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Footwork, fitness and FEARLESSNESS

The unstoppable life of Bangladesh's first female karate black belt



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NILIMA JAHAN

There was a time when doctors told her there was no cure. A time when the world seemed to close in, whispering that this might be the end. But she refused to listen. She chose to fight — not just with fists and footwork, but with the unyielding will of a warrior.

The story of Shamima Akhtar Tulee, Bangladesh's first female karate black belt and highest Dan, is more than just one of triumph. It is a testament to resilience, defiance, and sheer willpower — qualities that made her not only a champion on the mat but a fighter against every obstacle life threw her way.

A DREAM BORN FROM A POSTER

The spark was lit in 1983 when a blood-streaked poster changed everything. Tulee's brother brought home an image of Bruce Lee, battered but unbreakable. “He fought a tiger — and won,” he said.

The words sent a jolt through her. “If a human could possess such power, then it wasn't just legend — it was something to be learned, something to be mastered,” she recalled.

Her world at the time was one of academics. Her siblings studied at prestigious medical and university institutions, and Tulee herself was expected to follow in their footsteps.

But the spark ignited by that Bruce Lee poster was more powerful than any academic expectation. Curiosity turned into obsession, and obsession gave way to history. With the fire of a true fighter burning within her, Tulee found a way to begin her journey.

When her family moved to Dhaka, Tulee secretly enrolled in a karate class in Bhuter Goli, knowing well that society would never accept girls practicing martial arts. Instead of attending the coaching her father had arranged, she joined the class

without his knowledge, bringing her sister along for support.

She was the only girl among 59 boys.

The trainer was hesitant, insisting she bring a guardian's permission. Undeterred, Tulee forged her father's signature and began attending classes, using her tiffin money to pay the fees. She trained in secrecy, and though the trainer was concerned for her safety, the 59 boys quickly became her protectors.

“After a month, my uniform smelled of sweat, but I couldn't wash it at home for fear of being caught. When my mentor suggested dry-cleaning, I couldn't afford it, so I washed it myself. That's when my sister found out,” said Tulee.

Despite her family's disapproval, Tulee was unstoppable.

campaigns, selecting promising talents for advanced training at the center. Her skills and leadership earned her a place in the Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defence Party (VDP) team, where she was later appointed as a coach.

Despite her success, not everyone supported her. When she joined Dhaka University's English department, balancing academics and sports became a struggle. Critics questioned, “Why does she still fight?” Pressured to step aside for younger athletes, Tulee shifted focus to teaching, taking jobs at three English medium schools.

Yet, her passion for karate and fitness remained.

Determined to build something of her own, she saved every penny and, in 2001, launched Combat Gym by

government support.

But the women came. One by one, they joined. Mothers, students, professionals — women who had never stepped into a gym before. She was building a movement. And then — just as she reached her peak — life hit her with the hardest fight yet.

In 2003, when Tulee became a mother, she expected joy, not a battle for survival. But motherhood was soon overshadowed by a devastating diagnosis: Non-cirrhotic portal hypertension — a rare, incurable genetic condition.

For years, she was hospitalised for months at a time, battling jaundice, melena, anemia, and internal bleeding. Every two months, she needed a new stent. The medical costs drained her. She lost her savings. She sold everything. But it still wasn't enough.

Yet, following the famous Japanese proverb, “Fall down seven times, get up eight” — she refused to surrender.

“My strength was fading, and the doctors had no cure. Sent home with no hope, I made a decision: I would rise. I would rebuild my body and mind, no matter the odds. I would never again be powerless. And so, I returned to meditation.”

“I practiced exercise, lifted weights, and lifted myself up. I believed that one day, a great solution would come, and for that, I had to keep fighting.”

And then, in March 2022, at the age of 49, Tulee defied every expectation. She became an international veteran champion at the Ozawa Cup International Karate Tournament in Las Vegas — the first Bangladeshi woman to win a medal in the veteran category.

Over 900 karatekas from 30 countries participated in the tournament.

But this victory was even more special. Her son, Tahseen Shaan Leon, won two bronze medals alongside her. For the first time in Bangladesh's history, a mother and son stood together on the winners' podium.

“Despite being a five-time National Gold Medalist, I missed the World Karate Championship due to lack of funds, support, and sponsorship. Many golden opportunities slipped away, but after years of struggle, I was finally repaid — along with my child”, she said.

She was also one of five martial artists worldwide selected for the Fifth Martial Arts Research Initiative for Experts Programme 2022, organised by Unesco's International Centre of Martial Arts. She became the first athlete from Bangladesh to participate in this competitive and prestigious research programme.

Yet, just months later, her condition took a turn for the worse. By the end of 2022, she had been

admitted to four hospitals across three countries. Then came the final blow — she needed Tk 30 lakh for urgent surgery in Delhi.

“As a single mother for the past 10 years, solely responsible for both my long-term treatment and family, it was impossible to afford such a large sum,” she said.

Desperate, she reached out to the Bangladesh Karate Federation, wrote to the prime minister, and appealed to sports organisations but received no response. It was only her friends from Dhaka University's English department who, in the end, launched a campaign and raised the funds that ultimately saved her life.

“And throughout my difficult journey, my companion was always my son, Leon,” she added.

“I've dedicated my life to sports, bringing pride to Bangladesh in international competitions. I have served the Karate Federation, Powerlifting Association, Bodybuilding, and Yoga whenever and however they needed me, but when I turned to my own country for support, I was met with nothing,” she said.

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Reflecting on this, she advises, “While self-defense is crucial, education must come first. Finish your studies, understand your purpose, and become self-reliant. Without education and financial literacy, the world can be an incredibly tough place for women.”

She further emphasised, “Moreover, women should see fitness not as a luxury, but as a necessity. With pregnancy, hormonal changes, and constant shifts in the body, it's essential to first understand your body — its strengths, limits, and endurance.”

As part of her ongoing journey, she recently launched LOIS CHLOÉ, the country's first and only vegan cosmetic brand.

For Tulee, often called “Wonder Woman” in the fitness community, carrying the Bangladeshi flag to global platforms has never been about fame. It's about her unwavering belief that every woman deserves strength, empowerment, and the freedom to live fearlessly. This is the message she hopes to impart through her book, “Sick to Strong”, co-written with her son Leon.

Quoting her favourite words from Rumi, “You were born with wings, why prefer to crawl through life?” she urged every woman to rise, fight, and “be unstoppable.”



BREAKING BARRIERS, BREAKING RECORDS

In 1989, at just 16 years old, Tulee became the first Bangladeshi woman to receive a black belt in Shotokan Karate. She was tested twice to silence any doubts about a female earning the title.

That same year, she won two gold medals in the National Karate Championship.

Her father, unaware of her karate involvement, first discovered her achievements on the evening news when he saw his daughter receiving gold medals from a minister. When Tulee returned home that night with a split lip and bruises, she braced herself for her father's reaction, but he said nothing.

Between 1989 and 1993, she cemented her place as one of Bangladesh's greatest martial artists, winning five consecutive national championships. But her impact went beyond personal victories — she trained students in school

Tulee — Bangladesh's first female-led combat gym focused on fitness, self-defence, and mental strength.

She trained internationally in Yoga, Pilates, Fitness Training, Stress Management, Krav Maga, and Shaolin Kung Fu, traveling across America, Australia, India, Thailand, Malaysia, and China, learning the most advanced techniques in each field.

But fitness training revealed a new reality. She met women struggling with obesity, infertility, and chronic illnesses — women desperate to reclaim their health. She realised her mission was bigger than just combat training; it was about empowering women to take control of their bodies and their lives.

Since karate requires fundamental fitness, her gym became a hub for strength training, guiding over 10,000 people on their fitness journeys. She built it from the ground up — handling training, finances, logistics — without sponsors or