

Has the 'tree' taken root properly?

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

 'April is the cruellest month,' T.S. Eliot had written in The Waste Land. Given the current coronavirus crisis the world over, this April is likely to be another cruel month for mankind.

However, April has not always been so cruel to Bangladesh, and one April 23 years ago in particular, had brought reason for massive festivity when the national cricket team secured their maiden berth in the World Cup by winning the ICC Trophy.

Driven by the heartbreak of '94, three years later a team showed what can be achieved with the right processes. National cricketing heroes were born on April 13, 1997, heroes who are still remembered with great respect when one walks down the memory lane. But for one of those heroes, the memories could have been sweeter had growth of cricket in the country been at an optimum level.

Khaled Mashud, nicknamed Pilot, had scored a match-winning 70 against Scotland in the game that mattered the most -- the semifinal -- before playing a cameo in the final to emerge as one of Bangladesh's saviours in difficult moments. During an interview with The Daily Star, Mashud recalled how the final was 'one about happiness' while recalling that they were under 'great pressure' before the semis since 'either you win or you are out of the World Cup.'

"I had never batted at one-down before, but it just clicked that day. I was instructed to hold one end given that the ball was swinging early on those astro turf wickets. I was like a nightwatchman."

"It was a lot of hard work before the tournament and we became a great team. The preparation was good and we even played in astro turf in domestic league," Mashud recalled.

Who can forget Mashud hitting a big six off Martin Sujji or Hasibul Hossain Shanto stealing a single off the last delivery to clinch the enthralling final? 23 years on, those images remain iconic for our cricket.

"It was a great feat to beat Kenya, who were already playing in the World Cup," Mashud said.

For him, the feat of winning the ICC Trophy was 'like planting the tree from which everything would take root' in Bangladesh cricket.

"Had we failed, maybe there wouldn't have been the enthusiasm to develop cricket and move forward. Had we lost,



Bangladesh national cricket team was given a grand reception at the Manik Mia Avenue in the capital in 1997 after their historic ICC Trophy triumph.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

maybe we wouldn't have played Tests in 2000 and we would have to wait for everything for four more years," the wicketkeeper-batsman reflected.

But looking back at the times that have passed since that triumph, the now successful domestic coach has a tinge of quiet regret.

"Except for India, cricket is not as popular anywhere else in the world as it is in Bangladesh. I feel that in these 23 years, Bangladesh should have been a better team. I think we could have performed 30 percent better had we focused on the structures and processes, especially on how players come up through the system and how to create structures for that. We are improving. There is money coming into cricket and facilities have improved and the board is rich, but process-wise, we are lacking."

"We have passed two to three generations of players after becoming a Test nation. We should have not only had a strong eleven but a batch of 40 players

who could be at a level close to India's.

"We needed a better plan so that no matter who comes into the board, the process doesn't change. There has only been one cricket academy in Mirpur in all this time. It doesn't require money but a good thought process to reach that level," Mashud lamented.

Asked about the recent players' strike, Mashud said: "I don't know what the public perception is but what they wanted [during the players' strike] was the right thing. Think about it, if Shakib [Al Hasan], Mashrafe [Bin Mortaza] or Tamim [Iqbal] don't work for Bangladesh cricket after retirement, if their opinions are not sought, it won't affect them but it would be a huge loss for our cricket."

And this had happened in the past too, Mashud opined. "Look at our former players like Akram [Khan] who is now the Cricket Operations Chairman or Khaled Mahmud in Game Development. There should be others to shape structure but it would

have been more crucial if former players were involved with the next generation. Things such as how Akram bhai used to build his innings should be shared at field level. [Minhajul Abedin] Nannu bhai and Habibul Bashar are selectors now, but they could have been batting consultants. Their experience would have been crucial."

The development that is hoped for could have been possible. Mashud drew on the example of FC Barcelona in order to find the talents and said: "They [Barca] have a process. BCB should have enlisted all cricket academies in the nook and corner of the country. They should have categorised the academies according to quality of service provided. A standard should have been set and the BCB should have then assessed if the right way of training was taking place. Groom the coaches and provide a training structure for them. That's what they could have done," Mashud said, reminding that the tree ultimately did not take root the way it should have.

'We have meals on alternate days'

Bangladesh's fastest teenage sprinter talks about his hardships

ANISUR RAHMAN

The country's fastest teenage sprinter Samiul Islam and his family have fallen upon hard times in the midst of the global coronavirus pandemic, which has led to a countrywide shutdown that has hit Samiul on multiple levels.

Apart from winning the 100m sprint in the 18-19 age-group of the 35 National Junior Athletics Championships, clocking 11.41 seconds (electronic timing) in October 2019, Samiul is often called Kylian Mbappe for his nippy runs up front when going to Khulna to play in leagues as a hired striker.

With an income of Tk 1,850 per week as a temporary labour at Khulna's Crescent Jute Mills, under Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC), and through sporadic earnings from football, Samiul and his family were more or less content. However, losing his BJMC job in December 2019 and the subsequent suspension of sport countrywide have thrown them into a state of despair.

"We are not in a good position as we have been spending days almost without food. To be honest, with what the situation of the country is at the moment, we are taking meals on alternative days because we are a family of six with the father unable to do hard labour due to his back pain. Meanwhile, I don't have a job at BJMC and can't earn money playing football. Besides, I could also work as a farm hand on the field but there is no work at the moment," Samiul told The Daily Star over phone from Khulna yesterday.

"It would make a big difference to us at the moment if we had the job at BJMC. Because, we could have at least met the basic necessities at a time when everyone is struggling to feed their family," said Samiul, one of 273 athletes working as temporary labour, but all of them were terminated by BJMC in December last year as part of cutbacks as a result of losses incurred by the state-run corporation.

Samiul's family is now being run with a little income from his father, who is selling diesel to farmers at a profit of Tk 3 per litre.

"Having played football, I managed some money for my disadvantaged father, who is now selling some 40 to 50 litres of diesel a day to farmers in this harvesting season, apart from selling pigeon feed. Our family is surviving on an overall income of Tk 150 per day and through the money I saved from playing football," said the 20-year-old athlete, who said that he earned between Tk 200 and Tk 2,000 per match and around Tk 7,000 to Tk 8,000 per month during the football season.

After becoming the fastest teenager in the junior meet, Samiul got an offer from Bangladesh Army to play for them on a temporary contract, but the sprinter refused the Army job as he had the BJMC job then.

"After losing the BJMC job, I haven't had the chance to continue as a sprinter and I am likely to leave athletics permanently and play full-time football, as I can earn from it and bear the educational expenses of my three younger siblings -- two sisters and a brother," said Samiul, who hails from Digholia Upazila of Khulna.

The country's former fastest woman and BJMC coach Sultana Parveen Lovely had spotted Samiul from the remote area and trained him to compete at the national level.

"He was an obedient athlete from an underprivileged family and he had been doing really well. Although Samiul won the 100m sprint in junior championships, he was actually better in the 400m run. We could have made him a good sprinter had we given him more time and had BJMC not terminated him," said Lovely, adding that Samiul joined BJMC in the middle of 2017 and left BJMC in December, 2019.

BFF officials distribute food in Fatullah

SPORTS REPORTER

Some of the staff of Bangladesh Football Federation, along with local coaches, distributed one week's food items including rice, potato and oil, lentils and onion among 220 people in Fatullah, Narayanganj yesterday.

Mohammad Hasan Mahmud, assistant head of competitions department of BFF and Eftekar Uddin, an executive of the same department distributed the football at the Signboard area of Fatullah.

Narayanganj has been the second-hardest hit district by the coronavirus pandemic, with the city under lockdown since last week.

BFF is, meanwhile, carrying on distribution of cooked food among less privileged people of Arambagh area since the nationwide shutdown started.

Drogba offers hospital in virus fight

AFP, Abidjan

Former Chelsea forward Didier Drogba has offered his hospital in his native Ivory Coast to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic, a local politician said.

Drogba, who scored 65 goals in 105 appearances for his country, has proposed the use of the Laurent Pokou hospital in Abidjan.

"We thank Drogba for this gift considered as an act of patriotism," the head of the city's regional council Vincent Toh Bi said.



The term social distancing, which has now been prioritised over anything to help curb the spread of coronavirus, seemed to be lost on some teenagers, who sneak past the patrolling police at every opportunity to gather and play cricket at the Anandabazar beach in Halishahar, Chattogram. Meanwhile, at the old part of Dhaka, a young person is pictured, who unlike the ones on the left heeds to the social distancing term as he flies a kite on his own from a rooftop.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED/RAJIB RAIHAN

Nadal 'doesn't give a damn about tennis right now'

AGENCIES

 Rafael Nadal 'doesn't give a damn about tennis right now' as the fight against coronavirus takes priority, said his uncle and former coach Toni.

Tennis has been on lockdown since March when Indian Wells was called off due to fears over the spread of Covid-19.

Wimbledon and the Olympics have also now cancelled for the summer, with the French Open rescheduling for September.

Even that date is far from secure, though, and the same can be said of the US Open, leaving tennis facing the very real possibility that it may not be able to resume until 2020.

"We [Rafael Nadal and I] were talking and he told me he doesn't give a damn about tennis right now," Toni Nadal told the Spanish media. "That's logical if you have a little sensitivity."

"I said a few weeks ago that things were going to be totally stopped for a while. How do you want us to play tennis? It's unthinkable."

"It won't be played until there is a very clear security measure."



"If not, how do I go to an event? What if another wave [of infections] comes back in October? How many countries won't make restrictions on movement? How long will lockdown last? I don't know."

"Tennis is a sport that moves many people from one country to another."

"With the huge problem we have, all this has been forgotten. It's secondary. Coronavirus is what counts, not tennis."

'I'm not a sack of potatoes'

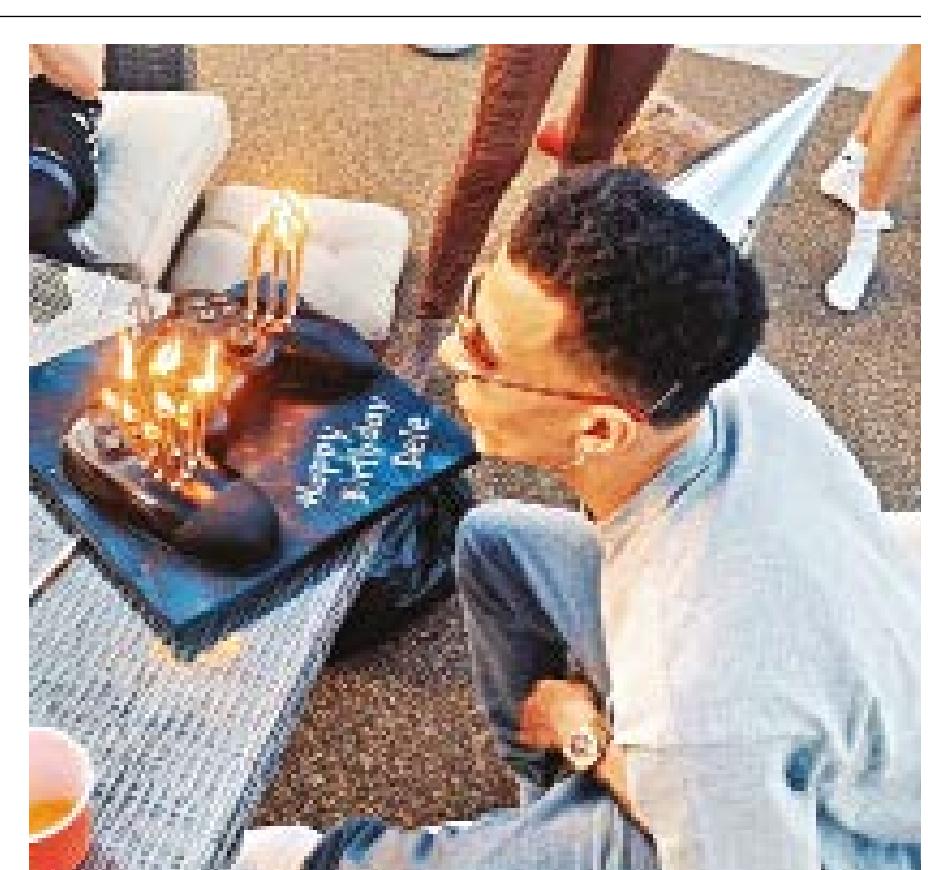
REUTERS, Barcelona

Barcelona midfielder Ivan Rakitic has criticised his club for their recent treatment of him and for trying to force his departure last year.

The Croatian has been at Barca since 2014 but has fallen out of contention this campaign due to the arrival of Dutch midfielder Frenkie de Jong.

"I understand the situation but I'm not a sack of potatoes who you can do anything with," the 32-year-old told Spanish newspaper Mundo Deportivo. "I want to be somewhere I feel wanted and respected. If that's here then I'll be delighted but if it's somewhere else then I'll be the one who decides where, not anyone else."

Rakitic confirmed he refused to move to PSG last year as part of a deal to bring Neymar back to the Camp Nou.



Tottenham midfielder Dele Alli was treated to a special cake for his 24th birthday while being locked up inside due to the coronavirus crisis. The England international showed off his PlayStation controller cake on social media to his seven million Instagram followers, with his fans loving the design.

PHOTO: INSTAGRAM