

“We aren’t honouring the umpiring job properly. The main reason behind it is club cricket. The manipulation regarding the umpires’ decisions is an open secret. If you want to hide it, it will be a big lie. Players suffer the effect in tournaments like the NCL. Moreover, several players, coaches, and managers highlight those to hide their limitations and flaws.”

ABHI ABDULLAH AL NOMAN,
In-charge of BCB Umpire’s Committee



A rotten domestic culture that puts PLAYERS, UMPIRES AT LOGGERHEADS



Shakib Al Hasan’s kicking and uprooting of the stumps in a Dhaka Premier League match in 2021 made headlines across the cricket world. PHOTO: STAR FILE

‘The umpires’ association often gives us a hard time’

Iftekhar Ahmed Mithu, chairman of BCB’s umpires’ committee for the last three years, in an interview with The Daily Star’s Samsul Arefin Khan, expressed his concern regarding the recent increase in code of conduct violations by players in the ongoing National Cricket League while also admitting umpiring errors that have led to such a rise. Here are the excerpts of the interview:

The Daily Star (DS): The violation of code of conduct has increased at an alarming rate this year. What’s the view of the board regarding this?
Iftekhar Ahmed Mithu (IAM): We’re doing two things to address this. Firstly, the match referees are implementing the code of conducts, which we are sending to the tournament committee. Secondly, a committee oversees and analyses the players’ reactions. To give everyone a fair chance, we are reviewing these matters and we are making a report by ourselves. After seeing on-field decisions from one or two cameras, we are trying to conclude whether the decision was correct or not, or whether it was a bad decision. We are making an internal report regarding these matters.

When any kind of controversy occurs, we are sitting out the concerned umpires from officiating in the next match or matches. However, the reaction from players, especially the senior ones, in many cases are unacceptable. They know that there is no DRS in domestic cricket. DRS is very expensive and there is no technician in Bangladesh for it. And we also can’t use our best umpires in every domestic match. We have to use our existing resources. The number of code of conduct violations have increased a lot but a big number of those violations have come from those who are playing for the national team or represented the national team in the past. I think the behaviour of senior players is sending a wrong message to the junior players.

DS: The demerit points of NCL, BCL only last for a year and don’t carry over to other domestic tournaments. Do you have any plan to add those points to other competitions such as DPL as well?
IAM: We should look into the practicality. The ICC has a timeframe for demerit points. For the next NCL, I will propose to have demerit points implemented across all domestic tournaments. To be honest, over the last three years the umpires have improved a lot. I won’t say we have reached the summit but probably, we have moved to 25 percent from five percent five years ago. We still have 75 percent scope for improvement. We are looking into other options to reduce the number of errors. We are increasing training facilities and bringing in new umpires. We are also looking into increasing technical aids as well.

DS: Are you facing any issues regarding poor umpiring from the umpires’ association?
IAM: Definitely there are some interferences. The association often gives us a hard time. They always talk about experienced umpires. For this, we are trying to include new umpires. When competition rises, everyone’s performance will rise. Since the new president took charge, we have increased remuneration of umpires by 30 percent in all domestic competitions. We are also thinking about taking assistance from the ICC. Plus, we want to use retired umpires and beef up grading and training of our umpires. We are doing all these for the betterment of the umpires. But sometimes there are hindrances from the umpires’ association. The association should join hands with the umpires’ committee and work for the betterment of umpires. They should understand that we are not their opposition, instead we are an extended arm of theirs. However, I can say that there is less pressure now on umpires compared to previous times.

DS: There are analysts to analyse players’ performance in all NCL matches. Are they analysing umpires’ performances too?
IAM: This is also a part of the improvement. We haven’t taken any underperformer from last season. We are giving them an opportunity to learn more and come back again. Umpires need to be both physically and mentally fit. We are also preparing guideline for the umpires, setting specific criteria for become a Grade A umpire.

DS: What are you doing with underperforming umpires?
IAM: If you are making too many mistakes, there will be consequences. Those whom we feel are not competent enough to conduct NCL, BCL and DPL matches, are being sent to third division matches. We are giving them opportunity to start from there and this is the policy.



Tamim Iqbal engaged in a heated exchange with an umpire during a DPL match in 2016. PHOTO: STAR FILE

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

While talking about Bangladesh cricket, many often lament that despite being a Test nation for around two-and-a-half decades, the country has failed to cultivate a domestic cricket culture. This assertion, however, is not quite true.

Club cricket began in a war-torn Bangladesh with the inaugural Dhaka League in 1974 and over the course of about half-a-century, a cricketing ecosystem, however lacklustre, has formed at the domestic level and so has a cricketing culture. Unfortunately, it is this very culture that has held back Bangladesh cricket in more ways than one.

Instead of creating an atmosphere of sportsmanship that encourages excellence, Bangladesh’s domestic cricket has always seen the big clubs and marquee players throwing their weight around, almost bullying umpires to always call in their favour, creating a culture of mistrust between players and umpires that continues to plague the country’s cricket even now.

A legacy of mistrust

“I wasn’t surprised. Most of your national team batters play for Abahani and Mohammedan. Umpires don’t give them out LBW, so they effectively play two-three innings in one match. This creates a bad habit. They don’t get the same advantage in international cricket.”

Asoka de Silva, a former Sri Lanka international who later became an umpire, said this in 1994 to cricket journalist Uptal Shuvro, who later recalled this conversation in a piece he wrote for Prothom Alo in June of 2020.

Here the Sri Lankan, in a very straightforward way, explained why he wasn’t surprised to see Bangladesh doing poorly in the ICC Trophy earlier that year.

Asoka, who had played for Mohammedan in the 1993 edition of

the Dhaka League and had played for Abahani before that, knew the ins and outs of Bangladesh’s domestic cricket and how the top teams always got favoured by the officials.

Accounts of senior journalists from that time corroborate this statement. In the 90s, when the Abahani-Mohammedan rivalry was at its peak, the umpires had to always think twice before every decision as one unfavourable call could result in a riot in the stands.

The star batters of that time – like Minhajul Abedin Nannu, Akram Khan – knew of their influence and never shied away from using it, which in turn made it tougher for them to score runs consistently in the international arena, at least that’s what Asoka insinuated back in 1994.

The seeds of mistrust between players and umpires which were sown by the earlier generation have sprouted and occurrences of players throwing temper tantrums against umpires has only increased.

The most infamous show of player dissent in recent times came from Shakib Al Hasan in 2021, when he infamously kicked the stumps in front of the umpire after his LBW appeal was turned down against Abahani’s Mushfiqur Rahim. The Mohammedan captain, later in the same match, also uprooted the stumps and slammed those on the ground for good measure.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had the chance to set an example out of Shakib by handing the all-rounder a stern punishment. The board banned him for three games and fined him Tk 5 lakh, which seemed like a light punishment and did little to dissuade others from following his examples.

Temper flare freely

Conflict between the players and on-field umpires has taken centre-stage in the ongoing 26th National Cricket

League (NCL).

The players have been breaching the code of conduct at an alarming rate, as according to match referee reports obtained by The Daily Star, the opening three rounds of the NCL witnessed 11 breaches, which is one fewer than the combined number of breaches in last year’s four-day tournaments – NCL and the Bangladesh Cricket League (BCL).

Many of those breaches were the result of players’ reacting adversely to questionable umpiring calls. But in showing their dissent, the players have been guilty of crossing the line at times, exhibiting a lack of respect towards the match officials, which resulted in them getting demerit points and fines.

“In my case, a genuine out was not given by the umpire against Pinak [Ghosh]. There was contact on the gloves. Honestly, I behaved badly but I didn’t use any bad language. But I shouldn’t have reacted like that as well,” said Chattogram Division’s wicketkeeper-batter Irfan Sukkur, who was fined 30 percent of his match fees and was handed one demerit point for his misconduct during his side’s second-round match against Sylhet Division.

“Compared to the previous year, I think the umpires are making more mistakes this year. But I think the players should take most of the blame. We shouldn’t react in such a way,” he added.

Slap on the wrist

According to some officials, the lack of implementation of demerit points and meagre fines are a reason behind frequent breaches of conduct.

According to the code of conduct used in the NCL, a demerit point remains in a players’ disciplinary record for a year, while in international cricket it remains there for two years.

Moreover, it is learnt that in Bangladesh a demerit point gained in a four-day competition like NCL or BCL will only be effective in first-class competitions and won’t be considered in white-ball events.

For this reason, players hardly accumulate the minimum four demerit points which would result in a two-match suspension.

The umpiring problem

The standard of umpiring is not always the highest in domestic competitions and the board is seemingly trying to deal with this issue by increasing the number of umpires in their pool, which currently stands at 24.

And whenever an umpire’s decision causes controversy, the board’s remedy is to sit him out from the next fixture. The pressures from big clubs and from marquee players is also still something the umpires have to deal with.

“We have failed to give the umpires a proper environment to do their work freely. We have to calculate the ratio of how many appeals an umpire faces in a four-day game and how many wrong decisions he makes. For example, if an umpire faces 16 appeals and then makes one wrong decision, it’s less than 10 percent. If the ICC is okay with a correct judgment ratio of 92-93 percent for elite umpires, why shouldn’t we be happy with an 85 percent ratio from our umpires?” said Abhi Abdullah Al Noman, in-charge of the BCB Umpire’s committee.

The consequence of poor umpire-player relations

Over the years, whenever the topic of improving Bangladesh’s domestic cricket is discussed, the talk mainly centres around preparing good wickets; very little, if any, attention is given on the players’ treatment of umpires.

The players may get their way with the umpires in domestic cricket, but this leaves them ill-prepared for the challenges at the international stage.

The sight of Bangladesh players looking dejected after the umpires decrees a wrong decision against them, is nothing new. Dealing with this disappointment and carrying on with the same spirit is something cricketers learn from domestic cricket, which sadly has hardly ever been the case in Bangladesh.

“All over the world, countries have a panel of umpires for first-class cricket. But it is missing in Bangladesh. Nobody knows who is in which grade. The players know which umpires are not capable enough to absorb the pressure of a four-day game and target him,” said a prominent local umpire, who like many is hurt by the lack of respect from players.

“The umpires, match referees, coaches and players – if all of us can do our jobs properly the cricket culture will change in a positive way. If we just focus on the wickets and not on other stuff like umpiring, it will have no impact on country’s cricket,” the umpire, who preferred to remain anonymous, added.

HIGHLIGHTS

Number of COC violation incidents in the last year’s NCL and BCL was 12

The opening three rounds of this NCL has witnessed 11 COC breaches

The code of conduct breaches do not come to light often, leading to a rising number of cases

The amount of fine slapped on a player for COC violation is negligible compared to what they earn as match fee

Umpires do not receive a copy of match referee reports on domestic matches

DRS is a very expensive venture and no DRS technician in Bangladesh

Top players earn 60-100 times more than an umpire during a Dhaka Premier Division match

Board more focused on increasing quantity of umpires, rather than quality

The manager’s position of BCB’s umpires’ committee has remained vacant since 2008



PHOTO: TV SCRENGRAB

Umpires, too, make dubious, often inexplicable decisions, leading to players’ remonstrations.