

## Abahani's Diabate sinks Mohammedan

Souleymane Diabate had scored many crucial goals during his storied Mohammedan career against Abahani. He had singlehandedly beaten Abahani in the 2022-23 Federation Cup final. Now, having switched allegiance, the Malian forward is haunting his old club, scoring a superb goal as the Dhanmondi giants came back from a goal down to win 2-1 in their Bangladesh Football League fixture at the Shaheed Dhirendranath Datta Stadium in Cumilla yesterday. The win -- Abahani's sixth in 12 matches -- helped the six-time champions to 22 points and close the gap on league leaders Bashundhara Kings to just two points, although the leaders have a game in hand. Mohammedan, the defending champions, slipped to seventh position with 11 points. (Inset) Mohammedan fans, though, gratefully remembered Diabate's contribution to the club with a banner hung on the gallery.

PHOTO: BFF/FACEBOOK

## ASIAN GAMES QUALIFIERS

# Bangladesh edge Chinese Taipei to finish fifth

SPORTS REPORTER

Last edition's runners-up, Bangladesh hockey team, eventually finished fifth in Men's Asian Games Qualifiers after registering a 3-2 win over Chinese Taipei in the fifth-place deciding match in Bangkok on Friday.

Bangladesh, who on Thursday survived a scare to qualify for the upcoming Asian Games with a nerve-wracking 3-2 win over Hong Kong in a shootout, broke the deadlock in the seventh minute, with Ashraf Islam converting the penalty corner, before Wei Cheng-Ze brought back Taipei into the match by levelling the margin from open play in the 11th minute.

It was again Ashraf who restored the lead two minutes into the second quarter, also by converting a penalty corner.

Chinese Taipei once again showed character to level the margin just one minute from the interval, as Lo Hai-Kai struck from open play.

After resumption, Bangladesh pressed hard to restore lead, and newcomer Mehrab Hasan Samin struck the winner in the 38th minute from open play to deny Chinese Taipei, a side Bangladesh beat with a narrow 4-3 margin in their tournament opener.

## NZ forced into late change for Bangladesh white-ball tour

ICC

New Zealand have been forced into a squad shuffle, with left-arm quick Ben Lister replacing the injured Kristian Clarke for their white-ball tour of Bangladesh beginning on April 17.

Lister, who has not played for the Black Caps in over two years, takes over from Clarke, who has been forced to withdraw due to injury.

Clarke suffered a cut to the webbing on his right hand while attempting a catch for New Zealand A in their tour match against Sri Lanka A earlier in the week.

Lister, also on the Sri Lanka tour, will travel to Bangladesh on Sunday ahead of the ODI series which begins next Friday, with the New Zealand-based team members departing for Bangladesh on Monday morning.

The first two games of the ODI series will take place in Mirpur, with the final match to be played in Chattogram.

The action then switches to the T20I series, with the first two matches taking place in Chattogram on April 27 and 29. The final game of the series will be played in Dhaka on May 2.

# Loose ends in club crisis still at play?

ABDULLAH AL MEHEDI

While it appeared that the club crisis was at an end after Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) held a meeting with councillors from the revolting clubs on Thursday, even setting a tentative date for the start of the Dhaka Premier League (DPL), it now seems like there are a few loose ends that need to be tied up.

Two out of the 12 DPL clubs -- Legends of Rupganj and Brothers Union -- did not attend Thursday's meeting, where the first week of May was floated as a probable starting date.

However, now Rupganj's councillor Lutfar Rahman Badal appears to be against haphazardly playing the league on a short notice while Brothers Union officials are yet to clarify the club's stance.

"I am abroad right now. I saw everything but there is a need for preparation regarding everything. It's not like you can just say today that let's play and then you start playing tomorrow all of a sudden. The state the country, the financial issue, after considering everything, I will take my decision," Badal told The Daily Star on Friday.

"Why is the league taking place suddenly? There is a window for everything in cricket. This year the [DPL] window was in February and it has passed. My understanding is that they are holding it

in a 'crisis-management basis'. They can do that, of course, but we will be taking our decision," he said, adding that he knew that as per the DPL bylaws, non-participation would lead to relegation.

Badal also criticised the culture of rushing to start a league and spoke about where the last two boards headed by former players Faruque Ahmed and Aminul Islam Bulbul fell short.



"Cricket board is like a parliament, you need to have policy-making capacity to run it. If those in charge have never been involved in policy-making, how will the cricket board create policies?... We don't have that culture and that's why you see that the BPL is being played within a month's notice and the DPL in two days' notice," he said.

A Brothers Union official said that their representative will "let the board know of

the club's decision", when asked if they were in favour of playing the league.

CCDM officials, however, claimed that they have no information regarding any club's unwillingness to play.

Mohammedan representative Ziaur Rahman Topu said the clubs were not haphazardly starting the league, saying, "We are not hurrying. There is 20-22 days before start of league."

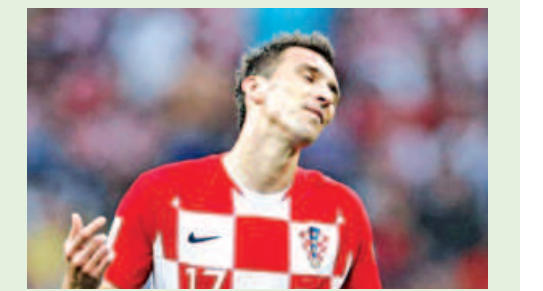
A.R. Mallick, representative of Dhanmondi Sports Club, said he was not aware of any disagreements, adding, "We usually always play in March and there were talks of starting on April 22 or 25. But since the New Zealand T20Is end on May 2, we decided to hold the league after that."

Rupganj councillor Badal had boycotted last year's Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) election at the last moment and yesterday, he told this newspaper that election irregularities led him to boycott.

However, organisers of other clubs who had also boycotted the polls suggested Badal stepped away at the insistence of the then sports adviser Asif Mahmud.

Sources also claim that Rupganj had signed contracts with players and officials for this season but have revoked those contracts.

While the expectation was that after the ouster of the Bulbul-led board, the club crisis would end, it now appears there are other issues at to resolve before holding the DPL.



## Mandzukic's unwanted piece of history

The 22 World Cup finals played to date have seen 80 goals scored by 61 different players. Among them, Croatia's Mario Mandzukic holds a unique, bittersweet record from the 2018 final against France. Not only did he score for his country, but he also inadvertently turned the ball into his own net, becoming the only player ever to score an own goal in a World Cup final that Croatia lost 4-2.

\*\* Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'A star is born: When 18-year-old Messi dazzled.'

# Arsenal return to PL title push

AGENCIES

The Premier League resumes this weekend after a break for international games with Arsenal's push for a first title in more than two decades buoyed by a timely win in Europe.

The leaders return to league action in control of their destiny after steadying themselves with a morale-boosting 1-0 victory over Sporting in the first leg of their Champions League quarter-final on Tuesday.

That followed a stuttering fortnight in domestic competitions, when Mikel Arteta's side suffered their first back-to-back defeats of the season.

They were beaten by rivals Manchester City in the League Cup final before their FA Cup run ended at the quarter-final stage against Championship side Southampton.

The wobble revived familiar questions about how Arsenal cope when pressure tightens, but Tuesday's win offered a reminder of their resilience.

"We stick together as a group, we have so much more to come this

season," said Kai Havertz, who scored Arsenal's lone goal against Sporting. "Seven weeks to go, we can win big titles, and we're going to go for that."

Arsenal have a nine-point lead over chasers Manchester City atop the table, though City have a game in hand.

Arteta's men host Bournemouth on Saturday knowing they cannot afford further slips with the finish line coming into view. Arsenal have seven fixtures left in the league season.

After months of looking short of their usual authority, Pep Guardiola's side have roared into form, outplaying Arsenal to lift the League Cup and then thrashing reigning Premier League champions Liverpool 4-0 in the FA Cup quarterfinals.

City travel to sixth-placed Chelsea on Sunday with confidence high and the sense that they are finally clicking into gear at the business end of the campaign.

Pep Guardiola's men still have a game in hand on Arsenal and the two face off next weekend in a potentially decisive clash in the title race.

## Under-21 coach to take temporary charge of Italy

AFP, Rome

Italy's under-21 coach Silvio Baldini will take charge of the senior side for two friendlies in June, the FIGC national football federation said on Friday.

Gennaro Gattuso resigned from the job last week after Italy missed out on the World Cup for the third time in succession, following a penalty shootout defeat to Bosnia in a qualification playoff.

They will play away to Luxembourg on June 3 before taking on Greece in Heraklion four days later.

Baldini, who has been in the under-21s role since last July, is known for his unorthodox training methods.

Last October, the former Palermo, Parma, and Empoli boss made the under-21s train with eye patches on to help improve their concentration.

Italy will not name a new full-time coach until after the FIGC presidential elections in June.

Gattuso was in his role for less than a year.

The new coach will be Italy's fourth since June 2023.

Napoli coach Antonio Conte, who previously was at the Italy helm from 2014-16, is the FIGC's preferred candidate, according to the Italian press.



Aston Villa have one foot in the Europa League semifinals after Thursday's hard-fought 3-1 win at Bologna, which could have had a very different complexion had it not been for the clinical Ollie Watkins. Ezri Konsa's header on the stroke of half-time and a brace from Watkins, who is playing for a place in England's World Cup squad, kept Villa on course for a first major trophy since winning the League Cup 30 years ago.

PHOTO: REUTERS