

## Rangpur and Barishal face off in blockbuster clash

SPORTS REPORTER

The second qualifier of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) between Rangpur Riders and Fortune Barishal is expected to be a cracker of a contest at the Sher-e-Bangla National stadium in Mirpur today.

The rivalry between the two former friends – Barishal's Tamim Iqbal and Rangpur's Shakib Al Hasan – only intensifies the hype of the fixture as the winner will take on Comilla Victorians in the final of the tournament on March 1.

The last time the two sides met, a fierce competition was witnessed, leading to Rangpur winning by a solitary wicket, and controversy followed from Tamim mimicking Shakib's celebration after the latter got out.

Both stars are in red-hot form, with Tamim having peaked for Barishal at the right time. The dashing left-hander is currently the second-best run-getter in the ongoing edition, with 443 runs in 13 games.

The 34-year-old led from the front recently, striking consecutive fifties against Comilla and Chattogram



Challengers in the eliminator, and thus will be carrying huge expectations on his shoulders to guide his side to the final.

Shakib, on the other hand, also rediscovered his mojo after a below-par outing at the start of the BPL, but the champion all-rounder seemingly overcame his eye issue and gradually looked in his element as the tournament progressed.

With 17 wickets in 12 games, Shakib currently holds the second place in the list of wicket-takers. He also scored 254 runs but more importantly, the star cricketer managed to overcome his initial batting struggle in the last few matches with great authority.

Both teams are also bolstered by several big names, adding to the aura of the most-anticipated battle of the

tournament.

Barishal, despite a shaky start to the tournament, managed to gain momentum, powered by the likes of Kyle Mayers, Mushfiqur Rahim, Mahmudullah Riyad and the late inclusion of David Miller makes their batting line-up one of the best in the competition.

However, the bowling unit is perhaps an area of concern for Barishal. Apart from Mohammad Saifuddin and Taijul Islam, none of the bowlers were able to perform consistently.

Rangpur, on the other hand, despite Jimmy Neesham's blistering and unbeaten 97-run knock in the first qualifier, were unable to defend a challenging 186 against Comilla.

Nicholas Pooran and Mohammad Nabi will have to come up with their best, with Shakib expected to assume the leading role with the bat after failing in the previous game against Comilla.

The inclusion of Afghan seamer Fazalhaq Farooqi can play the x-factor, especially given his track record against Tamim, since the left-arm seamer had the better of Tamim on quite a few occasions in the international stage.



Bangladesh's all-format captain Najmul Hossain Shanto bumped into Rangpur Riders head coach Sohel Islam in Mirpur yesterday. Shanto, who had a Bangladesh Premier League campaign to forget, shifts his focus on leading Bangladesh against Sri Lanka next month. Meanwhile, Sohel had to go back to the drawing board to plot another shot at making the BPL final as his side will take on Fortune Barishal in the second qualifier after losing the first against defending champions Comilla Victorians.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Loftie-Eaton smashes fastest T20I hundred

AFP, PARIS

Namibia all-rounder Jan Nicol Loftie-Eaton set a new record for fastest T20 international hundred on Tuesday by hammering a 33-ball ton against Nepal in Kirtipur.

In the opening game of a tri-series also featuring the Netherlands, Loftie-Eaton smashed 11 fours and eight sixes before being dismissed for 101 from 36 deliveries.

The previous record was held by Nepal's Kushal Malla, who reached a T20I hundred from 34 balls against Mongolia last year.

Namibia posted 206-4 batting first, before Loftie-Eaton also took two wickets as hosts Nepal fell short in their chase, losing by 20 runs.

The three teams competing in the tri-series have all qualified for the T20 World Cup to be held in June in the Caribbean and United States.

## TOWHID HRIDOY The adaptable prodigy

ASHEFAQ-UL-ALAM

'You couldn't hit one boundary!' In the 2022 BPL final, Towhid Hridoy of the Fortune Barishal was on strike against Comilla Victorians pacer Shohidul Islam for the last three balls of the match with his side seven runs away from victory.

Hridoy had a terrible tournament, averaging just 17 in 10 innings with a strike rate of 97.84, but had the chance to repay the faith shown in him by his team.

Shohidul tried to hit the yorker length thrice but missed his mark every time. But it didn't matter as Hridoy couldn't cash in on any of the deliveries and Barishal fell two runs short.

After the defeat, Barishal coach and Hridoy's cricket mentor Khaled Mahmud Sujon couldn't hide his frustration and told him, 'You couldn't hit one boundary!'

That statement seemingly ignited the fire inside him as in the next season, a new Hridoy burst onto the scene for Sylhet Strikers, raking in 403 runs at a strike-rate of 140.41.

Hridoy later revealed that change in his technique – a much higher backlift and a wider stance – together with a change in attitude towards batting came after some much-needed self-reflection following the failure in 2022.

The stellar BPL season earned him a ticket to the national team, where he carried the same attitude and form, quickly becoming a regular member of

the white-ball teams.

However, the chinks in his armour first got exposed in the Asia Cup and then in the World Cup last year.

Hridoy depended a lot on nudging the ball on to the leg-side towards midwicket to score singles and doubles to keep the scoreboard ticking.

But after his first few runs, which were against Ireland and Afghanistan, he came across tougher opponents in the Asia Cup, where this weakness of his



batting was instantly exploited.

Teams started stationing a fielder in the short mid-wicket region whenever Hridoy got on strike and as a result, his strike rate plunged below 70 in the tournament and the pressure of dot balls also meant he was hitting more rash shots and throwing away his wicket.

The situation remained the same in the ODI World Cup, where he couldn't fulfil the expectations of him, scoring at a strike rate of just above 70, in a tournament mostly dominated by

batters.

His inability to rotate the strike coupled with his weakness against slightly fuller-length deliveries on the stumps were enough to evoke talks of Hridoy being yet another age-level prodigy from Bangladesh who never lived up to his potential.

But for the second straight season, Hridoy proved his naysayers wrong in the BPL.

Playing for the Comilla Victorians, Hridoy has surpassed his last year's tally with 447 runs in 13 innings so far at a strike rate of 149.49, the first Bangladeshi to score over 400 at a strike rate of over 140 in consecutive seasons in BPL.

Although the flashy sixes and extravagant shots have gotten the bigger limelight, Hridoy's ability to find gaps to rotate the strike, most notably through the square-leg region, was the main catalyst behind his success this season.

However, Hridoy's success in BPL doesn't guarantee he would perform well against better teams on the international stage. The nature of international cricket is such that very soon teams will figure out new problems in his technique and zero in on that. But if Hridoy has proven one thing in his brief career is that he is adaptable and willing to make the changes necessary to improve his game and stay a step ahead of the bowlers, a habit that could turn him into a long-term prospect for Bangladesh.

## SHORT CORNER

### NZ quick Wagner retires from international cricket

New Zealand paceman Neil Wagner has called time on his 64-Test career, bowing out as the nation's fifth-highest wicket-taker with 260 scalps. Wagner was picked in the squad for the two-Test series against Australia starting on Thursday but was told by selectors he would not feature in either match.



### BCB announces itinerary for women's team's Australia series

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced the itinerary for Bangladesh women's team's first home series against Australia, which will begin on March 17. The series includes three ODIs and three T20Is. The ODI series is a part of the 2022-25 ICC Women's Championship.

### Hemp, Adams take charge of Tigers

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) appointed David Hemp and Andre Adams as the national team's batting and bowling coaches on two-year contracts. Hemp had been working as BCB's High Performance (HP) head coach since May 2023 and had toured with the national team as its batting coach in New Zealand last year, while former New Zealand all-rounder Andre Adams had been the White Ferns' bowling coach before joining Bangladesh.

\*Read full stories on The Daily Star website



Sohanur Rahman Sabuj of Dhaka Mariner Youngs Club tries to skip past Mohammedan's Aminul Islam and Australian recruit Connor Richmond during their 5-1 win in the final Group A fixture of the Club Cup hockey tournament at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday. Mohammedan will take on Abahani while Mariners will play against Usha in the semifinals -- both on Thursday.

PHOTO: STAR

## Bangladesh eye SAFF U-16 Women's C'ship title

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh under-16 women's national team are set to depart for Kathmandu today with an aim to play the final of SAFF U-16 Women's Championship.

The tournament, starting on March 1, will see the four teams – India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan – playing each other before the top two teams battle for the trophy on March 10.

### BANGLADESH FIXTURES

March 2: Bangladesh vs Nepal

March 5: Bangladesh vs India

March 8: Bangladesh vs Bhutan

This is the first time that the U-16 edition is going to take place after the four previous editions featured the U-15s, where Bangladesh became champions in the inaugural edition in 2017.

Since then, however, the girls in red and green had to be content with three successive runners-up trophies.

'The main challenge has been to build team chemistry in a short time, because we could not focus much on the U-16 team after SAFF U-19 Women's Championship,' head coach Saiful Bari Titu said at a press conference at the BFF conference room



yesterday.

'We have only seven players who have been in the BFF Academy for more or less two years while there are six BKSP players who also have experience of playing Subrato Cup in India but the rest of the players have come from different districts,' said Titu, who had recently guided the U-19 women's team to become joint champions with India at home.

The former national coach believes a winning start will boost their chances of a final berth, further mentioning that the altitude in Nepal is a factor for the girls but they are going there three days before their opening game to better acclimatise.

Captain Arpita Biswas said, 'We want to advance match by match, make it to the final, and emerge as champions.'

BFF women's wing chairman Mahfuza Khatun and Akhlaqur Rahman, sponsor Dhaka Bank's deputy managing director, were among others present on the occasion.