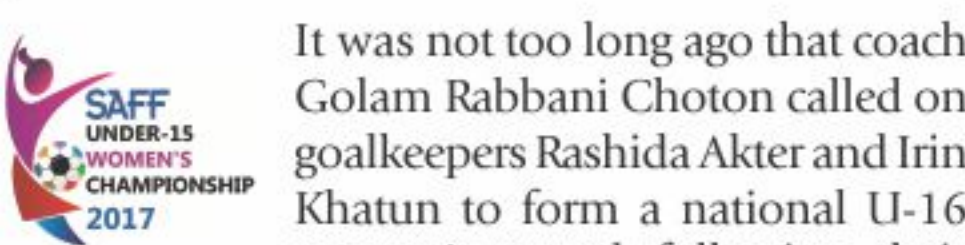


BIG DREAM, BIGGER HURDLE

ANISUR RAHMAN



It was not too long ago that coach Golam Rabbani Choton called on goalkeepers Rashida Akter and Irin Khatun to form a national U-16 women's squad following their good performance in the 2014 AFC U-16 Women's Championship Qualifiers in Dhaka, but he had to give up hope on both players as they got married in the meantime.

In another incident, Choton called on the then national team captain Sui Nu Pru Marma and defender Trishna Chakma for the 2016 SAFF Women's Championship, but both experienced booters failed to turn up for the training camp as they had just given birth to babies.

Goalkeeper Taslima and defender Ruma, who were part of the winning squad of the 2015 AFC U-14 Girls' Regional Championship in Nepal, and defender Asha and forward Sadia, who were part of the winning squad of the same competition in the following year, have not been in mainstream football after being dropped either due to for poor performance or injuries.

The drop-out rate for these age-group girls is roughly 15 per cent, a fact that hinders smooth transition from age-level to senior side.

Against this reality, the euphoria created by the girls winning the SAFF U-15 Women's Championship calls for a reality check.

Bangladesh have won two editions of the now-defunct AFC U-14 Championship Girls' Regional Championship in 2015 and 2016, qualified for the final round of the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in 2016 and played admirably in the final round this year before clinching the title of the first-ever SAFF U-15 Championship on Sunday.



PHOTO: FROZ AHMED

Four members of the Bangladesh under-15 women's football team keep a close eye on their teammates in training at the BFF astro-turf during the SAFF U-15 Women's Championship recently. If the success of these girls encourages the local game's governing body and other stakeholders to further invest on them long-term it will go a long way in finding further and bigger avenues of success.

This was all possible due to the continuation of a programme that has been running through for the past three years. Despite a few drop-outs, most of the players have remained together, in training and have also played a few practice matches ahead of different competitions.

But what's next? That is something the game's local governing body should be focused on now to sustain and enrich the success.

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) high-ups have already declared that their target is for Bangladesh to play in the Women's World Cup at age level, but the reality is that the BFF has a long way to go to make that dream come true as there is no competitive structure in women's football in the country apart from the drop-out of footballers despite their potential.

It must be admitted here that the responsi-

bility to ensure these things and to the take country's women's football forward doesn't solely rest with the BFF, rather the government, the professional clubs and corporate houses must come forward too.

During a reception of the under-15 team at the BFF headquarters yesterday, the federation's president Kazi Salahuddin promised to keep this group of girls together for the next

four years in a bid to make the dream of playing in age-level world cups come true.

"It is not a big ambition. We have already played the FIFA U-17 World Cup Qualifiers [AFC U-16 Women's Championship] and we have been in top eight teams in Asia at that level. Now we have to come into the top three to play in the Under-20 Women's World Cup in 2020. It is a hard job but I believe it is possible," Salahuddin said.

"I must admit that BFF can't do it single-handedly and we need financial support from the government, corporate houses and individual persons. We need only Tk 3 crore per year and the sum of Tk 12 crore is not a big deal for the government," the BFF boss added.

When asked whether if only continuous training over the next four years will be enough to achieve that dream, Salahuddin gave some positive news: "Today I received a few phone calls from clubs, who are interested to take part in the women's professional football league, which we will start from next year. Apart from that, we are also planning to introduce an under-19 women's football league from where we will be able to judge the standard of our footballers.

"I also want to arrange 10 to 16 international matches for women's teams per year, but that number will depend on the financial ability of the BFF. We will actually give you detailed plans in the latter part of January," added Salahuddin.

If those words turn into anything close to reality, there is reason to hope for an even brighter future in women's football. Nevertheless, they are already ensured a busy schedule in 2018 as Bangladesh will take part in the SAFF U-18 and Senior Women's Championships apart from taking part in AFC U-16 and U-19 Women's Championship Qualifiers.

Rivals aim to bridge gap

AFP, London



With Manchester City on a record-breaking sprint towards the Premier League title, the leaders have reached the halfway point of the season looking simply unstoppable.

The future is bright for Pep Guardiola's side, but City's rivals face a more uncertain time in 2018 as they try to bridge the gulf in class.

With 19 games played in the 38-match campaign, AFP Sport compiles a half-term report for the Premier League's big six ahead of the Boxing Day fixtures.

When City's Abu Dhabi-based owners hired Guardiola last year, they dreamed of the Spaniard delivering bountiful success in swaggering style.

A trophy-less first season in England was a huge disappointment, but the former Barcelona and Bayern Munich boss has worked his magic this term.

Playing such dazzling football that they have already been ranked among England's all-time great teams, City have reeled off a record 17 successive league wins to move 13 points clear at the top.

Guardiola spent big money to overhaul his squad in the close-season, but he has also shown a deft touch to bring the best out of key players like Raheem Sterling and Kevin De Bruyne.

The title race has been turned into a lengthy coronation by unbeaten City and, ahead of their visit to Newcastle United on Wednesday, the only questions remaining are how early they clinch the trophy and how many records they set in the process.

When Romelu Lukaku sprinted clear to notch his first league goal for United on the opening weekend of the season against West Ham United, it

FIXTURES	
(1500 GMT unless stated)	
Tuesday	Bournemouth v West Ham, Chelsea v Brighton, Huddersfield v Stoke, Liverpool v Swansea (1730 GMT), Manchester United v Burnley, Tottenham v Southampton (1230 GMT), Watford v Leicester, West Brom v Everton
Wednesday	Newcastle v Manchester City (1945 GMT)
Thursday	Crystal Palace v Arsenal (2000 GMT)

seemed Jose Mourinho had found the powerful attacking talisman that all his best teams have employed.

Lukaku, a close-season signing from Everton, hit 11 goals in his first 10 games as United matched free-scoring City blow for blow, but suddenly the goals dried up for the Belgian.

With Lukaku under fire from his own fans, the increasingly tetchy Mourinho has been unable to scheme

enough goals from other areas.

The nadir coming in a tedious 0-0 draw at Liverpool when Mourinho's cautious tactics were widely panned.

City's 2-1 win at Old Trafford was another hammer blow and United, who host Burnley on Tuesday, may need more major investment to catch up.

The champions hadn't even started their title defence when Blues boss Antonio Conte gave an ominous warning about their prospects.

Frustrated by Chelsea's failure to land his top transfer targets, Conte was already convinced his squad lacked the depth to compete for the title and challenge in the Champions League.

The Italian has been spot on and City showed how far ahead they were with a clinical 1-0 win at Stamford Bridge, while dismal losses at Crystal Palace and West Ham have kept Chelsea from establishing any momentum.

Alvaro Morata's predatory finishing in his debut season has been one of the few bright spots for Conte, whose side take on Brighton and Hove Albion on Tuesday languishing 16 points behind City.

Last Friday's scintillating 3-3 draw at Arsenal showcased everything good about Jurgen Klopp's commitment to an eye-catching style of play -- but just as significantly it emphasised the problems with the German's team as currently constructed.

Eboue offered coaching role

AGENCIES, Istanbul

Ex-Arsenal star Emmanuel Eboue has been offered a coaching role at former club Galatasaray after manager Fatih Terim read quotes about his tragic meltdown that almost led to suicide.

Eboue told the Daily Mirror how he lost everything after divorcing his wife, and how it nearly led him to taking his own life. Galatasaray boss Terim saw the shocking quotes and according to CNN Turk the former Ivory Coast full-back has been offered the job of under-14 assistant coach at the Turkish club.

Terim told CNN: "We heard news about Eboue, we will do whatever we can to help my friend."

Eboue, now 34, spoke of his appreciation for his former manager in Istanbul: "I would be very happy if Fatih Hodja gave me the duty in Galatasaray."

Galatasaray have gone on to launch a campaign helping former players with troubles, with club legends Hasan Şaş and Necati Ateş sharing messages of support for the Ivorian.

Serena to return in Abu Dhabi

AFP, Abu Dhabi



Former world number one Serena Williams will make a surprise comeback at the Mubadala exhibition event in Abu Dhabi next Saturday, as she gears up for her Australian Open title defence in January.

The decision to play in the United Arab Emirates should virtually confirm Williams' participation at Melbourne Park.

The 36-year-old has not played since clinching a 23rd Grand Slam singles title 11 months ago, after revealing she was pregnant during the tournament and taking time off to give birth to her first child, Alexis Olympia in September.

Williams will return with a match against Latvia's French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko, making them the first women to compete in the previously male-only event.

"I am delighted to be returning to the court in Abu Dhabi for the first time since the birth of my daughter," she said in a statement released by the tournament organisers on Sunday.

"The Mubadala World Tennis Championship has long marked the beginning of the men's global tennis season and I am excited and honoured to be making my comeback as part of the first women to participate in the event."

The former world number one can equal Margaret Court's all-time record of 24 Grand Slam titles, although she will have to

make do with a low seeding Down Under after slipping to 22nd in the rankings.

Williams' comeback raises the prospect of a renewal of her one-sided rivalry with Maria Sharapova, after the Russian's own comeback earlier this year from a doping ban.

It also provides a boost the Australian Open, after two-time champion Victoria Azarenka pulled out of the warm-up event in Auckland over the ongoing custody battle that has stopped the Belarusian from playing since Wimbledon in July.



Serena claimed an Open-era record 23rd major title by beating older sister Venus 6-4, 6-4 in this year's Australian Open final, a feat made all the more remarkable by the fact that she was two months pregnant.

Ostapenko broke through with a stunning French Open title, and the 20-year-old will take on Serena for the first time.

The Mubadala event had already seen men's world number one Rafael Nadal and three-time Grand Slam winner Stan Wawrinka withdraw.

QUICK SINGLES

The following are a few samples of stories that did not make the print edition. However, if they pique your interest, you can always read them online on The Daily Star website by simply scanning the QR codes listed below:

Zverev, Dimitrov serve notice

Alexander Zverev and Grigor Dimitrov have made their presence felt this year even as Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer resumed their domination.

Mash, Shakib, Mushfiquer congratulate BD girls

Bangladesh cricket's senior players congratulated the Bangladesh U-15 women's team for winning the SAFF U-15 championship by defeating India 1-0 in the final.

Messi is the El Clasico King

Individual awards are a thing of beauty, even in team sports. Some players soar above the rest and are therefore congratulated for their outstanding effort.



MERRY CHRISTMAS from the superstars

(L) Lionel Messi takes his family to meet Santa Claus. (Top) Cristiano Ronaldo celebrates Christmas eve with family and friends. (Bottom) Neymar was with his old man on this special occasion.

PHOTOS: COLLECTED



Salah wants to win titles

AFP, Liverpool

Egyptian forward Mohamed Salah said on Monday he hopes he can help Liverpool end a five-year wait for silverware after making a blistering start to life at Anfield.

The 25-year-old -- who joined from Italian club Roma in the close season -- has scored 21 goals in all competitions for Jurgen Klopp's side and is joint-top of the Premier League scorers' charts with Tottenham Hotspur's Harry Kane.

"I want to win titles here, I came here to win titles -- to win something for the club, for us, for the fans," he told Sky Sports News.

"I love to win something here. We are working hard every day to win something. I am sure we are going to win something this year."

Salah has formed a key part of Liverpool's 'fab four' attacking line-up alongside Philippe Coutinho, Roberto Firmino and Sadio Mane.

The five-time European champions sit fourth in the Premier League ahead of Tuesday's match against