

Chaos in the air, rivalry on the line

EKUSH TAPADER FROM DUBAI

There's a widely accepted notion in cricket that Pakistan thrive only when chaos surrounds them. Stability rarely serves them well; turbulence seems to be their fuel. This Asia Cup in UAE has been no different.

After being thrashed by India in both the group stage and Super Four, with their qualification for the final hanging by a thread, Pakistan found themselves cornered by criticism and controversy – and, as so often, they have found a way to turn that storm into momentum.

The Asian Cricket Council's (ACC) long-cherished dream has finally been realised: an India Pakistan final. In 16 previous editions of the Asia Cup, this matchup had never happened – until now, with commercial and sporting stakes sky-high.

On paper, skill and form suggests India call the tune; Pakistan wait for fortune's turn of the wheel.

The battle within the battle is tantalising. Abhishek Sharma, India's in-form opener, has plundered 309 runs in six matches at a blistering strike rate of over 200. Almost certain to walk away with the Player of the Tournament award, the rising star now faces star pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi, who has shaken off his early struggles and is starting to look dangerous again.

"Abhishek Sharma out first ball, then the match is ours," a group of Pakistan fans said while celebrating after securing a place in the final. So far, though, Abhishek has dispatched Shaheen's and the innings' first ball for a boundary and a six.

"Shaheen will try to knock you over; Abhishek won't hold back," said India bowling coach Morne Morkel. "That duel alone keeps fans on the edge of their seats."

India's main concern is Hardik Pandya, who walked off with a muscle strain while bowling against Sri Lanka. The management has kept his fitness status quiet. Otherwise, the Gautam Gambhir coached side look settled;



India will be eyeing their longest winning streak in T20Is against Pakistan. They have won their last four T20Is against the archrivals, matching their winning streak between December 2012 and March 2016.

India lead both the top run-getters' and top wicket-takers' lists in this Asia Cup, with Abhishek Sharma scoring 309 runs at an average of 51.50 and Kuldeep Yadav taking 13 wickets, both having played all six matches.

India come into the final having won all six of their matches. However, the last time India qualified unbeaten for a major tournament final, they lost the title clash against Australia in the 2023 ODI World Cup in Ahmedabad, after winning all 10 of their previous matches in that tournament.

Bumrah has rediscovered rhythm, spinners are dictating the middle overs, and contributions have trickled in from batters Shubman Gill and Tilak Varma, even if Sanju Samson's role remains unclear.

Pakistan, meanwhile, see opportunity for that one slip between cup and lip. Head coach Mike Hesson admitted the two defeats to India hurt, but insisted: "The only match that counts is the one at the end."

Yet the lead-up to the final has been

strangely flat. India skipped training altogether after Friday's win over Sri Lanka, leaving Morkel to double up for both post-match and pre-match duties. Pakistan trained yesterday after a day's rest. Even the customary trophy photoshoot with both captains was quietly shelved; relations are too brittle for such gestures.

Still, the match needs no ceremony. The rivalry has already been stoked by Suryakumar Yadav, who dismissed it as "no longer a rivalry" after India's Super

Four win. His words triggered Pakistan and unsettled even Indian journalists, who accused him of talking for effect while his bat has gone quiet – just 71 runs at a modest strike rate of 107 in the eight-team tournament.

And that's the beauty of it. Cricket has a way of punishing arrogance and rewarding chaos. If Pakistan can turn Suryakumar's words against him at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium, the sport could yet write another improbable story.

Japan tour cancelled as 'Mission Australia' hits roadblock

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh women's football team's proposed tour of Japan in November, intended as preparation for next year's Asian Cup in Australia, has been cancelled due to the hosts' inability to accommodate the team during the specific window.

In late August, Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) women's wing chairman Mahfuza Akter Kiron unveiled a comprehensive plan for the team's preparation under the banner 'Mission Australia', with a three-week intensive training camp in Japan from October 30 as a key highlight. The team's local camp was also scheduled to begin mid-September, postponed by two weeks from the original plan.

However, at a press briefing at the BFF House on Saturday, Kiron, who is also an AFC member, announced the cancellation of the Japan tour. The dates conflicted with a proposed tri-nation tournament in Dhaka during the November FIFA window (Nov 24 - Dec 2).

"We are unable to tour Japan, which was initially planned from October 30 to November 20, as it clashes with the FIFA window. Japan offered a window from November 20 to 30, but we



will be hosting a tri-nation tournament in Dhaka at that time," Kiron explained.

The tri-nation tournament is yet to be finalised, with Azerbaijan confirmed as one of the participating teams alongside hosts Bangladesh. The BFF is still searching for a third team to complete the lineup. While Kiron confirmed that a Plan B is being developed to make use of the newly freed window, she noted that most senior players will be occupied with the SAFF Club Women's Championship from December 5 to 20, where Nasrin Sports Academy will represent Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, a 29-member squad comprising senior and under-20 players, along with a seven-member coaching staff led by Peter Butler, departed for Chattogram on Saturday evening for a 20-day residential camp.

"The players will stay at the Korean EPZ under Youngone's management, with gym, field, accommodation, and food of good quality. We have kept the Air Force ground as a backup," Kiron said. She added that a long list of 43 players has been prepared, including 10 currently in Bhutan and four with the under-17 team.

"The 10 players in Bhutan will return on October 18 and join the 29 for 3-4 days of training in Dhaka. The team will then leave for Thailand on October 21 to play two friendly matches on October 24 and 27," Kiron concluded.



SAFF U-17 C'SHIP

Heartbreak at final hurdle

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh came from behind twice, including a stoppage-time equaliser, but fell to India in a penalty shootout in the final of the SAFF Under-17 Championship at Colombo's Race Course Ground on Saturday.

Golam Rabbani Choton's side had reached the final without conceding a goal and dominated possession and attacking play, yet lacked composure in front of goal, a gap that proved decisive in the shootout.

India struck first in the fourth minute through Dallalmuon Gangte, while Mohammad Manik replied with a 25th-minute header to level the score. Bangladesh came close to taking the lead, hitting the crossbar twice, but India went ahead through Azlan Shah before Habib Riduan pounced on a loose ball in stoppage time to make it 2-2 and force penalties.

In the shootout, India converted all four of their spot-kicks, while Bangladesh managed just one through Manik. For the third consecutive edition, Bangladesh – who previously won the SAFF youth titles in 2015 (U-16) and 2018 (U-15) – had to settle for second place, as India claimed their seventh youth-level crown.



Razzak resigns, among 60 nominees for BCB polls

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) election commission released nomination forms yesterday, with 60 forms collected across the categories.

Current BCB president Aminul Islam and director Nazmul Abedeen Fahim picked up forms from Category A under Dhaka Division and District respectively. Former captain Tamim Iqbal did the same from Category B, while former president Faruque Ahmed, ousted after his councillorship was scrapped, also filed in Category B via another councillor.

Meanwhile, former national cricketer Abdur Razzak surprised many by resigning from the BCB selection panel and collecting a nomination form as a councillor for Khulna Division. Two other forms were also picked up from Khulna Division and District in Category A.

Razzak cited a conflict of interest as the reason for leaving the selection panel. "If I have to run in the election, I must resign. That decision came automatically," he said. On his plans, he added: "I played for a long time, contributed as a selector, and now if there's an opportunity to take another step forward, I will... Mainly, it's about doing something good for cricket."

Nomination papers are due on Sunday, with the final list of nominees to be announced on Monday.

In Category A, 25 forms were submitted (Dhaka-3, Chattogram-5, Khulna-3, Rajshahi-4, Sylhet-3, Rangpur-6, Barisal-1), with Shakawath Hossain, BCB's Cricket Tourism Advisor, the lone candidate from Barisal. Ten board directors will be elected from this category.

Category B saw 32 forms collected for 12 board director positions. Notable names included Tamim Iqbal, Ishtiaque Sadeque, Shahnian Tanim, Mohammedan's Masuduzzaman, and current directors Iftekhar Rahman Mithu and Fahim Sinha.

In Category C, Khaled Masud Pilot filed as a former player, while former director Sirajuddin Mohammad Alamgir and former first-class cricketer Debabrata Paul submitted through Chattogram University and Jahangirnagar University, respectively.

Fortis shock Mohammedan

SPORTS REPORTER

Defending champions Mohammedan Sporting Club endured a disappointing start to their Bangladesh Football League campaign, suffering a 2-0 defeat against Fortis at the Bashundhara Kings Arena on Saturday.

Gambian striker Pa Omar Babou emerged as the hero for Fortis, scoring both goals in the second half.

The first half remained goalless and the deadlock was broken in the 61st minute when substitute Sajed Hasan Jummon intercepted the ball and threaded a precise pass to Babou, who unleashed a powerful left-footed strike from outside the box beyond goalkeeper Sujon Hossain.

Babou doubled his tally in the 79th minute, finishing a counter-attack he had started, exchanging passes with Riaz Sagor before volleying home.

Elsewhere, Bashundhara Kings were held 2-2 by debutants PWD after surrendering a 2-0 halftime lead, while Bangladesh Police edged Brothers Union 1-0 thanks to a 43rd-minute strike from Brazilian forward Paulo Henrique.

The first round concluded with several surprising results, and the competition now pauses due to national team commitments for the Asian Cup qualifiers and Kings' participation in the AFC Challenge League.



LEADERS STUMBLE

Atletico Madrid's Argentine striker Julian Alvarez celebrates one of his two goals in their thumping 5-2 win over LaLiga leaders Real Madrid in a thrilling derby at the Metropolitano yesterday. It was Los Blancos' first defeat in eight matches across competitions. [Inset] Liverpool's Virgil van Dijk looks dejected after second-spot holders Crystal Palace end the Reds' perfect Premier League start with a 2-1 win following a stoppage-time winner at Selhurst Park in London yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

