

What next for BANGLADESH'S GOLDEN GIRLS?

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

On Thursday, the champion Bangladesh team received a well-deserved hero's welcome after successfully defending their SAFF Women's Championship title the previous day against the hosts in Nepal.

After landing in Dhaka, Bangladesh's golden girls were adorned with flower garlands, paraded around the city in a specially-made open-top bus with thousands cheering them on from the streets before being greeted with sweets at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) headquarters.

One must wonder, while soaking in the outpour of love from their countrymen in the streets of Dhaka, did a sense of Déjà vu creep into the minds of some of the girls.

Sabina Khatun, for example, who has led the team to the title in both editions, must remember how they had become the toast of the country after bringing home the title in 2022 by beating the same opponents on the same ground.

The procession of felicitation continued for weeks, with each player receiving grand reception upon returning to their respective communities. The praises kept coming in from all corners and various organisations announced financial rewards for the champion team.

The former BFF president Kazi Salahuddin made many promises

to the victorious players and why wouldn't he, as the SAFF triumph in 2022 was the crowning achievement of his 16-year tenure at the post.

It took some time, but eventually, the buzz wore off. The fans moved on, the media shifted their focus on to other things and the champion players returned to living and training at the BFF dormitory, away from all the limelight.

The next time the women's team featured in competitive football was almost 10



months later in a two-match friendly series against Nepal at home.

They were scheduled to take part in the Olympic Qualifier's tournament in Myanmar in May of 2023, where they were slotted in Group B alongside the hosts, Iran, and the Maldives.

But just six days before the tournament, BFF announced it would not be able to bear the expenses of the campaign and has pulled out of the competition.

Soon after that, the SAFF winning coach Golam Rabbani Choton also left the job.

Bangladesh took part in the Asian Games in last year's September with just two competitive games under



their belt since the SAFF triumph.

The team was set up for disaster and unsurprisingly finished bottom of their group, receiving an 8-0 drubbing by Japan and a 6-1 thrashing by Vietnam.

While the national team was sitting idle, the BFF devoted much of its attention to launching a franchise league for women's football, an idea that sputtered, coughed and finally died.

After achieving Bangladesh's biggest feat in football since the men's team won the SAFF Championship in 2003, Sabina and Co rightly demanded better wages which reportedly ranged from Tk 5000-20,000 at the time.

It took the federation almost 11 months to finally announce improved salaries for the players, with the wages ranging from Tk 20,000-50,000.

However, the BFF has also been

guilty of not clearing the dues of the players in time. Reportedly, players of the champion team are yet to receive their salaries for the months of September and October.

The women's league is also suffering from a lack of competition, as none of the premier division clubs in men's football form teams in the women's competition. Bashundhara Kings were the only exception for a few seasons, but they also left the league this year.

In less than two years, the optimism spurred by the triumph in Kathmandu had seemingly evaporated and an acceptance of mediocrity had crept in.

The 1-1 draw against Pakistan in the opening match did not spur any optimism and Monika Chakma saying after the match that new coach Peter Butler does not want to field senior players rang alarm bells of an impending disaster.

But like any feel-good sports movie, right when the chips were down and the team looked down and out for the count, they put aside whatever differences they had, came together and started on a path to resurgence.

It began with a 3-1 win over India,

followed by a 7-1 thumping of Bhutan in the semifinal and a hard-fought 2-1 win over Nepal in the final.

And just like that, Bangladesh's golden girls have done it again.

Winning the title back-to-back is definitive proof of Bangladesh being the best in women's football in South Asia at least for a few years.

However, while Bangladesh are languishing at 139th in the FIFA Women's Rankings, runners-up Nepal stand at 99th and semifinalists India are 68th.

The main reason behind this gulf is that Bangladesh don't play as many matches as the former two countries. Nepal, for example, took part in the West Asian Football Federation's Women's Championship in February this year as an invitee while Bangladesh were without any international action.

Still, the girls overcame the mounting odds and came out on top in a triumph that will go down as one of the greatest in Bangladesh's sporting history.

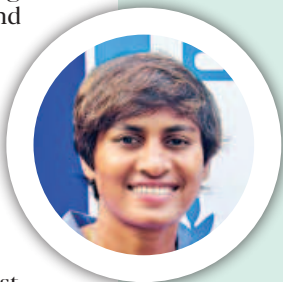
Right after the win over Nepal

in the final, the BFF's first order of business was preparing the open-top bus for celebration.

Celebrating this momentous occasion is all well and good, but once the euphoria over this incredible victory subsides, that's when the real task will begin for the newly elected BFF committee, led by president Tabitha Awal.

Other than Sabina, all members of the champion team are in their 20s, and about to hit their prime. This is the opportune time to push this side and see how far they can go.

But if the federation remains content with being champions in



After this SAFF, we should no longer be stuck at the South Asian level. We need to elevate ourselves to the Asian level.

SABINA KHATUN, captain of Bangladesh women's football team.

a regional event that holds little importance in the global context, if the honchos don't dream of making a mark at the continental or global level, it would never come to be.

As they say, it's better to try and fail than to never try at all. This is the time for Bangladesh to try and climb up the ladder in women's football globally.

I WAS AIMING FOR GOAL Ritu Porna affirms about wonder strike

SPORTS REPORTER

In the 2022 edition of the SAFF Women's Championship, Ritu Porna Chakma came off the bench in all five of Bangladesh's matches and played mostly a secondary role in the country's maiden triumph at the regional football extravaganza.

But in 2024, Ritu was no longer at the backseat as the girl from Rangamati started in each of Bangladesh's four matches, made an impact in every game and scored one of the most memorable goals in the country's football history in the final against Nepal to seal back-to-back SAFF titles for the girls.

Her amazing left-footed strike that gave Bangladesh the decisive 2-1 lead was the talk of the final. The packed crowd at the Dasarath Rangasala Stadium in Kathmandu were left stunned and millions of TV viewers were perhaps in momentary disbelief after seeing Ritu curl the ball into the goal from such a tight angle.

There were doubts whether Ritu had actually intended to go for goal or if she was trying to whip a cross but misused it and the ball just curled away from the Nepal goalkeeper's reach and ended up in the back of the net.

Only Ritu can tell what her real intention was and the Dhaka University student cleared up all confusion yesterday by stating she was indeed going for goal.

"I just raised my head to see the Nepal post and then I took the shot for goal," Ritu told the reporters at the BFF House yesterday.

"I could not believe it myself but I was really happy to have struck the goal in that moment. I have since watched my goal more than 100 times."

Ritu hogged all spotlight throughout the tournament with her speed, skill and neat crossing from the left flank and was deservedly named the Most Valuable Player of the Tournament.

"I never thought I would be the best player of this edition because I played the last edition as a substitute player," said the former BKSP player, who also assisted Shamsunnahar Jr to level the margin against Pakistan in the stoppage time of Bangladesh's tournament opener.

Ritu also assisted her teammates in the 3-1 win over India and scored one and assisted one in the semifinal against Bhutan.

"The tournament was more competitive this time than the last edition. Every match, whether it was against Pakistan, India, Bhutan or Nepal, was tough," Ritu said. "We played our hearts out against India and the belief we gained from there gave us the courage to fight against Nepal."

"Everything – venue, crowd, environment – was in Nepal's favour in the final and the final was not easy for us because we knew that we had to fight against all adversities. But we were confident about winning."

After the triumph in 2022, Ritu was promised by a government high up that she would be handed a piece of land in Moghachori village under Ghagra Union of Rangamati to build a house.

Yesterday, in-between talking about her wonder goal and the team's incredible triumph, Ritu also revealed she never received that promised land, giving a solemn reminder of how easily promises made to sportspersons get forgotten in this country.



Cricket stuck in VICIOUS CYCLE

NABID YEASIN

Bangladesh cricket is unparalleled in terms of one thing – creating its own mess and then bemoaning the untidiness.

The country's cricket is stuck in a vicious cycle of creating history and then hitting the nadir almost immediately afterward – an example of it could include how the Tigers went from registering their maiden Test series victory over hosts Pakistan to being hammered away from home by India and then by South Africa at home inside two months.

It is undeniable that the professionals playing out on the field need to take the blame for their abysmal cricket. But the ugly culture of making cricket take a backseat to their own drama and then complaining about it is something that often gets overlooked but must be held responsible for playing a major role in not only stunting the growth of the sport but also thumping it back to square one.

The successful Test series in Pakistan was achieved when cricketers did not have anything but cricket on their minds. With new Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) president Faruque Ahmed taking over just on the opening day of the first Test in Rawalpindi, there was no scope for anyone to emulate former board president Nazmul Hassan Papon's modus operandi of travelling all the way to where the Tigers are only to be bothered with toss decisions. Nor were there any melodramatic situations created by players, needing over-involvement from anyone outside the team management.

But since then, the usual ugliness in the process has returned. Skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto followed in on the footsteps of former captain Tamim Iqbal while Faruque apparently assumed the role of



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Papon in the true sense.

The chaos created by Tamim's retirement from ODIs in the middle of the Afghanistan series back in July last year has now returned in the form of Shanto's wish to step down from captaincy getting out in the media in the middle of the South Africa Tests. Even Shanto admitted that the captaincy issue 'might have' had an impact on their innings and 273-run hammering in the second Test in Chattogram.

Before the Shanto conundrum, it was the dilemma over Shakib Al Hasan's potential return for his Test swansong that took the focus away from cricket.

Meanwhile, the unresolved matter of Shanto now awaits a final decision, subject to meeting and discussion with the board president – just like it used to be even in the pre-Faruque era when there was a one-man dominance in the board.

The same Faruque who had resigned from his former post of chief selector back in 2016 due to outside interference, has now become the board president who takes it up on himself to cross cities overnight to solve players' issues personally by disregarding the proper process.

Faruque had also admitted to having made investigations on his own accord ahead of Hathurusingha's sacking – a type of role that was actively played by his predecessor despite huge criticism.

Shanto wished for such outside noise to not to come to light before any series or tournaments when he last talked to reporters. But it is apparent that he failed to understand the irony of the statement he made as it is the stakeholders of the country's cricket who often play the major role in creating such a fuss only to cry over it later.

Nahid Rana called up for Afghanistan ODIs

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh pacer Nahid Rana was called up for the upcoming three-match ODI series against Afghanistan, starting November 6 in the UAE, a Bangladesh Cricket Board press release confirmed yesterday.

Nahid, 22, has played five Tests for the Tigers and is yet to feature for them in white-ball cricket.



In: Nahid Rana, Nasum Ahmed, Zakir Hasan

Out: Anamul Haque Bijoy, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Taijul Islam

Wicket-keeper batter Liton Das was sidelined due to illness, while injury ruled out pacer Tanzim Hasan Sakib. Spinner Nasum Ahmed returned to the ODI squad for the first time since the 2023 ODI World Cup.

Left-handed opener Zakir Hasan was another notable inclusion in the 15-member squad. Taijul Islam and Anamul Haque Bijoy were dropped.

The Tigers will leave for Dubai in two groups on Saturday and Sunday, respectively. The second and third ODIs will be played on November 9 and 11.

Squad: Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid Tamim, Zakir Hasan, Najmul Hossain Shanto (C), Mushfiqur Rahim, Mahmudullah Riyad, Towhid Hridoy, Jaker Ali, Mehidy Miraz (VC), Rishad Hossain, Nasum Ahmed, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Shoriful Islam, Nahid Rana