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T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**"FOOTBALL AND OUR COUNTRY'S
ARMED FORCES HAVE ENJOYED A
CLOSE RELATIONSHIP OVER THE AGES"**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**GOLD, GLORY
& GALLANTRY**

Indian Football at the Asian Games



Table of Contents

02

PRESIDENT'S NOTE

04

BLUE CUBS SHAPING INTO FUTURE ROARING TIGERS

06

GOLD, GLORY AND GALLANTRY: INDIAN FOOTBALL AT ASIAN GAMES

09

SHOOTING RANGE

11

PM NARENDRA MODI EXPRESSES HAPPINESS OVER INDIAN MEN'S AND WOMEN'S FOOTBALL TEAMS' PARTICIPATION IN ASIAN GAMES

12

STATE OF AFFAIRS - 'NO-FOREIGNERS' RULE IN STATE LEAGUES BEHIND CFL PREMIER DIVISION'S SUCCESS IN 2023, SAYS IFA SECRETARY ANIRBAN DUTTA

15

AIFF INVITES TEAMS FOR OPEN DIALOGUE ON INSTITUTIONAL LEAGUE

16

WITH STRONGER DEFENCE AND CREATIVE OFFENCE, WE CAN BEAT BETTER TEAMS, SAYS THOMAS DENNERBY

21

SANJU'S TALE: OVERCOMING RISING TEAR IN THE QUIET VEIL OF PAIN

24

ADAPTABILITY, INTENSITY AT THE HEART OF CLIFFORD MIRANDA'S COACHING PHILOSOPHY

27

DOWNTOWN HEROES: RAISING HEROES IN THE HEART OF SRINAGAR

29

INDIAN FOOTBALL ATTRACTING FOREIGN PLAYERS FOR ALL THE GOOD REASONS, SAY GOKULAM KERALA'S NEW SPANISH DUO

32

MOHAMMEDAN SPORTING: STRENGTHENING THE THIRD PILLAR OF KOLKATA FOOTBALL

35

INDIA DRAW QATAR, KUWAIT IN FOUR-TEAM GROUP A OF ROUND 2 QUALIFIERS

37

DRAW OUT FOR 49TH KING'S CUP AND MERDEKA TOURNAMENT

38

AIFF SIGNS SUBROTO CUP MOU

40

DRAW REVEALED FOR SAFF U16 AND U19 CHAMPIONSHIPS

41

SANTOSH TROPHY, SENIOR WOMEN'S NFC 2023-24 GROUP STAGE DRAWS CONDUCTED

43

SPREADING THEIR WINGS IN ASIA: SOME MEMORABLE NIGHTS OF THE GREEN AND MAROONS

47

COME SEPTEMBER: THERE WILL BE INDIAN NATIONAL TEAMS IN SEVEN DIFFERENT TOURNAMENTS

51

INDIAN FUTSAL: A NEW BEGINNING

President's Note

Kalyan Chaubey

Football & The Armed Forces

Football and our country's Armed Forces have enjoyed a close relationship over the ages with many teams representing various units in events across the country.

In fact, the Santosh Trophy, the symbol of football supremacy at the national level, has been in the showcases of the army on numerous occasions.

Apart from participating in the national championships and in various club level tournaments, the Services have also provided employment to hundreds of footballers.

The Indian Army also boasts of being the host of one of the oldest club competitions in the country - the Durand Cup. In its 132nd edition, the Durand Cup this year has taken football to Kokrajhar in Assam, a place which has its own history as having been in the news for the wrong reasons a few years back.

With the Government in Assam committing crores to development of sports infrastructure in the region, it truly was an amazing sight when thousands had gathered for the kick-off in this Kokrajhar district at the western edge of Assam and abutting Bhutan.

The 132nd edition of the Durand Cup football tournament, organised by the Indian Army has 24 top teams including two foreign teams from Bangladesh and Nepal.

With top clubs from the ISL and I-League competing in this event, fans in Kokrajhar as well as in two other venues - Kolkata and Delhi - are bound to be entertained with some classy football.



For us at the AIFF, it was another region being bowled over by the beautiful game and Assam, like its fellow states in the region, has the potential to boost the country's football stock.

If the Durand Cup catered to the senior level of club footballers, another arm of the Services, the Indian Air Force, was doing its bit in grassroots level. Since 1960 the Subroto Cup - symbol of supremacy at the schools level - has been one of the pioneers in grassroots football in the country. And this season, the AIFF has stepped in to partner the organisers with some vital support which proposes to take this inter school event to the next level.



The AIFF inked an MOU with the IAF that allows a Subroto Cup combined XI team, formed with the best players across various age groups, to compete in the AIFF's youth competitions.

The AIFF will depute two scouts in a four-member committee for selection of the 25-player squad. The Subroto XI will get direct entry into the AIFF Youth Leagues for boys and girls across various age categories from the 2023-24 season onwards. The chosen U-17 Boys and Girls will receive scholarships and will also be invited to attend national team training camps of their respective age categories.

The MoU also ensures various marketing collaborations between the AIFF and the Subroto Cup, with regard to production and broadcast of matches. The AIFF will assist the tournament's organisers in age detection of players through the TW3 method from the 2023-24 season.

The federation will also devise education programmes for coaches of teams in the final rounds of the tournament. August seems to have been a month of football with the Services before we step into September when various teams of the Blue Tigers get into national duty action.

Recently, we have taken an important decision that may go a long way in shaping the future of country's football. I have constituted a Task Force for a feasibility study and evaluation of the footballers, who come under the status of Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) and Overseas Citizens of India (OCI). The Task Force will be chaired by Mr Samir Thapar, the President of the Punjab Football Association, and a veteran sports administrator.

The Task Force's primary objective will be to collect data on footballers who are either Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) or Persons of Indian Origin (PIO). Well, I know that as per the existing law of the land, OCIs and PIOs are not allowed to represent India in international sporting events unless they adopt Indian citizenship. But then, if we want to open up a dialogue and look into various ways of allowing such players to represent the Indian Football Teams, then we need concrete and comprehensive data to back up our arguments, which is why we have constituted this Task Force.

Blue Cubs shaping into future roaring Tigers

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

On September 2, 2023, the new management of the All India Football Federation will complete a year in office. In the past 12 months, we have taken a series of decisions that have had a direct impact on football development. Whether it is at the bottom of the pyramid or at the middle or top of the football landscape, concrete programmes, activities, and projects have been launched to transform Indian football to a great extent. It is an ample testimony to our commitment to bring positive changes to Indian football, which have been presented through our strategic roadmap Vision 2047 in the most transparent manner.

Our on-pitch achievements are showing strong signs of progress, but we have a long way to go before we reach a steady state of advancement. Youth teams, women's and men's National Teams are given maximum priority. At the same time, there are serious budgetary constraints to go full throttle into every aspect of the gaps that exist in our football landscape.

No doubt, winning three back-to-back trophies by our Men's National Team this year stands out as our FIFA ranking has gone up by six spots to 99. Our team's participation in the Asian Games 2022, after a gap of nine years, certainly gives us added exposure for our players. The decision of the Government to relax the norms while clearing the teams for the Asian Games must be hailed by our stakeholders. We can expect our men's and women's teams to grow consistently and reach our target of being in the top 10 and 8 in men's and women's, respectively, in Asia by the end of 2026.

Since we launched our flagship Grassroots Programme, Blue Cubs, in June 2023, we have engaged our stakeholders in building the capacity that would prepare us to unleash the massive potential of Indian football and provide an outlet for football loving fellow citizens to grow in the game and play an important role in shaping the future of football.



Within this short time, we have trained more than 1000 Grassroots Leaders, and what we have experienced is that there is a massive interest in being part of Blue Cubs initiatives. Within the next few months, we will be fully ready to implement all elements of the Blue Cubs on a mega scale across India.

After a three-year gap, come September, we will organise all the Youth National Championships. These championships will bring forth youth talents, and these, combined with our plans to launch Youth Leagues this season, will strengthen our youth competition structure. Further, our decision to start a new national U20 men's championship will bridge the gap at the youth level that has existed for a long time.



For women's football, the start of U13, U15, and U17 youth competitions at the state level this season will massively boost competitive structure at the youth level and encourage higher girls' participation in women's football across India. We have to thank the Sports Authority of India for funding these youth women's leagues under the Khelo India scheme.

The "Team AIFF" is working as one, and there is greater support and collaboration all across to take football forward in line with our Vision 2047. Our alignment with the Subroto Cup is yet another example of how we are strengthening the youth platforms that exist in our football landscape. Subroto Mukherjee Education Society under Air Force has made significant contributions to football through this biggest school tournament, and it is our endeavour to create an encouraging pathway for talented players to reach their potential through multiple initiatives and collaboration of this nature.

Let's not relax. We have an Everest to climb. Our responsibility doesn't end by taking decisions, but to ensure that on each day we strive to give 100% for taking our football to a new height and work with the highest integrity for the beautiful game and Mother India.



Gold at Jakarta 1962 is arguably the Indian football team's greatest achievement to date

Gold, glory and gallantry: Indian football at Asian Games

Indian Football has a glorious history at the Asian Games, and despite recent stumbles there remains hope of an upward tick in Hangzhou

AKHIL RAWAT

It is a well-known fact that Indian football's glory days fell in the 1950s and 1960s. As one of the continent's powerhouses then, India claimed numerous podium finishes in Asia, while also being a regular face at the Olympics. The Asian Games will always hold a special place in the heart of Indian football historians.

If gold at the inaugural 1951 edition in Delhi was the nation's first moment of glory, then repeating that glory at Jakarta 1962 became a tale of inspiration to be told for decades to come. The period also witnessed India's fourth-placed finish at the Melbourne 1956 Olympics, where Neville D'Souza's famous hat-trick against Australia clinched a 4-2 win. India were runners-up at the 1964 Asian Cup and the 1959 and 1964 Merdeka Cups in Malaysia after clinching four straight Quadrangular Cup titles between 1952 and 1955.

As India gears up to make its return to the Asian Games football stage in just over a month's time, it is coherent to hark back to the nation's illustrious spell in the quadrennial games. The gold medal at Jakarta 1962 by Syed Abdul Rahim's wards is arguably the Indian football team's greatest achievement to date. From losing the opening match to South Korea to beating the same opponents in the final amidst an antagonistic atmosphere, the ten-day campaign has etched its name in Indian sports folklore.



The Bangkok 1970 bronze medal-winning squad with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi

Whether it was central defender Jarnail Singh scoring in both semi-final and final despite suffering a head injury and playing the unusual role of the centre forward, wing-back Arun Ghosh adjusting and thriving in a new central defensive position, Pradyut Barman guarding the Indian goal with excellence till the semi-finals, or the holy trinity of Indian football – PK Banerjee, Chuni Goswami and Tulsidas Balaram firing on all cylinders and scoring a combined nine goals, Rahim's dream team was destined to return to India with the gold.

While everything clicked to magnificence on the pitch, off the pitch, the Indian contingent had to deal with strong animosity from the locals during their stay in Jakarta due to India's criticism of Indonesia denying entry to Israel and Taiwan athletes for the Games. But all that hoo-ha would fail to intimidate the Indians come the final. Filled with 100,000 people, the Senayan Main Stadium, where boos and jeers rang out during the Indian National Anthem and every time India touched the ball, became a legendary stage in the nation's sporting history.

It was coach Rahim's second Asian Games gold medal, arriving 11 years after Sahu Mewalal's clinical volley against Iran in the final in Delhi bagged India their first major title in football. With unparalleled crowd support, the newly-independent India's football team, captained by Sailendra Nath Manna, won all three of their matches without conceding a goal, thus making its name as the continent's best.

More than three decades later, when Delhi hosted the Asian Games again in 1982, India were no longer among the heavyweight sides in Asia but counted on home advantage to push for a podium finish. After topping their group with wins over Bangladesh and Malaysia and a high-octane draw with China, the journey came to a heart-breaking end with a last-minute concession against Saudi Arabia in the quarter-finals at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium.

That meant bronze at Bangkok 1970, won thanks to Amar Bahadur's solitary strike against Japan, remained India's last football medal at the Asian Games. Similar to Jakarta, it was another instance of India avenging previous defeats when it mattered the most, as Japan had beaten GMH Basha and PK Banerjee's men in the second group stage just two days before.

India haven't come anywhere close to replicating the success of the past since men's football at the Asian Games became a U-23 event, with three over-age players allowed, from Busan 2002 onwards. At those games, Stephen Constantine-coached India found themselves unlucky to miss out on the quarter-finals on goal difference. Another group-stage exit followed at Doha 2006. A solid 4-1 win over Singapore by Sukhwinder Singh's boys at Guangzhou 2010 was the last time India tasted victory at the Asian Games.

Incheon 2014, the only time India failed to score at the Games, was a campaign to forget, while the IOA chose not to send the football team to Jakarta-Palembang 2018. Fair to say things have gone downhill for Indian football at the multi-sport Games in this century, but the return of the Blue Tigers to the big stage after nine years has generated a lot of excitement among the fans. With the national team riding the crest of the wave fresh from the SAFF Championship and Intercontinental Cup triumphs, the timing couldn't be better.

Sunil Chhetri and Gurpreet Singh Sandhu will be heading to their third Asian Games in Hangzhou. Sandesh Jhingan was only 21 when he was named in the squad for Incheon. In the past two decades, the Games have been a platform for youngsters to gain international experience, while learning from over-age players and senior coaches in the squad. Apart from the aforementioned trio, Renedy Singh, Mahesh Gawali and Deepak Mondal in 2002, Subrata Pal, Steven Dias, Surkumar Singh, Syed Rahim Nabi and Gouramangi Singh in 2006, Jeje Lalpekhlua in 2010 and Pritam Kotal in 2014 are names who have gone on to become mainstays in the Senior National Team after playing in the Asian Games as a U-23 member.

Indian women at the Asian Games

While the Senior Indian Women's National Team have also had their golden days at the continental stage, with two runners-up finishes in the 1980 and 1983 AFC Women's Championship and third place in 1981, they have only ever played in two Asian Games - Bangkok 1998 and Incheon 2014. Unlike men's, women's football has been contested between senior teams since the first edition at Beijing 1990. With India's both previous campaigns yielding five losses and just one win, any success the Blue Tigresses obtain in Hangzhou will be the first of its kind.





Ashim Moulik and Chuni Goswami
at Mohun Bagan

Shooting Range



1982 Asian Games Delhi



India's runners-up squad at the 1964 Asian Cup

Chuni Goswami and players of the Indian team with the runners-up trophy of the Asian Cup Tournament Aviv in 1964. The Manager of the team, Wg. Cdr. K.K. Ganguly is standing at the extreme right.





Indian team at 1962 Asian Games Jakarta



TARGET 2026

IM Vijayan



Aloke Mukherjee at the 1982 Nehru Cup against Uruguay¹⁰



PM Narendra Modi expresses happiness over Indian men's and women's football teams' participation in Asian Games

The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi has expressed his happiness over Indian men's and women's football teams' participation in the upcoming Asian Games 2023. The Sports Ministry has given relaxation for Indian football teams to participate in the Asian Games 2023 in Hangzhou, China.

Responding to the tweet by the President of All India Football Federation, Mr Kalyan Chaubey, the Prime Minister said: "Great news for football fans across India! It will also encourage upcoming talent in this sport."





STATE OF AFFAIRS

‘No-foreigners’ rule in state leagues behind CFL Premier Division’s success in 2023, says IFA Secretary Anirban Dutta



From 15 teams the CFL has grown into a 26 team competition, while the lower divisions serve as junior competitions to bolster the grassroots

SOUOMO GHOSH

The Calcutta Football League, over the years, has been one of the most coveted football tournaments in India, made famous by the rivalries formed between the likes of Mohun Bagan, East Bengal, and Mohammedan Sporting.

While it was primarily the state leagues that brought players to the fore for the Santosh Trophy or the National Team, that changed in the 1990s with the introduction of the National Football League, and then subsequently that of the I-League and the Indian Super League.

Now, however, the Indian Football Association (West Bengal) are making efforts to revive the CFL as a whole, looking to bring it back to its glory days. From 15 teams, the CFL Premier Division has now grown into a 26-team competition, while the lower divisions have become junior competitions, with the players in each age group progressing to the next level with every passing year. IFA Secretary and recently-appointed AIFF League Committee Member Mr Anirban Dutta feels that the no-foreigners rule introduced by the AIFF for the state leagues has had a big role to play in the league's increased popularity.

"I must commend the AIFF for taking such a step. Kalyan Chaubey had called to ask us to implement the no-foreigners rule. We were not convinced at first, whether people will come to the matches if we lose the star foreign players, but then we somehow managed to convince our sponsors. Now we are seeing the results," said Mr Dutta.

"Since there are no foreign players, the matches are much more tightly fought, the difference between the bigger and the smaller clubs are not as much," he said. "This was a pleasant surprise for us."

The IFA has introduced a host of changes to the CFL Premier Division, with a digital marketing campaign to inform the fans of the matches, while also bringing in a rolling trophy.





"We've done a lot of new things in terms of popularising the league, including introducing a trophy, hosting an opening ceremony, and also conducting a digital marketing campaign to inform the fans of the league," said Mr Dutta. "However, the main reasons for this increased support are the closely fought matches and the fact that we have brought the league back to the city of Kolkata."

Having recently become a member of the AIFF League Committee, Mr Dutta will be using his experience in West Bengal football to help the league structure across the country grow further.

"I have just joined as a new member, but the League Committee has been doing very well over the past as well. Having a four-tier league system means a lot more football for the players across the country, which could only lead to bigger and better things in the future. I hope to use my own experience to help Indian Football grow further," he said.



AIFF invites teams for open dialogue on Institutional League

The Executive Committee of the All India Football Federation, on April 14, 2023, after extensive discussions, had arrived at a decision to give equal importance to the amateur structure in football. The Committee felt it will raise the level of competitive opportunities and ensure security for the players at this level.

To execute this plan, the Executive Committee decided to introduce an Institutional League from the current season. 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. The Committee was confident the introduction of the Institutional League will help the legacy institutional teams receive heritage treatment.

Keeping in line with the Executive Committee decision, the AIFF has decided to start a dialogue with the possible institutional teams interested to be a part of this new initiative. After an open dialogue, AIFF will finalise a Request for Proposal (RFP) document, which is tentatively scheduled to be published by the first week of September. AIFF intends to finalise the selection of teams by mid-October 2023.

To understand the planning, composition, and aspirations of the Institutional teams across the country, a meeting will be called in the last week of August where the institutions willing to spread their wings through the beautiful game will be invited to discuss and air their views.

Feedback/suggestions and views will be considered for finalising the conditions and modalities for the selection and conduct of the Institutional League. All entities interested in participating in the Institutional League are welcome to join the consultation meeting and may express their interest by submitting the form given [here](#).

With stronger
defence and
creative offence,
we can beat better
teams, says
Thomas Dennerby



Crucial months coming up for the Indian senior women's team as they gear up for the 19th Asian Games and the AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers Round 2

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

For Thomas Dennerby, Round 1 of the 2024 AFC Women's Olympic Qualifying Tournament in April in the Kyrgyz Republic was like accomplishing a mission for the Indian Senior Women's National Team. The veteran Swedish coach did it in style and with an impeccable record, winning both matches with consummate ease.

Now, Head Coach Dennerby is back in India after a gap of three months to take up the challenge at the next level. Under him, the Blue Tigresses will launch their campaign in the 19th Asian Games and AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers Round 2 in September and October, respectively.

The first challenge for Dennerby will be the 19th Asian Games, where his team have been drawn with Chinese Taipei and Thailand in Group B. After the Asian Games, the Blue Tigresses will be heading to Uzbekistan to play in the AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers Round 2. Hosts Uzbekistan, Japan, and Vietnam are the other teams in the four-team group.

The National Camp for the Indian Senior Women's Team, with 38 probables, will begin in Bhubaneswar from July 30.

In an exclusive chat with www.the-aiff.com, Dennerby spoke at length about his feelings about coming back to India, looking forward to new challenges in the upcoming tournaments, selecting a large pool of players, and much more.

Welcome back, coach. How do you feel coming back to India again after a considerable time?

Thank you very much. I'm feeling good to be back with the team, my staff, and everyone. As the Head Coach, I'm happy because now we can go on with the plans for this autumn and see how far we can go. Competition games are always exciting and nice to be a part of. I am happy to be a part of the Asian Games and would like to see how far we can take these games. That's probably the most important reason for being back here. It is a thrilling feeling.

Another season, another challenge, how do you plan to approach it?

It will be a new challenge that is coming up. It's been a while since the National team members were together. It was at the beginning of April when we played qualification Round One. Some other players have been playing in the same teams for their respective states; so they know each other pretty well already. But of course, football is a team sport. And what we have to do now is, first of all, is to probably raise the fitness level again, which includes conditioning training, strength training. And then, of course, technically, tactically, and let the players play a lot together. So, everyone is 100% sure what to do on the field.

We have eight weeks before the Asian Games, and I think this time will be good for us. Also, we have picked a lot of players this time. So, hopefully, we also can find out which players are best for the moment because that is also very important.

A large pool of players has been selected, from the senior, U17, and U20 batches. How do you look at the list of probables? A balanced one?

Yes, the list of probables is a little bit bigger. There are players from U20 and U17 teams, but all these players were picked so that we can be quite sure who is going to be important for Indian football in the future. Age is just a number. What finally decides is if you're good enough, or you can give the team something that the team didn't have before. So, when the youngsters come, I hope they feel that they are also there on the same premises as all the other players, so we'll say some of them will probably be there in the team and some not. We will also reduce the number of players after a couple of weeks because having 38 players when we get closer to the competition is a little bit too much.





But we will see—it's up to every player to show them the best side and show that they want to be there and the ones putting in the biggest effort will probably be there.

Sanju and Bala Devi are back after a long gap. How do you plan to make them ready for the big battle ahead? Or do you feel they are mature enough to get back into the groove easily?

I'm very happy for both of them. Bala was back in February, but again, she went back due to her ACL injury. She played very well in the games and I can see her skills. She is a player who will be useful for the national team. I met Sanju the last time when we were in the Asian Cup in January 2022, but during 2021 she played well and was one of the leading players in the Indian Women's League. We all know that she is talented. Now it's up to us to have her back physically first of all, and when you've been out for football for a while, your first touch, your movements, your reading of the game have to start again. Even if you have a small backup in your brain there you need to refresh everything, so hopefully we have them both in top form before it's time to play competition games.

The camp will be in Bhubaneswar, where you guided the U17 team in the World Cup. Feeling nostalgic? Or feeling excited to be back on the known turf?

Yes, we've been there for a long time in 2022. It's a nice place with beautiful football fields and also has good gyms that we can use. Everything was very good, starting with the accommodation, food. There's nothing at all that I can remember that didn't work in Bhubaneswar thus far, and I hope we will have a really good camp again.

Anthony Andrews and Maymol Rocky will be the other coaching staff with you, helping you around. Your thoughts?

I'm very happy to have Andrew and Maymol around. It's going to be a good time together. Maymol already knows me and Andrew will also understand me in a while. I hope they feel free, really act in training and come up with their good tips -- how to help the team get better and so on. They can feel free to come up with their own opinion.

Because even if I'm the Head Coach, it's all about teamwork. It's the same for the players; we have to do this together. And whether we do it together as a team, with the coaching staff, or with the technical stuff, the better we help the player.

What are the areas of improvement you are looking at with this team?

One of them is the same as we have been talking about before, that we have to utilise our chances around the offensive box. We created a lot of goalscoring chances in recent games but didn't come out with so many goals. We also need to keep on working hard with the defence which has been working very well and we didn't let any goals in for two games in the Olympic qualification --not even a goal-scoring chance, I will say. But we let some easy goals go in during the friendly games when we were preparing for the Olympic qualification, which I feel is not good. So, we need to take that away and if we have the discipline to play with really strong defence, we know that we always create chances, even against really good teams. So, we should be sharp when it's time to finish and keep up the good discipline and defence, I think India could be a team that can go all the way through the qualification, if we have a super good day.

What kind of preparations are needed to tackle top teams like Japan, and Uzbekistan?

It's an exciting and a tough group. We are not the favourites. Japan have already won two games in the World Cup without letting in a goal. Vietnam also are a good team. And yes, not to forget, finally, Uzbekistan, who are hosting the qualification round. So, it's three games where I guess India are not one of the biggest favourites. But with a strong defence, and also knowing that we always create chances, a good day at work, we can have a chance to beat them.

Japan will be very, very tough opponents. But the results of the football games are not decided on paper. They are decided on the pitch. It depends on how hard we work, how much effort we put in, and so on. We need to live with that from day one, when we arrive there. And when we arrive in Bhubaneswar, we have to prepare mentally for being a team that's going to make it through the next round. And also, of course, physically, technically, and tactically, we have to prepare.





Lastly, has women's football in India progressed enough to make it to the next level?

I will say that women's football in India is developing and will keep on developing. And for me, as I said before, it's realistic to see India in the World Cup 2027 or at least the World Cup after that. But it doesn't come from just saying that we want to be there. It comes from hard work, a good long-term plan, regular meetings, never missing FIFA windows and all that. We must play the better teams, help the players develop the tempo. You need to read the games quicker, you need to make your decisions quicker. And to speed up all that and go through that process, it can only happen by playing against a really good team. The quicker you can do it, the better the team will be. We have to qualify for big tournaments in the future, but enough talented players are there.

India have a huge number of young players. It is up to them to decide --I want to be there. I want to play in the World Cup one day because no coach in the world can ever force you to do it. You have to live with that passion yourself, and you have to put in the effort in. The coach can only help you and guide you on what to do, but it's your effort. That is the key.



Sanju's tale: Overcoming rising tear in the quiet veil of pain

Two ACL injuries in two years, but there was no way Sanju would let the pain wash away her dreams

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

On a hot and humid evening at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar last year, an Indian Women's League match came to an abrupt halt for a few minutes when a young footballer screamed loudly as she lay wreathing in pain on the pitch. While everyone around watched in horrified silence, the sobbing player, Sanju, was carried off the ground on a stretcher.

The injury was a huge setback for Sanju, one of the country's leading midfielders. She had just made her Sethu FC debut and had won the Player of the Match award in the previous encounter before she had to be carried out on that fateful evening.

It wasn't the end of Sanju's wretched run of luck. When she was admitted to a local hospital, the doctors confirmed that she suffered an ACL injury on her right leg that would confine her to bed for a long period of time. Unfortunately, this was the second time Sanju had to endure the intolerable pain of an ACL tear – the first time it happened was in 2021, which kept her out of football for around six months.

For a professional footballer, an ACL injury is a piece of heart-breaking news. Yet, this incident turned out to be a challenging point in her career, as it forced her to confront not only physical pain but also the emotional toll of being sidelined from the game she dearly loves.

"I will never forget that day in my life. It was my second IWL game for my team, and I was out on a stretcher before I could settle down. It was a nightmarish experience for me. The tears I shed will never go away, the tears that fell will remind me of the pain," Sanju told www.the-aiff.com from Bhubaneswar.

To put it briefly, Sanju made an inspiring and fascinating comeback overcoming the fiercest agonies despite a year-and-a-half-long injury layoff that nearly threatened to wash away all her dreams. This setback did not let the brave Blue Tigresses slow down in her approach, but changed her attitude and perspective on seeing life from the other side. Sanju felt that her injury made people lose confidence in her, but she never lost confidence in herself.

Despite all the challenges, Sanju is back in action in the National Team camp for the first time after the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2022. She has been called up to the preparatory camp in Bhubaneswar for the upcoming Asian Games and the AFC Women's Olympic Qualifiers.

Sanju's story resonates as a tale of resilience, determination, and the ability to turn setbacks into comebacks. Her journey serves as an inspiration to athletes and individuals alike, highlighting the transformative power of maintaining a positive mindset and unwavering dedication, even in the face of adversity.

"It wasn't easy," recalls Sanju. "To lay in the hospital bed and watch other teammates play and represent the country was a distressing and traumatic experience. There were a lot of times when I felt like giving up the game that had caused me so much pain.





"I lost it completely for the first few months during my recovery. The pain, the medications, and the recovery process were so long that it took a huge toll on my mental health. I was certainly not going through the best phase of my life, but somewhere I knew this would pass," the versatile footballer said.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," the 25-year-old commented and wanted everyone to believe in what she said. It was one of the rarest occasions when a woman player, who suffered two back-to-back ACL injuries, was strong enough mentally to return to professional football and carry on with the game with the kind of competence that took her back to the National Camp.

"Some of the days when my pain became severe, I questioned myself, what is all this for? The game, which I loved the most, is now hurting me to no end. But again, as a second thought, I told myself that if I stepped back due to my injury, I would fail in front of those who were playing the game.

"I wanted to be an example in the eyes of my juniors of how overcoming injuries and coming back to the pitch can also be a power that every athlete should have," Sanju mentioned.

"Seeing my name in the list of National campers was the day when I felt how stupid I was thinking about quitting the game. All the pain, the waiting – everything looked worth bearing. I think getting to wear the Indian colours again is the best feeling, not only for me but for any other athlete in my position.

"I trained very hard in these 15 months, played in the state league, and proved to everyone that I am physically and mentally strong enough to play 90 minutes in any match now. And here I am with my teammates and coaches, training for another two big challenges ahead," Sanju said. Sanju also thanked everyone who was in touch with her to support and motivate during her recovery process.

"I am thankful to my teammates, who used to call me during my rehab days and enquire about my recovery. I am also very grateful to coach Thomas (Dennerby), who texted me regularly and asked about my well-being when I was in Bangalore. I have never seen or heard of any other coach, who remembers his players if they are injured. Training under him has been the greatest gift," she said.



Adaptability, intensity at the heart of Clifford Miranda's coaching philosophy

The former India international midfielder will lead the Blue Colts at the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qualifiers in China in September

VARUN CHANDRA

Clifford Miranda has been a busy man recently, maybe even more so than in his playing days. The 2022-23 season has been one of reaping the benefits of said hard work – in April, he became the first Indian head coach to lift a major trophy with an Indian Super League side after he was trusted to lead Odisha FC for the Super Cup.

Following his Super Cup win, Miranda was named the AIFF Men's Coach Of The Year in July, and within a month, he was appointed head coach of the India U-23 National Team. His first task with the national side is the upcoming AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qualifiers. [The-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com) caught up with the man of the hour to talk about his recent success and his thoughts on the upcoming challenge.

"Nothing is more satisfying than the federation recognising the work that we have been doing," said Miranda when asked about the Coach of The Year Award and his recent appointment with the national side. "The work, my philosophy, and ethics were appreciated by the players at Odisha FC first and then the rest of the Indian Football fraternity. But it is done and dusted now. I need to look forward and keep improving myself and everyone I work with. I am very thankful to the AIFF for believing in me and trusting me with the U-23 side, which is just one level below the senior national team."

The 41-year-old has been one of the key players in the heart of the Blue Tigers midfield, back in his younger days, but is now seemingly thriving under completely different conditions as a coach.

"Playing is a lot of hard work and sacrifice, being a coach is tougher since we need to balance so many things – the staff, the players, and managing everyone and trying to keep everyone happy. Also, as a player, the matters are in your own hands, and you can make a difference in the game. As a coach, we are totally dependent on the players, all I can do is guide my players and have complete trust in them to get the job done."

The coach, who comes from Goa, is also expecting some differences in coaching a national team as compared to working with a club.

"We will get the players for a very short time where we need to have them learn our philosophies and adapt to our style of play. These young boys are professionals, though, and I am sure they will adapt to me and I will adapt to them in a way that we can play good football and qualify for AFC U-23 Asian Cup," said Miranda.

Miranda has gained his coaching experience one step at a time, having coached the FC Goa Reserves, before becoming their assistant coach in the ISL, following which he made the lateral move to Odisha FC, before taking over in Bhubaneswar as the head coach for the Super Cup. Miranda has developed his own philosophy of coaching over the years and summed it up in two words – adaptability and intensity.

"I like to keep progressive possession, not possession for the sake of it. We can have a direct approach to our build-up or play out of the back, depending on the opponents at hand and the personnel available in our team. We need to adapt to in-game situations and always have alternate plans," said Miranda. "I also want my boys to play with a certain level of intensity both on and off the ball. While going forward with the ball, pressing our opponents, or going in zones to deny space while defending, the intensity always needs to be there."





Having played at the highest level himself, Miranda believes getting involved in coaching helped him understand the game a lot better.

"Fathers often tell their sons that they will only understand what it means to be a father when they become one. Coaching is much like that. There is so much more to the game that I picked up only when I started doing my coaching licenses," said Miranda. "Back then I was still playing and it helped me know more about my game and understand football much better. I think it made me a better player and would recommend younger players to go for these coaching licenses even if they don't plan on coaching in the future. It will help them develop their game a lot more."

Miranda also relies on his playing experience when it comes to knowing the role a coach plays in building up a player's confidence. "I remember when I had broken my shin bone in four places and the doctors were telling me I might not play again, Bob Houghton who was the national team head coach at the time, visited me in the hospital and told me that he would include me in the national camp to be held in six months' time. That was the only thing that gave me confidence and got me through the rehab process. He also made sure I got all the help I needed to get back on the pitch."

Miranda's most immediate task will be to take charge of the India U-23s, who have been pitted in Group G of the AFC U-23 Asian Cup Qualifiers, against the likes of UAE, Maldives, and hosts China, with the matches set to take place between September 6 to 12. While preparing for the overall picture, Miranda laid special emphasis on beginning the campaign with a win.

"We have three very good teams in our group, but the first game of any tournament is always the most important. UAE are a tough side and playing China PR in their home is not going to be easy, but I am not thinking beyond the first game against the Maldives," said Miranda. "Of course, we will keep all teams in mind during our preparations, but I am focused on winning the opening game."

The Head Coach also mentioned that he is very well informed on all the players he has called for the camp leading up to the tournament. He said, "I have seen them all play and I have also worked with a few of the players in Goa and Odisha. I know all the players and I have a lot of faith in them. We need to get them in camp, plan as one unit, and work as one unit. It won't be easy and we will be facing some big opponents, we need to get our combinations and tactics right."



Downtown Heroes: Raising heroes in the heart of Srinagar

Taking pride in providing a platform to local players, Downtown Heroes are here to add another flavour to Kashmir's footballing ecosystem

SOUOMO GHOSH

The fans of Kashmir have often shown their love for the beautiful game, something that was amply seen in the I-League, where they thronged the stands of the TRC Ground in Srinagar to support their local club Real Kashmir FC. Over the last few years, another club have grown into Kashmir's burgeoning footballing ecosystem – Downtown Heroes FC.

The club who have become a part of the Second Division League, are spreading their wings one step at a time, with the prime aim of providing a platform for the local players.

Club co-founder Hinan Bhat says, "The Downtown area of Srinagar has a rich cultural history and is steeped in tradition. Over the years, sports has been a big part of the tradition in this area, with football being at its epicentre. It had become a place for instability in between, but we want to show the good side of this area, that those residing here are good, football-loving people.

"Our club is in its infancy, but we take a lot of pride in giving a platform to local players, especially when we see them getting opportunities in bigger clubs in the I-League or the ISL (Indian Super League)," he said.

Kashmir is no stranger to seeing their very own at the top echelons of football. Indeed, the likes of Abdul Majid, Arun Malhotra, Mehrajuddin Wadoo, and Ishfaq Ahmed have enthralled fans far and wide during their days, playing for top clubs across the land, and also representing the national team. More recently, Kashmir's very own son Danish Farooq went from the I-League to the ISL, playing for clubs like Bengaluru FC and Kerala Blasters FC.

Head Coach Hilal Rasool Pareh says, "It's always an honour to see our local players at the top level. One of our own boys from Downtown Heroes, Basit Ahmed Bhat, was also recently signed by Gokulam Kerala, which was a moment of pride for us."

Due to the no-foreigners rule introduced by the All India Football Federation in the I-League Second Division and the State Leagues, Downtown Heroes consists solely of Indian players, most of whom are from Kashmir itself. "We very much support the no-foreigners rule by the AIFF, as it completely aligns with our philosophy of promoting more local players," said Pareh.

Downtown Heroes are currently playing in the prestigious Durand Cup in Assam. In the past weeks, they have also taken part in the J&K Premier Football League and the Martyrs Police Memorial Football Tournament.

"It shows that our club is going in the right direction when we got an invitation to play in a big tournament like the Durand Cup," said Pareh. "It will be a very good platform for our boys to play against clubs from the ISL and the I-League."

The ambitious plans of this club which was started in 2020 do not just end with the men's team. The club also operate two junior teams, the U-15s and the U-19s at the state level, with all the players across these two teams hailing from Kashmir.

Co-founder Hinan also plans to promote women's football in Kashmir. "We are planning to have our own ground as well in the future, one which we plan to use extensively for our women's team too. Our idea is to come up with a women's team in the next couple of months and play in the Indian Women's League in the future," said Hinan. "Although everyone loves football, the Downtown area of Srinagar is prone to conservative ideas, and we want to work towards women's empowerment through our women's team as well."





Indian Football attracting foreign players for all the good reasons, say Gokulam Kerala's new Spanish duo

Alex Sánchez and Nili Perdomo are the Malabarians' latest recruits in their quest for promotion to the ISL

SOUMO GHOSH

The announcement of promotion from the I-League to the Indian Super League had come as a welcome change for Gokulam Kerala FC, who won back-to-back I-League titles in 2020-21 and 2021-22. While the more recent 2022-23 season proved slightly less productive for the Malabarians, the efforts to make it to Indian Football's top flight are in full flow down at the club's base in Kozhikode, Kerala.

To that extent, Gokulam Kerala have signed the Spanish duo of Nili Perdomo and Alejandro Sanchez, with the aim of addressing their woes up front after they netted only 26 goals from 22 I-League matches, finishing third last season. Playmaker Perdomo not only comes with the vast experience of playing in both Spain and Greece but has also had a brief stint in India with Bengaluru FC in the 2019-20 season when he made 10 appearances for the club in the ISL and the AFC Cup Preliminary Round 2 and Play-off matches before the COVID-19 pandemic struck.



"This is the second time I'll be playing in India, and I'm really looking forward to my time here. I had played earlier with Bengaluru, but that time was cut short because of COVID," said Perdomo to the-aiff.com. "Gokulam Kerala are certainly one of the bigger clubs in India, and I've heard a lot of good things about them from other Spanish players that had come here before, so when I learnt that they were interested in me, it was a quick decision."

A week after Perdomo's signing, Sanchez also joined Gokulam Kerala, as he spent seven days in pre-season camp, followed by the team's campaign in the Durand Cup during the silly season of 2023-24.

"This is my first time in India, and it's been an amazing experience so far. It's so different from Spain. I've really enjoyed my time in both Kozhikode and Kolkata," said Sanchez. "I am still in the process of getting used to the life and culture here, but my teammates have been very helpful in that regard."

Striker Alejandro Sanchez is from the Real Zaragoza youth system and has also played for CA Osasuna in Spain, before spending two seasons with Australian side Sydney Olympic FC.

"I've heard a lot about India and of Gokulam Kerala as well, that it is one of the bigger clubs in the I-League. We obviously aim to reach the top level in ISL, and I'll be trying to use all my experience to help the club get there," said Sanchez. "On a personal level, I want to score as many goals as possible for my club and help them reach their target."



India has become a rather attractive destination for Spanish footballers over the better part of the last decade. What has made it so? According to the two latest signings of Gokulam Kerala, it is the inherent growth of Indian Football over the years.

“From what I have seen, football is growing in the country. The National Team has been doing really well, and I was impressed with their recent wins in the SAFF Championship too,” said Perdomo. “I think India is steadily preparing to go to a higher level of football, which makes it very interesting. A lot of players from Europe are talking about coming here. The future is certainly bright.”

Sanchez, who has already had a taste of Asian football in Australia, believes it is imperative that football in the continent keeps growing, and that the Indian game is an integral part of it.

“I’ve heard a lot about India from other Spanish players who have been here, it’s been growing at a fast pace and I certainly want to be a part of it. For the world of football, it is important that Asia, and more specifically, India keeps growing in the sport,” said Sanchez. “Now that I am here, I want to be a role model for youngsters growing up, dreaming of making it as a professional one day.”

Gokulam Kerala are currently participating in the Durand Cup, where they have been drawn in Group C, alongside Bengaluru FC, Indian Air Force, and Kerala Blasters FC, with their matches scheduled to be played in Kolkata. Following the Durand Cup, the Malabarians will begin their I-League campaign.



Mohammedan Sporting: Strengthening the third pillar of Kolkata football

With a refurbished club ground at the Kolkata Maidan, the Black and White Brigade aim to engage better with the fans and promote local talent

SOUMO GHOSH

The Mecca of Indian Football, Kolkata, has three pillars, which have played a massive role in popularising the beautiful game in Bengal, and also to a large extent in India. While two of these pillars, Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, are currently in the top division, Indian Super League, the third pillar, Mohammedan Sporting are in resurgent form.

The Black and White Brigade, who famously won five back-to-back Calcutta Football League titles from 1934 to 1938, are currently gunning for their third CFL title in a row, after winning it in 2021 and 2022. While they have shown some remarkable form at the state level, Mohammedan Sporting have also been one of the front-runners in the I-League, where they have been vying for promotion to the Indian Super League.

While this period of on-pitch success and stability gives reassurance to the ardent fan base of the club, Mohammedan Sporting have also been using this period to upscale their activities around the pitch.

The famous Mohammedan Sporting Ground at the Kolkata Maidan has seen some recent refurbishments, as the club makes its efforts to transform it into an arena fit for modern football fans. Club General Secretary Mr Ishtiyag Ahmed said, "It is fabulous how we have turned around, our ground is one of the best today. Our tent, which has such a glorious heritage, looks more prestigious than ever.

"Facilities are important of course, and we can see that the players really appreciate the efforts being made by the club. I would like to thank our partners for that. Ever since we unified as one management, we have been able to provide our players with top-class facilities," he said. "I think our results in the last couple of years have also reflected that. Amongst the legacy clubs, Mohammedan Sporting's tent is the best in the country today."

The Black and White Brigade, under the new unified management, along with co-owners Bunkerhill, are harbouring dreams of making it to the ISL and thriving in the top division. Bunkerhill Director Mr Dipak Kumar Singh said, "Mohammedan Sporting have given a lot to Indian Football. Pre-independence, we were one of the strongest clubs and dominated the Indian Football ecosystem. That glory faded away to an extent for various reasons, but we are on the route of making a return in recent years.

"Money is an important part of this, but we also need to make sure that the system is sustainable. The idea is to bring Mohammedan back to the top level of Indian Football. I can say very clearly that there will be a day when the VYBK (Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan) will be full of black and white in the ISL, and no seats will be available. That's the dream," said Mr Singh.

While the infrastructure of Mohammedan Sporting is being refurbished, the club is also looking to constantly engage with fans in order to make the most of their resurgence in Indian Football.

'HAPPY TO PROMOTE LOCAL TALENTS'

In one of its recent rule changes, the All India Football Federation has made the state leagues an all-Indian affair, as clubs will only be able to field players who hold Indian passports. This has produced an upsurge in the number of Indian players who have come to the fore in this season's CFL. Indeed, Mohammedan's David Lalhlansanga (six goals) and Beneston Barretto (five goals) are fighting it out for the top scorer award, being placed second and joint-third, respectively, on the list.



Mohammedan Sporting Football Secretary Mr Dipendu Biswas extensively thanked the AIFF for introducing this rule and feels that it will go a long way in helping India promote more players in crucial areas of the pitch.

“I would like to thank the AIFF and President Kalyan Chaubey for introducing this rule. This has also made it an even fight between the clubs in the state leagues. Previously, big clubs like East Bengal, Mohammedan, and Mohun Bagan would sign the top foreigners and be far ahead of everyone else. Now, with only Indian players, things are more even,” he said. “If we can keep this up for a few years, I am sure we will find good players in key positions like centre forward, central midfield, and centre back.

“Our club is also benefiting from this as we are getting the opportunity to field more Indian youngsters, and the likes of David and Barretto, who nobody knew about, had heard of before, are now performing so well,” said Biswas.

The club management is also working towards furthering its footprint at the grassroots level, having opened an academy in Gurugram, and also making improvements to its existing academy in Kolkata.





India draw Qatar, Kuwait in four-team Group A of Round 2 Qualifiers

The Blue Tigers have been drawn in Group A of the FIFA World Cup 2026 Preliminary Joint Qualification Round 2 against Qatar, Kuwait, and winners of the Round 1 match between Afghanistan and Mongolia, after the draw was conducted at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Thursday, July 27, 2023.

Beginning from Pot 2 of the Qualifiers, India, who are placed 99th in the FIFA Rankings, will face Qatar (59th), Kuwait (137th), and the winners of the match between Afghanistan (157th), Mongolia (183rd) in a double round-robin format on a home-and-away basis.

The teams that finish in the top two positions in the qualification group will enter Round 3 of the FIFA World Cup 2026 Qualifiers, and get direct entry into the AFC Asian Cup 2027.

Blue Tigers head coach Igor Stimac said after the draw, "It was a very busy and exciting day of football for us in India. Now that we know all the opponents, we can clearly say that we were successful against all these teams in the recent past.

"I felt we were not lucky there and all these teams (in Group A), we've faced in recent times. We faced Qatar a long time ago, and have shown that even then we were successful against them," he said. "I beg everyone in India, all the stakeholders, let's start our meetings and planning, let's do everything to make sure that the Indian Football Team get enough time to prepare so we can match these teams, outplay them on the pitch, and go through as the winners in the group."



India have been in hot form in 2023, going on an 11-match unbeaten streak, spanning the Tri-Nation Cup, the Intercontinental Cup, and the SAFF Championship. During the course of this treble-winning run, India have played Kuwait twice in the SAFF Championship, with both matches, in the group stage and the final, ending 1-1. However, the Blue Tigers successfully converted the penalty shootout in the SAFF Final into a ninth sub-continental title in Bengaluru, earlier this month.

Igor Stimac's men had also been clubbed alongside Qatar in the previous edition of the World Cup Qualifiers, where they produced a couple of inspiring performances against the defending AFC Asian Cup Champions in Doha - earning a 0-0 draw before losing 0-1.

Afghanistan and Mongolia, who are set to face each other in the Round 1 Qualifiers, have also played against India in recent times. The former were clubbed in Group D of the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers, which were played in Kolkata last year; India won the match 2-1.

Meanwhile, Mongolia faced India in the Intercontinental Cup in Bhubaneswar earlier this year, with the Blue Tigers emerging 2-0 winners.

Group A: Qatar, India, Kuwait, WP1 (Afghanistan/Mongolia).



Draw out for 49th King's Cup and Merdeka Tournament

The Indian senior men's team will participate in two tournaments in September - the 49th King's Cup (Thailand) and October - the Merdeka Tournament (Malaysia). Both events will have four contesting teams and will follow the same format, the draw for which were confirmed this month.

Currently ranked 99th in the world, India will face Iraq (ranked 70th) in the semi-final of the King's Cup on September 7, while hosts Thailand (ranked 113th) meet Lebanon (ranked 100th) in the other match-up. The winners of the 49th King's Cup 2023 semi-finals will contest the final on September 10. The losers will meet in the third-place play-off.

At the Merdeka Tournament in the following month, India were drawn against hosts Malaysia (ranked 136th), with Palestine (ranked 96th) facing Lebanon (ranked 100th) in the other semi-final. Similar to the King's Cup, the winners of the semi-final will clash in the final on October 17. The two losing teams will contest the third-place play-off.

49th King's Cup 2023 Fixtures:

Iraq vs India (16:00 IST, September 7, 2023)

Thailand vs Lebanon (19:00 IST, September 7, 2023)

Third-place play-off (16:00 IST, September 10, 2023)

Final (19:00 IST, September 10, 2023)

Venue: 700th Anniversary Stadium, Chiang Mai

Merdeka Tournament 2023 Fixtures:

Palestine vs Lebanon (14:00 IST, October 13, 2023)

Malaysia vs India (18:30 IST, October 13, 2023)

Third-place play-off (14:00 IST, October 17, 2023)

Final (18:30 IST, October 17, 2023)

Venue: Bukit Jalil National Stadium, Kuala Lumpur



AIFF signs Subroto Cup MoU

The Federation has signed an MoU to promote youth football and revitalise a tournament of supreme importance for grassroots football in the country

The All India Football Federation signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Subroto Mukherjee Sports Education Society (SMSES) to promote youth football, in a function held in New Delhi, on Wednesday, August 2, 2023.

Both the AIFF and the SMSES will benefit from this MoU that will see the prestigious Subroto Cup, an inter-school football tournament, being raised to newer heights.

AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said, "Collaborating with the Subroto Cup is another decision to further strengthen our youth football structure and that way, our schools will be much more integrated into the competitive football structure in India. This collaboration between the Subroto Mukherjee Sports Education Society and the AIFF will bring a lot of positive changes in the organisation and overall impact of the Subroto Cup, which will make a big change in the youth football ecosystem in the larger scheme of things.

"It will encourage more schoolgirls to be a part of football and also help us scout new talents from the Subroto Cup, which would further motivate more schoolchildren to be a part of the game. Overall, this historic day for Indian Football and for Subroto Mukherjee Sports Education Society is going to be a significant moment," said Dr Prabhakaran.

Air Vice-Marshal Alok Sharma said, "We have got the talent and psychological map of the best students. We have got the vision of 2047 from the Prime Minister, and the AIFF's vision, which is also for the same year. So when I heard about this vision, there was no doubt that we have to be a part of it, and there was no doubt that we will be able to contribute to it.



"Not that long ago, were we discussing how to get this done. It has now materialised in a short duration, and I am thankful to the AIFF for it. Let's produce the results, as that will be the icing on the cake," said Mr Sharma. "The process is good, and now it's time for us to get the results. The major takeaway for us will be that the students will now have the aspiration of playing for India one day. They will be playing with the best, getting advice from good coaches, performing at a level where someone is looking at their future."

This MoU will see the SMSES field a Subroto XI team in the AIFF's youth competitions, which will be formed from by scouting the best players across the various age categories of the Subroto Cup. The Selection Committee of the aforementioned Subroto XI will comprise one member deputed by the SMSES, and one nominated member from the Sports Authority of India (SAI), along with two scouts nominated by the AIFF, to form a four-member committee.

The Selection Committee shall be responsible for identifying the top players and thereafter called up to the Subroto XI team of their respective categories. The AIFF, for its part, will allow the Subroto XI direct entry into the AIFF Youth Leagues for both boys and girls across various age categories from the 2023-24 season onwards.

Twenty-five players will be identified by the Selection Committee from each of the U-17 Boys and Girls categories for a one-time cash scholarship of Rs 25,000/- for every player. The same award for the Sub-Junior (U-14) category will be Rs 15,000/- each.

The players scouted from the Subroto Cup across various age categories will also be assessed using an IT-assisted Talent Development Scheme, and then be invited to attend National Team training camps of their respective age categories. The AIFF will also notify the ISL, I-League, and IWL clubs to depute their scouts once the match schedule for the Subroto Cup is provided.

The MoU will also see various marketing collaborations between the AIFF and the SMSES for the Subroto Cup, with the tournament being produced and broadcast in a never-before-seen manner.

The AIFF will also assist the SMSES in age detection of the players in the Subroto Cup via the TW3 method from the 2023-24 season onwards. Dedicated coach education programmes will also be undertaken for coaches of the teams in the Final Rounds.

Following the completion of the tournament, the AIFF will also identify the D License coaches from the Final Round teams and devise a suitable plan to upskill the said coaches to the AIFF C License.



Draw revealed for SAFF U16 and U19 Championships

The draw for the SAFF U16 Championship 2023 and SAFF U19 Championship 2023 was conducted at the BFF House in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on Saturday, July 22, 2023.

In the U16 event, India were placed in Group A alongside Nepal and Bangladesh. Hosts Bhutan, Maldives and Pakistan were drawn in Group B. The SAFF U16 Championship will take place at the Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu from September 1-10, 2023.

The India U19s were drawn alongside Bhutan and Bangladesh in Group B, while hosts Nepal, Maldives and Pakistan made up Group A. The SAFF U19 Championship 2023 will be held at the Dashrath Stadium in Kathmandu from September 21-30, 2023.

The format of both competitions is the same. After a single round-robin group stage, the top two teams from both groups will meet in the semi-finals, the winners of which will contest the final.

India emerged as champions of both SAFF youth tournaments held in 2022 for the U20 and U17 age groups. The India U20s thrashed Bangladesh 5-2 in the final in Bhubaneswar, while the U17s cruised past Nepal 4-0 in the summit clash in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

SAFF U16 Championship 2023 Draw

Group A:

India, Nepal, Bangladesh

Group B:

Bhutan, Maldives, Pakistan

SAFF U19 Championship 2023 Draw

Group A:

Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan

Group B:

India, Bhutan, Bangladesh



Santosh Trophy, Senior Women's NFC 2023-24 Group Stage Draws conducted

The Official Draw for the 77th National Football Championship for Santosh Trophy 2023-24 and the Senior Women's National Football Championship 2023-24 were conducted at the Football House in New Delhi, on Wednesday, July 26, 2023.

The Santosh Trophy will see participation from 38 teams, while there will be 37 teams in the Senior Women's NFC. Karnataka and Meghalaya, who were the two finalists of the Santosh Trophy in 2022-23 will gain direct entry into the Final Rounds of the competition, while the same will apply for Tamil Nadu and Haryana, who played the final of the Senior Women's NFC 2022-23.

AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said, "We wish each team the very best for the Santosh Trophy and the Senior Women's NFC. I am sure this season will see much better competition, and we will have the opportunity to see new teams and talented players come through. My very best to the participating teams and the members of the competition committee for the draw."



Competitions Committee Chairperson Mr Anilkumar P said, "I feel that the draw has been conducted in a very good manner, and the groupings have been fair to all the teams. Wishing everyone the best of luck for the competitions."

In the Santosh Trophy Group Stage, the 36 teams have been divided into six groups of six teams each. The winners and the four best second-placed teams, along with the champions and runners-ups from the 2022-23 season.

Meanwhile, the 35 teams in the Senior Women's NFC Group Stage have been divided into six groups (Groups A to E will have six teams each, while Group F will have five sides). The six group winners, along with four best second-placed teams will make it to the Final Rounds.

77th National Football Championship for Santosh Trophy 2023-24 Groupings:

Group A: Kerala, Goa, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir.

Group B: Punjab, Haryana, Odisha, Delhi, Ladakh, West Bengal.

Group C: Manipur, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Nagaland, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh.

Group D: Railways, Bihar, Chandigarh, Rajasthan, Assam, Himachal Pradesh.

Group E: Services, Uttarakhand, Mizoram, Pondicherry, Sikkim, Dadra and Nagar Haveli & Daman and Diu.

Group F: Maharashtra, Telangana, Andaman & Nicobar, Andhra Pradesh, Lakshadweep, Tripura.

28th Senior Women's National Football Championship 2023-24 Groupings:

Group A: Manipur, Pondicherry, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Mizoram, Uttar Pradesh.

Group B: West Bengal, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Nagaland.

Group C: Chandigarh, Assam, Sikkim, Karnataka, Kerala, Tripura.

Group D: Jharkhand, Lakshadweep, Ladakh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir.

Group E: Odisha, Goa, Meghalaya, Dadra and Nagar Haveli & Daman and Diu, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat.

Group F: Railways, Maharashtra, Andaman & Nicobar, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh.



Spreading their wings in Asia: Some memorable nights of the Green and Maroons

The Mariners have always had glorious ambitions – and significant triumphs – at the continental stage. With another campaign coming up we look at their best moments through history

Playing at the continental level is something special, something cherished by all Indian clubs. Not only does it set a marker on the domestic success that a club has had in the previous season, but it also gives the players a chance to compete internationally, albeit for their club.

Currently, India has three spots in Asian club competitions. The winners of the ISL League Winners' Shield get direct entry into the AFC Champions League Group Stage, the winners of the Super Cup enter the AFC Cup Group Stage, while the winners of the ISL Final have to win the AFC Cup Preliminary Round 2 and Play-off, before they gain entry to the competition proper.

ATK Mohun Bagan, who have more recently been rechristened as Mohun Bagan Super Giant, have been regular participants in the AFC Cup in recent years and will make their third consecutive appearance in the group stage if they properly navigate through their Preliminary Round 2 and Playoff matches. As the Green and Maroons get set to face Machhindra FC of Nepal in the Preliminary Round 2, we take a look at some of the more inspiring continental performances by the club in the past.

ASIAN CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP 1988

The 1988 Asian Club Championship arguably saw one of the best performances by Mohun Bagan on the continental level, as the Green and Maroons managed to make it to the Semi-final group.

These were the times when two points were awarded for a win and one for a draw. Drawn in Group 3 in the group stage, alongside Crescent Textiles (Pakistan), Kathmandu SC (Nepal), and Fanja SC (Oman), Mohun Bagan were looking to do one better from the previous year, when they missed out on progressing to the Semi-finals group after finishing second.

In 1988, however, when Group 3 was played at the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Stadium in Kolkata, the Green and Maroons came out all guns blazing against Crescent Textiles (8-0) and Kathmandu SC (4-2), before winning the last match against Fanja 1-0 to progress to the Semi-finals group.

Sisir Ghosh was the top scorer for the Green and Maroons with five goals to his name.

ASIAN CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP 1994

Coach Shanker Banerjee and his boys continued the good form in Mohun Bagan's 1994 appearance in the Asian Club Championship as well when they emerged top of the South Asia Group to enter the Second Round East Asia Playoffs. They defeated Club Valencia (Maldives) and Ratnam SC (Sri Lanka) to top their group.

In the Second Round, however, Mohun Bagan had to withdraw from the tournament due to a plague that broke out in Surat. AFC suggested that Mohun Bagan's home leg against Thai Farmers Bank FC be played in Malaysia. However, the Green and Maroons refused the offer and withdrew from the tournament.

Tausif Jamal was the top scorer for Mohun Bagan, with four goals to his name.



AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2016 PRELIMINARY ROUND

Mumbai City FC made India proud with their performance in the AFC Champions League group stage last season. However, before, when India did not have a direct entry into the AFC Champions League proper, Mohun Bagan's performance in 2016 stands out as the only win by an Indian club in the preliminary stages.

Facing Tampines Rovers of Singapore at the VYBK in Kolkata, Mohun Bagan produced a fine performance to win 3-1, as Jeje Lalpekhua, Cornell Glen, and Katsumi Yusa netted one each. Progressing to Preliminary Round 2, however, the Green and Maroons had to face Shandong Luneng (China), a match that they lost 0-6.

AFC CUP 2016

The 2016 AFC Cup will forever be remembered by Indian Football fans for Bengaluru FC's run to the final. Mohun Bagan, however, were also in fine form in that edition of the continental competition, under head coach Sanjoy Sen.

Having lost their Champions League Preliminary Round 2 match against Shandong, the Green and Maroons directly entered the Group Stage and were drawn against South China AA (Hong Kong), Yangon United (Myanmar), and Maziya Sports and Recreation Club (Maldives) in Group G. Mohun Bagan finished top of the group, with their only loss coming at home against South China AA (0-3); the previous leg ended 4-0 in the Green and Maroons' favour in Hong Kong.

Ironically, they faced Tampines Rovers again in the Round of 16, but suffered a 1-2 loss this time, after the Singapore side scored in extra time. Jeje Lalpekhua was the highest scorer for the Green and Maroons with six goals.





AFC CUP 2021

These were rather strange times for football. While the COVID-19 pandemic raged around the world, specific precautions were taken to hold the Group Stages in one venue (National Football Stadium, Male, Maldives). The Green and Maroons, however, produced some fine performances in Group D against Bashundhara Kings (Bangladesh), Bengaluru FC (India), and Maziya S&RC (Maldives), to finish top of the pile and book their spot at the Inter-zone play-off semi-final.

In the knockout stage, however, they suffered a 0-6 thrashing at the hands of Nasaf Qarshi of Uzbekistan.

AFC CUP 2022

The previous edition of the AFC Cup was also partially played under the veil of the bio-bubble, with Group D held in Kolkata. This time, the Green and Maroons faced Bashundhara Kings (Bangladesh), Maziya S&RC (Maldives), and Gokulam Kerala FC (India). Starting off with a shock 2-4 defeat at the hands of Gokulam Kerala, the Green and Maroons showed great character to win their remaining matches and finish top of the group.

Their Inter-zone play-off semi-final against Kuala Lumpur City (Malaysia) was an absolute cliffhanger. ATK Mohun Bagan thought they took the match into extra time when Fardin Ali Molla scored a 90th-minute equaliser, but Fakrul Aiman Sidid and Romel Morales scored in injury time for Kuala Lumpur to snatch the match away from the Green and Maroons.



Come September: There will be Indian national teams in seven different tournaments

AKHIL RAWAT

September 2023 is set to be one of the busiest months in Indian Football history, with the national teams competing in as many as seven different tournaments in four nations across Asia.

The men's senior, U23, U19 and U16, while the women's senior and U17 teams will be in action. September 21 will be the busiest day on the calendar with four matches - the Indian men and women against Bangladesh and Chinese Taipei respectively in the Asian Games in China, the men's U19 team versus Bangladesh in the SAFF U19 Championship in Nepal and the women's U17s against Thailand in the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers - all kicking off in the span of six hours.

September 1-10: SAFF U16 Championship (Thimphu, Bhutan)

Newly-appointed head coach Ishfaq Ahmed will lead India's title defence at the SAFF U16 Championship at the picturesque Changlimithang Stadium in Thimphu, Bhutan from the first day of September. After extensive scouting in five zones, the freshly-assembled batch of probables has been training in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir, since mid-July. India are drawn with Bangladesh and Nepal in Group A of the tournament, with the top two teams progressing to the semi-finals.

India's fixtures at the SAFF U16 Championship:

September 1: Bangladesh vs India - Group A (14:30 IST, Thimphu)

September 5: India vs Nepal - Group A (14:30 IST, Thimphu)

September 7: Semi-final (14:30 or 18:30 IST, Thimphu)

September 10: Final (17:30 IST, Thimphu)



September 6-12: AFC U23 Asian Cup Qatar 2024 Qualifiers (Dalian, China PR)

Having recently been named the AIFF Men's Coach of the Year, Clifford Miranda will now hope to secure India's first-ever ticket to the AFC U23 Asian Cup. The preparatory camp consisting of 28 probables will begin in Bhubaneswar on August 20.

After the opening fixture against neighbours Maldives at the Dalian Sports Centre Stadium, the task will get significantly tougher with hosts China PR and the UAE in the final two games of Group G. The group winners and four best runners-up across 11 groups will make up the cast of 16 at the final tournament in Qatar next year, which also acts as the AFC qualifiers for the Men's Olympic Football Tournament Paris 2024.

India's fixtures at the AFC U23 Asian Cup Qualifiers:

September 6: India vs Maldives (14:00 IST, Dalian)

September 9: China PR vs India (17:05 IST, Dalian)

September 12: UAE vs India (14:00 IST, Dalian)

September 7-10: 49th King's Cup (Chiang Mai, Thailand)

The first half of 2023 was a glorious one for the Indian senior men's team, who emerged champions of all three competitions they participated in. Eager to replicate their fine form in foreign soil, Igor Stimac's side will land in northern Thailand to take part in the 49th King's Cup during FIFA's September international match window.

The Blue Tigers, who won bronze the last time they played the King's Cup in 2019, which was also Stimac's debut tournament, will face Iraq in the semi-final of the 2023 edition, with hosts Thailand taking on Lebanon in the other match-up. The winners will contest the final on September 10, while the losers meet in the third-place play-off.

India's fixtures at the 49th King's Cup:

September 7: Iraq vs India - Semi-final (16:00, Chiang Mai)

September 10: India vs Thailand or Lebanon - Third-place Play-off or Final (16:00 or 19:00 IST, Chiang Mai)

September 19-23: AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Indonesia 2024 Qualifiers Round 2 (Buriram, Thailand)

In April, the Indian women's U17 team broke new ground by topping their Round 1 group and making it to Round 2 of the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers for the first time. Led by AIFF Women's Coach of the Year Priya PV, the Young Tigresses have been in camp in Indore since the first week of July. India are placed alongside Korea Republic, IR Iran and hosts Thailand in Group A. The top two teams will book their berth at the final tournament to be held in Indonesia in April 2024.

India's fixtures at the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2:

September 19: Korea Republic vs India (15:00 IST, Buriram)

September 21: India vs Thailand (19:00 IST, Buriram)

September 23: IR Iran vs India (15:00 IST, Buriram)

September 19-October 7: 19th Asian Games (Hangzhou, China)

India's much-anticipated Asian Games football campaign will get underway with the men's team's high-profile clash against hosts China at the Huanglong Sports Centre Stadium on September 19, four days before the opening ceremony. Indian football teams will be competing in the continental quadrennial event for the first time since Incheon 2014.

Men's head coach Igor Stimac has named a strong squad for the Asian Games, with Chhetri, Jhingan and Sandhu the highlights among a vibrant group of U23 boys. Bangladesh and Myanmar are the men's other two opponents as they will hope to qualify for the round of 16 by finishing in the top two or as one of the four best third-placed teams.

The Indian women's team have already begun their preparations for the Asian Games under head coach Thomas Dennerby in Bhubaneswar from the first week of August. The Blue Tigresses have been drawn in a three-team Group B alongside Thailand and Chinese Taipei and will play their matches in Wenzhou, a city situated 300 kilometres from Hangzhou. The group winners and three best runners-up will make it to the last eight.





India's fixtures at the 19th Asian Games:

September 19: China vs India - Men's Group A (17:00 IST, Hangzhou)
September 21: India vs Bangladesh - Men's Group A (13:30 IST, Xiaoshan)
September 21: Chinese Taipei vs India - Women's Group B (17:00 IST, Wenzhou)
September 24: Myanmar vs India - Men's Group A (17:00 IST, Xiaoshan)
September 24: India vs Thailand - Women's Group B (17:00 IST, Wenzhou)
September 27 or 28: Men's Round of 16
September 30: Women's Quarter-final
October 1: Men's Quarter-final
October 3: Women's Semi-final
October 4: Men's Semi-final
October 6: Women's Gold/Bronze medal match
October 7: Men's Gold/Bronze medal match

September 21-30: SAFF U19 Championship (Kathmandu, Nepal)

The second age-group men's SAFF tournament of the month will see India travel to Nepal's capital Kathmandu to take on Bangladesh and Bhutan in Group B. The tournament will be held in the same format as the U16 one, with the top two sides going through to the semi-finals. The Blue Colts will look to defend their title from last year when it was held as an U20 competition in Bhubaneswar. The opening game against Bangladesh will be a rematch of the final from 2022.

India's fixtures at the SAFF U19 Championship:

September 21: Bangladesh vs India - Group B (13:15 IST, Kathmandu)
September 25: India vs Bhutan - Group B (17:15 IST, Kathmandu)
September 27: Semi-final (13:15 or 17:15 IST, Kathmandu)
September 30: Final (17:15 IST, Kathmandu)



Indian Futsal: A new beginning

The Indian Futsal Team played their first ever international matches against Bahrain. Though they ended in two losses, there were plenty of lessons learnt for the unseeded side.

It was a new beginning for India, which sent its futsal team for two international matches for the first time ever. The opponents were Bahrain, a team that have been playing the game on the international arena since 2002.

History was made when the Indian futsal team first took to the court on August 12, 2023 at the Khalifa Sports Hall in Isa Town, Bahrain, in front of a handful of Indian supporters who cheered the boys on from the stands. While the results in India's two matches against Bahrain (0-3 and 0-4) may have left fans a bit disappointed, it was a valuable experience for a bunch of players that have never played the game at such a level.

Head coach **Joshuah Vaz** believes that it's all about getting the boys used to playing at such a level, that will ultimately yield results.

"The final scores may not look good, but our team played brilliantly in different patches. The fact that this was the first time we were playing in the international arena, was not lost on Bahrain. After the matches, we could see that they were quite surprised at how much we made them work in those 40 minutes," said Vaz.



The Indian futsal team have been training in Amritsar a month prior to the two international friendlies. They have now returned to the same venue to continue their camp, where they will prepare for the AFC Futsal Asian Cup 2024 Qualifiers. India have been drawn in Group E, alongside hosts Tajikistan (October 7), Myanmar (October 9), and Palestine (October 11).

Vaz feels that the two international friendlies against Bahrain gave the team a very good idea about what their strengths are against such teams.

“Our players have previously played the Futsal Club Championship domestically, but the international level is different. One small mistake, and they will punish you. We learned a lot from these two matches, and we now know our strong points that we can use in the Asian Cup Qualifiers, and also the areas where we need further improvement,” said Vaz.





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