

“Last season we hardly got any time to make a good squad because the board of directors had just taken over the responsibility of club. However, we had enough time to consult and form a strong team this time and believe that success is possible.”

GHULAM MOHAMMAD ALOMGIR,
Mohammedan's football committee chairman



Signs of overdue spark in Mohammedan's recovery arc

There were instances of some Mohammedan officials who even ventured beyond the border to rope in foreign players. The recent past, however, witnessed the club opting for mediocre players instead, citing financial limitations, and straying from title aspirations as a consequence. Besides, there has been whispers that top footballers did not trust the club officials to make any deals in last season following several instances of irregular payments in the preceding seasons.

ANISUR RAHMAN

Mohammedan Sporting Club, one of the oldest clubs in Bangladesh whose evolution since inception had been driven through sheer emotion from numerous passionate fans across the country, is more than a sporting outfit.

The Black and Whites had won the hearts of millions before and after the country's independence, courtesy of scintillating displays on the football pitch rather than the ones in cricket, hockey, chess and a few other indoor disciplines.

However, following continuous failures on the ground for over a decade, Mohammedan no longer occupy the same space in the hearts of its supporters. The crowd-pulling outfit continue to yearn for success in the most coveted football event in the domestic circuit since the introduction of the professional football league in 2007.

The administrative and organisational failures have been marked as one of the big reasons behind Mohammedan's setback in football. Although revival initiatives recently taken by the club since the casino scandal and ensuring the final berth of the ongoing Federation Cup certainly present a glimpse of hope, the road to re-establishing its position as one of the best top-flight football clubs in the country still remains arduous for Mohammedan.

Glorious past weighs heavy

During its early years, coinciding with the period before the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, Mohammedan emerged as a



editions. They stooped to the lowest in the 2016-17 season by finishing 10th out of 12 clubs, demoralising millions of their fan-base.

Absence of scouting programme

During the national football league championship of the pre-BPL era, Mohammedan officials were known to have travelled all over the country to unearth raw talents. Resultantly, illustrious names like Badal Roy, Mosabber Hossain, Jasimuddin Josy were scouted from the district level.

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squads only on paper. They train on a rented field and, to make matters worse, are often forced to conduct senior team's training in the small ground at the club premises. Thus, the coaches face huge challenge to brief tactical aspects ahead of matches.

Once there used to be some loyal footballers who played for Mohammedan year after year. They did not think much of payment back then but the scenario inverted in time as Mohammedan, having failed to live up to their financial commitments in previous seasons, can no longer take the signing of top local footballers for granted.

Fans' apathy

It was once unthinkable for Mohammedan to even consider dropping a point in a league match as their fans inevitably had the players confined at the stadium for hours before rushing to the club tent to protest the poor performances of their beloved team. Fearing backlash, the players

resulted in a sustained period of underachievement, with the club failing to clinch major titles and struggling to maintain consistency on the field.

However, the casino scandal became a turning point for the Motijheel-based outfit with the emergence of a set of new board of directors in early 2021. They are now trying to solve financial issues and form comparatively better squads in football and cricket, while having inserted dedicated former players in different sub-committees.

Financial constraints

Till the late 1980s, the management ran the club smoothly, a period where success rate was higher than the subsequent decades. Financial constraints played a major part in Mohammedan becoming underachievers in football and cricket. Under the leadership of long-serving Lokman Hossain Bhuiyan, who later was allegedly involved with the casino scandal, the club turned into a limited company in 2011, with an aim to bringing some financial solvency but the scenario did not improve. Instead, the club had hit its all-time low in terms of performance on the ground.

A Mohammedan official, seeking anonymity, said the club needs Tk 20 lakh per month to maintain daily operations but they have a permanent income of Tk 45 thousand per month, generated from two shops at the club tent.

Although the new board of directors headed by former Army Chief General Md Abdul Mubeen has not brought the desired financial stability yet, the club has not faced any financial crisis when it came to forming squads in football and cricket and running the club in general.

It was also learned that president Mubeen and football committee chairman and director Ghulam Mohammad Alomgir bear majority of the expenditure. Meanwhile, Max Group is sponsoring the football team and in cricket, United Group and Pran Group were involved with the Mohammedan cricket team in the just-concluded Dhaka Premier League. However, it is worth mentioning that Alomgir and Mubeen are affiliated with Max and United Group, respectively.

‘Top clubs should have permanent income sources’

Former national forward Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib has been continuously involved with Mohammedan Sporting Club for the past 24 years and saw ups and downs of one of the country's most popular outfits. The prolific striker had donned the Black and White jersey for 13 seasons since 1989, barring a five-year stint at Muktijoddha Sangsad in between, before calling time in 2007. Ever since, Nakib featured in different managerial roles at Mohammedan. In an exclusive interview with **Anisur Rahman of The Daily Star**, the 48-year-old talked about different aspects surrounding the club after they made it to the Federation Cup final for the first time in 14 years.

The Daily Star (DS): Your feelings after Mohammedan reached the final of the Federation Cup after 14 years?

Imtiaz Ahmed Nakib (IAN): Of course, it feels great to see my beloved Mohammedan in the Federation Cup final, and we are also happy to meet Abahani there. Before the transfer, we promised to form a young and capable team that would always fight but the appointment of Shafiqul Islam Manik bhai as the head coach was not right, I think.

I believe we have formed a good squad with the best promising players after around 10 to 12 years, but they did not perform well in the first leg of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL). However, they have started performing in the second leg of the league with the promotion of assistant coach Alfaz Ahmed, who had before worked with British coach Sean Lane for nearly three years. The coach is an important factor in football and a good change has come in our squad after the replacement of the head coach.

DS: Does Mohammedan show professionalism while running the club?

IAN: The path Mohammedan follows is not proper. Only two people, club president Mubeen sir and football committee chairman Alomgir bhai, are running the show with their utmost financial help but the fact is that football is now a big business in the world and you need to handle it properly.

We have a lot of backups in former Mohammedan players, the supporters and more but we can't go forward because of a lack of timely logistic support. The financial constraint has been Mohammedan's main problem for over 12 to 15 years and we haven't fully recovered from this financial crisis yet.

Besides, Mohammedan don't have a permanent ground. We also need to improve the standard of current accommodation, food, gym facilities among other things, otherwise we would keep going through such a lean patch in the coming days as well.

DS: Is it possible to solve the financial crisis in the coming days?

IAN: I believe 16 directors and the president of the club have the capability to change everything. The club has 5.5 bigha (79,200 square feet) land in the centre of Motijheel area. We don't need the donation to run the club if we make this land for a source of permanent money income. And even though the directors are providing money as per the club's requirement of Tk 15 to 16 crore every year, how long and why they will keep providing the money is a question. I think we can earn money permanently from the club land in Motijheel.

DS: Why do you think Mohammedan are missing financial fluency, dedicated players and supporters it once had?

IAN: I was also a Mohammedan footballer but I didn't see the decision-makers of the club had any vision or long-term plan, especially after the 1990s. There was no plan in football, cricket and hockey. During the transfers of every season, one or two persons were given the responsibility to form the respective squads and they did their job on a season basis.

Whereas, you see the plan of Bashundhara Kings, who made a stadium, gymnasium, dormitory for the players and have a proper plan of how the squad will be for the next season, but we don't have such a plan.

DS: How much blame should be shared by clubs for the miserable state of country's football?

IAN: Of course, the clubs are to be blamed hundred per cent for this fall because the federation would not grow footballers. Can you show me any plans from the clubs? Are there any youth teams of any clubs, except on paper? But the clubs are supposed to have youth teams who are meant to be nursed round the year in order to bring out quality players.

I think the federation is also a bit responsible for this situation because if they could run the district football regularly, then new footballers would come out but they did not. Besides, all leagues except BPL are being played on the poor artificial turf at Kamalapur stadium, leading to a lot of promising players dropping early after sustaining injuries.

DS: Why has Mohammedan been unable to develop its marketing wing?

IAN: I think the board of directors can tell you about it. What I see is that if social clubs like Dhaka Club, Gulshan Club, Chittagong Club are running by generating their own fund, then why a sporting club can't generate its own? I think all top-tier clubs should have permanent income sources.

DS: Mohammedan won all domestic trophies except for BPL. Can the Black and Whites taste the professional league title in coming days?

IAN: Actually, it depends on the decision of the club high-ups. If the club president and the football committee chairman can provide us confidence, then I think we can go forward. That is all.



local powerhouse in football. The Black and Whites continued their dominance despite the emergence of Abahani and, thus, had the nation divided into two groups of football fans. A record 12 titles of top-flight football league in 29 editions, prior to the introduction of the professional football league in the form of Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) in 2007, has been the evidence of Mohammedan's dominance.

Moreover, the Motijheel-based outfit won several silverwares in DMFLC Cup, Federation Cup, Independence Cup, Super Cup, National Championship, but the only missing silverware from the club's rich trophy cabinet is the prestigious BPL. Except for the first three seasons, Mohammedan struggled in almost all BPL

instances of irregular payments in the preceding seasons.

Club-licencing issue

To take part in any Asian Football Confederation (AFC)-sanctioned professional tournaments, clubs must meet several licencing criteria set by the AFC. Although Mohammedan could tick some of the boxes within five different sections – on sporting, infrastructure, personnel and administrative, legal, and financial grounds – they still lack modern training facilities, well-equipped gymnasium, permanent venue, and youth development setup, pinning the Black and Whites at the backseat of progress.

Having a youth development setup is mandatory for club-licencing but, like other clubs, Mohammedan have their youth

and club officials did not even come out publicly. The visible pressure from fans has diminished and now expectations are limited to sporadic successes in cup competitions.

Organisational weaknesses

Mohammedan was once run by some dedicated and competent organisers like Moinul Islam, Abdul Monem, MA Malek, Monirul Haque Chowdhury, Sheikh Akmal Hossain, Sirajul Haque Chowdhury, Anwarul Haque Helal up until the early 1990s. A dearth of quality organisers, however, triggered a decline in performance and posed a myriad of challenges in subsequent years.

Internal conflicts, financial instability, and lack of adequate infrastructure further hampered the club's progress. These issues