



WOMEN

Carry light in a gloomy year

NABID YEASIN AND SABBIR HOSSAIN

The overwhelming cheer that broke out at the Kamalapur stadium after Anai Mogini's long-ranger beat India goalkeeper only reflected the sports-crazy nation's year-long yearning for sporting excellence to boast about.

The fans' longing was fulfilled when they witnessed the young girls make laps around the Birshreshtha Shaheed Mostafa Kamal Stadium with the national flag after retaining the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship title, with the players' roar only drowned out by the even clamorous and enthusiastic crowd.

In a year that offered very little takeaway from the sporting arena, it was those moments gifted by the young women footballers that certainly lifted the nation's spirit. And also when news broke out that Nigar Sultana and Co will be heading to New Zealand next year to represent the country in their maiden ODI World Cup, there was much to be proud of.

Be it in cricket, football or any other sport, undoubtedly, it was the women's accolades that presented the very few celebratory moments to the country's sports lovers.

How incredible were the achievements of the likes of Mogini, Maria Manda, Jahanara and Sharmin can be gauged from facts that these girls flourished despite minimal



resources, severe infrastructural scarcity and under boards that kept on hitting new lows throughout the year.

No doubt, the ever-glorified men's sides, especially the considerably privileged men's cricket team, also offered fans plenty of moments to cherish. But unfortunately, those only ended up serving a false impression of success that only culminated in providing the country its biggest sporting disappointment this year -- banishment from the UAE without a single win in the Super 12 stage of the T20 World Cup.

Even the story of men's football team entails a similar sorry story. Jamal Bhuiyan and Co failed to make a mark in the World Cup qualifiers in Qatar and were subjected to agonising last-minute exits from the SAFF Championship and the Four Nations Trophy in Sri Lanka.

However, at least the male athletes will have some explanation for their apparent dismal year -- that they gave their best out on the field. But the governing bodies of the two most popular sports will probably have very little to say in their defence.

While the Bangladesh Football Federation



(BFF) ended the better part of the year without a static coaching panel, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) kept on setting hilarious examples.

From their penchant of not addressing the elephant in the room -- the country's fragile domestic structure the case in point -- to playing the blame game after every debacle, the Nazmul Hassan-led BCB ended the year with another farce.

The cricket's governing body of Bangladesh offered yet another shambolic players' draft of the Bangabandhu Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

And in the chaotic fashion that the tournament started, with BCB being forced to take over one of the ownership at the eleventh hour after failing to secure a franchisee, only promises that Bangladesh's already struggling domestic cricket awaits yet another disappointing start to the next year as the cracks in the frail system only keep widening.

There were, however, rays of hope in a few other less appreciated sports. Ruman Sana and Diya Siddique secured silver medal in the recurve mixed team event of the Archery World Cup while Diya and Hakim Ahmed Rubel bagged silver for the first time ever in the prestigious Asian championships.

Also, once a leading sport, hockey returned to the turf after a three-year hiatus through the Club Cup and Premier League before Bangladesh successfully hosted the prestigious Asian Champions Trophy for the first time.

But still, as the clock ticks down on 2021, it certainly is the girls' achievements that will remain the highlight of the year. The ambition now will be that the sports which made strides keep on achieving new heights. And also that the two elite sporting entities of the country inject themselves with the similar spirited attitude shown by the girls and, like them, thrive despite the setbacks.

Shakib in race for year's best

There was hardly any good news for Bangladesh men's cricket team in 2021 in terms of team and personal achievement. But country's premier all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan at least got good news at the end of the year. Shakib has been named among four nominees for the 2021 ICC Men's ODI Player of the Year awards. The International Cricket Council (ICC) yesterday revealed the names of the nominees where talismanic all-rounder Shakib, two dashing openers -- Ireland's Paul Sterling and South African Janneman Malan -- and Pakistan captain Babar Azam, the top-ranked batter in the 50-over format, have been included in the nominee list for the awards.



U-19s campaign end with heavy defeat

Bangladesh U-19 team ended their ACC Under-19 Asia Cup campaign with a heavy 103-run defeat against India in the semifinal at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium yesterday.

The Young Tigers will now fly for West Indies to defend their title in the ICC Under-19 Cricket World Cup, starting from January 14.

Poor batting effort saw them get bundled out for 140 runs in reply to India's 243 for eight wickets.

'Biggest focus is their battle against their own selves'

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh are set to take on New Zealand in the first of the two-match Test series -- part of ICC's new Test Championship cycle -- at Mount Maunganui on Saturday, hoping to turn around their fortunes and with determination to play to their potential. The task looks increasingly difficult given the recent set of bad results that has thrown Bangladesh cricket into chaos.

Missing key stars like Tamim Iqbal and Shakib Al Hasan, who have both



in conditions that are alien to them. However, as per team director Khaled Mahmud, the new-look Tigers had been able to cut through the gloom of the past few weeks and there is a fresh belief on return to action following performances in the warm-up match.

Bangladesh have lost all nine Tests they have played on Kiwi soil and Mahmud felt that the team was not under any illusion regarding the challenge.

"The boys are ready. There was some stress with the quarantine but it's not there anymore. They are looking fresh and we don't have any injury concerns.

Everyone wants to play good cricket and their biggest focus is their battle against their own selves. The mental side of the game is crucial and it's about the work we're doing and how we can implement it on the field," Mahmud told The Daily Star yesterday.

"Everyone knows what our results are in New Zealand and we also know how much teams from the subcontinent struggle here. Even England have struggled here. The challenge is very big. We are working on these mental aspects and looking to keep our thought processes intact when going forward," Mahmud said.

Tigers' top-order was creaky during the home series against Pakistan and in New Zealand, where conditions are conducive to pace and swing, the batters will be put to the test. Mahmud opined that the biggest focus has been on how the batters can apply themselves to persevere.

"Our training had a purpose. We analysed what kind of deliveries the batters were likely to face. At this level, it's not only about how you strike deliveries but also how to leave deliveries alone. What counts now is how much they are able to absorb mentally in game situations," Mahmud dictated.

"The focus will be on how we can use the sessions, the way we did in 2017. It was proof that when we apply ourselves, we can play well."

While technical details can be somewhat ironed out, the mental application was the priority going into the first Test.

"You can't go in with the thought that it's impossible to do well in New Zealand. What's clear is that they are geared up to play and they want to do their best in the new year without focusing on the result," Mahmud concluded.

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New Zealand vs Bangladesh
1st Test, Day 1
Live from 04:00 am (Saturday)

been hailed for facing up to New Zealand conditions in the past, Bangladesh will now have to look to a set of new faces to start the new year on a positive note