



THE POWER OF A DREAM: The Bangladesh girls' football team was once again the biggest success story of the year, which they capped by becoming champions of the inaugural SAFF U-15 Women's Championship at home on December 24.

PHOTO: STAR

CAN OUR STRUCTURE SUSTAIN?

AL-AMIN

Was 2017 pleasantly different from the preceding year or the year before in our sporting existence? Not quite so. A similar trend played out with cricketers hogging the spotlight and the age-group footballers, especially the girls, maintaining a consistent rise. Apart from that, successes here and there in other sports made up a year that will enter into history come tomorrow.

Looking back at 2017, we are more likely to reflect on Shakib Al Hasan's 217 and Mushfiqur Rahim's 159 in that stupendous 300-plus run stand in the Wellington Test; a never-experienced before Shakib-Mahmudullah magnum opus in that Champions Trophy game against New Zealand that the Tigers clinched at Cardiff in a most spectacular fashion; a memorable victory in the 100th Test at Colombo; a first-ever Test victory against the mighty Australians at the home of cricket in Mirpur.

In football, the

Bangladesh girls' first venture onto a truly global competition at the age level ended in three defeats against North Korea, Japan and Australia. But that narrow 3-2 defeat in Thailand against Australia was a big statement that Bangladesh are an emerging force in Asia in women's age-level football. And just to make that statement louder, the Bangladesh girls won the inaugural SAFF U-15 Women's Championship by defeating India in the final in the month of December.

Cricket and football are the two most followed sports in Bangladesh (many may argue that cricket is head and shoulders above football now). But few will argue that both games need a solid base or structure -- for cricket to build on its success and for football to revive its old glories -- that is unfortunately not articulated by either camp.

History has punished our country's football, which was the all-consuming game from the 70s to the early 90s. There was a time when football meant everything but tragically our football bosses allowed those

unprofessionally structured clubs to carry on when it needed only a desire and some will to make them professional. Now, the governing body of the country's football is virtually begging the clubs to comply with the minimum requirements of being a professional outfit. But with the popularity of domestic football gone, those non-professionally structured clubs -- bracketed as welfare organisations and living on donations -- simply continue to defy what is mandatory in the FIFA or AFC guidelines to be a professional club.

For cricket to grow, most of the successful nations have adopted a uniform structure. Not so Bangladesh, where the game has grown on the club structure. Interestingly, the same Dhaka-based clubs that promoted football also played the biggest part in uplifting cricket.

Although it is a flawed structure, the country's sports have somehow thrived on it. But the ground reality is that it is not sustainable and we have already seen the popularity of domestic cricket under the

club structure on the wane. And five to 10 years down the line, the once-popular Dhaka cricket might face the same fate as football.

Without being critical of the Dhaka-based clubs, they should embrace the reality that it is not economically viable for them to be involved in more than one sport -- preferably football -- if they really want to run professionally.

Football is based on a club structure all over the world and that structure is very popular, quite independent of the state of their respective national teams. Cricket is based on regions and its progress depends on the performance of its national team.

When Bangladesh won Test status in 2000, they promised to set up a strong regional structure. We are about to enter the 18th year of that unfulfilled promise with a rude reminder from history that has not spared our country's football.

Will cricket learn from history or keep riding on a golden generation of cricketers with a false sense of security?



PHOTOS: BCB/AFP/REUTERS

A BUMPY ROAD

Shakib Al Hasan hit a Bangladesh-record 217 in the Wellington Test in January, a match-winning ton in their 100th Test (TOP) in March and was involved in a record partnership with Mahmudullah Riyad (BOT-TOM) during Bangladesh's run to their maiden Champions Trophy semifinal in June, before a player-of-the-match performance in their first Test win over Australia in August. Mushfiqur Rahim (L) also had a year to remember with the bat, but the South Africa tour in September-October that cost him his Test captaincy left a sour taste.



YOUTH HAVE THE POWER



PHOTOS: AFC/BFF

It was down to the age-level teams to carry the country's footballing hopes and they did just that: (Clockwise from L) the U-18 boys' team fought back from 0-3 down against India to win 4-3 in the SAFF U-18 Championship in Bhutan during their runner-up finish in September, the U-16 girls put in arguably Bangladesh's best performance of the year in all sports in their 2-3 loss to Australia in the AFC U-16 Women's Championship in Thailand in September and the boys were at it again in the AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers in November, beating Uzbekistan and holding hosts Tajikistan to a stalemate.

GOOD HOSTS

Our reputation as good hosts once again extended to the sports sphere. (Clockwise from L-R) Archers of 33 nations flocked to Bangladesh for the 20th Asian Archery Championship in November; the Men's Hockey Asia Cup was won by India in October; the World Hockey League Round-2 in March with Malaysia clinching the trophy; and the love of sport came through in the hosting of a new sport, the Rollball World Cup, in February. However, the spectre of bad domestic governance was ever-present, the latest manifestation being the 11 dogs that cricketers of the National Cricket Championship in Dinajpur shared the field with in November.

PHOTOS: STAR

