

Uncertainty over hockey league playoff

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Dhaka Mariner Youngs Club and title-rivals Abahani were unanimous in their opposition to playing the playoff of the Green Delta Insurance Dhaka Premier Division Hockey League on Sunday, asking Bangladesh Hockey Federation to arrange a later date for the title-deciding match.

Both teams ended the league on top with 37 points from 15 matches – two more than Mohammedan, who had refused to play the remaining 18 minutes of their game against Abahani on Friday in protest of an umpiring decision, with the federation forced to declare Abahani the winners of the game.

Following the bylaws of the league, the federation had asked Abahani and Mariners to play the playoff to decide the winners on Sunday. However, neither team were willing to play, citing release of their players.

Abahani manager Mahub Harun said they want to play the game at a later date. "Four of our players from Bangladesh Air Force are trav-

elling to India, so we can't play the playoff at the moment. We have already informed the federation about this. We are willing to play the match after they return on May 1," Harun told The Daily Star last night.

Mariners general secretary Ahsanullah Khan Rana echoed the same sentiment. "We have notified the federation that we can only play the playoff after a certain time, as two of our players including top-scorer Sohanur Rahman Sabuj is accompanying the Air Force team to India. We have also released our local players and our foreigners have left too," Rana said. "Once the federation arranges a new date, we will bring our players and have a fitness camp before playing."

The federation's general secretary Mominul Haque did not pick up the phone when called several times. It has, however, been learnt that the federation officials were to sit last night to analyse the letters from the clubs to decide its next course of action.

It may be added that there were two instances where in 2010 and 2014 when two teams were declared joint champions.



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina poses for a photograph with the champions and runners-up teams of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup and the Bangamata Gold Cup Primary School Football Tournaments at the Army Stadium in Banani yesterday. Earlier, Chargolabari Government Primary School from Jamalpur won the Bangabandhu Gold Cup while Patgram Tepurgari BK Government Primary School from Lalmonirhat won the Bangamata Gold Cup title. State Minister of Primary and Mass Education Rumana Ali, Primary and Mass Education secretary Farid Ahmed and Bangladesh Football Federation president Kazi Salahuddin were also present at the event.

PHOTO: BSS

Tigers' nostalgic return to old stomping ground

EKUSH TAPADER

"This many people usually don't turn up to see a fitness test at six in the morning. I'm sure they are here because it's happening at the Bangabandhu [National] Stadium," said Shahriar Nafees, the current cricket operations manager, after the national team's fitness test at the famed venue yesterday.

Thirty-five cricketers turned up at the Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS) yesterday before 6:00 am for a physical assessment test, which required them to run a 1600m race in the newly installed athletic tracks.

This running session was the first professional cricket-related activity at the venue since January 31, 2015. The BNS did host the inauguration ceremony of the ODI World Cup in 2011, but there was no on-field cricketing activity at the venue.

Although the BNS has been a football stadium since 2006, it remains a venue deeply rooted in cricketing history.

Even before Bangladesh came into existence, this venue hosted Pakistan's inaugural Test match against India in 1955. A total of seven Tests took place at BNS, which was then called the Dhaka Stadium, in the pre-independence period where many legends of the game graced the venue. Bangladesh's Test journey also began here in November 2000 against India.

It is only the second cricket stadium after Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG),

which hosted the first ever Test between England and Australia in 1877, to host the inaugural Test of two nations.

Other than Mahmudullah Riyad and Mushfiqur Rahim, none of the other cricketers present at the BNS



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

yesterday have ever played at the venue. Even Mahmudullah and Mushfiqur's experience is quite limited, with the former playing here in a domestic tournament back in 2004 and the latter taking part in some age-level cricket.

For Shahriar and the current team manager Nafees Iqbal, however, memories of their playing days at the venue came rushing back once they

stepped out on the field.

Nafees' lone Test century came at the venue in 2004, when he batted almost eight hours for his 121, which ensured a draw for Bangladesh against Zimbabwe and, in the process, their maiden Test

series win.

Shahriar, on the other hand, never played an international game at the venue but had played many domestic matches here. He still remembered which gate of the venue would be shut down if there was a risk of a fan riot after a heated match at the club level.

"My domestic career began here. The pivotal innings of my career, the century for the Under-19 team, came

here," said the former Bangladesh team opener.

Cricket's return to BNS, even if it was for just one morning, happened because of the newly appointed strength and conditioning coach of the Bangladesh team, Nathan Kiely.

The Australian coach wanted to assess the fitness levels of the cricketers and felt that having them run 1600m on an athletics track was the best way to achieve it.

The 35 cricketers were divided into two groups for the run. Pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib won in one group while his fellow pacer Nahid Rana easily won in the second one and did the iconic Usain Bolt pose after his win to the raucous applause of his teammates.

Mahmudullah, the eldest of the bunch, came last but the 38-year-old received cheers from everyone as he crossed the finish line.

The second oldest of the bunch, the 36-year-old Mushfiqur, however, outran many of the youngsters and finished the race behind Tanzim.

Bangladesh Cricket Board trainer Iftekharul Islam said that the race was a way to assess the fitness level of the cricketers ahead of a busy schedule, where the national team is set to play at least 29 matches across three formats in the next seven months.

Shakib Al Hasan, who is in the USA and Mustafizur Rahman, who is busy in the Indian Premier League, could not be a part of the session while Soumya Sarkar, Tajjul Islam and Taskin Ahmed were absent due to injury.

'Cake prepared' as Real aim to hit wounded Barca fatally

AGENCIES

The last chance saloon has opened its doors early for Barcelona as they travel to the capital on Sunday aiming to hold off Real Madrid's LaLiga title run.

As it stands, Real top LaLiga on 78 points and a win against their second-placed archrivals would give them an 11-point lead with only six games left.

It had been a tough week for Barca fans as their side succumbed to a painful exit from the Champions League on Tuesday, a day before Real progressed in the competition's semi-finals with a dramatic shootout win at holders Manchester City.

Real coach Carlo Ancelotti said his team could strike a killer blow in the title race.

"It's a great chance for us to get closer to winning La Liga," said the Italian in a presser yesterday.

Madrid are aiming to win a league and Champions League double for the fifth time in their history.

"The cake is prepared and we have to put the cherry on top this month," said Ancelotti.

Ancelotti's counterpart Xavi said he was not throwing in the towel in La Liga despite Madrid's significant advantage.

"For us it's the most important game of the season," Xavi said in Saturday's press conference.



DPL Super League phase begins tomorrow

SPORTS REPORTER

The Dhaka Premier League (DPL) action moves into the Super League phase following Eid holidays, starting on Monday.

First up, holders and league leaders Abahani and Prime Bank Cricket Club are set to clash in Mirpur, Shinepukur Cricket Club take on Gazi Group Cricketers at BKSP Ground 3, while Mohammedan Sporting Club face Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club in Fatullah.

The Sky Blues, possessing several national team stars in their squad, have 22 points from 11 matches and are the only unbeaten side in the league heading into the Super League. Shinepukur, Mohammedan, and Sheikh Jamal are joint second with 16 points each, while Gazi Group and Prime Bank have 14.

Boasting an already star-studded lineup, Abahani will welcome back Liton Das into their squad. The right-handed batter played his last DPL match on March 17 after he was axed from the Bangladesh ODI squad following back-to-back ducks in the first two matches against Sri Lanka.

He only managed five runs before being castled by Arafat Sunny, and, following an unsuccessful Test series against the Lankans, the 29-year-old had informed that he will take part in the tournament after the holidays.

Star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan will not take any further part in the tournament after playing just three matches for Sheikh Jamal. He scored 106 runs, including a fifty, and scalped six wickets.

Five-star Diabate helps MSC pummel Brothers

SPORTS REPORTER

Souleymane Diabate bagged his first five-goal haul in a professional match as Mohammedan Sporting Club hammered relegation-threatened Brothers Union 8-0 in the Bangladesh Premier League at the Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium in Mymensingh on Saturday.

The Malian forward, who scored all four goals against Abahani in a spellbinding performance in the Federation Cup to lead his side to the Federation Cup title last season, eclipsed his previous best by shipping five goals past Brothers' hapless keeper Saiful Islam in the thoroughly one-sided spectacle.

The five goals helped the Mohammedan skipper top the scorers' chart with 13 goals – three ahead of Abahani's Grenadian forward Cornelius Stewart.

The 33-year-old forward scored his first with a tap-in two minutes before the break and doubled his tally by rounding



PHOTO: BFF

off the Brothers keeper following a neat one-two with a fellow forward two minutes into first half's stoppage time.

The Mohammedan linchpin added one more to his tally with a diving header 23 minutes after restart before grabbing his fourth with a solo effort four minutes later. Diabate then clinched the record-

breaking fifth goal in the 88th minute, calmly rounding off the keeper following a through ball into the box.

Shahriar Emon, Jewel Mia and Emmanuel Agbaji scored the other three goals for the Black and Whites, who are the only unbeaten club in the league this season.

Mohammedan had won 5-1 in the first leg of the league against Brothers, who have conceded 46 goals so far against 14 that they have scored.

The win kept Afaz Ahmed's charges firmly in second position with 26 points from 12 matches while fallen giants Brothers remained rooted to the bottom of the table with only three points from 12 matches.

Meanwhile, defending champions Bashundhara Kings held on to their lead with a hard-fought 1-0 win against Fortis FC at the Muktijoddha Smriti Stadium in Rajshahi, thanks to a 23rd minute strike from Miguel Ferreira. The win helped Kings retain their five-point cushion over Mohammedan with 31 points from 12 matches.

The other match of the day saw Chittagong Abahani beat Rahmatganj MFS 2-1 at the Shaheed Bir Shreshtho Ft Lt Mortiur Rahman Stadium in Munshiganj, with both teams now on 10 points.