



## DJOKOVIC unstoppable as Alcaraz falters

Novak Djokovic beat young rival Carlos Alcaraz 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 in a gladiatorial battle worthy of a title clash to charge into the Australian Open semi-finals yesterday, as the 10-time champion remained in the hunt for a record 25th Grand Slam title. In the latest chapter of a generational rivalry that has played out on the biggest stages, including last year's Paris Olympics gold medal match-up, it was the 37-year-old Serbian who used all his experience to seal the victory in a gruelling encounter that lasted over three hours at the Rod Laver Arena. In setting up a meeting with second-seeded German Alexander Zverev, Djokovic has become the first man to reach 50 singles semi-finals at Grand Slams – only two behind legendary American Chris Evert.

“I just wish that this match today was the final. Just one of the most epic matches I have played on this court, any court really.”

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Rahmatganj, Abahani into Fed Cup 2nd round

SPORTS REPORTER

Abahani and Rahmatganj MFS moved into the second round of the Federation Cup with third consecutive victories in Group B at different venues yesterday.

Abahani handed a 3-0 defeat to Fakirerpool Young Mens Club at Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla while Rahmatganj MFS won by the same margin against 10-man Chittagong Abahani at Rofique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium in Mymensingh.

The qualification of Abahani and Rahmatganj in the second round meant three other teams – Mohammedian SC, Young Mens Club, and Ctg Abahani – were eliminated from the group stage and the group leader will be decided through the match between Abahani and Rahmatganj on February 4.

Before yesterday's games, both Abahani and Rahmatganj needed just one point to qualify to the second round but they left the ground by keeping their winning run intact in the tournament.

Abahani struggled to break the defence of Young Mens Club in the first half but managed to bounce back strongly in the second half – striking three goals within a span of seven minutes.

Defender Yeasin Khan sent goalkeeper Arman Hossain to the wrong side from the spot to give Abahani a 65 minute lead before defender Hasan Murad doubled the margin with a low left footer in the 68th minute.

Three minutes later, Murad provided a nice pass for Mahdi Yusuf Khan, who beat the goalkeeper with a powerful shot from inside the box.

In Mymensingh, Rahmatganj went ahead with a brilliant strike from Egyptian Mostafa Mahmoud in the 32nd minute before Ghanaian Samuel Boateng doubled the lead from a rebounder just before half-time. Substitute Fahim Nur Toha wrapped up the victory in the 71st minute with a simple tap-in.

## ‘Players will die from starvation’

Former Bangladesh captain **Khaled Mahmud**, also a former director of Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), has seen all the corridors of BCB, club cricket and franchise cricket in the country. Mahmud, who is coaching Dhaka Capitals in what has been a lacklustre campaign in the Bangladesh Premier League so far, gave his insights about the ongoing payment issues in the BPL, the state of his team and their star batter Liton Das, and Dhaka's club cricket scenario in an interview with **The Daily Star's Abdullah Al Mehdi**. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

**The Daily Star (DS):** How do you see the conversation regarding Dhaka clubs' boycott of leagues and the reforms coming?

**Khaled Mahmud (KM):** Let's see the constitution first. But what has been heard is not very desirable. Bangladesh cricket survived this far due to clubs because the clubs pay the cricketers; that's how things run. It happened even before my time, and interest in cricket grew because of these reasons. If you deprive the clubs or the officials, at one time, Premier League would stop, and it would be very harmful for the country's cricket. Players will die from starvation at one point. How many players would BCB pay?

You will see that there is a turnover of 40 to 50 crore taka every year from [Dhaka] Premier League and first division to third division. They take care of players' payment and their allowances.

You are encouraging the divisions, but what do you get from the divisions? They don't run anything;

there is no Premier League or even tournaments from there. You want to reward them, but those who have worked for Bangladesh, you deprive them. I think it's the wrong strategy. Only time will tell.

**DS:** A BPL governing council member secretary said they only learned about payment issues from the media. What's your take on that?

**KM:** Taking a team on board doesn't mean it's the end of responsibility [for BCB]. Bank guarantees were not paid, and why that didn't happen is a



big question. If the franchises don't pay, BCB will have to pay. I think the BCB should, or else it would be a mistake. Let's see. They should call up the players from each franchise and ask what their condition is. It's bad for reputation, and foreign players don't want to come due to these payment issues.

**DS:** Are you disappointed with Dhaka Capitals' run of losses or perhaps angry?

**KM:** Performance isn't good but, as a team, it's [the outfit] definitely good. I don't get disappointed since, at the end of the day, it's a players' game. We can plan one way, and the opposition have counterplans

they could execute. I don't create pressure. I always say we have to keep the process right, but that's not being found.

Local players have done well for us. The foreigners couldn't, but that's their failure. It's part of the game. Maybe outside the field, I couldn't back them. It could be my failure in that regard.

**DS:** What's your observation on Liton? Do you think he faced a specific problem in his batting?

**KM:** There is no cricketing problem. Mentally, there seems to be too much on the plate. It's not too much cricket because everyone is playing more now. I think he can't accept these things, like trolling on Facebook. Abuse was hurled at him when he arrived in Chattogram. It could be the case that he is affected by it. Even though maybe he hasn't seen anything on social media, someone is telling him about it.

**DS:** How do you see Liton's Champions Trophy exclusion?

**KM:** I understand that he was excluded and don't see anything wrong with the selectors' decision. Definitely, they have logic behind it. From my side, I am a Liton fan, and I tell him that 'I can never drop you.' Maybe it's a blessing in disguise for good reasons. It could be that it will strengthen him mentally and make him more determined. What I want is that he will return very quickly.

Breaks are useful. We dropped him in one of the games, and then he scored a brilliant hundred. So, definitely, his confidence is high. I won't be surprised if he gets another ton.

## BPL payment issues: ‘Tomorrow never comes’

Sri Lankan all-rounder **Lahiru Samarakoon** has been warming Durbar Rajshahi's bench since the franchise's first game in the Bangladesh Premier League against Fortune Barishal where he conceded 64 runs in four overs on December 30. The 27-year-old made headlines recently after he complained to the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) regarding non-payment of the franchise. The Sri Lankan on Tuesday spoke to **The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan** over phone, sharing his experience regarding with the franchise and some other issues as well. Here are the excerpts from the interview:

**The Daily Star (DS):** It has been reported in media that you have officially informed the BCB regarding the non-payment issue of your franchise. How much truth is behind the news?

**Lahiru Samarakoon (LS):** Yes, the franchise hasn't paid me a single penny so far. I asked them about my money every day, but they are saying that they will give me the money tomorrow after the game or tonight. But the tomorrow never comes.

**DS:** You played here in the BPL last season for Durdanto Dhaka. Did the same thing happen at that time?

**LS:** Last year, before my departure, the franchise gave me the full contract money along with the other payments like DAs [daily allowances].

**DS:** Your current franchise has been claiming that they have cleared 25 percent payment of all players.

**LS:** I haven't got anything yet. I only received DAs from December 28 to January 15. My DAs are also due over the last seven days.



### Durbar Rajshahi's no-reply

The Daily Star reached out to Durbar Rajshahi's team manager Mehrab Hossain Opee to hear the team's observation regarding the complaint made by Samarakoon on non-payment. Mehrab, while not denying the accusation, said that he was in a serious meeting at the time and the reporter to call him after a while. Mehrab, however, did not pick up the phone when later called several times.

**DS:** What did you write to the BCB?

**LS:** I said that I have no money now. The other players got the money but it's only me who hasn't got any money. Actually my manager contacted the BCB.

**DS:** Whom have you spoken to in your franchise?

**LS:** I talked to both manager [Mehrab Hossain Opee] and owner [Shafiq Rahman]. They are now saying that before the game on January 23, they will give 50 percent of payment to all players.

**DS:** Did you or any of your team members receive any cheques yet?

**LS:** No, we haven't received any.

**DS:** Aren't you going to the field on match days or practice days?

**LS:** I went to the ground only yesterday [Monday]. Before that on January 19, I told the manager that if I didn't get payment, I wouldn't go ground.

**DS:** So as you said, you are now spending most of your time at the team hotel. What are the activities you are engaging yourself with?

**LS:** In Chattogram, there are a lot of Sri Lankans. I'm enjoying my time with them. They came here to meet me.



Bangladesh Football Federation's vice-president **Fahad Karim** and actress **Ashna Habib Bhabna**, along with other dignitaries, pose for a photograph with the participants of the **BFF Amputee Football Festival**, which was held at the **BFF turf yesterday as part of Youth Festival 2025**. In the final, **Shaheed Mugdho Ekadosh** beat **Shaheed Shafayet Ekadosh** in tiebreaker to win the title.

PHOTO: BFF



PHOTO: PRIME BANK

Prime Bank PLC's deputy managing director **Mohammad Nazim A. Chowdhury**, BCB director and game development committee chairman **Fahim Sinha**, and BCB's game development manager **AEM Kawser** hold aloft jerseys during a ceremony in Mirpur, marking the start of the 10th edition of the Prime Bank National School Cricket Tournament 2024–25. The tournament that started on Monday will see more than 7,000 students from a total of 351 schools from 64 districts fight for the championship.

## City ready for PSG ‘final’

### Real hope Mbappe form continues

AGENCIES

Pep Guardiola insists Manchester City will rise to the occasion in their crucial Champions League showdown against PSG after rebuilding their shattered morale with a 6-0 demolition of Ipswich.

Guardiola's side are languishing in 22nd place in the 36-team Champions League table with two games left.

PSG are in even worse shape, one point behind City in 25th place.

With the top 24 clubs going through to the knockout stages – the first eight automatically reach the last 16 and the sides from ninth to 24th face a play-off – the stakes could not be higher when City travel to Paris on Wednesday.

Fortunately for City, they were able to warm up for the blockbuster clash by recording their biggest Premier League win since thrashing Nottingham Forest by the same scoreline in 2022.

“We have two finals left, by winning two we qualify, winning one there's a big possibility,” Guardiola said ahead of the PSG clash.

“We have to get the points because we created problems ourselves, especially with Feyenoord, even the game we lost in Lisbon.”

Like Manchester City and PSG, Real Madrid face a tough equation. It would be unthinkable for the holders and record 15-time

European champions to suffer an early knock-out, but after a poor start they are presently 20th in the 36-team group.

One thing that would boost Real's confidence is that their star French forward **Kylian Mbappe** has finally come to the party. After a troubled start to life at Madrid, Mbappe finally seems at home and ready to wreak havoc both in Spain and in Europe.

Mbappe's rediscovered elan comes at the perfect time for Real Madrid with two crucial Champions League matches ahead, starting with RB Salzburg's visit to the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday.



Madrid then face Brest on the road next week, aiming to secure progress to the next phase of the competition.

Mbappe produced arguably his finest display for Madrid as he netted a brace against Las Palmas on Sunday to help take Real top of LaLiga.

“I have adapted to the team and I can play how I want, with my teammates, with personality,” he said after the game.

Vinicius Junior was suspended for their LaLiga game against Las Palmas but will return in the Champions League, and he and Mbappe must continue developing their partnership.

If Madrid's dynamic duo can find the same wavelength they will be ready to defend their status as the kings of Europe.