

Liverpool host City in end-of-era showdown

AGENCIES

Reigning Premier League champions Manchester City visit Liverpool today in a match that is being billed as a potential title decider.

The truth is more convoluted, though. Entering the weekend, the top three teams in the league were separated by two points. Liverpool (19 2 6, 63 points) is a point up on City (19 3 5, 62), while Arsenal entered its Saturday matchup against Brentford two points back of the Reds.

Thus, City's next two league games, on Sunday and at home to third-placed Arsenal on March 31, will go a long way towards deciding the title race.

City, aiming to become the first-ever four-time repeat English league champions, have spent precious little time in the lead this season in part because of Liverpool's excellent campaign.

The Reds will need to feed off the fizzing Anfield atmosphere if they are to end City's 20-match unbeaten run and they are boosted by the return of key players in time – such as forwards Mohamed Salah and Darwin Nunez – for the title run. While Sunday's match is critical, the quality on both sides leaves Klopp believing a bad result for either side won't be fatal.

"If you go through all of the possible scenarios, I don't think after whatever result anybody should open the bottles of champagne," said Klopp, who is stepping down at the end of the season.



Sri Lanka pacer Nuwan Thushara celebrates the wicket of Bangladesh batter Towhid Hridoy, who got into an altercation with the Sri Lanka team after his dismissal, during the third and final T20I in Sylhet yesterday. Thushara blew away the Bangladesh top-order during his five-wicket burst, including a hat-trick in his first over after Kusal Mendis's 55-ball 86 as the visitors won the match by 28 runs to clinch the series 2-1.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Rishad Hossain broke Jaker Ali's six-hitting record as he smashed seven sixes, the most by a Bangladesh batter in a T20I, in the final match of the three-match series against Sri Lanka in Sylhet yesterday. Jaker smashed six maximums in the first T20I at the same venue.

SCORES IN BRIEF

SRI LANKA
174-7 in 20 overs (Mendis 86, Shanaka 19; Taskin 2-25, Rishad 2-35)

BANGLADESH
146 all out in 19.4 overs (Rishad 53, Taskin 31; Thushara 5-20, Hasaranga 2-32)
Result: Sri Lanka win by 28 runs.
Series: Sri Lanka win three-match series 2-1
Player-of-the-match: Nuwan Thushara
Player-of-the-series: Kusal Mendis



U-16 SAFF WOMEN'S FINAL Eyes on the prize

SPORTS REPORTER

Barely a month after sharing the champions trophy with India, albeit following a bit of controversy, Bangladesh will square off against their next-door neighbours once again – this time in the SAFF Under-16 Women's Championship – in Kathmandu today.

The final will kick off at the ANEA Complex ground at 3:15pm Bangladesh time.

The girls in red and green have been perfect in the four-team competition, beating all three opponents quite comprehensively including a 3-1 win against India in the round robin stage. But the final is a different ball-game, Bangladesh coach Saiful Bari Titu felt.

"The best two teams are playing in the final. Final is always a final. Anything can happen. You have to give respect to each other's strengths and try to exploit the weaknesses. We are hoping to put on a very good show in the final. Let's hope it will be a memorable final for all of us," Titu told the media at a pre-final press conference yesterday.

Although Bangladesh won all three matches, they have scored far less than India, who thrashed Nepal 10-0 in their last match. Titu is wary of the Indian threat and feels the team that makes lesser mistakes in the final will win it.

"We have played each other once, so both teams know about the opposition well. So those things will be part of the plan. But the execution is more important. Furthermore, there will be nerves in the final. So whichever team makes lesser mistakes will come out on top," said the veteran coach, who has been in charge of the women's teams since the departure of Golam Rabbani Choton last year.

India coach Biby Thomas Muttath wants to forget the round-robin matches and wants his side to rectify the past mistakes.

"Tomorrow is a new day and let's forget the past. We have done very well and we're all calm and ready for the final," Muttath said.

An over that caught the Tigers off-guard

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet

Nuwan Thushara bowled a special spell to pick up a five-wicket haul, including a hat-trick, to dismantle Bangladesh's top-order in the third and decisive T20I at Sylhet International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

The 29-year-old only came in to this game due to a hamstring injury to Matheesha Pathirana and in the space of nine deliveries, he became the difference.

A slinging action just like Pathirana's, Thushara produced a deceptive angle and length but more dangerous was the late swing he managed in his first over of this series. The first one did Najmul Hossain Shanto as it pitched and tailed in to castle the Bangladesh skipper. The next delivery squared up Towhid Hridoy, pitching in middle-and-off before uprooting the batter's off-stump.

Mahmudullah Riyad came to face the hat-trick delivery and could not keep it out as another outswinger saw him squared-up and the ball rapped his pads, leading to a leg-before decision.

The low arm action had appeared to have caught the Bangladesh batters by surprise. Soumya Sarkar saw his stumps disturbed soon after to an inswinger when Thushara came in for his next over, leaving Bangladesh at 24 for five. Late blows from Rishad Hossain, who struck a stormy fifty and Taskin Ahmed's 31 only managed to reduce the margin of defeat but failed to avoid a 2-1 series loss for the home side.

"Yes, [that over changed the game] I think. It was a really good over and have to give credit to the bowler. In that one over, we went behind a lot," Bangladesh skipper

Shanto said at the press conference after the 28-run defeat.

Shanto added that 'it [a collapse] is not something that happens all the time but the bowler has to be given credit.'

"How we can minimise that [damage] in times like these is important," Shanto said.

Was Thushara a surprise package for the Tigers, having only come in due to an injury?

"There was no bounce due to the side arm action, so along with keeping low, there was swing," Shanto observed.

The hat-trick meant there was not much time to plan to stave off a collapse.

"I don't think it is about [not being mentally strong]. Normally we don't lose so many and batters come well prepared against all the bowlers. Inside that one over, there



Sri Lanka players point their fingers at their wrists in reference to Angelo Mathews' timed-out dismissal against Bangladesh in last year's World Cup in India. After winning the T20I series decider yesterday, in the series opener, Bangladesh pacer Shoriful Islam made a similar gesture.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

"No, actually his action is certainly a bit different. Normally I haven't been playing against someone with an action like that for many days. We played Pathirana in the last two games and we handled him well. I think along with that action, there was also swing in the beginning. So it was a bit difficult but in international cricket you have to accept that challenge and find out how we can play better cricket," Shanto answered, adding later on that the team had studied the bowler before the game.

was not much opportunity to make plans, so I don't think in future it will happen," he opined.

The Sri Lanka series was played on the good scoring wickets and Shanto observed that it would help build themselves up for the World Cup.

"T20 matches should take place in these kinds of wickets, especially bowlers are gathering experience on how to bowl on good wickets. The batters are also getting idea of how to chase 180 or 200. So it is good preparation for us."

Probe contains common knowledge, says BCB chief

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Nazmul Hassan Papon stated that there was nothing substantial in the much anticipated special committee report, which aimed to uncover the reasons behind Bangladesh's disastrous performance in last year's ODI World Cup in India.

The three-member special probe committee – formed in November, with BCB directors Enayet Hossain Siraj (convenor), Mahbubul Anam (member), and Akram Khan (member) – delivered their report to the board president of late.

"I received the report, and there is nothing against any board director, not one word against anyone. Today, I read the complete report to Jalal [Yunus] bhai, Khaled Mahmud Sujon, and a few others; even they didn't notice anything significant," Hassan told reporters following the board meeting in Mirpur yesterday.

A member of the investigative committee, requesting anonymity, said they did not want to blame anyone for the World Cup failure, and that the reasons for the Tigers' downfall were known to everyone.

The BCB chief, also the new Youth and Sports minister, stated that the board has already begun working on the investigative committee's suggestions.

"After consulting with stakeholders and others, the committee presented us with its recommendations and results. There is nothing new that we and you do not already know, as everyone is aware of the reason for the poor performance. According to their suggestions, work has already begun," Hassan further informed.

Bangladesh's build-up to the World Cup – where the Tigers eventually lost seven out of nine matches and were the first team to suffer elimination – was overshadowed by controversy regarding Tamim Iqbal's exclusion and his public spat with captain Shakib Al Hasan, following which the probe body met the duo in January.



Ravichandran Ashwin made his landmark 100th Test a memorable one as the veteran spinner took a five-wicket haul in the second innings as India hammered England by an innings and 64 runs inside three days in the fifth and final Test, on way to seal the series 4-1 on Saturday.

PHOTO: AFP

'700 wickets as a seamer is phenomenal'

REUTERS

England's seemingly ageless James Anderson on Saturday became the first seam bowler to claim 700 Test wickets, achieving the feat in the fifth and final Test against India at the Himachal Pradesh Cricket Association Stadium.

Playing in his 187th Test, the 41-year-old dismissed Kuldeep Yadav caught behind to become only the third bowler to reach that milestone.

India went on to win the Test inside three days, completing a 4-1 series victory, but Anderson's landmark wicket brought some much-needed satisfaction to the tourists. England captain Ben Stokes doffed his hat at his team mate.

"I've been there for quite a few of his milestones but 700 wickets as a seamer is phenomenal," Stokes said. "Every young kid out there who wants to be a fast bowler should be looking up to him and trying to emulate everything that he does."

"He's 41 years old but as fit as I've ever seen him. I don't know when he's going to

MOST TEST WICKETS

PLAYER	WICKETS
Muthiah Muralidaran	800
Shane Warne	708
James Anderson	700
Anil Kumble	619
Stuart Broad	604



stop because he's still got so much desire and commitment and it's great to watch."

While Anderson is immensely skillful, his remarkable longevity, attributed to his smooth action, as a fast bowler continues to amaze the followers of the game.

Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar, the only player who has played more Test matches than Anderson, praised the seamer's "stellar achievement" on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"A fast bowler playing for 22 years and performing so consistently to be able to take 700 wickets would have sounded like fiction until Anderson actually made it happen..." wrote Tendulkar.

Anderson made his England debut in a one-day international against Australia in 2002 and played his first Test five months later against Zimbabwe.

In his 22 years in international cricket, the Lancashire player has established himself as a complete bowler, renowned for his command over swing bowling, both traditional and reverse.