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They [Chittagong Kings fans] should be supporting their own team in the final. But maybe when I go out in the field to bat, they could cheer for me a little.

Fortune Barishal skipper Tamim Iqbal said he expects at least some support from the fans of Chittagong, the left-handed batter's hometown.

I think people would say that Barishal are probably the favourites, right? Fine. It is what it is. I think we have been playing really good cricket. I certainly think that people wouldn't be shocked if we won, right? We are a good team. That's what that is.

Chittagong Kings head coach Shaun Tait said ahead of today's BPL final.



Fortune Barishal skipper Tamim Iqbal and Chittagong Kings captain Mohammad Mithun stand by the trophy in the captains' photoshoot at a city hotel on the eve of the Bangladesh Premier League final.

PHOTO: BCB

## ‘Recognition of a massive cultural phenomenon’

SPORTS REPORTER

In a unique move and a massive recognition, Bangladesh national women's football team were yesterday announced as a recipient of the Ekushey Padak 2025, the second highest civilian honour of the country, alongside 14 other individuals for their contributions in various fields.

Introduced in 1976 in memory of the martyrs of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952, the award is usually given to recognise contributions in a number of fields, including culture, education, journalism, and economics.

However, this is the first time a sporting team will receive the honour. Late Abdul Hamid, a noted sports journalist and sports commentator, was the first and only individual from the sporting arena to have received the honour previously, even though he was awarded in 2003 for his contribution to journalism.

The recognition of the women's football team, who last year successfully defended their SAFF Women's Championship title, comes at a time when women's football is facing obstacles from various reactionary elements of society.

Recently, at least three women's football matches were halted in three northern districts of the country, the latest of which occurred in Rangpur yesterday.

Mostafa Sarwar Farooki, the adviser to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, termed this decision



as a recognition of the women's team's success as a "massive cultural phenomenon."

"Bestowing the women's football team with the Ekushey Padak is important from two perspectives," Farooki, also a noted filmmaker, told The Daily Star.

"The first is their sporting achievement, which is beautiful. But we don't consider this progress and the amazing rise of the women's football team as just a sporting phenomenon; we also see it as a cultural phenomenon, and we believe it has a huge positive cultural impact on Bangladesh and Bangladesh's progress," the adviser added.

Bangladesh Football Federation's women's wing chairman, Mahfuzza Akter Kiron, who oversaw the rise of women's football over the last decade, expressed her delight at the news and her gratitude towards the government.

"I can't express how delighted and happy I am. You all know how difficult and rocky the road to success for women's football in Bangladesh has been. So this is, I believe, a recognition of the hard work and struggle that we all have made this far," Kiron told The Daily Star.

Kiron hoped that this recognition would pave a smooth path for the women's national team and women's football in general.

"Women's football is at a crossroads at the moment as it is facing a lot of obstacles. So this recognition will definitely help women's football overcome those hurdles.

"I hope the award will also motivate the national team players to concentrate on football and have a positive outcome," added the BFF member, referring to the current impasse created by the boycott of the head coach by 18 senior members of the squad.

## Curtain falls on controversy-plagued BPL today

SPORTS REPORTER

The 11th Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) is coming to an end with the final between Fortune Barishal and Chittagong Kings at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Dhaka today.

The organisers had made many lofty promises in the lead up to the event and many steps had been taken to set this edition apart which included a nationwide 'Festival of Youth'. However, the tournament did not live up to its billing and will most likely be remembered for the wrong reasons in the years to come.

Much of the discussion this season has been around players' non-payment issue and new additions Durbar Rajshahi have been at the centre of the debacle, followed by finalists Chittagong.

Concerns over match-fixing in the BPL have also surfaced which prompted the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) to form an independent inquiry body to assist the BCB Anti Corruption Unit (ACU) regarding investigations.

Unsurprisingly, all of this has brought further ill-repute to Bangladesh's premier T20 tournament and harmed the reputation of the BCB globally.

In an apparent continuation of mismanagement in the BPL, there was no mention of an official captains' photoshoot when Barishal skipper Tamim Iqbal came to the press conference at yesterday noon, however, at around 5:30 pm, the BCB in a press release said a photoshoot will take place in the evening in the team hotel.

Fortune Barishal are appearing in the BPL final for the second time in a row. Overall, it will be the franchise's third final in four seasons (2022, 2024, and 2025).

The last time Chittagong Kings featured in BPL was back in 2013 and they were finalists in that edition as well.

Barishal and Chittagong faced off thrice in the competition so far. Barishal outplayed Chittagong in Qualifier 1, winning it by nine wickets, while the teams won one each in the league phase.

Chittagong's English batter Graham Clark is the leading scorer for the franchise with 387 runs in 13 innings. Skipper Tamim Iqbal leads the chart for Barishal in this regard,

scoring 359 runs in 13 innings

Barishal's Faheem Ashraf is the leading wicket-taker for the side with 20 wickets in 11 games while pacer Khaled Ahmed is Chittagong's leading candidate in terms of wickets, scalping 20 in 13 matches.

Bangladesh Cricket Board announced Tk 2.5 crore as prize money for the champions -- Tk 50 lakhs more than the previous edition. Meanwhile, the runners-up will receive Tk 1.5 crore, increasing it from last year's Tk 1 crore reward.

For the first time in the tournament's history, the third and fourth placed teams (Khulna Tigers and Rangpur Riders) will also get Tk 60 lakh and Tk 40 lakh respectively

while the emerging player of the tournament award has also been included for the first time.

Bangladesh icon Tamim Iqbal will be honoured with special mementoes from BCB ahead of today's presentation ceremony, acknowledging his remarkable 17-year career.

BCB changed the start time of the final from 7:00pm to 6:00pm just a day before. Although the media was informed about the matter yesterday, a BCB official insisted that the franchises were informed about the change in timing much before.

Instead of fireworks, this BPL final closing ceremony will only have laser shows.

Still, Tamim tried to highlight some good things that have happened this time around, especially praising the wickets which have produced plenty of runs.

"We can debate all day over what could have been done and I would even agree with you. But some things have been good. The cricket has been good. There are many gaps that will have to be filled," Tamim said yesterday.

"Wickets are a big issue in the BPL and I have talked about it too. We have to credit the groundsmen as the wickets were great [this time]," he added.

Barishal are the defending champions with local stars like Mushfiqur Rahim,

Mahmudullah and Towhid Hridoy alongside international stars such as Dawid Malan, Kyle Mayers and the recently-arrived James Neesham in their ranks. Tamim, who won the BPL twice, said that the team which keeps their nerves will have the best chance of winning the final.

"If you are not calm and let the pressure get to you, you will make mistakes. The team which remains calm will have more opportunities. I have played two finals before so I am not too anxious during finals. Hoping that tomorrow [Friday] goes the same way," Tamim said.

Chittagong, on the other hand, have

banked on their locals such as Shamim Hossain, Khaled Ahmed and Shoriful Islam in the absence of big name foreign stars. After a nail-biting win in the second qualifier against Khulna Tigers, the Port City team have no shortage of belief.

"Yes, absolutely confident [to lift the trophy]. I'm not getting overconfident, but you have to be. It's 50-50 almost as you are in the final. We came from a great win from the last night [Wednesday]. There is some confidence in the group but at the end of the day, you have to play well," Chittagong coach Shaun Tait said at yesterday's press meet.

## ‘No surprises’ as Howe’s Newcastle down Arsenal

AGENCIES

Eddie Howe hailed Newcastle's "huge" League Cup semifinal win against Arsenal and said his side's appearance in the final was no surprise.

Chasing a first major trophy since 1969, Newcastle swept to a 2-0 victory over Arsenal on a memorable night at a raucous St James' Park on Wednesday.

Jacob Murphy's first half opener and Anthony Gordon's strike after the interval sealed a 4-0 aggregate success that sent Howe's team to their second League Cup final in the last three seasons.

Newcastle were beaten by Manchester United at Wembley in 2023, but Howe is confident the lessons from that heartbreaking loss will provide valuable experience and motivation in the final against Liverpool or Tottenham on March 16.

The Magpies boss vowed his side would learn from the pain of their last visit to Wembley.



Eddie Howe has now led Newcastle to more EFL Cup finals (2) than every other manager in the club's history combined (1).

He has now overseen 17 EFL Cup ties in charge of the Magpies, losing just two of them. His only normal-time defeat came in the 2022/23 final against Manchester United, with the other a penalty shootout loss to Chelsea at Stamford Bridge last season.

Newcastle have beaten Arsenal for a third time this season -- twice in the EFL cup and once in the Premier League. This is also the first time that the Magpies have beaten The Gunners thrice in a campaign.

to superb performances from Sweden striker Alexander Isak and England winger Gordon.

Howe acknowledged he had tweaked his defensive system, switching to a back five to nullify Arsenal's set-piece threat.

Arteta had no answers to Howe's tactical masterclass as Newcastle beat the Gunners for the third time this season.

"It is huge (to get back to Wembley). The first appearance there was a bit unexpected, but we want to be there regularly, so it's not a surprise this time," he said.

"We are there on merit. Our run has not been easy this year, so we've done the hard yards.

"Hopefully we can learn from the last experience. We have come a long way since then. I would love to think we can go to Wembley and perform better."

Organised superbly by the astute Howe, they out-played Mikel Arteta's side thanks



Real Madrid's 20-year-old academy striker Gonzalo Garcia headed home a 93rd-minute winner to put his side into the Copa del Rey semifinals with a 3-2 victory at Leganes on Wednesday. Playing his third game for the senior side, Garcia scored for the first time for Real Madrid, who were without several key players -- including Kylian Mbappe and Jude Bellingham, sidelined due to minor knocks -- ahead of Saturday's LaLiga derby against Atletico Madrid and next week's Champions League playoff clash at Manchester City.

PHOTO: AFP