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VISION 2047

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**“SAFF TRIUMPH
UNITES THE NATION”**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**THREE IN A ROW,
WE'RE ON A ROLL**



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President's Note

Kalyan Chaubey

SAFF Triumph Unites the Nation

The recently concluded SAFF Championship has left a lasting mark in the hearts of every football enthusiast in India. The tournament was not only a remarkable success, but it also showcased India's potential as a rising football powerhouse.

As the President of the All India Federation, I am proud to share the extraordinary achievements and the sense of national pride that this event brought to our country.

The victory of our Blue Tigers was the pinnacle of this momentous occasion. They fought with unparalleled determination, showcasing their skills and passion for the sport. The atmosphere in the stadiums was electric, and it was evident that India has emerged as a formidable force in football. The flawless execution of hosting such a significant international sporting event speaks volumes about our capabilities as a nation.

One moment that truly stirred the emotions of all present was witnessing 25,000 fans unitedly singing our national anthem, Vande Mataram. It sent goosebumps down our spines, fostering a sense of unity and pride among everyone. What made it even more special was when the Indian team joined the fans in this beautiful display of patriotism.

The success of the SAFF Championship extended beyond the stadiums. The tournament garnered a staggering 10 million viewers across the nation, showcasing the growing popularity of football in India. It is a testament to the passion and interest of the people in our country towards the sport.



The whole nation rallied behind our Blue Tigers during the championship. It was heartwarming to witness the support pouring in from all corners of society. Our Honourable Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi Ji and Home Minister Shri Amit Shah Ji took to social media to cheer and motivate our boys. Even renowned cricketers and film stars expressed their admiration and encouragement, further solidifying the sense of national pride.

I would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to Lebanon and Kuwait for being our special invitees to the tournament. Their presence elevated the standard of the competition, providing our team with formidable challenges. This opportunity for our players to face international talent has undoubtedly contributed to their growth and development in the sport.



The success of the SAFF Championship has ignited a new passion for football in India. As the head of the AIFF, I am committed to harnessing this energy and taking Indian football to new heights. Our triumph in hosting this tournament and the performance of our Blue Tigers have laid a strong foundation for the future of football in our nation.

This SAFF Championship has been a landmark event that has united our nation in its love for football. It has showcased our hosting prowess and also proved that India has huge potential in the world of football.

And just 72 hours before India kicked off their SAFF campaign against Pakistan in Bengaluru, it was another Cup success for the Blue Tigers. India won the Intercontinental Cup as they defeated Lebanon 2-0 in the final at the Kalinga Stadium, Bhubaneswar.

That win was also the Indian team's sixth consecutive clean sheet, and they added two more in the SAFF, thus equalling a record that the Indian National Team set in 1951. In the Intercontinental Cup, India got the better of Lebanon in the league stage and also in the final, their first victory over Lebanon since 1977! Apart from India and Lebanon, Vanuatu, and Mongolia also participated in the Intercontinental Cup.

The support, encouragement, and unity displayed during these two tournaments demonstrate that our country is ready to make its mark on the global stage of football. With dedication and perseverance, we will continue to march forward, realising the dream of seeing our Blue Tigers conquer new heights in the beautiful game of football.

Let's celebrate the present and toast to a brighter future

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran

Secretary General, AIFF

These are remarkable times for Indian Football. The Senior Men's National Team have exhibited some tremendous performances at the Khuman Lampak Stadium in Imphal, the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar and at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium in Bengaluru to win back-to-back titles in the Hero Tri-Nation Cup, the Hero Intercontinental Cup, and the Bangabandhu SAFF Championship, respectively.

In doing so, the Blue Tigers have earmarked the remarkable improvement that they have achieved over the last year, defeating West Asian teams like Lebanon and Kuwait, something that they have not done in recent years. It just goes to show how focused and determined they are to improve in every aspect of the game. I must deeply thank all the fans that turned up at these three championships across these three cities for showing their support and appreciation for the players, who definitely felt that they were no longer being left alone, and their spirits were lifted by everyone who was present in the stadium, working hard towards taking Indian Football forward together.

Through the performances in the SAFF Championship and the Hero Intercontinental Cup, the Blue Tigers have demonstrated that they have grown in stature, moving up the FIFA Rankings to the top 100 in the world. It is now up to the rest of us as administrators to make sure that we take this momentum forward and put in place the good work that will ripple through the fabric of time and ensure that we become a footballing superpower in the future.

One of the key components identified by the Federation's management that will help us in the long term is our footprint at the Grassroots level. The Blue Cubs, our flagship programme for grassroots development, is aimed at just that, and with its launch, we aim to grow the footballing landscape in India.



This is where the Blue Cubs Football Schools initiative comes in to help engage more children with the game. We are also coming up with the grassroots leaders course to democratise the learning so that more individuals and organisations are empowered to be a part of football in India. We have launched a manual on June 23, 2023, the day we celebrated as the AIFF Grassroots Day. We have launched the Grassroots Leaders Course in multiple languages. We felt that there could be no better day than the birth anniversary of India legend PK Banerjee, and also the foundation day of the All India Football Federation.

We want the grassroots footprint of Indian Football to grow much bigger, and we should be there in every village. That's how we want 100 million kids to be a part of grassroots football by 2047.



Prior to India's ninth SAFF Championship title, the Federation's Executive Committee and the General Body met to discuss a number of key issues surrounding Indian Football. Five new clubs were inducted into the Hero I-League, spreading the competition to newer regions across the country. It just goes to reflect how more industrialists in India want to be a part of its footballing landscape. To see these five entities joining the Hero I-League sends a very positive message to everyone who is part of football, and also to those who are willing to invest in the game.

Our U-17 boys performed admirably in the AFC U-17 Asian Cup, where they were put in a rather tough group with Vietnam, Uzbekistan, and Japan. We drew against Vietnam and lost narrowly to Uzbekistan, but what was promising to see was that the boys were right there with the opponents up till the bitter end. That was further amplified in the last match against Japan, which we lost 4-8. The scoreline does not do justice to the effort and commitment that the boys showed against a team that would eventually go on to become champions of the AFC U-17 Asian Cup. Japan only conceded a total of two goals in their other five matches of the tournament.

While the U-17 Asian Cup clearly showed where India lagged behind, it also gave us ample perspective on the talent available in our country. That is why we have decided that from the coming season, we will have the U-13, U-15, and U-17 leagues, by dint of which, we hope to give the junior players across the country around 35 competitive games. This will ensure that the youth players that are eventually filtered through to the junior national teams are of a competitive nature, and will stand a better chance of doing well against the top teams in Asia.

Our strategic roadmap Vision 2047 stands out in our plans to take Indian Football further forward. We want to be in the top four in Asia by 2047, and in the top 10 in the continent by 2026. These are high goals, but they are very much possible if we work hard in partnership with our member associations, clubs, the government, and all the stakeholders.

All this is to come in the future years, but for now, let's take a moment to celebrate what we have achieved, and to later rejoice in a bigger way for greater feats to come in the future.



Double, double toil and Treble: Blue Tigers bask in SAFF C'ship glory

Three home tournaments, three titles! The Blue Tigers are unbeaten in eleven games at home and raring for more

AKHIL RAWAT

The Blue Tigers are on a roll! They have not tasted defeat in 11 matches, beginning from their Hero Tri-Nation opener against Myanmar in Imphal, and have now carried that run progressively south-west, on to Bhubaneswar in the Hero Intercontinental Cup, and then to Bengaluru in the SAFF Championship; the latter arguably being the most difficult of the three international tournaments.

Not only did India not have head coach Igor Stimac on the sidelines for more than half of the competition, but they also had to square up against quality opposition from West Asia, like Lebanon and Kuwait.

What made the SAFF Championship all the more special for the Blue Tigers was their opening clash against arch-rivals Pakistan. The rivalry between the two sibling nations has captivated generations on both sides of the border, but Indian Football fans have not always had the privilege of such high-intensity matches in recent years.

Though the result (4-0) was overwhelmingly in favour of the Blue Tigers, it gave them a sense of the intense rivalry that gave them the momentum to perform in adverse circumstances, something that they faced later on in the tournament.



Former India centre-back and current assistant coach Mahesh Gawali has been in the thick of things from the sidelines for most of the tournament, deputising for the suspended Stimac, and has played the Yin to the Croat's Yang to perfection. Indeed, it was when things were getting heated up in the latter stages of the matches against Kuwait and Lebanon that Gawali's transmission of calm spread to the players, who held their nerves in clutch situations.

It is not often that one gets to see a team win back-to-back penalty shootouts, but that is exactly what India did, defeating Lebanon in the semi-finals (4-2 on penalties) and Kuwait in the final (5-4).

"I think it's wonderful that we were able to maintain our consistency. Not only in the two penalty shootouts but also throughout this year. I would give full credit to the players for continuing in the same vein," said Gawali after winning his maiden SAFF title as a coach, and his third overall.

"This tournament gave me the opportunity to be in charge of the touchline for the first time. I have now won SAFF as both a player and as a coach, and that's a very special feeling," said Gawali. "Definitely I would rate this SAFF Championship as an altogether special one, as it is my first one as a coach. Also, we played some high-quality teams, with some very closely-fought matches. It is totally the achievement of the players."

Sunil Chhetri won the Highest Scorer of the Tournament award with five goals, which also drew him level with Maldives' Ali Ashfaq at the top of SAFF Championship's all-time highest scorer list (23 goals). The India captain was also named the Most Valuable Player of the Tournament. However, the one man who has played a crucial role in the Blue Tigers' ninth SAFF Championship title is arguably goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, who saved a penalty each in both, the semis and the final.

The 31-year-old has not had great memories of penalty shootouts at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium in international competitions; the last time he was part of the 12-yard lottery in an international competition in Bengaluru was in the AFC Cup 2020 Qualifying Playoff Round, where his club Bengaluru FC lost 3-4 in the shootout to Maziya. However, Gurpreet seems to have altered his fortunes in the National Team outfit.

"We have had a history of not winning penalty shootouts at the Kanteerava before, but that seems to be different with the National Team. I'm very happy and thankful to the team for showing such resilience and being creative," he said.

"Penalty shootouts are something that one needs to relish as a goalkeeper. I just try to keep my mind empty and make sure that I'm in the right frame of mind. You can't be jittery, you can't be overconfident," said Gurpreet. "I just see the striker, try to guess which way he will go, and pick my side. If I've gone the right way, it's a matter of getting your hand to it, and making sure that the ball does not go in."

It seems only yesterday that winger Lallianzuala Chhangte burst onto the scene in the SAFF Championship and became the third youngest player to score for India, netting two as a substitute for India against Nepal in a 4-1 victory. That match, however, was eight years ago. Fast forward to the fourth of July, 2023, the Mizo winger had a rather special day

It was the day when Chhangte was named the AIFF Player of the Year at the Federation's Annual General Body Meeting and then followed that up with a stellar performance against Kuwait in the SAFF Championship final, where he scored a 38th-minute equaliser, and also converted a penalty in the shootout, to help India clinch the title.

"It was an amazing day! I'm so thankful to AIFF for this precious award, and for all the opportunities that I have got from it. We've worked so hard ahead of the SAFF Championship, I am not at all surprised that we won it," said Chhangte. "I hope I can motivate more youngsters in the future."





Kumam Udanta Singh has been a regular over the years for the Blue Tigers, bombing down the right wing with his explosive speed. However, it was just a few months back, in March that he was sitting in the stands cheering India on, as his teammates lifted the Hero Tri-Nation Cup in his hometown of Imphal. Although he was one of the loudest supporters of the Blue Tigers in the two matches, Udanta was hungry to get back in the side, and a few stellar performances with his club in the Hero Super Cup the following month saw him return to where he wanted to be.

The SAFF Final in Bengaluru was a bittersweet one for the speedy winger. He was the only Indian player to miss his penalty in the shootout as his strike went over the crossbar. However, winning the championship as a team was all that mattered.

"I've been working hard over the past few months, and it's a very special moment to win the SAFF Championship. Yes, I missed the penalty, and that was hard to take, but I had confidence in Gurpreet-bhai, and he did produce that all-important save in the end.

"Even after I missed, everyone was really supportive. The team bonding in this group is second to none," he said. As we enter the second half of 2023, India have already won a treble this year, and are looking good as they aim for the AFC Asian Cup next year. Up next, they are set to play the King's Cup in Thailand and the Merdeka Cup in Malaysia, and the numbers are looking good for the Blue Tigers. They are on an 11-match unbeaten run overall; at home, that streak extends to 15 matches. However, the side is ever vigilant and waiting for tougher challenges as they prepare for the Asian Cup.

"There's still a lot of time left for the Asian Cup, and the time ahead will help us improve further," said Gurpreet. "The long camp helped us a lot this time, and I hope this can continue further. For now, we should enjoy this moment. Winning three trophies in a row is rare, even more so with the National Team. We are extremely proud, but we need to keep our heads down and keep pushing further."



Magical Kanteerava: The divine sound that played the Nightingale

India's victories at the SAFF Championship owe a lot to a crowd that screamed louder when the team were down, and carried them through thick and thin

AKHIL RAWAT

Minute 14 of the Bangabandhu SAFF Championship 2023 final at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium in Bengaluru – Shabaib Al-Khaldi had just tucked away the opening goal for Kuwait. The Blue Tigers faithful in the stands, though, didn't let any heads drop on the pitch. The first time in 11 matches that India found themselves chasing a game, unbelievably, gave them even more impetus to get the win.

Barely a few seconds after the goal, as the Kuwait players were reeling away in celebration and before the hosts could kick off again, the Kanteerava had already begun chanting in unison – "India! India!"

Twenty-six thousand sounding like 50,000. Where else have you heard as much noise in support after conceding a goal as after scoring one?



Bengaluru's very own, captain Sunil Chhetri remarked in a heartfelt video dedicated to the fans after the triumph, "We all felt something different this time in Bengaluru. You guys were special!"

A more difficult moment to digest for the Indian fans came in the last group-stage match against the same opposition, Kuwait. Anwar Ali's unfortunate injury-time own goal meant that India not only lost the top spot in the group, but also surrendered their eight-match clean sheet run. But the way the crowd came together in his support after the full-time is sure to stay in the memory of the young defender, who confidently went on to score from the penalty spot in the semi-final shoot-out against Lebanon four days later.

It didn't matter if it was a weekday – as in the final, or a weekday with pouring rain – as in the opening game against Pakistan, Bengaluru did not fail to be India's 12th man. Even for an eternal icon like Chhetri, these couple of weeks must have been among his most special ones. Netting a sensational hat-trick against Pakistan, breaching the 90-goal mark, uniquely announcing his contract extension with Bengaluru FC, winning his fourth and India's ninth SAFF title – all at his beloved Kanteerava.

"The games against Lebanon and Kuwait weren't easy, and if you weren't there, we wouldn't have got the trophy. I'm not trying to praise you or be modest. I'm just stating a fact," the skipper added in his video.

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu has been the city's guardian for six years now. The Kanteerava may be the most familiar territory for him, but the penalty shoot-out against Lebanon was his first for India. However, no sooner than the full-time whistle sounded, the fans had put all their faith in his safe gloves with the chants of "Oh, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu!"

With utter confidence, he walked up to take his place between the sticks, and his left arm did the rest, keeping out Kuwait captain Hassan Maatouk's strike to hand India the early and decisive advantage.





Same drill in the final. However, Udanta Singh's miss meant that things got more nerve-racking as the shoot-out went to sudden death. Even though the 27-year-old sank to the ground with his hands on his head, he could walk back with his head high, consoled by the "Udanta! Udanta!" shouts from the stands. Gurpreet came to the rescue again, winning the title with the all-important and almost identical save against Kuwait's captain Khaled Hajiah.

The importance of a player's confidence on the pitch cannot be stressed enough. And the biggest source of that confidence comes from off the pitch – the fans. Chhetri aptly put it, "We're going to win some games, and then we're going to lose some. But just to know that we're all in this together gives us a lot of hope."

Whether it was Naorem Mahesh Singh surging down the left wing, Sandesh Jhingan throwing his body to make a crucial block, or even Anirudh Thapa making a miss-pass. In the good and the bad, Bengaluru always stood with the Blue Tigers. Everyone had their names chanted.

There was some hostility reserved for the visitors as well, more apparent in the matches against Pakistan and Kuwait. With boos and jeers, the Kanteerava fans let everyone know it was 'their jungle, their prey,' and they're here to make the home advantage count. But it's all love and brotherhood after the game ends. "Well played, Kuwait!" chants as the West Asians went up to collect their silver medals are a testimony to that. The Kuwait players and staff thanked and acknowledged the appreciation with claps.

Last, but not least, the Blue Tigers and the entire Kanteerava chorusing 'Vande Mataram,' which went viral across social media within a few hours, was one of the biggest goosebumps moments in Indian Football. The stadium, which sang the song with endless enthusiasm during every single match, ultimately got their reward in the final, singing it together with their heroes.

July 4 will forever be a special, special day for Kanteerava, Bengaluru, and Indian Football.



Longer camps necessary for success on bigger stage, says Sunil Chhetri

The Blue Tigers skipper believes longer camps will allow the team to be better prepared to face higher-ranked opposition at the AFC Asian Cup

An 11-match unbeaten run in 2023 is not enough for Indian football team captain Sunil Chhetri, who is further looking forward to playing against tough international matches in September and October.

The Blue Tigers, after completing a treble of titles in 2023, winning the Hero Tri-Nation Cup, Hero Intercontinental Cup, and the Bangabandhu SAFF Championship, will be looking forward to participation in the King's Cup in Thailand in September, and the Merdeka Cup in Malaysia in October, as part of their preparation for the AFC Asian Cup.

India (FIFA Ranking 100) have been drawn in Group B of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, where they will face the likes of Australia (22), Uzbekistan (74), and Syria (94).

"When you start winning games, it adds to your confidence. The good part is that when we meet teams like Iraq (King's Cup), we get to gauge ourselves and know where we stand against teams of a certain standard," said Chhetri. "We've already played well against Lebanon and Kuwait, so we know where we stand against Syria, who are probably a notch higher, but are of a similar quality."



He further went on to state that the Blue Tigers need to face one of the top teams in Asia to gauge themselves for their clash against Australia.

“(Playing) Iraq will tell us what we need to do against Uzbekistan, and then, maybe closer to the Asian Cup, we need to play one of the top teams in Asia, like Iran, Japan, or the Korea Republic, in order for us to be better prepared for Australia,” he said.

While the AFC Asian Cup is set to take place in Qatar in January 2024, Chhetri is not one to look too far ahead into the future.

“I’m not sure what my expectations are exactly for the future, and that’s the way I am. I only keep short-term targets,” he said. “I don’t know about targets for the Asian Cup or the World Cup Qualifiers, but we are going to take things on a short-term basis and keep fighting. This is what I’ve been telling the whole team.”

The Blue Tigers’ SAFF Championship victory after a nerve-wracking penalty shootout against Kuwait in the final, which India won 5-4. That win saw praise being showered on them from all walks of life. However, Chhetri urged his boys to keep their heads down and carry on.

“This limelight that we’re getting we all like it, but we cannot get ahead of ourselves,” said Chhetri. “There is an invisible pressure on everyone, and we like it, we enjoy it. It’s not just us players or coaches, but everyone – AIFF, the Government, the clubs, and the corporate houses. Even the media as well. Everyone is under an invisible pressure when we need to perform.”

The Blue Tigers have been in camp for around two months, beginning in May, weeks before the Hero Intercontinental Cup, something that has set the process for their success. For Chhetri and Co, it has been two months of toil after the end of a long season.

"It was quite a tedious camp for us, and that's why you saw everyone so happy after we won the SAFF Championship. We had all been together and worked so hard for more than 50 days. What made it more difficult was that this came at the end of a long season," he said. "We played the Hero ISL, then the Tri-Nation, then the Super Cup, and then we were back in the National Camp. Some even played in the AFC Competitions for their respective clubs. But the results of that long camp were there for all to see."

The 38-year-old feels that it is essential for a team like India to have longer camps ahead of crucial tournaments, in order for the players to gel well with each other.

"For a team like ours, especially for the Asian Cup, where we know we will face the likes of Australia, Uzbekistan, and Syria, longer camps would always be helpful. When the boys play at the Hero ISL, they are playing at a certain level. But let's be honest, when we meet Australia, we would meet competition that is a couple of levels higher, if not more," said Chhetri. "That's the reason why when we come together and train, we know that it helps a bit. That is the reason why we need longer camps, and to play 2-3 friendlies against some of the top teams in Asia."





With hard work, we can continue to dream big, says Igor Stimac

The Blue Tigers head coach states that he's never angry with critics as they always push him to be stronger and more resistant

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY & AKHIL RAWAT

Igor Stimac has led the Blue Tigers to an unprecedented three trophies in a row this year. The Croatian recently completed four years as India head coach and is riding the crest of a wave, with some confident and consistent performances in recent weeks, characterised by a strong defence and a never-say-die attitude. Here's what Stimac had to say to the-aiff.com after a sensational two months of football from his boys.

Three back-to-back tournament triumphs are a kind of a record for Indian football. As the Head Coach, you must be extremely pleased. That apart, please tell us how this achievement on home turf will help Indian football in the long run.

Firstly, I am very proud of everybody involved – the players, who worked so hard throughout two months, and the coaching and support staff for managing their work to perfection. And also, our amazing supporters who were there in huge numbers to make our boys feel their passion from the stands and to push them to victory. I use this opportunity to also give a huge thanks to our president and his people for making it possible to have a long camp with so many games.

What's the takeaway from the Tri-Nation, Intercontinental Cup and SAFF Championship? Skills? Confidence? International exposure? Or the emergence of more players on the national scene?

A bit of everything to be honest because without even one of the above-mentioned things, nothing would be possible. Again, the most important thing for me as a coach is to implement the right mindset and drills from training practices into games.

You said the Asian Cup is still far away, and it will all depend on the preparation time at the end of the year. Yet, after three tournament wins, is there an idea forming in your head? Do you now have more clarity about the plan for the Asian Cup?

Considering the gap between now and December, the inconsistency in our football can kill all the good work we have done. Many players have changed their clubs and coaches and now new challenges lie ahead of them. Time will tell if they are going to do well or not.

You have often been accused of someone who is unsure of his starting eleven. In response, you staunchly defended your decision by pointing out how important the rotation of players is. Did you go into these three tournaments with the same mindset?

I was always very confident about what needed to be done. And that's the precise reason we are successful today. I didn't let criticism hold me back or influence my initial plans. And there is no anger about it. Critics were pushing me to be stronger and more resistant. I see a lot of things in football in advance that not many can see. There was never a single aspect of my work you can address with "experimenting." It's all based on knowledge and experience.





Among the three tournaments, which one was the toughest? Which one was the best in terms of your team's performance?

The SAFF Championship, definitely. Playing Kuwait twice and Lebanon was a huge challenge but we were up for it as our fitness level was perfect for such challenges.

Among the youngsters, are there some players whose performance left you pleasantly surprised?

No surprises again. We know all our boys really well and now we have engaged our performance coach and sports psychologist to help us raise the players' confidence and mindset, and also to reduce the disruptions we all carry within our lives. Everyone settled down perfectly during the camp. Whoever you mention - whether Jeakson, Chhangte, Mahesh, Sahal, Akash or any other - it's difficult to decide the best amongst them. That's the beauty of our success.

Are you now confident that India can maintain the same level of performance in away matches also?

I am confident that maintaining the same level of performance requires time for hard work. The least it gives us is the chance to dream and hope.



From player extraordinaire to a meticulous coach: The Mahesh Gawali way

Gawali won his third gold at the SAFF Championship, this one as a coach adding to two legendary editions where he led the Indian backline

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

On the night of July 4, 2023, when everyone at Bengaluru's Sree Kanteerava Stadium was revelling in India's ninth SAFF Championship triumph, standing almost unnoticed in a corner of the pitch was a man wearing a proud yet shy smile on his face. It was hard to believe that he was Mahesh Gawali, India's Assistant Coach and the Head Coach on the bench in the final; the man who played a significant role in steering India to the title in a difficult encounter against Kuwait.

Gawali, 42, is one of the most respected names in Indian football. He has made an indelible mark on the sport both as a player and a coach. His journey from a talented young footballer to one of India's finest defenders and finally an influential coach has been a remarkable one.

As a classy centre-back, Mahesh was the backbone of India's defence for more than a decade. In between, he won the SAFF Championships title twice in 2005 and 2011 in Karachi and New Delhi, respectively. The gold medal he earned on July 4 was actually his third in the SAFF, though the first in his new role as a coach.



In an exclusive chat with www.the-aiff.com, Gawali shared his experience of winning three international titles as an assistant coach of the Senior National Team, the way he handled the added responsibility from the touchline in the semi-final and final of the SAFF, the inner strength of the team and much more.

Winning the SAFF Championship as a player in Karachi and Delhi and then as a coach in Bengaluru. Which assignment was more difficult? What are your feelings?

Winning the title as a player, that, too, as a coach, was difficult, for sure. But now many things in SAFF have changed. Previously, only South Asian regional teams played in the SAFF. But now other teams like Lebanon and Kuwait are also participating. Yes, the team we had in Karachi had some gifted players and we faced good competition and qualities. It was a wonderful experience. Syed Nayeemuddin was our coach and his caring nature was too good. He took care of everybody in the team and there was a different type of motivation all around.

Was there anything in Syed Nayeemuddin that inspired you as a coach when you took up the present assignment?

Yes, certainly. When Nayeem saab was the coach, he used to motivate us daily. There was a phase in my life when I decided to stop playing football but he brought me back to the game. It was the turning point of my career and I achieved a lot thereafter. To be honest, it was he, who taught me never to give up. Now, I tell the youngsters to keep going. Don't stop, it will make you a better player for sure, I tell them now.

The AFC Asian Cup is knocking on the door, so what gives you hope for this team and why?

Honestly, I have a lot of faith in the way this team is playing. Everyone is showing the right attitude on and off the pitch. It has surely raised its bar considerably higher now. I feel that when we play Australia also, it will be very difficult for them to beat us. I have this feeling because my confidence level has grown, which was not as much when I entered the senior team last year. At present, things are different. So, if we continue working the way we are now, it will be very good for each of us.

What are the changes you are talking about?

Like in the SAFF final, everyone understood that they had to bear a lot of responsibilities and they performed well. In the dressing room, when I was leading the team, the environment was different. They were talking and discussing how they needed to cope with the situation. And the understanding, love, care, and attitude the players had amongst themselves were tremendous.

In the SAFF final, when Kuwait scored first, it was after a long time we found India trailing in a match at home. Did you panic?

No, I never had that feeling. Sometimes when you are trailing, it comes to your mind “Kya ho raha hai?”, which is funny. But this time it did not come to my mind at all. I thought I was pretty much stronger than before because I knew that something was coming because I could see my players wanted to do something. I just told them to force themselves and press higher. I strongly believed that we will come back and score.

You have worked with many foreign coaches before. So what is extraordinary about Igor Stimac?

Igor is a very intelligent coach. He understands each one of his players. He taught them to build up from the start. He told the players that if there is any pressure, they need to do the build-up, which will give them confidence. The process surely takes time, it is not something that can happen in one day. If we notice, we rarely kick the ball up these days. Igor truly believes in individual creativity.

What did you tell the boys at the half time of the SAFF final when you were in charge in the absence of Stimac?

I told them ‘It is our trophy’ and it shouldn’t go anywhere. I was just pushing them. After all, it was my job. I needed to create that pressure because, at the end of the day, it was our trophy and the nation’s trophy. I told them not to forget this fact.

As a player, you had so much success. Are you enjoying your success as a coach, too?

I don’t want to leave football and I want to be in this game as much as I can. Because I love the game and I’m enjoying all the moments. Yes, sometimes there are ups and downs. But you need to be more dedicated, work hard and stay mentally strong.





Players are now having an off-season. Are you also relaxing at home or have started working on your next plans?

Well, we need to start working immediately from the next day itself because we know there's a bigger task on our hands. The performance, fitness and all other necessary information of a player need to be kept. We should have the next plan ready at least two months in advance.

As a footballer, you possessed the amazing ability to make front tackles. Are you trying to inject the same into your centre-backs?

Well, it's a difficult skill. You have to have a really strong mentality and a strong reading power to intercept the move. You have to analyse the passer and be focused on the receiver. If you miss it, then you are out and the opponent gets a clear view of the goal. Yes, I am trying to do the same with Anwar Ali. He tends to come and do the move at the training, but it takes a lot of practice, for sure.

As a player, you had Sunil Chhetri as your teammate and a junior. And now you are his coach. How is the journey?

When he first came as a player, Sunil was not always in the starting eleven. But I found him someone, who was ready to give everything to be in the starting line-up. Slowly he started getting goals and became very strong as a player. His dedication and motivation level is still very high. He doesn't give up. Sunil is a thorough professional, and very disciplined in terms of his food, rest and in every aspect of life. This is what is helping him to grow better and become stronger. Every youngster should learn from him. He is focussed, dedicated, gives his hundred percent and most importantly, he never says "I can't".



Mahesh and Mahesh: The names on everyone's lips

The winger and the coach have both mesmerised Indian Football fans in their own ways, over the past few months

AKHIL RAWAT

Saturday, June 24, 2023, was the night of firsts for both 'Mahesh's in the Indian team. Naorem Mahesh Singh capped off a brilliant performance against Nepal with his first goal for the Blue Tigers, while assistant coach Mahesh Gawali, stepping in place of Igor Stimac, serving a one-match suspension, led the team to victory on his first day on the touchline.

It was a hard-fought but eventually, routine 2-0 win over Nepal as India sealed their spot in the Bangabandhu SAFF Championship 2023 semi-final with a game to spare.

"It was a game of two halves. In the first 45, Nepal did not give us the chance to play. They were tough and strong in defence. In the second half, we were cooler and calmer with the ball," said Gawali.

"The situation in the dressing room was calm. We told the players to minimise errors. No special instructions," he shared. "And we saw the change in the second half. They followed the instructions clearly, did not give the ball away and maintained possession."

The tempo of the game went up a few gears after the restart, and Nepal were forced to put all their men behind the ball as India increasingly started maintaining possession deeper and deeper in the opposition half.

India managed to unlock the Nepal defence in textbook style. Naorem Mahesh Singh played a terrific give-and-go with Sahal Abdul Samad to leave the defenders biting the dust and get a clear view of the six-yard box from the left wing. The return from Sahal was perfectly weighted, allowing Naorem to drill it in first time for the captain fantastic, who guided it home.

"Naorem's cross was the turning point of the game," said Gawali. "Because after Chhetri's finish, we dominated until the end. That goal brought back our confidence."

While Naorem's first assist was a classic and a well-worked one, that wasn't exactly the case with his first goal for the Blue Tigers. Not that it matters anyway, because the goal and the win for India are all he cares about. Rather bizarrely, Chhetri's effort was saved by goalkeeper Limbu before the ball bounced twice on top of the crossbar and, fortunately, fell back in play, where Naorem was the quickest to react and hustled it in with a combination of his head and shoulder.

This year has been an absolute dream for Naorem. While donning the national team colours is a massive privilege for anybody, doing so in your hometown is even more special. So, when the 24-year-old stepped onto the Khuman Lampak pitch in Imphal in the Hero Tri-Nation match against Myanmar, it was already the biggest moment of his career. And there were much bigger things in store in the summer.





His first goal contributions for India against Nepal at the Kanteerava got him in the limelight, before he stepped up to take his two biggest kicks of his life - in the penalty shoot-outs against Lebanon and Kuwait in the semi-final and final respectively.

Called upon for big-game moments, not just once but twice, and he delivered in style each time. Two cold finishes - tucked into the bottom corner against Lebanon, and slammed onto the roof of the net against Kuwait. Both followed by passionate roars of joy. "An excellent player. We're seeing a future star of Indian football," was the best Gawali could describe him.

For even a decorated former player like Gawali, it turned out to be one of the most sensational weeks of his professional career. Called into action on the touchline again after another red card for Stimac in the final group-stage match against Kuwait and his subsequent suspension for the knockout stage, Gawali was confidently up to the task and delivered the title in style.

Although the former central defender had won the SAFF Championship twice as a player (2005 in Karachi and 2011 in New Delhi), lifting the trophy as a coach was special in its own way, considering the much tougher competition from West Asian guest sides in this edition.

India have been almost unbreakable in defence in 2023, conceding just twice in 11 matches. Jhingan, who was named the Hero of the Tournament in the Hero Intercontinental Cup, acknowledged and appreciated Gawali's significant contribution to the Blue Tigers' rigidity at the back.

"Mahesh bhai was one of the best defenders India had during his playing days. We all looked up to him, and it's amazing for us to have had a longer camp with him. We have received praise for our solid defensive job, and a lot of credit should go to him. He gives us inputs all the time in every session. The system is what brings the best out of any player," stated Jhingan.



Shooting Range

SAFF CHAMPIONSHIP 2023 BENGALURU







President Kalyan Chaubey chairs AIFF AGM in Bengaluru

The All India Football Federation held its Annual General Body Meeting (AGM) under the leadership of President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, in Bengaluru, on Tuesday, July 4, 2023.

Vice President Mr. NA Haris, Treasurer Mr. Kipa Ajay, and Secretary General Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran, along with the Members of the AIFF Executive Committee, representatives from 34 Member State Associations, and two Affiliate Members – RSPB (Railways Sports Promotion Board), and SSCB (Services Sports Control Board), attended the AGM in Bengaluru. Present as observers at the AGM were three members from FIFA, and one each from the AFC, IOA, and the Federation's marketing partners, FSDL.

Addressing the gathering, AIFF President Mr. Chaubey said, "India is the fifth largest economy in the world, and we have an Hon'ble Prime Minister (Shri Narendra Modi), who loves and supports sports. We are in a time when football has a massive potential. Several times we've heard from our friends in the FIFA and AFC say that India are the sleeping giants of world football. I can assure you that the current AIFF General Body is so active and energetic that Indian Football is very much awake."

He further stated, "As the President of the Federation, I have, along with the Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary General, travelled to 17 states and union territories till last month, which gave us more ideas on how we can improve football across these areas. Never before have states like Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, and many others been visited by office bearers from AIFF, and I can assure you that each one of these regions has immense potential in football."

The AIFF President also highlighted the massive support that the Federation has received from FIFA and AFC and thanked them for it.

"In the last nine months, we have met the FIFA President (Mr. Gianni Infantino) at least six times, and we also received a personalised message on video from him, ratifying the Hero Santosh Trophy. That is the strength of the relationship we have built with FIFA, and I thank them for it," said Mr. Chaubey. "They have also promised massive support to us through their Coaching and Grassroots Programmes.

"We also met AFC President (Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa) and General Secretary (Datuk Seri Windsor John), and discussed the potential around the growth of football in India."

The President also went on to congratulate all the champions of every domestic competition, and all AIFF's Member and Affiliate Associations for successfully participating in all the National Championships.

Women's football is a big part of the Federation's plans for the future, charted out in its strategic roadmap, Vision 2047, and the President outlined AIFF's intention to take the women's game further forward.

"We have in our minds, an all-round inclusive growth for Women's Football for the country. We realise that if we put in good work now in this area, our women footballers in the future can reap the rewards," Mr. Chaubey said. "The need of the hour, at the moment for our women footballers, is more exposure at the international level, so that they can improve and put out better performances against top opponents in Asia and the world."

Finally, the President thanked the Karnataka State Football Association for the successful organisation of the SAFF Championship in Bengaluru.

"I must thank the KSFA, which has played a huge role in organising perhaps the best SAFF Championship in its history. For the first time, we are seeing full houses at matches, people are looking to buy tickets, and not just the free passes," he said.

AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran thanked all the Member Associations for their proactive role at the AGM. "This is the first AGM under the new management and was attended by all the State Associations except for Tamil Nadu and Jammu & Kashmir, and by representatives from the FIFA and AFC, and an IOA observer. We have in this AGM, deliberated, and discussed the agenda items and approved the appointment of a statutory auditor to audit the accounts of the Federation and the financial statements and audit reports of 2022-23, and also approved the budget of the financial year 2023-24 unanimously. All the associations proactively participated in the decisions," he said.





AIFF Executive Committee inducts five new clubs into Hero I-League, Federation Cup restored

The All India Football Federation's Executive Committee met in Bengaluru, with President Mr Kalyan Chaubey presiding over the meeting on Monday, July 3, 2023.

In attendance were Vice President Mr NA Haris, Treasurer Mr Kipa Ajay, Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran, along with Executive Committee Members Mr Lalnghinglova Hmar, Mr Deepak Sharma, Mr Menla Ethenpa, Mr GP Palguna, Mr Vijay Bali, Mr Syed Husain Ali Naqvi, Mr K Neibou Sekhose, Mr Avijit Paul, Mr Anilkumar P, Ms Valanka Natasha Alemao, Mr Maloji Raje Chhatrapati, Mr Mohan Lal, Mr Syed Imtiaz Hussain, and Mr Arif Ali. Eminent Player Members Ms Thongam Tababi Devi, Ms Pinky Bompal Magar, Mr Shabbir Ali, Mr IM Vijayan, Mr Bhaichung Bhutia, and Mr Climax Lawrence, were present. Special invitees Mr Satyanarayan M, Hon'ble General Secretary, Karnataka State Football Association, and Mr Mulrajsinh Chudasama, Hon'ble General Secretary, Gujarat State Football Association were present.

AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey said in his opening address, "This Executive Committee meeting is being held on a day when the Indian Senior Men's National Team is preparing to battle it out against Kuwait in the final of the SAFF Championship tomorrow (India were ultimately crowned champions). Despite two teams from outside the SAFF region, who are regarded as considerably stronger sides, playing in the current SAFF Championship, India made the final and are going for the 9th title. This is ample testimony of India's growing footballing strength. Having reached the FIFA Ranking of 100 after winning back-to-back tournaments in Imphal and Bhubaneswar, it is proved that Indian Football is moving in the right direction. I congratulate the entire Executive Committee on putting up a great effort in taking the correct path for achieving our ultimate goal.



He further stated, "The biggest strength of this Executive Committee is their complete faith in running the game in the country in the most democratic manner. Perhaps, never before has the Federation been run with so much inner democracy, where everybody has the right to air their views and opinions."

Five entities had placed their respective bids for corporate entries into the Hero I-League – YMS Finance Pvt Ltd (Varanasi, UP), Namdhari Seeds Pvt Ltd (Bhaini Sahib Village, Punjab), Nimida United Sports Development Pvt Ltd (Bengaluru, Karnataka), Concatenate Advest Advisory Pvt Ltd (Delhi), and Bunkerhill Pvt Ltd (Ambala, Haryana). The Executive Committee, in its first order of the day, decided to accommodate all five bidders into the Hero I-League, with the vision of expanding the competition to a stronger league.

The Committee, in line with AIFF's long-term plan, Vision 2047, felt it would be prudent to revive a legacy competition like the Federation Cup. To that extent, it decided that the Federation Cup will be the premier cup competition in India from the 2023-24 season onwards.

KSFA General Secretary Mr Satyanarayan M was, upon the proposal of Mr Chaubey, appointed by the Committee as the new Deputy Secretary General of the All India Football Federation.

AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said, after the conclusion of the Committee's meeting, "It is extremely encouraging to see all the Executive Committee members taking part in all the decisions today. We had open discussions on Indian Football agendas, especially the decision to inculcate five new clubs into the Hero I-League, which is historic. I am thankful to the League Committee and the Executive Committee for this. Also, I congratulate Satyanarayan for being appointed Deputy Secretary General, which will add to the strength of the AIFF in delivering and improving secretariat decisions."

AIFF 2022-23 Season Award Winners



PLAYER OF THE YEAR – WOMEN: MANISHA KALYAN

The sensational Kalyan was named the Women's Player of the Year for the second year running, becoming only the third player to win the award on multiple occasions after Bala Devi and Bembem Devi. The 21-year-old scored 6 goals to help her side Apollon Ladies FC win the Cypriot First Division title. Manisha also won the Cypriot Women's Cup and became the first Indian to play in the UEFA Women's Champions League Qualifiers.

PLAYER OF THE YEAR – MEN: LALLIANZUALA CHHANGTE

Lallianzuala Chhangte became only the second Indian to win the Hero ISL Hero of the League Award, scoring 10 goals to guide Mumbai City FC to the League Winners' Shield. The 26-year-old played a crucial role in India's three trophy wins this year. He found the net in the Hero Intercontinental Cup Final against Lebanon and the SAFF Championship Final against Kuwait, and was also named the MVP in the Hero Tri-Nation Series in Imphal.



EMERGING PLAYER OF THE YEAR – WOMEN: SHILJI SHAJI

The Indian women's U-17 team's goal machine Shilji Shaji picked up the top-scorer award at the SAFF U-17 Women's Championship with eight goals in four matches, registering two hat-tricks against Nepal and Bhutan. The 16-year-old has already scored 16 goals in just six matches for the Young Tigresses, and will look to continue her rich form in Round 2 of the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers.

EMERGING PLAYER OF THE YEAR – MEN: AKASH MISHRA

Full-back Akash Mishra produced another stellar season for club and country. A livewire on the left-wing, the 21-year-old was instrumental in all three tournament victories for the Blue Tigers – the Hero Tri-Nation, Hero Intercontinental Cup and the SAFF Championship, and also helped Hyderabad FC finish runners-up in the league season.



COACH OF THE YEAR – WOMEN: PRIYA PV

Priya PV was at the helm of the Indian women's U-17 team which secured qualification to Round 2 of the AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers for the first time. India beat the Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar in the first round in April and will line up for the next round in September with hopes to qualify for the final tournament for the first time since 2005.

COACH OF THE YEAR – MEN: CLIFFORD MIRANDA

Former India international midfielder Clifford Miranda led Odisha FC to the Hero Super Cup title in Kerala, thus becoming the first Indian coach to win a major title with a Hero ISL team. Apart from guiding the club to their first-ever silverware, he also earned them a spot in the AFC Cup group stage, their maiden qualification at the continental stage.





AFC U-17 Asian Cup campaign ends, but the dream lives on

Despite exiting the tournament in the group stage, the Blue Colts proved their mettle in their final game against Japan, a team that went on to win the title

SOUOMO GHOSH

India may have been knocked out of the AFC U-17 Asian Cup in the Group Stage, but their performance in the last match against defending champions Japan gave hope to football fans across the country.

Having gone down 0-3 in the first half of their last match of Group D against Japan, India produced a fantastic performance after the breather, taking the game to their opponents at the Rajamangala National Stadium in Bangkok, Thailand. However, Japan's quality shone through in the end, as they won 8-4, netting a goal each in the 7th and 8th minutes of the injury time. So what changed in the second half? A simple mindset, says head coach Bibiano Fernandes.

"I'm so happy with the character that the boys showed in the second half against Japan. At half time, we all spoke and decided to completely put the first half result behind us. Yes, we were down 0-3, but it's more difficult when you have that in mind," said Fernandes. "We decided that we just wanted to try and win the second half."

And that instantly worked. Two minutes into the second half, Mukul Panwar connected with a free-kick by Vanlalpeka Guite to score India's first goal, something that showed India that the mighty Japan can be messed with.

"We knew about the quality of the opponents. They are the defending champions, and sometimes it was so difficult to just execute the plans that we had brought to the game," said Fernandes. "They simply overpowered our plans in the first half."

"We were trying to stop their play in the midfield in the first half, but after the break, we tried pushing even further. We put three in the front to press their defence, and then three more behind them to pick up the scraps, and the boys responded brilliantly," said Fernandes. "To come back like that against an opposition of such high quality is a positive result for us."

For the Blue Colts players, it was a bittersweet night. They all had a unified dream of taking India to the FIFA U-17 World Cup, a dream that ended at the final whistle. Tears flowed out of the corner of many moist eyes. Fernandes, as he approached his players to console them, was met with a barrage of apologies. "I'm sorry we could not do it, coach. We could not fulfil the dream."

It was only after that, that the team realised what they had done. The few dozens of Indian fans who were in the massive Rajamangala Stadium, rushed down to the lowest tier and gave a standing ovation to the boys, who headed towards them to show their appreciation of the support. Goalscorer Danny Meitei could not believe that such a positive reaction could come from the stands despite losing a match.

"I didn't know what to feel. We had lost, but I know we had played well. It was only when I saw the fans cheering us after the match, that we realised how special our performance in the second half was," said Danny. "That leaves me wondering what could have happened, had we done the same in the first half, what could have happened if we had done it in the previous two matches?"

Goalkeeper Sahil Poonia, despite conceding eight goals, had a stellar day under the bar, making countless saves, including a thwarted penalty in the second half. "It's never easy to see your opponents score so many goals against you, but such was the quality of Japan. But we just tried to keep all the disappointments away from our minds and carry on attacking them," said Sahil.





Bibiano Fernandes bids adieu to Blue Colts

After eight years of guiding Indian Football's youngest and brightest, the Blue Colts head coach bids adieu in search of pastures anew

SOUOMO GHOSH

Consistency and creativity! These have been the two aspects of the India U-16/U-17 teams over the last eight years. The Blue Colts had consistently qualified for the AFC U-16 Championship, and the AFC U-17 Asian Cup (the rebranded version of the former) in 2018, 2020, and 2023.

While Indian Football is at a stage where qualification for the continental stage is celebrated as a success, there is one team that put that aside, dreamt of bigger things, and came tantalisingly close to achieving them. The man behind such 'success' and the subsequent audacious dream that almost turned into reality is none other than Bibiano Fernandes. While the 46-year-old now leaves the National Team fold after spending eight bright years in it, he leaves behind a sense of contentment and stoic belief that India can one day make it to the world's biggest footballing stage au mérite.

"As I come to the end of eight tremendous years with the India U-17 and U-16 National Teams, the feeling is one of ample gratitude from my end. I would like to thank the AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey and Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran for all their help," said Bibiano Fernandes. "It has been an incredible experience, and I've been fortunate to have had the pleasure of working with all the players and support staff who were with me during these years. My assistant coach Kanan (Priolkar), goalkeeping coaches Felix (Dsouza) and Jude Barretto, team manager Rocky, analyst Mishal (Thanveer), physios Burhan and Sudarson, and kit manager Constancio (Pango) have all been great. Whatever we achieved would not have been possible without any one of them."



"I am truly grateful for the support, guidance, and friendship I've received from each one of them, and I want to express my deepest appreciation for the hard work and dedication that each one of them has put into helping the India U-16 and U-17 batches win three consecutive SAFF titles and to qualify for the AFC Championships three times in a row," he said. "It was also a privilege to work with each and every player that was in our team across all the three batches, and I want to thank all of them for giving their all to the beautiful game."

Perhaps the most memorable moment for the Blue Colts under Fernandes came in the 2018 AFC U-16 Championship in Malaysia, where India finished second in Group C to book their spot in the quarter-finals – one more win away from qualifying for the FIFA U-17 World Cup. Vikram Partap Singh and co. came back with broken hearts, however, after a second-half strike from the Republic of Korea's Jeong Sang-bin meant a 0-1 defeat for India in the quarter-finals.

In next year's FIFA U-17 World Cup, Korea Republic made it all the way to the quarter-finals, while Sang-bin went on to play for clubs like Wolverhampton Wanderers in the Premier League and Grasshopper CZ in the Swiss Super League. For India, the dream carried on.



The following batch of U-16s under Bibiano Fernandes raised eyebrows and induced goosebumps in every Indian Football fan, going on to score a massive 32 goals in seven matches across the SAFF U-15 Championship and the AFC U-16 Championship Qualifiers, conceding only one goal, which came against a strong Uzbekistan side, in front of a hostile crowd in Tashkent.

“The kind of football we played with the first batch was completely different from that in the second batch, and that entirely came down to the experience that the coaching staff gained in the first campaign and implemented the learnings in the second one,” said Fernandes. “I feel we had a certain amount of luck while qualifying for the 2018 AFC U-16 Championship, but we made the most of it to gain the experience.”

Sadly, the second batch never got to play in the AFC U-16 Championship in 2020 due to the pandemic.

“Those were unforeseen times and I feel extremely sad for the boys who had worked so hard to get to that level but never got to test themselves against the best in Asia due to no fault of their own,” he said. “But such were the times. Football is a very small thing when people are suffering and dying all around you.”

For the next batch, a SAFF U-17 Championship victory in Sri Lanka was followed by a successful qualification campaign in the AFC U-17 Asian Cup Qualifiers in Saudi Arabia, and the dream continued. The situation in the AFC U-17 Asian Cup group stage was, of course, much more overwhelming, but the Blue Colts performed admirably, going on to put up a tough fight against eventual champions Japan, losing 4-8 in the process.

“What I can say at the end of the day is that everyone gave their best, and that’s all I can ask of my players,” said Fernandes. “I believe it’s important to acknowledge those in every arena of life who bring about a positive impact in everything. I’m thankful to all the players, staff, and fans that supported us through thick and thin and believed in our journey. Let’s keep supporting the Blue Colts. We have one goal, one dream!”





Start of something special for women's football in Tamil Nadu

Five years after their last Nationals title, Tamil Nadu's Women team added one more crown to the mix, in dominant style this time for good measure

SOUOMO GHOSH

When one speaks of powerhouses of Indian Women's Football, one generally thinks of states like Manipur, West Bengal, Kerala, and so on. The southern state of Tamil Nadu does not come too high up on such lists. However, the number of domestic trophies won by teams from Tamil Nadu in the last few years paints a completely different picture. Two Hero ISL titles, one Hero I-League title, and two Hero Senior Women's National Football Championships have all gone to the state or teams from the state.

The Tamil Nadu women's football team have shown great resilience to defeat Haryana in the final of the Hero Senior Women's NFC in Amritsar, Punjab, to be crowned champions against all odds, for the second time in the history of the tournament on June 28, 2023. The tournament, which has been dominated by Services and Railways in its recent history, now has a new contender in the mix, one that does not back down even if they fall behind.

At the centre of Tamil Nadu's revolution is midfielder Indumathi Kathiresan, who ended the tournament as the highest scorer in the Final Rounds with nine goals to her name. A sub-inspector in Tamil Nadu Police by profession, Indumathi is also one of the finest playmakers in the country, who also plays a key role in the middle of the park for the Senior Women's National Team.

“It was such a special moment for us all to win the championship for Tamil Nadu. This was the second time we won it, but I think this time it felt more special,” said Indumathi. “Last time when we won it in 2017-18, not so many people knew or cared. At least that’s how we felt after we came back. But this time the reception we got once we reached Chennai was amazing. So many fans and journalists had come down to greet us with flowers and drums. No matter where you play and what you win, having the fans by your side always makes it special.”

Such was the interest in the Tamil Nadu women’s team’s success that the entire squad was invited to a meet with the state’s Minister for Youth Welfare and Sports Development, Shri Udhayanidhi Stalin; a meet and greet with Chief Minister MK Stalin has also been arranged for the team, set to take place on July 25.

While the likes of Manipur and Railways were the two favourites for the championship, Tamil Nadu came with an unrivalled team spirit that transpired into some fine performances on the pitch. They have arguably been the most consistent side in the championship, having a perfect record of 10 victories from as many matches. They had topped Group V in the preliminary stages to make it to the Final Round, where they again topped Group A, scoring 32 goals and conceding none in the process.

In fact, the only goals they conceded in this campaign, came against tournament favourites Railways (scored by substitute Diparnita Dey), and against Haryana in the final (an own goal scored by Dhurga P).

The 2017-18 champions are able to dominate their opponents through a much superior midfield consisting of captain Indumathi Kathiresan and Karthika Angamuthu. The duo are regulars in the Senior Women’s National Team and have exerted their supremacy over their opponents in the middle of the park, distributing ball all over the pitch, and stretching the opposing back-line. Another player who has helped Indumathi in her goalscoring rampage in the championship is Sandhiya Ranganathan, who is not a conventional centre forward by any stretch of the imagination. The 25-year-old, who mostly plays on the wings for the National Team, has been operating in the tricky role of a false nine, often dropping back to drag or wide to drag opposition defenders along with her, allowing more space for Indumathi in the process.





“The team spirit in this side has been just amazing. We came with a determined mindset and we showed that although we were not the favourites on paper, we were the best team in the tournament, in the end,” said Karthika. “The way everyone stuck together was amazing. Indu akka’s (Indumathi) contribution was massive as well. Being the senior-most player, she made us all feel at home and led the way.”

In the end, it is all about building on each little success, to achieve bigger things in the future. The city of Chennai, in February, experienced two international friendlies played between India and Nepal women’s teams. The Indian team received goodly support in the friendlies, something that eventually led to more awareness about women’s football in Tamil Nadu, and a bigger celebration of the win in the Senior Women’s NFC.

“It is absolutely amazing that so many people are taking an interest in football and in our victory now. I hope this is the start of something good for the sport in the state,” said Indumathi. “Us winning the championship will not mean anything if there is no improvement after this. We need to make sure that we involve more children and more women in the game. It’s all a long process and there’s miles to go, but I feel this is the start of something good.” “It is absolutely amazing that so many people are taking an interest in football and in our victory now. I hope this is the start of something good for the sport in the state,” said Indumathi. “Us winning the championship will not mean anything if there is no improvement after this. We need to make sure that we involve more children and more women in the game. It’s all a long process and there’s miles to go, but I feel this is the start of something good.”



Tsering Angmo: Determined to take Ladakh football to Himalayan heights

A former athlete herself, Ladakh Football Association's General Secretary hopes to harness the passion for the beautiful game in her union territory and take it to greater heights

Vision 2047, as planned by the All India Football Federation, aims to spread the beautiful game far and wide across the nation. One of the latest benefactors of this outreach is the Union Territory of Ladakh.

Previously, footballing action in Ladakh has mostly been restricted to Grassroots activities, with pretty pictures of children playing in front of towering mountains. That, however, changed last year, when the Ladakh Football Association was, for the first time, affiliated with the All India Football Federation, allowing it's players to compete in the prestigious National football championships.

Indeed, it was a moment of pride for the people of Ladakh when their own football team, comprising of local players, was fielded in the Hero Santosh Trophy Group Stage, in the 2022-23 season. Ms Tsering Angmo, the General Secretary of the Ladakh Football Association, the first woman to be the secretary of a state football association in India, expressed that this small change altered the fabric of reality for Ladakh football.

"I am not a footballer. Rather, I am a mere administrator. But I could see it in the eyes of all of our footballers. They all had a vision in their eyes, a dream to become professional footballers one day. People were eager to watch matches, to idolise legends like Sunil Chhetri, and so on.



For Ladakh, it is not only a matter of sending their players for the national championships, but also for them to grow the sport in a region that is sparsely populated. One advantage that the Union Territory has, however, is a strong base.

“The people of Ladakh just love football. There’s not much else to do in the form of entertainment in Ladakh, so children start playing from the age of four or five,” says Angmo.

In fact, private football tournaments have been quite the rage in Ladakh, even before the formation of the LFA back in 2018. “We were hosting a private tournament there and the current AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji (Prabhakaran) had tweeted about the event, saying that Ladakh should have a football association. Since then, we got in touch with him, and he’s helped us massively to promote Ladakh football, and then in the formation of the association as well. We went step by step with his support and then finally got our affiliation with AIFF last year.”

Angmo herself is an athlete as well, having represented India in wushu, though after retiring from the sport, her interest has mainly been in football. “I was mulling my options after I finished my wushu career. I could go into Wushu as well, but then I realised that I wanted to help more people. Football was the perfect sport to do that,” she said. Angmo has since then gone on to become the General Secretary of the Ladakh Football Association, and is currently the only woman in such a position at any State Association that is affiliated with the AIFF.

The former wushu international feels that right now it is important to increase participation in various national level tournaments for Ladakh, and later to go on and build on that.



Heartbreak for eTigers at FIF Ae Nations Cup 2023

The Indian trio of Charanjot, Saransh and Saksham were knocked out by the slimmest of margins from the video game's pinnacle event

The Indian eFootball national team suffered an agonising elimination from the group stage of the FIF Ae Nations Cup 2023 on Wednesday, July 12 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The eTigers, represented by Charanjot Singh, Saransh Jain, and Saksham Rattan, bagged 10 points in as many matches to finish Group D in fifth place, missing out on qualification for the round of 16 due to an inferior goal difference to Peru, who also had the same number of points.

Matches are played in a 2v2 format played on EA Sports FIFA 23 FUT mode. Charanjot and Saransh played all five matches on Day 1 and the opening fixture of Day 2 before Saksham replaced Saransh for India's push for qualification in the final four games. All the action was streamed live on the Indian Football YouTube and Twitch channels.

India kicked off with a narrow 1-2 defeat to Germany before opening their account with a 1-0 win over South Africa, where a late penalty got the job done for the eTigers. Heavy defeats to Sweden and Israel saw India drop to fifth place in the table, but a draw with Peru ensured they kept within touching distance of the top four.



Another tight 0-1 loss to Germany began Day 2 before India were held to a gritty 1-1 draw by South Africa. The eTigers then put on arguably their best performance of the campaign to beat Sweden 1-0. Opening the scoring early on, they managed the game well against the group's top seeds who could not break through the stubborn Indian defence.

The win proved to be a big morale boost for Charan and Saksham, who then went on to hold unbeaten and free-scoring Israel 1-1 in a thrilling match. Although the group leaders did find the breakthrough early in the second half, India equalised in the 88th minute of the game before saving a penalty in injury time to come out with a point.

Heading into the last group-stage match against Peru, a virtual play-off for a place in the knockout stage, India knew that only a win would do for them. The eTigers kept the intensity high throughout the match and took the lead thrice, but Peru got back on level terms each time. The last equaliser came in the 85th minute, from where it was too late for India to bounce back again. It ended in a heart-breaking 3-3 draw for the trio of Charanjot, Saksham and Saransh, who gave their all for the country on the eFootball stage for two days in the Saudi capital.

INDIA'S FIFAe NATIONS CUP 2023 RESULTS

Day 1 (July 11):

India 1-2 Germany
South Africa 0-1 India
India 0-3 Sweden
India 0-6 Israel
Peru 1-1 India

Day 2 (July 12):

Germany 1-0 India
India 1-1 South Africa
Sweden 0-1 India
Israel 1-1 India
India 3-3 Peru



AIFF Blue Cubs Football Schools unveiled by Grassroots Committee



The All India Football Federation's Grassroots Committee meeting was held over video conferencing on Friday, July 7th, 2023, under the chairmanship of Mr Mulrajsinh Chudasama.

In attendance were Deputy Chairperson Mr M Satyanarayan and other committee members, which included Mr Naresh Khanna (Himachal Pradesh), Mr Ratan Kumar Singh (Manipur), Mr Bhagwan Singh Negi (Delhi), Mr Asgar Hussain (Bihar), Mr Sandeep Desai (Gujarat), Mr Kiyeka S Sumi (Nagaland), Mr Hmingthansanga (Mizoram), and Mr Aleixo Francisco da Costa (Goa) and members of the AIFF Technical Department.

The Blue Cubs Leaders Course, a new online football course for grassroots enthusiasts was presented in the meeting. The programme will be launched on July 15, 2023, in nine different languages in the first phase on a pan-India level.

Mr Satyanarayan introduced the inaugural blueprint for the AIFF Blue Cubs Football Schools, a ground-breaking and accredited model of football education supervised by the AIFF. This unique initiative enables interested entities that meet specific criteria to join and offer football coaching in their respective areas.

As per the model, the AIFF takes on the responsibility of providing crucial technical support, coach education, and age-appropriate curricula to these affiliated entities. Additionally, each participating location will receive a generous provision of 100 footballs branded with the Blue Cubs logo, fostering a cohesive identity throughout the programme.

Chairperson Mr Chudasama said, "We have moved fast in the grassroots arena in recent months. The Blue Cubs logo and operating manual were launched. We also celebrated the first AIFF Grassroots Day. Now we present to you a great initiative in the shape of Blue Cubs Football Schools, which has already been approved by the Executive Committee in its meeting earlier this week. I would like to thank all our AIFF members in the Football House, the Grassroots Committee and also the Technical Committee for doing a wonderful job."



Dates announced for AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers Round 2

The fixtures for Round 2 of the AFC Women's Olympic Football Tournament Paris 2024 were announced by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) on Thursday, July 7, 2023. The draw for the same was conducted in May.

India, ranked 60 in the world, will open their Group C campaign against London 2012 silver-medallists Japan (ranked 11) on October 26 at the JAR Stadium in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Three days later, the Blue Tigresses will take on 32-ranked Vietnam, who qualified for their first FIFA Women's World Cup this year, at the same venue. India's final opponents in the group will be 49-ranked Uzbekistan on November 1 at the Bunyodkor Stadium.

India qualified for Round 2 courtesy of two comfortable victories over Kyrgyz Republic (5-0 and 4-0) in Bishkek in April.

Round 2 consists of three groups of four teams each. Group A features Australia, Chinese Taipei, Philippines and IR Iran, while Group B has China PR, Korea Republic, Thailand and DPR Korea.

The three group winners and the best-ranked runners-up will progress to Round 3 to play two pairs of home and away matches in February 2024. The winners will take the two spots reserved for AFC in the Women's Olympic Football Tournament Paris 2024.

India's Round 2 fixtures of AFC Women's Olympic Football Tournament Paris 2024:

Thursday, October 26: Japan vs India (15:30 IST)

Sunday, October 29: India vs Vietnam (15:30 IST)

Wednesday, November 1: Uzbekistan vs India (17:30 IST)

AFC Futsal Asian Cup 2024 Qualifiers : India placed alongside Tajikistan, Myanmar and Palestine

The Indian men's futsal team is set to participate in the AFC Futsal Asian Cup™ 2024 Qualifiers for the first time. India were drawn alongside Tajikistan, Myanmar and Palestine in Group E after the draw ceremony held on Thursday, June 22, 2023, at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Tajikistan is set to host Group E of the qualifiers, which will be held from October 7 to 11 this year. A total of 31 teams were divided into eight groups – seven comprising four teams each, and one containing three.

Each group will be played at a centralised venue in a single round-robin format, with the eight group winners and seven best second-placed teams among all groups qualifying for the AFC Futsal Asian Cup™ 2024.

These 15 teams will join the Host Member Association (MA), to be determined at a later stage and who will receive automatic qualification, to form the final cast at the tournament.





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