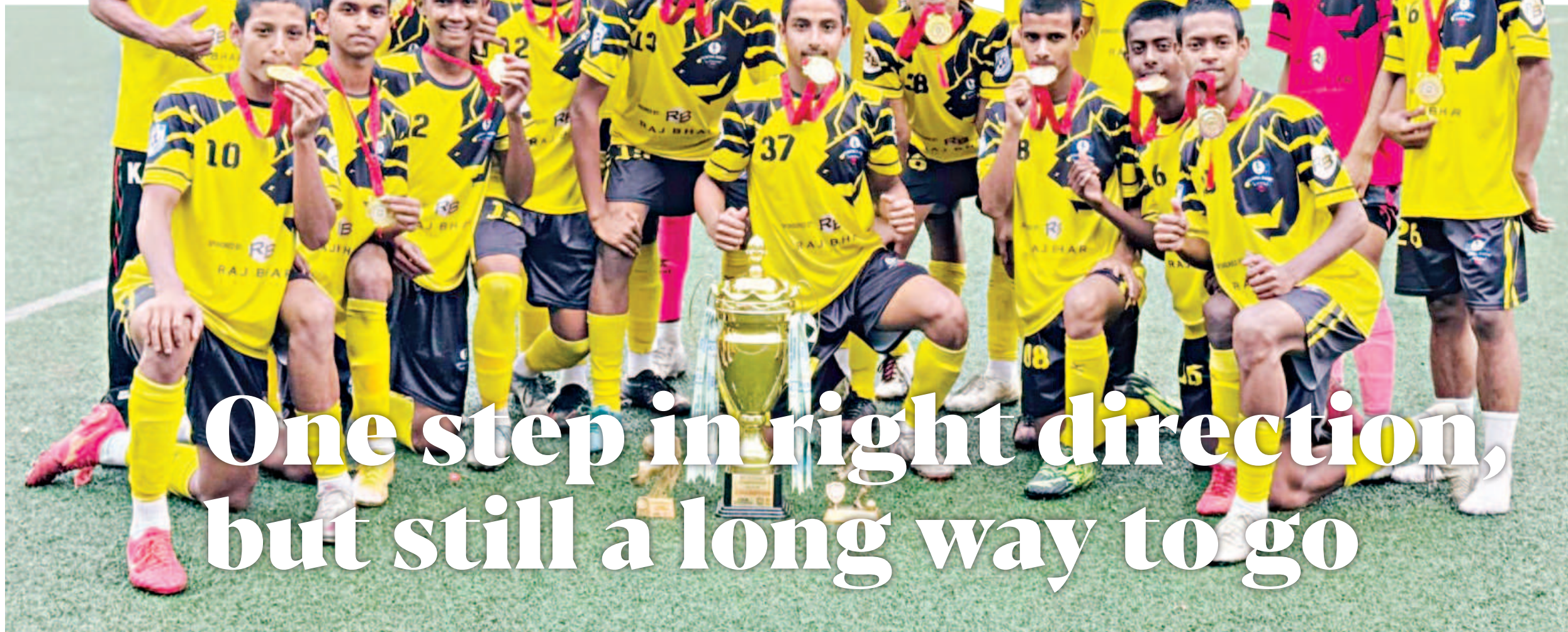


SPORTS



One step in right direction, but still a long way to go



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ANISUR RAHMAN

Poor technique and insufficient knowledge of footballers have often been blamed for poor results of the national team over the years. At times, even foreign coaches seemed bothered to have been working with such footballers.

However, hardly any initiatives have been taken to mitigate this deficiency of footballers' technique, skills, and knowledge of the game at the grassroots so far.

Unlike the heydays of the country's football, when most footballers would come through the ranks all the way up to the national team having been trained under some dedicated local coaches most of whom did not even possess any coaching certification, footballers now usually begin their journey at an academy.

However, the burning question has been whether those academies are run in a proper way, possessing the right training module, and appropriate facilities to hone the basic skills of budding footballers.

As the number of dedicated and

to get accreditation. The local game's governing body had earlier conducted two talent hunt campaigns with the involvement of those academies but the introduction of the BFF Academy Championship, involving 4800 budding footballers from 168 academies of 48 districts, has raised new hopes of helping the next generation footballers develop better techniques and skills as they make their way through the ranks. A total of 35 budding footballers have been picked for BFF Elite Academy from this programme.

Mosarrof Hossain mentioned how the BFF Academy Championship could help the academies bring the best out of the footballers.

"We need Tk 4000 to Tk 5000 to arrange a friendly match in order to judge the development of the footballers. However, most of the academies don't have the financial solvency. So, the BFF Academy Championship will act as a good platform to measure the improvement of our players each year," said Firoz.

Rajshahi's Bhabaniganj FAi secretary

there is no further platform for them to continue playing competitive matches. However, making district football leagues, which once acted as a rich pipeline for players to come through, regular once again could be an easy solution in this regard. Out of 64 districts, less than 20 held district football leagues last season.

As the guardian of the country's football, BFF can provide some financial assistance to the district football associations or convince them to revive district football leagues, so

is a norm in Europe, Bangladesh are yet to see any of their Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) and Bangladesh Championship League (BCL) clubs run and maintain a full-fledged youth development programme.

The clubs often state their limitations in providing proper accommodation for youth players as the main reason behind not even trying to build a development project. Addressing this issue, the BFF could help create a bridge between a few of the local academies and the top BPL and BCL clubs. The clubs could offer lump-sum financial assistance to the academies, who in turn will prioritise the specific clubs when it comes to providing youth talents during the BFF-sanctioned age-group championships.

This will not only help the BPL and BCL clubs erase their ill-reputation of not having a youth development programme but also help them scout better talents at the grassroots.

ENSURE A PATHWAY FOR COACHES

Though having a grassroots coach and an AFC C licence holder coach is mandatory for an academy to get accreditation from the BFF, the irony is that even the coaches of the champions and runner-up academies of the latest BFF Academy Championship are still aspiring to complete the BFF-arranged coaches' courses.

Bangladesh has approximately 1200 coaches, including 423 grassroots and 512 AFC C licence coaches, with most of them sitting idle due to fewer competitions in the periphery. The only way to put to use all these local coaches is by ensuring more local competitions across the country which would generate a need for academies to hire certified local coaches.

However, being part of an academy does not guarantee becoming a footballer. But the ever-growing football academies across the country are believed to be a step in the right direction that could lead towards the development of the country's football and the BFF should find a convenient way of getting the maximum out of these academies, so that they can produce the future stars of the country.



A COMPETITIVE PLATFORM AT LAST

Even though the country saw the initiation of a professional football league 16 years ago, none of the top-flight clubs possess fully functioning youth development programmes or youth academies in the true sense. Most of the football academies across the country have been formed voluntarily. These academies conduct training for three to six days a week but the budding footballers hardly get any opportunity to gauge their improvement due to a lack of competitive matches.

"I want to thank BFF for taking such initiative that would give our footballers a platform to compete against other academies," said Chattogram's Rampur Football Academy secretary-cum-coach Mohammad Farid, who has over 100 players in his academy that was formed some seven to eight months ago.

Firoz Kamal FA chairman Advocate

Asaduzzaman said, "We don't have any link with the Dhaka clubs to push players to the next level. I think the Academy Cup will give us that link to communicate with the Dhaka clubs."

Rangpur's Santos FA director and coach Shamim Khan Miskin thought it would be beneficial to have separate tournaments for different age groups.

"As the academies have different age-group teams, it would have been fantastic to get two to three more age-group tournaments under the Academy Accreditation Scheme," Shamim said.

BUT WHAT'S NEXT?

As the BFF Academy Championship is a tournament for the U-15 boys, it can be pegged as a stepping stone for footballers at the primary school level who usually take part in the country-wide Bangabandhu Gold Cup primary school football tournament.

But what's the next step? Apparently,

that the academy players can easily enter into this competition and earn valuable experience before heading to tournaments and leagues held in Dhaka.

A UNIFIED TRAINING APPROACH

For football to grow in the country, a level of standard needs to be maintained when it comes to operating the numerous football academies. In that regard, the BFF may as well take the initiative to formulate an exclusive and unified training module for all accredited academies, so that all academies can deliver the same training in a particular pattern in a bid to help the young footballers on the right trajectory by teaching them basic skills and knowledge about the game.

TAG THE BPL AND BCL OUTFITS WITH THE ACADEMIES

While players being scouted at the academy level and signed by big clubs



passionate football coaches decreased across the country, the concept of residential and non-residential football academies has gained traction, especially after the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF) initiative of BFF Academy Accreditation Scheme that started in 2020.

Under the BFF Academy Accreditation Scheme, there are 186 residential and non-residential academies including 14 women's football academies, all of which had to meet around 40 criteria

'Tournament should continue with more incentive provided to academies'

Among 168 teams, Firoz Kamal Football Academy of Brahmanbaria emerged champions in the recently introduced and FIFA-financed BFF Academy Championship. Despite being the chairman of the academy, advocate Mosarrof Hossain acted as the manager of the team during the tournament. The lawyer talked to The Daily Star's Anisur Rahman to share the academy's experience, limitations, prospects and other issues.

The Daily Star (DS): How did your academy become BFF's Academy Championship winners after being in operation for only over a year?
Mosarrof Hossain (MH): We formed this academy in 2022, after a team from our area became runners-up in the under-14 tournament organised by the Bangladesh Football Federation. We have received a one-star certificate from the BFF.

We started preparing for the Academy Championship three months before the start of the tournament. We formed a strong squad through a day-long trail of nearly 300 budding footballers. We also provided good facilities to the players under good local coaches and that is the secret to our success.

DS: How was the experience, starting from the zonal phase to the final phase in Dhaka?

MH: We played seven matches in total. We accommodated the players in four rooms of our house in Ashuganj for three months. The preparation was really good under local coaches. We did not face any on-or-off-field difficulties and everyone was excited over playing their first competitive tournament under BFF.

DS: Has there been any impact on the region following your academy's success in the BFF tournament?

MH: There has been a good response in Ashuganj, which has a heritage of football. Former national striker Saifur Rahman Moni is also from our area, and is seen as an inspiration by the next generations. There are other academies in our area. The biggest impact, I think, has been the fact that coaches of professional clubs like



Bashundhara Kings, Abahani and Fortis FC are communicating with us to take players for their age-level teams. I think the federation should continue to host this tournament every year.

DS: Despite being a lawyer, you are running a football academy. What drove this idea?

MH: Ashuganj has produced a few national team players in the past, but it is difficult to go to the top level

without proper football knowledge and training. This issue gave me the idea to start an academy so that the budding players can learn the basic skills and then we can sell these players to top clubs in future.

DS: How do you provide for the expenses of the academy?

MH: There are currently 194 footballers under three categories – under-12, under-13 and under-16. We provide skill training from Mondays to Thursdays and hold matches on Fridays and Saturdays. Sundays are off. I myself provide token monthly salaries worth Tk 15,000 to three coaches. But we are planning to introduce a Tk 50-100 fee for each footballer to give the academy a sustainable model.

DS: Do you face any problems to run the academy?

MH: As I am from a political family, I do not face any issues regarding training grounds. The only problem that I face is financial backing as no-one wants to sponsor football. We received a little help from others during the BFF Academy Championship. We need Tk 4000 to 5000 to play matches, so we struggle to arrange competitive matches to hone the skills of the players.

DS: Does your academy receive any support from the BFF Academy Scheme?

MH: The scheme started only two years ago. It would be better if we get financial support from the BFF. I think the scheme will benefit if the federation provides free football, training materials, etc and provides a discount on fees for coaches' courses.