

Gaining new ground in WOMEN'S CRICKET

In conversation with Nigar Sultana Joty

SHANIZ CHOWDHURY

Under Nigar Sultana Joty's leadership, Bangladesh women's cricket team qualified for the first time in the ICC Women's ODI World Cup in 2021. She is one of the most talented players in the country. Cricket fans have praised her determination, dedication, and hard work over the years.

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, the 24-year-old discusses her journey so far, her experiences of playing for Bangladesh, and her transition from a team player to the captain.

"I always had a penchant for cricket and knew that it is what I wanted to pursue professionally, when I grew up," said Joty, who was first introduced to the sport when she was only two years old.

Her older brothers and cousins played on the field and not long after, she also joined them.

A few years down the line, she started accompanying her brother to the cricket club in their town. When she showcased her athletic prowess in matches, everyone could see that she was born to be a cricketer. Joty first came to Dhaka in 2011 to play cricket professionally. BKSP had regular trials for camps, and she participated in one of them. However,



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NIGAR SULTANA
JOTY'S OFFICIAL
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she failed to live up to her expectations. Nonetheless, she was not going to let the fire be extinguished until she made it to the national team. For the next four years, she performed well in club cricket, and in 2015, she finally got the chance to play for Bangladesh against Pakistan.

"Everyone used to tell my brother that someday, I will be a cricketer in the national team. He always encouraged me to walk on this path because he saw the potential in me. He used to show

would accompany me to practice sessions, wait for me, and then, we would go home together. Without her love and support, I would not have made it this far," shared Joty.

As a part of her regime, Joty prays five times a day, and meditates regularly. The night before a match, she eats and sleeps properly. On match day, she tries to be punctual, as it helps her to stay disciplined.

Even during a pandemic characterised by uncertainty, she did not sit idle. "My father used his fishing net to create an enclosed batting cage so I could practice hitting and pitching. Counselling sessions were arranged for the whole team so we could remain mentally strong as we went straight into lockdown after playing the T-20 World Cup. That is why when we were back in the scene, it felt as though no time had passed," said Joty.

She was the captain for emerging teams and camps, but she did not expect to become the captain of the national team so early. Moreover, there were three more senior players who were on the run for this role. More than excitement, she felt a sense of responsibility to fulfil the expectations to take the team to greater heights.

"I know as the captain, I have to be a better player every day. I would like us to win a trophy for Bangladesh under my captaincy. Currently, our ODI ranking is at 5 and T-20 ranking is at 9. I want us to climb up to a higher T-20 ranking," said Joty.

"We were determined to qualify for this year's world cup. We practiced one-on-one and played so many matches that we knew each other's strengths and weaknesses like the backs of our hands. We arrived at Harare two weeks earlier to get accustomed to the weather."

Usually, Bangladesh men's cricket team gets more support and sponsorship. According to Joty, not enough newspapers or channels cover stories about achievements of the women's team. More often than not, people are unaware about what the team is up to.

"Media plays a huge role in our exposure to the world. The more people show interest in our team, the more sponsorships we can avail," she said.

The tigresses have played well in the past few years, especially in 2016 and 2017. They brought home the 2018 Women's T20 Asia Cup, which is one of the biggest achievements for Bangladesh cricket. Since then, they have garnered increased financial support from the board. Their strengths were balling and fielding, but now, they have also improved their batting performances.

Joty believes that every player on the team works to surpass their achievements and overall performances; they have worked really hard for years, so now, they are reaping what they sowed.

The author is a student of BRAC University, and a freelance journalist. Email: shanzaychowdhury@gmail.com.



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me pictures of Salma, Rumana, and Jahanara Apu. Salma Khatun's name is synonymous with Bangladesh's women's cricket. She is my idol, and I am so proud to be representing the team like she did," shared Joty.

However, playing a crowd-pleasing sport has not always been rosy. Big cities may not bat an eyelash when they see women play outdoors, but Joty grew up in a conservative society, where naturally, people were very judgemental. They could not fathom the fact that she went out in public wearing a cricket uniform. People tried to humiliate and tarnish the reputation of her family. Initially, her relatives could not even take it. She was a good student so people told her that she was wasting her time concentrating on sports, instead of studies. Not only was that a difficult time for her, but also for her family.

"My mother is the reason I never gave up, despite all the hardships. She never discouraged me from playing what other people called 'men's sports'. Instead of paying heed to what other people said, she taught me to be tough, physically and mentally. She told me to kick my fears to the curb and pursue my dream. She