

**“The forward has to know how to do a lot of things, not only score goals. I can score a goal, but if I don't touch the ball in 90 minutes, that's a problem.”**

KARIM BENZEMA



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## ‘I JUST THANK GOD WHEN I GET A GOAL’

**Before coming to Bangladesh after signing for Chittagong Abahani, Nigerian forward Peter Thankgod Ebimobowei had played in Nigeria, Egypt, Cyprus, Qatar and Oman, learning his trade as a striker. In the Bangladesh Premier League, the 28-year-old has been prolific, accounting for nearly 60 per cent of port city outfit's 28 goals. The tall marksman's 16 goals from 15 matches see him top the goal-getter's list. The Nigerian revealed how he honed his goal-scoring abilities, his impression of Bangladesh and football in the nation and many other topics in an interview with The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman.**

**The Daily Star (DS):** What was your first impression of Bangladesh?  
**Peter Thankgod (PT):** My first impression was not bad. I learned a lot after coming here. I see some differences. The road management is different, but people here are good and friendly and have different lifestyles. What I have seen here is good.  
**DS:** You scored one goal apiece in the Independence Cup and Federation Cup, before hitting your stride in the league. What is the secret behind your goal-scoring prowess?  
**PT:** When I came here and played in the Independence Cup and Federation Cup, I tried to adapt to the system. In the league, I read how they play and rest. But there is no particular secret. As a striker, when the opportunity comes, you have to put the ball into the back of the net. I have just been putting the ball in the back of the net. That's what I am doing as a striker. There is no secret.  
**DS:** It can be tough to score in any football match, but you do it easily almost every time. Did you go through any special training to hone your goal-scoring abilities?  
**PT:** Yes, people say it is most difficult to put the ball into the back of the net. It is very, very difficult. My name is Thankgod, so I just give thanks to God when I get a goal. Sometimes I miss, but in a game the opportunity will come. If you are in the right position, you will be able to put the ball in the back of the net. When I started playing football in Nigeria, I became top scorer. Then I was signed by Al Ahly of Egypt, the biggest club in Africa. Later in



Nigeria, one coach gave me extra training. He told me I needed extra training because I needed to develop my hold-up play in the box. He also trained me to meet crosses with my head and legs so that made me concentrate more on the box to score goals.  
**DS:** You are now the BPL's top scorer with 16 goals. How confident are you that you will stay on top at the end of the league?  
**PT:** There may be two other players in the race but I don't want to see others. I just want to play in the rest of matches and I believe I will be the top scorer at the end of the league.  
**DS:** With only seven league matches left, how many more goals do you want to score?  
**PT:** Only Allah give goals. I can't speak about what I don't know and what I can't see. But as a striker, I just want to keep

doing my best. And hopefully goals will come.  
**DS:** You have been scoring regularly but Chittagong Abahani are fifth in the table. Do you have any regrets?  
**PT:** I don't feel any regret. I have been doing what a player does on the field and I feel proud to be a player of Chittagong Abahani.  
**DS:** How would you assess the Bangladesh Premier League?  
**PT:** I played in the Egyptian Premier League, which is a more competitive and tough. It is the same in Cyprus. Then I went to Oman and Qatar, where the games are more intense. Whenever you get the ball, someone is close to you. Those aspects are different, but the league in Bangladesh is good. The people play good football but the intensity is not like that. However, the games are competitive. A match you might think is easier turns out to be tougher, so football is really competitive here.  
**DS:** Are the club facilities in Bangladesh standard for a professional football league?  
**PT:** The league is good but you need some good pitches. You need more funds to share with every team. The beauty of football is when you see people coming and shouting in the field.  
**DS:** How do you rate Bangladeshi footballers?  
**PT:** I played against some good players. There are some good players in Dhaka Abahani and a few other clubs. I think the national coach knows the best of all. I can't speak about all the players, but I saw some good players here.

## Training the key to Robinho's success

ANISUR RAHMAN

Robson Robinho was one of the major architects behind Bashundhara Kings' domestic double in his debut season in Bangladesh football, scoring 24 goals. This year, too, the Brazilian forward is leading the side from front, having scored 11 goals in 15 matches to stay in third position in the, five behind top-scorer Peter Thankgod of Chittagong Abahani.  
 While Robson would love to finish as the top-scorer again, Robson is more focused on helping his team win the league title after missing out on the other two domestic trophies as well as a disappointing AFC Cup campaign.  
 “Of course, I would like to be the top scorer in the league again, but first focus is to be champions and then I can think about the top-scorer,” Robson recently told The Daily Star. “We will put our full focus on the league and we will continue our work game by game, this is how we can win the title.”  
 “There's no secret for me in helping the team getting goals. I always train a lot so that in the game I can do what I do in training,” said the forward, adding, “As I always said we have the best local players in the country and with the work of the coaches, we were able to have a good first phase of the league.”  
 It is believed that the intensity of the Bangladesh premier league matches is less than some of the other top leagues in the region, a reason why the Bangladeshi players fail to keep up against opposition teams in international matches.  
 “International competition is much more intense than [Bangladesh] league matches because in league we lose a lot of game time, and in international competition the ball is always on the field and players do not take too long to charge the full back or the goalkeeper taking the time to kick the ball,” observed Robinho.



## Beneath the surface of local strikers' struggles

“I have always said that scoring a goal is the best feeling in the world,” legendary English striker Alan Shearer once said. In football, where goals decide destinies, it is a striker's role to deliver balls to the back of the net. Strikers often lead attacks, celebrate in flamboyant fashion and are the ‘face’ of their team. Although football is a team sport, no position is as respected as that of a goal-scorer. Ask any child what position they want to play, and they are likely to reply: “STRIKER!”. But what does it take to be a striker? Many say confidence, technical ability, awareness, composure, movement on and off the ball, communication and discipline shape what ultimately is known as a striker's killer instinct. To grow such instincts, it is often said that a great foundation is a pre-requisite. From Bangladesh's perspective, however, the nation has suffered on the international stage in the past decades due to the absence of instinctive strikers Alfaz Ahmed – one of the last Bangladeshis that belonged to that breed of strikers alongside contemporaries like Rokonuzzaman Kanchan, Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib and others – shared his concerns regarding the scarcity of lethal finishers in Bangladesh in an interview with The Daily Star's Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq. The excerpts are below:

**The Daily Star (DS):** What are your thoughts on Bangladesh's recent performances in the Asian Cup Qualifiers?  
**Alfaz Ahmed (AA):** The difference in the standard of football was clear. They are ahead of us in many aspects of the game. Bangladesh football has seen a lot of change off the pitch in recent times. For instance, changes to coaches and the squad. So they are having a tough time adjusting to the process. Although there were some glimpses of good football, our finishing totally let us down.  
**DS:** Speaking of finishing, we saw some great goal-scoring Bangladeshis during your era at both club and national level. But nowadays we see foreigners dominate at the club level while local strikers warm the bench. Why is that happening?  
**AA:** I think it has to do with the mentality of club authorities. You won't see them bringing foreign players for positions other than striker. There are clubs that bring more than one foreign striker and derive locals of opportunity and game-time. When young strikers do well at age-level, they get called to professional clubs. But



after making it that far, they don't get opportunities or game time because clubs prefer to play foreigners.  
**DS:** Is that because of a disparity in skill?  
**AA:** If a player is not getting game time, how can you expect him to gain skills? Sure, you can shoot a ball into the net 100 times in practice. But if you don't have the experience of scoring for your team in a difficult scenario, how will you be prepared for higher levels and the national team? Being a striker doesn't only mean knowing how to shoot on target, but also having game awareness, movement on and off the ball, positioning, first touch and great understanding with your teammates. But if opportunities are not afforded, how will a striker gain such qualities? As we can see,

most national-team strikers are acquired by big clubs like Bashundhara Kings and Abahani. But those clubs play their foreign strikers more often in the league. So you see foreign strikers topping the goal-scoring charts every year. If local strikers are not gaining experience at the club level, can we keep asking why they fail to score for the national team?  
**DS:** Given the current situation, what should a striker do to become better?  
**AA:** I think strikers should work on a lot of mental aspects. There are multiple issues. First, there are many strikers who change their positions just because they don't get enough game time up front. But severing the head is not a solution for a headache. A striker should

work hard and fight for his place on the team. You can only get better if you compete with someone better than you. If you think foreign strikers are better, you should try your best to outdo them. If you need game time, go to a smaller club, work hard, get more game time and score more goals. That will not only give you confidence, but you will also gain more experience as a striker and hone that goal-scoring instinct. If you're happy sitting on the bench at a big club, you will never improve as a striker.  
**DS:** You're currently coaching at an academy. What do you teach the kids who aspire to be strikers?  
**AA:** A good foundation is very important at every position. Whether someone wants to be a striker or a midfielder, fundamentals are very important. Things such as those I've mentioned earlier – game awareness, movement on and off the ball, positioning and first touch – should be taught to strikers during their developmental stage. It's not just in my academy, there are many academies around the country with licensed coaches that produce great strikers.  
 That may sound promising for the future, but there is a big gap. There are a lot of tournaments held every year for Under-14 and U-17 teams. Those who do well in the U-14s are promoted and do well in the U-17s and at both club and district level. But you hardly see U-19 or U-21 tournaments, which is a crucial stage when any footballer develops for the elite level. Due to this gap, many footballers drop out. And those who make it in professional clubs fall behind foreign strikers. Football is also very Dhaka-centric at the league level, so many aspiring players from outside the capital miss out on opportunities.  
**DS:** So what could the process of solving Bangladesh's goal-scoring conundrum look like in the long run?  
**AA:** See, the lack of strikers has created another problem. Those who are currently in the national team have started to take their positions for granted because of a lack of competition for places. This sort of mentality will only destroy a player in the long run. Back in our day, there was intense competition for the national team's No. 9 position. There were players like Nakib, Mijanur Rahman and Rokonuzzaman Kanchan alongside me and we used to work hard all the time for a place in the starting eleven. This sort of mentality is missing today.