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VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**"OUR TARGET IS TO
KEEP RISING IN THE
FIFA RANKINGS"**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**INCREDIBLE
IMPHAL**



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President's Note

Kalyan Chaubey

It has been happiness in abundance. India's football factory Manipur embraced international football in style recently. That was followed by success as the Blue Tigers went on to win the Tri-Nation Tournament and India climbed five spots in the FIFA ranking to 101.

Almost anyone connected with Indian football will vouch for the passion and progress of our North East football in general and Manipur in particular.

And when the Chief Minister of Manipur Shri N Biren Singh, a former footballer himself, rolled out the red carpet for AIFF and its Tri-Nation football tournament, the result was bound to be phenomenal.

The current Indian men's team is studded with seven players from Manipur but none had ever worn the country's jersey in a game on home turf.

The Khuman Lampak Stadium in Imphal, the capital city of Manipur, wore a festive look and was packed with over 30,000 roaring fans much before the kick-off for the opening match.

Wins over Myanmar and Kyrgyzstan in the tournament helped India boost their FIFA ranking while Manipur as a state bared its heart for the beautiful game.

Having seized the FIFA window to stage this first-ever international event in Imphal, the AIFF went a step ahead to consolidate the groundswell of support for the game.

With Manipur contributing 23% of players to the Men's National Team, and having witnessed the passion of the people in the region, the AIFF signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Manipur to create world-class footballing facilities in the state.

Manipur's CM and his government and the state football



association have a great commitment to taking football in the state ahead. They share our vision for the development of the game and I'm hopeful that the AIFF and the Manipur government will make a big difference to Indian football with this project.

And amidst all the good developments, the passing away of Tulsidas Balaram Sir, one of the greatest footballers ever to play for India, on February 16, was a sad moment.

Apart from a three-day mourning declared by AIFF, the legend's memory was brought alive during the Tri-Nation tournament as a huge banner was unveiled and respect paid to the footballing great.

The success of taking international football to the North East and giving the Indian Team game time during the FIFA windows will continue as we prepare for regional championships in the near future.

Now ranked 101, our next focus is to break the 100 mark and rise further. For that, we will all strive and move forward.

Activating the business industry is key to growing Indian Football

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

We cannot thank the football-loving state of Manipur enough for making the recently-concluded Tri-Nations Cup an experience of a lifetime. We have achieved something incredible. But then, it was never in doubt, as Manipur is not only the land of talents, but football is the biggest passion locals in Manipur invest in.

Our salute to all the stakeholders of Manipur Football for creating history and our team's performance was amply reflected by the support the Blue Tigers experienced on and off the pitch. It also resulted in our ranking moving up from 106 to 101 in the FIFA chart.

Coming back to Delhi, some of the decisions taken in our recent Executive Committee meeting at the Football House will enter history books – it was one of the landmark Executive Committee meetings, where women's football in India received the biggest boost in its history in the form of the minimum salary in IWL and a proper league structure for the first time starting with the 2023-24 season.

Come the 2025-26 season, there will be a 4-tier league structure for women's football. We can expect a gigantic growth in women's football after these decisions taken by the committee.

The launch of the Blue Cubs – a comprehensive grassroots project for the first time in Indian football history, would certainly redefine the grassroots football landscape in India. We must have robust and vibrant grassroots football in India and with the Blue Cubs Project, we can expect a sea change in every aspect of grassroots football in India.

Whether it is Blue Cubs League or Blue Cubs Elite Grassroots, or Educational Initiatives or Nutrition Elements,



etc., all will drive a significant participation increase in grassroots football in India.

We would activate and engage all the stakeholders in our Blue Cubs Initiatives to make this project one of the biggest grassroots projects in the world by 2047, in line with our Vision 2047 and Target 2026. One of the biggest gaps we have identified is the absence of an Elite Player Development pathway.

With Project Diamond, a project that would help us in developing an iconic star player for Indian football, a role model – a magnet of 1.4 billion will ultimately be in India, and in this process of producing one-star material, we will have established a robust Elite Player Development pathway in collaboration with our top clubs, elite academies, and other key stakeholders. We have raw talents, there is no doubt about it.

But the missing part is having a scientific approach to talent scouting and development with FIFA's Talent Development Scheme (TDS).

Our Elite Youth Leagues will also bridge the gap that exists in the youth competitive structure in India. The

other landmark decision taken by the Executive Committee on 14th April 2023 was to amend the Regulation on Players' Status.... with this amendment, we are going to boost talent development at the grassroots level as these academies/ clubs working in the remote areas by identifying talents and developing them would start receiving training compensation and solidarity payments if their players sign professional contracts.

There was a big anomaly in the way Training Compensation and Solidarity Payment were regulated in India. We have also amended several clauses to increase game time for amateur players. Now these players can also play for three clubs and play in more competitions. We at AIFF, are fully focussed on reforming every aspect of football in India to achieve the goals and objectives of Vision 2047.

For the first time, we will have a full-fledged Technical Department with competent staff to drive change in every aspect of technical development in Indian Football. Though we are working towards attracting much bigger investments into Indian Football, there are challenges, and to overcome these challenges, we have also decided to start a Football Industry Chamber in collaboration with the industrialists.

We want to play an important role in bringing the football business community in India together on one platform to drive the growth of the football industry and develop Indian football as a destination for the world football community. We are able to provide the best possible exposure and training opportunities to the India U-17 team for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup 2023, the team is already in Madrid, and after five weeks, the team will fly to Germany for two weeks of training and exposure matches.

Likewise, all our national teams, including the Senior Men's Team, will get the best possible exposure for their preparation for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023. We remain open to receiving suggestions and plans for the growth of football in India and we, together as one team, will work diligently and with all sincerity to take forward football in India and make India proud.

Jai Hind!





VISION 2047



Executive Committee ushers new dawn for Women's Football

The Executive Committee of the Federation met on April 14, 2023, to enact decisions in line with the Strategic Roadmap 'Vision 2047'

The All India Football Federation has decided to revamp and restructure Women's Football in the country, in line with the Strategic Roadmap Vision 2047 as decided on January 7, 2023.

To give women's football a refreshed look and create improved economic opportunities, the AIFF's has taken up the task of revamping the Hero Indian Women's League (IWL). Starting next season, it will be mandatory for the top eight participating teams in the IWL, to have a minimum 10 Indian players on a fully professional annual contract worth a minimum of Rs 3.2 lakhs.

Having arrived at this decision, the Executive Committee of the AIFF, which met at the Football House on Friday, April 14, 2023, also stressed its goal to further strengthen Women's Football in India by rapidly expanding the Hero IWL in the coming seasons. While the 2024-25 season will have 10 teams in the top division followed by two other divisions, the 2025-26 season will have a four-tier league with the last tier being the state leagues across the country.

Major Decisions in the AIFF Executive Committee Meeting on April 14, 2023

- STARTING NEXT SEASON, IT WILL BE MANDATORY FOR THE TOP EIGHT PARTICIPATING TEAMS IN THE IWL, TO HAVE A MINIMUM 10 INDIAN PLAYERS ON A FULLY PROFESSIONAL ANNUAL CONTRACT WORTH A MINIMUM OF RS 3.2 LAKHS.
- THE 2024-25 SEASON WILL HAVE 10 TEAMS IN THE TOP DIVISION FOLLOWED BY TWO OTHER DIVISIONS. THE 2025-26 SEASON WILL HAVE A FOUR-TIER LEAGUE WITH THE LAST TIER BEING THE STATE LEAGUES ACROSS THE COUNTRY.
- 'PROJECT DIAMOND' FOR ELITE PLAYERS' DEVELOPMENT TO BE CREATED. THE FIFA TALENT DEVELOPMENT SCHEME (TDS), LED BY FIFA CHIEF OF GLOBAL FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT, ARSENE WENGER, WILL PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN PROJECT DIAMOND, AIMED AT PRODUCING AN 'ICONIC STAR'.
- A COMPREHENSIVE GRASSROOTS PROGRAMME, BLUE CUBS, WOULD BE CREATED, WHICH WOULD HELP IN DEVELOPING THE FOUNDATION FOR BLUE TIGERS.
- INSTITUTIONAL LEAGUE IS TO BE INTRODUCED, WHERE 10 TEAMS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY WILL PLAY ON A HOME-AND-AWAY BASIS.

AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey said, *"This was a landmark Executive Committee meeting, where crucial decisions were taken that would directly impact the future of football in India and take it in a direction that was elaborated by the Strategic Roadmap, Vision 2047. We have, collectively, as a team, deliberated on various challenges, and gaps and have come up with projects and initiatives that will impact the future of Women's Football, in a way that has not happened in India in the past."*

"The members of the Executive Committee are experienced, and with their wisdom, we were able to come up with solutions that will help us create a vibrant structure. We have taken decisions for the league structure of Women's Football, and minimum salary regulations, and we think this will attract more girls to play football and will help the growth of Women's Football in India. Women's Football in India will be able to move ahead to reach the global level."

"This is a World Cup year for Women's Football and we will set a lot of activities for the women's game," Mr. Chaubey said.

The Executive Committee has decided to create 'Project Diamond' for elite players' development. The FIFA Talent Development Scheme (TDS), led by FIFA Chief of Global Football Development, Arsene Wenger, will play an active role in Project Diamond. All development wings of Indian Football, including those of Hero ISL and Hero I-League clubs, and elite academies, are expected to be a part of it. Project Diamond is aimed at producing an 'Iconic Star', who has the quality and skills to play at the highest level of the beautiful game.

An Elite League will be created as a part of Project Diamond – FIFA Talent Development Scheme officials will visit India early in May 2023 to hold discussions on the subject.



Apart from these decisions, the Executive Committee has taken up the task of creating a comprehensive grassroots programme, Blue Cubs, that would help in developing the foundation for Blue Tigers. It also includes an elite grassroots programme that is thoroughly multi-dimensional with collaborations at multiple levels including government NGOs, clubs and others. This is again a part of the Strategic Roadmap 'Vision 2047', which aims to engage 35 million children in football by 2026 and take the number up to 100 million by 2047.

AIFF Secretary General Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran said, *"We made our vision and our goals very clear and published and articulated them. We will use them as the guiding light and the principles for our work going forward. Based on that, we have come up with action plans and initiatives today. I would like to thank the Executive Committee for deliberating on and approving the projects that will shape the future of Indian Football. This will help us achieve our short and long-term goals under Vision 2047."*

"We think that this is a day we should celebrate for all the decisions taken towards the improvement of Women's Football. We are hopeful that this is one decision that will excite, incite and inspire women playing football and the supporters of Women's Football in India. I am confident that this will lead to an increase in participation and we will see women stars emerge due to the new thrusts and initiatives."

"We have never had a comprehensive grassroots structure and initiatives and we hope that through Blue Cubs and Project Diamond, we will be able to have a robust grassroots and an elite player development structure in our system," he said.

The Executive Committee has decided to give equal importance to the amateur structure in football to raise the level of competitive opportunity and security for the players at this level. To execute this, it has decided to introduce the Institutional League, where 10 teams from across the country will play on a home and away basis. The winners of the league, where the teams will be decided in a bidding process, may get an opportunity to play in the Cup tournament at the National level. This will surely help the legacy institutional teams get the heritage treatment.



Incredible Imphal: A first of many for Manipur

Blue Tigers won the Hero Tri-Nation tournament in front of a jam-packed Khuman Lampak Stadium

SOUOMO GHOSH

The Senior Men's National Team often finds itself surrounded by fans, asking for selfies or autographs. Perhaps the advent of new technology has increased the requests for the former in recent times, and the number of autograph hunters has gradually diminished. But the reception the Blue Tigers received in Imphal during the Hero Tri-Nation International Football Tournament, has been nothing short of phenomenal.

One man is always in the centre of attention with the Indian Football Team, no matter where they travel. However, this time, six more Men in Blue were showered with the same amount of love and attention, if not more. The six local boys of Manipur – Suresh Wangjam, Bipin Singh, Jeakson Singh, Roshan Singh, Naorem Mahesh, Yasir Mohammad and Chinglensana Konsham – are in a long line of national team footballers from the state but have the unique privilege of playing in India colours in their home.

Centre-back Cinglensana exhibited the biggest of grins when the flight landed in Imphal from Kolkata, where the team had camped ahead of the Hero Tri-Nation. "Welcome to my home, lads," he announced to those around him with an air of grandeur.



After a day of experiencing the Manipuri hospitality and going through the pre-match practice routines, the Blue Tigers took to the field against a resilient Myanmar side at the Khuman Lampak Stadium, a venue engulfed by madness. There was a definite cheer when each of the six local lads touched the ball, but there was equal love and respect for the other players, with chants going off in different parts of the stadium.

The Khuman Lampak, a compact stadium that suits the atmosphere of the beautiful game, can house approximately 30,000 fans, but the demand for the entry passes at the stadium was much more. Many who could not avail of such passes were left disappointed as they followed the action on their TVs or watched the live stream on their phones.

"It was crazy how many requests we received from family, friends and acquaintances. They were all asking for tickets to the game, and all of us have tried to accommodate as many of their requests as we possibly can," said Jeakson.

In the end, it was Anirudh Thapa, who came up with the goods for India against Myanmar, despite creating a flurry of chances in both halves.

Love for the beautiful game is everywhere in Manipur. The short ride from the stadium to the team hotel, under normal circumstances, would not last more than five to seven minutes. After each of the two wins, however, the team bus would be surrounded by fans at the gate of the Khuman Lampak, and the same journey would take at least 20 minutes.

"We got such amazing support from the crowd in the first game against Myanmar. This is the second time I have come here, and the first time that I've played in Imphal, but I understand why the people of Manipur are crazy about football," he said. *"I also saw a lot of travelling fans, as well as little girls and mothers, come to the stands, and that is really good for the game."*



Chief Minister N Biren Singh, himself a former footballer, had come down to the stadium to witness both of India's matches, and proceeded to unveil a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Manipur and the All India Football Federation to construct world class footballing facilities in the state.

India head coach Igor Stimac expressed his gratitude to the CM and his Government for being such gracious hosts.

"We are grateful to the organisers in Manipur, the Government, the honourable Chief Minister (Shri N Biren Singh), the organisers, and all the fans for providing the atmosphere," he said.

It was not just the ministers and politicians who were excited to meet the Blue Tigers. Laishangbam Anita Chanu, a sporting legend of Manipur and India in her own right, had come down to greet the Blue Tigers. Currently the Assistant Director, Youth Affairs and Sports, Government of Manipur, Chanu is herself a former weightlifter-turned-coach, who had trained India's Olympic silver medallist Mirabai Chanu in her younger days.

Padma Shri Bembem Devi also came visiting, and was instantly greeted by India head coach Igor Stimac, captain Sunil Chhetri, and a host of local boys, who came running to her, referring to her as 'Che' (elder sister). The Durga of Indian Football beamed at them happily and said, *"This is a really proud moment for us all. I didn't think Team India would play in Manipur, but here we are. I hope more such events keep happening here."*

In between the two India matches, Myanmar also played out a 1-1 draw against a much higher ranked Krygyz Republic, watch by a 10,000-odd fans at the Khuman Lampak, again underlining the love for the game in the state.



One of the biggest positives for the Hero Tri-Nation for the Blue Tigers was that a number of players got their debuts and performed admirably at the international level. Centre-back Mehtab Singh started against Myanmar and kept a clean sheet in his first match. Naorem Mahesh Singh was brought on as a substitute and impressed the coach with his hard work on the wing; so did Ritwik Kumar Das. Furthermore, Rohit Kumar got his first taste of International football against the Kyrgyz Republic.

"I am very happy with the team and the boys. They played with a brilliant attitude and the overall environment was also very positive. It's the result that creates this positivity for us," said Stimac.

"This was our fifth consecutive win at home, and that's very important for us to build confidence," he said. *"We were very stable and disciplined and did not allow Myanmar or Kyrgyz Republic any greater opportunities apart from a couple of minutes in the second half, where we were a bit soft. We could have done better in those areas, but the boys are always improving."*

The Imphal experience was an overall resounding one for Indian Football, and revealed a lot of potential for the Federation's plans to spread the game to every nook and cranny of the country in the future, as per Vision 2047. Midfielder Suresh Wangjam summed up the tertiary effects of the Blue Tigers playing international matches in Manipur perfectly.

"A lot of things could perhaps have been better, but what these matches in Imphal have done is to show Manipur what it takes to host football at this level," said Suresh. *"Regardless of facilities, the state is producing top footballers in the country by the dozen, and there will be many more to come."*



Sunil Chhetri wants to score many more goals for India

India's talismanic striker puts forth some new targets for himself, the Blue Tigers and those that follow the beautiful game in the country

SOUMO GHOSH

Two decades in Indian Football, and a record number of goals for the Blue Tigers. Yet The Tri-Nation Tournament was the first time that Blue Tigers legend Sunil Chhetri played a competitive match in Manipur, and his hunger to score for India was as high as it has ever been.

The mercurial striker, after joining the National Camp just a day after the Hero ISL final, was on song for India, in the first Hero Tri-Nation International Football Tournament match against Myanmar at the Khuman Lampak Stadium. Despite several efforts, a disallowed goal that left many questioning the off-side call on the India captain, was all he had to show for it.

In the second game of the tournament, he got the goal that he – and the crowd – had been aching for, against the Kyrgyz Republic, to cap off a brilliant 2-0 win for India, and take his personal tally to 85.

"My hunger to score is the same as it has always been, and it will be the same against the Kyrgyz Republic. Off-sides and penalty decisions are a part of the game, and you think about them for a certain amount of time, but then you move on and look forward to the next match," said Chhetri to the-aiff.com. *"What you rather do is to minimise mistakes and move on."*

"I don't want to sound pompous, but I feel that there aren't many players who are as hungry to score as I am," he said. The man who has seen and done it all in Indian Football, after playing for the first time in Manipur, a state that has supplied countless players to the men's and women's National Teams, got a better understanding about the popularity of the beautiful game in the state.

"We got such amazing support from the crowd in the first game against Myanmar," Chhetri said after the opener. "This is the second time I have come here, and the first time that I've played in Imphal, but I understand why people of Manipur are crazy about football," he said.

"I also saw a lot of travelling fans, as well as little girls and mothers come to the stands, and that is really good for the game."

The India captain also spoke of the motivating effect these matches could have on the younger generation of players from the state.

"Many of us who have been playing for a long time, we've not been here to play, so seeing all the Indian Football stars gives the younger kids that extra motivation," said Chhetri. "Even more than the others, seeing the likes of Suresh (Wnagjam), Jeakson (Singh), Yasir (Mohammad) could really motivate the kids here, though judging by the sheer number of quality players that come out of this state, they do not need as much motivation.

"I just hope that as a national team, we can give them that much more to help them dream more."





Shooting Range

HERO TRI-NATION INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT







India secure passage to Round 2 of Olympic Qualifiers

The Blue Tigresses posted two impressive victories over the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek to march into the second round of the qualifiers

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

Two wins. Nine goals scored. Zero conceded. If statistics were a measure of success, the Indian Women's National Team had found it emphatically. At the final whistle of the second game, there was an almost spontaneous eruption of joy, with the players, substitutes, staff all congregating on the pitch into many simultaneous huddles, with photographs taking precedence over everything else. A big contingent of Indian supporters – Bishkek plays host to many medical institutes, frequented by Indian students – had been vocal throughout the game, drowning out the local crowd, and they soaked in the players' applause soon after.

Through the celebrations, Head Coach Thomas Dennerby walked around, mingling with different players, a smile pasted across his face. From having gone winless in 2023 – prior to the Qualifiers, the team had played five friendlies, drawing three and losing two – they had suddenly hit a rich vein of form, right when it mattered.



India's dominant performances against hosts Kyrgyz Republic in Round 1 of the 2024 AFC Women's Olympic Qualifying Tournament were a satisfying culmination of a three-month long camp – but also the start of another journey.

Days before their opener, head coach Thomas Dennerby had hoped that good performances would set the tone for the rest of the women's football calendar, and in the moments after that second game victory, he emphasised that, now there was more to be done.

"I'm hoping that we can start preparing for Round 2 in earnest right after the Hero Indian Women's League season," the Swede said. "We will have a couple of FIFA windows, so it will be good to make use of them. In addition, we will have the Asian Games later this year. All that game time will be useful going into the second round."

India are one of 12 teams to make it to Round 2 and know that their task will be cut out as they venture into uncharted territory. Continental heavyweights Japan, Australia, China and South Korea will play Round 2, and India's task will be much harder than the one they faced in Round 1.

A majority in the Indian team have experience of playing Round 2 of the Qualifiers – India were knocked out by Myanmar on goal difference in Round 2 of the 2020 Olympic Qualifiers – and will be keen to erase the hurt from the past.

"There's many of us in the team now who were a part of that campaign," captain Ashalata Devi was keen to emphasize, "And many more who are injured, recovering, and not part of this campaign, who will also be keen to erase those memories. We owe it to them also to go and win these fixtures, so that they can get their chance at redemption in Round 2, too."



For Ashalata, the qualifiers and the upcoming season also hold a special kind of promise. Having watched the men's team receive the love and adulation of her home state, Manipur, she hopes the women's team get some of the same. *"My mother has never seen me play live," Ashalata says. "I've always wanted her to see me and have always been waiting for the perfect time to do so. I'm hoping that this experience and the fandom will mean that the Federation will look to return to Manipur soon, and with the women's team too."*

In Bishkek, despite the lack of a win in the calendar year, and the spectre of failure lurking, the team stamped their authority on the opposition to ensure that Dennerby's preparations bore fruit. The Swede had demanded that the team produce 'good performances and good results', and his demands were met.

In the opener played on April 4, Anju Tamang sparked the celebrations, scoring in the 6th minute from close range, before tapping in a Sandhiya Ranganathan cross right before half time. Soumya Guguloth, one of many in the Indian women's team playing abroad — Guguloth plays for Dinamo Zagreb in Croatia — added a cherry to that first half performance, scoring a spectacular volley to triple India's lead. Goals by Shilky Devi and Renu were enough to seal an emphatic win.

With three days between games, Dennerby, while optimistic that the result would not change, was keen to ensure complacency did not set in with the team. His daily message was that the team needed to replicate not just their attacking performance but also the one in their defence. A clean sheet was paramount.

Early adversity in the second game came in the form of a red card to Karthika Angamuthu, reducing India to 10 players for a majority of the game. Despite the numerical disadvantage, the team did not back down. If anything, it brought work rates up, Sandhiya, Tamang and Renu scoring goals to ensure the victory and safe passage were guaranteed.

"It's important to keep the momentum going," Dennerby said in the aftermath. "If we want to be ready for Round 2, we have to start preparations immediately. Tougher tests await."



Elangbam Panthoi Chanu: The girl who rose like a Phoenix

Having missed out on National Team call ups, game time and important tournaments due to ill timed injuries, the Blue Tigresses custodian is hoping to make up for lost time

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

The lives of sportspersons are fraught with uncertainty. The pressure squeezes them from all ends. Whether it is economic, or societal, personal or physical, surmounting odds are routine, and often enough par for the course.

But even then, to consider Elangbam Panthoi Chanu's odds is to conduct an exercise in analysing rotten luck. So often has she faced the bottom of the barrel, only to rise back up – and then drop back down – that it is a feat of resistance that she is still here, guarding the posts at all.

First, it's important to note that Panthoi never smiles. Not on the football pitch, at least. Dead serious, focussed and committed, she is the picture of professionalism. And at the Kant Sports City stadium, where the Indian Women's Senior National Team are training, this latest cycle of her professional footballing saga is the competition of a circle.

For Panthoi, the AFC Olympic Qualifiers present some kind memories, but also a chance to correct a lot of wrongs. As a 19-year-old, the goalkeeper was picked to be part of the squad for Round 1 of the Qualifiers for the Rio Olympics. A fledgling Indian Team fell to Myanmar, but for Panthoi – and a young Bala Devi – this was the start of a long journey at the upper echelons of Indian Football.

At that time, Panthoi was earmarked as one of the best young goalkeepers in the country. She was adjudged the best goalkeeper in the second edition of the Indian Women's League in 2017-18 (she plays for Eastern Sporting Union) and then in 2019, doubled up, winning the Hero Senior Women's National Championships with Manipur, and also the best goalkeeper award (she conceded two goals in six games, and both of those came in the quarterfinals against Railways).

"That is perhaps the most memorable time of my career," Panthoi says – smiling because we are not on the pitch. "I remember I saved two penalties in the tournament and it was very satisfying to not just win, but also get recognition for doing so."

The years that followed wouldn't prove so kind. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021, when in camp, Panthoi fractured her shin bone and had to go for surgery and spend a long time in rehab. She missed out on exposure tours, game time and a lot of experience, as her competitors and teammates slowly got some in.





When she was brought back into the camp, in preparation for the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2022, the injury recurred and she was forced out again. *"It was a really dark time for me," she says. "I was cursing my luck, and had just given up all hope. I was cursing the gods for having done this to me and had half a mind to give up the game and find something else to do."*

Somehow, with the help of family and friends, she focussed and gave it 'one last shot'. It culminated in her landing and going for trial to Spain for the Liga F teams, with India team striker Bala Devi.

"Just being there, training with players in Spain, taught me a lot of lessons," she says. "It was a very valuable experience. I came back with a lot more between my ears."

And yet, Panthoi refuses to take anything for granted. In the absence of regular starter Aditi Chauhan, the goalkeeping spot has opened for youngsters like Shreya Hooda and Sowmiya Narayansamy. Panthoi knows she has her work cut out, but is also grateful for the opportunity she has, even to be at this level. And of course, the goalkeeper's union is stronger than any other.

"In the end only one of us can play," she says. "But the other two of us have to make sure that we are there to support, create a healthy environment and ensure she isn't getting negative energy. We all have the same aim. To help the team win and get positive results," she said.



Shooting Range

AFC WOMEN'S OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS TOURNAMENT - ROUND 1







Mumbai City seal AFC Champions League 2023-24 Group Stage Spot

The 2022-23 Hero ISL Shield Winners ran rampant against Jamshedpur FC to book their spot among the continent's elite

Mumbai City FC defeated Jamshedpur FC 3-1 in their Hero Club Playoff clash here at the Payyanad Stadium in Manjeri, Kerala on Tuesday, April 4, 2023. The win confirmed a group stage spot for the Islanders in the 2023-24 edition of the AFC Champions League.

It was an end-to-end game with both sides going tantalisingly close to scoring on more than one occasion. Yet, strikes from Ahmed Jahouh, Alberto Noguera and Vikram Partap Singh were enough to guide Mumbai through. Eli Sabia's late effort for a Jamshedpur fightback hardly could make an impact.



The Islanders began the match strongly, displaying some fine passages of play. Jahouh was at the centre of all the dangerous attacks. However, Jamshedpur custodian TP Rehenesh managed to stave them off early on in the game. Jamshedpur, too, had a couple of opportunities to take the lead. In the 12th minute, Jay Emmanuel-Thomas' goal-bound free-kick forced goalkeeper Phurba Lachenpa to stretch and put it above the bar. At the half-hour mark, again, Jamshedpur almost found themselves in the lead. However, Ricky Lallawmawma miskicked a fine cross from the corner to hit the side netting.

The referee eventually blew his whistle as the two teams headed into the break with the scoreboard showing 0-0. After switching sides, Mumbai City once again looked deadly in the attacking third forcing saves from Rehenesh. Finally, the two-time Hero Indian Super League Shield-Winners found the breakthrough after Lallianzuala Chhangte was brought down inside the box by Ricky. Jahouh stepped up to take the spot kick and put his side in the lead with a cool-headed finish in the bottom left corner.

With 20 minutes left on the clock, Des Buckingham and his men doubled their lead. This time, it was Alberto Noguera who found the back of the net with a sublime left-footed volley from the centre of the box.

Jamshedpur showed signs of a fightback, with Ricky once again finding himself in a goalscoring position in the 76th minute. Unfortunately, the full-back failed to correct his earlier error and struck wide off the bar from close range. Nevertheless, minutes later, skipper Eli Sabia headed the ball in from a corner to make it 2-1.

But Mumbai City were in no mood to loosen their grip on the game. They kept marching forward to find their third goal and succeeded in doing so.

Former Jamshedpur man Greg Stewart led a counter-attacking move with just one defender and the goalkeeper at his disposal. The Scotsman passed it to Vikram Partap Singh at the centre of the box and the latter lobbed the ball over the goalkeeper to seal an emphatic victory for his side.



Shilji Shaji setting the bar high in the Indian U-17 Women's Team

The Kozhikode native's goalscoring feats, very early in her career have already marked her out as one for the future

NAVANEETH K

Six matches, sixteen goals - those are Shilji Shaji's figures in her brief career as an Indian Women's U-17 Team attacking midfielder. In February, she rampantly scored four goals each in India's 7-0 and 6-0 friendly wins over Jordan. In India's SAFF U-17 Women's Championship opener, she was on target thrice, helping the Young Tigresses cruise to a 4-1 win over Nepal. She went on to score five goals against Bhutan and ended up the highest scorer at the tournament.

Hailing from Kakkayam in Kozhikode, Kerala, Shilji just turned 16 in the first week of March. She started playing football at Kallanode School in fifth class. "My father played football, and he sent me to play as well. Very few girls of my age used to play football. So I mostly played with senior girls," she says.

The start of Shilji's journey into the national team only began last year when she was selected to play for Gokulam Kerala FC in the inaugural edition of the Khelo India U-17 Girls League. *"When I got selected for the sports school, my family was very happy. I've got my father, mother, my grandmother, and sister in my family. Because a lot of people were working hard in the selections, I consider it a blessing that I got selected,"* she humbly states.

Shilji's blessing continued as she was picked up for the latest batch of the Indian U-17 team after a selection trial in Kerala. The squad set up camp in Chennai under head coach Priya PV to prepare for the SAFF U-17 Women's Championship in Bangladesh and the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 1 to be held in the Kyrgyz Republic next month.

"We have been training under Priya madam for the past two months. All the coaches here are very good and supportive. If we make any mistakes, they explain to us how to do it right," Shilji says.

Even though she is not an out-and-out forward but an attacking midfielder, Shilji always manages to sneak her way into the right place at the right time inside the box. Her tricky runs and quick legs were a constant headache for Nepal. Every Indian attack either started with her or was finished off by her.

Shaji's next assignment will see her take on hosts Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar in the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 1 in Bishkek. India play their first game against the hosts on 26 April, 2023.





Shooting Range

SAFF U-17 WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP 2023





From fish seller to champion team's masseur: Nothing fishy about it

Ganesh Dalui's story may seem straight out of fiction, but for RoundGlass Punjab's well travelled masseur, it is the fulfilment of a lifelong dream

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Standing at the sidelines on the field of play, he watched the man in front of him, stunned and shell-shocked by his own good fortune. Ganesh Dalui could not believe that only a few feet away from him was the biggest star of Indian football, the legend of Bengaluru FC, Sunil Chhetri, warming up for the match.

Currently the masseur of Hero I-League champions RoundGlass Punjab, Ganesh had these thoughts running through his mind when the Punjab side met Bengaluru FC in the Super Cup match in Kerala. He has come a long way to reach this point where he can rub shoulders with the who's who of Indian football – his journey has been arduous and eventful, but he has made it with sheer perseverance.

Ganesh Dalui is not a professional footballer – he has never played football at the highest level. Yet, he is one of the key members of RoundGlass Punjab support staff. As the masseur, he is responsible for making each and every player match-ready and fit, apart from the medical staff. Ganesh once dreamed of playing football, but life took him in another direction where he can be with the game 24*7.



Ganesh's life-story is something straight out of a film script. He hails from the Santoshpur area in Kolkata, and has been working with RoundGlass Punjab FC for two years. He used to play football in his neighbourhood when he was 10 years old. His father was a car washer and his mother worked as a part-time cook in different households. Ganesh started selling fish at the age of 15 in a nearby market to supplement his family's income. But that could not stop him from playing football. He used to sell fish from 5 a.m. in the morning until noon and play his favourite sport in the evening.

"Football will always be my favourite thing in this world. Selling fish and playing football gave me happiness. I knew I had to earn money for my family, so I started working at an early age.

"Nothing could stop me from playing football. It brought peace to my life. All my hard work and determination have taken me to this level where I can boast of being part of a match in which Sunil Chhetri played," Ganesh told the-aiff.com.

Many years back, when Ganesh was casually playing football with his friends in Santoshpur, a member of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Football Club (ONGC) team in Bengal asked him: "You play good football, would you like to do football related work?" Ganesh immediately said 'yes' without missing a beat and it changed his life forever.

"I did not think for a second and agreed. I just thought that I would be able to work in football. What else can I expect as an eighteen-year-old", Ganesh said.

An ardent supporter of Argentina's Lionel Messi, Ganesh moved to Mumbai and learned the job of a masseur. He was a part of the ONGC team for 11 long years. He moved to Mohun Bagan and was part of the club's Hero I-League winning squad in 2019-20 experiencing the feeling of becoming champions for the first time.

"Oh, that was a feeling that I can never express in words. It was surreal. I was very emotional that day and couldn't believe that I was a part of the team who lifted the trophy.

"I am very grateful and thankful to chief coach Kibu Vicuna and all the staff, who supported me every single day. I couldn't speak English but it made no difference to me or any other member of the team. Players, support staff and coaches helped me every day to make me learn things slowly," Ganesh said.

After his stint with Mohun Bagan, he joined Hero I-League team RoundGlass Punjab FC in 2021 and completed the season in the bio-bubble. The next season, he was a part of another champion team when Round Glass Punjab won the Hero I-League 2022-23 title.

When asked about his feelings about being champions again, Ganesh said: "I would say, it's all the hard work of each of us. The feeling of being a champion will never be forgotten.

"I will always be immensely grateful to our coach Staikos Vergetis, Football Director Nikolaos Topoliatis, Club Doctor Sidak Dhillon, and Head Physio Levin Vinod and each and every member of our team who have motivated me to work hard and improve in the areas where I work," Ganesh said.

Ganesh is a father of a two-year-old kid and wants him to play football and fulfil his dream. "I dream of my son representing the country someday. I am happy that I am associated with football in some manner and want my next generation to do the same too," he concluded.





Hero I-League regulars relish the Hero Super Cup challenge

The Hero Super Cup has turned into a stage for I-league players, young and experienced alike to catch eyeballs and get some valuable game time

AKHIL RAWAT

The Hero I-League 2022-23 wrapped up just over a month ago. Now, the best teams and players from across the country have gathered in Kerala to battle it out for the Hero Super Cup crown. Some of the big names from the Hero I-League have continued to shine in the season-ending tournament.

Sreenidi Deccan FC were the first I-League side to defeat Hero ISL opposition (Kerala Blasters) in the Super Cup, with Konsam Phalguni Singh playing a big role in the middle of the park. While Kerala Blasters saw plenty of the ball throughout the game, Sreenidi relied on quick and clear-cut transitions. More often than not, the protagonist of such transitions was Phalguni. Positioned the highest up the pitch among the midfield trio of Faysal Shayesteh and Mayakkannan, he was key in distributing balls to both wingers - Rosenberg Gabriel and Rilwan Hassan - who made plenty of inroads behind the Kerala Blasters' backline.

"We have been playing with a lot of effort and enthusiasm," said Phalguni, who was chosen as the Hero of the Match for the game. "Everyone is playing for each other, and that is showing through our team effort."

Phalguni has been part of Sreenidi Deccan since the club's first Hero I-League season in 2021-22. In the last two seasons, the 28-year-old has played all but two matches for the Sreenidi Deccan, which just goes to show his reliability in the team.

What he lacks physically, he makes up for it with his quick feet and sharp turns. Swift one-twos, dirty nutmegs, cheeky lobbs - Phalguni does it all. A man of few words on the pitch too, he doesn't need to call for passes. Everyone passes to Phalguni, and Phalguni passes to everyone. *"On the pitch, we always play with confidence,"* he affirmed.

Churchill Brothers have played respectably as well, losing out to a last-gasp winner against Mumbai City FC before a battling stalemate against Chennaiyin FC. The Red Machines have not conceded any goals from open play so far, with Joseph Clemente and Lamgoulen Hangshing standing out in defence.

Lamgoulen, who completed the most tackles in the Hero I-League this season, was rewarded with the captain's armband by Churchill Brothers head coach Mateus Costa ahead of the Hero Super Cup. *"He's very reliable and he deserves it (becoming the captain),"* said Costa.

Joseph Clemente had a forgettable opening game against Mumbai City as he conceded a last-minute penalty, which allowed the Islanders to win the game. However, there was to be redemption. The 35-year-old veteran defender put on one of the best performances of his life in the 0-0 draw against Chennaiyin, and deservedly picked up the Hero of the Match Award.

In attack, Churchill's Anil Gaonkar had a breakthrough season in the Hero I-League, and started in both Super Cup games for his side. *"I finally got my break in January, and I'm thrilled to be playing at this level,"* said Gaonkar. *"The I-League was special for me, and so is the Hero Super Cup, as I am getting to play some of the top Hero ISL sides,"* said Anil. *"In fact, even the only game we lost (to Mumbai City), we were right there with them till the very end. So I do not think there's much difference, especially when a team like Mumbai does not include its foreign players."*





For Aizawl FC, things haven't gone to plan in the Hero Super Cup so far. The Reds have been eliminated after back-to-back losses to Hyderabad FC and Odisha FC, but 20-year-old Lalchhanhima Sailo has been a bright spot in the midfield.

"It might have been a defeat for us, but we've gained a lot of experience sharing the stage with the ISL clubs in a tournament where teams from both leagues are participating. Apart from not being able to capitalise our chances, I think we have played very well as a young squad," said Sailo after the loss to Odisha.

Typical of a central midfielder, Sailo always wants the ball at his feet. Scanning the pitch, distributing the ball upfront and out wide or carrying the ball forward with his quick change of pace is what makes him the midfield general of Aizawl. Occasionally, he might have a go at the goal himself from distance as he did against Mumbai Kenkre in the Hero I-League this season. And that too, twice. First with his right foot, then his left foot, he scored two screamers in the space of just ten minutes, exhibiting not just his shooting prowess but also his two-footedness.

Aizawl still have their last group stage match against East Bengal FC coming up next Monday, and Sailo remains upbeat for that one. *"We don't want to go back empty-handed, so we will be looking to take three points. Even though we're out of the group stage, we can still change the table and have a say in determining who qualifies for the semi-final. So yes, I expect a good game against East Bengal."*

As a team, we have gained lots of experience here, which, I believe, is an important tool in building the confidence to take us to the next level," Sailo concluded.

Hero Indian Women's League groups announced

The groups for the Hero Indian Women's League 2022-23 season were announced on Thursday, March 30, 2023, after a draw was held at the Football House in New Delhi.

The Hero IWL will start on April 25, 2023. The 2022-23 season will be played out with 16 teams split into two groups. The top four teams from each group will qualify for the knockout stage, consisting of quarterfinals, semi-finals and final. The top eight teams will also get direct slots in next season's Hero IWL, which will be played on a home-and-away basis.





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