

Meet Bangladesh's ground-breaking female coach who's 'married to football'

Mirona, of Dhaka City FC, is the first woman to coach a Bangladeshi football club

AFP | Dhaka

Not many Bangladeshis would quit a safe, public-sector job with perks and a pension to become a full-time football coach, especially not a woman in the conservative nation.

But Mirona, Bangladesh's first female coach at club level, has done just that. And the 27-year-old, who comes from a humble background, has no regrets.

"I have always dreamt of being coach of a top team and one day even the national side," said Mirona, who stands barely five feet (1.5 metres) tall.

The former Bangladesh in-

ternational was speaking as she coached a group of male players -- all much taller than her -- on the outskirts of Dhaka.

Mirona was an assistant coach at Dhaka City Football Club, a second-tier team, last year when Bangladesh Navy invited her to coach its women's team.

For most people in Bangladesh -- especially the lower middle-class -- this was like winning the lottery: a safe job with retirement benefits that many people can only dream of.

But a few months later, Mirona got a call from her former club, which is owned by a garment entrepreneur.

She was offered the head

coach's position with full freedom -- from recruiting players to preparing the team -- to fight for its promotion to the premier league.

Mirona, who grew up in a village among six siblings, did not think twice and she quit the Navy immediately, despite consternation from her senior military colleagues.

Dhaka City's administrative manager Robin Ahsan, also a former national player, said the club made the right decision in hiring Mirona.

"Our team's performance has improved since she joined us. Her honesty and hard-working attitude are tremendous," said



Mirona (C background), trains players on a field on the outskirts of Dhaka



Head coach of Dhaka Football City Club, Mirona (R), reacts as she trains players

Ahsan.

"She can mingle with players better than many male coaches in this industry."

Mirona said she is having the time of her life, despite some barbs directed at her by male coaches.

"At first many people negatively commented about me being in this profession. Many male coaches couldn't take that, a woman becoming a club head coach," she said.

"I believe in quality. If I have it then I know I can prove that I can train up the players," she said.

Overcoming barriers

Her parents and most of her siblings, who still live in rural Bagerhat district, some 250 kilometres (155 miles) south of the capital Dhaka, want her to settle

down and get married.

But Mirona says she is "married to football" and that for now the sport "is my life and my family".

She says she has largely avoided criticism from the community, adding that her parents' support played a big role when she started out as a footballer more than a decade ago.

Mirona was a midfielder for the national side for eight years, and also played club football in the Maldives.

"There was no family pressure when I took up soccer. Besides, I love the sport so much that I overcome all the barriers," Mirona said.

Mirona's return to Dhaka City electrified the training ground.

"We love being in her training sessions. We can feel our improvement day by day. She made us believe in fitness," said midfielder Ataur Rahman.

"She made me play in the midfield when I was a winger. But now I understand midfield strategy, thanks to her, very well," the 19-year-old said.

The club was so impressed that it signed two more female coaches, one for goalkeeping and one as an assistant, said team manager Ahsan.

For now, Mirona's main focus is the battle for the title in the second-tier championship league, which usually starts in June but has been delayed due to the worsening coronavirus situation.

She has now gone back to her village where she spends much of her time watching matches of Barcelona and her favourite player, Lionel Messi.

"He is technically so gifted. He is a superstar, yet so gentle. My ultimate goal is to watch him play a match at Camp Nou," she said.



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Mirona (L), trains players on a field on the outskirts of Dhaka

Winning FA Cup would be ideal preparation for Real clash: Guardiola

AFP | London

Manchester City's slim hopes of retaining their Premier League crown have gone but they still have two trophies in their crosshairs, manager Pep Guardiola said after the club reached the FA Cup semi-finals with a 2-0 win over Newcastle United.

As well as the Cup, City are also still in the hunt for the Champions League title and hold a 2-1 lead over Real Madrid from the away leg of their last 16 clash in February before the competition was suspended due to COVID-19.

Europe's elite club competition will be completed with an eight-team mini-tournament held in Lisbon in August. The FA Cup semis will be held on



Newcastle United's Swiss defender Fabian Schar (front) get his head to the ball as he competes with Manchester City's English midfielder Raheem Sterling (back)



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PEP GUARDIOLA

July 18-19 and the final is scheduled for Aug. 1.

"We have two competitions we can win," Guardiola told reporters on Sunday.

"It will be good to arrive against Real Madrid in the best condition. To win this title would be the best way to prepare for Madrid."

Guardiola also said he was pleased with City's response after last week's 2-1 defeat at Chelsea handed Liverpool the Premier League title.

"We're delighted after the defeat against Chelsea to be in London again at Wembley to play against Arsenal in the semi-final to try to reach the final of the FA Cup," he added.

"Always it's an incredible trophy and it gives us an extra bonus."