth Test will extend India's winning streak in home Test series to 17.**

**English pacer Jimmy Anderson needs four wickets to become the third bowler in Tests to claim 700 wickets.**

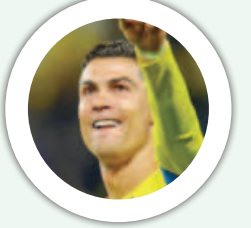
### SHORT CORNER

**Kroos announces Germany return**



World Cup winner Toni Kroos announced his return to the German national team on Thursday ahead of Euro 2024 on home soil. Kroos, 34, will be eligible for selection in the upcoming March international friendlies against France and the Netherlands. "Hey folks, short and sweet, I'll be playing for Germany again from March," Kroos said in an Instagram post.

**Ronaldo scores as Al Nassr ease into quarters**



Cristiano Ronaldo guided Al Nassr into the quarterfinals of the Asian Champions League on Wednesday as the Saudi Arabian side defeated domestic rivals Al Fayha 2-0 to progress 3-0 on aggregate. Ronaldo's goal was also the difference in Al Nassr's 1-0 victory in the first leg.

**Messi the creator as Miami win in MLS opener**

Lionel Messi created both goals as Inter Miami made a winning start to the new Major League Soccer season with a 2-0 victory over Real Salt Lake yesterday. The Argentine World Cup winner, who played the entire game, put aside any concerns about his fitness with an excellent performance for Gerardo "Tata" Martino's team.

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**Galeno netted a sublime effort deep in stoppage time as Porto snatched a shock last-gasp 1-0 victory over Arsenal in their Champions League last-16 tie on Wednesday. [Inset] Having failed to get a shot on target all night despite having the majority of possession, Arsenal players were left distraught at the final whistle as the Gunners suffered a fifth-straight defeat in the knockout stages of the competition.**

PHOTO: X/REUTERS

## Abahani start strong as hockey finally resumes

SPORTS REPORTER

The Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday was given a fresh look with the decoration of colourful flags, balloons and festoons as the season-opening Club Cup hockey tournament returned to the blue turf after a nearly two-and-a-half-year hiatus.

In the day's first match, title contenders Abahani produced a flying start with an emphatic 5-1 win over Ajax SC. Ashraful Islam struck a brace while Mehdi Hasan, Obaidul Hasan Joy and Forhad Ahmed Situl netted one goal apiece for Abahani, and for the losing side, Subrata helped reduce the margin.

The upbeat rhythms from the band at the venue added to the ambiance of the contest, but both sides' performances lacked entertainment, and the players' lack of fitness prevented them from showcasing anything that would captivate spectators in the gallery.

On the back of three-week preparation, star-studded Abahani predictably enjoyed the upper hand throughout the game, but they also

lacked pace and aggression in their performance. The Sky Blues, donning a special yellow jersey printed with Bengali letters, failed to snatch penalty corners in the first quarters while their forwards were too late to connect to some fierce hits coming



from the flanks, and that too in front of an almost open net.

The players from both sides struggled to control the ball and convert penalty corners on several occasions. Nevertheless, both sides were seemingly happy on having returned to competitive action following a long gap.

"We always enjoy the game and it

is like Eid day if we can play every day, but it feels really bad when we come to play after a long time," Abahani midfielder Nayeem Uddin said after the match.

"You all know we came back to the ground after 27 months, so there has been a problem with the fitness of the players. But things could have been better if it would have been arranged plan-wise," he added.

Abahani coach Hedayetul Islam Razib also echoed a similar sentiment, highlighting the problem of fitness.

"The missing thing in the game was the fitness of the players, so there was no stick-work and quick passing," said Razib, adding that the players also struggled to finish from the goalmouth.

"You won't get the benefit despite having a lot of the national players in the squad because they also suffered problems for not playing for a long time," said the former national defender.

In the second game of the day, defending champions Dhaka Mariner Youngs Club beat Police 2-0.