

## Ankon seizes chance to showcase natural game

SPORTS REPORTER

Mahidul Islam Ankon had been on the national team radar for some time, and his big break came during South Africa's tour of Bangladesh this year after Jaker Ali Anik suffered a concussion. Fresh off the back of a ton in the National Cricket League, he did not quite capitalise on the two innings he played against the Proteas. Yet, he was drafted into the Test squad against the West Indies.

In the tour match, Ankon demonstrated that his 2,078 first-class runs were not in vain, showing his ability to graft and stick to the crease. There were some clean hits during that match in Antigua, and even though he did not make the playing eleven in the Tests, his power-hitting yesterday in the Bangladesh Premier League proved to be the difference for Khulna Tigers against Chittagong Kings in Mirpur.



He came to the crease in the 15th over after the departure of Afif Hossain. With his side aiming for a substantial score, acceleration was the need of the hour, and in his 22 ball innings, laced with six sixes, Ankon delivered just that.

After hitting Shamim Hossain for back-to-back sixes, he took on pacer Shoriful Islam, hitting three sixes in the 17th over, which yielded 20 runs. In Shoriful's next over, he pounced again, completing his fifty in just 18 deliveries.

In doing so, Ankon recorded the fastest fifty by a Bangladeshi batter in the BPL, overtaking Rony Talukdar. He also equalled Liton Das's record for the fastest fifty by a Bangladeshi in recognised T20s, matching the 18-ball fifty Liton scored against Ireland in 2023. What made Ankon's feat even more impressive was that he achieved it in the death overs with a softer ball.

Khulna coach Talha Jubair explained the rationale behind selecting Ankon for the team.

"When we took Ankon, we had it in our minds that he has the ability to score runs quickly," Talha said.

Ankon had spent the last three BPL seasons with the star-studded Comilla Victorians, often struggling for opportunities. However, he seized his chance yesterday, coming in ahead of Pakistan's Mohammad Nawaz.

"In last year's BPL, he would come at the end and get quick runs. This helped us [pick him] as he took 180 scores towards 200 or even more. Ankon worked on his power-hitting and his confidence level is there for all to see," remarked the former Bangladesh pacer.

Ankon finished unbeaten on 59 off 22 balls, and for Talha, the difference was that Ankon stuck to his "natural game".

"We had the belief given the mentality that he has shown in practice... One shouldn't get out of their natural game," Talha said.



## Miraz's 'big heartedness' in time out retraction

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) almost witnessed its first time out dismissal yesterday in the match between Khulna Tigers and Chittagong Kings.

Khulna captain Mehedi Hasan Miraz appealed for time out against Chittagong batter Tom O'Connell after he was late to the middle and not ready to face the bowler inside the allotted two minutes.

The on-field umpire gave O'Connell out but Miraz then had a change of heart and recalled the batter, who then proceeded to get dismissed for a golden duck.

For opposition skipper Mohammad Mithun, Miraz calling the batter back was a show of great sportsmanship.

"Miraz gave an example of his big heartedness and you have to give him credit. In a T20 match, this shouldn't happen as the batter needs to be ready. He [O'Connell] was late in getting ready, maybe he didn't expect that the wickets would fall so quickly," Chittagong skipper Mithun said.

"It's a rule in cricket. If you don't go out in time, the fielding side will appeal. You have to give credit to Miraz for retracting it."

**Faruque's venture with wickets**

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Faruque Ahmed made a guest appearance in commentary yesterday



Shahid Afridi, Pakistani legend and mentor of Chittagong Kings, watches his team in action against Khulna Tigers yesterday. PHOTO: STAR

during the first match and later spoke with reporters at the press box about what instruction he gave the groundsmen regarding preparing wickets in BPL.

The BCB president said he relayed specific instructions to the groundsmen upon watching the wickets at St Kitts

during Bangladesh's recent Caribbean tour.

"The wicket there [St Kitts] was better than a cement wicket. Batters could play shots so effortlessly," Faruque told the reporters.

"I told the groundsmen I want to see

good wickets in BPL. If the wicket is good, the bowlers learn how to bowl on good wickets. There is some lateral movements on this pitch. The grass on it is 2.5mm. otherwise else it will turn and become slower.

"We saw a 200+ today [yesterday]... there are runs in the wicket. It's better if we can keep this trend going," he said."

**One ball, 15 runs**

Khulna Tigers pacer Oshane Thomas did not have the best of days yesterday, conceding 15 runs in just one delivery after overstepping multiple times and bowling a couple of wides.

Opening the bowling, he got a wicket in the first delivery but it was a no ball. The free hit was a dot and then he was hit for six off another no-ball. The sequence did not end there as he next bowled two wides and another no-ball which was hit for four as the scorecard read 15-0 after 0.1 overs.

He finished the over in 12 deliveries, conceding 18 and also picking up a wicket!

"I have never seen this before, 15 runs in a delivery. Obviously, bowlers go through bad days. But I feel there are lackings in his fitness as a fast bowler and he didn't find his rhythm. Maybe he didn't work on this specific problem [with run-up]. Still, it's very odd to concede 15 in one ball," Khulna coach Talha Jubair said.

## Djokovic, Sabalenka win season-openers

AFP, Brisbane

Novak Djokovic and Aryna Sabalenka launched their Australian Open preparations with straight-sets wins on Tuesday at the Brisbane International but Nick Kyrgios lost on his return from injury.

Former world number one Djokovic, who is chasing a record 25th Grand Slam crown in January in Melbourne, eased to a 6-3, 6-3 victory over wildcard Rinky Hijikata.

The 37-year-old Serb broke Hijikata once in the first set and twice in the second for a comfortable 74-minute win.

Djokovic, now ranked seven in the world, was all business against the young Australian and always looked in control as he set up a second-round clash against fellow veteran Gael Monfils.

Australian firebrand Kyrgios lost in three tight sets in his first singles match since June 2023.

Kyrgios went down 7-6 (7/2), 6-7 (4/7), 7-6 (7/3) to Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in almost two and a half hours as serve dominated.

The 2022 Wimbledon finalist Kyrgios, 29, is making his comeback following wrist reconstruction and other injuries over the past couple of years.

Women's world number one Sabalenka kickstarted her bid to win the Australian Open for a third consecutive time with a straight-forward win after a sluggish start.

The Belarusian appeared bothered by the high humidity on Pat Rafter Arena in Brisbane, but after breaking Mexico's Zarazua at 5-4, the 26-year-old surged through the second set to wrap up the match 6-4, 6-0 in 65 minutes.

## Kings, Fortis edge closer to Round 2 of Fed Cup

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Bashundhara Kings and Fortis FC bolstered their chances of progressing to the second round of the Federation Cup after winning their respective Group A matches yesterday.

Kings notched up a hard-fought 3-2 win over Bangladesh Police FC in Dhaka, while Fortis posted an emphatic 3-0 win over Dhaka Wanderers Club in Cumilla.

These results kept Fortis FC at the top of Group A with seven points from three games, while second-placed Kings stay second with six points from as many games. Meanwhile, Bangladesh Police FC and Brothers Union, with one and three points respectively from two games, still have a chance to advance to the next round.

Kings got off to a sparkling start by taking the lead in the sixth minute at the Kings Arena, following a brilliant flick from Tapu Barman on a Miguel Ferreira corner.

Police, however, levelled the score in the next minute. Left-back Isa Faysal ran down the left flank to enter the box before releasing a low cross for Al Amin, who raced in to tap the ball between defenders Isaiah Ejeah and Saad Uddin.

Kings, though, restored their lead in the 11th minute when Miguel drove a left-

footer home inside before a close-range tap in from Jonathan in the 52nd minute gave them a 3-1 lead.

Two minutes later, Al Amin reignited the contest by reducing the margin with a marvellous goal. The 20-year-old winger, receiving a through pass from Quazem Kirmancee, ran past the onrushing goalkeeper Mehedi Hasan Srabon and, despite finding himself in a difficult position inside the box, he struck from a



tight angle to make it 3-2.

At Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium, Fortis took the lead through Joy Kumar just before the interval. Joy doubled the advantage in the 75th minute before Piash Ahmed Nova sealed the win in the 89th minute.

## Midseason review of Premier League

AFP, Manchester

Liverpool have one hand on the Premier League title as 2024 draws to a close, while it was a first half of the season to forget for Manchester City and Manchester United. A season of unexpected twists has featured Nottingham Forest making an astonishing surge to second place, with United and Tottenham wallowing in the bottom half of the table.

**No Klopp, no problem for Liverpool**

The emotional departure of Jurgen Klopp had dampened expectations of a title challenge before the campaign began.

But Klopp had crucially rejuvenated his squad before passing the reins to Arne Slot, who has made a near flawless start.

The former Feyenoord boss has won 23 of his 27 matches in all competitions, which also includes a 100 percent record to top the Champions League and progress to the League Cup semifinals.

Mohamed Salah has been the catalyst with 17 goals and 13 assists in 18 Premier League games.

Arsenal, nine points back, appear their most serious challenger, but Liverpool are well on course to match Manchester United's record of 20 English top-



flight titles by May.

**Man City's fall from grace**

City's run of two wins in their last 14 matches has been the story of the season so far, with Pep Guardiola admitting their record streak of four consecutive titles will not extend to a fifth.

The defending champions are 14 points off the top, down in sixth and look in need of an overhaul if they are to return to their former glories.

The loss of Ballon d'Or winner Rodri to a season-ending knee injury in September has been pivotal to City's collapse, while Guardiola's defence has been ravaged by injuries.

Now they face a fight just to extend their 14-year run of qualifying for the Champions League.

**Forest lead surprise packages**

Forest only secured survival on the final day of last season but are enjoying a dream campaign under Nuno Espirito Santo.

Famous victories at Anfield and Old Trafford have been the highlights as the two-time European champions have their eyes on a return to the Champions League next season for the first time in 45 years.

The struggles of the traditional giants has also opened the door for other unlikely contenders for Europe. Bournemouth sit sixth, with Fulham in eighth.

**Man Utd sink to new depths**

Much has changed at Old Trafford over the past 12 months, but results have only got worse.



Since buying a minority stake in the club, Jim Ratcliffe has implemented a new sporting structure off the field, sacked manager Erik ten Hag and overseen another expensive spending spree in the transfer market.

United's eighth-placed finish last season was their worst for 34 years.

After 19 games they are 14th and closer to the relegation zone than the top four, with just seven points separating them from the bottom three.

Ruben Amorim has won just twice in the league since arriving from Sporting Lisbon in the worst start of any new United manager in nearly 100 years.

**Promoted trio in trouble**  
For just the second time in the history of the Premier League, all three promoted sides were relegated last season.

That feat is on course to be repeated with Southampton, Ipswich and Leicester ending the year in the bottom three.

The trend raises concerns over the growing gulf between the Premier League, which boasts the world's most lucrative TV revenue streams, and the second-tier Championship.