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**SANTOSH TROPHY:
THE CUP THAT
GLITTERED IN ITANAGAR**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**MISSION AFGHANISTAN:
BLUE TIGERS TAKE
BATTLE STATIONS**



Table of Contents

02

PRESIDENT'S NOTE

04

AIFF HOLDS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING AND AGM IN ITANAGAR

07

SANTOSH TROPHY: A JEWEL IN THE INDIAN FOOTBALL CROWN

10

SHAFEEL PP: THE MAN WHO JOINS HANDS WITH THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME OF SANTOSH TROPHY

12

SHOOTING RANGE: SANTOSH TROPHY 2024

13

WITH A CLEAR MINDSET, BLUE TIGERS EYE MAXIMUM POINTS AGAINST AFGHANISTAN

16

THE CUP THAT SLIPPED AWAY ON THE MEDITERRANEAN SHORES

19

MANISHA KALYAN ADJUDGED BEST MIDFIELDER IN TURKISH WOMEN'S CUP

21

SHOOTING RANGE: TURKISH WOMEN'S CUP

23

THE FIRST STEP OF A LONG JOURNEY FOR THE INDIA U16 GIRLS

25

SHVETA RANI, THE LATEST DREAMER FROM ALAKHPURA

27

PUNJAB'S GURLEEN KAUR RISES TO WEAR INDIA BLUE AT 12

29

SHOOTING RANGE: SAFF U16 WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP 2024

30

INDIA U23S TO PLAY TWO FRIENDLIES AGAINST MALAYSIA

31

INDIAN WOMEN'S LEAGUE 2 2024 GROUPS

32

AIFF ANNOUNCES U20 MEN'S NFC; TO BE HELD IN CHHATTISGARH

33

AIFF GRASSROOTS AWARDS 2023 ANNOUNCED

34

GOA TO HOST NEXT BEACH SOCCER NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP

35

SENIOR WOMEN'S NFC NAMED RAJMATA JIJABAI MAHARAJA NATIONAL FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

President's Note

77th Santosh Trophy, the glimmering light of Itanagar

Kalyan Chaubey

On March 9, 2024, when I walked into the Golden Jubilee Stadium in Yupia, near Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, I found the stands were already packed. There was still an hour to go before the kick-off of the Santosh Trophy final between ultimate champions Services and Goa, but the stadium was bursting at the seams.

I was told the gates had to be closed early as there was not an empty seat inside, yet a few thousand people were waiting outside, hoping to get a ticket for the match.

It was a pleasant experience, but believe me, I was not surprised by the crowd response or the way the 77th edition of the National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy proved to be a thumping success in Arunachal Pradesh. Because I knew it couldn't be any other way.

When the honourable Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri Pema Khandu ji, who is also the President of Arunachal Pradesh Football Association, told me last year that he would love to host the Santosh Trophy in the state, it immediately occurred to me that whenever we speak of football in the Northeast, we mostly think of Manipur or Mizoram. Having started in 1941, well before the Independence, the Santosh Trophy has travelled all around the country, but never to Arunachal Pradesh. We, at the AIFF, felt the right to host the tournament could be awarded to Arunachal Pradesh and it could reach greater heights.

Now that the 77th edition is behind us, I can say that the way this tournament has been hosted in Arunachal, I would have no qualms in stating that it is one of the best-hosted editions of the Santosh Trophy in India.



The Santosh Trophy is truly a glittering gem in the Indian Football calendar, and with Arunachal Pradesh as its host, this 83-year-old competition has only been further enriched. I want to thank the Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister and APFA President and his entire team at the APFA for the complete dedication that has been shown in the process of making the championship the massive success that it was.

The 76th edition of this National Football Championship was held amidst much fanfare in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and the players got the experience of playing in international standard stadiums with Video Assistant Referee (VAR). The arrangements in Riyadh had set a certain standard, and I was very happy to see that the standard of the Itanagar edition was very much at the same level at which the Riyadh one was conducted.



The Santosh Trophy was not only streamed on the Arunachal Pradesh Football Association's YouTube channel across India but also on the FIFA+ platform across the world. I am happy to say that Arunachal Pradesh has now set the standard for the Santosh Trophy, and we hope that we will be able to host bigger and better versions of this tournament in the future.

I would also like to congratulate Services on winning their seventh Santosh Trophy title, as they continue their legacy in this beautiful game.

Ever since our committee took over the charge at the All India Football Federation in September 2022, we have endeavoured to revive the old glory of Indian football. We are neither against the modern approach nor do we aim to swim against the tide. Our approach had always been to strike a balance, something extremely important on and off the pitch in a game of football. The Santosh Trophy had been the crowning glory of Indian football for many years; it hit a low for a few years in between for various reasons. We decided to revive the situation. Hence, we decided to tighten our belts and get down to business. The fact that our efforts have borne fruit is evident from the stunning success of the Arunachal Pradesh Santosh Trophy.



AIFF holds Executive Committee meeting and AGM in Itanagar

Members pledge in unison to take Indian Football to greater heights

AIFF Media Team

The All India Football Federation held its Executive Committee meeting on Sunday, March 10, 2024, followed by the Annual General Body Meeting (AGM) in Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh.

The Hon'ble Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri Pema Khandu, who is also the President of the state football association, attended the meeting.

The AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey chaired the Executive Committee meeting in the presence of Vice President Mr. N.A. Haris, Treasurer Mr. Kipa Ajay, Acting Secretary General Mr. M. Satyanarayan, and the members of the Committee.

After the completion of the Executive Committee meeting, the AIFF Annual General Body Meeting was held in the presence of representatives from various Member State Associations, other stakeholders and representatives from FIFA and AFC with Mr. Chaubey in the chair.

Mr. Chaubey said, "The way the 77th NFC for Santosh Trophy Final was conducted yesterday, was one of a kind. The ambiance and support we saw from the stands was absolutely amazing. I truly felt that the Santosh Trophy's popularity has risen to greater heights in the last couple of years.

"When football in the Northeast comes up for discussion, we mainly think about Manipur and Mizoram. But now, Arunachal has joined the team as the third force, hand in hand with their two other brothers from the Northeast."

The AIFF President pointed out that in several places in India, multipurpose stadiums are used for hosting football matches, forcing the spectators to watch the action from a distance. Mr. Chaubey, himself a former footballer, said that in modern football stadiums world over, the spectators watch the matches from close range. Hence, there is a need for stadiums exclusively for football in India.

The Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister said that his government was planning to build a stadium here dedicated solely to football.

The Executive Committee and the General Body held detailed discussions on the AIFF budget and passed it for the 2024-25 financial year.

Acting Secretary General M. Satyanarayan, said, "We have presented a balanced budget for the financial year 2024-25. We also must work hard to expand the game, increasing the number of tournaments, and resource development."

The House took up discussions on the current state of Indian refereeing and the possible introduction of VAR (Video Assistant Referee). The AIFF Chief Refereeing Officer, while submitting his report and pointing out that 85 percent of on-pitch refereeing decisions are proving to be correct in the current season, also held discussions with five reputed agencies specialised in VAR.

Based on the report, a presentation on VAR was made in front of the members, who felt that it was not impossible to introduce the advanced system in the Indian Super League from the next season on a no-cost-to-the-AIFF basis. The members were informed that there would be further discussions on this issue in the first week of May.

Both the Executive Committee and the General Body expressed anguish at the way personal attacks have been made against senior AIFF officials, especially the President, from certain quarters.



The members felt that the attacks were not only personal against the Federation President but also an outright insult to every member of the Federation and the AIFF in general. Taking note of this, the House passed a resolution calling this attack motivated and done with definite malicious intent. The members also expressed wonder at the fact that these attacks have been launched intentionally in the last six weeks, from the Executive Committee meeting in New Delhi on January 30, leading to the AGM in Itanagar, on March 10, 2024. They felt that this was in absolutely poor taste and has caused serious damage to the progress of Indian Football.

The members of the Executive Committee and the General Body welcomed two of its newest members into the AIFF family after the Ladakh Football Association and Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu were approved as full members of the national federation.

After detailed discussions, the Executive Committee and the General Body decided to give the go-ahead to the proposed FSDL-AIFF-IndiGo agreement. The members were of the opinion that the MoU on this issue that could be agreed upon, would immensely help in lifting the brand value of Indian Football.

The Executive Committee and the General Body passed a resolution that, in the future, only honorary members of the AIFF would be nominated for different committees and standing committees of the continental and world bodies, provided it is approved by the Executive Committee.

The members of the Executive Committee and the General Body unanimously expressed happiness over the conduct of the 77th National Football Championship for Santosh Trophy in Itanagar, and the production that was streamed live on FIFA+ as well as Arunachal Pradesh Football Association's YouTube channel.

The members condoled the death of Hardevsinh Jadeja, the former Treasurer and Executive Committee member of the AIFF.





Santosh Trophy: A jewel in the Indian Football crown

As thousands cheered, Services clinched their seventh National Championship crown in a nail-biting title clash against mighty Goa

SOUOMO GHOSH

The Golden Jubilee Stadium in Yupia, near Itanagar in Arunachal Pradesh was packed to the rafters. Not a single empty space could be seen in the galleries, as the 77th National Football Championship for Santosh Trophy final kicked off on a chilly Saturday evening in the easternmost province of India. Services, the eventual champions finally got to take their lap of honour in front of a galleries teeming with supporters, something that they were not quite able to do the last time they won the trophy back in 2018-19.

What made it all the more fascinating was that all 15,000 tickets were sold out, all the gates were sealed; and yet more people kept thronging outside the stadium, hoping to make it in. Those that could not get passes, took advantage of the local terrain, making their way up a nearby higher ground that overlooked the stadium.

Amidst all the fanfare, the 77th edition of the Santosh Trophy was an integral part of the revival process of this 83-year-old tournament, especially in terms of attendance at the stadium. Despite the fact that hosts Arunachal Pradesh did not make it to the knockout stages, the passionate fans of the state kept amassing at the grounds, supporting the teams who played good football. Teams like Mizoram, Manipur and Assam, who hailed from the neighbouring states also enjoyed a lot of support from the galleries, as a lot of students from these areas reside in the vicinity.



AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey said, "This has indeed been special to host the 77th NFC for Santosh Trophy Final Round in Arunachal Pradesh. We want to thank the President of APFA and the Hon'ble CM of Arunachal Pradesh Shri Pema Khandu ji.

"We hosted the 76th edition of the Santosh Trophy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, last year, in international stadiums, and with VAR technology. That set the standard. Now, I am happy to say that Arunachal Pradesh has very much upheld that standard. The deafening chants here in Arunachal Pradesh are being echoed across the world through FIFA+." The honourable Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri Pema Khandu said, "I want to welcome AIFF President Shri Kalyan Chaubey ji and all the members of the AIFF, who have come to Arunachal Pradesh today. I want to thank AIFF for allowing Arunachal Pradesh to host this prestigious tournament, which is being witnessed across the world via FIFA+. Seeing so many football fans here, I am convinced that Itanagar deserves an even bigger football stadium, which we will dedicate to all the fans here.

The champions showed both grit and determination to win their seventh Santosh Trophy, but the likes of Mizoram, Goa and Manipur won the hearts of the fans. Phijam Sanathoi Meetei (Manipur) was the top scorer with 11 goals, while from Services, Samir Murmu (10 goals) won the best player of the tournament and Sayad bin Abdul Kadir was adjudged the best goalkeeper of the tournament.

If individual performances are anything to go by, Mizoram's Malsawmfela was perhaps the biggest crowd puller. The former junior India international does not look like the fittest player on the pitch, and initially drew some flak for it. However, the experienced forward played an integral role for Mizoram in their journey to the semi-finals. While he scored two, his impact on the pitch, sometimes from the number nine position, while sometimes from the number 10, was undeniable.

Whenever Mizoram were in trouble, it was their iconic number 77 that stepped up as a substitute and made the difference. Therefore, it was no surprise that by the time the Santosh Trophy had reached the knockout stage, most of the second half of Mizoram's matches would be strewn with calls from the galleries to bring Malsawmfela on. Even in the semi-final that they lost against Services, it was Malsawmfela who, in the last 20 minutes of the game, gave his side the attacking edge, ultimately earning a free-kick which he eventually scored in injury time; sadly for Malsawmfela and the Mizoram fans, it came too late.

Goa were perhaps one of the technically stronger sides in the tournament, and they truly won the hearts of the local fans in Arunachal Pradesh. Indeed, there were not many Goans in the stands, and yet, whenever they played, the chants from the crowd were in their favour. Such was their style of play that Goa, who had an 11-match unbeaten streak right until the summit clash, never depended on one particular player to score the goals. Necio Maristo Fernandes (five goals), Lloyd Cardozo (three goals), and Joshua D'Silva (three goals) were all prolific in their own ways. One player who really impressed for Goa, however, was Mahammed Faheez, whose trickery on the ball always kept the opposition defenders on their toes.

It was, however, a determined performance by Services that got them to their seventh Santosh Trophy title on March 9, 2024, Shafeel PP scoring the all-important winner.





Shafeel PP: The man who joins hands with the crème de la crème of Santosh Trophy

The right wing-back was the man of the hour as his full-throttle right footer brooked no defence to make all the difference

AIFF Media Team

When referee Lakshay blew the final whistle to signal the end of the 77th edition of the National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy in Itanagar on Saturday, Shafeel PP felt like a man who just flew over the cuckoo's nest.

Never before in his career had Shafeel experienced such attention; a host of photographers rushed towards the Services dugout to click him from the closest possible angle, his teammates on the bench were all running in to hug him, the 15,000-strong crowd in the stands was chanting his name.

And why shouldn't it be? After all, he was the man of the hour. The Services had just won the coveted Santosh Trophy, defeating favourites Goa, thanks to Shafeel's all-important goal in the 68th minute.

The 26-year-old defender had no idea that the goal in the final made him a member of a select club, which includes names like Tulsidas Balaram, PK Banerjee, Amjad Khan, Syed Latifuddin, Manas Bhattacharya, Mohammed Najeeb Raman Vijayan and Manvir Singh. All these players would be remembered in Indian Football history as the ones who scored the all-important goal in a Santosh Trophy final, the latest addition being jersey number 24 of the 2024 Services Santosh Trophy squad.

"Once the final whistle came, my mind went blank for a few minutes," the striker-turned-defender told the-aiff.com. "Memories came rushing back. Everything about how I grew up as a poor boy in Thrissur and have come all the way to become the hero in the National Championship final played like a film in my life," he said.

"I was born and brought up on the beaches of Thrissur. My father works as a helper in the vegetable market near our home on a temporary basis. My mother is a homemaker. We were poor. And we still are. I wasn't great at my studies. But I had football that I enjoyed from Day One and clutched to it as my dearest friend," Shafeel recalled.

He played local football and then played for the district. But Shafeel wanted more; he wanted to go higher with the ball on his right foot. One fine morning, young Shafeel took a bus to Bengaluru alone and appeared for trials at a Bangalore club.

"There was no looking back for me thereafter. I went on to play for Karnataka in the Santosh Trophy and then landed a job in the army at the ASC Centre in Bengaluru. Now I am a Havildar. I have a steady job, and I take care of my family expenses regularly," said a proud Shafeel, who has an elder brother and a married sister back in Kerala.

Right wing-back remains Shafeel's favourite position, though he played as a centre-back for Services in the Itanagar Santosh Trophy. "In Itanagar, I scored four goals in total, so I have a habit of scoring. In the final on Saturday, I received the ball from Rahul Ramakrishnan and as I lifted my head, I could see the gap. So, I decided to take the shot from a distance and it went in," said Shafeel with a laugh.

It was certainly the best and most important goal of his career, but Shafeel is looking for a bigger goal ahead. "Given an opportunity, I want to showcase my skills in the I-League, or ISL. The army has given me everything. They have given me stability in life, and the opportunity to play on a bigger stage. I want to play in professional leagues, provided I receive permission from my employers," said Shafeel, life-long fan of another Thrissur great, IM Vijayan.





Shooting Range

Santosh Trophy 2024



TARGET 2026





With a clear mindset, Blue Tigers eye maximum points against Afghanistan

Igor Stimac and his determined bunch of 25 players aim to defy the altitude of Abha, Saudi Arabia, and bring down Afghanistan to ground level

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

There are just a few days left for the March 2024 FIFA window, a crucial few days for the Blue Tigers, who will play two back-to-back FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 Joint Qualifiers Round 2 matches against Afghanistan.

India head coach Igor Stimac sounded optimistic about his side's chances as they get ready for their two matches against Afghanistan, the first of which will take place in Abha, Saudi Arabia on March 21 (March 22, 12:30 am IST), and in Guwahati on March 26 at 7 pm IST.

Speaking from the sidelines of the AFC Cup Inter-Zone Semi-final match between Odisha FC and Central Coast Mariners FC (Australia) at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar, Stimac said, "We will go there to try and win the game. We are not looking at any massive calculations right now. Once we all get there, we will start talking about how to win the game from the very first second."

India had begun their FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 Joint Qualification Round 2 campaign with a 1-0 victory against Kuwait in Kuwait City, before suffering a 0-3 loss at the hands of Qatar in Bhubaneswar. The Blue Tigers currently stand level on three points with Kuwait but have an inferior goal difference in Group A.

They will be looking to bring their performances back on track after the disappointments of the AFC Asian Cup 2023 in January, when India lost against Australia (0-2), Uzbekistan (0-3), and Syria (0-1) in Qatar. The India head coach has his priorities in place, however, stating that making it to Round 3 of the World Cup Qualifiers for the first time is the biggest aim for his side right now.

"We are not a club that can work with the players on a daily basis. If you speak about the Asian Cup, it was of course a disappointment, but mostly for those who were not following us regularly. The expectations were high without any base," said Stimac. "That's behind us, and I'm happy that we have more important things to do now. The focus is on getting from the second phase to the third phase of qualifying."

A top-two finish in their group in the qualifiers will guarantee progression to Round 3 of the qualifiers for the Blue Tigers, something that they have never achieved before; progression to Round 3 will also ensure direct qualification for AFC Asian Cup 2027.

Speaking about the away match against Afghanistan, Stimac said that the opponents have been doing everything within their abilities to win the games.

"Afghanistan did everything to make it difficult for us, which was expected. Choosing Abha as their home venue at 2,270 metres altitude was a clever decision," said Stimac. "Playing there requires great endurance."

"Whatever the case may be, we are going there with a clear mindset, and we're looking for the points," he said. "Most of our boys are in decent form at their clubs, and hopefully we can overcome all difficulties and find a way to manage the game in a positive way."

Whatever the situation may be, Stimac's wards are in no need of additional motivation, as they all share the same dream. "They all have the same dream, so we don't need to inject any motivation into them. We have never made it to Round 3 before, and if we do that, it will then give them new dreams, to qualify for the World Cup in the future," he said.





Blue Tigers leave for Saudi Arabia to play Afghanistan in World Cup Qualifiers

A 25-member Indian Senior Men's Team left for Abha, Saudi Arabia, on Friday, March 15, 2024, to play the away tie against Afghanistan in the Round 2 of the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup 2027 Preliminary Joint Qualification.

The Blue Tigers will play the away match against Afghanistan on March 21, 2024, in Abha (March 22, 12.30 am IST). India's home match against Afghanistan will be played at the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati on March 26, 2024.

India are currently tied on three points in Group A of the qualifiers, along with Kuwait, who are ahead on goal difference. The Blue Tigers defeated Kuwait (1-0) in Kuwait City in their opening match of the qualifiers, before losing to Qatar (0-3) in Bhubaneswar. Qatar currently lead the group with six points.

The squad:

Goalkeepers: Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Amrinder Singh, Vishal Kaith.

Defenders: Akash Mishra, Mehtab Singh, Rahul Bheke, Nikhil Poojary, Subhasish Bose, Anwar Ali, Amey Ranawade, Jay Gupta.

Midfielders: Anirudh Thapa, Brandon Fernandes, Liston Colaco, Mahesh Singh Naorem, Sahal Abdul Samad, Suresh Singh Wangjam, Jeakson Singh Thounaojam, Deepak Tangri, Lalengmawia Ralte, Imran Khan.

Forwards: Sunil Chhetri, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Manvir Singh, Vikram Partap Singh.



The cup that slipped away on the Mediterranean shores

A last-minute goal forced the Blue Tigresses to miss the boat in Turkish Women's Cup

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

It was so near, yet so far. The underlying feeling of dejection in the oft-used phrase very much unfolded at the Gold City Complex in Alanya, Turkey, last month when the Blue Tigresses raised hopes of winning their first-ever women's title outside the SAFF region only to finish runners-up.

A last-minute goal scored by Kosovo shattered Indian hearts, who, throughout the four-team round-robin Turkish Women's Cup, looked increasingly capable of walking away with the glittering trophy. All they needed was a victory against Kosovo in their last encounter. But one goal against them in the 90+2 minutes upset all calculations for Ashalata Devi and her teammates.

After the final whistle, when India head coach Chaoba Devi's wards were left truly disappointed by the narrow loss, it was heartening to see how the members of the Kosovo team spontaneously applauded the Indian girls and hugged each of them to uplift their spirits. After all, it's the display of sportsmanship that remains paramount, irrespective of victory or defeat. In the end, Kosovo celebrated with the Blue Tigresses, who held the runners-up cup. India's Manisha Kalyan was named the "Best Midfielder" of the tournament.

Despite the last match setback, India emerged as the runners-up with six points on the strength of their absorbing victories against Estonia (4-3) and Hong Kong (2-0). This achievement stands as the most impressive performance by the Blue Tigresses in their three appearances in the Turkish Women's Cup so far (2019, 2021, and 2024).

The Indian Senior Women's National team's last international engagement came in October 2023, when they played the Asian Games and the Olympic qualifiers in the same month. After this, the players returned to their respective clubs for the IWL.

The Turkish Women's Cup was played in the beautiful city of Alanya from February 19-27, 2024. The city is often praised for its blend of timeless beauty and new development.

The Gold City Sports Complex, the tournament venue, perfectly embodied this contrast. Nestled amidst the sun-drenched beaches of this tourist haven, the sports complex rests atop a hill, framed by the Taurus Mountains and the mesmerising blue hues of the Mediterranean Sea.

The city truly captivated the players with its beauty, and they thoroughly enjoyed their stay. During breaks, both players and coaching staff indulged in a 30-minute evening walk after training sessions, taking the opportunity to unwind, appreciate, and soak in the city's scenic charm.

Before departing for Turkey, they had a two-week training camp in Bengaluru. The team arrived in Turkey in optimal physical condition, ensuring that fitness was never a concern for any member of the squad.





During their 10-day stay in Alanya, the team conducted a total of five training sessions, complemented by morning stretching sessions. Coach Chaoba Devi expressed satisfaction with the team's fitness level and believed in their ability to perform well at the start of the tournament. This confidence was validated in the very first match. Manisha Kalyan's brace, along with goals from Indumathi Kathiresan and Pyari Xaxa, secured a 4-3 victory against Estonia, setting a promising tone for the team's campaign.

In the second match against Hong Kong, the team faced a different scenario. Goals from Anju Tamang and Soumya Guguloth ensured another three points with a 2-0 victory. According to the coach, although they could have scored more to maintain a flawless head-to-head calculation, the team's performance was praiseworthy. Following the victory, Soumya dedicated her goal to her parents, marking the highlight of the day.

Before their final game, during the team meeting, everyone was energetic and pumped up. They were motivated and confident, aiming to secure another victory on European soil and create history. The fates, however, had different plans.

The fact that the girls played at the international level after many months, got exposure, and performed well was a positive sight for Indian women's football. There were few ifs and buts attached to India's performance – the joy of taking the title home would have washed away many of them. But sadly, it was not to be.



Manisha Kalyan adjudged Best Midfielder in Turkish Women's Cup

While disappointed at missing out on the title, the midfielder picked up an individual award, and is raring for more

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

When Manisha Kalyan walked up to receive the award of "Best Midfielder of the Tournament" at the end of India's Turkish Women's Cup campaign, the pain of disappointment for being pipped to the title was writ large on her face. She quietly but gracefully accepted the award and returned to her teammates.

Later, as the Indian Senior Women's Team were returning to the hotel with the runners-up trophy after the narrow 0-1 defeat against Kosovo, Manisha opened up a bit. The first thing the former AIFF Player of the Year said was that the award wouldn't have come without the active support of her teammates in the Blue Tigresses squad.

"I feel happy that I received the best midfielder trophy. What made me happier was that I could help my team reach this far and finish as runners-up. But it isn't an individual triumph for me; I wouldn't have achieved this without the help of my teammates," she said.

Manisha felt sad that India had to surrender three points on the pitch against Kosovo despite putting up a great fight. "We played well in the match. We created enough opportunities, but unfortunately, we couldn't convert them into goals. It was also a learning process for us. We have so many positives to take away from this match. We will use this valuable experience in our next endeavour," she said.



Head coach Langam Chaoba Devi aired similar views on the match against Kosovo that confirmed India's second place in the four-team competition.

Overall, my girls played well, they fought all out. But we couldn't sustain it in the last few seconds when they scored the winner. The Kosovo number seven (Erëleta Memeti) is a very good dribbler, something we discussed in the meeting on the eve of the match. But as was the situation, she scored the only goal of the match," said a disappointed coach.

"We had so many chances to score, but our girls were not able to convert. Yet, this runners-up title is a big thing because Kosovo are a strong side. All the credit goes to the girls because they played fantastic football throughout the tournament and had a good game today," said Chaoba, herself a former India defender.



Shooting Range

Turkish Women's Cup



TARGET 2026







The first step of a long journey for the India U16 girls

Despite missing out on the SAFF U16 Women's Championship title, the Young Tigresses have reasons to be proud and look forward to bigger battles in the future

AKHIL RAWAT

It ended in heartbreak for the Young Tigresses at the SAFF U16 Women's Championship final in Nepal on Sunday. Penalties are cruel, and the Indian U16 girls learned it the hard way. In their first foray on the international stage, they only had eyes for the trophy, but it wasn't to be.

Everyone was left numb as the Bangladesh custodian saved the fifth penalty. Bonifilia Shullai, Alena Devi and Divyani Linda, the three who couldn't convert their spot-kicks, were absolutely inconsolable, feeling as if they had let the nation down. But that was not the case. They had been one of India's finest performers throughout the tournament. The tears in the Indian dugout conveyed how much the young dreamers wanted to bring the trophy home.

With an average age of just 13.7 years and no prior international experience except captain Shveta Rani, this batch was one of the youngest to ever represent India in any competition. At such an early age, you want players to play as much as possible. The earlier you start, the more time you get to realise your full potential. Those were the fundamentals with which this group of players was selected for the tournament, as explained by head coach Biby Thomas.

The young guns displayed maturity beyond their years. Yes, they committed mistakes. But there was never any blame game or finger-pointing. Everyone supported and trusted each other. They came from all corners of the country but were always on the same wavelength. They won as a team and lost as a team. Always united in sisterhood. Some may say the shoulders were too young for such responsibility. But their hearts certainly weren't. These girls will enter the realm of professional football in the coming years, and such an experience must have surely taught them plenty.

Silver linings are always there. In the four matches, 20 out of the 23 players got minutes on the pitch. India's 19 goals were netted by nine different players, and a further three assisted, which means more than half of the squad registered a goal contribution. There were some memorable goals. Talk about Pearl Fernandes' stunning curler against Bhutan on the opening day and Anushka Kumari's clinical finish with her weaker left foot in the final. Not to mention the supreme vision from Bonifilia to assist her with a perfect over-the-top delivery. Gurleen Kaur made headlines as she debuted at the age of just 12. Six days later, she scored two and assisted two in the 10-0 thrashing of Nepal. A star in the making.

But the Indian who stole the show was 13-year-old Anushka Kumari, who bagged the tournament top-scorer award with six strikes. She scored in every single match. Despite not operating as an out-and-out striker, her diminutive figure seemed to always be at the end of every Indian attack. Left foot, right foot, header, long range, close range, Anushka found the net in every way possible. Such was her impact that Bangladesh head coach Saiful Bari Titu walked to the Indian dugout after the final and personally complimented the Indian number nine.

In sports, only results matter in the end. Unfortunately, those didn't go India's way. But this tournament was never only about results for this batch of players. It was also about developing as a player and as a person. It's not the biggest defeat of their careers, and even if they had won, it wouldn't have been the biggest victory either. Because these Young Tigresses will have many tougher and more meaningful battles to fight in the future. This was only the beginning of their journey.





Shveta Rani, the latest dreamer from Alakhpura

The Indian U16 women's team captain is following in the footsteps of her inspiration, Sanju Yadav, on the left flank

AKHIL RAWAT

It's no secret that over the last few years, Alakhpura, a small village in the Bhiwani district of Haryana, has made its name synonymous with women's football. Indian senior women's team regulars Sanju Yadav and Ritu Rani are household names, inspiring and making hundreds of young girls dream in a state where football is far from a popular sport. One of those is Shveta Rani, captain of the Indian U16 women's team which finished runners-up at the SAFF U16 Women's Championship, whose dreams are starting to take flight.

Shveta is a left winger, so obviously, Sanju Yadav had to be the one she looks up to. "My big inspiration is Sanju didi," the 15-year-old prompted in a heartbeat when asked. "I also like Manisha Kalyan, since we play in the same position, and Anju Tamang. Shilky Devi too, with how her career has progressed - from an U17 player to now being a regular with the senior team."

But Shveta would not be one of those dreamers had it not been for her father, who made her play the sport. "I didn't develop an interest in football on my own. It was my father who used to push me to go and play with the village kids on the ground in the evenings. I was 12 years old. I didn't like it initially, but he continued to urge me daily. Gradually, I got the hang of it, and that's how I started playing," she explained.

But one thing she never doubted about was her playing position. Left wing. "I have been playing on the left since I started," she said. Shveta was selected to represent her state and also played in the U17 Subroto Cup for the Government Senior Secondary School, Alakhpura, in 2022. The following year would be her breakthrough year. She played in the Junior Girls National Football Championship Tier 1, scoring three goals for Haryana. Internationally, she was selected in the Indian U17 squad which toured Jordan and subsequently played the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 1 in Kyrgyzstan. From being one of the youngest in that batch, she is now one of the most experienced in the current U16 batch.

That's why she was handed the captain's armband by head coach Biby Thomas. With players as young as 12 and 13 years old in the team, there's more responsibility on the pitch on Shveta's shoulders. She demonstrated that quite well during the SAFF U16 Women's Championship, scoring India's first goal in the 7-0 thrashing of Bhutan in the tournament opener, and also converting the first penalty in the final shoot-out.

Shveta is a physical winger, with good ball control and positional sense. But her biggest asset is likely her crossing ability. She is the primary set-piece taker of the team and bagged two assists in the tournament with her inswinging corners.

Unfortunately, it wasn't to be for Shveta and the Young Tigresses as they fell short in the penalty shoot-out in the final. But she's only getting started. Her first silverware for the national team will have to wait a bit, but the dreamer from Alakhpura cannot wait for the next challenge.





Punjab's Gurleen Kaur rises to wear India blue at 12

Not even a teenager yet, the dazzling young forward registered two goals and two assists at the SAFF U16 Women's Championship

AKHIL RAWAT

What were you doing when you were 12? Gurleen Kaur will be able to say that she was scoring goals for the nation in international football. At 12 years and 267 days of age, she made her India debut, coming on in the final few minutes of Friday's SAFF U16 Women's Championship win over Bhutan in Nepal.

"I wasn't nervous at all," the young striker did not hesitate to confirm. "My parents watched my debut. They told me on the phone that they are proud to see me playing for the country."

Gurleen is not even a teenager, and yet she's rubbing shoulders with girls three to four years older than her. It's not usual to have such young players in what is already the youngest age-group national team. But there are no two ways about it – she is good enough to be here, affirmed head coach Biby Thomas. A disciplined and calm figure not just on, but off the training pitch too.

"Gurleen is intelligent with the ball and always tries to make the best use of possession, better than many 16-year-olds. If we provide her the right path now, she will have a big future ahead and can become a great striker. She is very sensible, mature and confident for her age. With every minute she plays, she will grow into a better player," opined Thomas.

"I love playing as a striker. I like shooting and scoring goals, but I also want to help my team, so I like to play a passing game too. My inspiration is Sunil Chhetri. Internationally, I like Cristiano Ronaldo," said Gurleen, a seventh-class student from Mallah, a village in the Ludhiana district of Punjab. She may be young, but her relationship with the ball goes back many years, which is perhaps what makes her a special talent.

"I began playing when I was five. My father wanted me to play sports. I started with football for a year, then switched to boxing, but it didn't generate my interest, so I came back to football. I played in an academy in Chakar, a village just three kilometres from my home," she shared.

Gurleen was selected for the Ludhiana district team and subsequently, the Punjab state team for the Sub Junior Girls National Football Championship Tier 1 held in Amritsar last year, where she scored three goals. That's when she caught the eyes of the national team scouts and earned her place in the current Indian U16 batch. Against Nepal, she delivered a player-of-the-match performance with two goals and two assists. She could've even had a hat-trick but unselfishly decided to set up Gurnaz Kaur, who scored her first India goal with a fine first-time finish.

Goalkeeper coach Jasmeet Singh, who also hails from Punjab, shared how times are changing now in the state with regards to the women's game.

"Women's football is growing rapidly in Punjab. You can find girls playing football in villages across the state. It's great to see such a talent emerging from Punjab, especially a girl. Manisha Kalyan has played an important role in creating a pathway and inspiring girls in the state. Parents are more aware now. They don't differentiate between boys and girls and are actively encouraging girls to play football," said Jasmeet.







India U23s to play two friendlies against Malaysia

The Indian U23 men's team is set to travel to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to play two friendly matches against Malaysia U23 on March 22 and 25, falling under the FIFA international match window.

Former India international and current NorthEast United FC assistant coach Naushad Moosa has been appointed as the head coach of the India U23 men's team. Noel Wilson is the assistant coach, while Dipankar Choudhury is the goalkeeper coach of the team.

A list of 26 probables for the camp was announced by Moosa on Thursday, March 14. The camp began on March 15 in New Delhi following which the final squad of 23 players will travel to Kuala Lumpur on March 20.

List of 26 probables for India U23 men's team camp:

Goalkeepers: Arsh Anwer Shaikh, Prabhsukhan Singh Gill, Vishal Yadav

Defenders: Bikash Yumnam, Chingambam Shivaldo Singh, Hormipam Ruivah, Narender, Robin Yadav, Sandip Mandi

Midfielders: Abhishek Suryavanshi, Brison Fernandes, Mark Zothanpuia, Mohammed Aimen, Phijam Sanathoi Meetei, Thoiba Singh Moirangthem, Vibin Mohanan

Forwards: Abdul Rabeeh, Gurkirat Singh, Irfan Yadwad, Isak Vanlalruatfela, Khumanthem Nynthoinganba Meetei, Mohammed Sanan, Parthib Sundar Gogoi, Samir Murmu, Sivasakthi Narayanan, Vishnu Puthiya Valappill

Head coach: Naushad Moosa

IWL 2 2023-24

GROUP A – Kokrajhar SAI STC (Assam)

SAI FOOTBALL CLUB (ASSAM)
MUMBAI KNIGHTS FC (MAHARASHTRA)
AIPL FC (BIHAR)
PUDHUVAI UNICORNS (PONDICHERRY)
GARHWAL UNITED FC (DELHI)

Group B – Amal Dutta Krirangan (West Bengal)

SREEBHUMI FC (WEST BENGAL)
NITA FA (ODISHA)
CASA BARWANI SOCCER CLUB (MADHYA PRADESH)
PUNE KRIDA PRABHODHINI ACADEMY (MAHARASHTRA)
MGM AMBUSH CLUB (CHHATTISGARH)

Group C – Duler Stadium, Mapusa (Goa)

FC TUEM (GOA)
SAG FA (GUJARAT)
KHAD FC (HIMACHAL PRADESH)
CITY BAHADURGARH FC (HARYANA)
CELTIC QUEENS FC (PONDICHERRY)



AIFF announces U20 Men's NFC; to be held in Chhattisgarh

All India Football Federation (AIFF), on Thursday, February 29, 2024, announced the commencement of the Men's National Football Championship (NFC) for Under 20.

The newest age competition in AIFF's calendar for the year 2023-24 will start in April and be known as 'Swami Vivekananda U20 National Football Championship'. The championship will be held at the sprawling Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama in Narainpur, Chhattisgarh having an in-house full-fledged football pitch, training facilities and residential area.

Following the discontinuation of U21 competition during covid, AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, last July, had expressed the urgent need to restart the competition in senior boys' category to fill in the existing void at this level.

Mr. Kalyan Chaubey said, "I'm pleased to see the Under 20 NFC competition been brought back into our football calendar this year, thus bridging a wide gap which was in existence last few years in our youth structure pyramid between U17 Youth League to Santosh Trophy.

"We felt the need to have the competition in Under 20, to put the building blocks in place for our footballers' gradual progression into senior competitions and to create a pipeline for Asian Games U23 selection. The U20 group competition is very crucial in a player's life cycle to step into professional career. With the U20 competition back in recognition, the youth structure slabs from Sub Junior to Santosh Trophy gets completed," added Mr. Chaubey.

As a next step, AIFF will invite all its State member associations for participation in the U20 NFC.



AIFF Grassroots Awards 2023 announced

The All India Football Federation is pleased to announce that it is taking a significant step towards the upliftment of grassroots football across the nation.

To that extent, the Federation has introduced a first of its kind AIFF Grassroots Awards 2023 to acknowledge and appreciate the entities that have made exceptional contributions at the grassroots level.

The awards have been divided into three categories – Stakeholders, Event Operations, and Special Initiatives. A Presidential Award will also be accorded to five individuals for their service to grassroots football over the years. All entities that applied for the awards were thoroughly examined by the Federation before deciding the final winners, who will also be eligible for nomination to the upcoming AFC Grassroots Awards 2023.

Below are the list of AIFF Grassroots Award winners from 2023.

STAKEHOLDERS:

Best School: Ryan Group of Schools, Maharashtra
Best Grassroots Academy: Khelum Foundation, Sikkim
Best Professional Academy: Bengaluru FC, Karnataka
Best State FA: Mizoram Football Association

EVENT OPERATIONS:

Best Engagement: Young Star FC, Haryana
Best Event Organisation: Momin FC, Maharashtra
Best Volunteer Programme: Oscar Foundation, Maharashtra
Best Activity Programme: Warming Up Kids, West Bengal

SPECIAL INITIATIVES:

Best Kindergarten Initiatives: Great Goals FC, Tamil Nadu
Best Social Initiative: Slum Soccer, Maharashtra
Best Women's Initiative: Naandi Foundation
Best Disability Initiative: FC Goa
Best Rural Development Programme: Tata Steel Foundation, Jharkhand
Best Legacy Programme: Anantapur Sports Academy, Andhra Pradesh
President's Awards: Mr. Vishal Vaza (Bhavnagar FA, Gujarat), Mr. Nathaniel D'Costa (FC Goa), Mr. Sai Adithya Saravanan (First Kick School of Soccer), Mr. Nikolaos Topolitis (Punjab FC), Mr. Ganesh Prabhu (Chennaiyin FC).



Goa to host next Beach Soccer National Championship

The All India Football Federation's Beach Soccer Committee held a meeting via video conferencing on Monday, March 4, 2024.

The meeting was chaired by Mr. Ganapati Palguna, and attended by Acting Secretary General Mr. M. Satyanarayan, Deputy Chairperson Mr. Jignesh Patil, and members Mr. S. Dhanasegar, Mr. K. Nizamuddin, Mr. Sanjay Meshack, and Mr. Upen Patel.

The Committee, in its first order of the day, appreciated the Goa Football Association for stepping up to host the next Beach Soccer National Championships.

Requests had come in from various Member Associations of the AIFF that the Federation provide some aid for them to acquire Beach Soccer equipment, which can be difficult to obtain. Taking this into consideration, the Committee suggested that the Federation reserve a part of its budget to not only help the various State FAs garner Beach Soccer-specific equipment, but also to train referees and coaches across the country about the game.

The Beach Soccer Committee also suggested that the various states, especially those in the coastal areas, be encouraged to hold their own Beach Soccer competitions to further spread the game across the country.



Senior Women's NFC named Rajmata Jijabai Maharaja National Football Championship

The AIFF Competitions Committee met virtually on Monday, March 4, 2024, to discuss various issues, including the AIFF calendar for the 2024-25 season.

Mr. Anilkumar Prabhakar chaired the meeting, which was attended by the AIFF Secretary General Mr. Satyanarayan M., Competitions Committee Deputy Chairperson Mr. K. Neibou Sekhose, and members Mr. Ajit Banerjee, Mr. Hiren Gogoi, Mr. Mohammed Shahid, and Mr. Mohammed Ali K.

The Committee, in its first order of the day, suggested that the Senior Women's National Football Championship be renamed the Rajmata Jijabaisaheb Maharaj National Football Championship, as per the decision of the Executive Committee. Subsequently, the Committee also agreed with the suggestion that the U-20 NFC be named the Swami Vivekananda U-20 National Football Championship.

The Committee appreciated the Indian Football Association (West Bengal) for hosting the Final Rounds of the Rajmata Jijabaisaheb Maharaj Senior Women's NFC, which is tentatively set to begin in the second week of April. The Competitions Committee also suggested the approval of the calendar presented to it by the Federation, which charted out the various competitions and their tentative windows.

The matter of various teams' last-minute withdrawal from the Group Stages of the different NFCs was also discussed by the members of the Committee. It was recommended that the Members Associations that pull their teams out of a competition after confirming their participation would have to serve a one-year suspension from the tournament, and have to pay a fine or ₹ 1 lakh.



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