

## 'Kings now known beyond Bangladesh'

Bashundhara Kings' captain **Topu Barman** led from the back as the Bangladesh Premier League champions stunned Syrian giants Al-Karamah SC in Doha, sealing a fifth straight AFC Challenge League group stage berth. The win came despite a late coaching crisis, with Brazilian coach Fabio Farias jumping ship on the eve of training. Speaking to **The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman**, Topu recalled the improbable journey, the calm leadership of local coaches, Mahbub Hossain Roxy and Golam Jilani, and the mindset that made it possible. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

**DS:** How did Kings manage to reach the AFC Challenge League group stage despite short preparation and tough odds?

**Topu Barman (TB):** We started in difficult circumstances, but players gave more than a hundred percent in training. We were focused, dedicated, and hungry for victory because we knew how important the match was. Everyone played with heart, aware that Karamah were runners-up in both AFC Challenge League and AFC Cup, and that their Syrian players were of high quality.

**DS:** When did you learn that Brazilian coach Farias would not join in Qatar, and how did you adapt?

**TB:** We arrived in Qatar at midday and learned just one hour before our evening training that he hadn't come. That night it was confirmed he had joined an Iraqi club, but it didn't affect us mentally or tactically since we hadn't trained under him.

We continued under Roxy and Jilani sir, who had conducted our 12 day camp in Dhaka, advising us to stay calm, focus on our roles, and take responsibility. The win was special as it made Kings known beyond Bangladesh.

**DS:** How did the team maintain pace despite fitness concerns from only 14 days' training?

**TB:** It came down to mental toughness and commitment. Initially, we doubted whether we could beat a Syrian club, but once we had one-two training sessions in Qatar, our confidence soared. Taking an early lead helped us stay focused and strong throughout.

**DS:** What instructions did Roxy and Jilani give?

**TB:** We responded according to the demands of Roxy and Jilani sir. They were clear about how to build up play, handle pressure, and take individual responsibility. As coaches we've known since childhood, they earned our trust, and both local and foreign players fully supported their approach and implemented their philosophy.

**DS:** How did the team show such a strong combination despite foreign players training only two days?

**TB:** Dorielton Gomes had played with us before, Raphael Augusto's style suited our possession football, and Emmanuel Sunday proved his quality on and off the ball. All four foreign players knew our style from playing in Bangladesh, and we knew theirs. That mutual familiarity made quick chemistry possible.

**DS:** How confident are you about progressing from the group stage this time, after failing to secure a single point in the last edition?

**TB:** We were in a negative state ahead of the preliminary round but we'll have several national and domestic matches before the group stage in October. Our fitness and game temperament will be much better, and with the same effort, I'm confident we can advance.

**DS:** How do you rate Kings for the upcoming domestic season?

**TB:** I think we have a better, balanced and more matured squad than last season, capable of winning all five trophies.



## CAN BARCA DOMINATE AGAIN?

Young, relentless, and bold -- that's how Barcelona showcased themselves in the Spanish domestic league last season, securing an impressive LaLiga and Copa del Rey double. Hansi Flick's side will begin their title defence today with a trip to the Estadi Mallorca Son Moix to face Mallorca on the opening weekend of the new campaign. Barcelona were the most prolific attacking team across Europe's top five leagues last season, scoring a total of 102 goals -- around 53 percent of which came from their front trio: young sensation Lamine Yamal, Robert Lewandowski, and Raphinha. For their opener, however, Barca will have to make do without Lewandowski, who is still recovering from a hamstring injury sustained during pre-season. However, the challenge for Barcelona could be steeper this term, with arch-rivals Real Madrid adding even more firepower to their ranks under new coach Xabi Alonso as they aim to dethrone the Catalans.

PHOTO: BARCELONA

## All eyes on foreign players as transfer window closes

SPORTS REPORTER

Five-time Bangladesh Premier League champions Bashundhara Kings have emerged as the strongest side on paper, assembling a squad packed with 17 current and former national players alongside four proven foreign campaigners, as the two and a half-month-long transfer window closed on Thursday night.

Although six-time champions Abahani had been expected to form a stronger squad than last season, it was Kings who stunned the football fraternity by signing four established foreign players -- Brazilians Dorielton Gomes and Raphael Augusto, and Nigerians Emmanuel Sunday and Emmanuel Tony. Additionally, they secured two key local players, Mohammad Ridoy and Shahriar Emon, from rivals Abahani.

Kings also surprised many by recruiting Sunderland U-21 player Cuba Mitchell, further strengthening their 35 member squad, which already made an impact by defeating Syrian side Al Karamah SC in the preliminary round of the AFC Challenge League.

"I believe we've formed a stronger squad than last season, and we've already proved our potential in the AFC Challenge League," said Kings captain Topu Barman. "We aim to compete for all five titles this season and make history by winning them all."

Attention had also been on defending champions Mohammedan, especially after



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Mohammedan manager **Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib**

their historic maiden professional league title last season. However, the Black and Whites appear to have lost some strength after parting ways with three key foreign players -- Souleymane Diabate, Emmanuel Sunday, and Emmanuel Tony -- due to financial constraints.

Despite the setbacks, Mohammedan remain optimistic about competing on all fronts.

"We've signed better local players than last season, though we couldn't retain all our foreign players because of financial issues," said Mohammedan manager Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib. "Still, we've built a fighting team like last year when we started as underdogs. On paper, Kings have assembled the best squad."

Last season's runners-up

Abahani retained most of their local players, except Ridoy and Emon, but added national team stars Sheikh Morsalin and Al Amin, along with the return of proven Malian forward Souleymane Diabate.

"We could have felt better had we managed to form a stronger squad," said Abahani manager Satyajit Das Rupu. "It would have helped if we'd signed the foreign players we initially contacted. Now, we'll wait and see how the new foreign recruits perform."

Rupu added that Abahani believe in performance on the pitch rather than squad strength on paper and will compete for the four titles available this season.

Besides Kings, Mohammedan, and Abahani, the remaining seven clubs -- Fortis FC, Rahmatganj MFS, Brothers Union, Bangladesh Police FC, Young Men's Fakirerpool Club, newly promoted Arambagh KS, and PWD Club -- have also completed their player registrations.

Mohammedan's Nakib pointed out that teams like Fortis, Police, and Rahmatganj could pose challenges this season, stating, "There's little difference among local players across clubs; foreign signings will ultimately decide the matches."

Apart from three foreign players eligible to start against a maximum of five registrations, the new rule allowing five players from SAARC countries to be fielded as 'local players' could also potentially make an impact on how teams perform in the long run.

## Cabrera's camp in a bind over release of players

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings have once again refused to release players for the ongoing national team preparation camp ahead of the September friendly matches against Nepal, citing their own pre-season preparations.

Bangladesh coach Javier Cabrera conducted his first training session with only 12 players at the Bashundhara Kings practice ground on Friday after the club declined to release the following players: Topu Barman, Taj Uddin, Tariq Kazi, Saad Uddin, Sohel Rana, Sohel Rana Jr, Mohammad Ridoy, Faisal Ahmed Fahim, Rakib Hossain, and Shahriar Emon.

Defenders Issa Faisal of Police FC and Alomgir Molla of Abahani are expected to join the camp tonight. Players from Abahani, Mohammedan, and Brothers Union have already reported.

"In a bid to reduce the risk of injuries and ensure long term wellbeing of players following their prolonged absence from competitive football, we have already begun our pre-season preparations. Therefore, it is not possible for us to release the players, and we are sincerely sorry," read a letter from Kings, signed by the club's general secretary, Biddut Kumar Bhowmik, and addressed to the BFF general secretary.

Kings previously withheld players in 2019 ahead of the South Asian Games in Nepal, in 2020 ahead of two friendlies against Nepal in Dhaka, and in 2021 ahead of the World Cup Qualifiers in Qatar. However, on those occasions, they eventually released the players either later or in accordance with FIFA regulations. In 2023, the BFF excluded players from both Kings and Abahani when forming the squad for the Asian Games in China.

Interestingly, Kings president Imrul Hasan also serves as BFF's senior vice president and vice-chairman of the national teams committee, which is responsible for holding the current camp and arranging the friendly matches against Nepal on 6 and 9 September in Kathmandu.

Meanwhile, seven current members of the senior national team, who participated in the Asian Cup Qualifiers against Singapore in June, are now part of the U-23 national team. This has further complicated Cabrera's efforts to assemble a full-strength strong squad. National team manager Amer Khan told reporters that Kings are expected to release their players ahead of the official FIFA window next month.



Booster Robotics T1 humanoid robots take part in a 5-on-5 group match on a football pitch during the inaugural World Humanoid Robot Games at the National Speed Skating Oval in Beijing yesterday. China kicked off a three-day-long sports showcase for humanoid robots, looking to highlight progress in artificial intelligence and robotics, with 280 teams from 16 countries competing in sports such as football, track and field, and table tennis. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Off-season woes of FORGOTTEN FIRST-CLASS CRICKETERS

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

In November last year, pacer Mehedi Hasan Rana returned to competitive cricket after a two-year hiatus due to injury through first-class competition National Cricket League (NCL). The pacer made his mark immediately as he claimed 19 wickets in two matches and received player-of-the-match awards in both games for Khulna Division.

He then featured for the same division in the inaugural NCL T20 competition, represented Dhaka Capitals in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL), and Agrani Bank Cricket Club in the Dhaka Premier League (DPL) respectively.

However, after the season ended, Rana, one of the 100 male cricketers who are under Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) first-class contract, was not included in any BCB teams and had to individually prepare for the upcoming domestic season, which will start with NCL T20 on September 14.

"After the last season, I took one-month off to recover. In the following three months, I personally worked with BCB physio Yakub bhai [Chowdhury Dalim] in Dhaka as I was not part of any BCB teams such as the HP Unit or Bangladesh Tigers," the 28-year-old pacer told **The Daily Star** recently.

Another first-class contracted cricketer, who lives outside Dhaka and has not been part

of any BCB pipeline teams for years, detailed the challenges players face while trying to train in divisional areas during the off-season.

"We don't get any practice facilities from the BCB. Usually, we practice in nearby clubs during off season, we bear the cost ourselves. We also have to take permission from many places to use the wickets. If we ask for it 10 days, we get permission for only a day," the cricketer, requesting anonymity, told **The Daily Star**.

"Recently they have permitted first-class players to use indoor facilities and the wickets. Some of us went for practice in the last few days and we were allowed to use the indoor facilities. But I don't know whether it



will continue.

"We worked hard throughout the year and also performed well whenever we got the opportunity. But only some selected players get the facilities by rotation. Once I asked a selector and he told me that as they have invested a lot on a player, they could not drop him only after a year. Their thinking is that if they pick one player, whether he plays well or poorly, he will remain in the team," he added.

In recent times, some senior cricketers have been flying to countries like the USA, the UK and Australia after the domestic season in Bangladesh and one of the main reasons for it is over there, they get better practice facilities and match practice.

"Over there, we get three to four matches weekly. We play against different clubs.. "We get to play with the duke ball. It's good for preparation as in Tests and in first-class cricket in Bangladesh, we use duke balls too," said a senior cricketer.

According to a BCB official, around of 33-34 cricketers trained in separate Bangladesh Tigers camps so far this year. Meanwhile, a total of 28 cricketers recently completed a two-month training camp as part of the High Performance Unit in Chattogram.

This leaves around 63 first-class contracted cricketers of the BCB who played in the domestic season but were not part of these teams or the national side. Hence, these

cricketers had to come up with individual plans and had to toil hard to find practice facilities during off season.

Currently, 100 first-class cricketers in three different categories -- A, B, and C--get Tk 35,000, Tk 30,000 and Tk 25,000 per month respectively as salary from the BCB. Their salary was increased by Tk 5,000 recently although they are yet to be paid the new sum.

"As we are getting paid by the BCB, they should take few more measures to monitor our work. Those of us who aren't part of any BCB teams, can't work on our fitness to the level of those who are. If the BCB can hold two camps for us during the off season, I think it will do us good," Rana said.

"It will be good for us if indoor and outdoor facilities are improved in every division. They can also prepare separate wickets for us for year-long preparation," he added.

When contacted, BCB's tournament committee chairman Akram Khan accepted their limitations but also asked the players to act responsibly during off-season.

"At one time, we hardly had any playing fields, but we were developing gradually. Now, we have facilities available. It's their responsibility to work on their fitness and practice individually. If they want to depend totally on the cricket board and not do training and fitness work, they might lose their place in the team," Akram said.