

“To me it doesn’t matter whether it’s raining or the sun is shining or whatever: as long as I’m riding a bike, I know I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”

Mark Cavendish  
British pro racer



Cycling is one of the few sporting disciplines which has been a constant fixture in every Summer Olympic Games since the games resurrected in modern times in 1896. The discipline features multiple events, depending on the type of bicycle and the platform used for racing. Apart from the Olympics and other major multi-sport extravaganzas, cycling features prominently in world sporting calendar with glamorous events such as Tour de France and Giro d’ Italia. Hence, it’s safe to say cycling is a global sport which attract audiences worldwide. In Bangladesh, though, the situation is quite different. It is still more of an amateurish pursuit, mostly borne out of either the necessity to commute or as a healthy exercise. While there has been a few of waves in cycling in recent years among the urban youth, those waves have at best fetched a few Guinness records, but next to nothing on the professional circuit. Although there is a cycling federation active for the past five decades, most of its activities are confined within organising a national championship annually. Hamstrung by fund shortages and lack of infrastructure in the country, the federation has failed to produce any medal winner in regional platforms such as the South Asian Games, nevermind bigger platforms on a continental level. In this issue of the Weekly Sports Special, we focus on two individual cyclists who have pushed their passion for cycling to earn accolades against all odds.



# THE TRAILBLAZER

## taking Bangladesh cycling to new heights

29-year-old Rakibul Islam won a gold medal in the 30km individual time trial during this year’s 41st National Cycling Championship, following up on previous successes, including in the same event during the 9th Bangabandhu Bangladesh Games 2020. Hailing from a rural village in Rangpur’s Badarganj upazila, Rakibul was also champion in the Mujib 100 Years Duroto MTB Race in 2021 and holds a Guinness world record as part of the relay team that cycled the greatest distance in 48 hours (1670.33km) last year. The Daily Star’s Mostafa Shabuj caught up with the champion cyclist for an interview, the excerpts of which are below:

**The Daily Star (DS):** How did you start cycling? When did you realise cycling was a sport?  
**Rakibul Islam (RI):** Neither I nor my family ever wished that I would one day take up cycling as a profession. Before being admitted to Jahangirnagar University I did not know that cycling was a sport and could be taken up professionally. But I grew quite fond of cycling in my childhood.  
My father was a primary school teacher. I have three elder sisters, all good students. Therefore, there was a lot of pressure on me to be a good student too. My father had an old cycle, but I was not allowed to use it. One of my sisters secretly taught me how to cycle.  
When I was admitted to the Saidpur Cantonment Public School and College, which was 18 km from my village, I was allowed to use the old cycle to go between home and school. My father encouraged me, saying that we had to overcome financial constraints by becoming economical.  
Due to those constraints, I did not expect any luxuries. I used to see my sisters wear hand-me-down school dresses. They use to write on paper with a pencil first, then wrote over it with pens.  
After admission to the pharmacy department at Jahangirnagar University in 2010, I came to know that cycling was a sport. BDCyclists was an emerging cycling community in Dhaka at that time and I went to Dhaka only to see them train.  
In 2012, I bought a bicycle for the first time using the money I had saved up from tutoring jobs. I then joined the JU cyclists club and started training in the morning and evening with friends, teachers and kids. I later attended a cycling race for the first time, which was organised by BDCyclists in 2013.  
**DS:** You won a gold medal in the 41st National Cycling Championship recently, organised by the Bangladesh Cycling Federation (BCF). What was the story behind that?  
**RI:** I was the first cyclist from outside of a service team to win a gold medal in the BCF’s

41-year history. When I won a gold medal in the 2021 Bangladesh Games, the time gap between me and the next finisher was only 3 seconds. This time the finish was different. My competitor, who was second in the 41st National Cycling Championship, was one minute and 10 seconds behind me.  
I have always been well-prepared and that has kept me ahead of all other contestants. I was a pharmacist with a handsome salary at Evercare Hospital (Formerly Apollo Hospitals Dhaka) from 2017 to 2021. I left the job last August and went to the hilly areas in Khagrachari to practice because I had the upcoming events at home and abroad in sight.  
**DS:** What support does a cyclist need from family and others and what are the challenges they face?  
**RI:** First you need your family’s support. Cycling is a less popular game in Asia, even less in South Asia. So parents don’t want their children to take up cycling as a profession. Cycling as a sport is also expensive. The equipment you need for racing is not available in Bangladesh. A good quality racing cycle is around Tk 10 lakhs. I bought a mid-range cycle from abroad for Tk 4 lakhs. Speaking of challenges, I said before that families do not want their kids in cycling. The social collective mindset is to get a government or private job. You need a strong mentality to become involved in cycling because of societal expectations.  
Multinational companies doing business are not interested to invest in cycling as sponsors because it is not a popular sport in Bangladesh. They are keener to invest in cricket and football.  
We need good infrastructure, where we can practice and we need to arrange racing competitions. We don’t have a velodrome or cycling track in our country. We only have busy roads, where cycling is risky. We do not have good coaches either. But foreign coaches are always expensive.  
**DS:** How do you prepare for competitions?

**RI:** I always believe in discipline and hard work. I left my job to stay fit. I had to give my foreign coach over USD 1,000 over the past five months. I don’t have any coach now. I self-coach. I learn online and maintain modern structural training.  
**DS:** What is the overall scenario of Bangladesh cycling? What are its limitations?  
**RI:** Again, I have to say that cycling’s unpopularity in Bangladesh plays a role, even compared to other South Asian countries like India, Sri Lanka and Nepal.  
In the BCF, they don’t follow the modern protocols most south Asian countries follow. BCF has many limitations. They have no budget, no good coaches and no infrastructure. If the government invests a little money in cycling, we have a chance to get many medals from international events like the Powerman World Championship, Powerman Duathlon Asia Championship and Olympics.  
However, some community groups made positive impacts in the past 10 years. BDCyclist ran many campaigns and organised many events to make cycling popular as a mode of transport.  
We can find community cycling groups formed in every district town. They are the pioneers of community cycling in our country. In the past two-three years, social media and mainstream media have played a vital role to make cycling popular by covering our events. So, many youths now know cycling is a sport.  
**DS:** After leaving that handsome salary, how are you faring now?  
**RI:** I got my National Level Coaching Certification from India in 2022 and completed a Coaching Female Triathlete Course in Spain in 2022. I now work as a physical trainer, with clients from many corporate offices, and earn almost double what I made as a pharmacist. Many of the younger cyclists have also already started earning this way. It’s a new beginning.  
**DS:** What is your future target?  
**RI:** I am working hard to fly the nation’s flag in the international arena. My next target is to participate in the 2022 Powerman World Championship in Switzerland and the 2022 Powerman Duathlon Asia Championship in Malaysia.

## Shiuli Shabnam: A woman of many hats

MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Shiuli Shabnam is making a mark as one of the few female athletes competing at the top level of two different disciplines, while breaking barriers in the male-dominated sporting scene of the country.  
Competing both as a cyclist and as a runner in various competitions, the 35-year-old has carved out a growing reputation as a unique sporting personality. She has won a number of cycling events in the country while winning quite a few long distance running competitions.  
But the biggest satisfaction, she feels, comes from the fact that she is helping break barrier for women venturing into male-dominated sporting disciplines.  
It’s not been long since the Cox’s Bazar native started taking running and cycling seriously, but passion and commitment has pushed her to great lengths. Her passion for sporting activities and adventurism, though, goes a long way back.  
“I used to do hill trekking earlier. In 2018, when I travelled to West Bengal for trekking the highest mountain there, I had to do a lot of running. So, I thought why not start running too. Later, I started cycling, too, from passion and that’s how I became an athlete in two disciplines,” Shabnam said while talking to The Daily Star.  
A journalist by profession, Shabnam last month won a bronze medal in the 30km individual time trial event of the 41st National Cycling Championship after having won gold and silver medals in a number of cycling events over the past three years. She has also made at least 10 podium finishes in long-distance running over the same course of time.  
Her journey in sports has been met with opposition, but it has got her satisfaction nonetheless.  
“Cycling is still a male sport in our country. Therefore, when I started cycling, I faced criticism from family and society but my husband stood by my passion,” Shabnam, mother of one, recalled.  
While living in Chattogram, Shabnam’s tenants used to get a lot of complaints about her, especially for wearing tight dresses required for cycling training. But there was a positive side of the story, too, Shabnam revealed.  
“The same people started appreciating me when I won different competitions. So, I think the society will accept women in sports if they see us in sports more frequently.”  
When asked about the challenges as a female cyclist and runner she faced, Shabnam said, “The environment for women cyclists or runners is not yet friendly in our country. So, you would find very few women taking up cycling or running as sport. In different competitions, camps and during travels, I have to live and race with men in the same camp. And that is something that would discourage many parents to not allow their daughters into cycling or running.”  
Being a working mother, it’s not easy for the 35-year-old to find time to keep her passion ignited. “It’s very difficult for me in Dhaka. I have to wake up at around 4.30am and finish my practice by around 6.30am. Then I have to get my son prepared for his school. In the evening again, I practise cycling in my trainer’s house,” she said.  
Cycling is not just a sport for Shabnam, she also takes it as part of activism. It’s an opportunity for her to compete against men. If men get the opportunity in cycling and running, then women should too, opined Shabnam.  
With the dream of representing Bangladesh at international arena in cycling and running or in duathlon, Shabnam has one appeal to the government: “Patronise and activate local sports bodies to accommodate and encourage women, not just in cricket and football.”

