



THE YOUTH IN THE ERA OF DIGITALISATION

DHAKA THURSDAY FEBRUARY 20, 2020, FALGUN 7, 1426 BS



The team of Deshi Ballers

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSEH

Dribbling towards success

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Achievements of female athletes are often side-lined, as in the field of sports, players are judged based on their speed, strength, and command, characteristics that are unfairly classified as masculine. In order to pursue their passion in sports, women still have to overcome many hurdles, especially social stigmas, just to be a part of athletics. Despite such issues, today, women are stepping up to pursue their athletic dreams, challenging gender norms. Deshi Ballers, founded by basketball players Ashreen Mridha and Gulnahr Mahub Monika in July 2008 is a sports organisation for female basketball players who are determined to follow their athletic pursuits. What started as a Facebook community has grown into a platform for female basketball players around Bangladesh today. Through this initiative, women, irrespective of their backgrounds, ages, and social barriers, are able to balance their careers and personal lives, without having to give up their passion for basketball.

Ashreen, who currently is the brand manager of Surf Excel at Unilever, became the first Bangladeshi basketball player to join the Global Sports Mentoring Program (GSMP), funded by ESPN and the US Department of State. Her journey with Bangladesh Basketball Federation started in 2009 when she first played the Tripura-Bangladesh friendly series in Dhaka. She later went on to represent Bangladesh at both home and abroad in several tournaments, including Tripura-Bangladesh friendly (India) in 2011, Kolkata-Bangladesh (Dhaka) friendly series as Vice-Captain in 2015, Kolkata-Bangladesh (India) friendly series as Captain in 2016, FIBA South Asian Women's Basketball Championship (SABA) in Nepal in 2016 and All India Tournament (India) in 2018. "I wanted



Ashreen Mridha, Co-founder of Deshi Ballers.

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"With my HSC exams just around the corner, convincing my parents to allow me to attend basketball practices is difficult. I actually have to earn my game-time by maintaining good grades," shares Tazrin Titir Joyita.

to play a sport that the majority of the population did not play," shares Ashreen, while speaking about her inspiration behind choosing basketball as an athlete. "However, my biggest inspiration is my husband, Ibrahim Mohammad, who is also a basketball player (Ex National Team and Navy basketball team). We have both grown up playing and loving this sport so much that it is a way of life for us. We

even got married on a basketball court, which we decorated with our own trophies, medals and jerseys. We met and fell in love through basketball, and now we are working on basketball development together."

Deshi Ballers regularly organises training sessions and tournaments, including 'Leaders on the court', a monthly training programme for intermediate level female basketball players under coaches Caleb Earnest, Purity Odhiambo, and Ibrahim Mohammad. "Each month, we call for participants and based on their experience, consistency, and involvement with the sport, we choose 20 players to train. Eventually, we build them up to be camp leaders who can teach other girls to play," adds Ashreen.

The game practice sessions are organised twice a week, most regularly

on Sundays and Tuesdays from 7-9 pm, at Gulshan Youth Club. "I have been playing basketball since I was in the fifth grade. Now, to give up something like this due to a full-time job was difficult, that too when I have to work 48 hours per week. With evening gaming sessions, I am at least able to keep following," says Zara Ahmed, a resident medical officer at Square Hospitals Limited. "Amidst all the hurdles, my teachers, parents, and most importantly, my partner, have been my biggest sources of support. I still remember how I had to visit India a week after my wedding to play for Bangladesh. So, instead of going on my honeymoon, I followed my team to a tournament. I even played on my wedding day!"

Balancing between academics, work and playing the sport often proves to be tough for these young women. "With

my HSC exams just around the corner, convincing my parents to allow me to attend basketball practices is difficult. I actually have to earn my game-time by maintaining good grades," shares Tazrin Titir Joyita, an eleventh grader at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College, who is preparing to try-out for the national team soon. Joyita has secured a 5.0 GPA in all her board examinations so far. "Keeping my grades up makes my parents happy and so, they let me play," she adds.

Alongside regular practice sessions, Deshi Ballers also organises introductory lessons for kids at 'Car Free Street', on the first Friday of every month at Manik Mia Avenue from 9 to 11 am. The free for all sessions train children in basketball basics, such as dribbling, passing and shooting. These lessons are taught by girls from the 'Leaders

on Court' training group and other volunteers to kids of all ages. The group also visits schools and colleges outside Dhaka, organising various short camps and exhibition games, to showcase and promote women's basketball. "Decentralisation of basketball from Dhaka is key to developing it in other parts of the country," asserts Ashreen. Helping girls prepare for various tournaments is another prime concern of Deshi Ballers. The organisation is also a 'Service Learning' partner of the American International School Dhaka (AISD). "The AISD students support us in events and activities as volunteers. By partnering up with our initiatives, students find ways to give back and help the local female sports community to grow," says Ashreen.

Injury, being one of the main challenges for the players, often leads them to lose their forms. "I was injured in 2016 while playing a mixed-category tournament. It felt like a nightmare, as the doctor said that I would never be able to play again," says Farzeen Ghani, a student at Sir John Wilson School, who started playing basketball as a fourth grader, after being inspired by Ruthie Bolton. "I was completely out of shape after my comeback. At that time, Ruthie's words—'You cannot give up what you love'—helped me immensely. However, the fitness training really geared me up to come back to the court. I feel privileged to have the love and support of my peers and parents during such a challenging time."

From 2020, Deshi Ballers started 'Bootcamp Workout' sessions for girls who play sports or are into fitness. It is a one-hour workout programme led by Anne Sherman, to raise awareness about health and fitness on a general basis. They also arrange 'Watch Parties' where players get together and watch FIBA, NBA, WNBA, and NCC basketball games together. "They analyse plays, observe sportsmanship behaviours, and learn how to take decisions during a game," shares Monica, a Software Quality Assurance Engineer at Misfit Technologies and the co-founder of Deshi Ballers. "Developing the habit of watching games of professional athletes around the world helps our players in the long run, as they seldom get access to proper training from renowned coaches in the country."

So far, Deshi Ballers has organised a Summer Basketball Tournament in 2018 and an International Women's Day 3x3 Tournament in 2019. They also partnered up with Decathlon in a tournament last year. They are currently planning to host the first ever women's league for Bangladesh. Apart from competitions, the community also organises friendly games to keep their players motivated. Their latest initiative, 'New Bees Camps' for beginner female players, will be launched in February 2020.