

#FYI

Breaking Barriers: Women athletes leading the fight for change

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence is an international campaign to end violence against women and girls, observed annually from November 25 (International Day

for the Elimination of Violence Against Women) to December 10 (Human Rights Day). It was first launched in 1991 by the Women's Global Leadership Institute and is now supported by the United Nations,

governments, NGOs, and individuals worldwide.

This year, a part of the campaign, **Star Lifestyle** speaks to some of the women athletes of Bangladesh who are not only

striving for glory in the world of sports but are also challenging societal norms and becoming role models for countless young girls across the country.

“I never thought I would be MVP”

-- RITU PORNA CHAKMA

Ritu Porna Chakma from Rangamati's Kawkhali upazila came from a humble beginning. Although she first kicked a football when she was just in class three, it was later on that she was able to develop a passion for the game.

“The first time I kicked a football in 2012, I almost broke my toe,” Chakma chuckled, as she reminisced about the early days. “Back then I had no such dream of becoming a football player. I didn't even know girls could have international teams! To me, it was a game that I enjoyed playing a lot.”

Ritu Porna was a Mogachhari Government Primary School student, which has already become popular for producing top-notch athletes. There, under the guidance of head teacher, Birsen Chakma, Ritu's perspective of the game began changing.

“It began with the Bangamata Fazilatunnesa Cup. It was compulsory for us to participate. Birsen Chakma sir included me in that team for the tournament in 2012 and until 2015, I played every year,” said Chakma while recounting her formative years.

Then, tragedy struck. Ritu's father, the sole bread earner of their family passed away and life, as she knew it, came to a standstill.

“We're four sisters and one brother. We come from a very poor family and after the death of my father, everything stopped – my studies, my football, everything,” she said with a heavy voice. That was when Birsen, once again, lifted Ritu. “He took responsibility for everything to ensure I don't stop playing football.”

Coupled with her teacher's efforts was the undying support of her

family, which ultimately led Ritu to join the national team in 2017 for the SAFF U-15 Championship.

“The sole reason I was able to come this far was my family's support, especially my mother and my didi [elder sister]. Despite all odds, they always prioritised my needs, my dreams, and my aspirations. My career as a footballer was only possible because of them.

“However, it was difficult for my family as well. Society tried in

RITU PORNA CHAKMA

Age: 20

Debut: 2021

Position: Attacking midfielder

Best performance: Scored the winning goal against Nepal in the SAFF Women's Championship 2024 final in Kathmandu

Courtesy: TDS Sports Desk

many ways to hold me back. Our neighbours would say negative things to my family but my mother and sister never let those words even reach my ears,” she added, a hint of defiance in her tone.

With those women standing behind her like a wall, no obstacle could reach Ritu as she soared her way to the top.

Ritu Porna's performance in the final match against Nepal in the SAFF-2024 Championship grabbed headlines not only in the country but also abroad. It

was enough to prompt talks among European clubs to recruit the 20-year-old prodigy.

“I never thought I would be the most valuable player [SAFF-2024]. It's a great achievement for me. My family and I are very proud. I can't put into words how it feels,” Ritu Porna Chakma mentioned with pride.



“Every player has one person who pushed them”

-- SABINA KHATUN

Sabina Khatun's venture into the world of sports did not begin with football.

“Every player, I believe, has this one person who pushed them forward to reach their fullest potential. For me, that person was my coach at Satkhira's Nobarun Girl's School, Akbar sir. He made me take part in everything – handball, football, cricket, kabaddi, 100-metre sprint, whatever there was to play!” she exclaimed.

After seeing her excel in one sport after another, coach Akbar one day decided to meet Sabina's family.

“I was always playing. Even when he came to my house to meet my parents and four sisters, I was outside running around with the boys of the neighbourhood,” Khatun laughed.

Akbar informed her parents of her potential. And Sabina's parents and eldest sister agreed with him.

“For women in this country, it's impossible to play sports professionally if they don't have their family by their side. That support from home is imperative,” Sabina voiced, her tone growing serious.

Although female sportspersons have more freedom now, there were always struggles in the early days.

She recounted, “Our coach had to endure a lot. The entire neighbourhood was against him for training girls in sports. But he did not let that affect any of us. Sometimes, when all the girls sit and share stories of the past, it makes me laugh. They say things like, ‘We used to try and run away but our coach would drag us back onto the field for training. We were young and didn't understand why.’”

It is those coaches and their perseverance that ultimately helped these girls stand on their own two feet and kick the ball!

“I never aimed to be where I am right now. I just wanted to play football, that's all. When I was announced as the best player of the team in the 2010 SAFF Championship, I was unaware that my name was even being announced, it was that unexpected for me,” she admitted. “Back then,

SABINA KHATUN

Age: 31

Debut: 2010

Position: Forward

Best performance: Hat-trick in a 6-0 win against Pakistan in SAFF Women's Championship 2022 in Kathmandu

Courtesy: TDS Sports Desk

there were no facilities and barely any payments for us. Even until 2015-16, there was no financial support. Those of us who stuck through did so out of pure passion for the game and the struggles we have overcome that brought us this far, that brought me this far.”

When Sabina, now captain of the women's team, compared her past to her present, she found it to be vastly different.

“Before, we would just play. But now, if you notice, almost every player in our team is the breadwinner of their family. Ritu, me, and even our youngest player, Sagorika — we take our family's responsibility. I think this fact itself is such an inspiration that from such a young age we can support our families. And that is why our families know the importance of football in our lives,” Sabina concluded.

