



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Champions crowned, future stars discovered

ANISUR RAHMAN

The National Stadium yesterday witnessed the jubilant celebrations of the Rajshahi Division girls, who emerged as champions in the National Gold Cup Football Tournament with an emphatic 3-0 win over the once-strong Mymensingh Division in the final.

While the girls' celebration was visible to those present, another occasion for celebration perhaps went unnoticed by the general eye.

National women's team assistant coach Mahabubur Rahman Litu, who watched the final, has already selected a few players from both teams for various age-group national teams – a milestone for those working to advance women's football in the country.

"Three players – one from Dhaka Division and two from Chattogram Division – have already joined the ongoing U-17 national camp.

We also saw promising players like Jannatul, Aleya, Saleha, and Sadia from Rajshahi Division. We will verify their ages before considering them for different age-group national camps," said Litu.

It was fitting that this group of girls is already dreaming of donning the national jersey in the future.

"It feels really good to be named the best player of the tournament – this is beyond my imagination. We also fulfilled our dream of becoming champions," said Rajshahi Division's Aleya, who expressed her desire to play for the national team.

Rajshahi Division also claimed three more individual accolades – best player of the final, top scorer, and best goalkeeper – as they made a strong statement in the fourth edition of the girls' U-17 tournament. Remarkably, coach Zahir Iqbal had only three days to prepare the team, which was composed of players from Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Natore, Sirajganj, and other areas of the division.

"We know each other very well and

had good coordination. That's why we became champions," said Jannatul Ferdous, the final's best player, adding that she was optimistic about receiving a national call-up.

"I'm really happy because I helped the team win by scoring a brace, and I feel proud," said top-scorer Mousumi Khatun, who scored three goals in the final round.

While Rajshahi celebrated their maiden final appearance with the title, it was a somber day for Mymensingh Division, who had reached the final in the previous edition, which was ultimately canceled.

Mymensingh, particularly through Kalshindhur Primary School in Dobaura Upazila, once produced several national players like Sanjida Akhter, Tahura Khatun, Maria Manda, Shamsunnahar Sr. and Shamsunnahar Jr. However, the talent pipeline has now shifted to Ishorganj Upazila, more specifically, the Ishorganj Football Academy.

Of the 18-member Mymensingh squad, nine players were from the Ishorganj Football Academy, run by local referee and coach Mithun Chandra Sen. Two players came from Dobaura Upazila, with the rest hailing from other districts.

"Kalshindhur Primary School once produced many players under Mofiz Bhui, but no such initiatives exist there now," said Mithun. He added that he has been running the academy since 2018 with financial support from Choroni Khola High School in Ishorganj.

"I'm hopeful that the players emerging from the Ishorganj Football Academy will get chances to play in different national teams. Litu Sir has already noted the names of three of our players – Muslima Akter, Rimi Akter, and another," Mithun said.

Meanwhile, Rangpur Division clinched the boys' title of the tournament, coming from two goals down to beat Mymensingh 4-3 in a penalty shootout at the same venue.

No turn yet as bowlers pass tough day in Galle

SPORTS REPORTER

The Galle wicket remained batting friendly for the third successive day and the Sri Lankan batters made the most of it against a toothless Bangladeshi attack, reaching 368-4 at stumps to trail the visitors by just 127 runs at the end of the third day's play yesterday.

Opener Pathum Nissanka was the star of the day, smashing 187 off 256 balls, but missing out on a well-deserved double hundred after being dismissed by pacer Hasan Mahmud in the final half hour of the day.

Earlier, after resuming the day's play on 484-9, Bangladesh's innings survived only 16 balls on Day 3 before the side got bundled out for 494.

In their reply, the Sri Lankan batters scored at a much better rate than Bangladesh courtesy of Nissanka's top-class batting effort which was well supported by others.

Nissanka did not shy away from playing his shots and scored at a healthy strike-rate to keep the Bangladeshi bowlers at bay for majority of the day.



Dinesh Chandimal (54), Angelo Mathews (39) and Lahiru Udana (29) must be cursing themselves for not converting their starts into big scores but still, the hosts finished the day in a comfortable position.

Though Bangladeshi bowlers were at the receiving end

throughout the third day, their pace bowling coach Shaun Tait shielded his bowlers from criticism and the only thing he felt Bangladesh could have done better on the day was their bowling with the new ball.

"It's obviously a good batting wicket. It was a difficult condition

for fast bowlers today [Thursday]. They toiled hard and they gave effort," Tait said in the press conference after the end of the third day's play yesterday.

"We probably missed the trick with the new ball. It would have been nice to take a couple of wickets with the new ball. Apart from that, I'm not going to be negative. We batted for two days. You know it's a good batting wicket," said the former Aussie pacer.

Tait also heaped praises on the Sri Lankan batters for the way they batted and felt his side has a lot of hard work ahead of them in the next two days of the Test.

"They batted really well. Sri Lanka are no pushovers. This is the team which was competing to play in the World Test Championship final. So, they are no pushovers. They are a good side and they have some good batsmen," Tait said.

"I think people in general probably felt that the ball will start to turn from Day 3. But nothing significant happened and that's the way the game has been. Still a couple of days left in this match and Test cricket can turn very quickly," he added.



GENTLEMEN'S GESTURE

In a touching moment at the Galle International Stadium, Bangladesh players accorded a guard of honour to Sri Lanka all-rounder Angelo Mathews as he walked out to bat in his 119th and final Test yesterday. It was during the second session of Day 3 of the first Test between Bangladesh and hosts Sri Lanka. The gesture stood in stark contrast to their fiery 2023 World Cup clash, in which Mathews became the first batter timed out in international cricket following Shakib Al Hasan's appeal. "I hold no grudges," Mathews had said before this game. With over 8,000 Test runs, he departs a Sri Lankan great-- honoured fittingly in the gentlemen's game.

PHOTO: SLC

BPL probe drags on after 50 interviews in five months

SPORTS REPORTER

The independent inquiry committee, set up by Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) in February to assist its Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) in investigating suspicious activities during the last Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20, will need another one-and-a-half to two months to finalise its report.

Former cricketer and committee member Shakil Kasem informed that they have already interviewed over 50 individuals, including players and others involved with the tournament.

"There are some suspicious activities in the betting market based on observations from foreign agencies, and we are looking into the matter," Kasem told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We are collecting a lot of information. It will take some more time. It's going to be a voluminous report.

"It will take around one-and-a-half to two months to submit our findings. We have spoken to over 50 people in different categories. Not all of them are cricketers -- there are others we've spoken to regarding the matter," he added.

Earlier reports suggested the ACU had identified eight matches as suspicious, potentially involving spot fixing and match-fixing, based on anonymous tips and media reports. Ten players and four franchises were reportedly under observation.

Gill's new-look India face stern English test

AGENCIES

India's long wait for a Test series triumph in England enters a new chapter with a bold transition in leadership and identity.

When the five-match series begins at Headingley on Friday, all eyes will be on 25-year-old Shubman Gill, the newly appointed captain stepping into the roles vacated by legends Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli.

With Rohit retiring from Tests and Kohli also bowing out of the red-ball format, Gill not only inherits the captaincy but also the iconic number four batting slot-- once dominated by greats like Sachin Tendulkar and Kohli, who together amassed over 21,000 runs in that position.

Gill's own record, however, remains under scrutiny: an average of 35 from 32 Tests, dipping to 29 abroad and a concerning sub-15 mark in England.

Gill insists he's ready for the responsibility, saying recently, "I believe in leading by example-- not just in performance, but in discipline and hard work."

India's line-up is a mix of youthful



England and India greats James Anderson and Sachin Tendulkar have been honoured with a newly named trophy -- the Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy -- which will be contested in future Test series between the two nations, starting with this. ECB unveiled the new trophy on the eve of the first Test.

India have won only three Test series in England -- in 1971, 1986 and 2007.

Head-to-head record: Out of 136 Tests, England lead with 51 wins, while India have won 35.

At Leeds, the venue for the first Test, the two sides have met seven times -- England won four, India two, with one draw.

Their last five-Test series was in 2024, where India bounced back from 0-1 down to win 4-1 at home.

energy and untested promise. Rishabh Pant, back after a horrific car crash, will offer vice-captaincy support and middle-order steel, while young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal

is poised to make his mark. Yet the squad faces challenges beyond the batting order.

The bowling attack will be without Test greats Ravichandran

Ashwin and the still-recovering Mohammed Shami. Jasprit Bumrah is back but likely to be rotated due to the congested schedule.

With only limited preparation in English conditions, India's ability to take 20 wickets consistently will be tested.

Their opponents, England, aren't without concerns either. With pace legends James Anderson and Stuart Broad retired, the home side are banking on a relatively inexperienced attack. Injuries to Jofra Archer and Mark Wood have ruled them out of the opener, leaving Chris Woakes to lead a pace unit including debutant Brydon Carse.

Even Pant admitted England's absence of their veteran duo brings some relief, but warned: "They still have enough ammunition... We don't want to take anyone lightly."

This series marks the beginning of a new World Test Championship cycle, with both sides eager to reset after mixed recent fortunes. For India, the question is whether a new leader and a younger team can conquer the ghosts of the past and script a long-awaited series win in England-- their first since 2007.



Al Hilal goalkeeper Yassine Bounou celebrates with teammates after saving a stoppage-time penalty from Real Madrid's Federico Valverde, as the Spanish giants had to stay content with a 1-1 draw in their Club World Cup opener at Hard Rock stadium in Miami on Thursday night. Real Madrid had taken the lead through a Gonzalo Garcia strike in the 34th minute before Al Hilal's Ruben Neves earned and converted a penalty to level the score just before half-time, spoiling Xabi Alonso's debut as head coach of Real Madrid.

PHOTO: REUTERS