

Football, like life, is filled with ups and downs, and the most important thing is to keep moving forward and never give up.

DIEGO MARADONA, late Argentine football legend



A broken leg, a football academy AND A DREAM



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DIPANKAR ROY

When Sathi Munda stepped up to take Bangladesh's fifth and final penalty in the shootout against India on March 10, 2024, the fate of the SAFF Under-16 Women's Championship title was hanging in the balance.

Both teams had converted two of their first four penalties and a miss from Sathi would present India with the chance to score and lift the title at the ANFA Complex in Kathmandu, Nepal.

But Sathi, a BKSP student who hails from Satkhira, converted from the spot and then goalkeeper Yearzan Begum saved the final India penalty to win the trophy for Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh team, their support staff and the handful of Bangladeshi supporters present at the venue burst into celebration and the joy of the triumph carried over from Kathmandu to Bangladesh, bringing smiles to the countrymen.

But for Satkhira's Masum Billah, that win, specifically that fifth penalty from Sathi, was more than just a



coastal children are ready to compete with players from any region if given proper training," he added.

Masum himself was once a footballer trying to make it as a player. He represented the Satkhira district team and the Khulna divisional team and also played second division football in Dhaka.

But his dreams were shattered in 2008 when he badly injured his leg while playing a match at the capital's Kamalapur stadium.

The injury was so severe that for two years he could barely walk and gradually fell out of the game.

Then in 2010, to make a living, Masum bought a second hand motorcycle and started giving rides to passengers for a fare. But his heart still ached for football.

The idea of opening a football academy first came to his mind when he noticed that whenever there was a local competition, his upazila, Shyamnagar, would have to bring in players from other places to make up the team as there simply weren't enough quality local footballers around.

So in 2013, Masum decided to open the Burigoalini Basic Football Academy in his village, an academy where local boys and girls could come and learn the basics of the game for free.

But to Masum's dismay, his academy was far from an instant hit in the community as only about 10-12 kids showed up for practice initially.

Most families in the conservative community were not too keen about

sending their children to learn football and were especially against sending girls to the playing field.

"We had to convince the local community that playing football is not a sin and that it helps with the physical and mental growth of children. Slowly, more boys and some girls from the area started coming to the academy," said Masum.

Masum said that around 80 children are now training at the academy and many of his former students have already started ascending the ranks in the country's football.

He informed that six girls and five boys from his academy are part of the Satkhira women's and men's district teams respectively. Other than Sathi, another of his former students Shasthi Munda is also enrolled in BKSP and the national men's under-16 team's goalkeeper Abdur Rahman is also from the academy.

Masum also said that around 22 of his academy players are playing for different teams in the Pioneer Football League, a nationwide tournament of age-level teams.

Although this academy has given Masum's life a new sense of purpose after his footballing dreams fell apart, it has not been a financially beneficial endeavour for him.

"Many people want to know how much I earn from this academy, how much the fees are to practise here. In reply, I tell them, I don't do this to earn a living; I do this out of my love for football.

"Oftentimes, the players who train here need financial help to buy kits or boots. There have been times when players from the academy have gotten opportunities to play in other places and they have gone to play barefoot, as they couldn't afford to buy boots. I try to arrange boots for them and sometimes even sew old boots for them to put in."

Goalkeeper Abdur, one of Masum's most successful pupils, reminisced how Masum went out of his way to help him when he could not afford boots.

"I used to practise barefoot for the Bangabandhu Gold Cup. I didn't have boots. Later, the coach bought a pair for me... Initially, I didn't get any support from my family. But I did not give up hope. The coach helped me a lot," Abdur said.

Despite his best efforts, life got in the way of Masum and his football coaching. In November last year, Masum was forced to stop coaching for a while as he took up a job in Khulna after his motorcycle broke

down.

He wrote about his problem on Facebook and said he was planning to save enough fund to fix his bike and then once again return to his academy.

A few teachers of the Government Brajalal (BL) College in Khulna saw his post, took the initiative and bought him a brand new motorcycle last month and Masum once again returned to his academy in Burigoalini.

Shankar Kumar Mallick, professor of the Bangla department in Govt. BL College, told The Daily Star, "I am proud of Masum Billah. He did not give up in the face of hundreds of obstacles. He did it all for football, not for any personal gain."

In a recent visit to the Bono Konya Football ground, the local ground where the academy holds its practice sessions, a group of teenage boys and girls arrived soon after sunrise. They began training with some warm-up exercises and soon started practising dribbling, shooting and goalkeeping.

The field, which looked quite bare, remains underwater for over three months a year during monsoon. During that time, the academy has to shift practice elsewhere, which greatly hampers training.

Lima Rani Mondal, a ninth grader who cycled from Bhami village, which is three kilometres away from the academy, to join practice, spoke about the need for a better training ground.

"I have been playing here since the third grade. I didn't understand many things before but after training here I understand a lot more about the game. But we don't have a good ground. If we had one, we could practice more regularly and more safely," she said.

Md Ashiq Sabuj, who is involved with the running of the academy, said, "Our boys and girls have to endure many limitations when they come to practise here. We do not have a good ground. Sometimes, they have to play in dried-out shrimp enclosures."

Masum hopes that authorities would extend a helping hand and fix the ground problem for them, which would allow him to train his students without any interruption and help him fulfil their footballing dreams.

"If the field gets filled with sand and is renovated, then we can play here all year round. It would be even better if a separate field could be arranged for us.

"The boys and girls of the academy should not face the same obstacles I had to face when I was playing. Most of them have come from underprivileged families but have immense potential and can go far. My players have the mental and physical courage to compete with other regions' players. My main goal is to prove that unprivileged and coastal players can make it to the top," hoped Masum.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN/BFF