

“I don’t run away from a challenge because I am afraid. Instead, I run toward it because the only way to escape fear is to trample it beneath your feet.”

Nadia Comaneci
A 5-time Olympic gold medalist



Gymnastics’ flame flickers

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The BGF president Bashir Ahmed Mamun

ANISUR RAHMAN

When it comes to the country’s gymnastics, Bangladeshi descent Margarita Mamun has perhaps been the lone consolation amid Bangladesh’s never-ending failure in the Olympic Games and, at the same time, she has likely been the sole source of inspiration for the country’s gymnasts.

Mamun had been one of the finest Russian gymnasts to win an Olympic gold medal but Bangladesh are light years away from even securing an Olympic medal.

A dearth of quality gymnasts and lack of infrastructure allow little room for optimism although USA-based gymnast Syque Caesar once had given a glimpse of hope before fading away around eight years ago.

However, the country’s gymnastics has recently hit the headlines following a few age-level international successes in Singapore. The success stories involve an

Australian-born Bangladeshi gymnast and the appointment of a high-profile foreign coach.

Since the start of gymnastics in 1972, it has never been a widely practiced sport in Bangladesh compared to any other discipline and has been, more often than not, out of all attention.

Once Dinaipur, Mymensingh, Khulna, Barishal and BUET produced gymnasts to keep the local circuit alive. Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protisthan (BKSP) also came forward by opening the discipline in 1991 but the sport could never hog the spotlight.

And despite being an Olympic discipline, gymnastics has never been included in the SAF (South Asian Federation) Games – now known as SA Games – since its inaugural edition in 1984 to the latest one in 2019. Many believe this non-inclusion to be the main reason behind the lack of interest even from the government, who allocates only Tk 12 lakh to the federation per year.

The total number of active gymnasts in Bangladesh is composed of 55 senior players including 17 females, 40 junior players and around 150 age-group players.

The gymnasts also don’t have any permanent venue to practice regularly as the national players practice in the makeshift venue at the National Sports Council gymnasium, which is also used by three disciplines.

However, an unlikely source in Quantum Cosmo School, an educational and sports institute for underprivileged children in Bandarban, gave a ray of hope to the Bangladesh Gymnastics Federation (BGF) by producing quality gymnasts for the past decade or so.

And those gymnasts have already brought some laurels from junior events at the Singapore Open while representing the

national team and their success virtually drove the BGF to set a lofty goal of winning the medals in the Asian and Olympics Games.

They also appointed an Olympic gold-winning coach in Cho Sung Dong from Korea.

“As there is a huge difference in quality between the local and foreign coaches, we roped in a high-profile coach for a long-term plan,” the BGF president Bashir Ahmed Mamun told The Daily Star.

“First we want to create some international gymnasts, who can directly qualify for Olympics with their own merit and play the top-eight round because any top-eight gymnast usually has the ability to win a medal.”

In a bid to create a global image of Bangladesh gymnastics, the BGF is also providing support to Australia-born Bangladeshi gymnast Ali Kader Haque in New Zealand. And the 19-year-old is paying back with his progress.

“We are partially helping Ali Kader by bearing some costs of his international participation and his personal coach. By his participation at the international tournaments, the international judges will know the name of Bangladesh and we will not be a victim of the disadvantage that involved Syque Caesar during the Asian Games in 2014, I think,” said Mamun, also a renowned businessman, adding that they need a permanent venue to deliver good results.

Asked if it is possible to shine at the international level with a shortage of gymnasts, the BGF general secretary and former national gymnast Ahmedur Rahman said: “As it is an individual game, one quality player is good enough to get international success.”



Prenthoi fixated on Olympics dream

Prenthoi Mro, one of the 11 selected male gymnasts to train under the recently-appointed coach Cho Sung Dong, shared his experience of training under the Korean coach and his ambitions for the sport with The Daily Star’s Ashfaq Ul Mushfiq. The Excerpts of the interview are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): How did your journey start?

Prenthoi Mro (PM): In our locality of Bandarban, there is a Quantum Foundation program. Over there, we had access to various sporting activities alongside our education. I was very young when they introduced gymnastics and slowly I started from there.

DS: How is the training going so far under new coach?

PM: It has been very good. Before his arrival, it took us a long time to learn the difficult skills, but now we have become very quick learners under him.

DS: Is there any difference in the training schedule after his arrival?

PM: The duration of the training is very similar. However, the main difference is we are doing the higher-level drills, which didn’t do much in the past because we found them tough to accomplish.

DS: Is there any change in your individual performance under new coach?

PM: Previously, my style of gymnastics was very messy. I could pull off some maneuvers but my form was poor. Thanks to the coach, my form and display have significantly improved.

DS: Any improvements in diet and nutrition?

PM: Yes, we have reduced the amount of rice in our meal and increased vegetables

and fish or meats. Previously, we used to eat more rice, which eventually made us more tired. Now despite eating fewer amounts, more protein and vegetables allow us to perform for a longer period.

DS: Is ‘Vaulting’ also a part of your training?

PM: No, due to the lack of space, we are unable to practice vaulting for the time



being.

DS: What is your favourite event?

PM: My favourite event is ‘Parallel’ because I can do it faster and with better form than the other events in gymnastics.

DS: The federation and new coach set a target with the 2026 Asian Games and the Olympics. Do you think it’s possible?

PM: What I want to say is we need collective effort to make this come true. We need efforts from the gymnasts, coaches, and federation altogether to make this dream a reality. If we had more space and facilities to train, we could improve a lot more and win medals in the international tournaments.

We believe in ourselves and we were taught in the quantum foundation that “I can, I will”, and now with the new coach, this belief only amplifies.

DS: Unlike the major games, in Bangladesh, gymnastics doesn’t ensure much financial security for the future. Are you worried about this scenario?

PM: We all are here with one fixed mindset. And that is to play at the Olympics. What may happen in the future does make us concerned sometimes, but we don’t allow that to distract us from our main goal.

DS: Bangladesh is yet to win a single Olympics medal as so far we only emphasised on participation. What’s your individual goal?

PM: When I was younger, my goals were scattered, from becoming a doctor to other stereotypes. But after coming to gymnastics, I started dreaming about playing in the Olympics. I hope to win team and individual gold medals in the Asian games and progress to the Olympics gradually.

‘It’s troubling to juggle all these expectations’

Ali Kader Haque, born in Australia and living with his family in New Zealand, became the second expatriate gymnast to represent Bangladesh on the international arena after US-born Syque Caesar. Although Caesar won Bangladesh’s first gold medal in gymnastics, he could not shine on bigger stages like the Olympics and Asian Games. There are now hopes that 19-year-old Haque, who underlined his potential by grabbing four gold medals in age-group international competitions before delivering a silver medal at a senior competition this year, can change that as the Bangladesh Gymnastics Federation aims take the sport to new heights. Haque spoke about his love for his homeland, his ambitions and the weight of expectations during an interview with The Daily Star’s Anisur Rahman.

The Daily Star (DS): How are your preparations for the upcoming Birmingham Commonwealth Games? What do you hope to achieve in your second appearance in a senior international competition for Bangladesh?

Ali Kader Haque (AKH): Preparations are going well. I am having trouble juggling work and studies alongside training but I am doing my best and it is paying off in the gym. I am slowly feeling more confident and prepared. I aim to go out and do my best. No matter what result I achieve, if I tried my hardest then I have done myself and others proud.

DS: Bangladesh gymnastics appeared to be going nowhere but there are hopes that you can do something on bigger stages. Do those expectations align with your dreams?

AKH: I find it troubling having to juggle all these expectations, but I try my best to just focus on training and enjoy the process. As long as I do that, I will achieve the best result possible, even if it doesn’t measure up to other people’s expectations.

DS: How is the Bangladesh Gymnastics Federation helping you?

AKH: I had lots of support and encouragement from the BGF. I have been given funding for training equipment as well as to compete at the recent Singapore Open, which gave me useful experience on the international stage.



DS: Since 2019, you have represented Bangladesh in the 5th Junior Budapest Cup, the 16th and 17th Singapore Open and the Junior World Cup. How does it feel to represent your homeland?

AKH: I couldn’t wear the flag with more honour. I feel proud and grateful that I made my father’s sacrifice of moving away from his family worthwhile.

DS: You grew up in New Zealand with better training facilities compared to Bangladesh. Why did you choose to represent Bangladesh at the international level despite having the opportunity to represent New Zealand after good results in the national gymnastics championships in New Zealand?

AKH: To make my father and family proud. I found it hard to connect with my culture because I was living in New Zealand. I thought that competing for Bangladesh would be the perfect opportunity for me to have a better understanding as well as being something I could do for my family.

DS: We know coach David Michael Colvin has had a significant role in your development. But what sort of influence have your parents Akramul Haque and Nicky Jenkins had?

AKH: They supported me through everything. I have had various injuries throughout my career and every time they paid for physios or surgeries. They let me keep training and working to get back to competing. They have done so much and were the catalysts to my success.

DS: What drove you to become a gymnast and how long do you spend training?

AKH: My favourite part of gymnastics is the feeling of power. Being able to flip and land successfully is a unique skill that I absolutely love. My love for the sport is the biggest driving force.

DS: Do you have any favourite events?

AKH: My favourite event is floor exercise. I value the flipping part of gymnastics and power more. Past injuries also make other events like pommel horse harder to train for, so floor exercise is my favourite.

DS: Some may not know that your career was threatened after an unexpected accident that led to you dislocating your elbow and chipping your ulna bone. Would you tell us briefly about the rehabilitation process?

AKH: I was so young that I did not realise how badly damaged my elbow was. I spent six weeks in a cast and months rehabilitating, waiting for the strength to return to my arm and trying to straighten it. Even now it still doesn’t straighten all the way, which puts extra pressure on it when I am on floor exercise or pommel horse. It has been and will continue to be a problem that I have to manage in order to keep training to the best of my abilities.

DS: What is your ultimate target?

AKH: My biggest goal was the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, so that has been my focus for a long time. After this I will have to see, but Worlds and Olympics are in the back of my mind.