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VISION 2047

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“BEACH SOCCER HAS HUGE POTENTIAL IN INDIA”

BATTLE FOR RIYADH

-Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

Dozen teams fight it out in Bhubaneswar
in Hero Santosh Trophy 2022-23

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President's Note

Mr. Kalyan Chaubey

BEACH SOCCER MAKES AN IMPRESSIVE DEBUT

Two versions of football, Beach Soccer making its debut and Futsal, look promising enough to grow into a dominating sport in the future.

Just months after AIFF named a separate committee to look into making Beach Soccer an integral part of the country's football action, it certainly was a pleasing sight on January 26, 2023, when 20 states lined up for the first-ever Beach Soccer event.

The Dumas Beach in Surat, Gujarat, hosted this first-ever Hero National Beach Soccer Championship, and Kerala reigned supreme with a dominating display. For us in the AIFF, this was an astounding success, and Beach Soccer has the potential to not only grow into a popular sport but also feed talent into the country's football.

The skill levels displayed by players in this event, which takes us back to bare-foot football but on the challenging sand surface, hold promise for the future. With many states enjoying huge stretches of beaches, and the untapped sporting skills of populations living in coastal areas, Beach Soccer, in this inaugural edition, has built a case for a focused approach.

What turned out to be a huge surprise was that states that were not blessed with beaches or coastlines, also performed well and that augurs well for the sport.



Beach Soccer has the potential to also emerge as a strong discipline that will have TV broadcasters interested, while states can tap into this potential to market it as an attractive tourism element.

We are keen to target coastal areas for the growth of Beach Soccer. With countries like El Salvador and Panama among some of the top Beach Soccer countries, AIFF can look at getting top nations to come and play in India and help promote the game. An Indian Beach Soccer team is on the anvil and in a few years, we can look at competing in AFC and FIFA Beach Soccer events.

The success in Surat of this new version of football that requires minimum infrastructure and is played at



shorter durations is bound to catch on and the AIFF is glad to have introduced it and will drive it forward.

FUTSAL CHAMPIONSHIP

Soon after the success of Beach Football, AIFF rolled out the Hero Futsal Club Championship, another version that is registering tremendous growth. Touted as the 'T20 of Football', AIFF has introduced Futsal, and an exciting battle is on at the KD Jadhav Indoor Hall in the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in New Delhi.

Along with ISL giants Bengaluru FC and defending champions Delhi FC, a dozen champion clubs from Member states are part of the 14-club event. Futsal action does feature star players from mainstream football but is also throwing up specialists who ply their trade on Futsal artificial indoor surfaces.

This small-sided indoor football played for shorter durations with 5-a-side teams appeals as it can be played throughout the year.

India has the potential to make both Beach Soccer and Futsal popular throughout the length and breadth of the country and while growing alongside 11-a-side football, both versions are ideal stepping stones to the bigger format.



Federation fully prepared to walk the talk of 'Vision 2047'

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

Ever since the launch of Vision 2047, I have been repeatedly saying one thing in my internal and external communications. If anyone out there considers the Strategic Roadmap as the Holy Book for Indian Football for the next 25 years, then they should know that there is one mantra that remains unchanged – that is 'Change is Constant' in our evolution for a better tomorrow in Indian Football.

We must adopt a modern approach and mindset in all aspects of Indian Football in order to achieve all of the objectives and goals outlined in the short-term and long-term strategic plans.

As the saying goes, planning is easy, but the execution is hard. Indian Football is no exception when it comes to taking up the challenge of implementation; especially when the institutional credibility is low, it is a lot harder to convince many that the Federation is destined for bigger things, as stated in the strategic vision document.

This is no attempt to blame the prevailing scepticism in and around Indian Football or to undermine the criticism, but the present management remains focused on making all-out efforts to achieve each and every goal stated in the Strategic Roadmap with utmost dedication and absolute sincerity.

Walk the talk is the focus and an action-oriented approach weaved with a time-bound implementation remains the sole commitment.



Well, in the last few weeks, we have clearly demonstrated in which areas our priorities lie: whether it was about Manipur being given the opportunity to host Senior Men's team international matches for the first time, or the launch of the maiden Beach Soccer competition on the coast of Surat, Gujarat, we never stepped aside from taking revolutionary decisions.

Pardon me for listing this: But in the last six months, have we lagged in any of the areas like giving exposure to our youth national teams, improving the quality of broadcast production, or making every effort to make the functioning of the organisation as transparent as possible? At the same time, we are having a continuous dialogue with our stakeholders to make things far better in all areas. Appointing the first batch of professional referees or initiating fund support for our MAs in capacity building, for example, are well-thought-out and determined steps towards reforming the game in India.

The decision to play the Hero Santosh Trophy knock-out phase in Saudi Arabia was a first-of-its-kind initiative to

bring the focus back to the prestigious National Football Championship. And the results are already showing.

The states have gleefully lapped up the opportunity and after a long time, we can easily see that there is a fiercely competitive battle on the pitch to be in the top four and get global attention.

More good news is on the way for Indian Football fans, as we work to elevate the brand personality of the Santosh Trophy, which will be announced in due course.

Nothing can be achieved without teamwork, and I am proud to say that our team is working tirelessly to define our new journey from the moment they were elected. Our goal is to bring in a new work culture at the Secretariat level by hiring fresh professionals and empowering them to make the best use of the existing capable resources.

However, much more changes are required to stay agile as a player in the team and to make a definitive contribution in line with the strategic objectives of the organisation and Indian Football. We can expect a nimble and alert organisation functioning optimally by April and I endeavour to raise a crack team that exhibits the stated values and plays a significant role in achieving an incredible state of football in implementing Target 2026 and 'Vision 2047'.

Sustainability and increasing commercial growth remain challenges in Indian Football. We have to relook at and rework the policies to attain a course correction, and we have to define an investment model to create a value proposition and improve sustainability. All stakeholders, particularly big clubs, must come together so that we as a federation and our marketing partners can engage in an open discussion to create a model for sustainability and commercial viability in our football ecosystem.

We can expect big announcements in the coming weeks and months, which would further enthuse the stakeholders and firm up our teamwork in our journey towards our vision. We have to work harder than before on each preceding day, and when each of us is determined and positive about transforming football in India, success will come automatically.



Fans stay hooked on Hero Beach Soccer Nationals in Surat

Kerala crowned inaugural champions

Football has certainly evolved over the years. The game itself has even branched off into different versions, one of which currently made headway in India. The first-ever Hero National Beach Soccer Championship was played at Dumas Beach, Surat from January 27 to February 1, 2023. In the final, Kerala added another crown to their bulging cabinet of national football trophies, putting on a show and overwhelming Punjab 13-4, to win the title.

The game was a rematch of the group stage, where Punjab had won a close affair 6-5. On this occasion though, Kerala left them no chance, dominant from the first minute to the last. In the third-place game played earlier in the day, Delhi beat Uttarakhand 3-1. Kerala's goalkeeper Santhosh Kasmeeer was awarded the best goalkeeper of the tournament. Rajasthan's Amit Godara was the highest goalscorer, with 27 goals. The best player of the tournament was awarded to Kerala's Siju S.

The Federation has further plans to form a national team from the best beach soccer players that are scouted from the championship, with plans to participate in the AFC Beach Soccer competitions later on. Beach soccer is a game played barefoot on the sand, where both teams field five players each. The matchday squad of each team can have up to 12 players, and rolling substitutions are available. Unlike football or futsal, there are three periods in a beach soccer match, lasting 12 minutes, with an extra three minutes added if the scores are tied. If a winner is not decided in those three minutes, then the game goes to a penalty shootout. The recently concluded Hero National Beach Soccer Championship got underway at Dumas Beach in Surat on January 26 in the presence of AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey and Hon'ble Member of Parliament Shri CR Patil, Beach Soccer Committee Chairman Mr Jignesh Patil, GSFA Secretary Mr Mulrajsinh Chudasama, and Beach Soccer Committee Member Mr. Upen Patel.

Mr Chaubey said, "I am very happy with how Gujarat has taken up the mantle of hosting beach soccer this season, but we must also make sure that we make this event even bigger in the years to come." **Mr Jignesh Patil**, Chairman, AIFF Beach Soccer Committee said, "It is our hope that we will give beach soccer a new push through this championship".





Shooting Range

HERO NATIONAL BEACH SOCCER CHAMPIONSHIP 2022-23





Gracious hosts and ruthless competitors: Odisha set sights on Hero Santosh Trophy

The NFC returns to the state after more than a decade

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

The Odisha capital being the hosts of the Final Round of the 76th National Football Championship for the Hero Santosh Trophy, which kicks off on February 10 here, there will be increased eyeballs on the performance of the home side. Odisha narrowly missed out on a semi-final spot last season, pipped by Karnataka due to goal difference.

VISION 2047

Good governance is not a choice but a necessity to achieve excellence. Best-governed sporting organisations have proper regulatory framework that protect stakeholder's interests, guarantee the integrity of sports events and social and environmental responsibility, and have strict control mechanisms on the allocation and use of development funds. This creates value not only for the sport, but also for the community at large.

"Coming so close to making it to the knockouts last time and missing out only because of goal difference, has given us a lot of motivation," **Salim Pathan**, head coach of the Odisha team says. *"It has lit a fire within the boys. Seeing something snatched away at the last instance has proved to be a catalyst to do better and leave nothing to chance."*

Pathan's wards will look to use that to their benefit. The 42-year-old has been in his current role for over a year now, a small fact he hopes to use to the team's benefit when the tournament begins.

“For a lot of these boys, the tournament is a chance to shine, to get noticed and experience things they otherwise wouldn’t get to,” he says. “The Federation has put a renewed focus on this tournament, and the entire footballing fraternity is excited for that. We are looking forward to playing gracious hosts, but, and I cannot stress this enough, we hope to not be too gracious on the pitch.”

Odisha has always been a close partner of the All India Football Federation and has, in the past, hosted both editions of the Hero Super Cup and the last edition of the Federation Cup. The experience of hosting big-scale events is not new to anyone in the state and **Mr Avijit Paul**, Member, Executive Committee, AIFF, and Joint Secretary of the Football Association of Odisha stresses on the importance they are giving to the prestigious event.

“The state government has always supported promoting sport, and AIFF and Odisha have been long term partners regarding hosting events here. We have offered our facilities for National camps, and have also hosted tournaments,” he said.

“The tournament will be played across three different venues, and we have ensured that visiting teams are provided the best training, accommodation, and auxiliary facilities to ensure peak performance.”

Mr Pal is optimistic that the Hero Santosh Trophy will draw fans in Bhubaneswar, and cites the city’s history with sports as a reason to believe that the tournament will be well attended. *“The people of Bhubaneswar are passionate about the sport, and having the Odisha team is always a positive. We hope to see fans come and support football in a big way.”*

Pathan, while acknowledging the importance of crowd support – and home support no less – is also keen to stress upon the pressure this gives the home team. *“Obviously, it will be a situation that many of these boys have never faced before,” he said.*

For Pathan, every game will be a battle for survival, as his Odisha side looks to go one better than what they did in the last edition of the Hero Santosh Trophy.



Shooting Range

HERO SANTOSH TROPHY 2022-23





Hero Tri-Nation Friendly Tournament to be held in Imphal from March 22 to 28

India to play Myanmar, Kyrgyz Republic

The upcoming FIFA International break will be a momentous one where the India Senior Men's National Team will play the Hero Tri-Nation Friendly Tournament matches against Myanmar and the Kyrgyz Republic at the Khuman Lampak Stadium in the capital of Manipur, Imphal. The games will take place during the March FIFA International Window. The matches will be played on March 22, 25, and 28.

This was announced by Shri N Biren Singh, the honourable Chief Minister of Manipur in a press conference in Imphal on Monday, February 6, 2023. Present at the press conference were Mr Kalyan Chaubey, President, All India Football Federation and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran.

This will be the first time that the India Senior National Team will be playing in Imphal, Manipur, as the Federation looks to spread the outreach of the beautiful game throughout the country, in line with its strategic roadmap, Vision 2047.

The venue for the games is the historic Khuman Lampak Stadium, which has over the years hosted many Hero I-League games and also group stage games of the prestigious Durand Cup in August 2022. Established in 1999, the stadium has a capacity of 35,000.

The Blue Tigers last played on home soil in Kolkata in June 2022, when they topped their group to secure qualification for the 2024 AFC Asian Cup, defeating the likes of Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Hong Kong. The upcoming friendlies will be part of a series of matches that India will play in the FIFA International windows to prepare for next year's Asian Cup.

The national team is largely considered a reflection of the country's culture and Football Identity. Result-oriented team sports dictate the value chain and the vibrancy of the ecosystem which is heavily linked to historical success.

The level of national team performance is directly linked to the level of its respective culture, talent and competitive environment that the players are exposed to.

India has a long football history with Myanmar, dating back to 1952 (then Burma) when the two sides first met, and Sahu Mewalal netted a hat-trick in a 4-0 win for the Blue Tigers.

In recent times, Sunil Chhetri was the hero in a 1-0 victory over Myanmar, who are now 159th in the FIFA Rankings, in 2017 in the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers. The reverse fixture in Margao ended 2-2, with Chhetri netting a penalty and Jeje scoring the second.

The Blue Tigers have a winning record against the Kyrgyz Republic (94th in the FIFA Rankings), having won three matches to the Central Asian side's two. The match against Kyrgyz Republic was one of the crucial games in India's qualification campaign for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. The Blue Tigers clinched a 1-0 victory, thanks again to a strike by Chhetri in Bengaluru in 2017. Although Kyrgyz Republic won the reverse fixture 2-1, India topped their qualification group and booked their place in the final tournament in the UAE.





"It is a great initiative by the AIFF leadership that we are getting to host International friendly matches in Manipur for the first time in history. From our end, I can assure everyone that the Government of Manipur will do everything to provide the best facilities and facilitate the successful organisation of the tournament. Manipur has been a significant contributor to the Indian Football scene and we are grateful that the AIFF management has also taken the step towards spreading the game to different parts of the country. Manipur has provided many international players for the National Team. It is an honour to host the tournament and encourage our players and sports enthusiasts," said the honourable Chief Minister of Manipur, **Shri N Biren Singh**

"We all are aware of football's popularity in Manipur. The state has produced a huge number of footballers, both men and women, but never has a national team match been organised in the state. Having launched 'Vision 2047' recently, we aim to take quality football to the furthest corners of the country. Manipur's vibrant football culture makes them deserving hosts. I have massive respect for the state of Manipur and was glad to see CM sir's intent to connect with Indian Football. There have already been many international players from Manipur, but the CM sir is keen to take things even further. He has promised that the Manipur Government will open an academy, with top-level grounds, infrastructure and hostels. With his leadership, I am sure the AIFF will put its best foot forward so that every talent in Manipur can be nurtured properly. I can assure you that Indian Football will put all efforts to get the best from the boys and girls of Manipur," said AIFF President **Mr Kalyan Chaubey**



"Manipur is a state that has huge footballing potential and we hope that bringing international football here will provide a tremendous boost to local football and positively impact Indian Football. The state of Manipur is a factory of talent, which is clearly reflected in the record number of footballers playing in the top league across the country for several years. We will work with Manipur football in line with the 'Vision 2047' strategy to make things more vibrant and spread this culture throughout the country. Organising international friendlies here will hopefully galvanise the youth, inspire more youngsters to take up the sport, and even motivate other states to grow the game in a way where they can also become attractive locations with vibrant football culture," said AIFF Secretary General **Dr Shaji Prabhakaran**

"It will be great to play a few friendly matches at home again. We now have enough time to check our opponents' forms and formulate our plans accordingly. These games should serve us well as we prepare for the Asian Cup. Hopefully, we can start the year with a few good results. I hope all our boys will maintain good form and stay injury free in the next few weeks until we get together," said India Senior Men's National Team Coach **Igor Stimac**





Ex-internationals from Manipur laud decision to host Hero Tri- Nation meet in Imphal

Manipur set to welcome the Blue Tigers for the first time

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

Sitting at his home in Kolkata, **Kiren Khongsai** was, for once, thrilled and a bit surprised when he read the news in the morning. "Every day you read about so many troubling things, and even today, the front page was about the earthquake. It was heartbreaking," he says. "But when I reached the last page, I was thrilled, happy that at last Manipur is getting something it deserved."

The Federation's decision to stage the Hero Tri-Nation Friendly Football Tournament in Imphal between March 22-26, in line with its objectives in Vision 2047 to spread the game far and wide, has earned a lot of applause, with many former players from the state feeling that this long due honour will do a lot more for the beautiful game in the state. It is for the first time the Senior India Men's team will play official international matches in Manipur.

On Monday, the honourable Chief Minister of Manipur, N Biren Singh made the announcement of Igor Stimac's team playing the Hero Tri-Nation Friendly Football Tournament in Imphal. Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar are the other teams in the fray. Federation President Mr Kalyan Chaubey and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran were present at the press conference in Imphal.

For Khongsai, this is a moment of personal pride too. He was the first player from the state to ever turn out in the Team India colours, making his debut in 1989, against Sri Lanka in SAFF Games in Islamabad. Khongsai made a mere six appearances for India (scoring one goal), but his mere presence was the breaking of a glass ceiling. Presented with the evidence that this 34-year journey may well be his doing, he downplays it. *"I was lucky to play for India when I did," he says. "It is an honour and I am glad that I share this honour with many more Manipur players."*

For an improvement in quantity and eventually quality of Football in a country, the number of accessible playing surfaces needs to increase.

While full-sided pitches are critical to allow matches and formal training, small-sided pitches have proven to be a gamechanger globally as players get to spend more time with the ball and it facilitates the intensive technical development needed in a learning phase.

Football stadiums are increasingly crucial to the commercial strategies of football clubs from selling branding rights to matchday revenue.

The earlobe of India has always made itself heard loudly in Indian Football, having contributed over 50 players to the Indian Men and Women Senior National Teams over the years. **Oinam Bembem Devi**, one of the game's greatest female players, believes that hosting an international at the Khuman Lampak will inspire more young players to keep their heads down and work hard to earn their stripes.

"I'm glad that the Federation and the Manipur Government have taken this long due honour to our home," she says. "I can tell you from personal experience that hosting these sorts of prestigious events goes a long way to providing motivation for players. When the Women's Nationals was hosted in Imphal in 1991-92, I was very young, and I remember watching the games, seeing such big players and hoping to emulate them."

"Watching Sunil Chhetri and others in the flesh will be a massive morale booster for today's youngsters who have heard of them, seen them on TV but never otherwise."

AIFF Executive Member and former India Women International **Thongam Tababi Devi** was keen to add that while the Men had the honour of passing through Imphal first, it also sowed hope for the women next. *"Many girls in the Women's team are from Manipur and many in the past also have been from the state," she says. "It's good that they are bringing the Men's team here in March. Hopefully, after this, the women will also get to turn out in front of their home fans, friends and family."*

Former India midfielder **Gunabir Singh**, another pioneer of Manipur football, has no doubt that the fixtures would be a grand success – even in terms of results for the team – but also offered words of caution. *"Khuman Lampak Stadium has a capacity of about 35,000, and I think it might prove to be too small," he laughs. "The boys will have full support from a stadium and indeed a state bursting at the seams in its love for Indian football."*



We aim to win the group in Olympic Qualifiers, says Thomas Dennerby

The Blue Tigresses will begin their road to Paris 2024 in April

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Sixty-three-year-old Thomas Dennerby from Sweden is a cheerful person, whose talents have allowed him to perform many roles, including that of a distinguished midfielder, a competent police officer and even a television personality. Above all, however, he remains a top-class coach, who did wonders with his wards, given any opportunity.

Dennerby has coached the Senior Women's Team and the U-17 Women's Team in the past and is back after the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup. Now back at the helm of the Senior National Team after 10 months, the Swede is training the players as they prepare for Round 1 of the AFC Olympic Qualifiers.

The amiable personality that he is, Dennerby spoke at length to **the-aiff.com** and shared his thoughts on several topics about his team, the preparations, the players, and their way forward.

Excerpts:

Q: You are back at the senior national camp after almost a year. Your thoughts on it?

TD: It's a really good feeling. I'm happy to see the girls again. It's been a long time since I had the chance to train the seniors. It was in March 2022 when we went to Jordan, to play a couple of games, and now I am back at work with the girls again, it's amazing.

Q: The team here is a combination of old and new faces. How do you feel about it?

TD: Of course, as a coach, you always want to have the best players around, because that is the best way to play the games successfully, or to achieve success in tournaments. We're still missing some players who are not here yet – like Manisha, Soumya, and Indumathi, who will be joining us soon. But of course, it's a privilege to have the best players around.

There is a direct correlation between the level of a country's national team performance and the number of teams in the top-tier league of the respective country. While the average number of teams for the Men's game in countries ranked between 51-100 is 14.6, it steadily rises to 16.5 and 17.6 for the top 21-50 and 1-20 respectively. While the gap is lower for the Women's Football, it still rises from 10.3 in the 51-100 category to 11.3 in the top 20.

Countries with more clubs competing in a longer league are able to offer more professional slots in the top tier, widening the talent pool as well as offering a bigger opportunity of crucial playing minutes to younger players. Both of these are key to the effective transitioning of developmental players into senior football.

Q: Vision 2047 has been recently launched and it attaches lots of importance to women's football. What do you feel about the project?

TD: Having a long-term plan is, of course, essential, and following through on that plan is the next step. And for these young girls, we must ensure that there are pathways for them to keep pushing forward. If all these things come together and we can ensure that players are practising all year round, then, like I said before, I know that India can be a team who will play in the World Cup. We have talented players, no doubt, but we need to take care of them. And we need to keep on working very hard for 11 months a year. We can rest a little bit, maybe two times, two weeks each, but for the rest of the time we need to play football and play it professionally.

Q: What is your realistic target for the upcoming Olympic Qualifiers in April?

TD: We need to maintain the standard of the Indian team and keep playing the style of football that we want to. Personally, it would be a huge disappointment to me if we fail to handle the situations when we play teams like Kyrgyz Republic and Turkmenistan. So hopefully, we will come out of the first round with a good result and then move forward to the second. We should win the group.





Heart broken, but not shattered

The draw in the first friendly against Nepal was a bitter pill to swallow for the Blue Tigresses

SOUMO GHOSH

Football is a curious game. A 0-0 stalemate and a 2-2 draw may effectively be the same result, but it could have an entirely different effect on a team, depending on which side you are on.

The Senior Indian Women's Team, for the most part, controlled the pace of the play and dominated the proceedings against Nepal in the first of two International Friendly matches in Chennai. However, the prospect of a 2-0 victory turned sour at the last hour, when Nepal's Sabitra Bhandari scored two goals within the space of three minutes right at the end, to send her teammates and coach Anant Thapa into delirium; for India, perhaps a 0-0 draw would have felt much better than having the victory snatched from under their feet.

India Head Coach **Thomas Dennerby** was quite understandably gutted after the match. *"I am definitely very disappointed with the result. This game should have absolutely ended up 2-0 for India. Taking the right decisions on minute 90, when you're 2-0 up is a part of the game. You just can't give the ball away outside your own box. You have a goal kick, you send it far and let the other team start again from behind,"* he said.

"We have played many tougher matches where we did not concede for the 90 minutes, but here one small mistake, one lack of concentration, and the other team comes back. We should have scored 3-4 goals in the second half, and we should have closed this game when we had the chance," continued Dennerby. *"But we gave it all away, and that is just not done at all."*

The mood was rather sombre amongst the Blue Tigresses after the match. One look at the crestfallen scowls on the faces around the Indian dugout, and it was quite clear what was going on in everyone's minds. Sheer regret.

The team still stuck around on the pitch after the game, where they were greeted by first the two junior teams (U-17s and U20s), who are also training in Chennai, and had come to watch the match, and then by the Federation's Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran, who was ever consoling of a heartbroken bunch, looking to pull up their spirits before the next game. These were, after all, friendlies, mere preparation for bigger and better things – the AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers First Round.

Dr Prabhakaran greeted the players and said, *"You all played a tough and resilient side, and it was a difficult game, but let's not dwell on that. Let's all focus on the next game. I want to tell all of you that we are taking every step possible so that you all get the best facilities for you to train and prepare for big tournaments like the Olympic Qualifiers."*

"Regardless of results you all make India proud with your performance. You all have dedicated yourselves to football, and everyone admires you for it. I know that all of you give your level best, and that is why it is so important that we take football forward through you," he said. *"We are definitely working to make everything better, and I am sure all of you will focus to get better performances in the future as well. Take rest and recover well."*

Indeed women's football is something that the Federation is looking to push in a big way in the years to come. While results on the pitch is one thing, an overall improvement off it is what would bring about a holistic development of the women's game.

The Hero Indian Women's League, which was a two-month tournament at best, is now being targeted to be a more active league that will ensure that the players get to play and train continuously for seven months a year. This is something that every woman player in India has always wanted, something that promises to increase the level of competition and match-readiness of players across the land.

While it was a difficult result to digest for every fan of Indian Football, the general understanding was that the Blue Tigresses are preparing for bigger and better things, and roadblocks such as these are all a part and parcel of the journey. The hopes and dreams of a nation still remain on the shoulders of a side perched 61st on the FIFA Women's World Rankings, and 12th in Asia.





The Comeback Queens

Bala Devi and Sangita Basfore have battled injuries to return to the national camp after a long gap

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Injuries are known to be a part and parcel of any game, perhaps even more so in football. Ligament injuries are perhaps the hardest to recover from. While modern sports science has helped many players recover in a more systematic manner, the process itself is one that takes more grit, determination and will power than any other thing that modern athletes have to face.

The Blue Tigresses who have set camp in Chennai, to play two International Friendlies against Nepal in their preparation for the AFC Women's Olympic qualifiers, now have two such returnees, who over the past few years of sweat and hard work, have finally put their injury woes behind them and are ready to don the national colours once again.

Striker Ngangom Bala Devi and midfielder Sangita Basfore were names that almost picked themselves – before they got injured – two important cogs in the Blue Tigresses machinery. Now back in National colours after three and two years, respectively, it is a moment of happiness and determination for the duo.

“Well, I am back in the national team after three years. It’s a rather surreal feeling. I have been waiting for this moment for a long time, and now that the moment has arrived, I feel emotional, to be honest. Life’s certainly good and kind to me now. My rehab process was long, but I am glad that I am now fit and ready to play,” says **Bala Devi**. *“After my stint in Rangers, I received some offers from different clubs in other countries. But I wanted to come back and be in contention to represent my country. I will once again wear the India jersey – the best that can happen to me.”*

While Women’s Football is the fastest growing vertical across the world, historically it has been one of the areas with the least focus.

In India, the ecosystem around Women’s Football is significantly weaker as compared to that for Men. Hence, we need solutions designed specifically for Women to increase the all-around participation and technical level in women’s football across the ecosystem.

It was a double blow for **Sangita Basfore** in 2021, when she sustained a ACL injury during the Indian Women’s Team’s tour to Sweden, and then lost her father during the pandemic.

“Two years is indeed a long time for me. The injury and then losing my father last year was a tough phase in my life. But now that I am back, it’s a huge thing for me. I was waiting to be here and wear the National colours once again,” said Sangita.

“The pain was different on different days. At times, it was a huge physical and mental challenge for me. After my father’s death, I had to take care of my mother and look after the family as well. The rehab was painful for me in those days, but now that I have the India logo on my chest, I feel relieved,” she said.

While that chapter of her life is now over, it is not a quest for finding herself – or rather her game – once again.

“After everything, I am just trying to be myself and play the way I did. It’s not at all easy to make a comeback after an injury. But it’s all the hard work that counts in the end. I know my capabilities,” she said. *“After the injury, I was not in touch with many of my friends here, and it took time to feel comfortable again. But despite all this, I try to put my emotions aside and give my best during the training sessions.”*





For a striker like Bala, it's always about finding the right combinations with her teammates that would ultimately help her do the one thing that all strikers love to do – score goals.

“Initially, I was bit nervous because I was back after spending two years in Europe (at Rangers Women’s FC), and that too after recovering from my injury. I was not sure how the new and old combination would fit in, but I was wrong. I feel so pumped up after seeing the new faces and my old friends full of energy. I feel that I have to push myself a little more to match their vibes now.”

At the age of 33, Bala is one of the senior-most players in the Women’s Team at the moment, and over the years, she has garnered a number of fans, some of whom are now her teammates.

“All these girls always come to me and tell me they want to play with me – I am grateful for the love they have for me. I am confident that with the current team and the coaches, we surely have a better future ahead,” said Bala. *“I generally don’t come under pressure. I try to be with everyone because football is a team sport, and I am happy that everyone has faith in me. I want to set an example for youngsters and not show nervousness at any point. After all, the biggest responsibility is to represent your own country. Nothing feels better than this, nothing makes you more confident than playing for the nation.”*

The Indian Women’s Team has had a couple of disappointing outings in the last two major tournaments they have played in. The first came with an exit from the AFC Women’s Asian Cup 2022 due to the spread of COVID-19 within the team, and the second in the 2022 SAFF Women’s Championship, where the Blue Tigresses were knocked out after a 0-1 defeat at the hands of Nepal in the semi-finals. However, it is now time to put these results behind them and start afresh.

“It’s a new season for us, and we want to start afresh. It is time to forget the past and show that we can also do wonders. If we do well, our junior players will also get motivated and play good football in the upcoming tournaments. It’s like setting an example,” said Sangita.





Aggression the need of the hour, says Head Coach Maymol Rocky

India were knocked out in the group stages of the SAFF U-20 Women's C'ship, but the Young Tigresses are determined to bounce back in the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup qualifiers next month

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Maymol Rocky was an exasperated person Tuesday night. The crushing 1-3 defeat against Nepal in the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship that effectively threw India U-20 Women's team out of the competition, left her wondering what exactly went wrong for the pre-tournament favourites.

But then, it wasn't that the India Head Coach was unaware of the ground realities. She sounded forthright when she said: *"The lack of passion to score on the field cost us dear."*

"It is sad that the best team (India) in the tournament could not make the finals. We never expected this outcome. I believe the aggression to score and win a match was missing somewhere," Maymol said.

In the match, India had their moments early in the encounter and took the lead in the 21st minute through Apurna Narzary, but it was the Nepal colts who restored parity in the 48th minute, and then they scored from the penalty in the 69th minute to take the lead. They struck another in the 89th minute to make it 3-1.

"It's the small mistakes that always lead to such results and affect the team. It was no different during our match either. The penalty we conceded proved to be the game-changer. It's all about how focused you are when you have the ball with you."

In an ever-evolving modern coaching landscape, a significant amount of elite methodology is research-based. No single curriculum or institution can provide all the necessary tools to build a state-of-the-art coach education framework. A collaborative approach beyond traditional football licensing benchmarks across disciplines and a continuous learning environment is crucial to holistic coach development.

A comprehensive talent identification network coupled with a definitive development pathway with an overarching 'national football philosophy' embedded within the curriculum would enable the synchronisation of the football community across varying levels of ability.

"Nepal were a strong side. They performed, scored, and finally won the match. It was a really heart-breaking and unexpected result for us," Maymol added.

India started the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship campaign with a resounding victory against Bhutan (12-0) and then drew against Bangladesh in their next encounter. They were only a point away from playing the final at the Mostafa Kamal Stadium in Dhaka on March 9, but it didn't happen the way the fans expected.

"Everyone came prepared to win the tournament, but on a given day, you have to perform. Our girls gave their best in the last two games against Bhutan and Bangladesh but somehow couldn't play against Nepal and we had to suffer the loss," Maymol pointed out.

"These girls are talented, but they have to work a lot harder if they want to succeed in their football careers. Discipline, determination, and passion have to be there," she added.

The India U-20 Women's Team have resumed training in Chennai as they prepare for their upcoming AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers next month. Maymol said, *"We all are back with a heavy heart and we need to work on many areas. I hope the girls understand that no tournament is easy and they need the necessary aggression to win a match."*





Didn't know what a passport was till my first India call-up: Sunita Munda

The dynamic 18-year-old winger has now made her name as one of the key members of the Indian youth team

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Hardly anyone was surprised when Sunita Munda was called for the National camp for the AFC U-14 regional championship in 2016. Even before turning 14, Munda had proved to be a remarkable talent on the pitch, possessing all the necessary skills to blossom into a fine forward. Her coaches never doubted her ability.

However, the girl from Jonha village in Jharkhand had one 'drawback'. As a prolific goalscorer, Sunita knew how to beat a defensive trap or catch the rival goalkeeper on the wrong foot, but had no idea about the importance of a passport. When the team management asked her to submit her passport, Sunita looked at them blankly.

"To be honest, I did not know what a passport meant back then," Sunita said. "I went back home from the camp to apply and get my passport and flew to Tajikistan to play in the AFC U-14 Regional Championship.

"I have learnt new things while staying in different camps. Hailing from remote villages, many of us were unaware of some basic facilities needed to play football, like boots, quality footballs, regular physical exercises, and even proper food. Slowly we learned about these things after attending the camps and learnt their importance," she said.

Greater participation at grassroots increases the possibility of identifying elite talent at an early age. The wider the base & greater the participation, the greater the strength of the pyramid. In most developed football ecosystems, Governments invest hugely into grassroots as a means of engaging communities.

Club football is the leading access route globally for boy's football followed by school football. Female-only competitions are the most prevalent access route for girls with mixed-football a close second.

Despite being oblivious to urban staples, Sunita was armed with an advantage few girls her age receive in the country – the full backing of her family to pursue her love for football.

Her father, who played the game in his youth, took her to the field when she was marking her nascent steps in the game. He had never made it to the professional level but wanted his daughter to fulfil his dreams.

"I learnt the fundamentals from him. Now I want him to see me wearing the senior National team colours someday. That is something I have to do to fulfill my father's dream," said Sunita.

"Me getting this far wasn't easy, but I have a family who have supported me throughout," she said. "It is what has enabled me to become a National team footballer."

Sunita has proved to be a key player for the team ever since joining the national setup in 2016 scoring goals across various age group competitions. The 19-year-old forward also played a key role for the Indian Arrows in the Hero Indian Women's League (IWL) last year.

It is evident, upon observation, Sunita has an old head on young shoulders. When discussing her goals, she speaks with maturity and calm. *"To score goals for the country is the best thing a striker can do and it always makes the player feel special. When I got to know that I won't be a part of the U-17 Women's World Cup squad, I felt disappointed but to find my friends from the state, Astam and Nitu in the team, made me feel proud. And now they are my teammates,"* Sunita says, smiling.

The U-20 Women's and Senior Women's National teams are training under Maymol Rocky and Thomas Dennerby, respectively, at Chennai and both coaches are keeping a close watch on the players and their training for the upcoming tournaments.



Uzbek test for India U-17 in Goa

AFC U-17 Asian Cup preparations at full swing for Bibiano's boys

AKHIL RAWAT

The Tilak Maidan in Vasco da Gama hosted two international friendlies between the Indian U-17 National Team and Uzbekistan U-17 on January 22 and January 24. While the Blue Colts led by coach Bibiano Fernandes emerged 2-0 victorious in the first contest, the central Asians bounced back to win 3-0 in the second friendly.

The matches were held as a part of India's preparations for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup final rounds to be held in Thailand in the summer. Uzbekistan, who have also qualified for the final tournament, were thoroughly competitive opponents and provided much-needed match practice for Bibiano's boys.

In the first game, the Blue Colts did all the damage in the first half, as Korou Singh Thingujam ran the show on the right wing, assisting Vanlalpeka Guite and Lalpekhlua to score a goal each. Uzbekistan had their fair share of chances as well, but India goalkeeper Sahil was equal to any danger he faced and picked up a deserved clean sheet.

Lalpekhlua and Korou's pace caused Uzbekistan plenty of trouble on the flanks. India's continued pressure paid off at the half-hour mark when captain Guite found the opener after some explosive work by Korou on the right flank. Korou outran his marker and darted into the penalty area before slipping in a perfectly-weighted ball for Guite in the middle. The Indian captain made the simplest of tap-ins from six yards out to put the hosts ahead.

India got their second goal at the stroke of half-time thanks to Korou's vision, Gangte's mindfulness and Lalpekhlua's composure. The former's cross from the right allowed target-man Gangte to draw two Uzbek shirts towards him, leaving Lalpekhlua empty inside the area. The winger set himself up with a good first touch before splendidly curling it past Numonov into the bottom corner. India were two goals to the good at the break.

Club and academies are the dominant key stakeholders in player identification and development in most of the top-100 ranked countries. However, setting a clear direction through a formal talent identification strategy in line with the overall 'National Football Philosophy' helps shape characteristics of the talent pool.

A systematic approach that is data driven, has defined criteria for player selection and measures to deal with relative age effect has significant impact on the effectiveness of a country's ability to spot players with strong natural ability.

The Indian centre-back duo of Manjot Singh and Surajkumar Singh Ngangbam were solid in the second half and didn't leave any spaces down the middle, leaving the visitors with no option other than going for long-range attempts.

India kept on coming as the game entered its final stages and were unlucky not to add to their lead. Skipper Guite almost scored his second and India's third of the day when his low strike from just outside the area clattered into the upright in the 74th minute.

After a convincing opening-game victory, the Blue Colts were unable to repeat their brilliant performance a couple of days later, conceding three unanswered goals against a rejuvenated Uzbek side in the second match.

The first half ended goalless and both teams looked evenly matched on the pitch. But the second half completely belonged to Uzbekistan as the hosts failed to find any rhythm. Jamoliddin Rakhmatullaev's side opened the scoring nine minutes into the second half when Oybek Urmonjonov received a pass from Kuvonchbek Abraev on the edge of the box, and rifled it past Sahil with his left foot.

India were gifted a golden opportunity to equalise in the 65th minute but couldn't make the most of it. After intercepting a poor goal-kick from Numonov just outside the box, Guite raced clean through on goal but drove it wide of the far post. That glaring miss proved costly as Uzbekistan doubled their lead two minutes later, putting the game out of India's reach.



The protagonists of the first goal, Urmonjonov and Abraev, combined again as the former picked out the latter with a lofted ball inside the area. Abraev then took a touch before drilling a low shot past Sahil, who could've done better at his near post.

In the 72nd minute, midfielder Danny Meitei found space 25 yards from goal and unleashed a powerful shot which went just inches wide of the post, summing up a frustrating night for the Blue Colts. Four minutes later, Uzbek substitute Abdulkhamid Turgunboev sealed the victory for the visitors with a simple tap-in on the rebound after Sahil had made a good save to deny Saidov.

Continuing the preparations for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup, India U-17 will next play two friendly matches against their Qatar counterparts on February 23 and 26, 2023 in Qatar.

At the moment, Bibiano's boys are training in Goa. In addition to the players that were with the team during the AFC U-17 Asian Cup Qualifiers in Saudi Arabia, the team management has also called up a number of other potential players to their camp after the conclusion of the Hero U-17 Youth Cup.

Fixtures:

February 25: Qatar U-17 vs India U-17

February 28: Qatar U-17 vs India U-17



Kerala gets Hero Super Cup flavour

The season-ending spectacle returns after four years

The 2022-23 Hero Super Cup, featuring 16 teams in the Group Stage, will take place from April 8-25, 2023, in Kerala. Two of the three cities among Kochi, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram will host the tournament. The qualifying round will kick off on April 3.



All 11 teams from the Hero Indian Super League and the champions of the 2022-23 Hero I-League will get direct entry into the Group Stage of the Hero Super Cup. Teams placed 2nd to 10th in the Hero I-League will compete in the Qualifying Rounds for the four remaining Group Stage spots.

In the qualifiers, Hero I-League teams placed 9th and 10th will face each other in Qualifier 1, with the winner set to meet the 2nd-placed team in Qualifier 2. Along with the aforementioned fixtures, Hero I-League teams placed between 3rd to 8th will face each other in a knockout format for the Qualifiers.

Below are the fixtures of the Hero Super Cup Qualifiers:

April 3: HIL Team 9 vs HIL Team 10

April 5: HIL Team 2 vs HIL Team 9/10

April 5: HIL Team 3 vs HIL Team 8

April 6: HIL Team 4 vs HIL Team 7

April 6: HIL Team 5 vs HIL Team 6

The 2022-23 edition will mark the return of the Hero Super Cup after four years. FC Goa emerged champions in the previous edition in 2019, beating Chennaiyin FC 2-1 in the final at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar. The inaugural tournament in 2018 was won by Bengaluru FC, who beat East Bengal 4-1 in the final.

AIFF Secretary General **Dr Shaji Prabhakaran** said, "It is great that the Super Cup is back after four years. We could not stage the tournament during the pandemic, therefore, its return is very positive news for Indian Football. It will provide more competitive opportunities for players.

"It will be amazing to have the Hero Super Cup in an electric atmosphere in Kerala. I'm sure the Group Stage, followed by a Knockout Rounds, will make for an interesting tournament. My best wishes to all participating teams," he added.

The four Hero I-League teams that emerge from the Qualifiers will join the 11 Hero ISL sides and the Hero I-League champions in the Group Stage of the Hero Super Cup. The 16 teams will be divided into four groups of as many teams each, competing in a single round-robin format. The four group winners will qualify for the Semi-finals.

The group stage will be held from April 8-19, followed by the Semi-finals on April 21 and 22. The 2022-23 Hero Super Cup Final will take place on April 25. The winners of the Hero Super Cup will play 2021-2022 Hero I-League champions Gokulam Kerala FC for a place in the 2023-24 AFC Cup group stage. If Gokulam Kerala win the 2022-23 Hero Super Cup, they get automatic qualification to the 2023-24 AFC Cup Group Stage.



Classic Football Academy win Hero U-17 Youth Cup title

The tournament marked the post-pandemic return of national-level youth football in the country

After 402 goals scored in 111 matches between 49 teams across 40 days, Classic Football Academy emerged as champions of the 2022-23 Hero U-17 Youth Cup on January 31, 2023. The Manipur side beat Sudeva Delhi 2-0 in the final at the Deccan Arena in Hyderabad with goals from Khullakpam Zahir Khan and Gogocha Chungkham.

It was a pan-India tournament in a true sense with 49 teams representing 29 states and union territories in the group stage, which was played across 10 different locations - Bengaluru, Kolkata, Patna, Imphal, Hyderabad, Phagwara, Bokaro, Rudrapur, Bhilai and Benaulim. 10 group winners and six best runners-up qualified for the knockout stages held at the home of current Hero I-League leaders Sreenidi Deccan FC in Hyderabad.

The 10 group winners included hosts Sreenidi Deccan, Punjab State FA, Rajasthan United, Muthoot FA, Sudeva Delhi, Classic FA, Techtro Swades United, Minerva Academy, Garhwal FC and Zinc FA, the latter three with a hundred per cent winning record. Chennaiyin FC, KR Football Leaders, Gandhinagar, Odisha, Corbett and Himalayan Kinnaur made the cut as the six best runners-up. Himalayan ended up having a fairy-tale run till the semi-finals where they lost to eventual champions Classic.

Classic FA's title-winning run was built on a watertight defence and the clinical attack duo of Zahir and Gogocha. Genius Mashangva's boys conceded just two goals in eight matches and won all their knockout games in normal time, including the Round of 16 tie against Minerva Academy, who have been the heavyweights of Indian youth football over the past decade. In the quarter-finals, Classic FA ruthlessly put seven unanswered goals past a Punjab State FA side who were the tournament's top scorers with 23 goals.

Lemmet Tangvah of Chandigarh Football Academy was the highest individual scorer with 10 goals. Himalayan FC Kinnaur's Christian Lalthazuala was second with nine, while Karandeep Singh of Punjab had eight to his name.

The Hero U-17 Youth Cup marked the post-pandemic return of national-level youth football in the country and was important in finding more talent for the India U-17 team, which is currently preparing for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup to be held in Thailand in the summer.

Moving forward, the federation plans to have a robust Youth and Elite League structure going forward as per 'Vision 2047'.



Shooting Range

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HERO FUTSAL CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP 2022-23





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