



Bangladesh men's chess team had every reason to celebrate as they brought unprecedented success from the 2012 Chess Olympiad, followed by more individual successes abroad.

PHOTO: STAR FILE

United they achieved

ATIQUE ANAM

When Niaz Murshed became the country's first Grandmaster (the first one from South Asian as well) back in 1987, a generation of youth were inspired to take up the game. They thought that chess would give them an identity and fame like no other sport could. But soon enough the harsh realities of the game dawned on Niaz and his followers -- the lack of money in the game, the politicisation of the game's governing body and the struggle to cope with modern tech-based chess -- meant the positive vibe from the game slowly drifted away.

As a consequence, only four other players have made the grade 25 years after Niaz's achievement. Whereas neighbouring India, which got its first GM (Vishwanathan Anand) one year later than us, produced as many as 29 GMs in the intervening period. The reasons are straightforward. There was little or no political wrangling over the administration of the game, corporate sponsorships were a sure thing as long as there was success, and most importantly there was genuine interest from the parents to get their children into playing chess.

Unfortunately none of those amiable factors were present here.

Niaz, after a few years of initial success and stardom, got disillusioned with the game. So did his successors, being on and off with the game. The infrequent arrangement of International GM Chess/Rating Chess and absence of some of the top-rated players from the circuit did little to help the youngsters who aspired to earn norms and get their ratings higher.

However, there has been a silver lining in the end after all. The five GMs, in a rare show of unity, decided they would forget all their grievances and thought it was time to put the country ahead of personal egos and 'man versus institution' clashes. So they took

part in the Istanbul Chess Olympiad all united, and brought unprecedented success from there, by becoming 33rd among 150 nations, even leaving the mighty Indians behind in their wake. And that success drove home two more International GM crowns in the next two months.

The GMs thus showed that despite many obstacles, they still have the quality to make a mark on the international stage. The onus now rests on the governing body of chess to create a healthy environment for the game, to attract sponsors and take steps so that the young generation is encouraged to take up chess.

ANISUR RAHMAN

Domestic football competitions have been in a steady position over last five years without much improvement seen in the general standard of football. The poor standard of the country's footballers was exposed time and again when they competed at the international level in tournaments such as the biennial SAFF Championship, FIFA World Cup Qualifiers, Olympic Qualifiers or the AFC Challenge Cup.

The lack of international exposure is one of the hindrances to improvement, and thankfully the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) came forward with a new package that saw the national team playing FIFA international friendlies regularly in the last quarter of 2012.

The outcome of those friendlies against Nepal, Thailand and Malaysia might have been disappointing, but they nevertheless served the purpose of playing such friendlies, which is to judge the standard of the national team and identify the areas to work on.

Bangladesh managed to play out draws against Nepal and Malaysia but they were humiliated 5-0 at the hands of Thailand.

Just a decade ago Bangladesh could be seen fighting hard against Thailand, who have gone from strength to strength in the intervening period as a second-tier powerhouse in Asia while Bangladesh still remain in the third-tier due to irregular football activities.

The 5-0 drubbing at the hands of Thailand might be a harsh return but the defeat is an eye-opener and should tell the team management about the areas

the side can improve. The result should also be an eye-opener for football officials, who generally focus on immediate results rather than long-term goals.

Playing international friendlies regularly will help the players hone their skills and match temperament, and provide valuable experience while also get used to playing together and bond before a major tournament gets underway. The matches against international sides will also give the coaches more opportunities to change players, formations and tactics.

No one expects the Bangladesh national football team to put in overwhelming performances in a couple of years but it is reasonable to expect that there will be gradual but steady improvement. As they get better, international success will also draw more youngsters to the game.

India can be used a classic example in this case. Once, not too long ago, they were in the same standard as Bangladesh, but took their status to enormous heights over the last decade through playing against superior sides. Initial results were not encouraging, but they stuck to their long-term plans and are now reaping the rewards as they compete in earnest against teams like Kuwait, Qatar, Syria, Jordan, Uzbekistan.

Like the international cricket matches being held in Bangladesh, the football's governing body should stage international friendlies regularly in Dhaka that will eventually attract football spectators to stadiums now eerily empty, and the sport of football can reclaim its rightful place at the top of Bangladesh sport.

LONDON'S BOLT into immortality

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

In a cool summer evening on the 12th of August in London, Lord Sebastian Coe stood up to the podium facing 80,000 people and a TV audience of nearly a billion to whisper a simple phrase into the microphone.

"When our time came, we did it right," said Coe and the words of the man tasked with the responsibility of hosting the 30th modern Olympiad and London's third in just over a century, drew rapturous applause.

The applause was mostly because Coe was indeed right. London did "do it right" and a city tasked with hosting the largest sporting event in the world in these times of austerity managed to deliver with wit, panache and dexterity.

There were plenty of jitters and potential banana-skins.

From panicky predictions about transport failures to longish debates about budget allocations, the nervous Nellies were brushed aside all and sundry by the performances of a galaxy of stars including Usain Bolt, Michael Phelps, Yohan Blake, Jessica Ennis, Mohammad Farah, David Rudisha, Andy Murray and Sir Chris Hoy.

And as any great sporting

event needs to be, London 2012 too was full of intricate storylines. There was the fall and rise of a champion as Phelps defended his juggernaut reputation in style, exiting London not just as the most successful individual (along with a certain Missy Franklin we will probably be hearing a lot about) but also as the most successful Olympian of all time.

But it was not only about champions; there was also a blind archer who broke a world record and a man without legs who made it to the finals of a 400-metre relay. And then, there was also the collective euphoria that carried Great Britain to exalted heights.

For once, the British had their own heroes, and ones who actually delivered.

Jessica Ennis won the heptathlon and the smiling Mohammad Farah sent the stadium into raptures. In the futuristic Velodrome, Victoria Pendleton and Chris Hoy shot them to new heights while in the leafy outdoors of Hyde Park, Alastair Brownlee took human endurance to a new level.

The United States and China still finished first and second in the medal standings but "Team GB," as it was hailed, finished third with 29 gold medals and 65 overall.

But if we are to look back and reminisce about London, then we

need only to turn our attention to one man who transformed what was an excellent Games into what will probably be remembered as a phenomenal one.

Sport needs characters and in Usain Bolt, track and field has found its very own Muhammad Ali. Indeed, Bolt possesses that unique mix of talent and charisma that makes one sit up and take notice and all of it was in full evidence during the whole of London 2012.

In London, Bolt participated for less than two minutes, 65.79 seconds to be pedantically exact. But it felt like the purpose of the entire Games was to build up to that particular denouement, to that particular moment when the giant Jamaican stood in the starters' blocks for the 100-metre final, and leapt off the blocks in his hurtle towards immortality.

Bolt left London with three gold medals and a unique triple double, a feat unrivalled by any in history. He also left with the small matter of the tag of the fastest man in the planet.

But Bolt did not just take. He gave back too -- in the means of a plethora of memories which those lucky enough to have witnessed will cherish forever. London 2012 will be synonymous with Usain Bolt forevermore.



PHOTO: AFP FILE
Usain Bolt was the star of the stars at the 2012 London Olympic Games. The Jamaican sprint king secured an incredible three gold medals in London -- men's 100m, 200m and 4X100m relay -- a repeat of his Beijing 2008 performance.

Siddikur's highs and lows

ATIQUE ANAM

The year 2012 is a tale of two halves for Siddikur Rahman, Bangladesh's flag bearer in international golf. The man who became the first and only Bangladeshi to win an Asian Tour title back in 2010 has produced some brilliant performances, threatened to win another title, but in the end fell to disappointing depths.

Siddikur finished the season as number 17 in the Asian Tour Order of Merit, the first time in three years he failed to feature in the top ten. His earnings have dropped too, as well as his world ranking. From the 158th which he held at the start of the season, Siddikur dropped to 206th at the end of 2012.

But the beginning was so different from the way it ended and it had promised so much. Siddikur finished three times in the top five in the first half of the season, came second twice and racked up as many as 8 under-par scores in ten events he participated. He was touted as the Asian Tour's Mr. Consistent. At that point it seemed like a second Asian Tour title was just around the corner.

Then came the two-month break and he never really rediscovered that form. He took part in nine more Asian Tour events after that, only twice making it to the top five, whilst most of the times he failed pretty badly. He missed as many as four cuts in this period and finished over-par 7 times out of nine.

A couple of things might have coincided here which resulted in his dip in form and confidence. He was suffering from a lingering back pain, which he sort of played through. He showed a specific weakness in coping with rainy and windy conditions. And the events that he took part in the latter part of the season featured bigger stars and more treacherous courses to deal with.

But then again, Siddikur remains the best person to judge as to what went wrong. It is the golfer's own decision and precision, his technical skill and mental strength that ultimately decides how successful he will be on the field. So, Siddikur himself needs to identify his lapses and rectify them as soon as he can, because a whole nation looks up to him with great expectations.



PHOTO: STAR FILE
Siddikur Rahman carries the Bangladeshi flag to places where other sports fail to make an impression. So, it is doubly important that Bangladesh's golfing icon recovers from the dip in form.