

## Holders City get Real challenge a bit early

STAR SPORTS DESK

The Champions League quarterfinals draw in Nyon on Friday produced a number of mouthwatering ties, but one stood out as the tournament's most successful side Real Madrid were pitted against defending champions Manchester City.

Some might even argue that a contest of the two strongest contenders to lift the trophy in the last eight has materialised too soon, but the tie of two familiar foes surely has left the fans and neutrals very excited.

This will be the third consecutive season and four times in the last five seasons that the two sides will face each other in the knockout stages of the most elite competition in Europe.

It was by beating record 14-time winners Real Madrid in the semifinals last season that Pep Guardiola's side paved their way to lifting the prestigious trophy for the first time and also managed to be only the second English side after Manchester United to win a treble, also including the Premier League and FA Cup.

City will feel confident, considering how things went against Carlo Ancelotti's side last time around. Following a 1-1 draw at the Santiago Bernabeu, City crushed the then defending champions Real Madrid 4-0 at home in the second leg.

When it comes to overall head-to-head between the two sides in the competition, City hold a slender lead as they won four, drew four, and lost three. Real are also yet to notch up a win when playing City at their Etihad Stadium.

City, who are once again in the running to win the Premier League -- they are third in the table with 64 points, just a point behind leaders Arsenal and second-



**Towhid Hridoy flicks one off his pads for a successive maximum to end the innings in style as he helped Bangladesh pile up a competitive total of 286 for seven in the second of the three-match ODI series in Chattogram yesterday. Hridoy, who remained unbeaten for a career-high 96, would feel a bit unlucky as he came agonisingly close to his maiden ODI ton. [Inset] Meanwhile, Soumya Sarkar, under pressure for underperforming for a while now, was finally able to contribute with the willow as he scored a 66-ball 68 to help the Tigers' cause.**

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Imrul, Ariful tons help MSC stay perfect

SPORTS REPORTER

Centuries from Imrul Kayes and Ariful Islam helped Mohammedan Sporting Club to an 84-run win against Rugganj Tigers Cricket Club during a Dhaka Premier League (DPL) encounter at Khan Saheb Osman Ali Stadium on Friday. The win makes it two in two for Mohammedan this season.

After slumping to 52 for three, Imrul and Ariful put on 176 runs for the fourth-wicket to help Mohammedan to 266 for five. Imrul, who hit 106 off 127 deliveries with 10 fours and two sixes, notched his 13th List A ton while Ariful's 106-ball 115 was his maiden List A ton.

Despite Mahjful Islam's 78 off 113, Rugganj Tigers were restricted to 182 for nine as Abu Hider Rony picked up four wickets for 30 runs and spinner Nayeem Hasan bagged three for 18 during a tight spell.

Legends of Rugganj and Gazi Group also picked up their second wins in the tournament. Gazi romped to a comfortable five-wicket win over Partex at BKSP ground four while Shadman Islam's 91 saw Legends of Rugganj also win by five wickets against City Club at BKSP ground three.

# Ducks keep piling on for Liton

SPORTS REPORTER

Pacer Dilshan Madushanka seemingly missed his line in the third ball of the second ODI in Chattogram yesterday, pitching the ball on the leg-stump line against Bangladesh's Liton Das, who dealt with it by plopping his front foot forward and flicking the ball to the leg side.

The only problem for Liton, the ball flew straight into the hands of Dunith Wellalage at forward square leg, meaning Liton had to depart for



Dilshan then delivered the ball at the perfect line for the flick shot and Liton stepped right into the trap.

One look at the field setup should have been enough for Liton to realise what Sri Lanka were trying to do. But the wicketkeeper-batter, who has been playing international cricket for almost a decade, lacked that game awareness and paid the price.

Yesterday's duck was Liton's 14th in ODIs and seventh since January 2023. In fact, no other batter among Test-playing nations has been dismissed for naught in ODIs more than Liton since last year.

Even when the 29-year-old has managed to open his account in ODIs, he has not scored too many runs.

In the 30 ODI innings since 2023, Liton averaged just 24.11, with no centuries and five half-centuries.

Although he batted at number four in the ODI series against New Zealand last year, the right-hander

has been otherwise a staple at the top of the order for years now.

His form in ODIs was great in 2022 as he averaged 52.45. But since 2023, it has gone off a cliff.

Liton's dip in form in ODIs has come at a time when star opener Tamim Iqbal is on a hiatus from the format, making him the most experienced opener Bangladesh have at their disposal at the moment and perhaps the extra responsibility has hampered his ODI form.

While Liton has been struggling, his opening partner this series, Soumya Sarkar, who returned to the ODI side in last year's New Zealand series, has already made a statement in the five innings since his comeback. He hit a brilliant 169 against the Kiwis in Dunedin in December and a commanding 68 off 66 against Sri Lanka yesterday.

Liton's poor form in 50-overs cricket also begs the question whether it is time for the management to consider other players.

Nevertheless, Liton has been in good form in the other two formats, averaging 47 and 33.27 in Tests and T20Is respectively since 2023 but has been struggling for runs in ODIs. A break from the format could end up benefiting the experienced right-hander as it would give him time to go back to the drawing board and figure out where he has been going wrong. It could also give someone like Tanzid Hasan Tamim a chance to return to the ODI side after showing glimpses of his talents in last year's World Cup.

## Trailblazer Firoza nominated for Swadhinata Padak

SPORTS REPORTER

Former fastest woman in Bangladesh Firoza Khatun was nominated for the "Swadhinata Padak 2024" (Independence Award), the highest civilian award, for her outstanding contribution to the country's sports.

The 55-year-old was named alongside nine other distinguished persons by the Cabinet Division yesterday.

"When I heard that I have been nominated for the Swadhinata Padak, I was dumbfounded and started tearing up. To be honest, I did not expect to get nominated for the award this year though I had applied for it because there were many other aspirants," Firoza told The Daily Star over the phone from Mymensingh.

"Alhamdulillah for everything," said Firoza adding that the general secretary of National Women's Sports Association inspired her to apply for the Swadhinata Padak.

Firoza, who got her start in Bangladesh Textile Mills Corporation in 1987, called time on her career in 1996 from Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation following an illustrious career in which she became the country's fastest woman 10 times.

She also won numerous gold medals in 200m sprint and 100m hurdles and one silver medal each from high-up and long-jump events at the national level.

Firoza also was awarded the National Sports Award by the Youth and Sports Ministry in 2016.

Firoza is the 12th sportsperson to get the Swadhinata Padak since its introduction in 1977 to recognise the individuals who have made great contributions in different sectors. Athlete Habilar Mostak Ahmed was awarded the prize in the inaugural edition.

Last year, cricketer Rakibul Hasan was awarded the Swadhinata Padak.



placed Liverpool -- are now 22 games unbeaten home and away in Europe. They have also won their last 10 Champions League matches, becoming the first English side ever to achieve that figure.

While City crushed FC Copenhagen 6-2 on aggregate in the Round of 16 to progress to this stage, Real were tested sternly by RB Leipzig in the last 16, managing only a hard-fought 2-1 win on aggregate in a tie in which the German club clearly had the upper hand.

But when it comes to the Champions League, Real Madrid are a different beast. Even when City coach Guardiola was once asked why the most successful club in England in recent times have not been able to emulate the success in Europe, his simple answer was: "Because Madrid is always there."

Real Madrid live and breathe the stress, the pride, the ambition, the Houdini acts, and the majesty which any club needs in order to win this trophy.

Real Madrid are almost a runaway leader in La Liga, leading the table with 69 points -- seven points ahead of second-placed and surprise package Girona with arch-rivals lagging further behind at third. Given their pedigree in Europe, the little to no pressure in the domestic competition could only act as a boon for Los Blancos as they could focus and give their all to secure a record-extending 15th Champions League title.

It may be too soon to say but despite the quality matchups in the other last eight contests, the winners of the Real-City tie could go on to play and even win the all-important final that will take place at Wembley in London on June 1.

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a duck for the second consecutive time in the series.

Liton could blame his luck for yesterday's wicket as he got out to a seemingly loose delivery, but a look at the field setting during the ball reveals a different story.

Sri Lanka captain Kusal Mendis had stationed three fielders inside the 30-yard circle on the on-side when Liton was on strike, in perfect positions for a casual flick to the leg side.

## We will be ready for Palestine CABRERA

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national team head coach Javier Cabrera said that his side's ongoing training camp in Al Taif City in Saudi Arabia has been a success and that his side will be well-prepared to take on Palestine in their forthcoming FIFA World Cup qualifiers match on March 21 in Kuwait.

"The camp, like the previous year's one, was a great experience for the team and definitely, we are better team than what we were before coming here. We are little closer to the Palestine tie and we will be ready for March 21," Cabrera was quoted as saying in a video footage sent by Bangladesh Football Federation.

Bangladesh played the second of their two practice matches against Sudan on Thursday, where they lost 3-0.

Earlier on Monday, Cabrera's charges had earned a goalless draw against the African opponents, who are ranked 127th in the FIFA rankings.

Even though the team lost, Cabrera was happy with the fight his charges

displayed.

"Today [Thursday] we struggled [against Sudan] in mostly the physical aspect. We saw a very aggressive Sudan. We struggled a little bit in building up situation but the team gave a huge fight again. So definitely there were very positive feedbacks and positive outcomes in both games against Sudan which we believe is very similar to Palestine in terms of physicality."

Bangladesh national team manager Amer Khan told The Daily Star that Bangladesh tried all of their players in the second match in a bid to try out everyone before the ties against Palestine.

"We could've gained more confidence had we produced another good result against Sudan. But yesterday [Thursday] Sudan seemed very serious about the match while our coach tried out players in different positions. After the match, Jaiver told me that he is satisfied," Amer said.

Amer believes Bangladesh can give a good fight against strong Palestine if the players don't lose their concentration.

