

■ OFF CAMPUS ■

In conversation with **JUBAYER IBN HAMID**

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Jubayer Ibn Hamid has represented Bangladesh a record four times at the World Schools Debating Championship (WSDC) and was a part of the historic 2018 team that reached the Quarters for the first time at Croatia WSDC. He sat down with The Daily Star to talk about his most recent milestone: representing Stanford at the Open Finals of World Universities Debating Championship (WUDC) 2024 as the third-ever Bangladeshi on that stage.

We started at the beginning of Jubayer's debating journey. He reveals that his entry into the sport wasn't actually of his own volition. "Basically, I've always struggled to express myself and had stage fright. So when I was in eighth grade, my mom suggested, rather forced, me into debating as a measure to mitigate the issue."

"My first ever tournament, the BDC Pre-Worlds 2014 turned out to be very exciting. After that, I realised this seems fun, and I want to continue doing it." Soon after, he proceeded to found the debate club at Scholastica Mirpur with some friends, later hiring a coach.

Throughout his journey, Jubayer has had certain debaters he looked up to. He said, "My GOAT of debating is an annoying guy called Sajid Asbat Khandaker and Sourodip Paul." He also named Ashish Kumar, an incredibly successful debater, who won WSDC for Singapore back in 2011.

Finally, after a decorated school debating career, Jubayer took his talents to Palo Alto where he began pursuing his undergraduate degree in physics and mathematics at Stanford University.

However, his transition to the university circuit was anything but seamless.

"The Stanford Debate Club back then was broken. The club had a weird policy where freshmen were not allowed to compete at international tournaments, including Worlds. We were not even allowed to try out," he recounts.

Despite initially competing at a few open tournaments with friends, eventually the four-time WSDC alumnus quit debate entirely. "I was more interested in a lot of other things, like my research," he explains, referring to his work with Artificial Intelligence. "Also, in North America, I don't have any of the friends that I was really close to back in Bangladesh. So debating tournaments generally seemed much less fun."

However, he made his comeback soon enough, "Right after COVID, we got to travel for debate tournaments. Stanford ended up subsidising most

of it," he explained. Moreover, he took up the role of coaching Team Bangladesh in 2022 which also helped reignite his passion for the sport.

Around June of 2023, Jubayer teamed up with Tejas Subramaniam, a fellow Stanford debater who previously won WSDC 2019 while representing India and also became the Overall Best Speaker of that tournament.

Their run-up to the competition was a polar opposite of their eventual emphatic performance at Vietnam. "I did not particularly work hard. So very soon when we started doing poorly in tournaments, mostly because of me, we thought maybe we need to be more realistic."

Upon returning to Dhaka after finishing his exams at Stanford, Jubayer began preparing more seriously. "So around December when we were doing a bunch of spars, we realised we weren't as bad as we were before. We were getting back to the rhythm." He continues, "Day 1 of WUDC was when we finally clicked as a team."

And click they did.

Their team, Stanford A, swept through the Preliminary Rounds and qualified for the Knockouts as the second-best team in the world, right behind Tel Aviv University. Their momentum remained unhindered up until the Open Finals. When asked about his take on the ballot, Jubayer was quick to respond, "There's no doubt about that. We lose the debate. We lose the debate to Opening Opposition."

In the end, Tejas ranked as the Open Best Speaker while Jubayer barely missed out on the top ten, ranking eleventh best.

At this point, I asked Jubayer if this was the last we'll see of him at WUDC.

Luckily, he had an answer for me. "While I've lost other rounds in our Worlds run, I would give anything to be able to do the finals again. I've replayed that debate in so many ways in my mind to see where I would've done things differently. But

does that motivate me to come back to Worlds again? I realised that for me to give an honest answer, I need to give at least three months and see how salty I'm feeling after those three months. As of now, yes, definitely."

Jubayer highlights how the activity also helped broaden his worldview and perspectives. "If I did not debate back in school and university, I'd probably know very little about the real world and not be as progressive as I am right now."

He further emphasises the close friendships he's garnered through debate.

"Sajid was initially just a friend before he became a coach. Adi was initially just a coach. Now they're some of my best friends."

Before we ended the interview, Jubayer had some final words of wisdom for the

future generations of Bangladeshi debaters.

"Debating is extremely fun, but not just because you win trophies. Don't be shy of dreaming big. Even if you can't reach the heights that you've set out for yourself, the journey itself is worth it. So, set big goals. Work hard for that. If it works out, great. But if it doesn't, there are always going to be amazing memories for you to cherish."

