

MAD ABOUT FOOTBALL

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It surprises me, that even a decade later, more and more fans in Bangladesh are venturing into the realm of watching foreign leagues. As a nation whose national sport is *kabaddi*, and where the staple game of choice is cricket – it is shocking how the fan base around football continues to grow with every passing year.

However, while cricket has established itself in the annals of Bangladesh sporting history, the trend with football is quite different. Cricket in Bangladesh has its own domestic leagues, with most fans watching either the franchise-based Bangladesh Premier League or just first-class cricket in general. With football, on the other hand, our fascination doesn't lie within our own borders.

Instead, we find ourselves obsessed with the many European leagues taking place throughout the year.

The phenomenon of becoming "fans of foreign football" does not readily make sense. Our passion for some far-off country's league and its systems, along with our undying loyalty for the clubs, isn't something that can be easily comprehended by someone looking in from the outside.

When questioned about our passion for these foreign clubs, Fahim Imtiaz, 23, and a fan of Manchester United, said, "My first memories of watching football is that of United. This was during the prime Sir Alex Ferguson (SAF) era, when United dominated the English top-tier with insane performances and comebacks. As a young fan, United became the definition of quintessential

football for me; the resulting loyalty that I have for the team lasted all the way through its lowest points, in the post-Ferguson era. You cannot buy this type of loyalty, it has to be earned."

While this explains, to some degree, why newcomers tend to garner such high levels of loyalty for these foreign clubs, it's still difficult to understand why the domestic leagues in Bangladesh are overlooked in comparison to the likes of the English Premier League (EPL) or the continental UEFA Champions League (UCL).

Even in the presence of the Bangladesh Premier League Football (BPL), the country's top professional football league, these foreign leagues have for the longest time dominated the attention of local football fans.

So, why is it that we are more hyped for a Merseyside derby than our own Abahani versus Mohammedan?

Tawsif B. Alkas, co-founder of Plaantik, a central social-hub for Bangladeshi football fans, explains, "We used to worship our local clubs a fair bit in the 80s, it stopped because neither the clubs nor the league capitalised on the fan following over the following decades since. Thanks to the television broadcast, it became much easier to watch European leagues in the 90s, when compared to waiting in traffic for hours to go watch a local game of football. The European clubs, particularly the ones from the English Premier League, capitalised on this demand.



For many youngsters, it became easier to relate to the whole culture of fan following as a 'foreign supporter' than to actually support a local club. At the end of the day, in any capacity humans are still tribal; we love the overall feeling of 'belonging'."

When further asked if and how having a foreign fan base impacts the European teams, Alkas said, "Contrary to how it was a few decades ago, a large chunk of the fans for some of these big European clubs are foreign. From selling TV rights to jersey sales, these clubs have definitely felt the impact from fans overseas. This phenomenon of foreign following is also one of the main reasons why these clubs hold various pre-season friendlies and tournaments around the world. The Premier League trophy tour, which came to Dhaka along with the

Manchester United Legends, is an excellent example of European teams marketing their culture to us.

A spokesperson for the official Chelsea FC Bangladesh Supporters Club, when asked about our passion for leagues foreign to our own football culture, mentioned, "What the foreign leagues provide for us, like proper TV and media coverage, promotions, suitable weekend kick-off hours and home-away formats, all overshadow whatever is provided by our local football leagues. At present social media contents too have solid impacts to achieve sustainability – which is also missing here in Bangladeshi football."

There's still a lot to take away from the answers above. It seems the infrastructure of our local leagues have been set up to fail since the very beginning. Lack of quality and proper marketing, combined with little to no opportunity to hone young talents, has left us with a local football scene that can't even compete with a team from the lower leagues of Europe.

While we may still be a long way off from fixing the internal cogs that turn the wheel of the local football industry, it may prove useful to understand just how these foreign teams capitalised on our local fans.

The Bangladesh Premier League failed to capture the market, mainly due to the lacklustre state of its promotion, production and rosters. Add to that the overall lack of proper football stadiums further aggravated the situation to its current state.

On a different note, hugely popular international clubs such as Manchester United, Chelsea, and Liverpool have affiliated themselves with local fan communities in Bangladesh to form official supporter's clubs. Such PR moves helped accentuate the popularity of these clubs amongst the local

"Cristiano Ronaldo drives a pass to Wayne Rooney, who is at the edge of the penalty area. Rooney dummies past the first defender, lightly tapping the ball in front of Carlos Tevez, who converts from his first touch with ease. Brilliant from United!" This was, somewhat, the story of every English Premier League weekend during the era of the Ronaldo-Rooney-Tevez front line at Manchester United. I wouldn't be surprised if this trio had converted many first-time viewers of the premier league, at that time, into fans of United. I remember almost all my friends would watch football over the weekend, and then get together to discuss the gameweek every Monday.

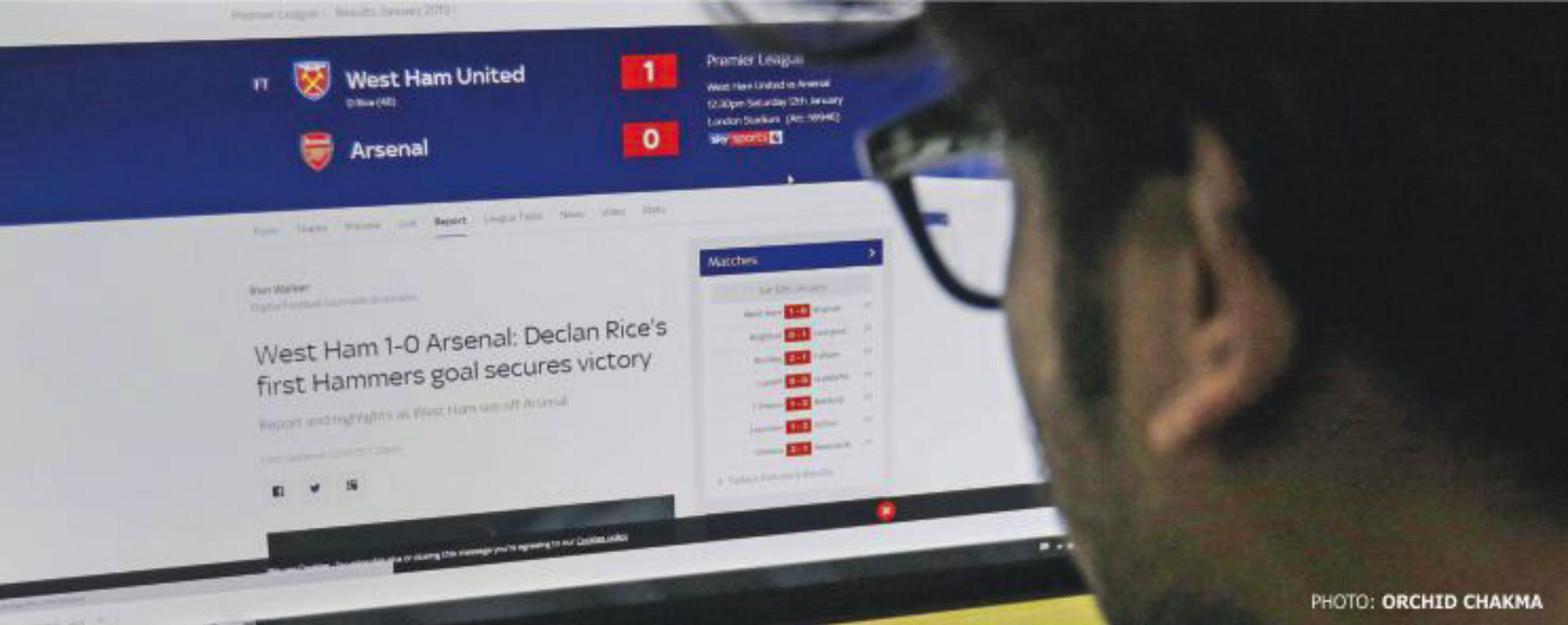


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

youth, who are only now beginning to watch football.

Student of BRAC University, Shaer Ali, 22, told why he supports a foreign team over a local one: "I fell in love with Liverpool FC the night they won the Champions League against AC Milan, in Istanbul. It's a pretty stereotypical moment to pick, but having witnessed such a high level of football definitely set the bar for me. While I love watching Bangladesh play cricket, when it comes to football, our local leagues have not reached the level of skill that makes me want to sit down and watch every one of their matches. Their league is filled with exhilarating moments all throughout the season, whereas ours lacks in overall flair."

The sentiment isn't too far-fetched either. Similar to how we, as consumers, import foreign products in the absence of quality local ones, our football industry is now the same inferior local product – maybe even an absent one – resulting in us importing foreign leagues from England, Spain, Germany and the lot, to quench our thirst for exciting football.

Another part of the problem has been the culture passed down to us by the generations before us. The older generation of our country grew up obsessed with cricket, their only football content being the FIFA World Cup of yesteryears. This resulted in an abundance of Argentina and Brazil fans in Bangladesh. Their influence on the



future generations certainly played a major role in setting the foundation of football in Bangladesh, the way it is at present.

However, despite the obstacles in its path, Bangladeshi football still has a silver lining lurking in the distance. The new generation of football fans in Bangladesh are more diversified than ever. Gone are the days of supporting only Argentina and Brazil during the World Cup; the city takes on a spectrum of colours from all the national flags hoisted on rooftops and balconies whenever the coveted tournament returns.

These fans will help set the standards for the days to come, and if the local football scene makes an attempt to garner their interest, then maybe there's a future where, Abahani versus Mohammedan will be the game school kids discuss in classes instead.

Aaqib loves petting doggos. Send him pictures of your "good boys" at aaqibhasib94@gmail.com

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