



PHOTO: FEROZ AHMED

A once-rich well now drying up

ANISUR RAHMAN

A group of brilliant young footballers put Bangladesh prominently on the map of age-level women's football, especially in South Asia, by clinching the first-ever AFC U-14 Girls' Regional Championship in December 2015. Eighth months later they once again made the whole of Asia sit up and notice by emerging the unbeaten champions in the six-team qualifying round of the AFC U-16 Women's Championship and advancing into the eight-team final round in Thailand.

The girls made history in the country's football by advance to the final round leaving strong teams such as Iran and Chinese Taipei in their wake. They carried their form and success through to the next year to emerge champions in the SAFF U-15 Championships (a few members of the original squad were left out of due to age limitations and were replaced by upcoming talented players) on home soil in December 2017.

The players from Kalsindur Primary School and Kalsindur High School under Mymensingh's Dhobaura upazila were key behind

those successes. The likes of Maria Manda, Marzia, Sanjida Akther, Shamsunnar Sr, Shamsunnar Jr, Saraban Tahura, Mahmuda Akter, Sajeda Khatun, Nazma and many others dominated in the age-group squads, which also contained a few booters from Tangail, Sirajganj, Kushtia and Satkhira.

Unfortunately, there are now no players from Dhobaura or Kalsindur in the 15-member squad that the Bangladesh Football Federation announced on Wednesday for the upcoming AFC U-17 Women's Championship Qualifiers to be held in April next year.

There are no players from Dhobaura even in the additional list of entry squads feeding into the national team, although a couple of players have come from of Mymensingh's Nandail upazila. Kalsindur Primary School had once been a role model for other primary schools across the country ever since their eye-catching successes in the Bangamata Primary School Gold Cup.

But the supply line from Dhobaura has dried up and other parts of the country are now producing players, with the current U-17 women's national squad featuring players from 11 districts -- Tangail, Thakurgaon,

Mymensingh, Cox's Bazar, Jamalpur, Sirajganj, Rangpur, Magura, Jhenaidah, Satkhira and Bagerhat.

"The girls from Kalsindur village have been dominating the national teams since 2014. Now they are even dominating U-19, U-20 and the national women's team but unfortunately, there are no Kalsindur representatives at the early age levels at present," national women's team head coach Golam Rabbani Choton told The Daily Star.

"It is a bit frustrating that we can't get players from that productive region, which was supposed to produce more quality players. There may be internal problems, although I actually don't know the exact reasons," said Choton, who basically fine-tunes the skills of players who enter at the age levels.

"But it's a relief that players are coming through different districts, although the supply line of Kalsindur is currently closed. We hope they will provide more players like Maria, Sanjida, Shamsunnahar and Marzia in future."

Mofiz Uddin, a Kalsindur Primary School teacher is the one who nurtured some quality players and led them to two successive Bangamata Gold Cup

triumphs in 2013 and 2014. But he is now a teacher at Ronosingha Govt Primary School, some six kilometres away from Kalsindur Primary School.

"As far as I know, girls of Kalsindur are taking part in training regularly but the players are not coming out to the national level. I don't know whether the training is going in the right direction because I have not been with them for nearly three-and-a-half years," said Mofiz. "Maybe the girls are not getting the attention they were getting before. There may be a lack of sincerity from authorities after Kalsindur High School turned into a government school."

Kalsindur may not be consistent in producing quality players lately, but coach Golam Rabbani is hopeful of continuing the consistent performances in the AFC U-17 Women's Championship Qualifiers (which was the AFC U-16 Championship last year) by qualifying for the final round for the third successive time as he has some 10 players out of 15, who have experience of playing international matches.

Meanwhile, some 33 players from the U-17 and U-20 squads reported to Choton yesterday and training will start at the BFF artificial turf from today.

Tsitsipas's overdose of information

REUTERS, PARIS



Stefanos Tsitsipas is coached by his father Apostolos but also his mother, who is also knowledgeable about tennis, around at the French Open has sometimes proved to be an overdose of information for the fifth-seeded Greek.

Tsitsipas's father has been a regular at Roland Garros, wearing a mask bearing an image of his son, but the 22-year-old also has his mother Julia in Paris for this year's claycourt Grand Slam.

"My mom, she knows a lot about tennis," Greece's Tsitsipas, who is also guided by Serena Williams' coach Patrick Mouratoglou, told reporters with a smile. "Sometimes it can be a bit complicated when she wants to give her own opinion or advice direct to me, then have my dad tell me something else."

"We've sat down and we said, 'Guys, that's my coach. Whatever opinions or whatever thoughts you have, has to be filtered through Apostolos, my father'. It can get quite hectic. "Obviously the presence of Patrick, we are a strong, united team. My mom is also a small part of it. She brings a lot to the team, a lot of energy, a lot of good vibes. She is lovely."

Austrian Dominic Thiem, with whom Tsitsipas is good friends, became the first player outside of tennis's 'Big Three' of Novak Djokovic, Rafa Nadal and Roger Federer to win a Grand Slam since 2016 when he claimed the U.S. Open last month.

Tsitsipas, who used to skip school to watch the French Open on TV, has also long

been marked out as a future prospect and made his second Grand Slam semi-final on Wednesday, after reaching the same stage at last year's Australian Open.

"Dominic inspires me a lot. What Dominic has achieved is amazing," Tsitsipas said after defeating Russian Andrey Rublev 7-5 6-2 6-3 in the quarter-finals.

"Being able to have back-to-back finals here at the French is truly inspiring. Dominic is someone that makes me understand the game and makes me want to push even further to reach what he has



reached.

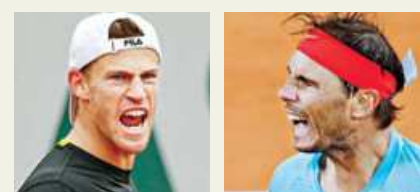
"He's a nice guy off the court. Big workaholic on the court. He's very balanced and a very passionate person in every aspect. I think I can learn a lot from him and add it to my game. From the young guys, he's someone that I really look up to."

Tsitsipas feels he is on the right track to achieve his dream of Grand Slam success.

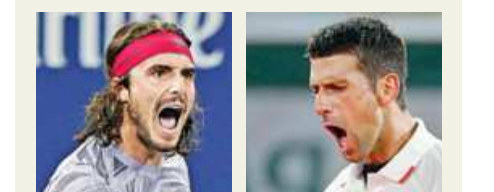
"I'm expecting since a young age to potentially triumph at these Grand Slams. I'm happy that I'm able to be in a position where I am today. Yeah, it's very, very satisfying," he said.

"I think I can learn from the previous one. I'm chasing something spectacular."

MEN'S SEMIFINALS TONIGHT



Schwartzman V Nadal



Tsitsipas V Djokovic

AGENCIES

World number one Novak Djokovic will face fifth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas in the Roland Garros semifinals tonight, while Rafael Nadal, the defending champion in men's singles, will take on 12th seed Diego Schwartzman in the other match on Philippe Chatrier Court.

Seeking an unfathomable thirteenth French Open title, Nadal has won all the 15 sets he has played so far. But his Argentine opponent Schwartzman previously proved that he could be a huge threat as he defeated the Spaniard

in Rome last month.

With an impressive win-loss record of 36-1 in 2020, Serbian Djokovic has dropped just one set in five matches in the tournament but suffered an injury scare in the last eight. However, Tsitsipas, in his first career semifinal at Roland Garros, looks fully fit and has also had an excellent tournament so far.

Nadal and Schwartzman have faced each other ten times before, with the 34-year-old leading by a massive margin of 9-1. Meanwhile, Djokovic leads the head-to-head 3-2 against Tsitsipas in their five previous meetings.



No arms, no problem

AFP, SAMUNDRI

Muhammad Ikram, who was born without arms, steps up to a snooker table, sizes up his options and with a firm flick of his chin strikes the cue ball and slots a red into a corner pocket.

The sport was perhaps an unlikely passion for Ikram, 32, to pursue, but the Pakistani player has spent years honing his skills and can now give anyone at his local snooker hall a run for their money.

"It is a tough job that requires hard work. If there is a player like me, I am ready to face him", Ikram told AFP during a recent visit to the snooker hall in the small town of Samundri in Pakistan's eastern province of Punjab.

Born into a poor home, he and his eight siblings did not go to school and he spent much of his childhood feeling isolated. As a teenager, he started to watch players in the local snooker hall and was inspired to start practising "in secret".

"In the beginning, I used to push the balls by myself on an empty pool table," Ikram said. "Gradually, I improved my game and started playing with others."

Ikram can now challenge the best players in town. He demonstrated a range of shots, giving a solid and assured flick of his head to sink reds

and then colours into pockets, drawing applause from other players.

"Chalk your chin," one of them quipped after Ikram eventually missed a shot. Worried he might injure himself, Ikram's parents initially barred him from snooker for several years, but last year they allowed him to return to the sport.

His skills quickly turned him into something of an internet celebrity among Pakistan's snooker-playing fraternity. "I become famous," Ikram said, though he confessed to having no idea what social media is. Cricket is by far Pakistan's most popular game, but snooker holds an important place in the country's sporting scene. British officers introduced the game during the colonisation of the Indian subcontinent and Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was a keen player.

Muhammad Nadeem, who owns the Samundri snooker hall, described Ikram as a "true sportsman".

"We don't charge him for a game. Instead people pay him to play with them," Nadeem said.

"He has no competition, in cricket and football there are disabled players but when it comes to snooker he is a one-of-a-kind player."

Int'l football returns with Lisbon stalemate

AGENCIES



National teams with national anthems, flags and small number of fans returned to the field across the globe as International Friendlies made its return on Wednesday night in multiple continents. As some of these matches were decorated with plenty of goals, others were agonizingly breathtaking.

Portugal had to settle for a 0-0 draw at home to Spain in a heavyweight friendly encounter as they hammered the crossbar twice and missed a last-gasp open goal. Cristiano Ronaldo, who hit a hat-trick when the two sides met in a thrilling 2018 World Cup group stage game, almost gave the European champions the lead when he sent a shot crashing against the underside of the bar early in the second half.

Germany midfielder Florian Neuhaus scored on his national team debut but Turkey came back three times to earn a 3-3 draw in their friendly. The Germans, playing without Bayern Munich and RB Leipzig players who were rested and missed several due to illness and injury.

Having become France's second highest all-



time top scorer on Wednesday by leapfrogging Michel Platini with 42 goals, Olivier Giroud is now gunning for Thierry Henry's all-time record of 51. Giroud netted twice in a 7-1 demolition of Ukraine in a friendly, celebrating his 100th cap in style in front of visitors' coach Andriy Shevchenko, one of his idols.

Forward Francesco Caputo scored on his Italy debut at the age of 33 as they routed Moldova 6-0 in a one-sided friendly.

Mexico handed new Netherlands coach Frank de Boer a defeat in his first game in charge as they enjoyed a deserved 1-0 win over their hosts in a friendly. Goals from midfielders Josip Brekalo and Mario Pasalic gave Croatia a 2-1 win at Switzerland.

Zambia secured a narrow 1-0 win over neighbours Malawi in Lusaka in the first international involving African countries since the Covid-19 pandemic shut down world sport in March.



(Anticlockwise from bottom L) Some 2,500 fans spectated the game from inside stadium as Portugal allowed spectators back in for the first time since the coronavirus outbreak. Croatia's Ivan Perisic throws his shirt to the fans after the match against Switzerland and the home crowd and a noisy visiting contingent created a cracking atmosphere as they filled 30 percent of the St. Gallen stadium, in line with UEFA's coronavirus regulations. Turkey's Kenan Karaman celebrates scoring their third goal with teammates while Germany's Emre Can looks dejected and Portugal superstar Cristiano Ronaldo consoles Joao Felix, who missed the target with the goal gaping in front of him.

PHOTO: REUTERS/TWITTER