

Teams take it easy in chilly Sylhet

SPORTS REPORTER from Sylhet

The temperature in Sylhet went down drastically in the last 48 hours, reaching as low as 15 degrees Celcius, forcing most of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) franchises to cancel training sessions yesterday.

Fortune Barishal, Sylhet Strikers and Rangpur Riders opted to stay warm in their respective hotels, choosing to rest as the Sylhet phase came to its first break. Dhaka Capitals, who are yet to win a match, had an optional practice session in which a few members of the squad, including an out-of-form Liton Das, were in attendance.

Durbar Rajshahi, Khulna Tigers and Chittagong Kings did make their way to the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium for scheduled practice sessions but decided to keep it limited to only drills and net sessions due to the chilly weather.

Rajshahi's in-form pacer Taskin Ahmed brought his eldest son

Tashfeen Ahmed to the ground and the father-son duo was seen spending some quality time with bat and ball on the field.

Meanwhile, journalists covering the tournament were more keen the outcome of the meeting between the national selectors and former Bangladesh skipper Tamim Iqbal at a hotel in Sylhet. They waited for hours in the hotel lobby and eventually was met by chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu who informed that Tamim's return would depend on him.

The BPL resumes today with another double-header. In the day's opening contest, league leaders Rangpur will take on second-placed Barishal in a reverse fixture. In the first meeting, unbeaten Rangpur, who are unbeaten and have a five-match winning streak, thrashed Barishal by eight wickets in Dhaka. The second fixture of the day will see Dhaka square off against Chittagong to end their four-match losing streak.



Durbar Rajshahi pacer Taskin Ahmed is seen walking into the Sylhet Outer Stadium with his son on Wednesday. While players of most of the Bangladesh Premier League teams spent the chilly day in Sylhet confided in their hotel rooms yesterday, Rajshahi had a practice session and will take on Khulna Tigers on Friday. The tournament's Sylhet phase, however, will resume today following a day's gap. In today's fixtures, defending champions Fortune Bairshal take on Rangpur Riders in the day game before Chittagong Kings square off against Dhaka Capitals.

PHOTO: DURBAR RAJSHAHI

SOUMYA'S recovery to take more time

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh and Rangpur Riders opener Soumya Sarkar is yet to recover from the injury he sustained during Bangladesh's second T20I in West Indies last month. Soumya underwent running exercises at Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday but while his stitches were removed following a dislocated finger joint, he would need some more time to finally play in the ongoing BPL.

"Three weeks have passed since Soumya's injury, and the stitches have been removed," BCB chief physician Debashish Chowdhury told The Daily Star.

"We initially projected a recovery period of four to six weeks, and that timeframe remains plausible. With three weeks already elapsed, we anticipate a clearer picture of his situation possibly in a week.

"Yes, there is some uncertainty. Typically, dislocations require four to six weeks to heal. Given that three weeks have already passed, we estimate an additional two to three weeks for full recovery," he added.

With the Champions Trophy knocking on the door, Soumya would now have to push to make full recovery and then gain fitness in time before the tournament.



Indecisive BCB moving Tigers in circles

SPORTS REPORTER

Veteran opener Tamim Iqbal last donned the Bangladesh jersey in April 2023, stepping away before the ODI World Cup later that year. Since then, neither he nor Shakib Al Hasan has participated in the last two ODI series, both critical for shaping the Champions Trophy squad. Despite earlier assurances of change following the 2023 World Cup in India, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) appears to be wavering yet again.

During the recent ODI series against Afghanistan and the West Indies, the BCB selectors did not indicate any communication with Tamim.

Now, with the Champions Trophy squad submission deadline looming on January 12, the decision to reintroduce a player to a national team plagued by batting consistency raises eyebrows.

"There is a vast difference between international cricket and domestic cricket. When a player reaches a certain age, they have to consider a lot of things. Tamim has not been in international cricket for a while, so it's a hurried situation if we think that in one meeting we can solve everything," chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu said yesterday after meeting with Tamim in Sylhet.

Tamim had previously outlined certain conditions for his return to the national team, though a BCB source clarified that these were not the focal point of yesterday's discussion.

While concerns over Tamim's fitness dominated discussions during the ODI World Cup, it no longer seems to be an issue.

"There is no question over his ability, given he played in the NCL and has ability. Anytime he does [want to return], he is definitely welcome," Lipu said, reaffirming the selectors' willingness to include Tamim..

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Thus, it boils down to the selectors' headache regarding the opening slot and batting troubles. Liton Das has not shown form, Soumya Sarkar will be returning after an injury and is yet to play in the Bangladesh Premier League, while

another opener, Tanzid Tamim, has not shown consistency. Also, the selectors have kept an eye on Parvez Hossain Emon during the West Indies T20Is and appear to be keeping their options open regarding opening slot selection matters.

The potential return of Tamim raises questions about the selectors' approach during the last two ODI series, where he was excluded. It reflects a cycle of testing alternatives, finding them inadequate, and ultimately resorting back into profiles with experience.

Shakib's situation, on the other hand, adds another layer of complexity. The chief selector confirmed that the board has yet to provide clear directives regarding the availability of Shakib, whose bowling suspension is also a factor.

On December 21 in Chennai, Shakib gave a fitness test but the results were delayed due to the holidays. Shahriar Nafees, in charge of cricket operations, informed The Daily Star: "We don't want to keep any suspense on the matter. The results were to arrive by January 5. Normally it takes 12 days, but there was the New Year and Christmas break, so we are expecting it anytime soon, and the ECB [English Cricket Board] will let us know."

It seems almost without a doubt that the board has no clear stance on either Tamim or Shakib. Since the 2023 World Cup discussions, Tamim's potential inclusion offers the only hint of change, but the board's indecision suggests they remain tethered to old patterns, leaving the Tigers' future in a state of uncertainty.

Arteta mocked for 'tricky' ball excuse

AFP, London

League Cup organisers have poked fun at Mikel Arteta after the Arsenal manager suggested the "tricky" match ball played a part in his side's defeat by Newcastle.

Eddie Howe's men took a major step towards the Wembley final in March with a 2-0 semifinal first-leg victory at the Emirates on Tuesday, with goals from Alexander Isak and Anthony Gordon.

Arsenal registered 23 shots in all, but only three on target, with both Gabriel Martinelli and Kai Havertz missing golden chances.

The ball used in the competition is made by Puma, while the one used in the Premier League is manufactured by Nike.

"We kicked a lot of balls over the bar," said Arteta. "It's tricky. This ball flies a lot. It's just very different to the Premier League ball and we have to adapt to that. It flies different, and the grip is very different as well."

Prior to the first leg of their last-four clash, Arsenal had scored 11 times in three matches in the League Cup this season.

The Carabao Cup (League Cup) X account, which has nearly 600,000 followers, reposted a clip of Arteta speaking about the ball during his post-match press conference and accompanied it with a meme of US rapper 50 Cent wearing an exasperated expression in an apparent dig at the Arsenal manager's comments.

The winner of the tie will face either Tottenham or Liverpool at Wembley.



June's SAFF C'ship to feature new format

SPORTS REPORTER

The 15th edition of the SAFF Championship is set to commence on June 15, with the South Asian Football Federation's (SAFF) executive committee approving a new home-and-away format yesterday, replacing the previous centralised venue structure.

"The meeting decided to hold the SAFF Championship in a new format, on a home-and-away basis, and it will take nearly 30 to 35 days," SAFF general secretary Anwarul Haque Helal told The Daily Star over the phone after yesterday's board meeting in Kathmandu.

Under the new format, each of the seven participating nations will play three home and three away games. However, the India-Pakistan matches will be held at a neutral venue.

The meeting also approved two new tournaments for this year: the SAFF U-23 Championship and the SAFF Women's Club Cup Championship. The latter, set to run from November 6-19, will feature eight teams.

However, given that not all countries have women's clubs, FIFA rankings will determine the number of teams from each nation.

Moreover, the SAFF is on the verge of signing a deal with Sports 5 to hold the SAFF Men's Club Championship in 2026. The tournament will involve eight teams, playing home-and-away matches, with the top-ranked team having two representatives.

Djokovic's another push for summit

REUTERS, Sydney

The blazing fire of the golden era of men's tennis has been reduced to dying embers without Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal but Novak Djokovic can send one last flame shooting into the Melbourne sky at this year's Australian Open.

Having ticked Olympic champion off his wishlist in Paris, Djokovic has the record for most Grand Slam singles titles in his sights and few would bet against him walking off Rod Laver Arena on Jan. 26 with the unprecedented 25th.

Yes, at 37, the body is no longer what it was, and yes, world number one Jannik Sinner won both of their contests last year, but the fierce drive that made Serbia's favourite son the most successful male player of all time endures.

"My main motivation comes from love and passion for the sport, and also the desire to keep competing," he said after losing to Sinner in the Shanghai Masters final in his last outing of 2024.

In 2024, Djokovic failed to win a Grand Slam for the first time since 2017 - his other loss to Sinner came in the Melbourne semis - but he proved he was still a sensational tennis player on his day when he beat Carlos Alcaraz to win Olympic gold.

There could be no place more appropriate

for Djokovic to finally break free of his tie with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam singles titles than in her own backyard at Melbourne Park, where he has won the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup 10 times.



Some quibble at the standard of some of the 11 Australian Opens that Court won, and others despise the 82-year-old for her politics, but a Grand Slam record is a Grand Slam record and Court shares it.

Djokovic, like Court, won his first major at the Australian Open and he can end the debate definitively on his 22nd visit to Melbourne as a professional.

Aside from the reliable band of supporters

from the local Serbian community, Djokovic has rarely been the most popular player at Melbourne Park but he has always been among the best.

From the dead-eyed competitor of his youth, through the self-styled "Djoker" of his 20s, to today's grand statesman of the game, Djokovic has played some incredible tennis on the famous blue courts.

Djokovic's trip Down Under was famously cut short by deportation from Australia during the height of the COVID pandemic in 2022, an incident which still triggers some nerves when he arrives at Melbourne airport.

This year, he arrived in Australia accompanied for the first time by his family and they were on hand as he was beaten in two sets by inspired American Reilly Opelka in the quarterfinals of the Brisbane International.

Warm-up tournament results have never been a reliable predictor of how Djokovic would perform at the main event, however.

His contemporary Andy Murray, who lost four Australian Open finals to Djokovic, signed up to his coaching team in the off-season and John McEnroe reckons the Scot will give Djokovic a shove should he need it as he approaches the summit.

"I think Murray will bring something to the table," the American great said of the unlikely appointment.



In a rain-reduced 37-over-a-side second ODI, Rachin Ravindra (79) and Mark Chapman (62) smashed attacking half-centuries and stitched a 112-run second-wicket stand to power New Zealand to a commanding 255-9 against Sri Lanka at Seddon Park yesterday. Sri Lanka spinner Maheesh Theekshana claimed a late hat-trick, but his efforts went in vain as a poor batting display saw the visitors get bundled out for 142 in 30.2 overs, losing the game by 113 runs to concede the three-match series 2-0 to the Black Caps with a game in hand.

PHOTO: AFP