

OFF CAMPUS

How 19-year-old Mariya from Rangpur became Bangladesh's first female Ironman 70.3

AYMAN ANIKA

"I didn't have money to afford professional gym equipment, and so, I trained with whatever I could find – water gallons for weightlifting, YouTube tutorials for guidance, and the strategies I learned at BKSP," says Ferdousi Akter Mariya, who, at only 19 years of age, became the first Bangladeshi woman to complete Ironman 70.3 race and subsequently, secured the second position.

In October 2024, Mariya stood at the starting line of the Ironman 70.3 Malaysia, her heart pounding with anticipation. The 1.2-mile ocean swim, the 56-mile bike ride, and the 13.1-mile run ahead were daunting, but Mariya was ready.

Her journey is not only remarkable for her personal achievement but also for how she has defied societal expectations and broken through barriers, particularly as a young woman coming from a conservative family.

Mariya's story begins in Pirganj upazila, Rangpur, where sports were far from the norm for young girls. However, from a young age, Mariya defied expectations. "I have been playing football since I was in class two," she shares.

marathons – a suggestion that would change her life.

What began as a way to stay fit turned into a passion. Mariya participated in her first half-marathon at the Bangabandhu Marathon in 2024, completing the 21.1 km distance. "Since then, I've run in 9-10 half-marathons, placing in the top three in seven or eight of them," she says proudly.

But even as she excelled at running, the world of triathlons was still uncharted territory for Mariya. She knew how to ride a bicycle but swimming was a different challenge entirely.

"I had never even seen the ocean before, and I couldn't swim," Mariya admits. Despite this, she made the bold decision to register for Ironman 70.3 Malaysia, setting in

motion a series of life-altering events.

With only months to prepare, she began learning to swim under the guidance of sports officer, Ferdous Alam, and trainers, Mizanur Rahman and Taufiq. "I only started swimming lessons last March, but I was determined to master it," she says.

Her resilience paid off. Supported by mentors and friends like Dr Md A Salam, who helped with the registration process, and triathlete, Dr Saklayen Russel, who encouraged her to push her limits, Mariya found a network that believed in her.

Her cousin, Akterul Islam also played a crucial role in motivating her. Jaya Chakma, her coach at BKSP, inspired Mariya to move forward despite the obstacles.

She also expressed her gratitude to Mohammad Hedaytul Hasan Philip who helped her get the passport. She was sponsored by Baraka Group, Active Plus, Aariz Foundation, and Cycle 365, which provided her with the bicycle she needed for the race.

The total journey was a test of endurance and faith in herself. Now, with her sights set on the Ironman World Championship in Spain and the Olympic triathlon qualifiers in Thailand, Mariya is more determined than ever.

"I want to do it all – Bangla Channel, English Channel swimming, Ironman, and the Olympics," she says, adding, "The path ahead would become easier for me if I can get enough sponsorships."

As Mariya continues to push boundaries, she remains a source of inspiration not only for young athletes in Bangladesh but for anyone facing obstacles in pursuit of their dreams.

Her story is a reminder that

with grit, resilience, and a supportive community, even the most challenging goals are within reach.



PHOTOS: COURTESY