

SPORT



2022 IN REARVIEW

The maiden SAFF Women's Championship title was undoubtedly the biggest success story from the sports arena for Bangladesh in 2022. In an otherwise success-deprived sporting atmosphere, the triumph of the women footballers galvanised the whole nation and set off massive celebrations across the country, which continued for days. It was also a rare moment of limelight for the nation's football officials, who find it hard to grab headlines due to the decadence of football in general, and when they do, they often get it for the wrong reasons. Cricket, the nation's most popular sport though, was always on focus, for reasons right and wrong. While there were a lot of controversies regarding cricketers and cricket administrations, the performance on the field was a bit of a respite, especially when compared to the lows which the sport had hit in the previous year. The year also saw the coming of age of players like Liton Das, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Taskin Ahmed and Ebadot Hossain, with Liton especially excelling as both a player and a leader. Other sports in the country did not generate too many talking points even though the successful floating of the first franchise hockey league in the country breathed fresh air into the sport and injected some much-needed financial incentive for the hockey players.

Girls hoist the flag of BANGLADESH FOOTBALL



ANISUR RAHMAN

The country's domestic football in 2022 was much more vibrant compared to any season in the past. All football competitions, from Bangladesh Premier League to Pioneer Football League alongside youth competitions of professional and semi-professional clubs, took place smoothly. Sadly though, the positives of those competitions were hardly reflected at the international level, however, on the bright side, the SAFF Women's Championship triumph was the glaring exception.

The national men's football team are still searching for solid ground to keep their feet at the international level. The men in red and green could notch only one victory out of eight international matches they played in 2022 under new head coach Javier Cabrera – appointed early this year following short regimes of two interim coaches since the termination of English coach Jamie Day last year.

The wages of male footballers in the domestic circuit have been going up every season, with top footballers reportedly getting paid nearly one crore taka, but the booters remained lacklustre at the international circuit. Five defeats including a 3-1 defeat at the hands of sub-continent rivals Nepal is a testament to the subpar performances of Cabrera's charges.

The successors of the senior men's team also frustrated in four international tournaments in 2022 – SAFF U-17 and U-20 Championships, AFC U-17 and U-20 Championship Qualifiers – despite the BFF Elite Academy's players having undergone a grooming process since September last year.

However, the women's team rocked the nation with their scintillating performances. They broke the dominance of five-time champions India and four-time runners-up Nepal in SAFF Women's Championship in September and were able to write a great

chapter in Bangladesh women's football history, which started its journey just over a decade ago.

The achievement was far from a fluke as the SAFF glory was in the making for a long time. It has been a continuation of their successes they achieved at international age-group competitions. Finishing runners-up in both SAFF Women's U-15 and U-17 Championships in 2022 were indications of the progress of the girls, who had been defying heavy odds on their way to the peak.

The massive enthusiasm in the capital, and elsewhere, upon the return of the team from Nepal was evidence of the unconditional love that Bangladeshis have towards football. The game's local governing body, however, yet again failed to protect the country's football from the curse of online betting, spot-fixing, match-manipulation, and more.

Uttar Baridhara Club, an outfit of top-tier Bangladesh Premier League, faced the consequences while Karwan Bazar Pragati Sangha, an outfit of second-tier Bangladesh Championship League, were penalised for their involvement in illegal activities. They were relegated to the first and third division football league, respectively.

The BFF management once again shown its incompetence in handling the finances of foreign coaches as FIFA, in October, ordered the BFF to clear unpaid wages, reportedly worth 86,000 US dollars, to Jamie Day. In 2016, BFF had to clear unpaid wages and compensation worth 80,000 euros to Dutch coach Rene Koster as per FIFA's instructions.

To conclude on a positive note, the BFF deserves a lot of credit for organising almost all competitions in the 2021-22 season since the country's football fraternity had demanded for years that all domestic competitions get rolled properly, in an attempt to provide room for budding footballers to groom up from the grassroots.

The year Liton came through on the long-overdue promise

NABID YEASIN

Ever since Liton Das made his international debut in a Test against India back in 2015, the common sentiment, especially from within the team management, has been that he is a player with a ton of potential to flourish.

Years passed as Liton turned into a more seasoned player with his bag of experience enriching but the promise of his flourishing was still just that – a promise.

Sure, there were instances of brilliance when those mesmerising strokeplays combined and culminated into milestones and landmarks for the aesthetically pleasing wicketkeeper-batter, but those only deepened the frustration of seeing Liton still unable to leave a more substantial mark in Bangladesh's cricketing landscape and even in the global stage as consistency was hard to come by for the 28-year-old.

But the year 2022 proved to be Liton's year. All the expectation surrounding the exquisite right-hander, which often put him under pressure and at the receiving end of the sticks from the critics and the media, started to finally materialise with Liton slowly living up to his billing and gradually transforming himself into a prospective leader of Bangladesh cricket for years to come.

And even though Liton left it a bit late to come through on the promise made, his emergence as one of the consistent performers for Bangladesh could not have come at a better time – with stalwarts Mushfiqur Rahim and Tamim Iqbal already retiring from T20Is the year after Mahmudullah Riyad hung up his whites in 2021.

This year, Liton, in 50 innings in 42 matches across formats, scored 1921 runs at an average of 40.02. He remains only behind the year's leading run-scorer in

all formats, Pakistan's Babar Azam, who scored 2584 runs in 51 innings.

Also, three of Liton's eight centuries in international cricket came this year.

Aside from racking up the numbers to aid his stats, Liton also impacted when it mattered the most. He was one of the star performers for Bangladesh during their most historic Test win, against New Zealand at Mount Maunganui, in January this year. Liton's 86-run knock on way to a 158-run stand with Mominul Haque gave the Tigers the stability they usually look for in the middle order.



Following that historic eight-wicket victory, Bangladesh were thrashed by an innings and 117 runs in the second Test in Christchurch. But Liton still managed to stand out in that game, scoring his second Test ton in the second innings to reduce the degree of humiliation for the Tigers.

Alongside being the top run-getter in both ODI and T20I series during Afghanistan's tour of Bangladesh in February-March, Liton was picked as the most impactful player by cricinfo with 115.58 impact points.

When the chips were down and the Tigers were pushed to a corner, losing five for 24 inside just seven overs of a Test

against Sri Lanka at home in May, Liton once again came through for Bangladesh as he stitched a record 272-run sixth-wicket stand with Mushfiqur Rahim.

He remained instrumental in Bangladesh's historic ODI series win over South Africa – first time that the Tigers won a series away from home against the Proteas – in March and also in the series sweep of the Windies in the Caribbean in July.

It was Liton's brisk 27-ball 60 against India that almost paved way for Bangladesh's maiden semifinal berth in the T20 World Cup in a campaign where the Tigers had their best-ever showing in the marquee event with two wins in the main phase for the first time ever, that too after overcoming some turmoil and sudden changes in the leadership just prior to the tournament in Australia.

With Tamim sidelined due to injury, Liton showed that he has what it takes to take on the baton when he led the Tigers to their second ODI series win over India at home in December.

It is only a testament to Liton's consistency and the faith shown in him by the team management that the right-handed wicketkeeper-batter saw the year close with something that any modern cricketer craves – an Indian Premier League contract. With Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) swooping in for the 28-year-old's services, the year 2023 is set to see Bangladesh's highest representation in the money-spinning franchise league – Shakib went back to KKR to join Liton and Mustafizur Rahman was already retained by the Delhi Capitals.

After all these years, with Liton finally finding his feet in the international arena in the true sense, the hopes will be that he can only keep on maintaining the upward trajectory the coming year, especially in order to help the Tigers explore the uncharted in their most favoured format when the ODI World Cup returns in October-November in India.

