



VISION 2047

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**U20 MEN'S NFC
COULD BE A
GAME-CHANGER**

**ODISHA FC,
MOHAMMEDAN SPORTING
EMERGE CHAMPS**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF



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President's Note

Swami Vivekananda U20 Men's NFC could be a game-changer

Kalyan Chaubey

The Swami Vivekananda U20 Men's National Football Championship, which kicked off in Narainpur, Chhattisgarh, recently, has been launched by the All India Football Federation after giving the project careful thought. It is a double-edged advantage for the progress of the game; a U20 NFC will not only help the upcoming youngsters find the right platform to showcase their skills at the national level but will also create a pool of players, who will remain prepared for bigger international commitments like the Olympic qualifiers or the Asian Games.

If we look back to the recent past, we will find that in the Asian circuit, India have often done well at the U16 and Senior levels. However, our performance chart in the U19 and U23 tournaments had never been as impressive as the other two. Over the years, India have mainly participated in two U23 tournaments, the Olympic Qualifiers and the Asian Games. Unfortunately, in both, we did not play to our potential recently.

In the last two editions of the Olympic Qualifiers, India could not cross the first round hurdle. On both occasions, the federation had to work extra hard to raise the U23 sides. Since there was no benchmark available, it was not easy to pick up the right bunch of players and train them properly on the eve of the campaign. Naturally, the result did not go the expected way. The story often got repeated during the Asian Games, too.

So, once the new committee took over, the plan was to start a national-level tournament, which could truly be the launching pad for finding the right talents for the future U23 teams. Hence, we have started this tournament; I have a strong feeling that it could be a



game-changer and will help everyone move in the right direction when the time comes to select the squad for the next Asian Games in 2026.

But, as we say, it is easier said than done. The project, I must say, would not have been successful without the active help of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narainpur, Chhattisgarh. They have done a yeoman service to football by kindly allowing us to host the five-week-long tournament at their excellent facilities in Narainpur. As the President of the AIFF, I remain indebted to them on behalf of the entire federation. Ramakrishna Mission and its management are true lovers of football and their contribution can never be forgotten.

We feel proud as well as humble to name the U20 Men's National Championship after Swami Vivekananda, one of India's greatest sons. Swamiji once called upon the youngsters to play the game of football. He once famously



said: "Be strong, my young friends, that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of the Gita. These are bold words, but I have to say them, for I love you. I know where the shoe pinches. I have gained a little experience. You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger."

Coming back to the current Swami Vivekananda U20 Men's NFC, I once again say with conviction that the talents who would emerge from this championship are going to play important roles on the national platform in the near future. Let the next continental level U23 meet come, we all should be able to see the difference.



Mohammedan Sporting roar and stir the soul after 27 years of wait

The Black and White fury fades away dozen other I-League challengers

I-League 2023-24 was no Punic War for Mohammedan Sporting; it was a simple ball game that demanded remarkable consistency in a 24-match streak. Yet for the 133-year-old iconic Kolkata club, winning the title was like Hannibal Barca and his Carthaginian army's improbable five-month journey across the snow-ridden Alps.

The long whistle at the end of the match against Shillong Lajong FC at the SSA Stadium in Shillong on Saturday, April 6, 2024, was much more than the curtain coming down on a 90-minute affair for Mohammedan Sporting. It was the watershed moment of a seemingly endless wait, 27 years to be exact, to wear a crown that they longed dearly for but remained elusive over the years.

Ever since the National Football League (NFL) kicked off in the 1996-97 season and was renamed the I-League in 2007-8, Mohammedan Sporting, the winners of every major domestic title multiple times, continued to exist more like outsiders in this pan-India league.

A rollercoaster ride would perhaps be an appropriate way to describe the journey of Mohammedan Sporting Club in the last decade. At the end of the 2013-14 season, the Black and White Brigade were relegated from the I-League. Ten years down the line, they will say goodbye to the I-League again, but this time after clearing their path to the Indian Super League, subject to fulfilling the club licensing criteria.

What they're living in right now is the crest of their rollercoaster ride. After spiralling into near obscurity, spending season after season labouring in the I-League 2nd Division following their relegation, the Black and White side of Kolkata will be battling among the big boys again. The three consecutive Calcutta Football League titles between 2021 and 2023, which ended their 40-year wait for local dominance, were merely a trailer for bigger things to come. And they have come now, as Mohammedan Sporting added another feather to the cap of a city which lives and breathes football.

This season, the Black and White Brigade were certainly no gatecrashers. They stormed the finish line with a wonderful degree of steadiness, leaving their other 12 rivals behind by a lengthy distance. They bagged the trophy with a round to spare; 15 wins, seven draws and only two defeats, the second one coming in their last game against Delhi FC after the title was wrapped up and their minds were only on the party which was to follow. The points table is a testimony of the Kolkata side's dominance. What we have just witnessed was one of the most authoritative I-League campaigns of all time. From start to finish, Andrey Chernyshov's side never lowered their guard, not for a moment.

"Yes, it is the end of a long wait," said Mr. Dipak Singh, the Chairperson of the Mohammedan Sporting Board of Directors. "I feel proud because we planned to raise a team with young and talented Indian footballers, along with capable and effective foreign recruits.

"We didn't believe in having an exorbitant budget or going on an expensive buying spree in the transfer market. We looked for a balanced side with solid bench strength. The result is in front of you."

This I-League has seen Mohammedan Sporting introduce a bunch of Indian players, who were hardly known beyond a restricted circle, but now, at the end of the season, are looked upon with respect in the Indian football fraternity.

No one cared much when Padam Chettri switched over from Mumbai Kenkre FC, the team who twice finished at the bottom of the I-League last term. But under the tutelage of Andrey Chernyshov, the custodian became one of the trump cards of Mohammedan Sporting, who owe many of their points to Chettri.



Not far behind are players like forward David Lalhlansanga, midfielder Sagolsem Bikash Singh or Lalremsanga Fanai. They came from Aizawl FC, TRAU FC or Rajasthan United, rather unnoticed, only to play major roles in Mohammedan Sporting's maiden I-League triumph.

The champions didn't go for fashionable foreign recruits either. Argentine forward Alexis Gomez and Uzbek midfielder Mirjalol Kasimov were earlier plying their trade at Sudeva Delhi FC and NEROCA FC, respectively. Their top-scorer Eddie Hernández had plied his trade in his native Honduran league for the last four years before switching continents and dominating the forward line for Mohammedan Sporting. In the end, it has been proven beyond doubt that they are no mean operators; their contributions to Mohammedan Sporting's triumph will be written in golden letters.

The head coach, Andrey Chernyshov, a Russian, was undoubtedly a key factor behind the club's title-winning performance. A reputed centre-back of his time, his second stint with the Maidan outfit has proved fruitful; he has achieved something that many of his celebrated predecessors could not. He has helped one of India's most popular clubs get promoted to the Indian Super League; a few million more fans will, for sure, join Indian football's super show next season.

In the last game against Delhi FC at the Vivekananda Yuba Bharati Krirangan, 25 thousand Mohammedan Sporting supporters attended the trophy celebrations. Dancing and drumming and cheering in the stands. On the pitch, until the champions stage was being set up, the players went on a victory lap around the stadium. Argentina, Honduras, Ghana, Russia, Uzbekistan and India - with flags from all across the world draped around their bodies, it showed that the celebrations weren't just limited to Kolkata and India.

The largest cheer of the night was reserved for the crowning moment, as Mohammedan Sporting captains Samad Ali Mallick, Zodingliana Ralte and Joseph Adjei hoisted the coveted I-League trophy into the Kolkata sky. Now begins the next chapter in the history of this 133-year-old club.



Return to the Roots: Rinzuala leaves his mark in the I-League scoring charts

The Mizo youngster etches his name in history while surpassing the I-League goalscoring records of many legends of Indian Football



SOU MO GHOSH

It is rare to see an Indian forward with double figures in the scorers' charts in the ISL or I-League. Only twice in the last 10 seasons have Indian players scored double digits in the I-League – Sunil Chhetri's 14 goals in Bengaluru FC's title-winning season in 2013-14, and Bidyashagar Singh's 12 goals in TRAU FC's title challenge (they finished third) in 2020-21.

The 2023-24 season of the I-League, however, has brought forth a fledgling forward, a 23-year-old, who has surpassed those that have come before him. Fondly called Rinzuala by those around him, the Aizawl FC forward has already netted 15 goals from 20 appearances in his debut season.

Rinzuala has already surpassed the likes of Sunil Chhetri, Bhaichung Bhutia (14 goals in 1996-97), Jeje Lalpekhlua (12 goals in 2010-11) in terms of the number of goals scored in a season. The 23-year-old finished third in the I-League 2023-24 top scorers' list with 15 goals to his name -- Alejandro Sanchez Lopez of Gokulam Kerala (19) and Richardson Kwaku Denzel of Rajasthan United (16) are the only two players to have scored more than Rinzuala. Unfortunately, the Aizawl FC forward did not get the opportunity to play in his side's last two matches against NEROCA FC and TRAU FC, as the games were called off due to unavoidable reasons.



“I never thought I’d score so many goals when I joined Aizawl at the start of the season. My personal aim was to score maybe five or six. I did not even think that I would get to start so many matches,” he laughed. “But the atmosphere here at Aizawl is very friendly. We all feel at home here, because all of us are like friends.”

Like all forwards, Lalrinzuala also had a lean spell in the middle of the season, when a minor injury meant that he did not score for five games. However, the mid-season break gave him time to recover, and Rinzuala netted in every game in March.

DETERMINATION AGAINST ALL ODDS

Rinzuala had started his footballing journey in the streets of Serchhip, a small town in Mizoram, where he honed his core skills. He played in the Subroto Cup, before being scouted by the Bengaluru FC academy, which he represented at the U-16 and U-18 levels. However, just when it looked like the young forward could launch his career, tragedy struck – twice.

His father, a driver, passed away in 2016, taking away the sole breadwinner from his family before his elder brother died in an accident the following year.

Rinzuala’s woes would not end just there, as he suffered an Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) in 2018, an injury that took him 11 months to recover from.

“It was a very difficult period for me, we were all emotionally down. My mother started a chicken farm after that, and that has sustained our family since,” said Rinzuala. “As for my injury, it took me a long time to get back to playing football. It was an uncertain period, but I’m happy that I’ve put that past me now. I don’t like to dwell much on it nowadays. It’s better to keep looking forward.”

Gokulam Kerala came calling for Rinzuala, and although he played for the club for three seasons, he mostly operated in the reserve team. Just when things did not seem to be going according to plan, Rinzuala decided to take a step back and move back home, when he joined Chhinga Veng to play in the Mizoram Premier League in 2022.

“It was a decision that I felt I had to take. Things were not working out for me, and I was not getting to play as much. Also, the situation at home was not that great, so I needed the change in my career, I needed to come back home and start afresh,” said Rinzuala.

After a good season in the MPL later, the young forward was snapped up by Aizawl FC to play in the I-League. “It was a good moment to finally make it to the I-League. I can now provide for my family, which is the most important thing for me,” he said. “I also have the added advantage of playing professionally from home. I think coming back here has helped me a lot. It helped take my mind away from other things, and now I can focus on football. I am much calmer now, than what I was a few years back.”

As the 23-year-old looks to end the season as the top scorer in the I-League, he has his eyes set on the national colours. “Right now, I think the most important thing is for me to make it to the National Team. I know that’s still some distance away, but that’s where I want to be.”





Shooting Range

I-league 2023-24





Odisha FC: The newly-crowned queens of Indian women's football

Having lost out in the quarterfinals in their debut season, the club's consistency and durability shone through as they clinched the IWL title

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Odisha FC Women had a dream to chase when the club was formed 20 months ago. And for dreamers, they knew, hard facts are never an obstacle. So, they didn't let the dream fly away and pursued it with more conviction.

The results are here for everyone to see. Odisha FC, one of the latest additions to the Indian women's football circuit, have outshined their competitors to clinch the Indian Women's League (IWL) title in the 2023-24 season.

In the concluding match of the league on March 24, 2024, Odisha FC clinched the title in style with an impressive 6-0 win over Kickstart FC at the Kalinga Stadium, Bhubaneswar. With this victory, they dethroned defending champions Gokulam FC, who were known as the undisputed leaders of Indian women's football.

Odisha FC Women, formed in 2022, earned the top spot with 31 points from 12 matches, which put them two points ahead of their closest competitors, Gokulam Kerala FC. This title holds immense significance for Odisha FC as it earns them the opportunity to represent India at the inaugural AFC Women's Champions League.

Throughout the season, Odisha displayed remarkable consistency in both attack and defence. They scored 31 goals in 12 matches and conceded only four. India International Pyari Xaxa emerged as the top scorer for the team, and joint second in the league, netting eight goals, while Win Theingi Tun from Myanmar contributed seven goals. Their biggest support in the midfield came from India International and captain Indumathi Kathiresan, who played a pivotal role in the team's success.

Shreya Hooda, another member of the National Team, and a top contender for the Golden Glove award this season, showcasing her exceptional talent as the number one goalkeeper for Odisha FC. She conceded only four goals throughout the season, securing an impressive nine clean sheets in 12 matches.

"I am so happy to come up with a good performance this season. I want to thank my coaches, support staff, teammates and especially Odisha FC for believing in me. I am grateful to all for this opportunity this season and it all happened because of my team. I want to dedicate this award to my defenders," Shreya said.

"The numbers (about conceding fewer goals) do matter to me because when I consistently perform well for my club, it gradually impacts my performance in the National Team. Then, handling situations becomes less difficult." Shreya told the-aiff.com.

While players rightly steal the limelight when the team win matches or bag a title, it is important not to overlook the contribution of the coach. In Odisha FC's case, it is Crispin Chettri, the head coach, who remained the backbone of the team throughout the season and planned his strategies meticulously.





“Well, it’s a massive achievement for both the club and me. I have been after this trophy for three years,” Chettri said. “I told my players to have self-belief and behave like champions. I had this written in the dressing room permanently,” he added.

“We were brilliant throughout the season. Yes, we suffered early in the season because of injuries to Sweetie (Devi) and Jasoda (Munda). But the players who replaced them showed desire, character and hunger to excel, and now here we are. The state of Odisha had an overall good year. We won the gold medal in the National Games and now we have won the IWL. I think we have created a path for all players,” Chhetri added.

The Bhubaneswar-based team appointed Crispin Chettri, an A-licensed coach and former India U19 and Mohun Bagan player, as their first head coach for the women’s team. Chettri was the coach of SETHU FC, who finished runners-up in the previous edition of the IWL.

“I think guiding Sethu FC was more challenging than this year because I had young, promising players and I was new to women’s football. So SETHU was a great learning platform. In Odisha FC, I knew about the vision of the owners and we had a project. Though last year we didn’t achieve much, but as a new club, we grew with the passing year. So this year, we had more character in the dressing room.

“I think to be the champions, you need character more than quality, especially in women’s football. We need to create a team bond, having the same objective for all players and staff and making players learn rather than just coaching,” he said.

This year, the Indian Women’s League adopted a new format, the home-and-away structure, spanning over three months. Coach Crispin regards this format as the most beneficial change and said, “I think this is the best way to move forward in women’s football. It gives time for coaches to plan accordingly for each match and also gives players proper recovery time. Most importantly, in this system, players pick up the ability to adapt to different playing conditions quickly. It helps to shape the mentality of players when they go on National team duty.”



IWL 2023-24 Roll of Honours announced

The IWL saw one familiar face and several new ones grab the individual awards for the season

Indumathi Kathiresan has once again made her way into the honours list of the best individual players in the Indian Women's League (IWL). The seasoned international, who plays for Odisha FC in the IWL, has been named the "Best Midfielder" in the just-concluded IWL 2023-24 for her exemplary performance throughout the season.

Last season, Indumathi, then playing for Gokulam Kerala FC, was declared the best player. On Thursday, the talented midfielder was ecstatic upon hearing the news of her winning the award.

"I am extremely happy to win the award. But it is not an individual achievement. I wouldn't have achieved it without the help of my teammates and coaches. We are like a family in Odisha FC. What gives me more pleasure is that I am the captain of Odisha FC this season," she said.

"I think I did my job well as the captain. As the leader and one of the senior players, it was my duty to play well and guide the juniors. This season, we had lots of junior players. They might look at me as a role model and do well in the future. There lies my success," she said.

Indumathi said there were a few challenges in the season. "The most challenging was when two key players suffered an injury. Early in the season, players like Sweety (Devi) and Jasoda (Munda) got injured, but we were able to overcome the difficulties because of having good substitutes," she said.

IWL 2023-24 awards:

Winners: Odisha FC (Rs 10,00,000)

Runners-up: Gokulam Kerala FC (Rs 5,00,000)

Best Match Organisation: Sports Odisha (Rs 50,000)

Participating Club with The Best Media Operations: Odisha FC (Rs 50,000)

Best Striker (13 goals): Fazila Ikwaput – Gokulam Kerala FC (Rs 50,000)

Best Goalkeeper: Shreya Hooda – Odisha FC (Rs 50,000)

Best Defender: Hemam Shilky Devi – Gokulam Kerala FC (Rs 50,000)

Best Midfielder: Indumathi Kathiresan – Odisha FC (Rs 50,000)





Twenty years at the top: Sunil Chhetri looks back at his implausible voyage

India's talismanic striker sets a new milestone while maintaining an inspirational work ethic and desire to rival younger players

SOUMO GHOSH & AKHIL RAWAT

Sunil Chhetri was born for milestones. Having played his first International in 2005, he has so far earned 150 international caps, 94 goals and 11 trophies for the nation. [The-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com) caught up with the captain, leader, and legend, who became just the 41st player in football history to have represented their nation in 150 international matches, to look back on his glorious career.

Tell us about your journey with the National Team so far.

SC: When I started, it never occurred to me that I could play for the country one day. In fact, even a few days back, I was not aware that I was on the verge of such a record. When you pause and think about it, it's an unbelievable feat. I'm very fortunate, extremely thankful, and highly privileged to be in this state. I think I'm the only one to play 150 games for the country in India. I'm really fortunate that I got such an opportunity.



When you were initially scouted in the Subroto Cup and the Delhi league, did you ever think you'd come this far?

SC: When I was playing the Subroto Cup in Delhi, I didn't even think or dream that I would play for the country. The professional setup of playing for a club was too far. There wasn't any bridge that directly connected your actions to your destination. That is not the case now, as a kid playing in any club knows what he or she has to do to get to where they want. That was not the case in those days. And hence, I never dreamt of playing for the country.

You have scored in your first, 25th, 50th, 75th, 100th, 125th and 150th international games. How do you feel about this stat?

SC: I wasn't aware of this stat. If you ask any player, they will not be thinking about such stats. Even if they know some stats, the moment the kick-off whistle goes, they will forget about it.

What would you describe as the most memorable and the most difficult match you've played with the National Team?

SC: There are quite a few matches that were quite difficult. For a very strange reason, there was an AFC Challenge Cup after the 2011 AFC Asian Cup that we played in Myanmar. That was the first step towards qualification for the Asian Cup. We played horribly and ended up losing a match that we should not have lost. That was one of the big reasons why we missed out in 2015.

I think the Myanmar game, in particular, we didn't turn up at all. And what was at stake is exactly why I think it was one of the most difficult games. Not because of the opponents, not for any other reason, but we later realised what an opportunity we missed, if we had carried on, we could have played the Asian Cup in 2015.

What, would you say, is the difference between Sunil Chhetri who made his debut in Quetta in 2005, and the one who has now 150 internationals?

SC: There are a lot of differences, but that probably comes because of my age and the number of games I've played. I'm more experienced now. I know what works for me and what does not. Also, many of my mistakes on the pitch have made me wiser in hindsight. I think I was more fearless back then.



I cared less about what was going on around me, I wasn't bothered at all, and I'm saying that in a good way. The onus was not on me. Everything is different now, probably because I've played so many games.

How much of an influence did Sukhwinder Singh, your first coach in international football, and also your former coach at JCT, have on you?

SC: I think when I played under him, that was the right time to do so for me. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, I think I did the right thing. I learned a lot as to what not to do as a player on the pitch, and Sukhi Sir has had a massive role in teaching me things. He allowed me to do the things that came naturally to me.

I wasn't exactly the thing that a lot of people associate with me today. They call me 'Captain Cool', but I wasn't always so cool and calm. I was quite mischievous, I was quite haywire. I tried a lot of things on and off the pitch. He helped me understand what serious football is, and with the help of others who came later as well, he had a massive role in turning that little boy in me into a man.

How did you choose the No. 11 jersey?

SC: That was the only number available when I started playing club football. When I went to Mohun Bagan, (Jose) Barretto had number 10, Bhaichung Bhai had number 15, and somebody else had nine. The only number available was 11. And I wasn't too bothered about the jersey number back then. I just wanted to play. Now, yes, I always want the number 11, I like it.

This may be a personal landmark for you, but what impact would you hope it could have on Indian Football?

SC: I just hope that I can inspire young players to give their best and keep going. It's probably evident that if you keep working hard and try to do the right things, you can achieve a lot. I'm not very special in a holistic manner. A lot of boys are very talented here, so if you keep working hard, you can have a long career. And for the ones who have supported me, have encouraged me, I want to convey my immense gratitude. You may think that how a boy sitting in Uttar Pradesh or Andaman could make a difference for me, but every bit of support I receive counts. And the common thing between us all is that we all want to see Indian Football do well.



Calculators out but Blue Tigers still have a good chance to advance

June 6 could relaunch India's onslaught for FIFA World Cup Qualifiers Round 3

AKHIL RAWAT

The nation nursed a dream of making it into the third round of the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers, and it got off to the perfect possible start when the Blue Tigers clinched a 1-0 away win in Kuwait in November 2023. Just five months have passed since then but the Blue Tigers' aspirations suffered a setback for the time being after not-too-encouraging results against mighty Qatar and neighbours Afghanistan.

Afghanistan left a big dent in that dream last month, holding India goalless in Saudi Arabia before eking out a 2-1 win five days later in Guwahati. Dropping five points against a lower-ranked team complicated the Blue Tigers' qualification scenario to a great extent.

But outside the perimeters of the Damac Stadium in Abha and the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati, luck was in India's favour. With some help from Asian champions Qatar, who won both their matches against Kuwait, India maintained second place in the Group A standings, which means the Blue Tigers' fate still rests in their own hands

June 6 versus Kuwait was already marked as a big day when the fixtures were announced last year. Now, it has gotten as big as it could have. Practically a must-win home game against the opponents India last tasted victory against, and a repeat of those heroics would bring an end to this disappointing cycle of games, giving the Blue Tigers a new lease of life, potentially propelling them into a life they've never lived before - Round 3 of the qualifiers.

But keep in mind, nothing will be decided on June 6. An Indian victory will eliminate Kuwait from contention, but they will require another favour from Qatar, who will face Afghanistan on the same day. In that case, on the final matchday on June 11 when India travel to take on Qatar, the Blue Tigers will only be required to match Afghanistan's result against Kuwait to officially qualify for Round 3.

"The game against Kuwait on June 6 will be one of the biggest days in Indian football, as a win will immensely brighten our chances to qualify for Round 3 for the first time. The staff and the players are all aware of this historic moment that awaits us, and we will do everything in our capacity to win," said head coach Igor Stimac.

The significance of making it to the next round cannot be stressed enough. It would mean 10 more matches against the best of Asia, not to mention direct qualification for the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027. For a team, who qualified for only three Asian Cups between 1964 and 2011, qualifying three times in a row between 2019 and 2027 will indicate a decade-long consistency.

Rubbing shoulders against the likes of Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Australia for an entire year. That is the Round 3 dream. The next two months will decide India's fate for the upcoming 12 months after that.





Greener the vegetables, greener the pastures: Imran Khan's voyage to National Team

From helping his mother sell vegetables in his native Manipur to wearing the India badge on his chest, the 29-year-old winger shares his story

AKHIL RAWAT

With a football at his feet is how Imran Khan journeyed from nothing to everything. From zero to here - it was all about hard work and love for the game, believes the latest winger to earn the Indian senior national team call-up. From selling vegetables with his mother to wearing the coveted blue shirt, Imran couldn't be prouder.

Playing for your country is the biggest achievement for any football player. You hear it every day. It is perhaps the biggest cliché in football. But there's no bigger truth as well. Imran can attest.

"My brother called me and told me I was selected for the national team. I was really surprised. I asked him, "Are you serious?" I thought it was a dream. I was so ecstatic. I had been dreaming of this moment for a long time, for so many years. As a kid, I always wanted to wear the Indian jersey. I was really happy. I couldn't explain in words how I felt at that moment," shares Imran with child-like excitement.

Imran was raised in Kairang Mayai Leikai, a village in the Imphal East district of Manipur. "Football is a culture there. Kids are always playing on every corner," he says.

"My mother used to sell vegetables on the street. We didn't even have a cart. She sold them sitting on the floor. I was around 13 years old at that time and always used to go with her to help her out. That's how we earned our living. Beside that place, there was a small ground where some kids used to play. My mother asked me if I wanted to join them, and that's how my friendship with the ball began."

For Imran, football was simple. Ball at the feet at all times. Taking on opponents, dribbling past them, always keeping an attacking mindset. That's the kind of player he has turned out to be professionally too. Impressive enough for Igor Stimac to give him a chance to prove himself with the Indian team. With the kind of performances the 29-year-old has been dishing out for Jamshedpur FC in the ISL this season, many would say it was only a matter of time before he was rewarded with the call-up.

"But I don't expect too much in life," the winger says. "I was only focused on doing my best for my club."

"When I was a kid, I always loved to play with the ball at my feet. I didn't have any preferred position or anything like that. I just wanted to have the ball all the time. In terms of what I need to improve, I need to be better without the ball. Football is a team game and I try my best to improve in all aspects and help my teammates."





The one whom Imran wants to help the most on the pitch is his inspiration and idol Sunil Chhetri.

"Yes, I want to score my first goal, but I really want to assist Sunil bhai," he laughs. "I loved to see him score on TV all the time. His mentality is second to none. At such an age, he keeps going and runs more than any of us. I've played against him so many times as an opponent, and now we're on the same team. I want to be the one to provide him with an assist."

Representing the country on the international stage, sharing the dressing room with Chhetri, and making his mother proud - these are the best days of Imran's life.

"It's a great feeling to be a part of this family. It's a dream come true and I'm really happy. The coach and the teammates really support me. I've played with many of them before in different clubs. Every moment is fantastic with the national team," he concludes.



Shooting Range

FIFA World Cup Qualifiers



TARGET 2026



24





Down but never out, Panthoi determined to leave a mark Down Under

*The athletic custodian joins a select
group of players to play abroad*

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

In 2021, during the National Team training camp in Goa, goalkeeper Elangbam Panthoi Chanu suffered a fractured right shin that not only left her bedridden for two months but also raised serious doubts about her footballing future.

Little could one imagine that the athletic Manipuri would not only defy all odds to return to the pitch with a bang to clinch her spot in the National team again but would also travel to Australia to play in the South Australian National Women's Premier League for Metro United WFC. Never before in history had an Australian club side recruited an Indian footballer.

Panthoi's journey had always been difficult; no bed of roses was laid down on her path of progress. After she recovered from the career-threatening injury in 2021, misfortune struck again in 2022 when the injury resurfaced, sidelining her just before the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2022. But Panthoi remained resilient. She underwent two years of recovery and intensive training in Spain last year before making an inspiring comeback to the National Team.

THE DOGGED DETERMINATION

Panthoi remained unstoppable. Simply. Last week marked a significant milestone in the career of the girl from Keirak Village, Manipur, as she debuted for Metro United WFC in a match against Football South Australia, showcasing her indomitable spirit.

“My debut match this week was a good experience for me, but I feel I have to get better in many areas that I am working on,” Panthoi told www.the-aiff.com from Adelaide, Australia.

“I joined the club a week ago, and the training intensity has been pretty good. All the girls are very competitive. I hope I will improve with more training and matches to come. Training has been going well and I am looking forward to playing as many matches as possible,” she added.

Panthoi arrived in Australia in the first week of April and is fast adjusting to the new environment. “I’m starting to feel at home and really enjoying it here. The weather is pleasant and perfect for playing. Although the lifestyle is different, I am already adapting to it and getting used to the Australian accent,” the 26-year-old said.

Panthoi spoke about adjusting to the timing of meals, particularly dinner, and the variation in food, but as an athlete accustomed to frequent travel, she finds it manageable.

“I am getting used to eating very early, especially dinner and the difference in the cuisine is the change I am getting to feel here. But being a sportsperson, it’s something I am used to with my regular travels. The climate is similar to that of Manipur in February, so I did not find any problem adjusting. The winter in Australia is approaching, so it’s going to get a bit colder,” she said.

TREADS INTO A FRESH TERRITORY

Metro United WFC was established in 2006 and currently have 10 teams playing in different Football South Australia competitions in 2023. “The players are mostly from Australia and are very friendly. I have had no problems adjusting to them. The Head Coach, Paul Morris, has been looking after me from day one, right from the airport, to ease me into the team and the system. The coaching staff and club management have been very helpful as well,” Panthoi said.





In recent years, Panthoi has ascended to become India's premier goalkeeper. Before joining Metro United WFC, she played a pivotal role in the recent success of the Senior National Team, helping them secure the runners-up position at the Turkish Women's Cup held earlier this year.

Asked how she clinched the Australian club deal, Panthoi said: "I participated in a scouting camp organised by an organisation named Women in Sport in June last year. Coaches from various countries attended to scout Indian players.

"Adelaide United coach Adrian Stenta wanted me to make a move to Australia and said it would be good to start with a club this season at this level to get regular game time and adjust to the country and then try to step up to the A-League as well. He recommended me to Paul Morris, head coach of Metro United WFC, then he contacted my agent, and we confirmed the transfer a few months ago."

JOINS THE SELECT CLUB

Before Panthoi, Indian women players such as Bala Devi (Scotland), Manisha Kalyan (Cyprus), Dangmei Grace (Uzbekistan), Soumya Guguloth (Croatia), and Jyoti Chauhan (Croatia) had ventured to various parts of the world to pursue their international careers.

"It certainly feels good, as it's a great opportunity to play in a strong league. I want to do my best and open the doors for more Indian players to play in Australia. There is a huge interest in Women's Football in Australia after their recent success in the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2023. There is also a women's football league at every level in all areas.

"My family is very excited about me playing here. The only thing that bothers me a bit is that I won't get to see them in six months. But they are a constant support and have told me to play in this league as long as I can. I can't thank them enough," she said.

Lastly, when asked to give a message to her fans in India, the best goalkeeper of IWL 2017-18 said, "I would just tell everyone to work hard and grab whatever opportunities come their way. I have stepped out of my comfort zone to see what I can do at this level. Unless you do the same, you will never know what you can achieve."



PHOTO COURTESY: FA MALAYSIA

India U23s have valuable exposure in Malaysia

The India U23 Men's National Team played two friendly matches against the Malaysia U23 National Team at the Kuala Lumpur Football Stadium, in the March FIFA International window.

While the Blue Colts lost the first game 1-2 on March 22, they showed resilience in the second one, to get a 1-1 draw on March 25. Chingangbam Shivaldo Singh, M Thoiba Singh scored in each match for India.

Head coach Naushad Moosa, himself a former India defender, said, "It was important to give equal opportunities to all the players. It helped us to know the potential of the players at the international level." The coach said, "All the players were fit and had a positive mindset. The four-day camp we had in Delhi was really good and all the players adapted to the style we wanted to play."

India Under 23 squad:

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

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

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

Forwards: Abdul Rabeeh, Gurkirat Singh, Isak Vanlalruatfela, Khumanthem Ninthoinganba Meetei, Mohammed Sanan, Parthib Sundar Gogoi, Sivasakthi Narayanan, Vishnu Puthiya Valappill

Head coach: Naushad Moosa



STATE OF AFFAIRS

AIFF President launches Ladakh Football Association official website

All India Football Federation President, Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, on Friday, April 5, 2024, launched the [official website of the Ladakh Football Association](#) at the Football House, New Delhi.

Present at the Football House, were AIFF Acting Secretary General Mr. M Satyanarayan, Ladakh Football Association General Secretary Ms. Tsering Angmo, and senior officials of the LFA.

The official launch was attended virtually from Ladakh by senior state government officers, including Joint Director, Youth Services and Sports, Mr. Moses Kunzang, OSD Secretary, Youth Service and Sports, Dr. Stanzin Thakchos, Vice President LFA, Mr. Tsawang Dorjay and Treasurer LFA, Mr. Lobzang Paldan.

While unveiling the website, the AIFF President, Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, congratulated the President and the General Secretary of the Ladakh Football Association and the entire team of the LFA for the good work done.

“My congratulations to LFA for unveiling the website today. I went to Ladakh last October and watched matches in the Climate Cup there. There, I experienced how popular football is and how much potential footballers have. I genuinely feel there is a huge opportunity to develop football in Ladakh.

“Having said this, we know the state has logistical challenges. We will try and support football development there in the best possible manner,” said Mr. Chaubey.

The AIFF President said the federation would do everything to support the LFA in having a sufficient number of licensed coaches to develop young talent.

“I am sure that through this newly launched website, Ladakh Football will have a global presence and football fans across the world will get to know about football activities in the state through this website. After all, this is the time of social media; one can communicate and share news at the click of a button. Let us avail of this opportunity and do our best for the development of the game,” the AIFF President said.

Ladakh Football Association General Secretary Ms. Tsering Angmo said, “We are a new state association in a state that has a curtailed season because of climatic conditions. Yet, football remains a highly popular sport in Ladakh. This website will not only help us spread our activities and update our calendars, but it will also be helpful in marketing and sponsorship matters. I am confident the launch of this website will help spread the message of the game.”



AIFF stresses on TW3 age test in youth football

A meeting of the AIFF member associations, chaired by AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, was held virtually on March 19, 2024.

The meeting was attended by Acting Secretary General Mr. M. Satyanarayan and 26 member states. Senior staff members of different departments of the AIFF were present at the meeting.

The meeting, which held extensive discussions on several issues, decided to ensure that the TW3 age test will be applied across U13 and U15 competitions at the national level youth leagues and for the Sub Junior boys and girls championships.

Mr. M. Satyanarayan said: “Now we have opened the National level youth league for all the winners of the state leagues to participate, even at the U13 level. If a particular state has eight teams in its state league, the winners will be eligible to play at the national level. If a state has more than eight clubs and academies playing in the state league, then two teams will be eligible. We are ensuring that trained scouts will be present during the national level youth leagues to spot talent at the age group level.”

However, the meeting decided that all the players who will qualify for the several National Youth Leagues through their respective state leagues will have to undergo the TW3 age test. It was pointed out that introducing such a practice will automatically cover 70–80% of all the players in the U13 and U15 areas and will help to minimise age fraud.

The meeting also raised concerns about teams pulling out of IWL2 at the last moment. It has been decided to give the state a deadline of May 31, 2024, to complete all their respective state leagues, so that all the winners will be ready to play in the 2024–25 season. This practice will help in having the participants defined long before the leagues begin at the national level, so that the AIFF calendar can be followed smoothly.

As a criterion, the respective state leagues will have to have a minimum of six teams and each team should play at least 10 matches. Thanking the members, the AIFF President, Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, said that such meetings should be held regularly and followed up immediately to take the necessary actions to implement the decisions reached.

The President also referred to the unfortunate incident that happened in a local unregistered tournament in Kerala, where a foreign player was chased and beaten up by fans. He requested all the member associations take note of it and stay vigilant against such unregistered tournaments. He stressed the need for AIFF and member associations to work together and take preventive measures against possible match-fixing attempts at various national and state competitions.



28th Senior Women's NFC for Rajmata Jijabai Trophy Final Rounds groupings announced

The draw for the 28th Senior Women's National Football Championship for Rajmata Jijabai Trophy Final Rounds was held virtually on Wednesday, April 3, 2024, at the Football House.

Twelve teams were divided into two groups of six each, with three direct entrants, hosts West Bengal, defending champions Tamil Nadu, and runners-up Haryana, along with six group winners from the group stage and three best second-placed teams.

The Final Rounds will kick off on May 1, 2024, in West Bengal.

Manipur (Group A), Delhi (Group B), Sikkim (Group C), Punjab (Group D), Odisha (Group E) and Railways (Group F) were the group winners. Maharashtra (Group A), Jharkhand (Group D) and Chandigarh (Group C) advanced to the Final Rounds as the three best second-placed teams.

Matches will be played in a single round-robin format, with the top two teams from each group qualifying for the semi-finals. The final will be played on May 15, 2024.

The groupings for the Final Rounds:

Group A: Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Delhi, Railways, West Bengal, Chandigarh

Group B: Haryana, Manipur, Odisha, Sikkim, Jharkhand, Maharashtra



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