



Focus on grassroots: the only way out?

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh national men's football team, who continue to reside at the bottom of FIFA rankings, had once showcased consistent performances and achieved international success despite serious limitations. To add insult to injury, in terms of current rankings, the 24 teams below Bangladesh are not considered as serious footballing nations.

When the country's struggle in the recent past alongside the dearth of quality players is factored in, does the appointment of another foreign coach allows room for optimism?

"Where Bangladesh football stands now, no coach in the world can get you results. That's because there is a huge crisis of players. Many don't understand this but want results," opined former national striker Alfaz Ahmed, who won silverware with the national team in the 1999 South Asian Games and the 2003 SAFF Championship.

"Currently the [established] players have no alternative, which was not the case during our time. There were at least three to four players in each position. Besides, we didn't get enough facilities," the 50-year-old added.

"I think there is no way but to focus on the district leagues to produce more players. Instead of spending crores behind the foreign coaches of the national team, the federation could offer [BDT] 50 lakh to 1 crore [prize] money for each competition, so that the clubs can be encouraged to maintain age-group teams by hunting talent from the district level," Alfaz concluded.



A NEW BEGINNING or another year wasted?



ATIQUE ANAM

As Bangladesh national football team braces for a new beginning under new coach Javier Cabrera with optimism that things will finally take a positive turn after a year of turmoil, experimentation and failure, time is probably right to remind everyone that things can only change as much as they want it to change.

Following Jamie Day's release from national duties towards the end of last year, Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) experimented with two successful club coaches -- Oscar Bruzon of Bashundhara Kings and Mario Lemos of Abahani -- in two regional tournaments.

It's safe to say that those two appointments came out of desperation and as stop gap measures rather from any conviction or part of any long-term plan. Expectedly those experiments failed to bring any positive result, prompting the game's local governing body to look for something new.

What it has come up with is basically a coach with similar attributes to that of Day when the Englishman was first roped in, but perhaps with very different philosophy of football.

Whatever his philosophy,

the Spaniard will have plenty of opportunities to make a mark during his one-year tenure. While the planned friendlies against Indonesia have been cancelled, BFF is likely to use the March FIFA window and other windows available later in the year. The biggest challenge awaits in the form of AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers in June and the likelihood of the SAFF Championship towards the end of the year.

Spanish coach Javier Cabrera became the 24th foreign coach in Bangladesh's history, and the 13th foreign coach appointed in 13 years under the leadership of Kazi Salauddin, the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president.

It is good that BFF is giving the new gaffer a number of assignments to prove his worth. Another good thing about this contract is that Cabrera will have to stay in Bangladesh for the most part of the year, allowing him time to watch the players in the domestic leagues closely and develop an understanding and bonding with the national team players, something

that is very important if positive results are to be expected.

However, only ensuring time and togetherness will not yield the desired results unless the coach is allowed a free hand in implementing his ideas. There ought to be non-interference from the BFF executive members in selection of players once the coach is familiar with the pool of players available.

Another aspect that needs ensuring is the fairness of the leagues -- both premier league and championship league -- so that teams and the players can show their true quality on the pitch. In that regard, refereeing will need to be of the highest standard, so much so that the match officials will not shy away from using their authority, not mindful of which one is a big team and which one a small.

The new coach will have the advantage of starting without much expectation of him, but come June onwards, there will be a lot of expectations and pressure. How the Spaniard will handle that pressure on and off the field will eventually decide whether 2022 is another year of wasted experiments or a turning point for Bangladesh football.

We haven't worked with the new coach, so we don't know him yet. But we are taking his arrival positively for something better in the near future.

National striker Suman Reza



'No FA has a role in developing its nation's football'

Legendary footballer Kazi Salauddin has been at the helm of the Bangladesh Football Federation for 13 years but the national team has not made satisfactory progress in that time. The BFF boss spoke to *The Daily Star's* Anisur Rahman, sharing his thoughts about the new coach and the team's plans for the next year. The excerpts are below:

DS: What changes are you expecting in this year under the new coach?

Kazi Salauddin (KS): It was inevitable that we would have to appoint a new coach following the last coach's [Jamie Day's] performance, decisions and remarks, which forced me into a decision. We looked at some high-profile coaches with high price tags, but ultimately we got Javier Cabrera at the right price for one year. What I want is for him to improve the performances of the national football team by 10 per cent compared to recent performances. If there is 10 per cent development,

BANGLADESH'S FIFA RANKINGS

Best	110	1996
Present	186	2021
Lowest	192	2018

BANGLADESH'S MAJOR SUCCESS

Champions, Four-nation tournament in Myanmar, 1995
Champions, South Asian Games in Nepal, 1999
Champions, SAFF Championship in Bangladesh, 2003
Champions, South Asian Games in Bangladesh, 2010

we become a power in South Asia. If Cabrera can perform well, it will be very good. Otherwise, we will have to decide further.

DS: Similar to previous coaches, Cabrera also does not have experience managing a national team. How optimistic are you?

KS: If I wanted to sign a coach who has experience working with national teams, it would cost US \$40-50 thousand per month. What we are doing is signing a coach within our capabilities.

DS: What international engagements lie ahead for the national team?

KS: Bangladesh are supposed to take part in the AFC Asian Cup Qualifying round in June. For the national team, we want to avail all FIFA windows in January, March and September.

We have already decided to play two friendly matches against Indonesia, subject to meeting the criteria set by hosts Indonesia. We will also play friendly matches in two more windows to improve our FIFA ranking. Apart from that, the Bangladesh Olympic team is supposed to take part in the football event at the Asian Games in China in September.

DS: What are the developmental steps you have taken to groom quality players in future?

KS: This question was answered many times before. 210 countries play football and clubs bear the responsibility of developing a nation's football. If you count the top 20 clubs of the world, everyone spends \$230-260 million behind the players per year. No national federation has a role in developing its nation's football but I find that our clubs are more interested in ready-made players instead of nursing age-group players.

'It looks like they play football for the sake of it'

Grassroots football plays a major role in the scouting of talented players who can go on to have an impact at the highest levels for both club and country. In Bangladesh, however, the focus on grassroots development is still very low.

Khaled Ahmed, an AFC-C licensed coach who coached the Sylhet Under-17 team to the title of the Bangabandhu U-17 Gold Cup 2021, spoke about the current condition of the grassroots culture and its future with *The Daily Star's* Ashfaqul Mushfiq. The excerpts are below:

DS: What is the current condition of grassroots football in Bangladesh?

Khaled Ahmed (KA): Not that good to be honest. The idea of grassroots is very new in this country and the amount of work done for the grassroots is very small.

DS: You are the head coach of the Sylhet Under-17 divisional team and also coach in local academies. What is the daily routine at these academies?

KA: There isn't any proper structure in these academies compared to the likes of BKSP. The players come to practice



in the field in the afternoon and go back home after training.

DS: What experience and qualifications do the coaches who train these young players have? Why can't they produce players of a similar ilk to those we had during our golden years?

KA: Most coaches don't have any academic coaching licenses. Even if some of these coaches get their licenses done, they still train players with a very casual approach. They barely do any activation work before training, let alone teach the players the basics of the game. I can give many

examples like this and I think that is why many players around the country lack basic skills in terms of first touch and passing. It looks like they play football for the sake of it.

DS: What are the obstacles grassroots players face in their development? Why do many fade away?

KA: The main problem is poverty. Most of these players come from very poor families who are unable to provide financial support. This is why many of these players can't continue. A player of the Sylhet U-17 team, I won't name him, came to me saying he won't be able to play football anymore. He went to Dhaka to make a living and support his family. That, coupled with the absence of good coaches, means they are missing the essential components that will make them skilled footballers.

DS: How are you helping such players overcome obstacles? How are these

academies funded?

KA: The funding comes out of my pocket. A few cousins of mine who live in the United Kingdom support me from time to time. We need to buy balls, boots, training kits and accessories. I had to fund most of the things we have now. I've gone to many people for funding but returned empty-handed. Mind you, I don't get paid as a district division coach. And I have to run my family as well.

DS: What's the process of these players making it to higher levels?

KA: Our Anik Deb Borma became the best player of the Bangabandhu Gold Cup. Seeing his play, he got called for a trial at Chittagong Abahani by Maruf Islam. Four of my players will play the U-18 B league for Bashundhara Kings and three for Mohammadan. Three more went for a trial at the Bangladesh Air Force senior team. I am confident they will do great.