

## SAFF C'ship at centralised venue again

SPORTS REPORTER

The South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) has backtracked from the proposed new format of home and away, instead deciding to hold the 15th edition of the SAFF Championship at a centralised venue.

An executive committee meeting of the regional football body, in its previous meeting, had in principle decided to hold the tournament in home and away basis. Some 23 matches were supposed to be played in that format, but according to a new decision yesterday, the number of matches will be trimmed if held at a centralised venue like the 14 previous editions.

"The SAFF Championship will be held at a centralised venue instead of home and away format. Either Sri Lanka or India is going to be the host but the final decision was not taken at the meeting," BFF general secretary Emran Hossain, who attended the meeting virtually from Dhaka, informed The Daily Star.

The championship is likely to be held between June 20 and July 8.

A source within the SAFF informed that the executive committee, who held a nearly two-hour meeting in Kathmandu yesterday with physical and online presence of participating nations, AFC representatives and marketing agent SportFive, backtracked from the proposed format due to the political uncertainty and election concern in both Bangladesh and Pakistan as well as unavailability of venue in Bangladesh.



With the aim of shaping up women's hockey in the country, the BRAC Bank Women's Development Cup Hockey 2025 began at the Maulana Bhasani Hockey Stadium yesterday. A total of 11 teams are participating in this edition of the competition, with the Bangladesh Hockey Federation relaying that it will be keeping an eye on emerging players from this tournament to nurture them further with training facilities in the coming days.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



PHOTO: REUTERS

## Reasons why CR7 is still in Portugal squad

Despite turning 40, Cristiano Ronaldo continues to deliver the goods. Ronaldo's penalty and a brace from Jhon Duran fired Saudi Pro League side Al-Nassr into the quarterfinals of the AFC Champions League Elite on Monday, with a 3-0 second-leg win over Esteghlal. Ronaldo, who has now scored an unprecedented 927 career goals, was recently backed by Portugal coach, Roberto Martinez, for still including him in the national squad. "He is not in the team today for what he has been, but for what he continues to be: the top scorer with 17 goals in the 21 games we have played in two years," said Martinez in an interview with The Coaches' Voice.

# Atletico 'still alive' in battle against Real Madrid

AFP, Madrid

Atletico Madrid stare down both bitter city rivals Real Madrid and the weight of history as they aim to reach the Champions League quarterfinals on Wednesday.

Los Blancos are the record 15-time champions, the current holders, and lead 2-1 Atletico in the last 16 tie as well as seemingly holding a decades-long jinx on Atletico.

The teams have been paired on five occasions in the history of the competition, and Real Madrid have emerged triumphant every time.

"History exists, and Madrid's history in the Champions League is extraordinary," admitted Atletico coach Diego Simeone before the first leg, with his side still waiting for a first European Cup.

Most painful for Atletico were the 2014 and 2016 final defeats in Lisbon and Milan respectively.

The defeat in the 2016 final was their third defeat at the last hurdle, after losing against Bayern Munich in the 1974 final, with then-president Vicente Calderon labelling his club "el pupas" — the cursed one.

Never does that feel more accurate than when Simeone's side face Real Madrid in Europe. Atletico were undone by Real in tight semifinal and quarterfinal ties in 2017 and 2015, respectively.

However, Atletico's motto is "courage and heart" and with nearly 70,000 fans behind them at their Metropolitan stadium, they will believe they can write



⚡ Atletico have not lost a home Champions League knockout-stage match since a 3-2 defeat to Ajax in March 1997, going unbeaten in 18 such contests since (W11, D7).

⚡ Atletico have lost just once in their past seven home game against Real Madrid in all competitions (W3, D3). In cup competitions, they are unbeaten in five home fixtures against their rivals, winning four and drawing the other.

⚡ Real Madrid had a streak of eight consecutive away victories against Atletico between January 2008 and



February 2014. However, since then, they have managed just three wins from 17 away games in this derby across all competitions (L7, D7).

⚡ Real Madrid have progressed 21 times from 22 Champions League ties when they've won the first leg. Under Carlo Ancelotti, they have progressed on nine out of nine such instances.

⚡ This match will mark Ancelotti's 75th Champions League game in charge of Real Madrid, making him the first coach to reach this milestone with the club, and the seventh coach to do so with any single team.

a new chapter into the history books.

This will be the first Champions League clash against Real Madrid at Atletico's new home, with their 2017 final four battle their last ever European game at their beloved Vicente Calderon

stadium.

Simeone said the first leg was "very tactical" for a Madrid derby, with both sides cautious in the second half after Brahim Diaz put Madrid 2-1 ahead in the 55th minute.

Rodrygo Goes gave the hosts the lead but Julian Alvarez's fine strike levelled for Atletico in the first half.

"If it was difficult tonight, imagine what it will be like next Wednesday," said Carlo Ancelotti last week, fully aware of the pressure from the stands his side will face.

Simeone's team were cautious at the Bernabeu despite trailing because they believed that with a tight scoreline at the half-way point, they can capitalise at home.

"Our fans push us, they give us energy, they make putting in the effort not difficult, and we need them," said Simeone.

"We are still alive and we may have a good night on Wednesday."

Star Madrid forwards Vinicius Junior and Kylian Mbappe were kept extremely quiet in the first leg but both scored as they beat Rayo Vallecano on Sunday in LaLiga to pull level with leaders Barcelona.

Ancelotti was able to take off some star names, including Mbappe, Rodrygo, and Jude Bellingham, who is back from suspension and set to start for Madrid. Atletico endured a more painful weekend with two late goals consigning them to a 2-1 defeat at Getafe, but Simeone said his team would recover in time to face Madrid.

"The players feel bad because we played a bad match," admitted the Argentine.

"We have to try to be strong, united, with the hope of improving our game, and we can't imagine anything else."

## SHORT CORNER

### United to leave Old Trafford for 100,000-seat stadium

Manchester United on Tuesday announced plans to build a new 100,000-capacity stadium close to their historic Old Trafford home, which co-owner Jim Ratcliffe promised would be the "world's greatest" football ground. The stadium, which will be built on land surrounding Old Trafford, will cost around £2 billion (\$2.6 billion) and the project timescale is five years.

### Australia-England 150th anniversary Test to be played under lights at MCG

Australia's clash with England to mark the 150th anniversary of the first Test match will be played as a day-nighter at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in March 2027, Cricket Australia said on Tuesday. The MCG hosted the first Test ever played in 1877 and the centenary match between Australia and England 100 years later. The hosts won both matches by 45 runs.

### Pant urges young cricketers to prioritise national dreams over IPL

India's star wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant has advised young cricketers to focus on representing their country instead of prioritising the glamour of the Indian Premier League (IPL). "Since childhood, I had only one dream—to play for India. I never even thought about playing in the IPL. I think today, people are more focused on the IPL. Of course, it's a great platform, but I believe that if your goal is to play for your country, everything else—including the IPL—will eventually fall into place," said Pant.

\*\*Read full stories on The Daily Star website

# BCB hopes WDPL prepares team for WC qualifiers

SPORTS REPORTER

Nigar Sultana Joty-led Sheltech Cricket Club secured the Women's Dhaka Premier League (WDPL) title on Monday with a game in hand, having picked up seven straight wins.

But this year's edition of the WDPL has been more than just about deciding which is the best 50-over women's outfit in Dhaka's club scene as the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is hoping the tournament will help the national team get ready for the ODI World Cup qualifiers in April.

The WDPL is usually held later in the year but the BCB preponed it this year ahead of the qualifying matches, a move the BCB women's wing chairman Nazmul Abedeen Fahim commended.

"The Women's Premier League is going on and it's very important for this year because right after this the team will head to Pakistan for World Cup qualification tournament where there are teams such as West Indies and Sri Lanka," Fahim said in a BCB video message.

"Only two teams would qualify for the next 50-over World Cup and

so this league is very important in terms of preparation. I think the tournament this time was well organised because it was played at the right time. Usually it is played between May-June during high temperatures when the wicket is not very good," he added.



While established national team players like Farzana Haque Pinky and Sharmin Supta are leading the run-scoring charts, their strike-rates are stuck in the 70-75 region while youngster Shorna Akter amassed 277 runs at a strike-rate of 112, which is the kind of impact that

BCB is searching for.

Fahim recognised that strike-rate has been an issue in women's cricket over the years and also spoke about how the team often struggle when key players like Joty misfire.

"We have seen that the team is dependent on one or two individuals. We can talk about Nigar Sultana Joty and there have been sporadic performances from some players.

"In this year's league, we have found players we can depend upon, who have consistently scored runs. At the same time, a players' strike rate is also very important."

The Tigresses missed out on direct qualification following the 2-1 defeat in the West Indies series in January. As Sheltech lift the trophy today after their final game against Bashundhara Sports City at BKSP, the focus will shift to the qualifiers.

"After the league, the players will have a short camp which will take place on either side of Eid and then the team will depart for Pakistan. We are hoping that the team will qualify for the World Cup," Fahim added.



Bangladesh women's kabaddi team members pose with their medals during a reception at the NSC Conference Room yesterday following their bronze-medal win at the recent 6th Asian Women's Kabaddi Championship in Iran. Captained by Sraboni Mallick and coached by Maleka Parvin, Bangladesh finished with a first-ever bronze medal after making it to the semifinals. Youth and Sports secretary Rezaul Maksud Jahedi, on behalf of the Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuiyan, declared a Tk 25 lakh grant for the team's training during the event, which was also attended among others, by Bangladesh Kabaddi Federation's general secretary SM Newaz Shohag.

PHOTO: BKF