

From childhood heartbreak to fulfilling a nation's dream

MIRZA SHAKIL

On what was a regular afternoon, a little girl growing up in a poverty-stricken background only insisted on playing her favourite game of football. Her mother, though, under continuous pressure from the surrounding community, took a knife and resorted to puncturing her favourite toy, a football in this case, right in front of those innocent, teary eyes.

The girl in this story is none other than Krishna Rani Sarkar, who became the darling of the nation as her two splendid strikes ensured Bangladesh's victory against Nepal in the final of the just-concluded SAFF Women's Championship.

Krishna made her international debut in 2013 for the U-14s and she played in Under-16, 18, and 19 teams before featuring in the senior team. Under her captaincy in the AFC U-16 Women's Championship Qualifier in 2016, Bangladesh fought on level terms against heavyweights like Iran, Chinese Taipei, Kyrgyzstan, Singapore, and Krishna had led from the front by netting eight goals.

Asked about the lengths taken to stop Rani playing football, Krishna's mother Namita Rani Sarkar said: "What else could I have done? I couldn't control myself because of the constant taunts from the neighbours and the uncertainty surrounding the future of my daughter and my family."

Ever since a four-year-old Krishna started playing football with local girls and boys in a playground next to her house, she was under the scanner of a certain conservative section among the neighbours. She, however, did well academically as the test results placed her among the top students from grade first to fifth, but that did little to dilute the prevalent taboo against girls pursuing sporting excellence.

Krishna is not the only one to face such harsh social stigma. Most of her teammates, too, had to struggle a lot in the beginning after having decided to take up the sport of their choice. However, success is known to dramatically transform attitudes. Now, the same neighbours are heaping praises towards Krishna, with people converging from all over the country to see her.

Earlier in 2016, Krishna and the Under-16's sensational success had seen her birthplace Gopalpur upazila in Tangail come under the spotlight. And after Bangladesh women's maiden SAFF title triumph, the focus on the remote northern Pathalia village of around three hundred families is set to scale several notches further.

Krishna's mother is singing happy tunes at present. "Now things have changed and those neighbours and villagers are now coming to my house and expressing their joy and pride in my daughter's success."

It is worth mentioning that after Krishna's mother had punctured that football in anger, it was Krishna's uncle Gaur Chandra Sarkar who bought her a new football and kept the flame of aspirations alive.

Krishna acknowledged the roles of her father Basudev Sarkar, maternal uncle, primary school teacher Saim-al-Mamun, and high school teacher Golam Raihan Bapan in playing pivotal roles during her developmental phase.

"Among them, Bapan sir not only inspired me, he actually made me a footballer," Krishna said.

"The girls are playing football and doing well now. But girls who are aspiring footballers need support from parents, relatives, and neighbours," she added.

Neighbour Saiful Islam informed before Krishna's success, almost no one from outside the village came to the area. "We are thrilled upon seeing Krishna's success. She let us hold our heads high in front of others," he said.



Bangladesh women's football team members Sanjida Akhter (L) and Maria Manda browse through clothes at a shopping mall in Kathmandu on Tuesday, the day after they claimed their maiden SAFF Women's Championship title beating Nepal 3-1 in the final. The players and coaching staff, who spent a day of relaxation and celebration, will return to the country this afternoon.

PHOTO: BFF

Salahuddin sets sights on Asian level

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) president Kazi Salahuddin said he wants the victorious SAFF champions to give 60 per cent more effort in their endeavour to challenge at the Asian level. He said this during a press briefing at the BFF House on Tuesday, the day after the women's team clinched their maiden SAFF title by beating Nepal 3-1 in the final in Kathmandu.

Salahuddin said he wants the players to forget about the past and look towards the future with more determination.

"Once they come, I'll tell them that they've done extremely well to emerge as champions but to forget that and look forward. You will have to work harder to move forward because the others will try to surpass you. You will get gifts and monetary rewards. But you will have to go back to work after a few days of rest. Or else you will remain as one-time wonders," Salahuddin told reporters, adding that he had expected the success to come one or two years later, but felt the team fully deserved the success.

"There are many matches in Asian level in coming days. We will arrange the money needed for these matches. The team will have to work 60 per cent harder in training. Our target now will be to catch up with the ASEAN teams, or else we will fall



back," Salahuddin said.

Speaking about BFF's plans in making that transition from South Asia to the continental level, the head of local football's governing body said it partially depended on receiving fund from the government.

"We have already asked for an increased budget for men's and women's football to the sports ministry so that the teams can play international matches in all FIFA windows. Otherwise, we won't improve in FIFA ranking," Salahuddin said. "If we get the fund, we can go ahead with a specific calendar regarding which teams we would play against."

The BFF president also explained his reasoning behind not being in Kathmandu with the team for the final and his plan of skipping the reception at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on Wednesday.

"I felt my presence there might put the girls under pressure to perform. As the president of SAFF, my duty

was to hand over the trophy to the winning team, but I felt my team's wellbeing comes first before my responsibility as SAFF chief," Salahuddin said. "If I go to the airport, media might look for my comments which would deprive the team of the limelight they so much deserve. This is the moment for these girls. They deserve all the limelight. Let's focus on them tomorrow. Don't steal her [their] thunder."

The BFF boss hoped that this success will drive a wave of enthusiasm in women's football at the grassroots level. "There will definitely be an impact. When we called the parents of these players initially, they had very little earning. But due to football, those families now have TV sets, mobile phones, bank, balance, etc. The reception that BFF and the sports ministry will accord tomorrow [Wednesday] will get more girls and more families interested in football."

'I'm proud to be their childhood coach'

SPORTS REPORTER

Shanti Moni Chakma, the childhood coach of SAFF Women's Championship-winning players like Rupna Chakma, Monika Chakma, Ritu Porna Chakma, Anuching Mogini and Anai Mogini, could not contain his emotions after Bangladesh finished as undefeated champions in Kathmandu on Monday.

"They were very little when they came to learn football. I tried my best to train them, but I never thought they would make it this far. They learned the basics from me and are now bringing laurels to the nation and enhancing the country's image. I can't forget the endless labour I provided for them. I really feel proud to have been their childhood coach. Sometime, I get lost in that joy," Shanti told The Daily Star over phone from



Rangamati yesterday.

Goalkeeper Rupna Chakma yesterday phoned Shanti from Kathmandu to inquire what he made of her performance while he himself reached out to Ritu Porna before the final.

"Today [Tuesday] Rupna asked me over the phone, 'Kakai (uncle) how did I perform in the final?'. I replied that she and the others performed well. I also phoned Ritu before the final and advised her to stay confident and play without fear," the 37-year-old said.

It is not that the coach and students only speak during big occasions, those five students regularly phone Shanti on the weekends and whenever they can make time.

Shanti coached the Moghachori Primary School — with a team featuring the likes of

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Shanti Moni Chakma

Monika, Anai and Anuching — to the title of the maiden Bangamata Primary School Gold Cup in 2011. He later coached Rupna and Ritu.

At present, some 40 students of Ghagra High School train under Shanti but although a lot of the social stigma surrounding women playing football has eroded, the facilities there are insufficient.

"Guardians once expressed fear, some thought we would traffic their children. Such concepts do not exist anymore. Now, guardians willingly bring their children for training," Shanti, who played in the Chittagong Premier League, said.

"The former headmaster of Ghagra High School provided all the necessary support, including accessories and food, but now there are no such benefits," Shanti added.

Shanti also informed the district administration gave Tk 1.5 lakh each to the families of Rupna and Ritu Chakma yesterday following their triumph.



Germany's Thomas Muller and Jamal Musiala share a light moment during their training session at the DFB Campus in Frankfurt ahead of their UEFA Nations League encounter against Hungary next Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Teams get chance to tune up before WC

AFP, Paris

A hectic schedule of club football ahead of the World Cup is interrupted this week as national teams get a last chance to finetune their preparations before travelling to Qatar for the start of the tournament on November 20.

Extra importance is therefore placed on events over the next week, as European sides complete the UEFA Nations League group stage while other contenders play friendly matches, including back-to-back games for Brazil on French soil against Ghana and Tunisia.

Reigning world champions France are preparing to defend the crown they won in Russia in 2018 while simultaneously trying to avoid being relegated from the top tier of the Nations League. They need wins against Austria and Denmark.

Like France, England suffered a series of poor results in June and so realistically need to win both of their games against Italy and Germany to avoid relegation to League B.

Spain and Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal will warm up for the World Cup by meeting in Braga on September 27 in a game that could decide which of the Iberian neighbours advances to the Nations League finals next June.

Meanwhile, fresh from signing a new four-year deal, Wales manager Robert Page has named Los Angeles FC's Gareth Bale in his squad for games against Belgium and Poland.