

## 'Inspiration' for Shanto, a point for Tigers

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN from Rawalpindi

Before leaving Dhaka for the ICC Champions Trophy, Bangladesh captain Najmul Hossain Shanto had boldly announced his grand goal of bringing the trophy home, raising many eyebrows.

Shanto's lofty claims fell flat in the tournament after his side lost their opening two games to India and New Zealand and were already out of the running for a spot in the semifinals with one match to go.

The Tigers were supposed to play for pride against Pakistan in a dead rubber Group A match yesterday but the game got washed out with no toss due to heavy rain in Rawalpindi.

The wash out handed Bangladesh their only point in the campaign and owing to a better net run rate, they edged Pakistan and finished third in Group A.

And just like that, another global event ended in utter disappointment for the Tigers, with the players having nothing to show for other than a point which they didn't even earn.

But even after such an underwhelming campaign, captain Shanto is choosing to see the positives from the two convincing defeats instead of eating his words.

"The way we held the game for long periods of the game was very inspiring for us in the two matches. We hope we can learn from our mistakes," Shanto said in the presentation after the washed-out contest against Pakistan.

The long-held games Shanto was speaking about were the matches against India and New Zealand, which the Tigers lost by six and five wickets with 21 and 23 balls to spare respectively.

Shanto, perhaps, was trying to laud his bowlers for showing some fight in both contests after the batters put up a paltry total and also spoke how their failure

to rotate the strike hurt them in both games.

"We have always struggled with our fast bowling unit, but in the last few years a lot of fast bowlers are coming through."

"We have to think about strike rotation. It is very important and I hope the boys will understand what we need to do," he added.

However, for a team that has been a Test playing nation for quarter of a century, have taken part in 22 major ICC events but are still nowhere near conquering the summit, talks about improvements in pace attack and trying to improve rotating strike sound cheap.

Unlike Shanto, the fans in Rawalpindi did not have the same glass half-full approach after two of the three scheduled matches in their city got rained out.

"All people waited for a long time to see an ICC event but right now they are disappointed for not having games due to rain," said Pakistani photo journalist Mian Zaman, who had worked in Rawalpindi when the venue hosted three games in the 1996 World Cup. If the fans in Rawalpindi had the same approach to life as Shanto, perhaps they would be happy thinking at least they got to see one match out of three.



## Afghanistan put on a 'tamasha' to remember

ASHFAQ UL ALAM

It was truly a 'tamasha' in Lahore on Thursday, wasn't it?

To the unaware, 'tamasha' is an Urdu word which has been naturalised in Bangla and is usually used with a negative connotation, to deride something as a joke.

But, originally in Urdu, this word is used to describe a grand spectacle -- an event that one can't look away from, and above all, something that entertains.

Cricket writers from the Indian sub-continent over the years have used 'tamasha' to describe the spectacle of cricket, especially in the limited versions.

However, some may be tempted to follow the Bangla usage of this word when describing certain drab games of cricket, such as Bangladesh's recent matches against India and New Zealand in the ICC Champions Trophy.

But the thousands that were present at the Gaddafi Stadium and the millions who tuned in from around the globe to watch the Group B encounter between Afghanistan and England on Thursday, witnessed an absolute cricketing 'tamasha' in the truest sense.

Afghanistan started on the backfoot, three down with barely anything on the board, before opener Ibrahim Zadran hit a career standout 177 and found some late



- ➲ A win for Afghanistan against Australia in Lahore today will confirm their spot in the semifinals.
- ➲ Australia will qualify if they win today, but having a point in hand over Afghanistan means they will also go through even if the game is washed out -- a possibility considering there is a rain forecast in the city today.

support as the score reached 325-7.

Chasing the target, England needed at least one batter to play the big innings and Joe Root, arguably their best batter, put his hand up.

Root kept losing partners at regular successions as the valiant Afghans kept chipping away at the heavyweight English batting line up, but remained undeterred. It was an enthralling contest, with

both teams having their noses ahead at different points only for the opposing team to fight back and restore parity.

It looked like Root was destined to take England to the promised land when he hit Omarzai for a six in the 45th over.

But Omarzai, who had already done his job with the bat with a 31-ball 41, had the last laugh. He had Root edge one back to the keeper in the following over.

The game was still not over as even though England were seven down, their tail had enough ammunition.

All the remaining deliveries were an event in themselves. Jofra Archer hit two fours in the first three balls he faced before getting caught off a slower delivery while trying to play the hero shot, exactly six balls after Jamie Overton got himself dismissed the same way.

In the final over, Omarzai, who finished with 5-58, held his nerves while defending 13 and got the final wicket of Adil Rashid in the penultimate ball with once again another slower delivery. The fact that the final catch was taken by Zadran added a poetic layer to this contest, as if this was a meticulously scripted drama which had twists and turns stored at every juncture.

It was a 'tamasha' ODI fans won't forget for a long time and if the Afghans can put on another brave showing against the Aussies in Lahore today, it could bring them the ticket to the semifinals.

## Liton, Fizz yet to find teams in budget-reduced DPL

SPORTS REPORTER

Two Bangladesh stars -- Liton Das and Mustafizur Rahman -- have not signed with any clubs for the upcoming Dhaka Premier League (DPL), and the latter may not play the league at all this season.

This DPL is set to be played with reduced budget from March 3. Clubs, officials and players have all confirmed about their pay-cuts. One club's official yesterday informed that even the staffs' salary has been slashed by over 50 per cent.

"We did not approach Mustafizur since we had budget issues," a Prime Bank official told The Daily Star yesterday.

While Liton has been unable to agree on a remuneration with Abahani, Mustafizur was released by Prime Bank ahead of the players' transfer.

"Yes, Prime Bank released him and he would have to take a [No Objection Certificate] NOC if he wants to play for another club," a Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) said about Mustafizur.

As per the transfer rules, Liton submitted a token to be picked from the transfer list on February 22 and 23. Meanwhile, Mustafizur, who is away on Champions Trophy duty with the national team, registered online like rest of the national team players.

Mustafizur will require a NOC from Prime Bank to play for another team in the league but the player has not prioritised playing the DPL in the past.



PHOTO: REAL MADRID

Teenage striker Endrick celebrates after scoring the only goal in Real Madrid's nervy 1-0 win at Real Sociedad in the first leg of their Copa del Rey semifinal on Wednesday. In the 19th minute, 18-year-old Brazilian Endrick took in his stride a long pass from Jude Bellingham before firing a left-footed strike past the goalkeeper.

## Arsenal to witness Liverpool's PL celebration at Anfield?

REUTERS, Manchester

Liverpool's march towards the Premier League title could culminate with a win over closest rivals Arsenal at Anfield on May 10 in the most tantalising of the possible scenarios.

Arne Slot's men climbed 13 points clear at the top with their 2-0 victory over Newcastle United on Wednesday.

No team have been so far ahead at this stage of the season and not won the title going back to the beginning of English top-flight football in 1888-89.

Slot, however, does not dare get ahead of himself, saying after Wednesday's win: "It is still a long way to go, 10 games. In March, we only play one Premier League game, so we are not focused on the long term."

If Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta sees the writing on the wall, he is not saying so, telling reporters before Wednesday's scoreless draw with Nottingham Forest that he would concede the title "over my dead body."

Liverpool could have locked up the title sooner but, as Slot mentioned, because of the international break plus two Champions League last-16 games against PSG and the League Cup final versus Newcastle, they have only one league game in March.



Seven more wins would seal a second Premier League title for Slot's team and their 20th in top-flight football overall. Six of their final 10 games are in their home cauldron of Anfield.

Other potential scenarios have Liverpool clinching the title on April 5 versus Fulham, but that would require them winning their next three matches and Arsenal, who have a game in hand, losing their next four.

Liverpool could also claim the crown at home to Tottenham Hotspur on April 26 or on May 3 at Chelsea.

### PRIMARY SCHOOL GOLD CUP FOOTBALL

## New champions crowned in new-look National Stadium

ANISUR RAHMAN

Having undergone a vibrant transformation, the National Stadium in Dhaka became a festival ground for budding young footballers yesterday as the prestigious Primary School Gold Cup Football Tournament returned to the country's premier venue after nearly six years.

With newly installed sheds, colourful chairs brightening the galleries, a freshly laid greenish pitch, an athletic track, and decorative touches, the stadium radiated renewed energy. Adding to the spectacle was the electrifying atmosphere created by the excited screams of school-going boys and girls, making the stadium pulse with life once again as it hosted the finals for both boys and girls.

Since the Gold Cup's last edition held here in 2018, subsequent editions were paused due to the pre- and post-COVID period. However, the primary and mass education ministry managed to continue the tournaments in 2022 and 2023 elsewhere while the stadium underwent renovations.

Now nearing full restoration, the stadium was partially reopened to host the Gold Cup -- an event that has



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

long been a breeding ground for future stars. Players such as Maria Manda, Monica Chakma, Shamsunnahar, Akhi Khatun, Krishna Rani, and Tahura Khatun have emerged from this very platform, turning their school-level dreams into national success stories.

In the girls' final, Jorgacha Govt. Primary School from Sathiya upazila, Pabna, etched their name into history by becoming the eighth team to win the silverware. They overcame Bancharampur Model Govt. Primary School from Brahmanbaria with an impressive 3-1 victory.

Lamia Khatun, named the best player of the tournament, was overjoyed

with the triumph and shared her dream of following in the footsteps of national forward Sabina Khatun. "I don't know many players by name, but I've watched a few matches featuring Monica, Marzia, and Akhi Khatun. However, I want to be a player like Sabina," she said, beaming with pride after lifting the trophy.

The boys' final saw Koiarbil Govt. Primary School from Kutubdia upazila, Cox's Bazar, script their own fairy tale. They claimed the title by defeating Ichagari Govt. Primary School from Sumamganj 2-0, becoming the 12th school to win the prestigious tournament.

Koiarbil's journey was nothing short of remarkable. In the early stages, they were on the brink of elimination at the union level, just as they had been in the previous edition. However, fortune favoured them, and they scraped through via a lucky toss in their second match. From that moment, they never looked back, stringing together 14 consecutive victories to emerge as champions.

"I am happy to make my school proud," said Jubair, the tournament's top scorer, who netted three goals in the final phase. Now, with his confidence soaring, he has set his sights on joining either BKSP or a private football academy to chase his dream of playing at the highest level.

This year's tournament witnessed overwhelming participation from more than 11 lakh young footballers representing 65,000 schools across the country. As the event concluded, chief guest Dr Bidhan Ranjan Roy Poddar, adviser to the interim government, delivered an encouraging announcement. The primary and mass education ministry, he revealed, is set to appoint physical education teachers in primary schools to strengthen the foundation of school-level sports.