DHAKA WE[illegible]Y OCTOBER 7, 2026, ASHWIN 22, 1433 BS

SPORT



It was a privilege to be part of your story, little guy. Today was my last training session with Argentina. And although I tried to experience it like any other day, I knew from the first moment that nothing would ever be the same again.

NICOLAS OTAMENDI, who, like **LIONEL MESSI**, will play his last match for Argentina against Benin today, said in a farewell message to Messi.





France's Michael Olise celebrates scoring their third goal during a stunning 4-1 UEFA Nations League comeback win over Belgium at home yesterday. Dodi Lukebakio's first-half strike nearly handed the visitors their first competitive win over Les Bleus in 45 years, but France erupted with four goals in the final 13 minutes. Desire Doue equalised in the 77th minute before Olise set up Rayan Cherki and then bagged a brace himself, including a stoppage-time strike, to preserve manager Zinedine Zidane's unbeaten start (3W, 1D) and edge France closer to the quarters. Elsewhere in Bologna, Italy striker Pio Esposito celebrates sealing a 3-1 victory over Turkiye. After Gianluca Scamacca's 26th-minute opener was cancelled out by Aral Simsir just past the hour mark, late strikes from Riccardo Calafiori and Esposito secured the win. The results leave Italy second in Group A1, three points behind leaders France and one ahead of Belgium. PHOTOS: **REUTERS**

A second chance for 'idle cricketers' through Second XI

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

- Second XI players get Tk **15,000** per match, compared to Tk **1.5** lakh for First XI players, with lower allowances and basic accommodation.
- Eight divisional teams will compete in the three-day Second XI, with the top two meeting in the November **11–13** final.
- BCB gave each division Tk **3** lakh for training and has demanded itemised accounts from Rajshahi.

Young wicketkeeper-batter Gazi Mohammad Tahjibul Islam played 10 matches for Dhaka Metro and Mymensingh Division across the last two editions of the National Cricket League. This season, however, the 22-year-old will represent Dhaka Division in the NCL Second XI, which begins across four venues today.

A Bangladesh U-19 World Cup representative in 2022, Tahjibul was left out of Dhaka's First XI, with Mahidul Islam Ankon and Ashiqur Rahman Shibli preferred. The Second XI gives him a chance to regain his place.

"The Second XI tournament is a great initiative. If this Second XI didn't exist, we would have had to sit idle this season. Now there's a chance that if I play extraordinarily well and produce strong innings, I will definitely get called up to the First XI," Tahjibul told The Daily Star on Tuesday.

In April, Bangladesh Cricket Board president Tamim Iqbal announced the NCL Second XI Championship, inspired by England's County Championship.

The NCL is contested by eight divisional teams, and the Second XI competition also features eight divisional teams. The three-day tournament will conclude with a final between the top two sides from November 11 to 13.

Left-handed opener Minhazul Hasan Megh, who has represented Bangladesh at different age levels and played for Shinepukur Cricket Club in the last First Division Cricket League, also welcomed the opportunity.

"I have played First Division cricket for three to four years. Last season, I scored two hundreds and finished sixth among the top run-scorers. With two XI teams this year, more opportunities have opened up," Megh, who will play for Rangpur Second XI, said.

The tournament could also provide a pathway back for players such as Jubair Hossain Likhon, who has struggled to secure opportunities with his domestic teams and last played first-class cricket in 2019. Likhon has been included in Mymensingh's Second XI squad this season and sees the tournament as an opportunity to showcase his ability.

"The thing is, in the First XI, apart from big players or seniors, First Division or Second Division players rarely get a chance to play... Now no player is sitting idle. Everyone stays involved in matches and practice, which is really good," said Likhon, who represented Bangladesh in six Tests, three ODIs and one T20I between 2014 and 2015.

Likhon, who will miss the opening match due to fever, hopes the introduction of the Second XI will help change the perception of leg-spinners in domestic cricket, saying players like him could otherwise spend most of their time on the bench.

For the inaugural season, the BCB has prioritised regular cricket for Second XI players over First XI-level facilities. While First XI players receive Tk 1.5 lakh in match fees, Second XI players will receive Tk 15,000. Their daily allowance is also lower, while the BCB has arranged accommodation for the eight participating teams at Krira Palli and the Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Pratisthan (BKSP).

BCB tournament committee chairman Sirajuddin Md Alamgir acknowledged the limitations but said the primary objective was to create a platform for players to prove themselves.

"We are creating a competitive platform on a limited budget to give players an avenue to perform and progress upward. Our facilities are limited due to realistic constraints. Players are accommodated at BKSP Krira Palli, which offers medium-standard rather than top-tier accommodation," he said.

"We gave Tk 3 lakh in training funds to each of the eight divisions, with clear spending categories. Today, we issued a show-cause notice to the Rajshahi Divisional Sports Association seeking itemised accounts. If they cannot show the money was spent as specified, they must refund it," he said, adding that divisional associations must take ownership of their teams rather than rely entirely on the BCB.

The Second XI may not offer First XI-level rewards, but for players waiting for an opportunity, regular cricket could be the most valuable reward of all.

BCB turns to Kookaburra for balance

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Three of the four matches of the first round of the National Cricket League ended in draws, harking back to a time when the competition frequently produced dull games. That was not the case over the last three seasons though when the ball dominated the bat in the majority of matches, barring those played on placid tracks. The biggest change this season has perhaps been the reintroduction of the Kookaburra ball.

Last season, after securing the NCL title, Rangpur skipper Akbar Ali had told this newspaper that a 'result-oriented wicket in the last round' had helped them secure the result they needed to win the title. The Dukes ball came into play from the third round last season, and its overall effect was telling. Pacers were able to get the ball to move almost until the 60th over, while batters faced tough examinations during morning sessions.

BCB chief selector Habibul Bashar feels it is still too early in the tournament to identify a pattern or conclude that the NCL is returning to its old ways, but believes the spinners might have more of a say this season than the pacers due to the introduction of the Kookaburra.

With a strong fast-bowling unit dominating national cricket and batters somewhat struggling, the BCB wanted to create more balance between bat and ball. The conditions, however, seems to have had a rather extreme effect.

"We asked for 6 mm grass and that's what's being used. But it feels like it was too hot and the grass dried up pretty quickly. The ball change, though, is a significant factor since with Dukes we would see more wickets fall, as happened in the last three seasons. It is not wrong to try something different or new because bowlers are getting tested. We are a subcontinent side and have to learn to play in such conditions. I think it's important to have that balance," Bashar added.



Rangpur certainly did not have it easy against Dhaka in Mirpur, with Akbar having to steer them to safety after three wickets fell for no runs on the third day. If even mediocre bowlers were getting the ball to swing and seam to a great extent with the Dukes, the Kookaburra has made things more challenging for bowlers.

"You need a bit of skill with the Kookaburra," said Mukidul Mugdho, last season's leading wicket-taker among pacers with 29 wickets. "Out of my six fifers [first-class], I got three with Dukes, two with Kookaburra and one with SG. Yes, with Kookaburra, despite the help, that little bit of effort and skill is needed. It's a bit challenging since you need the right length and have to create pressure. I think it's going to bring a balance. Hasan [Mahmud], Shoriful [Islam] got fifers in Australia with Kookaburra, so you just add to your skill," he said.

The hot conditions and the switch to Kookaburra are set to present different challenges. Good or bad, the change is preparing domestic players for new skillsets, despite the three draws in the first round.

MSC, Kings win big in Fed Cup

SPORTS REPORTER

Title contenders Mohammedan SC got their Federation Cup campaign off to a winning start when the Black and Whites came from behind to beat Arambagh KS 3-1 in their first match at Gopalganj District Stadium on Tuesday.

Forward Sourav Dewan, midfielder Sohel Rana Jr and striker Souleymane Diabate scored one goal apiece in the second half as Mohammedan SC came from behind to beat Arambagh KS after Ghanaian Suraj Rayies had stunned the holders by giving Arambagh a first-half lead.

Following a 1-0 win over Fakirerpool Young Men's Club in the Bangladesh Football League, Varela had all six of Mohammedan's national players available. However, the experienced coach started only two of them, Saad Uddin and Sohel Rana Jr, before introducing Shahriar Emon as a substitute.

In the day's other matches, Bashundhara Kings blanked Dhaka Wanderers Club 5-0, while City Club secured a 1-1 draw with a late equaliser in second-half stoppage time.

WHAT TO WATCH

T SPORTS
World Championship of Legends
Australia vs Bangladesh
Live from 9:30 pm
England vs West Indies
Live from 9:30 pm



A giant Argentina shirt bearing the iconic number 10 and the word 'Gracias' -- which translates to 'thank you' -- is displayed at the National Flag Memorial in Lionel Messi's hometown of Rosario on the eve of the Albiceleste's international friendly against Benin today. The match is set to be Messi's final appearance in the famous sky blue-and-white jersey after the record eight-time Ballon d'Or winner announced his retirement from international football in August. The 39-year-old is not only Argentina's record appearance-maker but also their leading scorer, with 125 goals in 207 games, as well as a record 68 assists. The man who captained Argentina to their third World Cup in 2022 and fell at the final hurdle in the last edition a few months ago will perform his wizardry for the national team for the final time in front of some 85,000 fans at Buenos Aires's Estadio Monumental, bringing down the curtain on his 21-year international career. PHOTO: **AFP**