



## Afif's struggle mirrors Tigers' woes

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

There was a striking similarity between the starts of New Zealand and Bangladesh in the opening ODI of the three-match series in Mirpur on Friday, but the contrasting approaches that followed defined the outcome.

At the centre were Bangladesh's Afif Hossain, who once again failed to fulfil the finisher's role entrusted to him, and New Zealand's Dean Foxcroft, who excelled at reading and adapting to the conditions.

Opting to bat, New Zealand lost their fourth wicket at 131 in 27.5 overs, bringing Foxcroft to the crease. Playing only his second ODI, the 27-year-old showed composure beyond his experience. Having toured Bangladesh with South Africa's age-level side during the 2016 ICC U-19 World Cup and with New Zealand 'A' last year, he appeared well-acquainted with the conditions.

Foxcroft struck a measured 59 off 58 balls, rotating the strike smartly and reading the situation astutely to guide his side to a competitive 247 for eight – a total that always looked challenging for Bangladesh, who

have won just one of their last eight ODI chases.

Bangladesh's innings began in a remarkably similar fashion. They too lost their fourth wicket around the same phase – at 132 in 27.2 overs – setting the stage for Afif. Despite the quick dismissals of set batters Saif Hassan and Litton Das, the hosts remained well-positioned, with Tawhid Hridoy at the crease and skipper Mehidy Hasan Miraz still to come.

At that point, the Tigers needed 116 runs from 136 deliveries – a manageable equation. However, this is where the parallels ended.

Instead of maintaining momentum, the middle order allowed pressure to build. Afif and Hridoy struggled for boundaries, managing just one during their 52-run stand, while dot balls pushed the required rate beyond six. Afif eventually fell for a sluggish 27 off 49 balls, holing out to long on in a desperate attempt to break free, leaving the chase in disarray, raising further questions about his role.

The 26-year-old, recalled after a 16-month absence during the recent home series against Pakistan, has yet

to justify his return. He did not bat in the first ODI, scored 14 in the second, and remained unbeaten on five in the third after being pushed down to number seven.

However, is Afif solely to blame? The issue appears deeper. The team management has persistently tried to mould him into a finisher, despite his domestic success coming up the order. His recent century in the Bangladesh Cricket League came at number four – a position he has also occupied regularly in domestic T20s, including the Bangladesh Premier League.

In contrast, his ODI record tells a different story: of his 33 innings, 27 have come at number six or lower, with only six in the top five. This mismatch between role and natural position has hindered his consistency at the international level.

Bangladesh's persistence with this experiment has yielded little success, and Friday's failure once again highlighted the risks of forcing players into unsuitable roles. If the approach remains unchanged, Afif's career may continue to drift, with the team's broader batting concerns unresolved.

## Pakistan ring in changes for Bangladesh Tests

AGENCIES

Pakistan Cricket Board yesterday named four uncapped players in their squad for next month's two-Test series against Bangladesh, while also appointing Sarfaraz Ahmed as head coach.

Sarfaraz, who led Pakistan to the 2017 Champions Trophy title, replaces interim coaches Aaqib Javed and Azhar Mahmood, who had guided the side since Jason Gillespie's departure in December. Former Pakistan pacer Umar Gul joins as bowling coach.

Captain Shan Masood leads a squad featuring new faces Azan Awaiz, Abdullah Fazal, Amad Butt and Muhammad Ghazi Ghorri, rewarded for strong domestic performances.

The team will travel to Bangladesh on May 2 for the World Test Championship matches in Dhaka (May 8-12) and Sylhet (May 12-16). Pakistan are currently fifth in the WTC standings after a 1-1 home draw against South Africa last year.

**Pakistan squad:** Shan Masood (captain), Abdullah Fazal, Amad Butt, Azan Awaiz, Babar Azam, Hasan Ali, Imam-ul-Haq, Khurram Shahzad, Mohammad Abbas, Mohammad Rizwan, Muhammad Ghazi Ghorri, Noman Ali, Sajid Khan, Salman Agha, Saud Shakeel and Shaheen Afridi.

### SHORT CORNER

#### Russian forward helps PWD out of relegation zone

Russian striker Marat Tareck scored a brace as PWD moved out of the relegation zone with a 2-0 win over Brothers Union in the lone Bangladesh Football League fixture in Munshiganj on Saturday. The win took PWD three points clear of the relegation zone, on eighth position with 13 points.

#### Allegri rules out taking Italy job

Massimiliano Allegri said Saturday that he was not interested in the vacant Italy job, the AC Milan coach saying that he was hoping to stay with the seven-time European champions. "My career speaks for itself: changing jobs often isn't part of my DNA," Allegri told reporters ahead of Sunday's Serie A fixture at Verona.

\*\*Visit The Daily Star's website to read full stories



Japan celebrate with the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup trophy after defeating defending champions North Korea in the final at Thammasat Stadium in Bangkok yesterday, sealing a record-extending seventh title. The triumph comes weeks after Japan's senior women's team also lifted the Asian Cup. The 12-team tournament in Thailand also featured Bangladesh, who were making their debut but exited at the group stage after three defeats. The top four sides -- Japan, North Korea, China and South Korea -- qualified for the 2026 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup in Poland.

PHOTO: AFC

53 DAYS TO GO



## Zabivaka steals the show

The wolf-like "Zabivaka" was selected as the mascot of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. It won with nearly 53 percent of the votes from over one million online voters. Its competitors, a tiger and a cat, received 27 percent and 20 percent of the votes, respectively. Notably, the tradition of World Cup mascots began in 1966.

\*\* Visit The Daily Star's website to also read: 'Grit, bravery, and a medal for the doctor'

## Mohammedan surge as DPL transfer power shifts

SPORTS REPORTER

For more than a decade, Abahani Limited built a squad resembling a national team in the Dhaka Premier Division Cricket League (DPL). Their dominance was reflected not only in their playing eleven but also in their bench strength, where even established national players often had to wait for opportunities. The results followed, with Abahani clinching six titles in the last eight completed editions, underlining a period of remarkable consistency.

However, with shifts in the country's administrative and political landscape, the balance of power appears to be changing. Their traditional rivals, Mohammedan Sporting Club, have emerged as the most aggressive side in the ongoing transfer window.

Yesterday, the opening day of the two-day transfer window, Mohammedan made a strong statement by signing 11 cricketers, including three current national players: Rishad Hossain, Tanvir Islam and Afif Hossain. They also added experienced domestic names such as Anamul Haque Bijoy, Mohammad Naim, Parvez Hossain Emon and Yasir Ali, along with promising pacer Ripon Mondol.

Their recruitment drive is expected to continue today, with several high-



"I think credit goes to Tamim [Iqbal] because he came and took this initiative.... cricketers always want to be on the field and play, and there's nothing bigger than that."

MAHMUDULLAH RIYAD, after joining Prime Bank from Mohammedan

profile players targeted, including Tawhid Hridoy, Taskin Ahmed, Mushfiqur Rahim, Tajul Islam and Mohammad Saifuddin. Mohammedan, champions last in 2009-10, are still chasing their first title since the league gained List A status in 2013-14, having finished runners-up to Abahani last season.

Abahani, however, have also remained active. On the opening day, they secured Jaker Ali, Soumya Sarkar, Mahidul Islam Ankon and

Khaled Ahmed, among others, and are expected to finalise deals with Najmul Hossain Shanto, Mosaddek Hossain Saikat and youngsters Jishan Alam, S M Meherob Hasan and Rakibul Hasan.

Elsewhere, Mahmudullah moved to Prime Bank Cricket Club from Mohammedan, Mominul Haque joined Dhaka Leopards from Abahani, while Tanzid Hasan Tamim and Tanzim Hasan Sakib also joined Prime Bank from Legends of Ruppangj.

A total of 79 players featured across eight clubs so far: Abahani Limited, Agrani Bank Cricket Club, Bashundhara Strikers, City Club, Dhaka Leopards, Gulshan Cricket Club, Mohammedan Sporting Club and Prime Bank Cricket Club. The remaining sides, including Gazi Group Cricketers, Legends of Ruppangj, Ruppangj Tigers Cricket Club and Brothers Union Limited, will complete their business today ahead of the season, set to begin in the first week of May.

This year's transfer window carried added significance amid earlier uncertainty over the league, following a boycott threat from clubs that had questioned the legitimacy of the Aminul Islam-led board. The situation eased after the board was replaced by an ad hoc committee headed by Tamim Iqbal, allowing the league to proceed.

## 'Like a final': City host Arsenal

AGENCIES

Manchester City host Arsenal on Sunday in a defining Premier League clash that could reshape the title race as the season nears its conclusion.

Arsenal, awaiting first league title in over two decades, arrive as league leaders with a six-point cushion, while City hold a game in hand and the advantage of playing at home, making the encounter finely balanced and intensely significant.

Erling Haaland has framed the fixture in the starkest terms, saying, "It's a massive game without a doubt. We all know the importance of this game. It's like a final."

His words reflect the mood inside the City camp, where players are fully aware that anything less than victory could severely damage their hopes of retaining the title.

Pep Guardiola has also spoken candidly about the stakes. "If we lose, yeah, it's over," he admitted, while also stressing that even a win would not guarantee success.

He added that Arsenal have been "the best team in England so far", warning his players not to become distracted by the pressure surrounding the race. "We want to challenge them," he said, highlighting City's determination to close the gap.

Arsenal's recent form has been inconsistent after a strong start to the campaign. Defeats in cup competitions, including the League Cup final against City, have contributed to a dip in momentum.

Injuries have added further difficulty, with Bukayo Saka and Mikel Merino unavailable,



⚡ Arsenal lead the table with 70 points from 32 games, but head to the Etihad in their worst run of the season. The North London side have won just one of their last five matches in all competitions: a 1-0 victory over Sporting in the Champions League quarterfinal first leg.

⚡ While Arsenal have stumbled, City are hitting top gear, recording statement wins over Arsenal, Liverpool and Chelsea in their last three matches across all competitions.

⚡ The stakes are massive. A City win would cut the gap from nine points to just three within a week, and a victory over Burnley days



later could send them top with five games remaining, leaving Arsenal staring at a fourth straight runners-up finish.

⚡ History offers mixed signals. The clubs have met 215 times since 1893. Arsenal lead with 101 wins to City's 66, with 48 draws. However, City have not lost a home league game to Arsenal in 11 years, yet Arsenal are unbeaten in their last five Premier League meetings with City.

⚡ Last meeting recap: In September's league clash, Gabriel Martinelli came off the bench to score a stoppage-time equaliser after Erling Haaland's early opener, as the sides drew 1-1.

while key figures such as Martin Odegaard and Jurrien Timber are being assessed ahead of the trip to Manchester.

Despite these setbacks, Mikel Arteta remains confident in his squad's mentality. "It is certainly the most important game, as it

is the next one," he said. "We have earned the right to be in this position." He also dismissed any suggestion of cautious tactics, insisting, "We are not going to spend one second about that (playing for a draw). We prepare every game to win."

## Bundesliga and more in Bayern's sights

Just days after knocking out Spanish giants Real Madrid to reach the Champions League semifinals, Bayern Munich can cap a perfect week by sealing the Bundesliga title on Sunday -- with several records also within reach.

⚡ Already 12 points clear with five games left, Bayern's 35th league title is all but certain.

⚡ They can clinch the title at home today even with a draw after Hoffenheim beat second-placed Borussia Dortmund 2-1 on Saturday.

⚡ A 13th Bundesliga title in 14 seasons now feels inevitable given their dominance.

⚡ Bayern have scored 105 goals -- already a Bundesliga record -- and need 21 more in five games to set a new European league record.

⚡ Their scoring form suggests it is achievable: five goals scored six times, six goals three times, and eight goals once this season.

⚡ They boast a 78-plus goal difference, exceeding their 76-point tally. No team in Bundesliga history has ever won the league with a better goal difference than points tally.



PHOTO: FC BAYERN