Star SPORT
DHAKA TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 16, 2025, ASHWIN 1, 1432 BS

What to WATCH

T SPORTS
Asia Cup T20
Afghanistan vs Bangladesh
Live from 8:30 pm
SONY SPORTS 1, 2, AND 5
Champions League
Athletic Bilbao vs Arsenal
Live from 10:45 pm
Juventus vs Dortmund
Live from 1:00 am (Wednesday)
Tottenham vs Villareal
Live from 1:00 am (Wednesday)
Real Madrid vs Marseille
Live from 1:00 am (Wednesday)

Politics fails to mask muted Dubai duel

EKUSH TAPADER FROM ABU DHABI

On Sunday in Dubai, India and Pakistan faced off in the much-anticipated Asia Cup group-stage clash, a fixture long celebrated as cricket's most intense rivalry. Yet once again, the pitch told a familiar story: India dominated from start to finish, and that the fire of the rivalry is being kept alive largely through politics.

Events like the Pahalgam attack, ongoing border tensions, and the cultivation of aggressive nationalism have driven the nations further apart. On the field, this manifests in unsporting gestures: Indian players refused the customary post-match handshake, while Pakistan boycotted the press conference.

In a pre-match discussion on Cricbuzz, when the host remarked, 'India now have only the easiest match left in their group,' commentator Harsha Bhogle interjected jokingly: 'Easier than this one (the match against Pakistan)?'

Given how routinely Pakistan crumble against India, Bhogle's jibe landed perfectly, and it is hard to argue when someone labels these encounters "easy" for India.

The last real thriller between the two came in Melbourne in 2022, with Virat Kohli's classic T20 World Cup finish. Another memorable contest was last year's low-scoring T20 World Cup nail-biter, narrowly lost by Pakistan. Outside these rare moments, the matches have been overwhelmingly one-sided.

The head-to-head record in multi-nation tournaments underlines the gulf. In 14 T20s, Pakistan have won just three times -- the same number across their last 20 ODI and T20 encounters combined. In ODIs, they are yet to win a World Cup game against India.

After Sunday's seven-wicket defeat, one Pakistani fan lamented: "They don't even know how to play modern cricket. Whether you play with Babar Azam or these Salmans, nothing will change. Pakistan cricket doesn't have DNA anymore."

Ex-captain Shoaib Malik echoed the sentiment: "I'm not surprised at all. This match showed where our cricket stands. It's not a bad day; it's a lack of skill. We were once great at hockey, now we're at the bottom.

"Cricket is going the same way... Against big sides, we have no chance in any format."

There is a prevalent joke that Pakistan cricket, which has been a carousel of chaos for a while now, starts the morning under one board chairman and ends the evening under another. Coaches rotate constantly, captaincy swaps abound; even players struggle to track leadership.

"Our cricket has been stagnant for years. People come to run it for four months, then leave, and someone else comes in. It keeps going like this," Malik added.

In such disorder, it is impossible to match the standards India, England, or Australia have set. Once, the West Indies were dominant too; now occasional wins are newsworthy themselves.

Even Indian fans are growing weary of one-sided contests. Unais Thottiyil Yusuf, a taxi driver from Kerala, put it bluntly: "What's the point of watching the Asia Cup? There's only one team, and no competition."

In Dubai, many seats remained empty, reportedly due to high ticket prices. The one-sided nature of the opening clash could likely follow through to the Super Four rematch. While Indian fans will still flock to watch their stars, Pakistani supporters' confidence in their team has undoubtedly eroded.

The two teams may meet up to two more times in this edition, but if the performance gap continues, even political colouring may not sustain the all-too-familiar pre-match buzz in future tournaments.

Afghanistan hold the edge in T20I head-to-heads against Bangladesh, winning seven of the 12 encounters. Bangladesh have won the other five.

The Afghans won convincingly in their last Asia Cup T20 clash against the Tigers, played in Sharjah in 2022.

Bangladesh skipper Litton Das is just 27 runs shy of surpassing Shakib Al Hasan (2,551) as the country's all-time leading run-scorer in T20Is.

Litton is also the top scorer in Bangladesh-Afghanistan contests, amassing 227 runs in 10 matches at a strike rate of 109.66, with two half-centuries.

Afghanistan's Mohammad Nabi ranks second with 220 runs at a strike-rate of 118.27, and along with Shakib Al Hasan.

Rashid Khan is the leading wicket-taker in these fixtures, claiming 22 scalps at an economy rate of 5.52 and an average of 10.54 in 11 matches.

Hopes hinge on Afghan hurdle

EKUSH TAPADER FROM ABU DHABI

Bangladesh's last T20 clash with Afghanistan in Kingston during last year's World Cup in the USA remains unforgettable -- a game that handed the Tigers two defeats: one on the scoreboard and another in mindset.

Back then, Bangladesh needed a big win to boost their net run rate and stay in contention for the semifinals. Yet they never fully seized the opportunity, playing just to win and ending up losing. The defeat rattled the team's confidence, while Rashid Khan and teammates made history by advancing to the last four.

The stage is different now, but the challenge is similar. In this Asia Cup, Bangladesh must beat Afghanistan to keep their Super Four hopes alive -- then wait for a loss from Afghanistan against Sri Lanka.

Coming into the tournament, Liton Das and his side looked confident, showing signs of stability. Yet after a heavy defeat to Sri Lanka, the atmosphere has turned tense.

Afghanistan, meanwhile, have played one match so far but showed intent in a convincing win over Hong Kong. The UAE pitches are familiar territory, giving Rashid's team a clear advantage.

Afghanistan coach Jonathan Trott acknowledged Bangladesh's potential: "My sense is that Bangladesh have real match-winning players. We will have to put up a good challenge."

He also recalled their T20 World Cup triumph in St Vincent: "Qualifying for the semifinal gave us great confidence. That was a historic, tight game." Trott added that Bangladesh will face added pressure in this do-or-die scenario.

It was the batting collapse against Sri Lanka that put Bangladesh in a tough spot today. Bangladesh spin coach Mushtaq Ahmed highlighted the mental side of recovery: "I think little doubts occur. When you have that kind of failure early on... you have to tell your batsmen that those things happen, but you have to move on very fast, very quickly. So, our duty as coaches is to let them know not to go into a shell, not to lose their confidence."

Bangladesh must regroup quickly, according to Mushtaq. "From a coaching point of view, we have to believe that we can qualify.

"It's difficult, of course, when you rely on 'ifs and buts,' but you have to concentrate on the next coming match, concentrate and win that match first. Then, when you are mentally strong and have belief, it can happen."

Sunday's loss exposed the fine margins in Bangladesh's approach -- skill alone is not enough if cautious mindset persists. Against an experienced Afghan side, the Tigers face a stern test to keep their campaign alive.

Bangladesh U-19s find positives in rain-marred UK tour

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Bangladesh Under-19 team's just-concluded tour of the United Kingdom was heavily marred by inclement weather, with only two of the six scheduled YODIs producing a result. Still the team's management is glad that a few individuals made their mark in the limited opportunities that were on offer.

Earlier this month, the Young Tigers travelled to the UK for a one-off YODI against Ireland U-19 side followed by a five-match series against their English counterparts.

Against Ireland, Bangladesh U-19 reached 209-7 in 37 overs before rain abruptly ended the game in Loughborough.

In the series opener against England, Rizan Hossan's brilliant hundred, aided by left-arm spinner Samiun Basir Ratul's four-wicket haul, helped the tourists earn a massive 87-run win.

The hosts won the rain-curtailed second match by four wickets in DLS method after English opener Isaac Mohammed, nephew of English all-rounder Moeen Ali, struck a match-winning hundred in Loughborough.

The third and fourth match in Bristol and Kent respectively ended in a no result as in both games the first innings couldn't be finished due to rain while the fifth YODI was abandoned without a ball being bowled.

In between the constant rain interruptions, youngsters Rizan and Ratul impressed, with the former making 159 runs in three outings against England, which included a hundred and a half-century, and the latter finishing the series as the joint highest wicket-taker with eight wickets in three innings.

"I think Rizan and Ratul have been really consistent for us and we can think of fast-tracking these two cricketers," U-19 team selector Ehsanul Hoque told The Daily Star on Monday.

"The England side was a difficult opposition and playing against them that too on their soil was more challenging... I think our players got a good taste of playing in that condition despite all the rain," he added.

Meanwhile, head coach Naveed Nawaz feels that his charges learnt a lot from this tour.

"It was a great experience. Unfortunately, rain spoilt most of the matches but I am sure our boys learnt a lot from this," the Sri Lankan said.

"Experience of conditions will help players learn to navigate and to know what England U-19 looks like to do strategic comparisons since we might play them in the World Cup as well," he said, adding that he feels there are still few places up for grabbing for the World Cup bound-flight.

The U-19 team is scheduled to return home today. They will next play a five-match YODI series against Afghanistan at home next month, which will be their last bilateral series before the Asia Cup, slated to begin in December.

SHORT CORNER

NCL fixtures 'bodily shifted' as Bogura switch falls flat

The ongoing National Cricket League Twenty20 (NCL T20) tournament has found no respite from rain, as both fixtures that were shifted to Rajshahi were abandoned on Monday. With the situation worsening, Tuesday's fixtures in Rajshahi have now been postponed, a BCB tournament committee official confirmed. "The fixtures will be bodily shifted," the official informed.

Hurdler Roni disappoints

Hurdler Najimul Hossain Roni finished third from last in the heats of the 400m hurdles at the World Athletics Championships in Japan Sunday. Roni, who set a national record in the 400m hurdles in February with a time of 50.84 seconds, was well off his personal best in the World Championships, clocking 52.47 seconds. The Bangladesh Army athlete finished ahead of only two competitors -- from Macao and Saint Kitts and Nevis -- and placed 42nd out of 44 participants overall.

Finals of JFA U-14 set to begin today

The final round of the Japan Football Association U-14 Youth Women's Development Tournament is set to get underway on Tuesday in Rajshahi, but zonal champions Rangamati have withdrawn from the competition, citing a lack of available players and financial constraints. Khagrachari have been included in place of Rangamati to complete the eight-team final round. The final is scheduled to take place on September 25.

**Read full stories on The Daily Star website.*

Real aim for consistency as Champions League returns

AGENCIES

The Champions League is back on Tuesday, and with it the promise of more upsets, drama and high-stakes nights under Europe's brightest lights.

After Paris Saint-Germain's historic 5-0 demolition of Inter Milan in May, the tournament that introduced a radical new format last season is set for its second run.

UEFA's revamped 36-team league phase, replacing the traditional eight groups, injected unpredictability into the competition. Gone were the days when Europe's elite could coast through early rounds; instead, last season giants like Real Madrid and Manchester City found themselves fighting for survival until the final fixtures.

Even so, PSG's eventual triumph showed that powerhouses still hold the edge -- though the shake-up gave mid-tier clubs a better shot at progressing.

Now the chase begins again, and attention quickly turns to whether anyone can stop PSG from defending their crown. No team has retained the trophy since Real Madrid, who famously won three straight titles between 2016 and 2018.

Madrid themselves enter this season with renewed ambition. The 15-time European champions open their campaign at home to Marseille on Tuesday (Wednesday, 1:00 am, Bangladesh time), hoping that former midfield maestro Xabi Alonso can guide them back to continental dominance.

Last season was a sobering one for Los Blancos. Carlo Ancelotti's side were thrashed 5-1 on aggregate by Arsenal in the quarterfinals, exposing flaws in both tactics and squad balance. Despite boasting a "fantastic four" attack of Kylian Mbappe, Vinicius Junior, Rodrygo and Jude Bellingham, Madrid's defence too often crumbled. Six defeats in the competition left them empty-handed while Barcelona celebrated a domestic treble.

Alonso has quickly imposed order since his arrival in the summer, alongside €170 million worth of new signings. Madrid have started La Liga with four wins from four, keeping two clean sheets and showing resilience, notably in Saturday's 2-1 victory over Real Sociedad when they played more than an hour with 10 men.

"The players made a huge effort and dug deep for the benefit of the team," Alonso said after that win, stressing the collective focus that seemed absent last year.

The Basque coach has already shown a willingness to rotate and adapt, benching Vinicius in one game and substituting him early in another. With eight matches in the Champions League league phase, rotation will be key.

For Madrid, consistency is the target, with Mbappe's sharp form -- four goals in four La Liga games -- offering encouragement. If Alonso's pragmatic edge matches his squad's attacking brilliance, Europe's most decorated club could once again set its sights on the throne.

Mondo Duplantis broke the pole vault world record for the 14th time with a jump of 6.30 metres as he secured a third straight world title on Monday. The gold medal was already secure for the American-born Swede when he had the bar raised a centimetre higher than the record height of 6.29m he managed in Budapest last month. He failed by the narrowest of margins at his first two attempts but, roared on by a captivated crowd at the National Stadium, slid over on the third with the bar giving a slight wobble before settling.

PHOTO: REUTERS