

Saurashtra secure maiden Ranji title

Skipper Unadkat Ensures Vital First-Innings Lead In Final Vs Bengal

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Rajkot: A new name was added to the list of Ranji Trophy winners as Saurashtra claimed their maiden title on first-innings lead against Bengal after the final at SCA Stadium ended in a draw here on Friday. It was a moment Saurashtra cricket had been waiting for after having emerged second-best thrice in the Ranji final in the last eight seasons.

As for Bengal, their wait to lift the coveted trophy for the first time since 1989-90 got longer. The match went down to the wire, but Saurashtra



ECSTATIC: Saurashtra players celebrate winning the 2019-20 Ranji Trophy at the SCA Stadium on Friday

skipper Jaydev Unadkat led from the front — as he did throughout the season — when it mattered most. The left-arm seamer picked up two wickets and ran out Akash Deep as Bengal ended

their first innings at 381, thereby conceding a lead of 44 runs. The Saurashtra bowlers, who looked tired towards the end of Day 4, came hard at Bengal on the fifth morning with the match

evenly poised and Bengal needing 72 runs to take the decisive lead. Quite, fittingly, Unadkat — the season's highest wicket-taker — brought the curtains down on the Bengal in-

nings by claiming Ishan Porel leg before. An ecstatic and emotional Unadkat lay flat on the ground as his teammates went berserk. But with the final day being played behind closed doors, Saurashtra fans missed out.

Bengal were all out after adding just 27 runs in an hour and 10 minutes of play in the morning. Although Bengal coach Arun Lal walked into the rival dressing room immediately after the hosts took the lead to congratulate counterpart Karan Ghavri, the Saurashtra boys had to wait for a few more hours to lay their hands on the trophy — after the teams decided to call off play at tea with the home team at 105 for four in their second innings.

"This is the biggest moment of my career," Unadkat said. "It's not just my achievement, but my state's achievement," he added. **Brief scores (final):** Saurashtra 425 &

Numbers Game

1 Saurashtra won their first Ranji title after a 73-year wait. Their first Ranji match was (as Kathiawar) vs Gujarat in Rajkot in December 1946. Saurashtra had lost three previous finals - 2012-13 & 2015-16 to Mumbai and 2018-19 to Vidarbha

67 No of wickets at 13.23 runs apiece in 10 matches by Jaydev Unadkat, a new record by a pacer in a Ranji season, and the second highest tally ever behind Bihar's Ashutosh Aman's 68 (ave 6.48) in eight matches in the 2018-19 season

- RAJESH KUMAR

105/4 vs Bengal 381 (S Chatterjee 81, Saha 64, A Majumdar 63, AA Nandi 40; Unadkat 2/96, D Jadhav 3/114, PN Mankad 2/45)

Sindhu fails Okuhara test

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FOUND WANTING: PV Sindhu

PV Sindhu's All England sojourn ended on Friday following her 21-11, 15-21, 13-21 quarterfinal defeat to Nozomi Okuhara in Birmingham.

Sindhu began brilliantly by winning the first game in 18 minutes but soon ran out of steam against the former world champion from Japan.

Okuhara made several unforced errors in the first game as Sindhu zoomed ahead to a 7-2 lead. The Indian played some powerful down the line smashes and attacked her rival's backhand. However, towards the end of the first game, Okuhara got into rhythm and started hitting lines with ease. The late surge bolstered the Japanese girl's confidence in the second game.

Engaging the Indian in long rallies and by not allowing her to execute smashes, Okuhara built a 7-3 lead in the second. Sindhu reduced the lead to 5-7. But leading 11-8, Okuhara engaged the Indian in a 38-shot rally after the break. That rally seemed to have broken Sindhu's resolve as it was Okuhara all the way thereafter.

Confining the Indian to the

back of the court, Okuhara smashed the bird with precision to win consecutive points. From 13-9 she moved to 16-9 and then to 18-10, giving the Indian very little chance of staging a comeback.

The decider was no different as a visibly tired Sindhu caved in to the Japanese shuttler brimming with energy. Okuhara took a 7-2 lead and never looked back. She will next play world No.1 Chen Yu Fei of China, who defeated Ratchanok Intanon of Thailand 17-21, 21-15, 21-17.

In the men's quarterfinals, unseeded Lee Zii Jia of Malaysia stunned Olympic champion and third seed Chen Long 21-12, 21-18. Former world champion and second seed Viktor Axelsen of Denmark routed seventh seed Shi Yu Qi of China 21-15, 21-7.

BWF suspends all tournaments till April 12

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Hyderabad: Badminton World Federation (BWF) has suspended all the world tour and BWF-sanctioned tournaments from March 16 to April 12.

The BWF said in a release that the escalation of the COVID-19 outbreak has led to this suspension. "The escalation of the COVID-19 outbreak globally has led the BWF, in close consultation and consensus with its Host Member Associations and Continental Confederations, to cancel or postpone all

tournaments in this period due to heightened travel and quarantine restrictions in place and the subsequent extreme logistical complications this causes to the movement of badminton athletes", BWF said in a statement.

Meanwhile, all the shuttlers who exited the All England Championships in Birmingham are headed back to India. While Kidambi Srikanth and singles coach Park Tae Sang arrived here on Friday, Saina Nehwal, Srikanth and others, who were to compete in the Swiss Open next week, have pulled out of that event.

Tragedies put life in perspective



WRISTY BUSINESS

VVS LAXMAN

THE postponement of the remaining two One-day Internationals between India and South Africa was inevitable, given the circumstances. The coronavirus pandemic is gradually bringing life to a standstill across the world, and as is unfortunately normally the case, it is tragedies such as these that put life in perspective. After initially announcing that the Lucknow and Kolkata matches would be played behind closed doors, the Board of Control for Cricket in India and Cricket South Africa acted in the best interest of all stakeholders of our great game and announced the rescheduling of the two matches left after Thursday's first ODI in Dharamsala was washed out without a ball being bowled.

The latest edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL), originally scheduled to start on March 29, has also been pushed back to April 15. These developments are in tune with the rejigging or cancellation of a majority of high-profile sporting events globally. The safety and good health of people has to be paramount, and it's commendable to see the international sporting commu-

nity coming together to take the right steps in times of great challenges for all of us.

As far as Indian cricket is concerned, the biggest and most committed stakeholders are the fans who have stood behind the sport and the national team through thick and thin. Without intending to trigger panic, it is my sincere appeal to all of them to follow necessary precautions and stay safe as we make all attempts possible to ward off the progress of the virus.

The pursuit of sporting excellence is a wonderful endeavour, but at the end of the day, there is no substitute for good health and for collective cheer. In this trying period, let us all look out for each other and contribute our mite to ensure that we come out of this situation stronger and better as human beings. After all, adversity tests our character like nothing else.

I join the citizens of our country thanking our government for being proactive and moving swiftly to ensure that there is no spread of panic. Like the government, the BCCI has also taken decisive steps in this difficult time. Having said that, it is our responsibility to do everything in our control to make sure we keep ourselves secure and healthy. Times like these help us be more appreciative of and grateful for the good things in our lives. GAMEPLAN



Winter season ends abruptly

Bengaluru: The winter racing season in Bengaluru was brought to an abrupt halt after the Bangalore Turf Club (BTC) authorities on Friday decided to cancel the schedule for the remaining three days of the season owing to the coronavirus outbreak. Races were scheduled on Friday and Saturday and the concluding race day was on March 21. On Tuesday, the BTC was confident that the show would go on with some precautionary

measures in place. But, it had to change its decision following the state government's diktat and advisories from the Union government, particularly against mass gathering of people at sports events. With the crowd at the racecourse touching thousands during race and off-course betting days, the move was expected. In a media statement, the BTC also added that all inter-venue off-course betting stood suspended from March 14 until further notice. The Royal Western Indian Turf Club (RWITC) too is likely to follow suit. TNN

Manchester United make short work of LASK in empty stadium

Paris: Manchester United put one foot in the Europa League quarterfinals on Thursday with a 5-0 win at LASK Linz in one of four last 16 first leg matches played behind closed doors due to the coronavirus pandemic. Odion Ighalo slammed home the opener via the underside of the bar from 20 yards just before the half-hour, and Daniel James added a second with a sharp run and finish just before the hour mark.

Juan Mata bagged a third eight minutes from the end and Mason Greenwood and Andreas Pereira struck in injury time, as United extended their unbeaten run to 11 matches, with nine clean sheets in that time.

"I think the quality in our play was good. We were well prepared for them and they did fantastic," United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer said.

Fernandinho fined

Guangzhou: Chinese champions Guangzhou Evergrande hit their Brazilian winger Fernandinho with a whopping three-million-yuan (\$430,000) fine on Friday because he "seriously violated" team rules. Fabio Cannavaro's Guangzhou said in a statement that Fer-



IN FORM: Odion Ighalo enjoys scoring Manchester United's first goal

nandinho "refused to follow the club and head coach's arrangements" during pre-season training in Dubai. Guangzhou, the most successful club in Chinese Super League (CSL) history and two-time Asian champions, declined to give further details.

US Soccer president quits New York: US Soccer president Carlos Cordeiro resigned on Thursday after taking responsibility for language in a federation court filing that "caused great offense and pain" and prompt-

ed an on-field protest by the national women's team.

The women's team sued the national federation for gender discrimination just over a year ago in a lawsuit that included complaints about wages and working conditions. A trial date has been set for May 5 after talks between the two parties broke down. The federation's court filing said men's national team players had a greater level of responsibility than the women and that their job "requires a higher level of skill based on speed and strength." AGENCIES

Australia crush New Zealand by 71 runs

Sydney: Australia crushed New Zealand by 71 runs in the first One-day International at an empty Sydney Cricket Ground on Friday. After New Zealand kept the home side to 258 for seven, the Australian bowling attack dominated the Kiwi batsmen to dismiss the visitors for 187 in the 41st over.

Cricket Australia barred spectators from the match in response to the coronavirus pandemic, leading to the strange sight of players acknowledging milestones to empty grandstands.

It was also revealed that Australian fast bowler Kane Richardson was in quarantine early in the day and had been tested for the virus after feeling unwell. However, he was subsequently cleared of the virus and returned to the ground to rejoin his teammates. Australian skipper Aaron Finch won the toss and chose to bat, with the home

side at one stage looking at a score in excess of 300 following a superb opening partnership from Finch and David Warner.

But once Warner (67) and Finch (60) were dismissed, the Australian innings lost momentum and New Zealand clawed their way back into the

FIRST ONE-DAYER

game, despite a late flourish from Marcus Labuschagne, who made 56 from just 52 deliveries.

New Zealand must have given themselves a good chance of taking a 1-0 lead in the three-match series, but some superb Australian bowling in the first 10 overs meant the visitors were always behind in the run chase. None of the New Zealand batsmen was able to dominate - Martin Gupthill top scored with 40 -- and wickets fell at regular inter-

vals as Australia took control.

The victory will come as a welcome boost to the Australians, who had lost their last five ODIs in series losses to South Africa and India. Test spearhead Pat Cummins was the pick of the bowlers with 3-25, while allrounder Mitchell Marsh claimed 3-29.

Adam Zampa and Josh Hazlewood both picked up two wickets in an impressive team display.

Earlier, New Zealand spinners Mitchell Santner and Ish Sodhi reined Australia in after Finch and Warner's bright start. The second match will take place on Sunday, also at the SCG.

Brief scores: Australia 258/7 in 50 overs (D Warner 67, A Finch 60, M Labuschagne 56; Ferguson 2/60, Santner 2/34, Sodhi 3/51) bt New Zealand 187 in 41 overs (M Gupthill 40, K Williamson 19, T Latham 38, C de Grandhomme 25; Hazlewood 2/37, Cummins 3/25, Marsh 3/29, Zampa 2/50). AFP

ISL: The final showdown

Chennaiyin, ATK Chase Third Title Behind Closed Doors

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Margao: Chennaiyin FC have fond memories of their time at the Nehru Stadium in Patorda. It was here that they recorded their debut win, here that they stunned hosts FC Goa for their maiden Indian Super League (ISL) crown in 2015. Since then, they have added one more trophy to their cabinet, and on Saturday they can create history once again by becoming the first club to clinch their third trophy.

It won't be easy. At the other end, there is ATK, a team which is as successful and with similar ambitions. Even though the match will be played behind closed doors because of fears over the coronavirus, nobody will need an added dose of motivation.

ATK were always the favourites to make it to the final. Chennaiyin, however, are the dark horses, who galloped ahead of everyone else. They have come a long way since being at the bottom and just one win from their first six games.

Much of the credit goes to head coach Owen Coyle, who transformed the team after taking over from John Gregory in December.



LAST BATTLE: Chennaiyin FC players train ahead of the ISL final

"I took over for the Jambhede game and our next match against NorthEast (United) was postponed which gave me eight days to work with the team. We changed the team and discovered outstanding Indian midfielders like (Anirudh) Thapa, Germanpreet (Singh), Edwin (Vanspaul)," said Coyle.

The former Burnley manager has brought the best out of winger Lallianzuala Chhangte, who has seven goals to his credit, most from open play. The 22-year-old is the first Indian to score in both legs of the semifinals and is the second highest domestic goal-scorer

behind India captain Sunil Chhetri. "I think as a group we have worked very hard. We are not here by accident and had to win every week. It was our mentality of winning in different situations and it was just incredible," said Coyle.

TALKING POINTS

■ In ISL history, the team which defeated FC Goa in the semis, has never lost the final.

■ If Chennaiyin win, they will have a unique record of winning ISL every alternate season.

■ If ATK win, Antonio Habas will be the first ISL coach to win the league on multiple occasions. He also won the ISL title with ATK in 2014

SEASON OF DISCONTENT

While ATK and Chennaiyin FC vie for honours in the final of ISL in Margao on Saturday, Hyderabad Football Club (HFC) will ponder on what could've been in their debut season. Aditya Singh puts a finger on the HFC shortcomings and the way forward.

THE BEGINNING

Born from the remnants of FC Pune City, Hyderabad FC were formed by entrepreneur Vijay Madduri and ex-Kerala Blasters CEO Varun Tripuraneni on August 27, 2019. The club appointed Phil Brown as the head coach a day later. The Englishman had coached FC Pune City in the second half of the 2018-19 ISL season. The majority of the squad was signed from the erstwhile FC Pune City.

DISMAL RECORD

The newly-formed team endured a tough introduction in the league as ATK thrashed them 5-1 in Kolkata on October 25, 2019. The defeat laid the template for the team's poor away record. The team managed only one win on the road, against NorthEast United. Their only other win was in the first home match, when they defeated Kerala Blasters 2-1. Lack of fitness and niggling injuries hindered the selection of a consistent playing 11. Key players like Bobo and Rafa Lopez were sidelined for the first half of the season due to injuries. Nestor Gordillo was forced to sit out till December due to an AIF-imposed ban. Multiple centre-back partnerships failed to stem the flow of conceding goals. Lack of consistent full-backs did not help either. Players often lost intensity and failed to handle pressure in the final quarter. HFC finished at the bottom with 12 losses and 2 wins.



Hyderabad FC celebrate their thumping 5-1 win over NorthEast United FC at Guwahati on February 20

PROBLEM AREAS

Errors at crucial times by Nikhil Pojary and Ashish Rai cost them dear.

Goalkeeper Kamaljit Singh added to their woes. A lacklustre defence meant HFC were the only team without a single clean-sheet this season. The team conceded 39 goals, the worst defensive record since the inception of the league. With a pass completion rate of just 67.85%, the team has struggled to move the ball. The midfield has been bypassed with ease by the opposition. HFC struggled to create goal-scoring chances due to lack of creativity in the midfield. Forward Marcelinho's return of 2 assists was the highest contribution. A low goal conversion rate of 8.97% resulted in only 21 goals being scored this season.

LOOKING AHEAD

HFC parted ways with Brown on January 11 and appointed Albert Roca in his place. The performance of Marcelinho (7 goals and 2 assists) and Bobo (5 goals) stood out. Adil Khan, deployed as midfielder and defender, has made an efficient 87 tackles across 14 matches. HFC signed forward Liston Colaco, midfielder Hitesh Sharma, midfielder Deependra Singh Negi, defender Saavik Chakrabarti and goalkeeper Kunzang Bhutia. More transfers are likely before the next season. A changed line-up outclassed NorthEast United 5-1 in their final match of the season and HFC hopes to build on the season gone by and do well next season.