

Unheralded Aklima outshines Sabina, Krishna

SPORTS REPORTER

For playing football with boys, Aklima Khatun once hid herself to avoid scolding from her father – Mizanur Rahman, a farmer. She even waited outside the home for her father to leave before having a meal.

The girl from Bagerhat, now 18-year-old, has left that past behind. She is enjoying playing football in the domestic circuit as well as representing Bangladesh age-group teams at the international level.

In the recently concluded women's football league, Aklima outshone big names – the likes of national strikers Sabina Khatun, Krishna Rani Sarker, and Sirat Jahan Swapna. She became top-scorer with 25 goals from nine matches to help Ataur Rahman Bhuiyan College Sporting Club finish runners-up.

"I never expected I could be the top-scorer among the senior players who have vast experience," Aklima told the reporters after their last match against ultimate champions Bashundhara Kings on Thursday.

Sabina, who was last season's top-scorer with 35 goals, was the second top-scorer with 19 goals followed by Krishna – the top-scorer of 2019-20 season with 22 goals – who netted 12 goals this season.

"I think I could have scored more if I got the opportunity to play two more matches, where I could not participate due to injury," said the BKSP student, who represented Bangladesh U-18 team in the SAFF U-18 Women's Championship early this year. There she struck three goals in four matches in Jamshedpur, India.

The forward now looks ahead to secure a place in the senior national women's team by performing well in February's SAFF U-20 Women's Championship at home.

"The SAFF U-20 Women's Championship is going to start in February, on Feb 03, at home and I am hoping to carry this performance to the tournament. If I can perform better for the U-20 team, then I will have an opportunity to secure a place in the senior national team," said Aklima who was also part of a winning team of BKSP in 2019 Subrata Cup in India.

The lanky forward started playing football alongside boys in the playground adjacent to her home – located within the Mithakhali village of Monga, Bagerhat. She risked playing the game by going against her father's order but now she is an important player of Bangladesh age group team.

However, his father admitted Aklima to BKSP in 2017 after she took part in Bangamata Gold Cup Primary School tournament in 2015.

"When my father first saw me playing football with boys, he got angry and I went somewhere to hide in order to avoid him. I came back to the playground after he left the area," Aklima recalled. "I often wasn't served food because of playing football and I took my meal when my father left home."

Aklima smiles and informs that her father now gets angry if she doesn't eat on time or doesn't go to the training while on vacation.

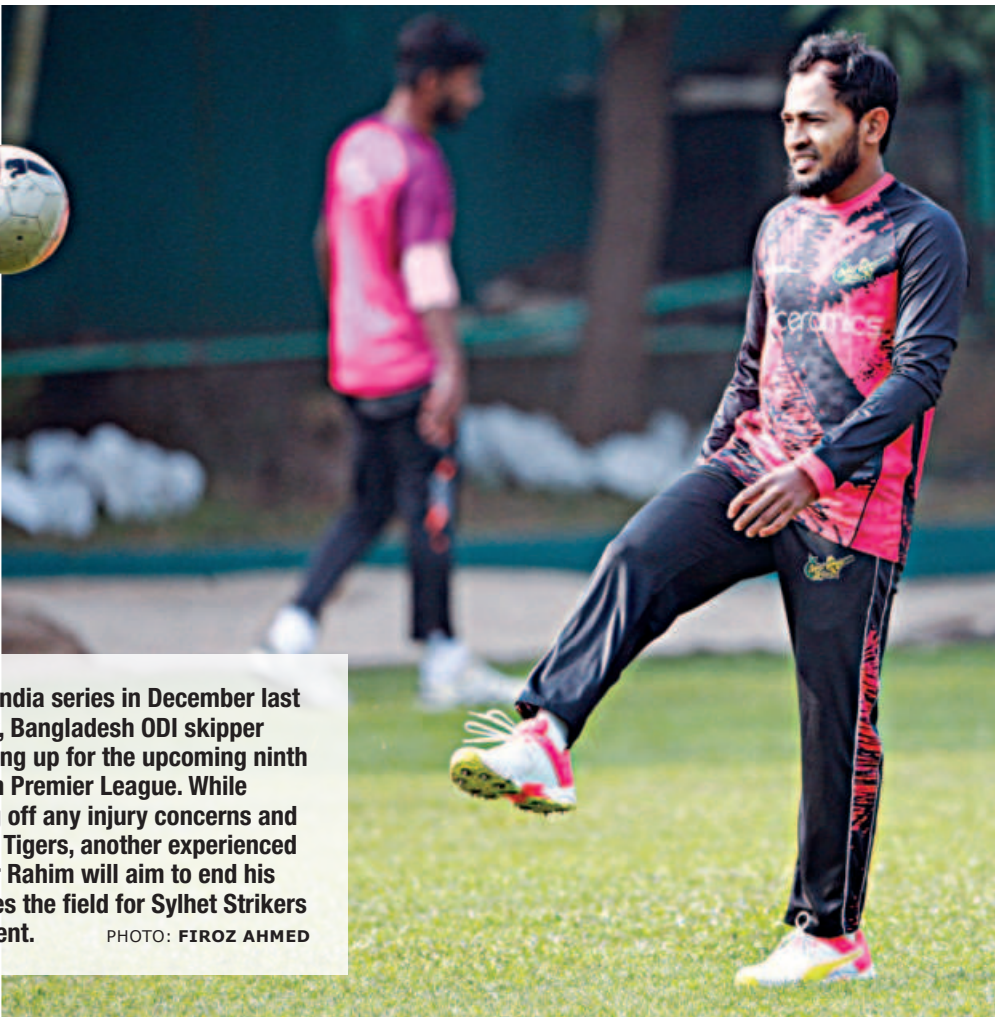
National striker and captain Sabina also praised Aklima.

"I want to congratulate her and I am taking her knack of scoring goals very positively because this will ultimately help our women's football."



After having missed the India series in December last year due to a groin injury, Bangladesh ODI skipper Tamim Iqbal is now gearing up for the upcoming ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League. While Tamim will hope to shrug off any injury concerns and come through for Khulna Tigers, another experienced campaigner in Mushfiqur Rahim will aim to end his form slump when he takes the field for Sylhet Strikers in the franchise tournament.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED



I always want to bat in the top-order: Miraz

SPORTS REPORTER

Mehedi Hasan Miraz was one of the top performers for Bangladesh last year, especially in terms of coming through for the Tigers with the bat alongside doing his usual bit as an ever-reliable off-spinner.

With the ninth edition of the Bangladesh Premier League starting later this week, the all-rounder would want to keep that up in 2023 as well as he eyes to build on his batting pedigree for his side Fortune Barishal.

Barishal have an enviable pool of players at their disposal this time around, with a number of national stars including captain Shakib Al Hasan, Mahmudullah Riyad, Ebadot Hossain, Khaled Ahmed and Miraz to ply their trades for last season's finalists.

Miraz, who, despite being more than handy in wielding a willow, often had to bat down the order in the national side to accommodate the experienced players up the order. Miraz, however, made statements whenever opportunities arrived – his match-winning 83-ball 100-run blitz against India earlier last month saw Bangladesh come back from a precarious position to win the second ODI and clinch the series with a game in hand.

Earlier in February, with the Tigers six down for 45 while chasing a 215-run target, Miraz and Afif Hossain stitched an unbeaten 174-run stand for the seventh wicket to not only help Bangladesh avert humiliation but also take lead in that three-match ODI series. Miraz was awarded the player of the match for his unbeaten 81.

With an aim to carry his form with the bat into this year, Miraz was blatant in mentioning his eagerness to bat up the order in BPL.



"Actually, it will depend on the team management's decision. There's still a lot of time before the tournament. But as I have said, I always want to bat in the top-order. The rest is up to the team management," Miraz said when asked if him partnering Shakib for the opening position was on the cards.

Miraz, however, would definitely like to avoid any kerfuffle with the brass over his batting position – something that almost saw him leave the Chattogram Challengers franchise in the previous edition of the tournament.

After failing to clear the final hurdle in 2016 with Rajshahi Kings and in 2020 with Khulna Tigers, Miraz also seemed hopeful to finally lift the trophy this time around.

"We have a very good team. There is Shakib bhai, who played for this franchise last year as well. Then we also have Riyad bhai, I, Ebadot, Khaled, so we almost have a number of players from the national squad. Definitely, we hope to become champions."

"This is maybe my sixth tournament; I played in the final of the BPL twice but could never become a champion. But, hopefully this time we will be champions,"

a confident Miraz said, adding that the bonding with his national teammates is sure to help their cause in the franchise tournament as well.

The all-rounder also hoped that the BPL will go a long way in helping the national players prepare for the ODI World Cup, slated for later this year.

"We have a very big event in 2023 as we have the 50-over World Cup this year. So, we will plan everything keeping that in mind. I, too, will prepare myself mentally in that manner and also focus on improving myself further," Miraz added.

Pakistan fight back after Conway ton

AFP, Karachi

Off-spinner Agha Salman and pacer Naseem Shah helped Pakistan derail New Zealand to 309-6 Monday after opener Devon Conway scored a brilliant hundred on the first day in the second Test in Karachi.

Salman grabbed 3-55 and Naseem took 2-44 to trigger a New Zealand middle order slump which saw the tourists lose five wickets for 45 runs during the final session, slumping from 234-1 to 279-6.

At close, Tom Blundell and Ish Sodhi were batting on 30 and 11 respectively as they try to revive New Zealand's innings.

Conway, who scored 122, put on 134 for the opening wicket with Tom Latham (71) after New Zealand won the toss on a National Stadium pitch that had traces of grass but did not initially support bowlers.

Conway steadied the innings with another 100-run stand for the second wicket with Kane Williamson who made 36, but Pakistan pulled back after the visitors were 226-1 at tea.

Salman had Conway caught behind by Sarfaraz Ahmed soon after tea to make it 2-234 before six runs later Naseem dismissed Williamson in the same manner.



Ronaldo set for grand unveiling

AFP, Riyadh

Portuguese superstar Cristiano Ronaldo will be unveiled before thousands of fans at Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr club on Tuesday, a spokesman said, after sealing a shock move estimated at more than 200 million euros.

The 37-year-old great, a five-time winner of the Ballon d'Or, will arrive late on Monday with his family together with media and technical staff, club spokesman Al-Walid Al-Muhaidib told AFP.

Ronaldo, who left Manchester United under a cloud after slamming the club in a TV interview, will appear at Al Nassr's 25,000-capacity Mrsool Park stadium in Riyadh at 7:00 pm (1600 GMT) on Tuesday, officials said.

The latest, and possibly final, chapter in an illustrious career comes weeks after Portugal's quarter-final exit from the World Cup in neighbouring Qatar, where his great rival Lionel Messi lifted the trophy with Argentina.

Ronaldo's signing until June 2025 is just the latest foray into top-level sports by oil-rich Saudi, which has moved into Formula One, boxing and golf and snapped up English club Newcastle United.

Critics have dubbed the strategy "sportswashing" – an attempt by the conservative country to distract attention from its human rights record.

Al Nassr is expecting a full stadium for the unveiling, according to one official who did not want to be named because he was not authorised to speak to media.



Headed by the son of late Brazilian football legend Pele, Edinho, people transport his coffin into the Urbano Caldeira stadium in Santos, Sao Paulo in Brazil on Monday. Brazilians bid a final farewell this week to football giant Pele, starting Monday with a 24-hour public wake at the stadium of his long-time team, Santos.

PHOTO: AFP

Djokovic gets hero's welcome in Adelaide

AFP, Adelaide

Tennis fans gave Novak Djokovic a raucous welcome during his first match in Australia in almost two years when he made a rare doubles appearance at the Adelaide International on Monday.

Playing with Canada's Vasek Pospisil, they lost to doubles specialists Tomislav Brkic and Gonzalo Escobar 4-6, 6-3, 10-5 but enjoyed overwhelming crowd support along the way.

The Serbian superstar was deported from the country before the 2022 Australian Open for not being vaccinated for Covid and was subsequently barred from re-entering for three years.

But the ban was lifted in November and he will be attempting to win a 10th Australian Open title later this month.