



A frantic finale in the offing

The new league phase of this season's expanded Champions League is all set for a frantic conclusion on Wednesday, as 18 matches are played simultaneously across Europe, with 16 games having something at stake. Meanwhile, the likes of Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain will be battling to avoid an early exit.

Liverpool and Barcelona are the only two teams guaranteed to be in the top eight, with The Reds even confirming a top-two finish.

Arsenal are all but certain to make the top eight -- the spots for automatically qualifying to the last 16. However, the unlikely scenario in which Arsenal would finish out of the top eight includes them losing to Girona on Wednesday and at least 11 other teams' results working out in a particular way.

Inter Milan would only need a point against visitors Monaco to guarantee a top-eight spot.

Meanwhile, Inter, Atletico Madrid, Bayer Leverkusen, and AC Milan are guaranteed to make the play-off round (top 24).

A win at home against Celtic will see Aston Villa, placed ninth in the standings, overtake any of the four teams above them if they fail to win and qualify for the last 16 directly.

Each of LOSC Lille, Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich, Brest, Monaco, Real Madrid, and Juventus would require a win and a handful of other results to go their way to jump up into the top eight, but they are at least guaranteed to make the play-off round.

Celtic are also sure to finish in the top 24.

Benfica, PSG, Sporting CP, and VfB Stuttgart are all on 10 points, three points off the top eight, but none can make it into the top eight positions due to some teams above them -- such as Lille and Feyenoord -- facing each other. Lille vs Feyenoord alone guarantees that the team finishing in eighth will have at least 14 points.

Manchester City are 25th in the standings -- a place away from play-off spots -- and Pep Guardiola's men must need a win at home against Club Brugge to sneak into the top 24.

* PSG avoiding a defeat away to Stuttgart will ensure a top 24 finish for the French champions but a loss could complicate things for them.



Bumrah, Kerr scoop top ICC awards

ICC

Indian pace sensation Jasprit Bumrah has been honoured with the prestigious Sir Garfield Sobers Award for ICC Men's Cricketer of the Year, recognising his extraordinary 2024, in which he dominated opponents in the longest as well as the shortest format of the game.

The bowling talisman overcame fellow nominees Travis Head, Joe Root and Harry Brook to the title and is the fifth recipient of the award from India, after Rahul Dravid (2004), Sachin Tendulkar (2010), Ravichandran Ashwin (2016) and Virat Kohli (2017, 2018).

This was the second individual ICC award for Bumrah this year, as the premier pacer was also named the ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year for 2024 for his 71 wickets from 13 games.

Bumrah dominated the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2024, where he spearheaded India's title-winning campaign with 15 wickets at an astonishing average of 8.26 and an economy of just 4.17.

Meanwhile, New Zealand star Melie Kerr won the Rachael Heyhoe Flint Trophy, beating Laura Wolvaardt, Chamari Athapaththu and Annabel Sutherland to the top honour.

In T20Is alone, Kerr amassed 387 runs and took 29 wickets at an average of 15.55, yet it was during the World Cup campaign that her brilliance was most apparent - setting a new record for the most wickets in a single edition (15) and culminating in an unforgettable individual display in the final to secure the silverware and the Player of the Tournament accolade.



Smith just one shy of 10k elite club

AFP, Galle

Australian batting great Steve Smith begins a tour of Sri Lanka just one short of entering the elite club of 10,000 Test runs ahead of Wednesday's opening match in Galle.

Smith, who will captain the team for the two-match series in the absence of Pat Cummins, has amassed 9,999 runs in 114 matches at an average of more than 55.

The 35-year-old is old but assured of becoming the 15th batter in the world -- and fourth Australian after Ricky Ponting, Allan Border, and Steve Waugh -- to achieve the milestone.

"Honestly, I'm trying not to think about it [the milestone] too much," Smith said on Tuesday.

Smith suggested it had played on his mind "a bit too much" during Australia's fifth and final Test against India in Sydney this month, where his 33 and four left him agonisingly short.

"Now it's just about focusing on the job at hand," he said.

Australia, who have already set up a World Test Championship (WTC) final with South Africa at Lord's in June, will be looking to stamp their authority as the number-one Test team.

Sri Lanka, led by Dhananjaya de Silva, will be looking to reclaim the Warne-Murali trophy.

Sri Lanka hammered the visiting Australians 3-0 in 2016 but the last series in 2022 ended 1-1, with both matches played in Galle.

Brothers back in Fed Cup last four after 20 years

SPORTS REPORTER

Brothers Union, once the country's third football powerhouse after Mohammedan and Abahani, reached Federation Cup semifinals for the first time in 20 years following a goalless draw against Bangladesh Police in their Group A final match in Cumilla yesterday.

Despite tying on seven points with Fortis, who they defeated 1-0 earlier, Brothers secured their semifinal spot due to their head-to-head record.

Meanwhile, in Mymensingh, Bashundhara Kings thrashed Dhaka Wanderers Club 5-0 to emerge as Group A.



Brothers, who last made it to the semifinals in 2005 when they won their third Federation Cup title, faced stiff resistance from Police. Eleta Kingsley's missed penalty in the 66th minute denied them a win, but the draw was sufficient to progress.

Brothers, who escaped relegation last season after applying to the Bangladesh Football Federation, have been impressive this year, defeating Police and Chittagong Abahani while earning draws against Fortis, Kings, and Abahani. The club's new management bolstered the squad at the last minute, capitalising on the withdrawals of Sheikh Jamal and Sheikh Russel, and included several national discards.

BCB accepts responsibility for BPL mess

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

In an attempt that could be compared to putting a band aid on a bullet wound, the governing council of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) held a meeting with the franchise owners yesterday, to address the many scandals that have overshadowed the on-field action in the ongoing tournament.

The players' non-payment issue and some questionable actions from some franchise owners have turned the running season into one of the most scandalous editions in BPL history.

The tri-party agreements between Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), franchises and the players, which should've been complete before the tournament commenced, are still in the process of being signed and the BCB also did not take any bank guarantees from franchises beforehand, a choice the officials are surely regretting right now.

With 10 days left in the 40-day event, the BPL governing council tried to address these issues with the franchise in a meeting in Dhaka, however, it could not even ensure everyone's presence as the Chittagong Kings owner did not turn up.

"We have seen some incidents which do not go with the BPL," BPL governing council's member secretary Nazmul Abedeen Fahim told the media yesterday at Mirpur following the meeting.

"We discussed the problems

with payment, their plans were also discussed and we have arrived at a place [regarding a solution]. We have seven [10] days left and not sure how much the problems will be solved by then. Time will tell," he added.

Durbar Rajshahi have been at the



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centre of the non-payment issue, with all of their overseas players boycotting a match on Sunday in protest. Rajshahi had provided all of its local players with cheques with partial payment the same day but yesterday, a local player from the team informed The Daily Star that all of their cheques have bounced.

Players of the Rajshahi team, who have completed their league phase

matches and are currently third in the points-table, are waiting to see whether they make the playoffs and are discussing among themselves about what to do next.

Meanwhile, Chittagong's Parvez Hossain Emon's case has also come under media scrutiny after the franchise owner sighted 'self-satisfaction' as a reason behind not clearing his dues.

"We don't expect that someone would make a comment like that. A team or a player can do well or poorly but I believe the player who was talked about, tried his level best... Obviously we didn't take it well," Fahim said.

Fahim also said the board will monitor the activities of the franchise more closely, saying, "From now on, we will follow every moment whether they are keeping their commitments," he said.

No matter what action the BCB undertakes now, it cannot avoid responsibility for the current mess in the BPL, and Fahim did not attempt to do so.

"At the end of the day, obviously it was the board's responsibility... The things which happened were still very unexpected. Having said that, we have to take responsibility."

But even after so many occurrences that have brought ill-repute to the tournament, the BCB will not be taking any legal action yet, the governing council declared yesterday, as the board's current priority appears to be damage control.

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