

## 'We have brought back people's love for the club'

### Mohammedan clinch maiden BPL title

SPORTS REPORTER

Mohammedan coach Alfaz Ahmed said it was time for the club to pay back for the sacrifice of the players and the coaching staff after guiding the Black and Whites to their first professional football league title.

The former national team captain, along with his charges, watched on Youtube as their closest rivals, Abahani, got beaten 2-1 by Fortis FC at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Dutta Stadium in Cumilla on Saturday afternoon, effectively handing the Bangladesh Premier League to Mohammedan with three games in hand.

Their first title in 18 years of professional football era also ended a 23-year wait for Bangladesh's most successful club. The 89-year-old club had gone through a lot of ups and downs this century -- having won their last title in 2002 when the league was called Dhaka Premier Division League -- before making a bit of a resurgence under Alfaz, a prodigal son of the club.

Following the success, Alfaz said that their biggest satisfaction is bringing back the love and conviction of legions of fans.

"What we have done is bring back people's love for the club. We have instilled belief that we can beat teams



like Bashundhara Kings," the 51-year-old coach told The Daily Star over phone from the club tent.

Abahani, the six-time BPL winners, had the chance to delay Mohammedan's title party had they even been able to register a draw. However, Abahani's defeat against 10-man Fortis had set the players and coaching staff up for party mood.

Alfaz, though, isn't entirely convinced

that they should start the party already. He feels their success will only be meaningful once they are rewarded by the club management, both figuratively and literally.

In the wake of the change in political landscape last year, many sporting clubs have suffered, not the least of whom were Mohammedan themselves. The club has struggled to pay the salaries to the players

and the coaching staff, with close to three months' salaries remaining unpaid. Alfaz believes the club's 20th top-tier league title -- the most in Bangladesh's domestic football -- was a result of the sacrifice of the coaching staff and the players as well as contribution of the club's president and the football committee chairman.

"We want that everyone gets paid their dues," Alfaz said. "You don't win championships every other day... It's time for the officials to pay back."

Under Alfaz, Mohammedan had shown resurgence over the last three seasons. They had won the Federation Cup title in 2022-23 season and reached the final last year too. They lost the final to Bashundhara Kings and endured the same fate in both league and Independence Cup.

There was belief, Alfaz said, that the club could become league champions this time, focusing all their energy on this title. Led by their inspirational skipper Souleymane Diabate, Mohammedan notched 38 points from 15 matches, having lost only once.

"It is a dream come true for me. I've been here for six or seven years. Many teams wanted me to leave but I told them I want to stay here to give something to Mohammedan," the Malian told reporters at the club tent.

## U-19s face toughest test in SAFF final today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will be up against a formidable Indian side when they look to defend their title of the SAFF U-19 Championship in the final at the in Yupia, Arunachal Pradesh today.

The title deciding fixture between the two unbeaten sides will kick off at the Golden Jubilee Stadium in Yupia at 7:30pm Bangladesh time.

The men in red and green, who had won the title of the SAFF U-20 Championship last year, have set their sights on the title again after edging past a gritty Nepal side 2-1 in the semifinals on Friday.

Bangladesh's inspirational skipper Nazmul Huda Faisal, who racked up a goal and an assist in each of the three matches, said they are determined to win the title despite having utmost respect about the quality of the opposition.

"We didn't face each other in this tournament before. So it will be new for both teams, not a problem though," Faisal said at the pre-final press conference yesterday.



"We were confident about our team and the players since the first match of the tournament. Since it's India in the final, so it will be a bit different," Faisal said. "We respect India as a good team. But we will try to give our 100 percent to achieve our target."

The hosts have been flawless in the tournament so far, having racked up 15 goals in three matches without conceding any.

India coach Bibiano Fernandes showed respect to his opponents too, but said they were fully prepared for the final.

"They [Bangladesh] have shown good character in the semifinals, beating Nepal. We respect that. We will prepare from our side and get ourselves ready and make sure we give best efforts in the final," Fernandes said.

## Batting collapse sees 'A' team lose big

SPORTS REPORTER

A dramatic batting collapse saw Bangladesh 'A' team suffer a 70-run defeat against their New Zealand counterparts in the opening four-day of a two-match series at the Sylhet International Cricket Stadium on Saturday.

Chasing a target of 246 runs on the final day, the hosts reached 170-6. However, they lost their last four wickets for just five runs in a span of 19 balls to get bowled out for 175 in their second innings in the final session of the match.

Mahidul Islam Ankon was stranded at one end, unbeaten on 57 off 167 balls, while opener Zakir Hasan scored 50.

Visitors' off-spinner Adi Ashok was the chief wrecker, finishing with 5-54, while left-arm spinner Jayden Lennox claimed three wickets.

Earlier on the day, New Zealand added 41 runs to their overnight score of 216-5 before they were dismissed for 257. Overnight centurion Nick Kelly made a team-high of 122 off 207 balls.

Left-arm spinner Hasan Murad returned figures of 5-61 while off-spinner Nayeem Hasan took four wickets for the hosts.

## Can Rakibul become the next Rafique or Shakib?

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Bangladesh have long celebrated left-arm spinning all-rounders -- from the trailblazing Mohammad Rafique to the iconic Shakib Al Hasan. Now, another name is quietly entering the conversation: Rakibul Hasan.

Known primarily for his left-arm spin, Rakibul is beginning to showcase the kind of all-round ability that could one day earn him a similar status. His recent match-winning performances with both bat and ball in the emerging team suggest that Bangladesh may have found a new



finished as the joint highest wicket-taker with 30 wickets alongside his Abahani Limited team-mate Mosaddek Hossain.

But little was known about his ability with the bat, which finally came to light during the emerging team's three-match one-day series against South Africa, where he played two crucial innings of 24 not out and 42, both contributing to his side's victories in Rajshahi.

"I think playing in the DPL really helped me a lot. I'm happy to contribute to the team's victories," Rakibul told The Daily Star yesterday, as his side reached Chattogram from Rajshahi to play the opening four-day match of a two-match series against the same opponents.

In the series opener, Rakibul walked in

with Bangladesh at 263 for seven, chasing 302. He smashed 24 off just 10 balls, including three sixes, sealing the win with two deliveries to spare.

Rested for the second game to allow squad rotation, Rakibul returned for the decider and once again made an impact. This time, the home team were in deeper trouble at 118 for eight. His 40-ball 42, in an 84-run partnership with Mahfuzur Rahman Rabby, helped the hosts post 225 -- a total that proved more than enough.

He followed up his rescue act with the bat by taking four for 26 in 10 overs, helping secure a 34-run victory and the series, ending with five wickets at an economy of 3.25.

Rakibul acknowledged that his work with High Performance batting coach Rajin Saleh had paid off, and that he is "not worried" about getting a national team call-up yet; even though many of his 2020 U-19 World Cup-winning teammates have already made the step up.

Rajin, however, sees Rakibul as a potential all-round option for the senior side.

"Rakibul worked with me last year in the HP unit," the former Bangladesh player informed. "With the maturity and experience he has now, if he works on a few areas and performs consistently well, he has the potential to serve Bangladesh as a quality all-rounder."

**"With the maturity and experience he has now, if he works on a few areas and performs consistently well, he has the potential to serve Bangladesh as a quality all-rounder."**

HP batting coach **Rajin Saleh**

dual-threat talent in the making.

While his bowling credentials were already well established, having made more than an impression in the recent Dhaka Premier League (DPL), where he

ITALIAN OPEN

## Sinner, Alcaraz set up blockbuster final

AGENCIES

World number one Jannik Sinner produced a sublime semifinal display as he fought back from a set down to beat American Tommy Paul 1-6 6-0 6-3 on Friday to set up today's Italian Open final showdown with Carlos Alcaraz.

Sinner ended a 47-year wait for an Italian to reach the men's singles final in Rome after Adriano Panatta lost the title match to Bjorn Borg in 1978.

Serving first, 11th seed Paul stunned the crowd and went up 5-0 in the first set against Sinner, who approached the clash on a career-best 25 match winning streak. The last time Sinner lost a set 6-1 was in the quarterfinals of the 2024 US Open against Daniil Medvedev, a match he won on his way to his second Grand Slam triumph.

But the Italian top seed, making his comeback this week after serving a three-month doping ban, kept his cool and orchestrated a stunning comeback in the second. He delivered a bagel, giving his rival no chance when forcing a decider.



Sinner and Alcaraz have clashed 10 times since their first encounter at the 2021 Paris Masters. Alcaraz holds a 6-4 advantage in the head-to-head, having won each of their last three matchups. Sinner's most recent victory came at the 2023 Beijing Open.

A win for Sinner will make him the first Italian to win the title since Adriano Panatta in 1976.

Sinner, who is playing in his first tournament since capturing Australian Open title, was up 3-0 in the final set before marching on to reach his seventh ATP Masters 1000 final.

The 23-year-old will face world number three Alcaraz today, the last player who beat him when the pair met in the China Open final in October before Sinner embarked on his now 26-match winning run, with all eyes on another potential final between arguably the two best players of the modern era at the French Open next month.

"If I want to win Sunday, I have to play some of my best tennis," Sinner added. "Carlos played some incredible tennis today. Let's see what's coming."

Alcaraz reached the Rome final for the first time after a thrilling 6-3 7-6(4) win over local hope Lorenzo Musetti earlier on Friday.

"It wasn't about playing brilliant, spectacular tennis. It was about playing smart tennis, playing solid, going to the point when you can, and waiting for the chance to play aggressively. I think I did that pretty well," said Alcaraz.



Chelsea defender Marc Cucurella celebrates scoring the only goal in a nervy 1-0 home victory over Manchester United in the Premier League on Friday, as the Londoners ensured that qualification for the Champions League remains in their own hands. [Inset] Aston Villa also bolstered their bid to qualify for Europe's elite competition with a 2-0 win over Tottenham, courtesy of second-half goals from Ezri Konsa and Boubacar Kamara. The wins helped Chelsea move fourth and Villa a spot below in the table, with four other teams competing to get Champions League tickets in the final stretch of the Premier League.

PHOTO: CHELSEA/REUTERS

