



It was a dreadful year for Bangladesh's booters. The national football team lost a crucial fixture against Bhutan during the Asia Qualifiers and as a result will not receive a chance to play in any AFC-sanctioned friendly for the next three years. That's a big loss considering that they won't be able to play competitive matches.

Maintaining as opposed to sustaining

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In most scenarios, with the notable exception of cricket, that marriage is a dysfunctional one. There are of course exceptions, but they unfortunately just prove the rule. Few stories are as inspirational as the recent one of the Under 14 and later Under 16 women's football team carrying all before them by first winning the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Under 14 Girls' regional championships in 2015 and winning all matches at home in the AFC Under 16 Women's Championship Qualifiers. It is a truly remarkable achievement by mostly underprivileged teenage girls from the conservative environs of rural Bangladesh.

Those who watched the girls in action were uniformly impressed by their skill and stamina, which hints directly that they were beneficiaries of good coaching and effective training regimes. It is a microcosm of what is possible when interest and passion at grassroots level is met with a willingness to nurture those qualities.

But as of this moment, it remains a microcosm because a large majority of the heroic girls—both at Under 14 and Under 16 levels—have come from Kalsindur Government Primary School of Dhobaura Upazila, and the seeds of inspiration were sown mostly by the enthusiasm and will of one man: coach Mohammad Mofizuddin, who in 2011 set out to form a girls' team which by 2013 won the Bangamata Gold Cup. He formed the nucleus for the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), and the BFF ran with it ahead of the Under 14 and Under 16 events.

One notable takeaway from the story of the Bangladesh U-16 girls are the dates: in 2011 Mofizuddin was planning and forming a team for a competition that was to begin two years later—a nationwide competition for schoolgirls. Suffice to say, that kind of long-term vision is very rare in the higher echelons of Bangladeshi sport, as Margarita's story illustrates.

There have been flashes, but nothing that has sustained. Before the 2010 South Asian Games at home, the participating athletes started training under the auspices of their respective federations a year before the event and the step bore results—Bangladesh won 18 gold medals, the highest in their history. The impetus was lost, however, as



Mahfuza Khatun Shila became the first Bangladeshi woman to win gold for swimming in the South Asian Games, and the first Bangladeshi to win 2 consecutive golds in the event.

the South Asian Games took a long break, and Bangladesh won just four gold medals.

Under foreign coach Oliver Kurtz, Bangladesh's hockey team won the Asian Hockey Federation (AHC) Cup for the third edition in succession in November 2016, and again it was down to a long training lead-up to the AHC event.

In stark contrast is the state of the men's football team. The domestic calendar, dominated by the clout of clubs, often interferes with interna-

tional assignments. And the state of domestic events, with clubs often being at loggerheads resulting in delays of major leagues and competitions, hardly improves matters. The result has been the humiliating defeat to Bhutan in the Asian Cup Qualifying playoffs.

A way to turn things around would be long-term planning, which has already been seen to be beneficial on the rare occasions when such initiatives have been allowed to pan out. Shooting is a sport where Bangladesh has traditionally been promising, but too often

a lack of proper grassroots training has seen talented shooters fall by the wayside when faced with the best the world has to offer. In this respect the Bangladesh Shooting Sport Federation should come up with a vision now for the 2020 Olympics—much like BFF's Vision 2022, but with more substance—to give themselves enough time to improve the shooters already in place and unearth new ones.

For that to happen, as mentioned, there has to be policy and funding in place that encourages grassroots devel-

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opment. Currently, much of the government funding maintains what is already in place—in other words funds allocated to federations enable them to maintain their day-to-day operations, but not much else. Funds to sustain growth or development is another matter altogether, and one that is conspicuous by its absence. Unless the policies are in place to sustain growth across the country's sport, successes like the Under 14 and Under 16 girls' teams and the 18 South Asian gold medals will continue to be flashes in the pan.

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