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Midfielder OMAR FARUK MITHU



Talent sought, FOUND AND FORGOTTEN



The four footballers who trained in Brazil still have age on their side but in the ruthless world of football, where most players can remain at the peak of their powers for only so many years, time is quickly running out for them as well.

“I am hopeful and confident that one day I will get a national team call-up and I am ready to prove myself again if I get a BPL club in the mid-season transfer window,” he added.

Jogen had to put his football dreams in the backseat and take a job in the Bangladesh Army.

The 20-year-old, who has played in second and third-division leagues once, is hoping to realise his dream of playing top-flight football and the national team by performing for the Bangladesh Army football team.

“The experience was really good, especially the way they showed us the training and technical aspects in Brazil. I think the training helped me play better in the Pioneer, second and third-division football leagues.

“However, I am still hopeful of becoming a good footballer and playing top-flight football by performing well for Bangladesh Army football team.”

Nahid is yet to play in club competitions in Dhaka as the university-goer is currently playing for a football academy in Rangpur.

“I got offers from a few clubs in Dhaka but I could not play for them because I was participating in an Indian tournament for Rangpur-based Santos Football Academy. Kings also called me for their Under-18 team but my academy did not release me.”

Though the training at Old Trafford and Sociedade Esportiva do Gama were short-term, expectations from them were huge.

On paper, both these programmes were a chance to unearth hidden talents at a young age, groom them to play top-flight football and eventually represent the national team.

But so far, both programmes have failed to achieve what they had set out to do.

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Perhaps the biggest lesson these two programmes have taught is that without an elaborately laid out plan about what will be done for the selected players after the training camp ends, programmes like these will never actually benefit the country’s football.

The only thing these programmes will bring is some positive press for the organisers and something for the media and countrymen to bemoan about a few years down the line.

The four youngsters who went to Brazil were - defender Nazmul Akand, forward Jogen Lakra and midfielders Omar Faruk Mithu and Latifur Rahman Nahid.

ANISUR RAHMAN

In July of 2020, at a time when Bangladesh like the rest of the world was battling the coronavirus, an image of a young man wielding a broom started making rounds in the country’s social media.

The man holding the broom was Ripon Kumar Das, a cleaner in the road transport and highway division’s regional office in Faridpur.

The reason that image was being virtually passed around by all was because in 2012 Ripon was amongst the 12 football prodigies selected out of thousands of applicants from across the country in the Airtel Rising Stars programme for a training camp at the Manchester United Football Club in England.

After the training camp, Ripon tried to make it as a footballer in Bangladesh, playing at the lower divisions for a few years but eventually had to quit to earn his bread and butter.

From dribbling the ball at Old Trafford, Ripon was sweeping the premises of an office, something people felt was a disheartening but consistent example of what happens to

talented footballers in Bangladesh.

However, Ripon is just one out of 12, what about the others, where happened to them?

And what about the 12 youngsters who went to train in Manchester in 2014 under the same programme, where are they now?

Only a few of the lucky 24 like Mahmudul Hasan Kiran, Rakib Khan Evan, Mizanur Rahman, Mustajik Khan, Mahadud Hossain Fahim, Anik Hossain and Emon Biswas could make it to the country’s top-flight football but none of them have yet made it to the national team.

The Airtel Rising Star programme ended in Bangladesh after the company merged its operations into Robi Axiata in 2016.

In 2019, another opportunity arose for the country’s talented youth footballers, this time it was a chance to train in Brazilian club Sociedade Esportiva do Gama.

This opportunity came about thanks to Brazil’s then ambassador to Bangladesh Joao Tabajara de Oliveira Junior, who had promised to help the country’s budding footballers after



seeing the overwhelming support from Bangladesh for Brazil in the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

As part of the programme, four talented footballers went for a month-long camp in Brazil in 2019, after the initial plan of a year-long training had to be scrapped due to FIFA’s rules.

After the Covid-19 pandemic, 11 more players were supposed to head over to Brazil for training but those

plans eventually fell through.

The four youngsters who went to Brazil were - defender Nazmul Akand, forward Jogen Lakra and midfielders Omar Faruk Mithu and Latifur Rahman Nahid.

Out of them, Nazmul had impressed the Brazilian scouts the most and even earned a three-month trial with Sao Paulo-based club Salto FC in 2023. However, after the trial, the defender went AWOL.

The other three trainees are more or less active in football but are yet to truly make it big.

Mithu had secured a place for Bangladesh Police for two seasons before a knee injury ruled him out for one year. The fit-again midfielder is now without a club but hopes to get an outfit during the mid-term window transfers.

“Of course, I benefited from the training in Brazil though it could have been better for us had we got long-term training there. What I realised there is that we were learning things that we should’ve been taught when we were kids,” Mithu said.

‘Local coaches shun the overseas-trained players’

Abdur Razzak, a local coach who holds an AFC A level certification, was involved with the selection process in all three talent hunt programmes and accompanied the four promising players in Brazil as coach. The 55-year-old, who has been in the coaching profession for 23 years, spoke with The Daily Star’s Anisur Rahman about what happens in such overseas training programmes and why have the budding footballers not been able to make it big after returning home.

The Daily Star (DS): How was the training experience in Brazil overall?

Abdur Razzak (AR): The boys trained in the same club where Brazil’s Kaka used to train. The training shortly after we arrived in Brazil. Later, the boys participated in an academy football tournament where the European scouts were present, searching for talents. I was given the responsibility to guide a team. A Brazilian coach translated my messages to the players. One of our four players Nazmul [Akand] drew interest from a club named

Real [Associação Esportiva Real] during a match and wanted to keep him. But they later changed their minds after watching Nazmul’s performance in the final match of the tournament.

DS: Why weren’t the 11 players selected for the programme in 2021 sent to Brazil?

AR: We returned home in December 2019. Then almost everything was halted due to the coronavirus outbreak in 2020. As far as I know, the ministry did not give the nod to continue the programme in 2021 due to financial constraints.

DS: Do such training trips help players improve?

AR: In football, there are four stages of learning - basic, build-up, follow-up and high performance. The basic learning starts at the age of eight or below. The European and Latin American kids



know the basics. The build-up stage starts at 12 and our players received that level of training over there. In most cases, our players aren’t accustomed to this type of training. So, it hardly helps them improve. Instead of such training camps, I think we should take

part in age-level tournaments in developed countries, find out the differences between our players and other teams and help them improve by training them at home.

DS: Why do you think so many of the budding footballers who received overseas training have left the game?

AR: The main reason is the ignorance of the officials and local coaches, who tend to overlook these players as they try to show that they have more talented players training under them. The overseas-trained players also get taunted every time

they fail to do something on the field, which also troubles them psychologically.

DS: What should be done to prevent such dropouts?

AR: We should have a database of these players and arrange short-term training camps for them around the year similar to what Japan’s Sakai Football Academy does for their players after figuring out their weakest points. Then, these players can improve themselves by playing in different competitions and gradually come into mainstream competitions.