

'I plan to play the World Cup'

From humble beginnings in Mymensingh's Kalsindur high school team, Maria Manda has led Bangladesh's age-level women's football teams to multiple international trophies. She hit yet another jackpot as Bangladesh won the 2021 SAFF U-19 Women's Championship and the 18-year-old midfielder shared the motivation behind her team's success and her dreams while speaking to The Daily Star's Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq yesterday.

The Daily Star (DS): From Kalsindur to leading Bangladesh and becoming SAFF champions. How do you put your journey into words and what lies ahead?

Maria Manda (MM): I have changed a lot. I have improved myself to be more than what I was back then. I want to reach new heights and make an impact on my country's progress. I plan to play in the World Cup and to do well in Asia.

DS: You have made winning a habit. What is the secret behind your success?

MM: Hard work and long-term plans. Our



Bangladesh had won trophies in other games as well. However, we didn't win any trophy in any event this year until yesterday [Wednesday], when we won the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship.

DS: What role do you play as a captain in the dressing room and on the pitch?

MM: My main role is to motivate everyone and keep everyone together. If we are together, we can definitely do something good. If there are any misunderstandings between the players, I try to resolve them. It's my responsibility as captain to spread the coaches' message to all the players during the match. If any player is inattentive during training, I try to make

feels happy and tries again and maybe scores.

DS: Bangladesh have dominated possession throughout the tournament. As a midfielder, you played a crucial role in getting such command in the middle of the park. What was the tactic behind such an intimidating display in the midfield?

MM: Each of us had an individual role to play during the match to make sure we put

pressure on the opponent. If anyone was lagging behind, others were reminding her of her role so that we could work together as a unit. As a midfielder, my role is to set up transitions in attack and also not let the opponents get past me while defending.

DS: You have talked about motivating your teammates. If any player makes a mistake during the match or training, how do you motivate her?

MM: Mistakes can happen at any time in the game. If any player makes an error, it's our job as teammates to encourage her, to tell her to keep going even if she fails. For instance, a player can take a shot off-target and get demoralised. But if we clap for her or encourage her by asking her to keep trying, she

technical director Paul Smalley and head coach [Golam Robbani] Choton have given a lot of effort towards us and we are champions today because of our collective hard work.

DS: Is this success different from any of your previous achievements?

MM: I think this achievement is different because, during our previous accomplishments,

Kiron envisions brighter future

The brilliant women of Bangladesh maintained the phenomenon of winning every age-group football tournament that they have participated in by clinching the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship. Mahfuza Akter Kiron, chairman of Bangladesh Football Federation's women's wing and an executive member of FIFA and BFF, is considered the organiser that has taken the girls to stratospheric heights and she spoke to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the past, present and future of women's football. The excerpts are below:

On what has played a role in the success: Continuous training and a disciplined lifestyle are major reasons behind this success. For years, we have been providing them with proper food in line with a plan prepared by a nutritionist and we offer counselling twice a week to keep them ready.

On the next step for the women's football team: Our next target is to be a good senior women's team in Asia and compete for a place in the FIFA Women's World Cup. We have been trying to shape the senior national women's team gradually because it is impossible to suddenly form a senior team with women who don't know how to play football. I believe we will have a strong women's football team within the next three to four years with this group of players having an average age of 23 at the time. We now have 70 plus players in the camp.

On what course has been set to make a strong national team: I must admire technical director Paul Smalley and his role in this success. He designed everything, right from the training schedule for all women teams. Head coach Golam Rabbani Choton has also played a tremendous role in their success. As we don't have a proper senior women's team, we are



focusing on developing age-group teams to eventually form a good senior team. We are hunting players from the JFA U-14 and UNICEF football competitions every year to prepare a good backup for the U-15 team. If you watch the girls across age-group competitions, they play at the same pace and rhythm and that means they are now more physically fit and capable of competing at the international level.

On the facilities that the BFF is providing: The girls are getting all types of training facilities: technical, tactical, theoretical, practical, gym and swimming. We are also providing them with financial benefits ranging from Tk 3500 to Tk 12000. I want to thank BFF president Kazi Salahuddin for arranging the financial benefit for the players.

On whether such facilities are good enough to enable them to reach the next level: Yes, I think so. Our main problem is related to financial constraints. At the moment, we have convinced some sponsors to run women's football, but it is a really hard job to manage sponsors. You can run women's football through the sponsors but, to be honest, you can't reach that level without financial help from the government.

On the need for government funding: The players compete in domestic competitions as well as age-group international competitions regularly but they can't play competitive international matches at the senior level. If we get regular financial help from the government, we can put forth a proper plan and play four to five international friendlies against strong sides like Japan, South Korea, Australia and China every year. Thus, the players can mature and gain experience. The coaching staff will also get an idea of what is required to improve the standards of the team.

On the difficulty strengthening the senior women's team due to girls being pressured by their families to get married: It happened in the past but now the ratio of women's footballers getting married is low because we discussed the issue with their parents twice a year to help them understand the benefits of letting their girls play football. The girls are providing financial support to their families through football. So, I am convinced that they won't drop out and we can form a strong senior women's team in the future.

Federation Cup groups drawn



SPORTS REPORTER

Right after the mouthwatering Independence Cup final between Abahani Dhaka and Bashundhara Kings that occurred a week ago, both title contenders may clash in the final of the Federation Cup as the tournament starts from Saturday at the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium.

In the opening matches, Kings take on Swadhinata while Abahani meet Baridhara.

The draw of 12-team Federation Cup was held yesterday at the BFF House with Kings, Mohammedan SC and newcomers Swadhinata Krira Sangha placed in a relatively tough Group A. It was Swadhinata who had stunned Mohammedan in group stage of Independence Cup to advance to the quarterfinals.

Group B consists of Abahani Dhaka, Sheikh Russel KC and Uttar Baridhara Club while Saif SC, Chittagong Abahani and Bangladesh

Police FC were drawn in Group C. Group D features the remaining teams -- Sheikh Jamal DC, Rahamatganj MFS and Muktiyoddha Sangsad KC.

While clubs like Kings, Muktiyoddha, Baridhara had expressed dissatisfaction over the poor artificial turf in Kamalapur, which forced injuries of multiple players during the Independence Cup, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) will still hold the Federation Cup on the same turf due to organisational limitations.

"Some clubs warned us their players will get injured from playing on this turf but we made them understand about our limitation as we could not manage a grass-ground inside Dhaka, even though there was no shortage of effort from our part," said BFF senior vice president and professional league committee chairman Abdus Salam Mursheedy at the press conference at the BFF House yesterday.

U-19s start Asia Cup campaign today

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Under-19 side will begin their ACC Asia Cup campaign with their encounter against Nepal at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium today.

The Asia Cup is being considered a part of the build-up to the upcoming ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup in the West Indies next year and the defending World Champions are keen to start their campaign in the UAE on a winning note.

"It is very important to start the campaign with a win in the first group stage game. We want to play good cricket," said Under-19 skipper Rakibul Hasan yesterday.

The young cricketers had their first practise session yesterday after spending a day in quarantine.

"Our team is in very good shape. We will try to give our best. We are well prepared for the game tomorrow [Friday]," Rakibul added.

'Tigers will enjoy batting in NZ' despite rugged history

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh batters are expected to be put to a stern test in their upcoming two-Test series away to New Zealand, starting from January 1 next year.

If trend and history are not enough, New Zealand's pace-heavy squad announced for the two matches should be a clear indication that the Kiwis will be trying to dismantle the 'Tigers' batting order, especially the fragile top-order, with their venomous pace and swing.

Despite the apparent pace threat that looms, the 'Tigers' batting consultant Ashwell Prince remained confident the Bangladesh batters will be able to score runs in New Zealand's typical green surfaces.

"I must say that our batsmen are looking really good. I think our batsmen will enjoy batting in New Zealand. The pitches, especially the practice pitches here at the [Lincoln] University Ground, have been really good. The bounce is consistent. I think our guys are feeling comfortable that we can trust the bounce in New Zealand," Prince said in a video message from Christchurch yesterday.

Prince's statement could be termed optimistic at best given the lack of experience in the 'Tigers' squad and also the way top-order, at times the whole batting line-up, crumbled when facing the likes of Pakistan's Shaheen Shah Afridi and Hasan Ali on flat tops at home in their recent-



most Test series.

With Shaheen and Hasan brutally having exposed the 'Tigers' weakness at playing pacy deliveries directed towards their bodies, it would not be a surprise to see the Kiwi pacers applying the same tactic. And on a more ominous note for the Bangladesh batters, the Kiwi quicks will be assisted by the typical green tops which the Pakistan pacers did not get in Bangladesh.

New Zealand even left out in-form spinner Ajaz Patel from the squad less than three weeks after he became only the third bowler to pick all 10 wickets in an innings of international cricket in order to accommodate the likes of seamers Tim Southee, Trent Boult, Neil Wagner, Kyle Jamieson and Matt Henry.

And New Zealand coach Mike Stead's reason behind Patel's exclusion only goes on to give a glimpse to what might be waiting for the 'Tigers'.

"We've always applied a horses-for-courses selection policy and believe the players selected best fit the way we want to take on Bangladesh here at home," Stead said in a statement.

However, according to Bangladesh batting consultant Prince, it is something that the 'Tigers' are also expecting.

"Yes, there will be a little bit of seam movement but that is what we expect. It is still early days. We still have seven-eight days of build up to the first Test match. So gradually we are looking to improve and peak at the right time when the first Test will start."