

# UNDERGROUND FOOTBALL

## Past, Present and Future

MD. ZAMILUR RAHMAN SHUVO

We all know that cricket took over as the leading fandom in our country just around the time when the new millennium kicked in. But before the craze for the gentleman's game took control of our sporting arena, football sat on the throne for quite a long time. National and club level football were always at the heart of it. Times have changed and so have the scenes surrounding the game's environment. Now, there is only a glorified past that one can stick to as far as football is concerned.

But even after the long and inevitable downfall of the quality of football in our country slowly but surely began, there was another phenomenon that revolutionised football in the early 2000s. It was the introduction of "underground (UG) football" that led to another mention-worthy chapter in the game's history in Bangladesh. Most of us are familiar with the names, teams like 7 Nation Army, Amigos, DOHS United, Red Court, Illuminati, and Josephite Soccer Knights, but are unaware of its history, the present situation and what the future beholds. It's time to finally shed some light on the sensation that captured the attention of an entire generation of football fanatics.

Sujayet Kabir, coach at Dhaka Football Academy and a

former UG football player himself, shares the story of how things started.

"Initially it started with few school teams coming together for playing tournaments among themselves around 2002-2003. We used to play football with our own team in our respective schools or local fields. Later on, we thought of playing friendly matches with one another and gradually came the idea of organising and participating in regular tournaments," Kabir recalls.

The idea had begun to take shape. The undying passion for the game gave everyone an opening to make the underground football scene a reality. So, everyone got to work.

"We started by renting fields, taking entry fees from participating teams, and having trophies or medals or prize money for the winners. The purpose of this was to see the competitiveness of individual teams and to have fun among ourselves. The numbers of teams were few at that time so we quickly bonded with each other and had camaraderie."

Another former UG player, Jainus Saleheen Shawgat of Galacticos, shared his own story of how he got acquainted with this form of game. "It was kind of on and off till college. But once I got into North South University in 2011 things really kicked into next gear. We formed a team with the alumni of Government Laboratory High School which went

by the name Lab Galacticos. Apart from that I was also part of a team made up of friends in North South University and we regularly participated in underground football tournaments."

For everyone involved, it was a way of feeding into their love and passion for the game and being a part of it in one form or another. Being a professional footballer in this country is not really a feasible career option for a lot of people, but through underground football, those who harboured the dream of playing the game had the chance to actually live the dream. Be it in front of a smaller crowd, in a smaller outdoor field, when they stepped onto it, it was their Old Trafford, Santiago Bernabeu and San Siro. But at the same time it was also about maintaining fitness and refraining from bad activities that plague the young generation sometimes. All in all, underground football was a blessing in disguise that quickly became popular due to the immense positivity it buzzed around.

Now, as usual, there were some pioneers who made all of this possible with their hard work and dedication. "Over the course of it, there were people like Rohini Alamgir and Arman [Mohammed] from 7NA and later on Majed Ul Huq from Powerpuff Boys who took the entire thing to the next level with organising and generating participation. Zubair Mahbub from Josephite Soccer Knights was omnipresent in every aspect of the underground football arena," says Sujayet Kabir, reminiscing.

But it wasn't all a cakewalk; there were struggles and hurdles that had to be overcome in the initial stages. Limited amount of grounds to choose from, getting the word out at a time when Facebook still wasn't a big part of our social life, lack of enough teams were to name a few.

However, over the past number of years, underground football has somewhat died down. Shahir Afif Islam, founding captain of Soccer Messiahs puts it this way, "Though I am not adequately informed about the overall current situation of underground football, I do know that the current tournament scene is a far cry from the glory days when you would get at least one high quality tournament every few months. The lack of quality of personnel to organise tournaments is also quite noticeable. There was a time when each and every team captain would show up at the captain's meeting before every major tournament. Tournaments would also get decent sponsorship and even TV exposure. It has mostly died off now." Apart from that, there is another major issue too. The original organisers and pioneers who kickstarted the entire thing moved on to different career prospects as expected and for some reason the underground football scene is not the same as it was before.

"It's hard to pin down when exactly this started to happen. But you have to understand that the golden generation of UG was either in high school or university in the late 2000's. At some point in the next few

years, many of these talented players migrated abroad for higher studies. Some of them finished university and went into work life. The president of Underground Football Association (UFA), Majed Ul Huq, also left the country and we were not having the annual UFA Champions League anymore. The quality of tournaments dwindled rapidly. Also, in Dhanmondi you could not just play anymore. Sheikh Russel had their trainings in 8 no. field and that meant you couldn't just walk in

during the evenings with your friends for a kickabout," added Shahir. Moreover, the focus of the organisers in question has somewhat shifted towards being done with the tournament as soon as possible. They are more concerned about getting the entire thing over with within a day, which has resulted into shortening match durations to as low as 10-minutes maximum. But then again, there is also the fact that field owners ask for a sky-high price for renting purposes, even for a day. This eventually puts a lot of pressure on the financial aspect of organising. But the kids are helpless here. Those who are in charge of renting fields are aware of the high demand and are taking full advantage of it. If you want to play, you will have to play it by their rules. This has put the football enthusiasts in a really tight spot since in spite of wanting to organise a proper tournament with proper time management, the plan doesn't come to fruition because of budgeting problems.

"I've heard that these days the renters charge as much as seven grand for just a couple of hours, which is mind-boggling. Their greediness has affected the underground football to its core and the results are right in front of us as lesser amount of tournaments are organised as time goes. This is one of the reasons why kids have decided to turn their backs on underground football," says Galacticos' Jainus Saleheen. Meanwhile Sujayet Kabir thinks the underground football scene has taken a different shape over the years. "Nowadays hardly any 11-a-side underground tournaments are organised around Dhaka city mainly due to time constraints and because it's not commercially viable. Also since the introduction of

futsal, the trend has shifted into shorter version of the game with limited time and space." But he sees light at

the end of the tunnel with this evolution of underground football too. "Organising tournaments have become easier, more profitable and number of participating teams has increased exponentially. I sometimes am astounded with the potential team list reaching up to 50-60 for a tournament, that too with entertaining and creative team names," he added.

In the meantime, another form of the footballing scene has started to gain momentum. It goes by the name of Corporate League. The league consists of different renowned companies putting together teams with their respective employees to go head to head against one another in the battle for supremacy. The ASCENT Corporate Cup, the BGMEA Cup are examples of this Corporate League. For former UG players, Corporate League is actually the best alternative that they can afford at the moment. In Jainus Saleheen's words, "For former underground footballers like me, it's actually a really good option. We get to experience the smell of the grass and the intense competitiveness that we once felt. And in here, because the entire tournament is usually well-funded by sponsors, everything from the crowd to the hype and stakes feel bigger and better. Sure, it's not the same for all of those who participate, but for people like me who have the love and the passion for this game it's a great opportunity to blow off some steam while embracing our favourite sport one more time."

But coming back to underground football, the million dollar question here is —What is in store for the future?

"I think it will basically come down to the cumulative effort of everyone who is currently involved with underground football. Underground football was the nurturing platform for those who aspired to become professional footballers as well. The kids want to play, so let's give them what they

need," said Jainus Saleheen.

Sujayet Kabir thinks the problem can only be averted from the inside. "The organisers and players I grew up playing with are now established in their specific fields and life. I think if new organisers and teams are not entrepreneurial like the pioneers were they will miss a great opportunity to be part of an exciting community. Also, platforms like Underground Football Association and Plaantik can help the new organisers and tournaments to maintain the standard and quality we enjoyed in our time. Now we have more fields and teams in Dhaka so the opportunity is aplenty. So if the current generation is nurtured and guided properly the future of underground football is not bleak to say the least."

Football always had a place at the heart of this nation's youth and it still does. It's about time they got the platform to present themselves and rejuvenate the sport in Bangladesh once more.

MD. Zamilur Rahman is a self-proclaimed foodie and comic geek. So if you have enough money to treat him with kacchi he will be interested to hang out with you. Connect with him at your own risk at shuvosanctum@gmail.com



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