

India's spin ploy pays off



PHOTO: AFP

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN FROM DUBAI

The ploy of having a diverse spin attack in the Champions Trophy once again clicked for India, this time in the all-important final against New Zealand at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium yesterday.

It did not come as a surprise when India named a spin-heavy squad for the tournament as they were scheduled to play all of their matches in Dubai where surfaces are more conducive to spin, as opposed to the ones in Pakistan, where other teams were scheduled to play except for the games against India.

For their first two matches, against Bangladesh and archrivals Pakistan, India had the same three-ponged spin attack of left-arm spinners Axar Patel and Ravindra Jadeja alongside chinaman Kuldeep Yadav.

India opted to crank their spin ploy up a notch, adding mystery spinner Varun Chakravarthy alongside the aforementioned three from their last Group A game against New Zealand. Varun made an instant impact, claiming a career-best 5-42 in the final group game.

India went with the same spin quartet in yesterday's final as well. However, for a while, it seemed as if their spin-loy would finally backfire when New Zealand openers Rachin Ravindra and Will Young put up a quick 57-run opening stand after India skipper Rohit Sharma lost a record-equaling 12 tosses in a row.

The wicket of Sunday's final was previously used during India's match against Pakistan on February 23, and during that game, spinners got a decent amount of purchase from the surface.

With spinners on Sunday extracting very little turn, it looked like the Black Caps were heading towards a big total in the final.

According to broadcasters, the average turn was only 2.0 degrees on Sunday during New Zealand innings, the lowest in all five matches played so far in Dubai. The opening match between Bangladesh and India here witnessed a 3.5-degree turn – the highest in the tournament – while the second semifinal against Australia saw an average turn of 2.7 degrees.

But the Indian spinners quickly adjusted to the condition, bowling

with extra pace at stumps. The result was evident as the four spinners combined to account for five wickets in 38 overs, conceding just 144 runs.

Introduced in the first Powerplay, Varun, just in his second over, gave India the first breakthrough, trapping Young in front for 15.

Kuldeep then joined the party by taking two quick wickets – those of Rachin (37) and Kane Williamson (11). Jadeja removed Tom Latham (14), and suddenly the momentum of the game had changed, with the Black Caps reduced to 108 for four in the 24th over.

When Glenn Phillips (34) was trying to build a partnership with Daryl Mitchell (63), Varun once again hit back by casting the former to put India on top in the contest in front of the sea of blue in the Dubai gallery.

Axar might have finished wicketless, but his economical bowling saw him build the pressure on the Kiwis as he gave away just 29 in his eight overs.

26 of the 47 wickets claimed by Indian bowlers in the tournament were scalped by spinners – a fact that sums up how spinners were pivotal in India's bid to regain the Champions Trophy title for first time after 2013.

'We have always wanted to train with seniors'

Bangladesh women's football team defender Afeida Khandokar was handed the captaincy after 18 players, including most seniors, boycotted training under coach Peter Butler. The lanky centre-back wore the captain's armband in two friendlies against hosts UAE recently, both matches ending in 3-1 defeats for Bangladesh. Following her return to the country, Afeida spoke with *The Daily Star's* Anisur Rahman in an interview, where she opened up about their recent tour, their experience of playing without the seniors, and a few other issues. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): You have represented Bangladesh several times along with the senior players, but this time, you were probably the most experienced player in the senior squad. How was your experience?

Afeida Khandokar (AK): When I represented the national team along with the senior players, there was no pressure on me because there were players like Sabina [Khatun], Masura [Parvin], and other senior players in the team, and I just played my own game. But, in the matches against UAE, there was a bit of pressure because our team had only three weeks of preparation. Besides, we were also tired while playing the first match against UAE because we had reached there just a day before the match after a sleepless night. So, it was really hard for us to play without rest, and there was also a fear of how UAE would perform because we had no prior knowledge about them.

DS: What do you think were the differences between Bangladesh and the UAE team?

AK: The UAE players had more experience and were better at decision-making on the field. We might have failed to make the final pass, which allowed them to counter, and we conceded goals due to mistakes in defense and midfield.

Another difference was the physical advantage of the UAE players, who were taller than us. Also, many players in our team represented the senior team for the first time, and a few played their first international matches. So there were some differences, but we were satisfied with our performance.

DS: Did you feel the absence of the senior players who were not part of the team?

AK: We could have fought better had the SAFF-winning squad played the matches. We might have even won the matches. However, we did not dwell too much on the absent players; rather, we focused on those who were available.

DS: How did you feel about the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Tabitha Awal's announcement to start the next women's camp with 55 players, including the boycotting players, on the night you returned from UAE?

AK: We also want to put everything that happened behind us and start afresh as a

team. We were really pleased to hear the announcement from the BFF president. Before leaving for Dubai, we were happy to hear that they would join the camp after the two friendly matches because we never wanted to see them outside the training camp. We always wanted to train with the seniors.

DS: How did you enjoy leading the senior national team in the two friendly matches?

AK: I never thought about leading the senior national team, but I had to do it. I tried to fulfill the responsibility I was given in both matches.

DS: How long do you think it may take for this group of young players to mature?

AK: I think the only thing this group of girls lacks is experience. If they are given opportunities to play many international matches, they will develop quickly. Our senior players have been playing international matches for the last 12 years. They also played in the

SAFF Women's Championship when they were U-16 players. We finally became SAFF Champions in 2022. The result did not come overnight; it happened over a long period. I think every player should be given time, and the results will come eventually.

DS: I want to go back a bit. What was your mental state when a group of senior players skipped training while a group of young players, including you, continued training under Peter Butler?

AK: We came here to play, and we prioritised playing, regardless of who conducted the training, because we were about to sign contracts with the federation. It is a professional environment where an individual player has to focus on her own performance.

DS: What do you expect from the Bangladesh women's team in the upcoming AFC Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers?

AK: We should play more beyond our comfort zone, especially beyond South Asia. We still don't know our opponents in the Asian Cup Qualifiers. The coach will take care of how we prepare after the draw. However, we expect good results in the Asian Cup Qualifiers because the senior players will rejoin the team, and together, we will try to perform well.



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



Slot blast fuelled Liverpool comeback

AGENCIES

Frustration was written all over Liverpool boss Arne Slot's face when miscommunication allowed lowly Southampton to score first in the Reds' 3-1 victory on Saturday, and Mohamed Salah said the manager gave the team an earful about it at halftime.

Salah scored twice from the penalty spot – extending his goal tally to 32 across all competition along 22 assists – and Darwin Nunez also struck in the victory, but all three Liverpool goals came after the break.

Will Smallbone had stunned the Anfield faithful with a goal from bottom club Southampton in first-half injury time, capitalising on miscommunication by goalkeeper Alisson and centre-back Virgil van Dijk, and the television camera caught Slot, who was serving the second of a two-game suspension for a recent red card at Everton, in the stands holding his head in both hands.

Slot's pep talk in the break seemed to do the trick.

"It was a bit of frustration, his head was going for us," Salah told Premier League Productions about Slot's halftime speech. "It is something you need sometimes."

"We were sloppy and slow in the first half. I don't think we played good today. If you want to win the Champions League or Premier League you have to win these games like that."

Liverpool, who have just one Premier League loss in this remarkable season, extended their lead atop the table provisionally to 16 points ahead of second-placed Arsenal, who have two games in hand.

"It's a sign of a good team, that you can win in different ways," Slot, who made three halftime substitutions, told the BBC.

"I had to change because of work rate. I don't think that happened a lot this season. So it was a poor performance first half. Not only in the way we played but definitely also in the energy we brought. I don't think they ran at all. I exaggerate a bit but they saved their energy."

"To find a way, you have to play better. You have to find something. It will not come from the sky [if they are to qualify for Champions League]. You have to do it. In situations you have to find something. The situation is what it is, we have 10 games left starting next Saturday against Brighton, international break after and then we will see what happens."



Manchester City manager PEP GUARDIOLA said following 1-0 defeat to season's surprise team Nottingham Forest on Saturday.

Naim-powered Prime Bank post record score to go top

SPORTS REPORTER

Prime Bank posted the highest-ever score in a DPL game, reaching 422 for eight against Brothers Union at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium yesterday to register a 173-run win. Mohammad Naim was the architect of the record score with his highest List A score of 176.

Prime Bank's 422 helped them overtake Abahani's 393 for four posted against Prime Doleshwar back in 2018. It was the very first instance of a team surpassing the 400-run threshold in the domestic List A circuit and Naim, who has been struggling to get back into the national team, executed his plans to help break a record.

Naim showed an ability to accelerate in short bursts, especially against pacer Nur Muhammad with a slinging action, picking up a four and a six in the sixth over to get going. The opening duo of Naim and Sabbir Hossain put



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

on 140 for to set the platform for a big score before Sabbir fell for a 63-ball 73. Naim dispatched a few more fours and sixes in the 14th over to reach his fifty. He would go on to score 176 – the fourth-highest individual score in DPL – hitting 18 fours and eight sixes during his 125-ball stay. Although Naim missed out on a double ton, Abdulla Al Mamun's 22-ball 40 and Sazzadul Hoque's 50 took Prime Bank to the record total.

Naim's favoured areas were mid-wicket, long on and long-off but while his footwork was always an issue, he said he had been working on his shots through the off-side.

"Obviously I have been working on shots through cover and extra cover. I have been doing it from the NCL [T20]. There are specific areas where if you score runs, you feel good. Maybe I scored more runs but I was trying my best not to miss out on deliveries in these zones," Naim said in a video message.

So vigilant was Naim that Nur bowled just five overs for 66. Salauddin Shakil conceded 75 off nine overs for two wickets while Al Amin Hossain bagged three for 77 in his 10 overs.

"Definitely they [Brothers Union] came with their best attack but I don't want to give any personal opinion. I have tried to play my best game," Naim said, evading controversy on the nature of the attack that gave away the record total.

"It's history? I didn't know that but feels good," he said, showing he was unaware of the record during the game.

Prime Bank bowled out Brothers for 249 to win by 173 runs and climb to the top of the table with two wins in three games.

Meanwhile, Tajjul Islam and Nasum Ahmed shared seven wickets between them before skipper Tamim Iqbal hit an unbeaten 125 off 112, laced with 11 fours and five sixes, to help Mohammedan beat Partex Sporting by seven wickets at BKSP Ground 4.

At BKSP 3, Rupganj Tigers reached 260 all out, courtesy of Mohamad Al Amin Jr.'s 89-ball 104 but Abahani picked up a six-wicket win after contributions from Mohammad Mithun (60) and Mosaddek Hossain (47).

HIGHEST TEAM SCORE IN DPL

Team	Score	Oppositio	Ground	Year
Prime Bank	422-8	Brothers	SBNCS	2025
Abahani	393-4	Prime DSC	BKSP	2018
Prime Bank	388-5	Shinepukur	BKSP	2022
Prime Bank	380-4	Brothers	BKSP	2024
Abahani	377-7	Rupganj	BKSP	2019