

“When I worked with women’s football in 2013, there was nothing to mention as most of the players could not shoot the ball properly but now there were good players in other teams as well. They can play football; they understand their positions; they understand how to defend but they are not mature enough for competitive matches.”

Bashundhara Kings head coach Syed Golam Jilani



Lack of interest and competition stunting growth of women’s league

The stats pretty much sum up the story of the league underlining Kings’ absolute domination. Kings won all 37 league matches they played in the last three editions and scored a whopping 442 goals, averaging 11.94 goals per match.

ANISUR RAHMAN

The success of women’s football across different age-groups had demanded the re-introduction of the women’s football league in a bid to provide female footballers with a foundation for them to stay in football and hone their skills for international competitions.

After two seasons in 2011-12 and 2012-13, Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) brought back the league in 2019-20 and has run two editions since then but has struggled to bring quality to the field due to a lack of interest from well-known professional clubs.

The first two editions of the league saw top flight outfits like Sheikh Jamal, Mohammedan, Abahani, Brothers Union, Arambagh, Dhaka Wanderers, and Wari Club participate which helped produce a few competitive matches but the overall standard was not up to the mark. Since then, however, the



performances of female footballers have significantly improved, especially at international level and the country’s football fans have begun to rally behind the women’s team following their SAFF Championship

triumph in 2022.

But when it comes to providing structure through the women’s league, clubs still show a lack of interest, with the aforementioned clubs opting to sit out in the last three seasons.

Quite naturally, the women’s league has now turned into a one-horse race, with the Bashundhara Kings roping in almost all national team players forming a team that has been largely unchallenged as they won a hattrick of league titles, while the other teams have largely been there to make up the numbers.

The stats pretty much sum up the story of the league underlining Kings’ absolute domination. Kings won all 37 league matches they played in the last three editions and scored a whopping 442 goals, averaging 11.94 goals per match.

This further intensifies the

argument for having Bangladesh Premier League clubs participate in the league which could make things more competitive.

Kings, though, deserve appreciation as they made room for the national team players offering payments that ranged from Tk 3 lakhs to Tk 8 lakhs this season, considerably higher compared to some of the other clubs like Ataur Rahman Bhuiyan College and Uttara FC that paid around Tk 50,000 to Tk 1.5 lakhs to most of their players.

It has also been learnt that a couple of teams fielded players without making any payments.

BFF had previously struggled to convince clubs to enter the women’s league but this time around, they completed the fifth edition with 12 teams – the highest ever and four more than the previous edition. The league featured nearly 250 players from across the country.

Despite the lack of competitiveness, national team coach Golam Rabbani Choton felt there was some improvement in the league, especially in terms of competition between the table toppers and the rest.

“I think the league has improved a bit compared to the previous editions because participating teams tried to play competitive football following some organised training,” Choton told The Daily Star.

“Though the performances of the small teams were not quite reflected in the scorelines, they improved match by match,” he added.

Around 64 national players from the senior national team and different age-group teams played in the league.

“For the first time, I picked four promising players for the U-17 and U-20 teams from the league and this means the league has gradually improved. Kings played the only competitive match against ARB

College but they won the remaining matches without much effort,” said Choton.

Kings’ head coach Syed Golam Jilani, who coached the national side in 2013, also admitted that the only challenge his side faces was from the ARB College, which featured players from U-20 and U-17 national teams.

“To be honest, the last match (between Kings and ARB College) was the only competitive match in the entire league,” Jilani said.

“When I worked with women’s football in 2013, there was nothing to mention as most of the players could not shoot the ball properly but now there were good players in other teams as well. They can play football; they understand their positions; they understand how to defend but they are not mature enough for competitive matches,” said the AFC A-licensed coach.

‘Football drives me in everything’

Bangladesh women’s team striker Krishna Rani Sarkar, who hit a brace against Nepal in the final of SAFF Women’s Championship last year, played a vital role behind Bashundhara Kings’ hat-trick triumph of the Women’s Football League. She emerged as the third top-scorer with 11 goals this year after finishing top of the chart with 28 goals in the last edition. Krishna talked to The Daily Star’s Anisur Rahman about different aspects of women’s league and women’s football.

The Daily Star (DS): How was the experience of playing the latest league?
Krishna Rani Sarkar (KRS): It was more or less good because the matches of the league and our play have been improving day by day. So far, my teammates and I have enjoyed the women’s football league.

DS: How was the competitiveness of the league compared to the previous two editions?

KRS: It was previously seen that one team conceded a lot of goals and their players stayed packed inside their half or box, but this time things changed a lot with all teams showing their attacking attitude. It was a different case for Bashundhara Kings though, which is full of national players.

DS: Did you enjoy playing one-sided league matches for star-studded Kings?

KRS: I think our opponents went down morally after hearing the name of Bashundhara [Kings] and they could not put up a fight against us, thus conceding a lot of goals. This time, we played our first match against Uttara FC and they conceded only two goals. It proved that if the opponents wanted to fight against us, they could. I think the girls from our opponents were not instructed as they should have been. They likely had been instructed to keep the margin of defeat less and the girls played accordingly.

DS: Will playing league matches help you at international stage?

KRS: To tell you the truth, many players are coming out because of the women’s



football league. Also, some talented players have been called up for the different age-group national teams. I think playing in the league will help those players perform well at the international level. It is evident that there have been some creative players who could not draw the attention before due to lack of matches, but through the league they could make their presence felt.

DS: To improve performance of senior players at international level, what kind of league matches do you need to play?

KRS: No doubt, we need to play more competitive matches because a team scoring one goal after another, while the other conceding a goal after another, is not at all competitive. The way I see it, I won’t personally be able to improve my game playing such one-sided affairs, rather the competitive matches could

give us an opportunity to improve performance and rectify the mistakes collectively or individually. Nevertheless, we should play more competitive matches to improve ourselves. To achieve this, the league needs more competitive teams.

DS: How do you evaluate the performances of the budding players outside the national camps?

KRS: I think they are also good players. Having watched the international achievements we delivered, they are also dreaming of representing the national team and trying to get a place in the national camp. I believe if they get more opportunities to play and proper support from the respective organisations, they can reach our level. It is more important to keep them engaged in football because they are getting to play only the women’s football league.

DS: Do those girls interact with you and the national team’s players for inspiration?

KRS: After the completion of our league matches, most of the girls from

the opposing team approached us and talked about different aspects of football. Sometimes we senior players went to their tent to console them, saying that they played well, and inspired them to do better next time.

DS: How was the payment from the club this time? How do you continue to support your family by playing football?

KRS: As our performance is upward, the payment is also improving day by day. Now, we need big clubs like Abahani, Mohammedan SC, Sheikh Jamal in the women’s league. If they form the squad for the women’s football league, it will benefit the players. My family members, teachers and many others have gotten recognition through me and they feel proud of me.

I built a house playing football and continuing to help my brother to study. I help my family whenever they need it. To be honest, football drives me in everything.

DS: You once played a lot of international matches for different age-group teams but you are getting less international matches to play at senior level. How do you maintain the international standard playing only domestic league?

KRS: I heard the federation will arrange the international matches during the FIFA window. I believe the federation will take the steps for the betterment because it is not wise to sit idle round the year. Besides, it won’t be not bad if we are invited to play different international tournaments.

