

MIRONA STANDS TALL

ATIQUA ANAM

Mirona Khatun is barely noticeable when she sits in the Dhaka City Football Club dugout. A slight physique of 4ft 8in, Mirona is hidden behind the more imposing and authoritative figures of her coaching staff. Even as she celebrates a goal, jumping up and down the sideline, it is difficult to notice her.

What makes her stand out, though, is the fact that she is the first woman to sit in the dugout of a professional football club in Bangladesh as a head coach. Although her role is still very much confined to being an understudy to coach Abu Noman Nannu, she harbours the dream of one day taking the reins at the top division in domestic football -- the Bangladesh Premier League.

HOW THE JOURNEY STARTED:

Mirona comes from a poor family in a village in Bagerhat, with a brother the only other among her five siblings to be involved in sporting activities. She is not quite cut out for football, but she possesses athleticism, which helped her win many awards and trophies in different sports at school level and then at district level. Her move to football took place when she showed up for a talent-hunt programme for the Citycell National Women's Football League in 2008 in Khulna. As women's football was still at a nascent stage at that time, her talent and athleticism were instantly rewarded.

"One of my teachers told me to go to the trial for the Citycell National Championship in Khulna. I went there and got selected. From there I came to Dhaka and impressed, being called up for the national women's team's camp in 2009 for the 2010 SA Games," the now Championship League club's coach reflected on her early sporting years.

There was no looking back for her on the football pitch with the national team for the next seven years, but off the pitch there was a lot of uncertainty which held her back from fulfilling the promise she showed at the highest level.

"During those times women's football was not very widespread and there were hardly any matches for us except for the national team. So there were no earning options for us, which made me apply for a job in the Bangladesh Navy in 2014," Mirona explained.

THE JUGGLING ACT AND THE FIRST STEPS IN COACHING:

While still a full-time footballer of the national team, Mirona continued to be an equally good, if not better, exponent of athletics. She kept participating in national athletics meets, on the way racking up many medals of all three colours, including 13 golden ones over a



career which spanned nearly 10 years.

Her first step into football coaching came accidentally. In 2013, Mirona and a number of her peers were cajoled into taking an AFC C License course, the first step to professional football coaching in Asia, by the high-ups of the Bangladesh Football Federation. Little she did know at that time that it would be a stepping stone to a whole new world.

While she remained busy with her commitments to football, athletics and the Navy for the next five years, she realised in 2018 at the age



of 25 that she might not have it in her for much longer to deliver on either the football pitch or the athletics track. So she took the timely initiative of going for the AFC B License course, which would eventually catapult her into making history in Bangladesh football.

"Although Mirona is very introverted and shy, she always had the thirst for knowledge. That is what drove her, along with two other female footballers, to successfully pass the AFC B License course. Mirona was one of the fastest players on the pitch during her football career, and I believe she would make a good coach if given the proper guidance and assistance from senior coaches," Bangladesh Football Federation's former strategic director BA Jubair Nipu, who oversaw Mirona's football career as well as her coaching courses, opined.

DHAKA CITY FC COME CALLING:

A few retired Navy officers decided to form a football club, with the aim to establish an academy which would produce young players for the future. Formed in 2017, the club enlisted for the Bangladesh Championship League, the second-

tier professional league, with an experienced coaching staff in the dugout. As luck would have it, though, none of the coaching staff -- including would-be head coach Nannu -- had an AFC B License, a requirement made mandatory for head coaches by the AFC, the continental governing body of football.

Mirona's job in the Navy and her B License came in handy in this case. The management of the club spent no time in signing the female footballer up ahead of their debut season, penning the deal on December 24, 2018. The deal benefitted both sides -- the club got the name with the license to put on their team sheet while Mirona got the perfect platform to learn the traits of top-level coaching from close up.

Shamsuddoza Khan, the club's general secretary, explained the move. "Mirona is a very good coach.

She may lack experience, but she has the knowledge and the brain. We did not consider whether she is a male or female, our consideration was her talent."

Mirona's coronation was complete when she stepped up in the club's first match of the season against Farashganj SC on February 11, 2019.

STILL SOME WAY TO THE DREAM:

The first female coach of a Bangladesh Championship League team, though, understands her status and the not-so-solid footing which she currently stands on. She perfectly realises the fact that she is not much more than a symbolic figurehead at a club with lofty ambitions. But she is willing to take the challenge and embark on the long route to her dream, that of becoming a head coach of a Premier League club, with enough authority and expertise so that she would be regarded in the same light as her peers, and not just bracketed as a female figurehead. She believes "this is a learning experience" which will help her in future when she leads from the dugout in BCL or the BPL one day.



Barcelona striker Luis Suarez celebrates his second goal against Real Madrid during their Copa del Rey semifinal second leg at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday. PHOTO: FC BARCELONA

Liverpool run riot

AFP, London

Sadio Mane and Virgil van Dijk both struck twice as Liverpool demolished Watford 5-0 to stay ahead of a charging Manchester City at the top of the Premier League on Wednesday.

Jürgen Klopp's men calmed fears over their staying power following a recent dip in form as they chased down their first top-flight title since 1990.

Defending champions City finally broke the resistance of West Ham at the Etihad Stadium in the second half to stay just one point behind Liverpool, while third-placed Tottenham slipped to a damaging 2-0 defeat at Chelsea.

Arsenal swatted aside a limp Bournemouth team 5-1 to remain in fourth place, one point clear of Manchester United, with Romelu Lukaku taking advantage of the absence of Marcus Rashford to score twice in a 3-1 win at Crystal Palace.

Suarez double sends Barca into final

REUTERS, Madrid



A clinical Barcelona won 3-0 at Real Madrid in an intense second leg of their Copa del Rey semifinal on Wednesday as a Luis Suarez double helped them secure a 4-1 aggregate victory and a spot in the final for the sixth straight season.

A dominant yet wasteful Real ravaged their rivals in the first half while spurning a string of clear chances at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Yet Barca went ahead against the run of play in the 50th minute as Ousmane Dembele led a counter-attack and Suarez slotted his pass into the net.

Spearheaded by the pace and confidence of Brazilian teenager Vinicius Jr, Madrid continued to fly forward but failed to find the target.

Barca effectively killed off the tie when Raphael Varane bundled the ball into his own net as he tried to prevent Suarez reaching another cross from Dembele.

Suarez then earned a penalty and further humiliated Madrid by converting with an audacious 'Panenka', deceiving goalkeeper Keylor Navas by chipping the ball into the net.

Barca, who lost first leg games to Levante

and Sevilla in the Cup and drew 1-1 with Madrid in the first leg of the semifinal, booked their place in the final at the Benito Villamarín stadium, the home of Real Betis, on May 25.

Bidding to win the trophy for a record fifth year in a row, the Catalans will face either Betis or Valencia, who drew 2-2 in the first leg of their semifinal and meet again on Thursday.

"This is another demonstration of how good this team is. People keep saying that we don't care about the Cup, but we have shown that we always want to win every single trophy," Suarez told reporters.

Real coach Santiago Solari stressed his side's dominance in the game but cursed their inability to have their numerous chances.

"In football you have to be efficient and take the chances you get," he said.

"We fell with honour, we could do no more. We were not clinical but they were, and we go home feeling hurt because we really wanted to reach the final."

Worst of all for Madrid, La Liga leaders Barca will be back at the Bernabeu once again on Saturday for a league fixture which, should they win again, would see them move 12 points clear of their arch rivals.

Sunday lesson for MSC Kings back on top

SPORTS REPORTER



Whenever Abahani and Mohammedan squared off in the past, it was always regarded as what should be a fierce competition between two perennial rivals with fans turning up in droves to support their sides. However, when the Sky Blues annihilated Mohammedan 3-0 in a Bangladesh Premier League encounter amid sparse support at Bangabandhu National Stadium yesterday, it proved that those days are long gone.

Abahani's foreign trio -- Nigeria's Sunday Chizoba, South Korea's Minhyeok Ko and Haiti's Kervens Fils Belfort -- struck a goal each to bring further humiliate the struggling Black and Whites, who remain winless from their last seven matches. Meanwhile, holders Abahani have notched seven wins from nine.

Interestingly, the biggest outcry for Mohammedan's sorry state did not come from officials but instead from Abahani striker Sunday, who once played for the outfit.

"I think Mohammedan are a good side with good players but sadly, they are not united. Maybe they have some groups, groups always cause problems. They have good players but they don't have love for the team," said Sunday, who was a part of the Mohammedan squad

which beat Abahani to win the Super Cup.

"I played for Mohammedan and at that time we had a strong team with five foreigners. We won the Super Cup, beating Abahani," Sunday continued. "Mohammedan is a big team in Bangladesh and I think what they need is love. They are not united like Abahani."

Following showers, both sides tried to control the game with Abahani attacking through the flanks. Mohammedan's attacks were sporadic at best.

Sunday gave Abahani the lead in the 37th minute with a tap-in after a drive from Nabib

Newaj Jibon came off the post. Minhyeok then fired home from inside the box after a cut-back from Sunday in the 57th minute.

Ten minutes later, Belfort headed in a Rubel Mia corner to hand Mohammedan their biggest defeat against Abahani since the 9th edition of the league.

Mohammedan coach Shahidul Islam Jewel was frustrated with the poor performance.

"The boys could not carry out my instructions and implement the game plan. The boys were instructed to stop the Korean player [Minhyeok] but they could not do it and the second goal threw us from the match."

This was Abahani's 10th win over Mohammedan, who have won four times in 22 BPL meetings,

'Target is to qualify'

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to confirm their place in the AFC U-16 Women's Championship when the girls in red and green square off against hosts Myanmar in the second Group B match of Qualification Round-2 at Mandala Thiri Stadium today.

The match will get underway at 5:30pm.

Golam Rabbani Choton's charges made a strong start with a massive 10-0 win over Philippines and only need to win either the match against Myanmar or China to secure a semifinal spot as well as a place in the eight-team final round.

If the girls put up the kind of spirited performance they did against Philippines with midfielders Maria Manda, Monica Chakma and forwards Tahura Khatun and Anuching Mogini all on song, the team management could hope for more of the same.

"I hope we play better football in our second match against Myanmar. We will try to win as our target is to qualify," said vice-captain Akhi Khatun as quoted in a statement provided by Bangladesh Football Federation.

"I will try my best to score against Myanmar to keep our team in winning ways," said striker Tahura, who struck four goals against Philippines.

'He lacks respect'

AGENCIES, Acapulco



Rafael Nadal accused Nick Kyrgios of lacking respect "for the public, the opponent and himself" after a stormy defeat to the Australian firebrand at the Mexico Open.

Kyrgios survived three match points to beat top-seeded Nadal 3-6, 7-6 (7/2), 7-6 (8/6) on Wednesday and reach the quarterfinals.

However, 17-time major winner Nadal was furious with Kyrgios who at one stage complained of being sick and served underarm late in the match before cupping his ear to the boos of the crowd at the conclusion of the second round tie.

"He is a player with huge talent and could be winning Grand Slams or fighting for the number one ranking," said Nadal. "But he lacks respect for the public, the opponent and for himself."

Kyrgios, ranked 72 in the world, hit back at Nadal.

"I'm different, Rafa's different. He can focus on what he needs to do. He doesn't know the journey I have been on, he doesn't know anything about me," said Kyrgios who famously stunned Nadal as a teenager at Wimbledon in 2014. "I am not going to listen at all. That's the way I play. The way he plays is very slow between points. I've got my game, he's got his game. People are different, that's the sport."

Kyrgios also defended his underarm serve on social media in response to a comment that said: "Praise for the underarm attempt. Someone will eventually catch Nadal out [for] standing so far back."

Kyrgios replied: "That's the only reason for doing it... I mean isn't that the idea to serve where the person can't get the ball? Try to get an ace?" Nadal had three chances to close out Wednesday's match after taking a 6-3 lead in the third-set tiebreaker. Kyrgios saved the first with a leaping drop shot, and the second with a net-skimming volley.

Nadal was just wide with a passing shot to make it 6-6, double-faulted to give Kyrgios a chance and sailed a backhand long to end the match after three hours and three minutes.

Kyrgios screamed and dropped to the court in celebration -- a conclusion that seemed unlikely when he complained to a trainer after the opening set that he was feeling ill but feared the fallout should he retire.



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SUNDAY CHIZOBA
ABAHANI STRIKER

