



PHOTO: AZIBOR RAHMAN

Goaldah girls a ray of sunshine in the gloom

AZIBOR RAHMAN FROM MAGURA



Walking towards a school field -- more like a small open space at the front of a building -- on a gloomy day with the earth muddied by incessant rainfall, this reporter was awestruck to see a bunch of school girls practising football with razor sharp focus even in such a poorly facilitated environment.

And after standing there for a few minutes witnessing the prowess and the matured game sense portrayed by those budding footballers, it became almost certain that those young girls had a purpose in mind and playing football was much more than just a fun pastime on a rainy day.

Digging into the matter, it was learned that the 16 girls playing were from Goaldah Government Primary School, which is 20 kilometers away from Magura district. Of these 16, five are in BKSP while nine have already represented the country in different age-level tournaments.

The girls' perseverance and steely determination, playing on a small muddy ground nowhere near the standard of even a mediocre practice facility, was on display as they practiced with the level of enthusiasm resembling that of professionals in a properly appointed football ground at the highest level. And much of the credit for such eagerness goes to headmaster Provash Ranjan Devjyoti

and his assistant teacher Shahidul Islam, who act as their coaches and guide them in their pursuit.

While there is no shortcoming in their determination, lacking are their financial capabilities and a decent enough ground to help them grow. Take the case of Swarna Rani Mondol, an eighth-grader in the BKSP and an age-level goalkeeper. Those who witnessed Swarna saving two penalties in the tie-breaker to snatch victory for her team in the Bangamata Begum Fazilatunessa Mujib Gold Cup (under-17) last February at Bangabandhu Stadium, would probably not believe the hurdles Swarna had to overcome before becoming the shield for her team.



"We very often pass our days without consuming any food. We remain unfed if my husband [a day labourer] cannot manage work. We cannot provide necessary things like books, pens and other sports materials and it also becomes very difficult to pay Tk 700 per month to



BKSP as Swarna's fees," said Sarma Rani Mondol, Swarna's mother.

Purnima Rani Mondol, a ninth-grader in BKSP who represented Bangladesh at the age-level in SAF Games in Kathmandu in 2019, also lives with similar financial constraints. No work, no food is the harshest reality for Purnima's family of four, headed by her father Nripen Chandra Mondol, also a day labourer.

Another BKSP ninth-grader and age-level player Ria Khatun is now faced with hanging up her boots at this nascent stage. Ria, who took part in Subrata Mukherjee Gold Cup tournament in New Delhi in 2018 and 2019 and scored a goal in the 2018 edition, has injured a ligament in her right leg while practising at the BKSP. As doctors suggested, Ria would soon be needing a Tk 1.5 lakh operation if she

wants to go further in the game.

"I do not own a land of my own. I can barely make enough to feed the six of us [in his family] by working on others' land. It is impossible for me to arrange such a big amount [for Ria's treatment]," said Ashaduzzaman, Ria's father.

Meanwhile, Anika Tanjum, the most talented of them all, is in better financial condition than the rest of the girls. Anika, as academically meritorious as she is skilful with a ball at her feet, has scored three crucial goals and led the Khulna Division (Under-17 side) to the Bangamata Begum Fazilatunessa Mujib Gold Cup title last February. The contribution of these girls has not gone unnoticed. Much like the promising girls of the famed Kalsindur village of Dhobaura upazila in Mymensingh, the Goaldah village also boasts a number of talented footballers and the Magura district sports officer acknowledged their contribution.

"These girls have given notable performances in the Under-14 and Under-17 level. I hope they will maintain the good reputation that they have built so far," hoped Anamika Das, district sports officer of Magura.

And when the whole world is struggling to fight with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic with many athletes around the globe still uncertain about returning to the field, for the girls of a small village like Goaldah, playing football remains their only focus even in a not-so welcoming environment.

Plans change after positive results

SPORTS REPORTER



The national team management has been forced to delay the team's return to training after four national footballers tested positive for Covid-19. The original first batch of 12 footballers has now shrunk to eight, who will be kept under surveillance for three days instead of starting training yesterday, as originally scheduled, at Gazipur's Sarah Resorts.

The 12 members were supposed to be divided into two groups on the first day of low-intensity training, after a four-and-a-half month break due to the coronavirus pandemic, but the positive results scuppered those plans.

"Our initial plan was to make two groups of six each to train under a coach in separate sessions but we have instead planned to keep eight players of the first batch in four separate groups of two each. We want to observe them for three days from Thursday to Saturday to see whether they exhibit any symptoms of coronavirus as they were with those who tested positive on Wednesday," said national team manager Satyajit Das Rupu.

Yesterday, the second batch, comprising another 12 footballers, underwent the Covid-19 test under the supervision of the Bangladesh Football Federation for the preparation camp ahead of the World Cup and Asian Cup Qualifiers.

"If the second batch are found all negative, they will leave for Gazipur tonight [Thursday] and start their training separately from tomorrow [Friday]," said Rupu. "For now, coach Jamie Day doesn't want to call up new players; he wants to wait till the results of the last batch of footballers who will take the test on Saturday, instead of Friday."

It has been learnt that eight footballers of the first batch have been a bit of anxious after MS Bablu, Nazmul Islam and Suman Reza, who had been with them on Wednesday, tested positive. It has also been learnt that Bishwanath Ghosh tested negative in second test but will still be kept away for another week before taking the BFF-initiated test.



PHOTO: BFF



PHOTO: REUTERS

Masood steadies ship after Babar's departure

REUTERS, MANCHESTER



James Anderson and Stuart Broad took wickets in an improved England bowling performance as they restricted Pakistan to 187 for five at lunch on day two of the first Test at Old Trafford on Thursday.

England had been criticised by coach Chris Silverwood for allowing too many "easy balls to hit" after a rain-shortened first day, but were markedly improved under heavy skies on the second morning.

Opener Shan Masood (77 not out from 225 balls) has maintained his long vigil at the crease and will resume after the interval with all-rounder Shadab Khan (one not out).

Pakistan added only 48 runs in the morning session at a paltry rate of 1.86 per over, also losing key batsman Babar Azam (69), Asad Shafiq (7) and wicketkeeper-batsman Mohammad Rizwan (9).

It was largely due to the disciplined line of the England seamers, and chalk and cheese from their wayward performance on the first afternoon, both targeting the wickets with a straighter line and stifling the scoring opportunities of the tourists.

Babar was out in the first over without adding to his overnight score, edging Anderson to Joe Root at first slip.

It was the bowler's 590th Test wicket as he closes in on becoming the first seamer to 600 scalps.

Broad removed Asad after finding the edge as well, this time Ben Stokes diving across Root to snatch the ball in front of first slip.

Rizwan never looked comfortable at the crease and used up 41 balls for his nine before nicking a Chris Woakes delivery to wicketkeeper Jos Buttler.

Earlier, former England captain Michael Vaughan in a bold statement has said that Pakistan batsman Babar Azam has shifted Joe Root from the 'Fab 4' batting list and made space for himself there.

Champions League returns with last-16 ties

AFP, PARIS



The UEFA Champions League returns on Friday with the remaining places at the final tournament in Lisbon up for grabs as Europe's top clubs look to go all the way and lift the trophy on August 23 after a suspension of five months because of the coronavirus.

Manchester City v Real Madrid (City won first leg 2-1)

Pep Guardiola's City have already claimed one major European victory this summer after the club's successful appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport which saw their two-year Champions League ban overturned. That may mean they are extra motivated to go on and win the trophy for the first time, even if Guardiola insists "this issue is over". They are in prime position to reach the quarter-finals after a 2-1 victory in Spain in the first leg, when Kevin De Bruyne's penalty won the game.

Nevertheless they are without the injured Sergio Agüero, and there is pressure on them. Their campaign was underwhelming domestically and the high point of City's experience in the Champions League so far remains a defeat to Real in the semi-finals in 2016.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FACTS

FIVE TOP SCORERS 2019/20:

- Robert Lewandowski (Bayern): **11 goals**
- Erling Braut Haaland (Salzburg/Borussia Dortmund): **10 goals**
- Dries Mertens (Napoli): **6 goals**
- Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur): **6 goals**
- Serge Gnabry (Bayern München): **6 goals**

ROAD TO LISBON

Lisbon will host this season's Champions League final on August 23 after UEFA confirmed that the final stages of the 2019-20 competition will be held in the Portuguese capital from August 12-23, rather than Istanbul as originally planned.

- August 12: Quarter-finals, Atalanta vs Paris Saint-Germain.
- August 13: Quarter-finals, Leipzig vs Atlético.
- August 14: Quarter-finals, Napoli / Barcelona vs Chelsea / Bayern.
- August 15: Quarter-finals, Real Madrid / Manchester City vs Lyon / Juventus.
- August 18: Semi-finals, Leipzig / Atlético vs Atalanta / Paris Saint-Germain.
- August 19: Semi-finals, Real Madrid / Manchester City / Lyon / Juventus vs Napoli / Barcelona / Chelsea / Bayern.
- August 23: Final.

Zinedine Zidane's team are fresh from claiming the Spanish title after an exceptional run of post-shutdown form. However, they must do without Sergio Ramos, who is suspended after being sent off in the first leg while Gareth Bale was left out of the 24-man squad for Friday.

Juventus v Lyon (Lyon won first leg 1-0)

Lucas Tousart's goal gave Lyon a surprise 1-0 win on the night, but much has changed since then -- for a start Tousart

is no longer at Lyon having signed for Hertha Berlin. Lyon were a lowly seventh when the French season was brought to an early end. Their defeat on penalties to Paris Saint-Germain in last Friday's League Cup final -- their first competitive game since March -- means they must win the Champions League to qualify for Europe next season. That seems unlikely, but putting out Juventus might not be. The Old Lady have just won their ninth successive Serie A title, yet there are doubts

about Maurizio Sarri's side. Juve won just twice and lost four of their final eight league games, and in Europe they may be reliant on Cristiano Ronaldo's appetite for more Champions League success.

Bayern Munich v Chelsea (Bayern won first leg 3-0)

This is surely a formality, with Bayern producing a stunning display to beat Chelsea 3-0 away in February thanks to Serge Gnabry's brace and a Robert Lewandowski goal. The Bavarians picked up where they left off in style when the Bundesliga resumed in mid-May, romping to a league and cup double by winning 11 games in a row post-lockdown.

Barcelona v Napoli (First leg 1-1)

After missing out to Real Madrid in La Liga, Barcelona cannot contemplate being knocked out of the Champions League already, but they are far from safe against Napoli.

They drew 1-1 in the first leg in Italy with Antoine Griezmann cancelling out Dries Mertens' opener, so Barca have the upper hand. However, all is not well at the Camp Nou, with coach Quique Setien under intense scrutiny. Barca are looking for a sixth European Cup, five years on from their last success. Lionel Messi has turned 33 since the first leg and time is running out for the Argentine to lift the trophy again.



Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos shows the thumbs up sign on board a Manchester-bound plane while Manchester City's Gabriel Jesus balances the ball on his head during practice ahead of tonight's Round of 16 second leg Champions League tie at the Etihad Stadium.



PHOTO: COLLECTED