

Ritu Porna shines brightest

SPORTS DESK

Despite 2024 being a tumultuous year for the country, with sporting activities halted a number of times owing to the July Uprising, the sporting achievements of Bangladesh on the international stage have been quite impressive.

The year started with the women's youth football team winning the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship at home in February, a success that was followed up by their male counterparts in the SAFF U-20 Championship in Nepal in August.

In cricket, Bangladesh men's team earned a few historic victories, including a Test series whitewash of Pakistan in Pakistan in August-September and a first-ever T20I series whitewash against West Indies in the Caribbean in December.

However, three achievements, according to The Daily Star Sports team, stood out.

On December 3, Bangladesh hockey created a piece of history by sealing their maiden qualification for next year's FIH Hockey Junior World Cup during the Junior Asia Cup in Muscat where they eventually finished fifth.

Hot on the heels of this success came a cricketing achievement as Bangladesh successfully defended the ACC Men's Under-19 Asia Cup title in UAE, beating archrivals India by 59 runs in the final on December 8.

But arguably the most significant of those three successes came on October 30 in Kathmandu as Bangladesh retained the SAFF Women's Championship title, beating hosts Nepal 2-1 in an entertaining final.

It was a victory against all expectations as Bangladesh's buildup to the tournament was quite listless and the campaign itself was chaotic.

Despite being the defending champions, Bangladesh went to Nepal without having

played any preparation matches in four months. They started the tournament with a frustrating draw against Pakistan, the aftermath of which opened up a can of worms, with the senior players and the head coach slinging mud at each other right through the campaign.

But after the Pakistan draw, Bangladesh grew from strength to strength, brushing aside every opponent that came their way. And the player who shone the brightest in Bangladesh's undefeated campaign was Ritu Porna Chakma, the winger who dazzled with every move down the left flank, provided deadly crosses for the strikers and turned into a goalscorer when her team needed one.

Ritu Porna was head and shoulders above the rest of the performers, not only in the Bangladesh team but also among all the seven participants. She was named the Most Valuable Player of the tournament, and for us, she was the best sports personality of Bangladesh in 2024.



‘I am my own inspiration’

Ritu Porna Chakma, The Daily Star's sports personality of the year, recently spoke with the Sports team's Sabbir Hossain. Here are the excerpts:

The Daily Star (DS): How would you evaluate the performance of Bangladesh women's football team over the past year?

Ritu Porna Chakma (RPC): The year began poorly, with no games for five months. Despite that, we became SAFF champions for the second consecutive time, which was a satisfying end to the year.

DS: What stands out as your most memorable experience of 2024?

RPC: The outpouring of love of the people of our country after winning the SAFF Championship was the most rewarding experience. Bringing them the title and celebrating together filled us with great joy.

DS: What was the hardest time you had in 2024?

RPC: As you know, we train year-round at the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) camp. After winning our first SAFF Championship in 2022, we worked hard for the following two years to maintain that level of success. However, this year we faced many adversities, including severe financial difficulties. Our salaries were irregular, sometimes delayed by two or three months, which was the most hurtful aspect.

DS: Apart from the team's success in the SAFF Championship, what was your personal highlight of the year?

RPC: The moment I was announced as the Most Valuable Player of the tournament at the SAFF final awards ceremony is a memory I will cherish forever. I hadn't anticipated it at all, and the feeling of happiness was indescribable.

DS: Could you provide a detailed account of the match-winning goal in the SAFF final?

RPC: In the final, I made several crosses from the left wing, but none resulted in goals. I then decided to try my luck with a shot. Although it was from a difficult angle on the left outside the box, I truly aimed to score. Fortunately, it found the back of the net and became the winning goal.

DS: What inspires you in your professional career?

RPC: I am my own inspiration, always focusing on what's best for me. My love for football fuels my game, and I maintain strong self-belief whenever I'm on the field. From a childhood pastime, football has now become my profession, and I'm determined to represent Bangladesh for many years to come.

DS: How important is the support from the people of the country for your performance?

RPC: Hailing from the remote village of Magachhari in Ghagra union, Kawkhali upazila, Rangamati, I've faced numerous challenges to reach the national team.

The support and affection I'm currently experiencing from people across the country provide great motivation, and I strive for consistent performance.

DS: How do you see yourself contributing to the development of football in Bangladesh in the years to come?

RPC: As football is my passion, I want to spend my life contributing to the sport. A dream that I cherish is to establish an academy named after my younger brother after I retire. He tragically died from electrocution at home two months before our SAFF Championship victory in 2022.

DS: How do you manage the demands of both sports and your studies?

RPC: I am currently studying Philosophy at the University of Dhaka. Balancing sports and studies is challenging, and my attendance has suffered. However, I'm determined to complete my graduation, no matter what.

DS: What are the barriers to progress for female footballers in Bangladesh, and what steps can be taken to overcome them?

RPC: I've noticed a growing interest in football among girls. However, many in our country still hold negative views. This prejudice persists despite girls' achievements, making our path difficult. To advance women's football, academies with comprehensive training facilities should be established in every district. I believe we have the potential and talent to become one of the best teams in Asia.

DS: Could you provide an overview of the team's aspirations for the next year?

RPC: We've been on vacation for over a month now, and the BFF has yet to provide a calendar of upcoming matches and events for 2025. We have requested that a calendar be provided to enable us to prepare and maintain our performance levels. We've also discussed several demands with the new BFF president, Tabith Awal, including regular salary payments, improved diet in BFF camp, and consistent scheduling of international matches. We await their implementation.



Bangladesh's fastest bowler Nahid Rana grabbed the attention of the cricket world since making his international debut against Sri Lanka in March this year with his ability to breach the 150kmph mark. In just six Tests, the 22-year-old pacer from Chapainawabganj has claimed 20 wickets and has also made his ODI debut. In a conversation with The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan on Wednesday, the pace sensation opened up about the flying start to

his Bangladesh career and what he plans to achieve in 2025. The excerpts are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): How do you sum up your performance in 2024?

Nahid Rana (NR): I think everything has gone really well for me since I made my international debut. When I played the first game [a Test against Sri Lanka], I realised what international cricket

really is. I prepared well before every game and I'm happy with what I achieved this year.

DS: What was your favourite moment of the year?

NR: There are plenty of them. The Pakistan series is definitely one of my favourites. The West Indies series can be the other one.

DS: Where did you like bowling better, West Indies or the sub-continent?

NR: I enjoyed bowling in the West Indies. The wicket was really good. When I tried to generate pace, I got good carry. Overall, the conditions, the team bonding and everything else

was perfect in the West Indies.

DS: Your raw pace sets you apart. What kind of work do you do to maintain it?

NR: I'm trying to remain fit both mentally and physically. I mentally prepare myself to be in a position where I can prove myself whenever I get an opportunity. I'm also trying to be disciplined in my food habits, sleeping time, and gym so that I can remain fit.

DS: How did you handle the pressure of international cricket so well so early in your career?

NR: I always think normally. I try

to adjust to the situation. I try to understand how the wicket is behaving and try to bowl by reading the conditions. Moreover, I try to enjoy my game.

DS: The team management has rested you a few times to manage your workload. How do you feel about that?

NR: They are my well-wishers and guardians. Them trying to manage my workload, I think, will benefit me.

DS: As a newcomer, how did you find the bonding of the pace bowling unit?

NR: We are all like brothers. The seniors are like elder brothers and

juniors like me are younger brothers. We are not bonded by blood but are very close. If someone doesn't get enough matches, the others support him and give him confidence. We spend a lot of time together and enjoy each other's company.

DS: What is your goal in the upcoming year, starting with the BPL and then the Champions Trophy?

NR: I don't think too far ahead. I only think about staying fit and enjoying the game. In the BPL, I will try to help my franchise win the title. And of course, if I get the opportunity to play in the Champions Trophy, I will try to become the highest wicket-taker.

A year of contrasts in BANGLADESH CRICKET

ASHFAQ-UL-ALAM

Writing a year-end is not rocket science. If one asks ChatGPT or any other AI language model how to write one, it will provide an array of suggestions like: "Briefly explain the significance of the year; provide a summary of the major events; highlight the overall theme or recurring patterns." While helpful, these don't suffice when reflecting on how Bangladesh cricket fared in 2024.

Sports, at the end of the day, is a mode of entertainment. Unlike journalists or statisticians, fans don't obsess over numbers, significance of events, or overarching themes; they remember the moments. Years from now, fans might not recall that the men's team won 12 T20Is -- their highest in a single year -- but they will likely remember Jaker Ali's emphatic knock in the third T20I against West Indies, leading to a 3-0 clean sweep.

The year 2024 had its share of such memorable events, although not all were pleasant. In women's cricket, for example, the highlight was Nigar Sultana shedding tears of joy after her side beat Scotland -- sealing their first-ever win in a T20 World Cup. Beyond that, the Tigresses struggled, suffering clean sweeps at home against India, Australia, and Ireland.

In age-level cricket, the fiery spells of Bangladesh



pacers Iqbal Hossain Emon and Al Fahad against India in the final of the Under-19 Asia Cup, which the young Tigers won, left an impression that could survive the test of time. The U-19 women's team also put up a good showing in the Women's Asia Cup, but succumbed to India in the final.

Administratively, the sight of former Bangladesh captain Faruque Ahmed smiling ear to ear after being elected as the president of Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) -- ending the longstanding reign of Nazmul Hassan Papon -- was an unforeseen moment that came to pass through the ripple effect of the fall of the Awami League in August.

However, Faruque's handling of Chandika Hathurusingha's dismissal as head coach drew criticism, and the frequency of his appearances in media raised eyebrows as it turned out to be eerily similar to his predecessor's.

The men's cricket journey this year was a rollercoaster.

Out of nine Tests, the Tigers won three -- all on foreign soil -- including a historic 2-0 victory in Pakistan. Afterwards, however, they faltered at home to Sri Lanka and South Africa and also suffered a 2-0 series defeat in their tour of India before getting whitewashed 3-0 in T20Is by the world champions.

In ODIs, Bangladesh won just three out of nine matches, struggling to find balance in the 50-over format. Despite losing to Sri Lanka and the USA in T20I series -- with the latter occurring right before the ICC T20 World Cup -- they ended the year on a high, sweeping West Indies 3-0, having played 24 T20Is.

The ICC T20 World Cup saw the Tigers pull up their socks and beat Sri Lanka in the opener, a match Bangladesh fans would remember for the bravado of Towhid Hridoy, who hit three consecutive sixes off Wanindu Hasaranga to swing the game's momentum. Yet, their campaign ended with

disappointment as they missed a semi-final spot due to a timid approach against Afghanistan in their final Super Eights encounter.

Individually, pacer Taskin Ahmed had a career-defining year, claiming 63 wickets at an average below 20. Leg-spinner Rishad Hossain's 35 T20I wickets set a national record, and Mehedi Hasan Miraz emerged as a reliable batter, amassing 1,095 runs. But in terms of moments to savour, speedster Nahid Rana breathed fire to add the X-factor to an already potent pace attack.

Shakib Al Hasan and Mahmudulla Riyad, meanwhile, retired from T20Is after the India series, but the former's wish for a farewell Test in Mirpur against South Africa was thwarted by public ire over his political associations. A ban on Shakib's bowling action in December further marred his year.

Looking ahead to 2025, the burning question is whether Shakib and Tamim Iqbal, absent since September 2023, will get a swansong in the Champions Trophy.

As for the year that is winding down, it was neither an overarching triumph nor a debilitating failure. The stench of mediocrity was present, but so was vivacious tenacity. Above all, it was an interesting year in cricket for Bangladesh -- one that fans would not forget soon.



‘Everything has gone really well for me’