

‘If you don’t play, people forget you’



An injury during the NCL T20 nearly ended **Mukidul Islam Mugdho's** entire domestic season. But the pacer not only fought his way back to the field, but also played a pivotal role in Rangpur Division's title win in the red-ball NCL, finishing as the second-highest wicket-taker with 29 scalps in just four matches and was adjudged the player-of the tournament. In a conversation with **The Daily Star's Samsul Arefin Khan**, the 25-year-old spoke about the team's remarkable turnaround, his recovery journey and the challenges that lie ahead. Excerpts are as follows:

The Daily Star (DS): It was a great NCL for you and Rangpur Division. Your team staged a tremendous comeback in the last match against Khulna Division after conceding a 134-run first innings lead. How did such a turnaround happen?

Mukidul Islam Mugdho (MIM): Unfortunately, we dropped six catches in the first innings and there were a few wrong umpiring decisions, which allowed them to post a decent total.

Then we suffered a collapse in our first innings. When I went in, [captain] Akbar [Ali] bhai told me, "Play as long as you can. If we avoid the follow-on, the game can still change." Babu [Alauddin] bhai was batting with me and together we avoided the follow-on.

After the innings, the whole team sat together and decided that we had nothing to lose. Everyone bowled with discipline and we managed to dismiss Khulna for just 96. The batters then did their job brilliantly in the chase.

DS: You missed most of the NCL T20 due to injury. How tough was the recovery process?

MIM: During the first NCL T20 match, while trying to save a boundary, I suffered a Grade II hamstring tear. The BCB doctors said it would take at least a month to recover. I completed the rehab, but the recovery wasn't perfect.

I was eager to return, but the medical department didn't allow me initially due to the risk of recurrence. That's why I missed the first two matches of the longer version. Even after that, they were hesitant. I told them I felt ready and eventually got clearance. Even now, I'm not fully fit. There's still a bit of pain.

DS: Why did you risk returning before fully recovering?

MIM: The BCB physios had warned me that returning before fully recovering carried risks. But the reality here is that if you don't play, people forget you. I missed the NCL T20, the BPL was coming up, and I felt that if I didn't perform in the NCL, I might not even get a team. So, I told myself I had to be mentally strong. Whatever happens, I would keep working and try to perform.

DS: At one point, you were seemingly knocking at the doors of the national team, but now you seem far away. What happened?

MIM: Honestly, I don't know. My job is to perform and I try to do that whenever I get the chance. Selection is not in my hands.

DS: You are not part of any BCB programme at the moment, how challenging is it?

MIM: I haven't been in any camp for the last two years. Being in a camp helps a lot. Coaches, physios and trainers monitor you closely, and structured training is crucial for fitness. When you're outside the camp, you have to manage everything on your own. It's difficult, but players still try their best.

DS: There is a two-week break between the NCL and BPL. How important is this period for your recovery?

MIM: Alhamdulillah, it's very important. I'll go back to the BCB and get my hamstring checked again. The physios will assess my condition and I'll follow the programme they give me over the next 10 days.

DS: You will play for Chattogram Royals in the BPL. What is your target?

MIM: My main goal is to stay fit. If I can stay fit, I believe I can perform anywhere. The BPL is very competitive and opportunities are never guaranteed. If Allah has written it in my destiny, I will try my best to make it count.

Can BHF build on WORLD CUP SPARK?

ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh U-21's spirited showing at the Junior World Cup has revived an old discussion about whether Bangladesh Hockey Federation can turn isolated success into sustainable progress.

The Challenger Trophy, courtesy of a 17th-place finish, may not sound glamorous, but for a sport long starved of structure and investment, it was a reminder of what is possible when talent meets even a little organisation.

The junior side, limited in resources yet rich in belief, proved on the world stage that they can compete if given the right environment. Their finish ahead of Austria, Korea, China, Egypt and Canada -- along with brave contests against Australia and France -- signalled that the gap is not insurmountable.

Players like Amirul Islam, Rakibul Hasan, Din Islam, Mahmud Hassan, Obaidul Joy, Hozifa Hossain and Mehrab Hossain embodied that unity and appetite.

This spark of hope contrasts sharply with the sport's broader decline. The last wave of nationwide excitement came in 1985, when hosting the Men's Asia Cup inspired children to play with bent bamboo and paper balls.

Four decades later, the landscape



looks stark: no regular premier league, no district competitions, and a shrinking talent pipeline that forces dependence on BKSP.

For BHF general secretary Lt Col (Rtd) Riazul Hasan, the crux is simple -- money. He said financial constraints remain the sport's biggest barrier, though the

federation hopes to approach sponsors and seek government assistance to build on the World Cup momentum. He suggested that even "small contributions" from sponsors could help sustain programmes.

Dutch coach Siegfried Aikman, whose four-month tenure introduced

discipline, compact defending and quick transitions, is unlikely to stay due to budget shortfalls. Riazul acknowledged that retaining a foreign coach long-term is unrealistic without secured funding, though the federation plans to appeal to the government and, if successful, rehire Aikman or bring in another top-level FIH coach.

He also admitted it will be difficult to keep the squad together in the coming months. The federation is considering setting fitness benchmarks, ensuring players maintain standards before joining camp.

There are also plans to send the team abroad for invitational tournaments, depending on available funds.

On the domestic front, Riazul echoed players' calls for competitive leagues, though clubs have remained reluctant. He said the BHF will again urge them to restart the premier league. The recent support from Brac Bank for women's hockey offers a hint of what thoughtful corporate involvement can achieve, and Riazul hopes similar backing will emerge for the men's game.

This Junior World Cup run hinted at what Bangladesh hockey could be. The real test is whether BHF can convert momentum into a movement before the opportunity fades.



LIVERPOOL SHINE SANS SALAH, KOUNDE BARCA'S UNLIKELY HERO

Liverpool shrugged off the absence of Mohamed Salah -- dropped for the trip to San Siro after publicly criticising club and manager Arne Slot -- as midfielder Dominik Szoboszlai converted an 88th-minute penalty to seal a 1-0 win at Inter Milan and boost their hopes of a top-eight finish. Meanwhile, the return of the Champions League to the Camp Nou for the first time since 2022 could have turned sour for Barcelona when Eintracht Frankfurt forward Ansgar Knauff put the visitors ahead in the 21st minute on Tuesday. However, unlikely goalscoring hero Jules Kounde struck twice with headers early in the second half to help Barca bounce back to a 2-1 victory, allowing Hansi Flick's side to find their stride after a draw against Club Brugge and a loss to Chelsea.

PHOTO: AFP/REUTERS

Rare gifts that keep on giving

AGENCIES

At an age when most cricketers either step away from the game or begin planning for life beyond it, India's evergreen greats Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli are still rewriting what longevity can look like at the elite level. And now, they appear poised for a fascinating duel for the No.1 spot in the ICC ODI batting rankings.

Kohli has surged again in the latest ICC Men's ODI Player Rankings released on Wednesday, strengthening his push to reclaim the top position he last held in April 2021 before being overtaken by Pakistan's Babar Azam. His recent form in the three-match ODI series against South Africa underlined a remarkable late-career renaissance. The 37-year-old piled up 302 runs across the series, earning the player of the series award, and climbed two places to No.2 -- just behind longtime teammate Rohit Sharma.

Rohit, 38, retained his place at the summit after scoring 146 runs in the same series, with Kohli now a mere eight rating points behind following his unbeaten 65 in the Visakhapatnam finale. Their duel is set to continue when India host New Zealand for a three-match ODI series from 11 January, a contest that will put renewed focus on two veterans still producing masterclass innings while defying sporting age norms.

Despite constant speculation about their

futures, both Rohit and Kohli continue to silence doubts with weight of runs. Free from the relentless demands of Test cricket and the intensity of T20Is, the pair have channelled their experience and energy into ODIs -- and the results have been emphatic.



Kohli's last four ODI innings -- 74*, 135, 102 and 65* -- reflect a sustained stretch of dominance. Rohit, leaner and purposeful at the crease, has notched four fifty-plus scores in his last five appearances, reaffirming his control at the top.

Whether the duo will still be around for the 2027 World Cup is uncertain. But for now, their longevity, hunger and sheer class continue to light up India's ODI cricket. For millions of fans, Rohit and Kohli remain the rare gifts that keep on giving.

First Division League deferred again

SPORTS REPORTER

The Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) announced yet another deferment of the First Division League, which will now begin on December 14, the CCDM stated at a press conference at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

The start of the league has been pushed back multiple times after 44 clubs protested alleged irregularities in the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) elections and declared a boycott of all domestic competitions.

Initially scheduled to start on November 18, the First Division League was first deferred to November 25. BCB president Aminul Islam had later announced a revised start date of December 11.

The league has now been postponed to December 14 due to complications with ground preparations, CCDM chairman Adnan Rahman said at the briefing.

Although only 12 of the 20 First Division clubs took part in players' transfers, Adnan confirmed that fixtures have been prepared with all 20 teams included.

Former Bangladesh captain Tamim Iqbal -- one of the club councillors who boycotted the BCB elections -- has instructed his club, Old DOHS, to participate in the league. The BCB "saluted" Tamim in a statement on Wednesday and welcomed the decision.



BFF, BSRM join hands for football development

The Bangladesh Football Federation and BSRM joined hands to strengthen the foundation of football in the country. In this regard, the two organisations penned a 10-year deal at the BFF headquarters in Motijheel on Wednesday. According to the BFF high-ups, BSRM, the No 1 steel brand of the country, will become the development partner of BFF, and will assist the federation in conducting coaches training programme and technical programme as well as development of BFF Elite Academy apart from other development activities of the federation. In the first five years, BSRM will provide a certain amount of financial support to the BFF. After evaluating the activities of this phase, the financial sum for the following five years will be determined. BFF president Tabith Awal and BSRM's managing director Aameir Alihussain signed the agreement on behalf of their respective organisations. The agreement signing ceremony was also attended by BFF's vice-president Fahad Karim, BSRM's finance director Zohair Taherali, director Abdul Qadir Zohair and Sarah Ali, managing director of FCB Bitopi.