



Bangladesh Under-19 pacer Shoriful Islam leaps in the air after having India batsman Ravi Bishnoi run-out through a direct hit from his own follow-through during the Under-19 World Cup final in Potchefstroom, South Africa in February this year. The memories of that match may seem distant as we edge closer to the end of 2020, a year that had seen the sporting world, much like everything else, halted for most part. The cubs went on to register a historic three-wicket victory against India and lifted the Under-19 World Cup -- arguably the biggest achievement in Bangladesh's sporting history.

PHOTO: ICC

SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

The country stood still when the pandemic struck in March but sportsmanship was intact even in the toughest times of 2020. Every year The Daily Star recognises the sportsperson of the year based on on-field performances. But it was probably a different scenario altogether in 2020 as players stood up for humanitarian causes during the pandemic in Bangladesh.

MAZHAR UDDIN

The stars of Bangladesh sport, ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal among them, came forward to help 91 struggling athletes from different disciplines as well as different coaches by providing monetary help, paid through money transferring mobile apps and portals.

Star all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan also formed a charitable foundation to help people in need during the pandemic. Mushfiqur Rahim, Mahmudullah Riyad and Rubel Hossain also extended their support during this period.

But among all the stars, two names stand out as The Daily Star this time honours two sportspersons of the year in cricketer Nazmul Islam Apu and former women's cricketer Arifa Jahan Bithy for their relentless support to suffering people during the pandemic.

He may be famous for the 'Nagin dance', his trademark celebration after scalping wickets on the international circuit, but



"I know the pain of hunger. I have experienced it once upon a time in my life and that prompted me to contribute towards society within my limitations. I tried to manage funds and also contributed from my own savings. I feel delighted to make people happy and I will continue to help in future as well."

ARIFA JAHAN BITHY

left-arm spinner Nazmul showed another side to his character during testing times. He not only showed his humanitarian side but also displayed the signs of a true fighter after himself testing positive for Covid-19 alongside his parents.

The cricketer has worked tirelessly with his friends to collect funds, purchase goods, and package and deliver goods from a community centre to his hometown in an industrial area in Narayanganj.

Nazmul even began to stay away from his family in a separate home for about 20 days so that they would not be infected as he continued helping people during that time.

Arifa, currently working as a coach in domestic cricket, also stands out for her outstanding contributions during the pandemic. Although Arifa never played for the national side her humanitarian performance surely makes her a national star.

From providing cooked food to people in need on the roads, helping out pregnant women, distributing free sanitary napkins to girls, reaching out to people in flood-affected areas to provide food, to even donating sewing machines to widows and divorced women, Arifa made sure she stretched her hand out to people around her in any way possible.



"After the Dhaka Premier League was postponed, my friends and I were discussing how we could help the people in our area who were suffering. I didn't just want to help for one or two days. I wanted to take responsibility for those people for at least a month. But I didn't have the finances to support around 500 people. Tamim [Iqbal] came forward to support me financially and also provided goods. Mushfiqur Rahim also came forward and joined the cause and donated a sum of money from his auctioned bat. A few of my friends also helped make this happen."

NAZMUL ISLAM APU

A year like never before

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

The year 2020 in the sporting calendar had been a remarkable one due to the challenges facing sporting events all over the world. Not since the World War II has there been a more severe case of disruptions to the sporting calendar as elite-level sports found out that it was not immune to the escalation of the pandemic and the consequences it brought. If fans were the integral part of sporting events, 2020 became the year when fans became peripheral to continuation of the major events, at least in terms of their presence in stadiums.

From February-March, the realisation dawned that sports simply could not go on as it had done under normal circumstances. As warning signs flashed, Champions League fixtures started being played behind closed doors before UEFA postponed all fixtures with one particular Atlanta-Valencia game apparently fuelling contagion in Italy due to presence of supporters. By March, all major sporting events had been postponed owing to the pandemic. Novak Djokovic, who won his eighth Australian Open title in January, quickly became the bad boy of the tennis world as an ill-fated Adria Tour in June -- one he himself organised -- acquainted tennis with the realities of the pandemic and dented tennis's planned return.

As sports succumbed to the chain reaction of the pandemic, the sporting scenario completely changed worldwide. A year that had begun with much promise for Bangladesh in the sporting front, with the under-19 cricketers winning the World Cup in England, became almost a separate reality. By March, including cricket, all domestic sporting events halted and the young cricketers' development was hampered significantly while the national team's home series against Australia and

New Zealand were postponed indefinitely along with domestic competitions.

As sports faced a bleak future, it also ushered hope and resilience as it so often does. The German Bundesliga returned in May but the most significant factor was the fact that there would not be any fans in major sporting events. With other major European football competitions too restarting in June, the likes of Cristiano Ronaldo or Lionel Messi returning to action gave people something to cherish amid lockdowns. The unity shown, the

Bangabandhu T20 Cup in November-December as a significant crop of cricketers got some much-needed cricketing action. It would also pave the way for the upcoming home series against West Indies to be confirmed -- set to be Bangladesh's first international assignment since the start of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the passing away of the footballing legend Diego Maradona would leave its mark on 2020 along with the death of Kobe Bryant while on the domestic front the passing away of former



gargantuan task of setting up bio-secure bubbles -- while it still felt like a delicate, fragile thing to consider sports amid the pandemic -- and the logistics required while there was no map to use as a guideline for such a scenario, will remain exemplary as sports slowly returned.

International Cricket slowly began too as West Indies became the first team to tour England during the pandemic in July.

Bangladesh Cricket, too, returned with domestic competitions such as the BCB President's Cup in October and the

national star Badal Roy was a big loss for the country's football.

As an unrelenting year comes to an end, sports fans are left with the longing to return to the old days even as new strains of the virus can put significant denture to those plans. Players too have felt that vacancy in the stadiums. Maybe the transition can best be surmised when Messi says: "It's horrible to play without fans, it's a very ugly sensation. Seeing no-one in the stadium is like a training session and it is very tough to really get going at the start of a game."

