

U-19s lose SAFF final in shootout

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh suffered a heartbreaking loss in a penalty shootout (4-3) against India after fighting back from a goal down in regulation time in the final of the SAFF U-19 Championship at the Golden Jubilee Stadium in Arunachal Pradesh on Sunday. Bangladesh captain Nazmul Huda Faisal blew his shot over the bar before Salah Uddin Shahed saw his shot saved by the opposition keeper after goalkeeper Ismail Hossain Mahin had handed the boys in red and green the advantage with a save from the first shot.

Earlier, it was Mahin's howler which had given India a second-minute lead of the thrilling final, the goalkeeper backpadding casually to a freekick from India captain Singamayum Shami, eventually watching the ball sail into the back of the net.

The hosts, buoyed by a full-house crowd at the top of their voice, launched a torrent of attacks in the first 15 minutes of the match but Bangladesh soon started controlling the game with their skillful and organised football.

The Bangladesh players applied heavy pressure towards the end of the first half and the persistent pressure paid off 16 minute after the break when substitute Joy Ahmed smashed home from a goalmouth melee as India failed to clear the danger.



(L-R) Shamsunnahar Sr, Maria Manda, Monika Chakma, Ritu Porna Chakma and Rupna Chakma (behind in blue jersey) – the five senior players who returned from Bhutan on Saturday after being called up to the women's national team camp, had their first practice session under coach Peter Butler at the Abahani Ground yesterday morning. Part of the 18 senior players who had rebelled against the English coach, these five players are expected to be part of the 23-player final squad that will leave for two friendly matches against Indonesia and hosts Jordan on May 27.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Cricketers positive about Pak tour, prefer reduced schedule

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh players are positive about touring Pakistan but requested the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) to shorten the series, which was originally scheduled to consist of five T20Is.

Meanwhile, BCB has also proposed extending the ongoing two-match T20I series against the UAE by one game, considering their upcoming tour of Pakistan.

BCB president Faruque Ahmed and cricket operations chairman Nazmul Abedeen Fahim are in the UAE and sat down with players to discuss the upcoming tour of Pakistan, with the players responding positively. The BCB is also in discussion with the team management regarding their opinion on the matter.

With the Pakistan tour still pending confirmation due to the India-Pakistan conflict, the BCB expressed interest in adding an extra match in the UAE. The extension would provide time for final decisions and allow the team to travel to Pakistan directly from the UAE, if the tour proceeds.

The BCB has officially proposed the additional match to the Emirates Cricket Board.

"Yes, a proposal has been sent by the board to play another match there. The UAE cricket board will now let us know what decision is taken," said Shahriar Nafees, in charge of BCB cricket operations, to The Daily Star.

Tigers eye improvement in second T20I

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh skipper Liton Das said that they need to improve death overs batting and also focus on making the most out of conditions with the ball in the second T20I against UAE on Monday.

Barring Parvez Hossain Emon's ton, Bangladesh batters did not have the impact they should have had on a batting-friendly surface in the first match of the two-match series which Bangladesh won by 27 runs.

The Tigers need to address their batting-order issues as Mahedi Hasan came in front of Jaker Ali and Shamim Hossain. Neither of the three batters contributed anything significant to the score and thus having reached 103 in the first 10 overs, Bangladesh could only manage 191 for seven in the end, thanks to Emon's 54-ball 100.

"We have to finish better. We couldn't score much in the last three overs," Liton said after the match.

The bowlers, too, found it difficult to contain UAE at the beginning, and at one point of the chase the hosts had found themselves in the driving seat before the bowlers produced key wickets to grab the win.

"I always know my bowlers can bounce back at any time. I trust our bowling unit," Liton said. "That said, credit to the UAE batters as well.

We have to finish better. We couldn't score much in the last three overs.

Bangladesh T20I captain **Liton Das** after first match

They batted very well in the middle overs and we need to learn from this -- to understand what kind of bowling works on this pitch. The way all the bowlers bowled and showed composure was impressive. It looked 50-50 in the middle overs, but they pulled it back brilliantly," he added.

Mustafizur Rahman was the pick of the Bangladesh bowlers, getting in crucial overs in the middle and finishing with two wickets for 17 runs. With Mustafizur departing for his IPL stint and unavailable for the second T20I, the bowling department would have to find answers. In particular, Mahedi Hasan's spells were the most expensive and a remedy in the Powerplay phase might be needed in case Bangladesh's plans with Mahedi do not work in the Powerplay.

For Emon, the match would go a long way to bolstering his confidence in this T20I outfit, having become just the second Bangladesh batter after Tamim Iqbal to notch a T20I ton.

Having played to his strength, Emon would look to keep the momentum going but the other batters have their work cut out to produce a meaningful score after a disappointing first game in the UAE.

'City now must play to qualify for CL'

AFP, London

Pep Guardiola has urged his Manchester City flops to use the pain from their shock FA Cup final defeat as fuel to salvage their dismal season by qualifying for the Champions League.

Guardiola's side will finish without major silverware for the first time in eight years after crashing to a 1-0 defeat against Crystal Palace at Wembley on Saturday.

Guardiola believes City can still partially save face by securing a top-five finish in the Premier League, which guarantees a place in the Champions League next term.

They are currently sixth in the table, one point outside the top five, with a home game against Bournemouth on Tuesday followed by a trip to Fulham for their last match on May 25.

"We are sad because we didn't win a beautiful competition. Now we must continue and recover quickly for the last two finals we have to play to qualify for the Champions League," the Spaniard said.

It was City's second successive FA Cup final defeat after losing last year's showpiece against arch rivals Manchester United.



Di Maria 'will not' return for Benfica

REUTERS

Angel di Maria will not return for Benfica next season, the Argentine forward said after the club failed to win the Liga Portugal following a 1-1 draw at Braga on Saturday, finishing two points below champions Sporting.

The 37-year-old, who retired from international soccer last year after making 145 appearances for Argentina, has spent five years at Benfica in two spells, having re-joined the club in 2023.

"It hurts a lot to end this way after such a long year. It was my last championship match with this shirt and I'm proud to have been able to wear it again," Di Maria wrote on Instagram.

"There's still a final on Sunday and we're going to go there with all our desire and joy to win it. Together as always. Thanks for your support, Benfica fans."

Benfica play Sporting in the final of the Portuguese Cup on May 25, before kicking off their Club World Cup campaign on June 16.

Di Maria, whose contract runs until June 30 according to media reports, did not say if he will play in the Club World Cup.



'I was fighting for a BPL title for so long'

Malian striker Souleymane Diabate has been a driving force for Mohammedan Sporting Club since joining the Black and Whites in the 2018-19 season. The 34-year-old has stood by the club through thick and thin, becoming a symbol of loyalty. This season, his dedication has finally been rewarded with a maiden Bangladesh Premier League title for himself and the club. Club captain Diabate played a pivotal role in the club's historic triumph, netting 10 goals in 15 matches. The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman caught up with the veteran to discuss Mohammedan's triumphant season, his enduring commitment to the club, and much more.

The Daily Star (DS): Captain, it took six seasons here at Mohammedan for you to win the league. How did it feel?

Souleymane Diabate (SD): I'm so happy. After six long years at Mohammedan, I've made it and we've won the league. So Alhamdulillah, we are champions. I was fighting for this one for so long.

DS: How challenging was the league this time, considering the absence of big clubs like Sheikh Jamal DC and Sheikh Rasel KC?

SD: This year was our year. All the teams were complete, everything was there. Allah had already decided that Mohammedan was going to win the league. So, no one could change it.

This time, the league was very tough [to compete in]. Abahani was there, Bashundhara was there, Fortis and many good teams were there. We fought for it and won.

DS: Last season, Mohammedan were runners-up in the league, the Federations Cup as well as the Independence Cup. This time around, you got eliminated from the group stages of the Federation Cup. Did it fuel your desire to win the league?

SD: We were eager to win that. Like I said, it was Allah's will. We were out of the Federation Cup, but it didn't matter because we had won it before. So, this was our chance to win the league. Mohammedan had never won it. So, we were focused on that. The league was more important for us than the Federation Cup.

DS: Mohammedan has been struggling to clear payments for a long time and couldn't even clear payments for the last three months. As a professional player, how do you keep yourself motivated in such situations?

SD: We are professional players. We play in so many countries before coming to Bangladesh. We face the same problems like we face here. So, we handle the problems and we continue to play by being mentally strong. We are from Africa. We are mentally strong. I knew that Mohammedan was going to pay. They are going to give everything before we leave. So, it was not much of a problem because I have been here for six years. Local players, or foreigners, they are going to pay. That's why we didn't cause any problems and continued to play our football.

As far as this season is concerned,

I'm telling you that they will pay. Don't worry about the payment. There have been so many problems and the country had collapsed after Sheikh Hasina got toppled. There are business problems but Mohammedan still managed to pay the players. I know they will pay.

DS: You were offered to leave Mohammedan two years ago. What made you stay?

SD: Football is not all about money. It's about the respect and the love also. So, the love Mohammedan gives me and the respect they give me, that's why I stay. I know if I go to another team, they are not going to give me the same love. We are looking for money but it is not everything. They respect me, they love me, they listen to me also. Anything I say, they will respect it.

DS: How do you evaluate Bangladesh Premier League?

SD: They need more professionalism for Bangladesh football. Many countries, they are more professional than here. Even our team, they need to be more professional.

The league is good, but they need to add more teams, more professionalism.

DS: Can Mohammedan supporters expect to see you in Black and White next season?

SD: I cannot say anything yet. For now, we are champions and I'll celebrate this one and we'll see if I stay or not.

Loyalists rejoice MSC triumph

ANISUR RAHMAN

The vibe would likely have been different had Mohammedan SC clinched their maiden Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) title with a win on the field -- especially after such a dominant display by the Black and Whites throughout the tournament.

Instead, their first top-tier league title in 23 years was secured when archrivals Abahani lost to Fortis FC on Saturday.

Even though fan frenzy was largely absent, what stood out was the longing of Mohammedan loyalists to see their club end the long trophy drought. Hardly any fans could be seen at the Mohammedan club tent in Motijheel yesterday, but former Mohammedan players like Hasanuzzaman Khan Bablu, Kazi Jasim Uddin Josy, Imtiaz Sultan Jonny, Rumman Bin Wali Sabbir, among many others, turned up at the club premises to celebrate the joyous occasion.

There has long been an emotional attachment among these players to one of the country's most popular outfits, which reached its peak with their help in the 1980s and 1990s before enduring a prolonged dry spell without the prestigious league title for over two decades.

Understandably, the former players and supporters were exhausted by the repeated failures of their beloved club and had borne the pain of not winning the coveted BPL title -- the only trophy missing from Mohammedan's cabinet.

Now, they all share the same sentiment -- relief and ecstasy at seeing their side back at the top once again.

"Alhamdulillah, I am very happy because a long-held expectation has finally been fulfilled," said Josy, a league-winning Mohammedan member in 1982, 1986, and 1987.

"It has been unbearable to go 23 years without the league title. We were also victims of discrimination when it came

to recruiting players. Mohammedan were tagged as 'the opposition', and many didn't dare to finance the club. But the approach changed after the Casino scandal," said the former speedy winger.

Jonny, who won three league titles with Mohammedan SC, said, "I can't express my happiness right now. I hadn't even counted the years without the league title -- and now I realize it has been 23 years."

"It's hard to describe the feeling of becoming champions again. We always hoped, but for many years, Mohammedan were fighting to avoid relegation. That was unbearable. It happened due to previous



mismanagement," said Sabbir, adding that the involvement of former players in the last six years since the Casino scandal helped revive the club's past glory.

Former player Sayeed Hasan Kanon called the triumph a result of hard work across all levels and urged the club to take immediate steps to build a strong squad for next season.

"This is the time to form the squad and plan for the next season. It is crucial that we decide about the future while celebrating the title," Kanon said.

For Mohammedan -- a club that has overcome numerous challenges in recent years -- turning Kanon's words into action is crucial if they are to avoid another 23-year wait for league glory.