

Against the tide

SHAHNOOR RABBANI

In a country where women participating in the male-dominated world of sport does not invite universal social approval, Bangladesh skipper Salma Khatun has certainly managed to break away from the mould and has to a certain extent proven all doubters and naysayers wrong.

Growing up in Khulna, Salma took an interest in cricket and would often play with her cousins in her neighbourhood. "I loved watching and playing cricket when I was a kid, even though my mom would scold me from time to time saying, 'This is a boy's game. It's not for you to be playing,'" Salma said. "But often I wouldn't listen to her because I loved it so much," she added.

Salma has already shown why she might arguably be the best female cricketer to come out of Bangladesh so far with her all-round skills and her captaincy. There is no way to look past Salma's contributions to Bangladesh women's cricket. Her innings of 73 against the Irish in a must-win match and her inspired five-wicket-haul against the

Japanese after defeat in the first match against Pakistan speak for her ability to lead from the front. Without those priceless contributions the Bangladesh women's team would



SALMA KHATUN

probably not have achieved ODI status. What also cannot be discounted is her crucial bowling performance against the Irish taking 3

for 34 to defeat them in Bangladesh's first ever ODI.

Although she remains honest and humble, there is no denying that she has taken a brave career step in choosing to become a female cricketer in Bangladesh, where the sport is still in its infancy and is not the most lucrative either.

At just 21 years of age, she is already looked upon as a role model of sorts by girls who are interested in picking up the sport. "Often times I have parents calling me up and telling me their girls want to play cricket and ask for advice. I try and help them out whichever way I can," she added. She herself has many cricketers she looks up to and would like to emulate. Among them her favourite players are Bangladesh's own Shakib Al Hasan, Indian batting maestro Sachin Tendulkar and Australian legend Ricky Ponting.

Women's cricket in Bangladesh may still be in its early stages but Salma Khatun will always remain one of the pillars on which it has been built and her name will be entrenched in history for being the first ever Bangladesh women's cricket captain.

Hurdling challenges

BISHWAJIT ROY

The year just past was an eventful one for Mushfiqur Rahim.

In all the three formats of the game the Bogra-lad improved his performance, in particular the averages, significantly but he will likely remember this year as one where he transcended into becoming national captain; a dream for any cricketer.

In contrast to his keeping, the 23-year old has always been rated highly as a batsman because of his solid technique and ability to hit the ball hard when needed but yet, there is still a lingering suspicion that he has yet to prove his true potential in the middle.

However, it would be hard for any ardent follower to forget Mushfiqur's maiden hundred against Zimbabwe in August 2011. The fabulous knock provided evidence that the little man has got the ability to give Bangladesh's vulnerable middle-order some solidity, even though his team lost the match by five runs in keeping with a generally disastrous tour. There were some other sparkling knocks and he also looked better behind the stumps this year.

It was however not his individual performances, but the way he got the captaincy that hogged the spotlight. Mushfiqur was appointed captain for the two home series against West

Indies and Pakistan following the whimsical decision of removing Shakib Al Hasan from the hot seat after the Zimbabwe debacle.

It would be unwise to judge Mushfiqur as a captain after only two series. It's not an easy task to lead a



MUSHFIQUR RAHIM

team like Bangladesh, especially in the longer version of the game. But yet, Mushfiqur made a dream start as captain when he led from the front with an unbeaten 41 to guide Bangladesh to a three-wicket victory

over West Indies in the lone T20 International in October. It however took little time for Mushfiqur to feel the heat and pressures associated with the job, but not before the Tigers won one one-day match in the three-match series and showed rare character in the first Test against West Indies.

It could have been a fantastic year for Mushfiqur if the Tigers could have taken something away from the series against Pakistan. By courtesy of Shakib's wonderful all-round performance Bangladesh gave Pakistan a tough time in the second Test but still there were some hard questions to answer.

But one that was answered beyond any suspicion was questions about Mushfiqur's commitment and work ethics.

There were still whispers about his confidence in dealing with a crisis. And in the second Test against Pakistan Mushfiqur gave enough evidence that he was still struggling to cope with the pressure -- the missed stumping of Taufeeq Umar and the run-out of Shakib Al Hasan are cases in point.

So, the challenge for the little man in the New Year will be to prove the critics wrong. But if we know Mushfiqur, it is something he has had plenty of experience doing.

Kubra carries a message

SAVEEM SHAMA

In a very short time, Khadiza Tul Kubra has made a name for herself. Her 18 wickets made her the second highest wicket-taker in the ICC Women's World Cup qualifiers in November, helping Bangladesh to the ODI status they so craved.

The number is impressive, letting her make more headlines than the rest of her teammates. And all of this sounds a lot better when one finds out that she is all of sixteen years old and hails from small-town Bangladesh; where finding a cricketer is a rare feat, let alone a female cricketer.

Kubra has come a long way both geographically and in terms of accomplishments from her hometown of Bogra. This bright teenager has a special connection with cricket very early in life.

Having started off playing with her brother in the Choklokman colony, Kubra began falling in love with the game. When she thought of trying it out properly, Kubra found her greatest support where it matters most for aspiring children in the country family members. Her parents, three siblings and grandfather has been her main push.

"My grandfather has been my greatest support, encouraging me to take up cricket. My family helped me shine and it is for them that I never faced any difficulties coming this far," Kubra told The Daily Star Sport recently.

"According to my grandfather's suggestion, I joined the district cricket camp which the cricket board held in Bogra and got selected and made it to the women's national team", she continued.

However, making it to the national team means that Kubra has to spend more time in the capital. Luckily for Kubra, her family's mindset is far from the stereotypical types that come from the outskirts and acts as a message to every family of talented girls in the country.

"I saw Kubra had great interest in cricket since her childhood and thought I should not make her sit at home. Instead we encouraged her to try out at the camp this year. It was the will of Allah that she got selected for the national team there and went this far," said Jamil Akhtar, the proud father of the youngster.

It wasn't easy though; Salma Khatun, the national captain, gave her strength, especially at the beginning. "Kubra is an extremely nice girl. She was very nervous at first when she joined the squad this year as she is the youngest member, then I supported her and helped her overcome her nervousness, told her there is nothing to be afraid of," she said.

Kubra is in her first year of college and her parents would support her picking either cricket or any other field as a career she wants to go for in the future. But right now, she loves the experience and all the other paraphernalia that tags along. "I cannot be happier being a part of the national squad. As I am the youngest member, everyone takes care of me and treats me really well and helps me in every step," she said.

Curiously though, Kubra is a big help to those who have trouble being themselves. Battling her odds, the youngster should now be a model of determination, belief and effort.

All this can take a person to boundless heights. Just ask Kubra.



KHADIZA TUL KUBRA



Uruguay won the Copa America for a record 15th time after defeating Paraguay in the final.



Li Na made history by winning the French Open, the first man or woman from China to win a Grand Slam.



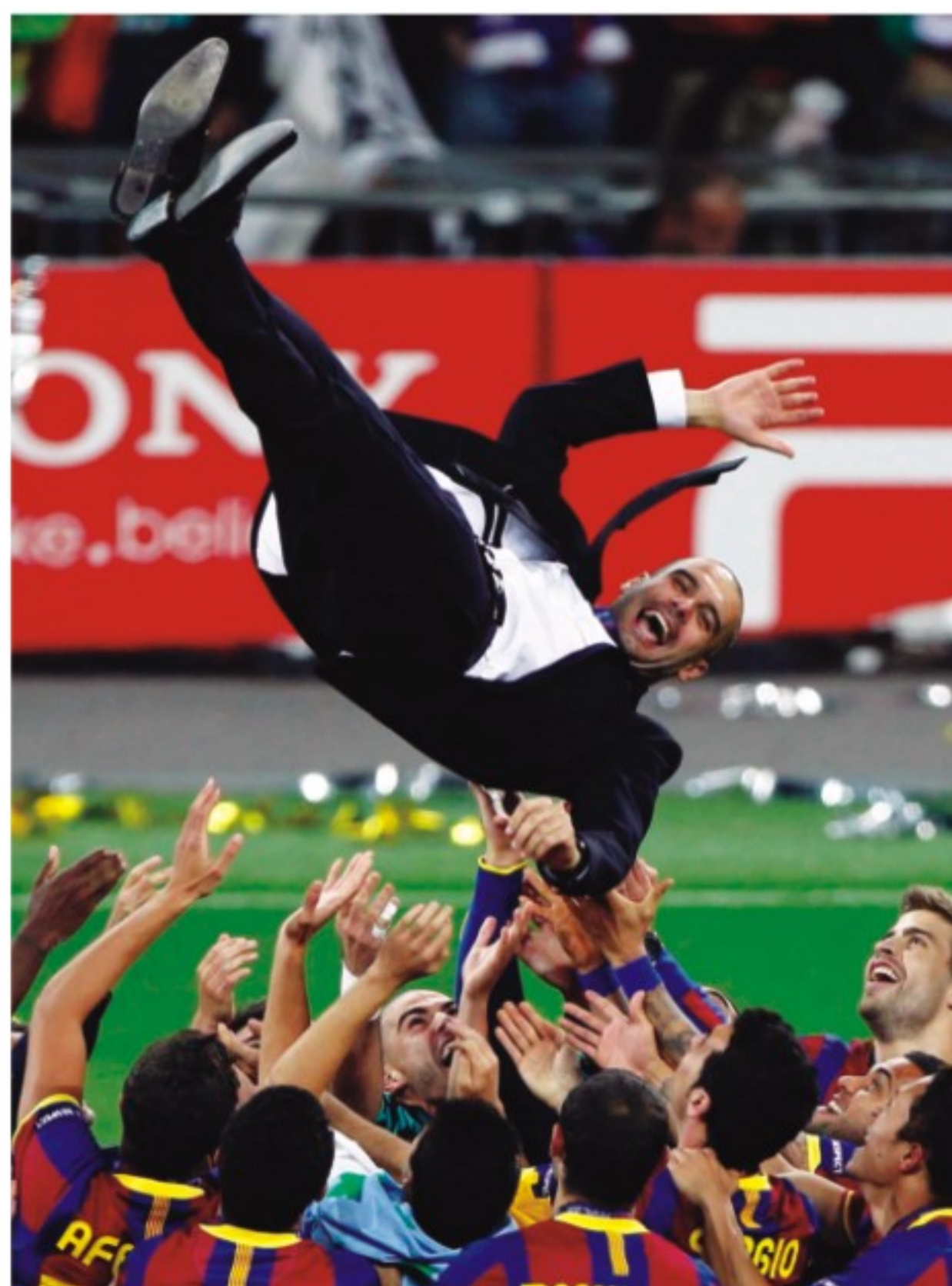
Serbian star Novak Djokovic won three Grand Slams and became tennis's world number one for the first time.



New Zealand won the Rugby World Cup beating France in the final after a trophy gap of 24 years.



Indian opener Virinder Sehwag entered the record books by scoring 219, the highest individual runs in ODIs.



Barcelona captured the Champions League for the fourth time overcoming Manchester United.



English cricketers conquered the Aussies Down Under for the first time in 24 years to win the Ashes.