

SPORT



Fame diminishing, impact as well

Dhaka Premier League (DPL), the premier 50-over competition of the country, is set to return this month. The tournament, which gained List A status in the 2013-14 edition, has worked immensely behind making Bangladesh a force in the ODI format, especially at home. However, despite playing such a role in molding the country's cricket, the competition lost its charm and has seen focus shift away as cricketers, especially the national mainstays, started being captivated more towards the international stage. Even after a long time since its inception, questions are still raised regarding the tournament meeting the standard and competitiveness required to help cricketers make a smooth transition to the international stage. In an attempt to shed some light on the reasons that worked behind the DPL's declining fame, The Daily Star got in touch with the likes of former national skipper Gazi Ashraf Hossain, who served the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) in different capacities, Salahuddin Chowdhury, the new chairman of Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis and local cricketer Rubel Mia, set to play in the competition for Mohammedan as they tried to voice their opinions and stance on the country's most coveted 50-over tournament.

'The base of the pyramid is gradually decaying'

"It was a time when, in our hearts, we wanted to lose the toss so that we could escape the wrath of the supporters if we ultimately lost the match," former star batter Minhajul Abedin told this reporter while recalling their golden days in the Dhaka Premier Cricket League.

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There are still many who got nostalgic when they reminisce about those days of the country's premier 50-over competition, which was characterised by excitement, drama and suspense. To them, there was no shortage of stories to tell.

Expressing disappointment, many often say now: Those days are gone. Former national skipper Gazi Ashraf Hossain, who served the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) in different capacities, loves to reminisce about those golden days, which he was very much part of as a player and official.

But he was disappointed that this important competition had failed to live up to the demands of time and expectation.

While there has been huge criticism regarding the lack of a proper structure for first-class competition, Gazi Ashraf observed that hardly anybody noticed the shortcomings in planning and structure in the 50-over competition, with some even believing that the Dhaka Premier Cricket League is the backbone of Bangladesh's success in 50-over cricket.

"If we want to tell the story about the collapse, we must go ten years back in the past. There are a number of reasons for the collapse, including shifting venues outside Dhaka, an inconsistent calendar and the recurring unavailability of national players

are just a few of them. Mohammedan roped in a number of national stars for this season and made headlines. But in reality, those national players have little chance to play in the league," said Gazi Ashraf.

"I think it's a totally wrong concept to consider this league the best one in the country. Because of this concept, 12 directors represent the board from here and there is pressure on them to arrange this league regularly. But we have to look at the bigger picture and think beyond the Dhaka League. We have to wonder where these 400-500 players are coming to the league from.

These days you cannot make any Dhaka-centric plans for any format if you want to improve the standard.

"Bangladesh cricket is more focused on the national team than the BPL. Nobody is interested in thinking about what is happening all over the country, at the grassroots level.

Even when you are think about the Dhaka league, you must think about the whole country's cricket because the players are coming from all over the country. We are already late in reshaping our cricket, particularly the 50-over competition. Now we are basically being sustained by age-level cricket, but you never know if it could be the cause of a huge setback for the country's cricket in the future," he continued.

Gazi Ashraf said that despite

international exposure, the country's cricket is run in an old-fashioned manner. "The time has come to split the cricket operations committee. We need a domestic operations committee. Domestic operations committee must look after everything...wickets, grounds, facilities, yoga and upgrading coaching and umpiring standards all over the country and only then you will get quality cricketers for the Dhaka Leagues."

"We play so many day-night international matches but we don't have any proper plan to arrange day-night domestic matches, so how can you expect players to learn the nitty gritty of a day-night match from domestic competitions," questioned Gazi Ashraf, adding that he doubted whether the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) has any database that is used to preserve the information of cricket activities all over the country.

The former national captain then pointed out a very vital issue regarding the Dhaka Leagues, comparing it to a pyramid. "We all hear many things and allegations about lower-tier cricket. It's like a pyramid because you cannot think of the Dhaka Premier League separately. Instead, the third division qualifiers, third division league, second division league and first division league are all linked with the premier league. But unfortunately, the base of this pyramid is gradually decaying," said Ashraf.

The seasoned organiser wanted emphasis on changing the approach and attitude towards the country's cricket rather than only talking about the traditions of a competition.



'I hope the fans support our local cricket'

A die-hard Mohammedan fan since his childhood days, all-rounder Rubel Mia has finally fulfilled his dream when he signed up for the prestigious club for the upcoming Dhaka Premier League season. The 29-year-old, who has experienced the highs and lows of domestic cricket, shared his experience of the prestigious fifty-over domestic competition and his future plans during an interview with The Daily Star's Mazhar Uddin. The excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): When did you start your cricketing journey?

Rubel Mia (RM): I started playing in 2005 and went on to become the second-highest run-scorer in the first division league in 2009. After that, I got a call up in the Bangladesh under-19 team and played a home series against Sri Lanka. I made my DPL debut in 2015 for Old DOHS. After that, I played for Victoria Sporting Club, Legends of Rugganj and also for Prime Bank, where I played alongside Tamim Iqbal Bhai. Its a dream come true for me to be able to play alongside Shakib Al Hasan bhai, Mushfiqur Rahim bhai for Mohammedan this season and I am looking forward to it.



DS: When did you start following the Dhaka Premier League?

RM: Right from my childhood days, I used to watch football matches between Abahani and Mohammedan at the Bangabandhu National Stadium. Since then I was a die-hard fan of Mohammedan and once I started playing cricket, I always wanted to represent this club. I used to follow the Dhaka league and watch matches whenever I got the opportunity.

DS: Can you recall the intensity of a Mohammedan-Abahani game in the Dhaka league?

RM: Oh, yes. I can remember the jam-packed stadium whenever Mohammedan and Abahani faced each other. The supporters of the two teams used to cheer and even engaged in fights at the stands during the matches. This is what makes this tournament lively and the players who represent the clubs also get pumped up to give their best. This used to be a traditional rivalry back then and everyone was divided into two groups.

DS: Do you think the rivalry or the intensity in the DPL has decreased from what it was in the past?

RM: The DPL has always been the biggest source of income for the players and when it comes to intensity the players always give their best in the field. Yes, you can say the presence of spectators may have decreased from what it was in the past. It is also true that we don't see such enthusiasm among the spectators whenever Mohammedan, Abahani face each other. But that's not in our hands and as a player, I really hope the fans come in numbers and support our local cricket.

'Competition is more intense than ever'

Whenever Bangladesh national team's performances go south, especially in the shorter formats, fingers are pointed at the quality, or lack thereof, of Dhaka-based domestic cricket. There are also a lot of questions regarding the fairness of the umpiring. Salahuddin Chowdhury, the new chairman of Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis, in a conversation with The Daily Star's Sabbir Hossain, spoke about how his committee is trying to mitigate the issues to improve the standard and acceptability of the leagues.

On the differences between the past and the present:

What I have seen while working here at CDM is that stakeholders try their best to make the Dhaka Premier League more competitive since it is the most followed 50-over cricket tournament in the country. So, we leave no stone unturned to make it more attractive. I don't want to make



any comparisons, however, I can say that now there is more scope for the players to be groomed and nurtured for the future. We are selecting the top players and transferring them to different age-groups and High Performance Unit.

On current season: The clubs want the league to be held on time every year as they invest a

lot of money. If the schedule becomes lengthy, their expenses increase. So, what we have done this year is we have made a compact schedule. There is much talk about the availability of the national team players, but we have to bear in mind that they are going to play a lot of games for Bangladesh this year, including the Asia Cup and the T20 World Cup. So, there is no scope of getting a suitable window for having them all before December.

However, the BPL might be held during that time. Having already completed the second division and the third division, we are running the first division while the DPL will start soon. It will make sure the cricket atmosphere prevails in the clubs.

On the role of unearthing new talents:

The DPL alone cannot serve the purpose of bringing out new talents for the national team. Many other programmes are going on. Around 1500 cricketers are playing in lower tiers. So, there is a huge field for the players to emerge through competitiveness as potential candidates for the future. Now the BCB is creating more opportunities for them to be nurtured through a coordinated effort. A lot of centuries were scored in the second and third divisions this season, which means players are performing and coming on the radar of selectors. Competition is more intense than ever.

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