

## With Hamza onboard, BFF gets men’s team sponsor

SPORTS REPORTER

With the imminent arrival of Hamza Choudhury and an air of expectation following the swearing-in of a new governing body a few months ago, Bangladesh Football Federation has snapped up a long-term sponsor for the men’s senior national team.

United Commercial Bank, a first-generation private commercial bank of the country, has come forward to sponsor the men’s team for the next five years, confirmed Bangladesh Football Federation’s vice-president Fahad Karim.

“There is a positivity from the sponsors regarding football these days. I won’t say they are very excited, but when we approach sponsors, we get a positive response. I think Hamza Choudhury is definitely a factor in this, plus the overall expectation regarding football is much higher nowadays,” Karim told The Daily Star, informing that the deal would be part-cash-part-kind.

A memorandum of understanding in this regard between the two parties will be signed at the bank’s head office today.

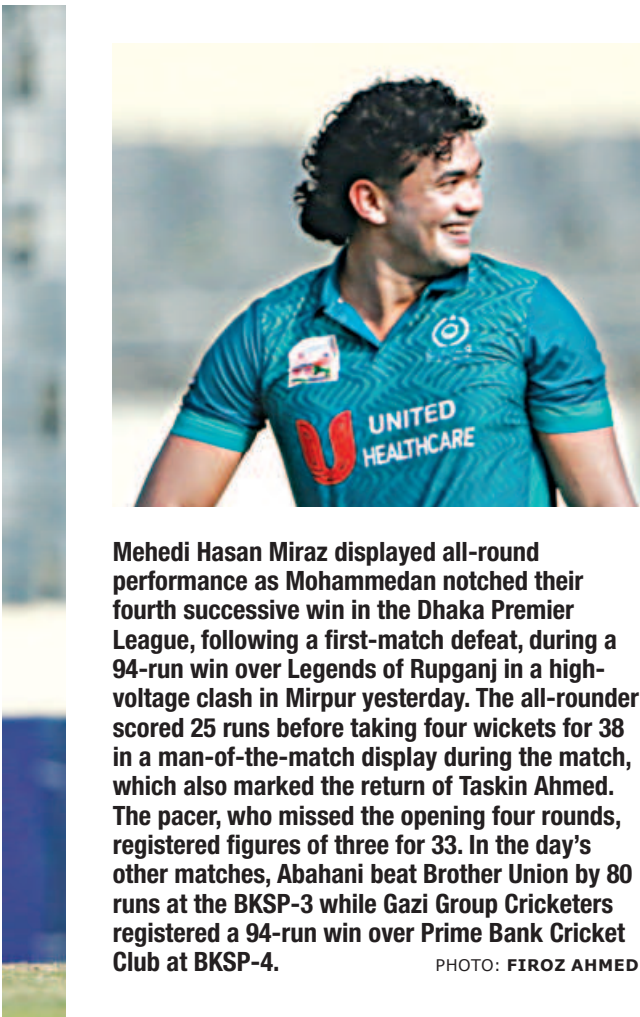
Meanwhile, the BFF vice-president elaborated on the schedule of Hamza’s visit to Bangladesh for the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers fixture against India.

The 27-year-old, who will be making his debut for Bangladesh against India in Shillong on March 25, will arrive on the morning of March 17 and spend the next two days in his ancestral home, informed Karim.

“Hamza Choudhury will land in Sylhet at 11:40am on March 17 on a Biman flight from Manchester. He will be accompanied by nine people – his family members including his mother, his wife and his three kids. Four or five of our executive committee members will be there to receive him. We will have a vehicle arranged for him; he and his entourage will travel from there to Habiganj, which is his ancestral home. He will spend the night there and also the entire day of March 18 there, which will be a completely private affair,” Karim said.

The BFF vice-president said that Hamza and coach Javier Cabrera will face the media on March 19 afternoon ahead of the team’s departure the following day.

“Hamza will come to Dhaka either on the night of 18th or the morning of 19th, and will join the camp straightaway. Then there will be a team photoshoot followed by a press meet, where Hamza and coach Javier Cabrera will face the media,” Karim said, adding that due to the tight schedule in Dhaka, there will not be any special public appearance for Hamza.



Mehedi Hasan Miraz displayed all-round performance as Mohammedan notched their fourth successive win in the Dhaka Premier League, following a first-match defeat, during a 94-run win over Legends of Rupganj in a high-voltage clash in Mirpur yesterday. The all-rounder scored 25 runs before taking four wickets for 38 in a man-of-the-match display during the match, which also marked the return of Taskin Ahmed. The pacer, who missed the opening four rounds, registered figures of three for 33. In the day’s other matches, Abahani beat Brother Union by 80 runs at the BKSP-3 while Gazi Group Cricketers registered a 94-run win over Prime Bank Cricket Club at BKSP-4.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



## Kohli excited by cricket’s return at LA28

REUTERS, BENGALURU

Virat Kohli welcomed the inclusion of cricket in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics and, although the Indian great will not be coaxed out of retirement for the showpiece, he said he believed a new generation of Indian athletes would be ready to strike gold.

Cricket, which enjoys a huge following in India and has a rapidly growing global audience, is returning to the Games after more than a century with a proposed six-team Twenty20 format for men and women in Los Angeles.

Kohli, 36, who retired from the sport’s shortest format last June after India’s World Cup triumph, said international leagues around the world had played a big role in elevating the profile of the sport and ensuring it was showcased at

the Games. “It’s great, I mean, when I heard the news I was really happy about it,” Kohli, who continues to play 50-overs and test cricket for India, said during the RCB Innovation Lab Indian Sports Summit on Saturday.

“It’s happened and the amount of T20 cricket that has been played all over the world, the leagues that are played all over the world and the Indian Premier League (IPL) have definitely played a massive role in that as well.

“It has got cricket to the stage where it’s part of the Olympics. It’s a great opportunity for some of our athletes to be able to taste it.”

## Wounded Atletico seek quick recovery against Barca

AGENCIES

Atletico Madrid will have to pick themselves up as they prepare to host Barcelona in a top-of-the-table LaLiga clash on Sunday after a heartbreaking and controversial shootout defeat to rivals Real Madrid in the Champions League on Wednesday.

While Wednesday’s result was a gut punch for Atletico, Simeone said he hoped they could recover quickly for Sunday’s game against title rivals Barca.

“We’ll see if this defeat will cost us moving forward, the way we went out it’s not easy to digest,” Simeone said on Wednesday.

“I’m sure Barca wanted us to go to extra time. We will get to the game tired, beaten after we competed the way we had to compete tonight, but we’ll give it everything we’ve got on Sunday.”

Barcelona led against Atletico in the first league match in December but Rodrigo De Paul levelled for the visitors and Alexander Sorloth hit a 96th minute winner which helped them usurp the Catalans at the top of the table.

Then in the Copa del Rey semi-final first leg Barcelona let in two goals in the first six minutes and two late goals, including another Sorloth stoppage time strike in a wild 4-4 draw.

“I think we have had really two great matches and of course we have to be focussed from beginning to the end of the match,” Hansi Flick warned his Barcelona stars.

## ‘It’s our turn to take Tigers to the next level’

SPORTS REPORTER

The recent retirements of stalwarts Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad from the white-ball formats have left a giant vacuum in the national team as it is now officially without any of their five senior cricketers, all known together as the ‘Big Five’.

The other three names in this group – Mashrafe bin Mortaza, Tamim Iqbal and Shakib Al Hasan – are no longer active in the national team. Although of the three, only Tamim has officially retired, chances of the other two representing Bangladesh in the future seem next to nil.

Although these five cricketers demonstrated individual brilliances in many games for Bangladesh and helped them win many matches but when it came to winning a global tournament, they always fell short.

On Saturday, all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz insisted that it’s now the turn of the next generation to take Bangladesh cricket to the next level and that they will aim to bring home a trophy from a major event, something their predecessor could never achieve.

“Everyone has to leave at some point. They had a big contribution in taking Bangladesh cricket to a level. Now it’s our turn to take it to the next level,” Miraz told reporters in Mirpur after delivering a match-winning all-round performance of 25 runs and four wickets for Mohammedan Sporting Club against Legends of Rupganj.

“We are yet to win a trophy. Our target will be to win a big tournament which I

think will be good for our generation,” he added.

Miraz also said there are many players in the current side who have considerable experience in the international scene and they must take up the responsibility now.

“Those of us who are in the team now, it’s crucial that we all perform. Many of us have also played 7-8 years in international cricket. There are 6-7 players who have

need of giving extended opportunities to the current cricketers keeping the 2027 ICC World Cup in mind.

“If you want to establish someone, you need to give them opportunities. We have to give them opportunities in the ODIs we have left before the World Cup. We need to take long-term preparation. If we start our preparations just two to three months before the World Cup, it will be difficult.

<b>May 2025:</b> 3 ODIs against Pakistan (away)	<b>March-April 2026:</b> 3 ODIs against Pakistan (home)
<b>June-July 2025:</b> 3 ODIs against Sri Lanka (away)	<b>April 2026:</b> 3 ODIs against New Zealand (home)
<b>July-August 2025:</b> 3 ODIs against Pakistan (home, proposed)	<b>June 2026:</b> 3 ODIs against Australia (home)
<b>August 2025:</b> 3 ODIs against India (home)	<b>July 2026:</b> 5 ODIs against Zimbabwe (away)
<b>October 2025:</b> 3 ODIs against West Indies (home)	<b>August 2026:</b> 3 ODIs against Ireland (away)
<b>November-December 2025:</b> 3 ODIs against Ireland (home)	<b>November-December 2026:</b> 3 ODIs against South Africa (away)

played international cricket for 6-7 or even 10 years. You can’t say that everyone in the team is new in international cricket.

“I feel there is enough experience in the team, we have played international cricket together for many years. Now it’s very important for us to deliver using our experience,” said Miraz, who expressed the

“We have around two-and-a-half years left before the World Cup. We need to decide what will be the team’s setup from now on. We need to start our preparations considering who will be playing in which position. Players need to be given opportunities and everyone must back each other,” he concluded.

## Serie A title race heats up as Inter clash with Atalanta

AGENCIES

With just ten rounds remaining in a thrilling Serie A season, leaders Inter Milan prepare for a high-stakes clash against third-placed Atalanta on Sunday.

A mere three points separate the sides, setting up a crucial encounter in Bergamo that could redefine the title race.

Inter sit atop the table with 61 points, just one ahead of reigning champions Napoli, who will be keen to capitalise when they visit relegation-threatened Venezia.

Simone Inzaghi’s men, despite their European exploits, have struggled for consistency in the league, winning only three of their last seven matches.

Their latest league outing saw them scrape past bottom club Monza 3-2, but a commanding Champions League victory over Feyenoord should provide much-needed confidence.

“It’s true that our Champions League numbers look different from our league form,” admitted Inzaghi after his 200th game in charge. “But we’re still in the mix, and we’ll fight on all fronts.”

Inter also have a Coppa Italia semifinal against city rivals Milan to contend with, making squad rotation a crucial factor in the coming weeks.

Meanwhile, Atalanta, who exited both the Champions League and Coppa Italia last month, are solely focused on Serie A glory. Gian Piero Gasperini’s side boast the joint-best attack in the league alongside Inter, having netted 63 goals, but their form has dipped. After an incredible 11-match winning streak between October and December, La Dea have won only four of their last 11 games.

Napoli, lurking in second place, ended a five-game winless run with a crucial 2-1 victory over Fiorentina. They could leapfrog Inter with a win at Venezia, should the Nerazzurri falter in Bergamo.

Juventus, currently fourth with 52 points, were humiliated 4-0 by Atalanta last weekend but remain in contention for a top-four finish. They travel to eighth-placed Fiorentina, aiming to bounce back and stay ahead of Lazio, who sit just one point behind them.

Further down the table, Milan—now nine points off the top four—host Como, knowing anything less than three points will likely seal their fate outside of next season’s Champions League.

As Serie A enters its final phase, every match takes on added significance. For Inter, Atalanta, and Napoli, the margin for error is razor-thin, making Sunday’s showdown a true title decider.

## Can Magpies end decades of heartache?

AGENCIES

In the heart of Newcastle, where the grand St James’ Park towers over the city like a sacred shrine, statues of the club’s legends stand as silent witnesses to the Magpies’ long and storied history.

For generations of Geordies, these bronze figures are more than mere sculptures—they are symbols of hope, nostalgia, and an undying connection to a football club that has endured decades of heartache.

Among them, Jackie Milburn’s statue holds a special place in the hearts of those who remember Newcastle United’s golden era. ‘Wor Jackie,’ as he is affectionately known, was the hero of the 1955 FA Cup final, scoring in the very first minute to set the Magpies on course for a 3-1 victory over Manchester City.

That triumph was Newcastle’s sixth FA Cup title and their third in five years. But since then, the club’s trophy cabinet has gathered nothing but dust, aside from the now-defunct Inter-Cities Fairs Cup in 1969.

Over the years, Newcastle have come agonisingly close to reclaiming glory. Under Kevin Keegan’s leadership in the mid-90s, they famously squandered a 12-point lead in the Premier League, ultimately finishing



second to Manchester United. FA Cup final heartbreak followed in 1998 and 1999, and more recently, the Magpies fell to Manchester United in the 2023 League Cup final despite the financial boost from the club’s Saudi-backed ownership.

But now, a new hope emerges. As Newcastle prepare to face Liverpool in another high-stakes final tonight, fans dare to dream again. The city is buzzing with cup final fever—children have been given permission to ditch school uniforms in favour of black and white stripes, and thousands will descend upon London with dreams of witnessing history.

At the heart of Newcastle’s resurgence is Swedish striker Alexander Isak, who has netted 22 goals in 32 appearances this season. Though he admits to being unfamiliar with much of Newcastle’s football folklore, he understands the weight of expectation. “I think you find out

quite quickly about the greats and the history of the club,” he said. “I’m trying to create my own history.”

Midfield maestro Bruno Guimaraes, still haunted by the tears of their last final defeat, is determined to rewrite the story. “I want tears of happiness this time,” he declared. “We want to make thousands and



thousands of Geordies happy.”

With their loyal supporters behind them and a squad brimming with belief, could this finally be Newcastle’s moment? The Magpies have waited 69 years for silverware—on Sunday, they have the chance to end the drought and give their city the celebration it so desperately craves.