

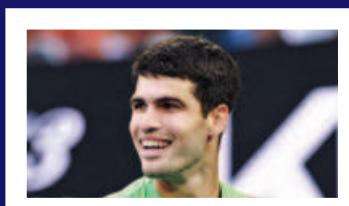
SPORT



KICKING OFF THE FUTURE

Young footballers take part in the BFF Football Academy Festival, organised under the Bangladesh Football Federation's grassroots programme, at the BFF artificial turf on Saturday. A total of 120 academy players were divided into three age groups – 8-10, 11-14 and 15-16 -- and featured in matches designed to promote enjoyment, learning and competitive spirit. The festival highlighted the federation's emphasis on long-term player development at the grassroots level. BFF vice-president and development committee chairman Naser Shahriar Zahedee, executive committee members and senior officials were present at the event.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



History beckons DJOKOVIC, ALCARAZ

History will be on the line in the Australian Open men's final on Sunday as tennis gladiators Novak Djokovic and Carlos Alcaraz lock horns, each vowing no surrender. Separated by 16 years, the two stand at opposite ends of their careers, chasing milestones that could define their legacies in very different ways.

Djokovic is striving to win a record-extending 11th Melbourne crown and, with it, a 25th major title that has so far eluded him.

A victory would see Djokovic surpass Australian icon Margaret Court, who also won 24 Grand Slam titles in the women's game.

The 38-year-old could also become the oldest man to lift the Australian Open trophy, surpassing Ken Rosewall, who won the title in 1972 shortly after turning 37.

This will be Djokovic's first major final since Wimbledon in 2024, having last claimed a Grand Slam title at the US Open in 2023.

Djokovic never lost an Australian Open final, boasting a perfect 10-0 win-loss record. He last lifted the trophy in Melbourne in 2023.

The 22-year-old Alcaraz has already won six Grand Slam titles and is bidding to become the youngest man to complete a career sweep of all four majors. Fellow Spaniard Rafael Nadal achieved the feat at the age of 24.

This will be Alcaraz's maiden Australian Open final, where he holds a 17-4 win-loss record at the tournament.

Alcaraz leads Djokovic 3-2 in their Grand Slam head-to-head, including a win in their most recent meeting at the 2025 US Open semifinals.



From heartbreak to redemption

AGENCIES

Born in Moscow but playing for Kazakhstan, Australian Open champion Elena Rybakina once said that "I don't live anywhere, to be honest".

One place she does feel very much at home, however, is the tennis court, and particularly Melbourne's hard courts.

The big serving 26-year-old upset world number one Aryna Sabalenka 6-4, 4-6, 6-4 in Saturday's title decider, drawing strong support from a section of the crowd.

"Thank you to Kazakhstan. I felt the support from that corner a lot," Rybakina said after lifting the trophy.

Saturday's match was a rematch of the 2023 Australian Open final, when Sabalenka had fought back to deny Rybakina a second Grand Slam title. On that occasion, the Belarusian prevailed in three sets, months after Rybakina had claimed her maiden major crown at Wimbledon.

This time, the Kazakh turned the tables, displaying her trademark composure to earn revenge on the sport's biggest stage in Melbourne.

Shy off the court but devastatingly powerful on it, Rybakina once again let her tennis do the talking. Standing at six feet tall (1.84 metres), she possesses a booming serve and relentless baseline power -- qualities that made the final a blockbuster encounter. She finished the tournament with 47 aces, comfortably more than any other woman in the draw.



Rybalkina's path to the title came against the backdrop of scrutiny off the court. Only a year ago at Melbourne Park, she was defending her coach Stefano Vukov, who had been provisionally banned by the WTA before the suspension was lifted in August following an investigation into a potential breach of its code of conduct. Vukov was again part of her team during this title run.

"I want to say thank you to my team. Without you, it wouldn't be possible," Rybakina said. "We had a lot of things going on, and I'm glad we achieved this result. Hopefully, we can keep on going strong this year."

Her semifinal opponent, American Jessica Pegula, summed up Rybakina's on-court presence by calling her "cool as a cucumber", a description that rang true once more in the final's decisive moments.

For Sabalenka, the defeat was a bitter one. The world number one admitted she was "really upset" with herself after failing to capitalise on a 3-0 lead in the deciding set. While acknowledging Rybakina's aggression, the Belarusian said she felt she had played strong tennis throughout the tournament and the final.

The two-time defending champion, who has now won four and lost four Grand Slam finals, remained optimistic despite losing her last two Melbourne finals. "Today you're a loser, tomorrow you're a winner," Sabalenka said, adding that her goals remained unchanged -- to keep fighting and put herself in position for another shot at the title.



Butler slams Pokhara pitch despite 12-0 win

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh coach Peter Butler delivered a scathing assessment of the pitch at the Pokhara Rangasala Stadium after his side began their SAFF U-19 Women's Championship title defence with a crushing 12-0 win over Bhutan on Saturday.

Despite the emphatic scoreline in the tournament opener at a venue hosting a SAFF-level competition for the first time, Butler said the playing surface was "not fit to play good football on" and questioned the fairness of staging a developmental tournament on such a pitch.

"Considering the circumstances, that pitch is not fit to play good football on," Butler said at the post-match press conference. "It has been sprayed green to make it look like there is grass, which, in my opinion, is totally unfair to ask of two teams that are trying to develop players and play the game the right way."

On the field, however, defending champions Bangladesh showed no mercy. Munki Akter struck four goals while Trishna Rani Sarkar and Alpi

Akter netted a hattrick each as the girls in red and green completely dominated a one-sided contest, adapting far better to the difficult conditions than their opponents.

Butler stopped short of praising the performance in footballing terms, insisting the surface prevented his team from playing their natural game. "I would not describe our performance as 'great' football because you cannot play good football on a surface like that," he said. "However, I believe we adapted to the conditions much better than the opposition. I am very pleased with the attitude, commitment and organisation of the group."

With a packed schedule ahead, the English coach said player welfare was his overriding concern and that he used the match to rotate his squad as much as possible. "I tried to make as many substitutions as we possibly could. It was very important that we finished the game unscathed, with the least amount of injuries possible," Butler noted, adding that rest and recovery would now be prioritised.

Bangladesh will next face India on Monday, after India edged hosts Nepal 1-0 in the day's other match.

What to WATCH

STAR SPORTS

SELECT HD2

Under-19 World Cup

Pakistan vs India

Live from 1:30 pm

SONY SPORTS 1,2

& 5

Australian Open

Final

Live from 2:30 pm

T SPORTS

Pakistan vs

Australia

3rd T20I

Live from 5:00 pm

STAR SPORTS

SELECT HD1

Premier League

Man United vs

Fulham

Live from 8:00 pm

Tottenham vs Man

City

Live from 10:30 pm

BCB limits media access at SBNCS

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) introduced new restrictions on media access to the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium (SBNCS) and its surrounding premises yesterday, enforcing revised entry regulations.

"As part of the ongoing security enhancement measures at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium (SBNCS) and its surrounding premises, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) wishes to advise that revised entry regulations are being introduced, which will be effective from now on," a press release stated.

Access for media representatives will now be limited to specific occasions only -- match days, official press conferences, events held upon formal invitation from BCB, and designated practice or training sessions as communicated by board.

Journalists have traditionally used the stadium's media facilities for regular coverage of Bangladesh cricket, and such limitations had not been imposed previously. According to BCB, the decision has been taken as part of ongoing efforts to strengthen security at the venue.

BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury and media committee chairman Amzad Hossain could not be reached for comments.

SHORT CORNER

Cummins ruled out of T20 World Cup

Pat Cummins has been ruled out of the upcoming ICC T20 World Cup after failing to recover fully from a lingering back injury. Cricket Australia confirmed that Cummins, who had been named in the provisional squad with the hope he could be managed through the early stages, "needs more time" to recover from a lumbar stress injury. Left-arm seamer Ben Dwarshuis has been drafted in as his replacement.

ICC, WCA locked in dispute over player terms

The ICC and the World Cricketers Association (WCA) are locked in a fresh dispute over player terms, including name, image and likeness (NIL) rights, ahead of the 2026 Men's T20 World Cup, reports ESPNcricinfo. The WCA has accused the ICC of distributing squad participation terms to players from several countries that differ from an agreement signed by both bodies in 2024. According to the WCA, the new version is significantly more exploitative and strips players of key protections.

Tigresses eye fourth qualifier title

Having already secured their place in the ICC Women's T20 World Cup, Bangladesh are now targeting a fourth qualifying title as they prepare to face the Netherlands in their final Super Six match in the qualifiers at the Mulpani Cricket Ground in Kathmandu today.

**Read full stories on The Daily Star's website

PAKISTAN CLINCH AUSTRALIA SERIES WITH RECORD WIN



Skipper Salman Ali Agha led from the front as Pakistan crushed Australia by 90 runs in Lahore yesterday to clinch the ongoing three-match T20I series 2-0, with a game in hand. It was Pakistan's biggest-margin victory in T20Is against Australia, providing a morale boost in a series serving as a build-up to this month's T20 World Cup. Agha smashed career-best 40-ball 76, while Usman Khan also registered a career-best 36-ball 53 as Pakistan piled up 198 for five in 20 overs at the Gaddafi Stadium. Australia never looked comfortable against Pakistan's spin attack and were bundled out for 108 in 15.4 overs.

PHOTO: PCB