

Today, cricket gets maximum priority. They get big sponsors, jobs, all kinds of opportunities. If a third of this money and opportunities was given to table tennis, players would be able to give their best.



Zohera Rahman Linu



Vibrant past, dismal present, only hope for the future

After prolonged training under foreign coaches, I have improved a lot. I never thought before that I could do what I saw on YouTube, but now I can play that way. I am now dreaming big.

ANISUR RAHMAN

Unlike the prevailing scenario nowadays, many disciplines had a place in the country's sporting arena in the past and regularly produced stars that would hog the national spotlight.

Table tennis was among them, with local tournaments proving quite a success in terms of participants and spectators. Zohera Rahman Linu earned celebrity status through her displays while names like Mossadekul Haque Rochi, Saidul Haque Sadi, Nasimul Hasan Kochi, Ali Khan Sumit and Sad Uddin Kislu were well-known by sports followers across the country.

But those days are gone. There is hardly anyone now who can match up to the name and fame of their predecessors and, perhaps most importantly, the sport has failed to maintain any zeal in the country's sporting arena.

Many believe a lack of international successes, proper planning, lack of grassroots-level development and splinters within the federation have impeded the game, but they are also looking forward to a

new beginning after some positive initiatives in recent times.

The game has always been Dhaka-centric, with Azimpur, Dhanmondi, Swamibag, Farashganj, Armanitola, Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) considered breeding grounds for players.

Educational institutes such as St. Joseph School, St Gregory's School in Dhaka and district schools provided facilities to play table tennis on concrete boards but the sport only gathered real momentum in recognised parts of Dhaka and its suburbs with the help of passionate organisers.

Yet, the sport lost its charm not only in Dhaka but also in districts like Rangpur, Nariel, Rajshahi, Jashore, Habiganj, Khulna, Chattogram, Gaibandha and Kushtia. Only a couple of sports institutes -- Quantum and BKSP -- are now leading the way to revive the sport.

The Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation (BTTF) has taken some initiatives to bring back its glory days. They are grooming and training promising players under foreign

coaches as well as making the Premier Division Table Tennis League a lucrative way for players to earn their bread and butter.

"After prolonged training under foreign coaches, I have improved a lot. I never thought before that I could do what I saw on YouTube, but now I can play that way. I am now dreaming big," Bangladesh Games champion Sadia Rahman Mou said.

A rise in player payments is also being considered a good sign.

Former national champion Sonom Sultana Soma said: "It is true that we have been getting better payment over the past two years and the players are also giving the effort to perform better. If it continues, I think table tennis will go far."

"Our women's team suffered a 3-1 defeat to Nepal in the South Asian Games in 2019 but they beat Nepal 3-0 in the Asian Table Tennis Championships last year while the men's team also beat higher-ranked Palestine and Sri Lanka in the same tournament," national coach Mohammad Ali said.



'We are in a take-off position'

Khandokar Hassan Monir, vice-president of the Bangladesh Table Tennis Federation (BTTF), plays an important role in the development of table tennis in Bangladesh and he spoke to *The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman* about the past, present and future. The excerpts are below:

The Daily Star (DS): Please tell us where table tennis stands at the moment?

Khandokar Hassan Monir (KHM): We are in a take-off position towards a good situation. By the grace of the Almighty we can boldly say that we will win a silver medal in the next South Asian Games, something we have never achieved before.

DS: Can you tell us the reasons behind the game's decline?

KHM: I agree that the popularity of table tennis has reduced a bit because of failure at the international level for 17 years [actually 14 years from 1996 to 2009]. When players can't produce good results at the international level, the game generally loses popularity. But it is gaining popularity again because we grabbed bronze medals in each of the last three SA Games. Changes are also coming on the domestic front.

DS: Is there an iconic player in the current squad with the potential to become future star?

KHM: More important than stars is to win an international medal. There are some players in line who can be iconic players, like national champion Mohtasin Ahmed Ridoy -- who outshone all previous players by moving into the quarterfinals in U-19s group of the WTT Youth competition in Oman last October. Ramhim Lian Bom played in the pre-quarterfinals. The Bangladesh men's team -- comprising Ridoy, Ramhim, Sabbir and Sajib -- finished 20th out of 43 countries in the Asian Table Tennis Championship. I think all four have the possibility to be stars in future.

DS: Players and officials have often been involved in conflicts in the past. So how will the sport progress?

KHM: Given the socio-economic aspect of Bangladesh, no player can ensure a future by playing only table tennis. So, they also have to work for their bread and butter. A gap was created due to the implementation of training instructions from the Bangladesh Olympic Association, which directed us to not consider players for the national team if they do not attend training twice a day. Because of that instruction, some players were dropped. But we are now reaping benefits, with junior players coming in and replacing senior players based on merit.

DS: In which context you are conducting long-term training with players from different groups?

KHM: We are eight months into a four-year training camp. We are nursing 22 male and female players from U-15, U-19 and U-21 and the national players because we our preliminary target is to win a silver medal in the next SA Games.

- » Eight players from Dhaka dominated the National Table Tennis Championships by sharing 23 men's single events titles out of 39. Only six players from outside the capital bagged titles in the past 47 years (since 1974).
- » Currently, clubs like Bangladesh Police, Wari Club, Pallolic Group, Biman Bangladesh, Aarunima Sangsad and Ajax SC are top outfits among Premier League sides and are offering top players contracts ranging from Tk 2 lakh to Tk 4 lakh.
- » Mohtasin Ahmed Ridoy, who was the sixth table tennis player from outside the capital (Rangpur) to become the men's singles champion in the National Table Tennis Championship, is considered as the future table tennis star.

MEDALS IN SOUTH ASIAN GAMES

YEAR	GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE
1989	-	-	-
1991	-	-	1
1993	-	-	1
1995	-	-	2
1999	-	-	-
2006	-	-	-
2010	-	-	2
2016	-	-	1
2019	-	-	2



'The main obstacle is nepotism'

Dr. Manash Chowdhury is a dentist, musician and five-time national table tennis champion. He spoke to *The Daily Star* about the despondent environment in the country's table tennis circuit and shared his thoughts about how it could overcome the gloom while also expanding on how he manages to juggle his multi-dimensional life. The excerpts are below:

The Daily Star [DS]: You are a doctor, musician and table tennis player. How are you balancing all of these tasks?

Manash Chowdhury [MC]: I basically set my life like this. Apart from seven hours in my chambers, I try to properly utilise the remaining time. I don't gossip or waste my time. Instead, I focus on my work. When I'm in my chambers, I'm fully engaged with my patients. I dedicate three to four hours to my practice in the morning and afternoon. I play before coming in the morning and also in the afternoon.

DS: There is a training camp in Chattogram financed by Bangladesh Police. Are you in that camp?

MC: Yes, the camp is situated on the ground floor of my house. We had an Indian coach for a couple of months but he returned home when the Covid-19 situation worsened. If the situation improves, he may return in the middle of next month (February).

DS: When did you start playing this game? How long are you willing to play?

MC: I started playing in 1989. Although I did not play for around eight years in the middle. I retired from the national team, complaining about nepotism. Right now, I only play to maintain my fitness. But when I go down to play, I instinctively start playing for the championship again.

DS: What are the obstacles players face in this sport?

MC: I won't speak about myself because I have a healthy financial background since I am a doctor so my case is different. But in reality, I never want my children to choose table tennis as a career. Because I really don't like the misuse of power over there. The financial state of our table tennis players is miserable. Apart from



eight to ten players, nobody gets paid properly. I get paid for representing [Bangladesh] Ansar or Police because I have reached a level and I'm maintaining it. But most of the players can't afford to buy a ping-pong ball, how will they reach a level where they will get paid?

DS: Against such a backdrop, Bangladesh's table tennis does not have much scope to develop, does it?

MC: There are many reasons that our table tennis is in ruins. The main reason is nepotism. The federation only plays the players they like. Those who flatter higher authorities the most get more opportunities regardless of credibility. And those who are actually skilled and capable are not even given the chance. The federation doesn't want players, they want boot-lickers. There are many senior and experienced players

in Dhaka who are not even called to the camp for even one session of training each day.

DS: So despite having skilled players, our table tennis is declining due to nepotism within the federation?

MC: 100% right.

DS: What steps do you think are needed to ensure the sport's improvement?

MC: All the banks, big insurance companies and other big companies must form teams and make players permanent employees so that they don't have to worry about financial security. They will only focus on their game and when there is no event they can work for the company. Having a permanent job can solve many problems, including the lack of freedom of speech among players.