

We have regularised football and made it year-round that is what I promised when I took charge. Players are now earning more money. Back at that time, footballers used to get Tk 2-3 lakhs per season each but they now earn Tk 60-70 lakhs.

Kazi Salahuddin told after being elected for the fourth consecutive term as the BFF boss in October 2020.



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Is there any place for BPL in the world of professional football?

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The league has improved a bit compared to the early editions of the competition but we need to be improved a lot when it comes to professionalism. We, players, are pleased to play BPL in every season but the clubs must improve in terms of professionalism. Four to five top clubs have been showing some signs towards professionalism but it would be really good if the rest of the clubs also show the same tendency.

Tapu Barman



ANISUR RAHMAN

Even in its 14th year, the Bangladesh Premier League is struggling to find its identity in the world of professional football. After being instructed to do so by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), the Bangladesh Football Federation introduced a professional football league in 2007. The belief was that it would allow clubs to set new benchmarks on the field as well financially and in terms of infrastructure and administration. But objectives have not been met in the past 13 years and even the ongoing 14th Bangladesh Premier League is struggling to roll on smoothly following a dispute over venues two weeks after the league began. The Bangladesh Premier League still lacks a lot and the federation appears reluctant to meet the criteria of professionalism. So the most satisfactory aspect remains that the league is at least being held every season and the players are at least earning a living through the sport.

LEAGUE STANDARDS

Complaints about the organisation of the Bangladesh Premier League are rife, with organisers failing to settle on rules despite 13 years of experience. Among those are the number of participating teams, the number of teams to be relegated, the foreign players' quota and even the timetable. The constant shuffling of the rules even forced one club to



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There are a lot of problems. I think overall professionalism has to be improved. We, the players, have nothing to do except playing in the way they are running the BPL right now.

Jamal Bhuiyan

seek, and receive, justice from the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

The committee has even prolonged seasons to 10 months by interrupting the league, leaving clubs with no choice but to pay more to foreign players while also giving local players no room to breathe.

The standard of football, when measured by either the national team's results or club achievements in international tournaments, has not improved, but the league has become more competitive.

FINANCIAL CONDITION

Financial constraints have undoubtedly been a significant hindrance towards professionalism, but clubs in Bangladesh have never attempted to gain financial liberty

by merchandising their products or exploring other ventures. Instead, they continue to rely on donations from wealthy stakeholders and run their clubs on a season-by-season basis.

22 clubs have so far taken part in the professional football league since 2007, but the league had to be confined to Dhaka because Dhaka-based clubs were unwilling to play outside the capital, citing financial constraints. However, this has not stopped the wages of players from skyrocketing. The few top players, especially those in the national football team, secure contracts ranging between Tk 70 lakh and Tk 90 lakh per season. Other players can earn between Tk 10 lakh to Tk 30 lakh.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

While all the clubs have age-group or youth teams in line with their club licensing agreements, it appears to be only on paper. The clubs do not provide training or coaching around the year. It is not unusual for clubs to only bring in young players as needed, shaping them up for a month or two before the rare age-level tournament.

In terms of competitions, there is little interest from any concerned party in holding a regular league or tournaments that could give young players an ideal breeding ground. The Bangladesh Football Federation's own Under-18 Football Tournament has not been held since 2019.

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are engaging new supporters on social networks.

DS: Although Abahani spends millions behind its senior team every season, why do they not have a youth team?

KNA: This will happen when the players provide a financial value for clubs, when different clubs can buy and sell players in the truest sense. Although the federation has arranged U-18 tournaments a few times, engagement has been very limited. I believe having it on a regular basis is going to help clubs intensify their efforts to form U-16, U-18 or age-group teams and strengthen the pipeline.

DS: Do you think players are being overvalued in the current transfer market?

KNA: I don't think that because the clubs are willing to pay those amounts. Players are commanding that in a free market. 12 or 13 clubs are competing at the highest level and there are only a limited number of very good players. So of course, there is competition to get them.

DS: Do you believe Abahani have become a professional side?

KNA: I will say Abahani is yet to transform itself into a truly professional club, but the journey is ongoing and I definitely think Abahani are on the path.

DS: When will fans be able to watch Abahani play league matches in its own home venue?

KNA: That is a challenge for every club. Only one club has taken steps towards creating their own home venue and I appreciate them. I believe we

need to do that and we are already holding talks to explore the possibilities and find out how we can do that. I hope it is going to happen soon.

DS: How satisfied are Abahani with the federation, for example in terms of postponement of the league or selection of venues?

KNA: Changes that happen and the decisions that are taken are due to circumstances but that is not very helpful for any club. All clubs expect long-term decisions and it is easier to plan if it can be based on long-term goals. Recently due to Covid-19, the decision was taken to hold the league in a central venue even though they had done a lot of work in order to make Sylhet our home venue.

DS: In India, they hold the Indian Super League on a fixed schedule but in Bangladesh the league is scheduled haphazardly. Can Abahani play some kind of role behind fixing a concrete timeframe for the Bangladesh Premier League?

KNA: Abahani wants a yearly plan taking into account the national team's engagements or national holidays and other issues. This is something other countries are doing. We urge the federation to work towards making fixtures that we play on the basis of a fixed calendar and schedule.

‘I think the league before was more organised’

AKM Maruf Haque, the only coach in Bangladesh with a UEFA A license, has watched the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) from the dugout for the past 13 years, with coaching stints at Mohammmedan, Sheikh Russel, Sheikh Jamal, Arambagh, Chattogram Abahani and even the national team. The 51-year-old spoke to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the professional football league and his experiences at different clubs.

The Daily Star (DS): How would you evaluate the BPL?

Maruf Haque (MH): I have been a part of the BPL since the beginning and I think the league before was more organised. Things including venues and fixtures were decided on well ahead of the start of the league but we don't see that now. On the other hand, we are seeing many good teams that had not been seen before. Now the title race is confined to four to five teams instead of just two teams, which used to be a regular phenomenon.

DS: How much of an impact do you think the BPL has had on the development of Bangladeshi football?

MH: There are five to six components of developing football and the most



important is the highest-level football league of any country because it has an immense impact on development. I think players' performances fluctuate because of the way the Bangladesh Premier League is held. Due to that fluctuation in performance, the national team suffers at the international level. It is better to run the league smoothly and avail the FIFA window, but not allow 20-day breaks. An interrupted league also has a big impact on development.

DS: How much logistical support do you get from professional clubs in training camps?

MH: I will say I am lucky in regards to this aspect because I have received support from each club that I coached. I made it work because I know the socio-economic

status of the country and the clubs as well. So I always sought support with the club's ability in mind and I was never denied. For example, I wanted a drone, which can cost between Tk 60,000 to Tk 3 lakh. But I wanted a lower-priced one and I got it. This time I demanded an interactive smartboard, which can also vary in cost but I got one suited to my needs. However, the coach must make the club understand why he needs specific

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support.

DS: Can you assess the quality of the players in the BPL?

MH: Players are unlucky because they do not get training either at the youth or grassroots level. That's why we get footballers who are not educated about football. At the beginning, I got players who had that education but were not hard workers. However, the current batch is hard-working but not well-equipped

with technical and tactical skills or knowledge.

DS: Does the country lack quality coaches?

MH: It is a mixed bag. I don't think enough local coaches are ready for top-flight football. Our coaches lack the ability for self-assessment. On the other hand, clubs sometimes bring in foreign coaches unnecessarily. If a quality foreign coach is roped in, that also helps local coaches learn. But in most cases, high-quality foreign coaches are not signed.

DS: Can you single out weak or strong points of the BPL?

MH: The weakest aspect is that BPL does not have a fixed timeframe or fixed format. Does the BPL follow the home and away format? There is also no fixed quota for foreign players. If it was fixed, clubs could fix their plans accordingly. The positive side is that the league has been very competitive for the past four to five years and a lot of players have come into the league. For instance, we didn't know who was going to play for newcomers Swadhinata KS before the start of the season but they are doing well on the pitch, like Uttar Baridhara last season.