

SPORADIC SUCCESSES in a year of gloom

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Moments of joy amid long periods of gloom has been the story of sports in Bangladesh in 2023.

In cricket, the country's most popular sports, the women's team pulled off a number of memorable victories while the men's team almost self-sabotaged themselves and ended up with one of their worst ever years in recent times.

The men's football team had a decent year and sprinter Imranur Rahman won the country its first gold medal in Asian Indoor Athletics Championship but the scenes in the other sports remained bleak.

The Bangladeshi archers had a disappointing year, so did the shooters and the kabaddi players, who were part of Bangladesh's contingent of 180



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

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that went to Hangzhou for the Asian Games, an event where Bangladesh returned with just a couple of bronze medals in cricket.

At the domestic front, different sporting bodies were seemingly still recovering from the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as the frequency of domestic competitions remained low.

Hockey, a sport that was on par with cricket in terms of popularity in the 80s, almost vanished from the country as the game's governing body failed to host the premier league for the second year in a row, owing to a lack of desire from the clubs and mismanagement of the federation.

Bangladesh Athletics Federation also failed to hold the national athletics championship this year.

The disappointments in other sports could've been swept under the rug had the men's cricket team performed up to expectations.

But the shocking performance of the Tigers in the ICC ODI World Cup only exacerbated the disappointment of the country's sports loving fans.

The Shakib Al Hasan-led side finished eighth in the 10-team tournament in India, with only two wins in nine games – their worst performance in the ICC flagship event in 20 years.

And their shoddy performance in the World Cup was the trend not an aberration, as before heading over to

India, they had lost three ODI series at home and had an underwhelming showing in the Asia Cup.

The first Test win at home against New Zealand and the maiden ODI and T20I wins against the Kiwis in the opponent's backyard did little to make up for the disappointment.

But more than the poor results, the cricket board's decision to not investigate the Tamim Shakib episode, which was a major source of disruption for the team throughout the year, and instead only form a committee to 'assess' the team's performance in the World Cup, left a bad taste.

In women's cricket, there was no such drama as the Nigar Sultana Joty-led team recovered from a winless campaign in the ICC Women's Twenty20 World Cup in February and turned 2023 into one of the most memorable years for the country's women's cricket.

First came the T20 win over India, followed by a 1-1 series draw against the same opponents in ODIs. They then

won a home T20I and ODI series over Pakistan.

Then came the biggest achievements of the year, as the team broke their duck in T20Is and ODIs against the South Africa women in South Africa.

Fargana Hoque became the country's first women's cricketer to hit an international century against India and then repeating the feat against South Africa.

Spinner Nahida Akter became the country's first women's cricketer to be named the ICC player of the month for the month of November.

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The charges of Jaiver Cabrera also bounced back strongly against Lebanon to play out a 1-1 draw in FIFA World Cup Qualifiers despite a demoralising 7-0 defeat at the hands of Australia.

Bashundhara Kings became the country's first outfit to play the play-off of AFC Champions League but couldn't make it to the main competition before suffering another heartbreak in the AFC Cup.

There were also a couple of scandals, first the Bangladesh Football Federation's long-serving general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag getting banned by FIFA over financial mismanagement and then five footballers getting fined and suspended for getting caught with excessive amounts of liquor while returning home from the Maldives.

The performance of the women's football team after BFF's decision not to send them to the Olympic Qualifiers was also a mixed bag and the departure of long-serving women's team coach Golam Rabbani Choton shocked the football fraternity.

Sportsperson of the year

Nigar Sultana Joty may not be a player whose style of play is very pleasing to the eye, but the 26-year-old stands out among the rest for her understanding of the game.

Aside from making her presence felt almost constantly on the field from behind the stumps, Joty, captain of the Bangladesh women's team, has been the Tigresses' mainstay in the batting order for a while now.

Having led the country in the 18 T20Is that the Tigresses played this year, Joty remains the leading scorer for the side with 388 runs, including two fifties. She also had a decent year with the willow in ODIs as well, amassing 242 runs in 11 matches this year to be second in the leading scorers' list behind opener Fargana Hoque, who had an outstanding year with 460 runs in the same number of matches as her skipper.

What stats and figures might fail to portray about Joty is how influential she has been in propelling the Tigresses to a few landmark achievements this year. Under her leadership, Bangladesh recorded their first-ever ODI and T20I series wins over Pakistan at home and their maiden ODI and T20I wins over South Africa in their backyard. The Tigresses also posted their highest-ever ODI total of 250 for three against South Africa to record their biggest margin of win (119-run win) in the format.

An ODI series draw against a strong Indian side and a T20I series draw away to South Africa were also recorded by the Joty-led side in 2023.

Despite all these achievements, Joty and Co received a rather toned-down reception when they returned home from their tour of South Africa with which they capped off a successful year.

"Our job is to play cricket, so we want to focus only on it. We do not regret how much media coverage we received or did not receive as that's not in our hands," a humble Joty said after returning from their South Africa tour in December.

Like always, in terms of media attention and interest from fans, the scenario has been contrasting for the Tigresses when compared to their male counterparts in the country. Despite all these, Joty and Co have certainly surpassed expectations this year, with the skipper putting Bangladesh women's cricket on the map through her excellent leadership. And as a gesture of appreciation to mark a tremendous year by the Bangladesh women's cricket team, The Daily Star recognises Joty, who has been the central cog in almost all of the Tigresses success this year, as the Sportsperson of 2023.



BCB waiting for Shakib over captaincy decision

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) seems to be uncertain about finding the next long-time skipper of the national side even more than a month after the World Cup 2023.

"Look, whether Shakib [Al Hasan] will continue [as captain] or not is a matter for later," Jalal Yunus, the Bangladesh Cricket Board's (BCB) chairman of cricket operations, said at the BCB headquarters yesterday.

Jalal, however, maintained that the board still considers Shakib as their regular skipper despite the cricketer clearly mentioning during an exclusive interview ahead of the World Cup that he would not continue in the role after the mega event.

Shakib, who is contesting in the upcoming general election, missed the two-Test home series against New Zealand in November and the ongoing white-ball tour of the Black Caps due to a finger injury.



PHOTO: AFP

Tigers' chance to cap off 2023 IN STYLE

SPORTS REPORTER

Although rain had the last laugh in the second T20I between Bangladesh and New Zealand in Mount Maunganui as the match was called off with the hosts on 72 for two in 11 overs yesterday, it eventually ensured that the Tigers would end the series with an achievement they never experienced before.

Bangladesh came to the game yesterday on the back of a historic first-ever T20I triumph over the Black Caps on New Zealand soil. Hence, a no result in the second match meant that even a defeat in the third and final T20I would see the Tigers, who had never won a white-ball match against the Kiwis at their den before this tour, return home with a drawn series.

But the Najmul Hossain Shanto-led Bangladesh would definitely want more than just a drawn series, especially since they gained rhythm from their win in the third and final match of the preceding three-match ODI series.

However, trailing 1-0, the hosts will look to spoil the Tigers' party and wrap the series up with a comeback win in the final T20I in Mount Maunganui tomorrow.

Before the game was washed out on Friday, it was Shoriful Islam who once again provided an early breakthrough in the second over of the innings after Bangladesh elected to field. The left-arm seamer removed opener Finn Allen, caught at cover while going for a drive on two.

Although there were some missed opportunities initially, capitalised by the hosts through an early rampage from Tim Seifert, the Tigers were able to pull the strings when skipper Shanto took a smart catch running backwards from cover to dismiss Seifert after a 23-ball 43 off the bowling of pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib in the eighth over.

Since then, the visitors kept things tight, thanks to leg-spinner Rishad Hossain who conceded just 10 from his three overs before rain intervened for the last time.

It has been a mixed year for

Bangladesh as they lost momentum in their favorite format, the ODIs, resulting in a World Cup debacle in India in November but managed to flourish in the shortest format of the game. Barring the three matches played by the second-string side in the Asian Games, Bangladesh won eight out of 10 T20Is in 2023.

With no fear of losing the series, the Tigers now have the perfect opportunity to wrap this year up by clinching their maiden T20I series against New Zealand at their den.

"It feels good that we got a big opportunity [to win the T20I series] and we will try to utilise it. We went out to win the game [yesterday] but we had nothing in our hands when it rained. However, we don't have any regret and we will try to win the next game and look to take the series," Rishad told the media after the game yesterday.

After missing out in the second T20I for suffering an injury in the first T20I, Bangladesh once again will be without wicketkeeper-batter Liton Das for the third and final T20I.

East face North in BCL final

SPORTS REPORTER

North Zone will defend their Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL) one-day version title as they take on East Zone in the final at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur today. The day-night game will begin at 12:30pm.

Three teams ended up with equal four points in the four-team tournament, with Central Zone winning two out of three matches. However, North, with a better net run-rate, eventually finished the league stage in second position behind top-placed East Zone.

East Zone will carry some confidence into the final, having won the league-stage encounter with North by 62 runs – courtesy of a century from former Bangladesh Test skipper Mominul Haque.

Captain Cummins hails 'crazy year' for Australia

AGENCIES

A fired-up Pat Cummins bagged five wickets and 10 in the match to earn Australia a nail-biting 79-run win in the second Test and clinch the series against a battling Pakistan Friday.

Set 317 for victory, the visitors put up a stellar fight but were dismissed for 237, with the last five wickets falling for 18 runs.

Australian skipper Cummins was the chief destroyer, taking 5-49 to go with his first innings 5-48.

"Little bit twitchy, felt okay but they were batting pretty nicely," said Cummins.

"Anything with a three in front of it was the aim, so we got that," he added of the target they wanted to set Pakistan. "Felt like we had enough to bowl at but a little bit tight."

It was always going to be a tough task, with the highest-ever successful fourth innings run chase at the Melbourne Cricket Ground the 332-7 England managed in 1928, with no other team getting past 300.

Cummins's second 10-wicket match haul in 57 tests capped off a glorious year in which he led Australia to the World Test Championship, a 50-overs World Cup triumph and the retention of the Ashes in England. The Australia all-rounder termed 2023 as a crazy year.

"Crazy year. Lots of cricket, lots of success on the field," said Cummins. "I think we're going to look back and remember 2023 as one of the special ones."



Najmul Hossain Shanto was appointed as the skipper for these two New Zealand series and the 25-year-old earned praises for leading the Tigers to a home Test win over the Kiwis, and their first-ever ODI and T20I wins over Black Caps in New Zealand during his tenure as the interim skipper.

With Shanto impressing through his leadership in his short stint as the captain, questions have been raised about whether the 25-year-old, who had already expressed his willingness to captain Bangladesh in the long haul, should be named as the next regular skipper of the Tigers.

But BCB, apparently, will wait till meeting with Shakib before deciding in this regard.

"The final decision as to whether Shakib will continue or Shanto will take over will be taken by the board. But obviously, we will discuss it with him [Shakib] and will try to know his stance regarding this matter. And only after that, we will be able to know who is going to captain the side in the long term," Jalal said.