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VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**“HISTORIC SUCCESS
ELEVATES STATUS OF
SANTOSH TROPHY”**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**KARNATAKA
CHAMPIONS**



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President's Note

Mr. Kalyan Chaubey

It was a glorious Saturday night on March 4 at the King Fahd International Stadium in the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh, when our country's National Championship added a historic chapter.

Even since the new committee took over the reigns at the Football House, one of our main focuses has been on the Santosh Trophy – the symbol of inter-state football supremacy.

Doing away with the zonal preliminary rounds and unveiling a new group stage that saw states pitted against rivals from across the country was a move that has been heaped with praise by most states.

A double group stage ensured the four semi-finalists played a total of 10 games before making it to the final four - this was also a first. Both stages threw up some exciting fare that truly re-ignited the Santosh Trophy in its 76th edition.

And I can safely say that it was a historic final stage as our MoU with the Saudi Arabian Football Federation saw the latter host the semi-finals and finals in Riyadh, a move that became a life-changing event for most of the nearly 100 aspiring footballers.

Many players swiftly got their first-ever passports and many were flying both within and outside India for the first time! The facilities and hospitality of our friends from Saudi just added to the thrill and excitement of the players and their display on the field seemed to be equally befitting the atmosphere.

Truly international-class goals and skills studded the final stage and for the first time VAR was used for domestic games in the country. The AIFF can now proudly conclude that the Santosh Trophy has been elevated both in class and status.



This success has also triggered some state governments to come forward and offer to host the next edition!

Congratulations to Karnataka as the state's recent efforts was aptly reflected in their triumph after 54 years while Meghalaya added to the history with their maiden final appearance.

The AIFF also reacted swiftly when one of the Services players, Adersh Mattumal, was seriously injured in the semi-finals. He was admitted and a top surgeon performed a surgery to set right his fractured shin. The player is back after the surgery and the AIFF took full responsibility of his medical care.

Two days after the success of the Santosh Trophy final in Riyadh, another event back home in the south



Indian city of Bengaluru stole our hearts.

In line with the AIFF's 'Vision 2047' to revive popular football tournaments of the past, the Karnataka State Football Association held the Stafford Challenge Cup tournament after a gap of 30 years.

It was another great occasion to witness and participate in the awards ceremony of the Stafford Challenge Cup, an event that was first held in 1938 and is one of the oldest events in the southern part of India.

While appreciating the success of KSFA in reviving this event, and in addition to some other similar events like the Kalinga Cup, Churchand Singh KCSICBE Memorial Invitation Football Tournament, in Manipur on the anvil, the AIFF is keen to encourage this development.

With more such club competitions, the players will not only sharpen their skills,



but will also experience more game time.

The AIFF will coordinate with states that will be reviving such heritage events and any new club competitions so that a calendar can be chalked out to enable clubs to gain more game time, something that is lacking at present.

Collective effort will usher in a new era for Indian Football

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

As I sit down to pen my column for the March 2023 edition of our e-magazine, the first thing that comes to my mind is about expressing my heartfelt thanks to the Saudi Arabia Football Federation for their contribution and support behind the grand success of the Hero Santosh Trophy this season. The 76th edition of the National Football Championship was very special on many counts this time - the change of format that made the tournament hugely competitive and the unique plan to host the business end of the tournament on a foreign land, Riyadh, brought a wholesome change in the entire approach. It was like a dream outing for players, with the best of facilities, top-class stadium, quality production, the VAR making an entry for the first time in Indian football; the overall experience of everyone involved with the championship was memorable. Many of these things would not have been achieved without the support of the SAFF. On behalf of the football family of India, I appreciate the efforts of the Saudi Arabian Federation once again.

From the point of view of the game, this edition of the Santosh Trophy was a big gain for Indian football. The success of the tournament in Saudi Arabia will definitely create more interest for the NFC, which was somehow going down in the last decade. We sincerely hope the Santosh Trophy now will regain its past glory and will once again occupy pride of place in Indian football.

Last but not the least, congratulations to Karnataka for winning the trophy after 54 years. Equally appreciable is Meghalaya making history by reaching the final for the first time.



The kind of reception the Meghalaya team received at home after returning from Riyadh, certainly boosts the confidence that this is one championship which has the potential to become Euro or Asian Cup or Copa America of India.

At the club level, my congratulations to RoundGlass Punjab, the new champions of the Hero I-League. The league this season was a highly competitive one - we could see some exceptional performances. It also created a broadcasting record of sorts with multiple channels and OTT platforms telecasting the league, which helped in taking the game to a new audience. I do admit there are scopes for improvements, but we can surely expect the Hero I-League to reach newer heights in the coming seasons.

At the same time, I congratulate Mumbai City FC for bagging the Hero ISL League Winners Shield.

And now the National Team will be back in action and when Manipur hosts the tri-nation friendlies involving the Kyrgyz Republic, Myanmar and India, it will be yet another history-making event for Indian football. The state of Manipur had never hosted Senior Men's National Team matches before and it will further boost the growth of football not only in Manipur but also in the North Eastern Region. The matches will be of great importance for the Blue Tigers, as the Imphal matches are part of our preparation for the AFC Asian Cup 2023, which will be held in Qatar from January 12, 2024.

On the other hand, Women's Football, for us, is one of the priority areas and we can expect a slew of initiatives starting from the next season. Our Women's National Teams were in action recently and many important fixtures for the Senior and the U-17 teams are coming up in the next few weeks.

Our U-20 team didn't have a great outing at SAFF U-20 Women's Championships in Dhaka, but in the AFC U-20 Women's Championship qualifying rounds in Vietnam, they improved drastically. True, the performance wasn't enough for qualification to the next round, as they lost out on goal difference, but the girls, I can say with confidence, did a good job.

Our girls will be provided with more competitive opportunities going forward. Come next season, we will have a completely new structure of women's football landscape and that is the change we are waiting for to take women's football in India to the next level.

At the administrative level, we are going through a transition period as we continue to strengthen our competencies with new hires and try to build a culture to service the game with improved efficiency, professionalism and clear accountability. We can expect more changes in this key area to attain a global outlook. I take this opportunity to extend our gratitude to all those who are supporting and working hard for the development of football in India. We have no doubt that our collective effort will soon usher in a new era in Indian Football.





Karnataka end 54-year Hero Santosh Trophy drought in Riyadh

Karnataka beat Meghalaya in the final to win the coveted trophy

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

In December last year, when Karnataka went down to Delhi in the concluding preliminary Group 1 league match of the 76th National Football Championship for the Hero Santosh Trophy in Delhi, they weren't sure about making the next stage because of all the calculations involved.

Yet, on March 4, 2023, at the King Fahd International Stadium in the Saudi Arabian Capital, Karnataka not only emerged the proud champions with a hard-fought 3-2 win over Meghalaya, but also ended their 54-year wait for the title that remained elusive to them since the 1968-69 Nationals In Bangalore.

That was a different era with different names in those days. The state that won the trophy beating Bengal in the final after two days of intense struggle was Mysore, not Karnataka. The match was played in Bangalore, the garden city, now known as Bengaluru.





Since then, the Hero Santosh Trophy could never return to the Karnataka State Football Association's cupboard, despite the state being one of the major producers of quality footballers in the country. In between, some of the finest names in Indian football, starting from Iliyas Pasha, Rehamatullah, Babu Mani, Carlton Chapman to Shanmugam Venkatesh and many others, served the National Team with distinction, but the coveted trophy for the National Football Championship always travelled elsewhere after every meet.

Not even the staunchest supporters of Karnataka could perhaps ever imagine that the state team would have to travel more than 3,000 kilometres from Bengaluru to bring back the Hero Santosh Trophy after five decades. But it happened like that and watching the final at one of the continent's finest venues one may have clearly felt the youngsters from Karnataka, on Saturday night, were eager to make sure the trophy doesn't give them a slip once again.

There were reasons to believe this. Karnataka simply began with a bang, scoring in the second minute when Sunil Kumar's angular volley from the right was deflected off a defender before finding the corner of the Meghalaya net. The backlash was sharp and quick. Meghalaya came with a vengeance and in the ninth minute, Sheen Stevenson Sohktung was brought down inside the box and Brolington Warlarpih made no mistake from the resultant spot kick with a strong and confident shot.



Karnataka were not ready to be bogged down, not this time, at least. In the 19th minute, Sunil Kumar was once again in the thick of things – he passed the ball for Bekey Oram, who tapped it in amidst confusion in the Meghalaya defence. Three minutes before the half time, Robin Yadav, who was later adjudged the Player of the Championship, took a free-kick from around 25 yards that dipped into the Meghalaya goal leaving the custodian Rajat Paul Lyngdoh visibly frustrated.

After a rousing display in the first half, Karnataka defence paid for the momentary lapse 15 minutes after the change of ends. Their defenders would find it hard to explain why Sheen was left unmarked in the box and the Meghalaya striker took full advantage of it to pull one back. It did turn the last half an hour of the game into a more exciting one, but Karnataka thereafter remained cautious despite feeling pressure from the rivals from both wings.



Meghalaya's Fairytale: Of small steps and giant leaps

Meghalaya create history by reaching the final of the Hero Santosh Trophy 2022-23

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

There are some names in Indian Football that generate a feverish cult like fervour, fans, critics and watchers alike gripped by goosebumps when they are uttered. Often it isn't because of the player's long list of accolades but just the 'feels' when he was seen.

Eugeneson Lyngdoh is one such. In his prime, a creative force unstoppable, Lyngdoh was the fulcrum of the Indian team and even his club side. A cult figure to many and idolised by more.

"When I was growing up, I idolised players like Rocus Lamare," Eugeneson Lyngdoh says. "And I tell these guys that they have a chance to become an inspiration themselves."



While Lyngdoh might talk in the future tense, the truth is that ‘these boys’, the history makers of Meghalaya, are already an inspiration, having done something even the likes of Lamare and Lyngdoh haven’t – reach the finals of the Hero Santosh Trophy.

“Shillong has had a rich history of football,” Lyngdoh says, when asked how this result would impact football at home. “Shillong Lajong was the first club from the North East in the Hero I-League and even some that gave so many good players from other states also a chance to shine.

“Mahesh Naorem is making waves in East Bengal right now, but it was at Shillong Lajong that he grew up,” Lyngdoh says.

Lyngdoh himself started his career at the city’s third Hero I-League club (the second were the firebrand rebels of Royal Wahingdoh, led by a young winger Jackichand Singh) Rangdajied United. From there a truly cult career took flight.

Now retired, Lyngdoh was a mentor to the Meghalaya team in Riyadh and keen to highlight the need to talk more about the players, young and old who have for years plied their trade in the Shillong league. *“A lot of these boys have so much to prove, so much to learn and it is a really proud moment for us for every young footballer in the state that this result has arrived,”* he says.

“I played under Khlain Syiemlieh [Meghalaya head coach] as a player at a time when there were not so many coaches with such knowledge and education as him. It is a great result for him too and I hope people notice this.”

Many from their own state already are. Rajasthan United striker Shaiborlang Kharpan keenly followed the team’s progress. Kharpan is from a generation that idolised Lyngdoh and the likes of Aibor Khongjee, and saw his own colleagues receive attention that was long deserved. *“I was laughing and crying at the same time watching them because of their heart. It is history that will be remembered forever.”*

And yet there is the promise of more. Lyngdoh and Syiemlieh promise that this is just the start of Meghalaya’s rise in the Indian Football pantheon.



Shooting Range

HERO SANTOSH TROPHY 2022-23







RoundGlass Punjab's indelible night of Hero I-League triumph

RGP were crowned Hero I-League 2022-23 champions with one game to spare

AKHIL RAWAT

RoundGlass Punjab FC are the 2022-23 Hero I-League champions, having in fact won the league with one game to spare. After 22 matches, 16 wins, 52 points, 45 goals, and just 16 conceded, they have demonstrated their domination in a manner very few have done over the past few seasons in the competition.

On Sunday, March 13, 2023, RoundGlass Punjab triumphed 2-0 against Tiddim Road Athletic Union at their home the Tau Devi Lal Stadium, in Panchkula, to add the cherry to their champions parade. It was their seventh straight win, and the perfect end to a title winning season. They will secure promotion to the Hero Indian Super League, subject to fulfilling the club licensing criteria.



It was a two-horse race with Sreenidi Deccan for the large part of the season, but RoundGlass Punjab went full throttle at the right moment, sweeping away everyone on their path, while their rivals from the south collapsed under pressure.

Their seven-game winning run included three consecutive tough fixtures away to Gokulam Kerala, Aizawl and NEROCA in the space of 11 days. They nicked a one-goal win in each of those games, and that set them on course to the title. Clutch when it mattered the most. Back home in Panchkula, they were comfortable as always. In fact, too comfortable in the 8-0 drubbing of Sudeva Delhi, where Spanish striker Juan Mera netted a hat-trick and added two assists. Three days later, a 3-1 success over Churchill Brothers brought them to the cusp of history – just one win away from the crown.

RoundGlass Punjab's Greek head coach **Staikos Vergetis** has been the definition of pragmatism, never counting his chickens before they hatched. *"All the games this season have been difficult, and the championship has been highly competitive. We will have to be very careful tomorrow,"* he had said on the eve of their title triumph – at an away game against Rajasthan United in Ambedkar Stadium on March 4.

"The upcoming game is the most important thing in our life, and after that, the next game will be the most important one. In my entire coaching career, I have always followed a similar mentality," he had said then.

And that's the mentality which helped RoundGlass Punjab reign supreme this season. At the Ambedkar stadium that evening, they were the only team to turn up to fight. The hunger was palpable. They played with a sense of authority only champion teams possess. Even fortune favoured them as an own goal helped them get off to the perfect start. From then on, it was just one-way traffic. They were not in the capital just to win the league but to do it in style.



Luka Majcen added a second before the break, his 14th goal of the season – he added two more on the final day to overtake Sreenidi Deccan's David Castaneda and win the golden boot.

While his team toyed with Rajasthan, and the result seemed like a foregone conclusion, coach Vergetis was in no mood to celebrate until he heard the full-time whistle. Restless from start to finish, he spent the entire 90 minutes barking instructions from the touchline, demanding perfection from his side.

"Discipline, dignified, respectful and mature" were some of the adjectives Vergetis had for his squad after the historic game. *"I feel very satisfied and proud of my players. They fought a lot, and I would like to say a big 'thank you' to them. We gave a lot of happiness to our state Punjab,"* he added. This was the second time the Hero I-League title went to Punjab, after Minerva Punjab FC's triumph in 2017-18.

The scenes at full-time were spectacular. Everyone hugged everyone. Rajasthan United were respectful in defeat – their head coach Pushpender Kundu was one of the first to shake Vergetis' hands and congratulate him. The Greek was then ushered away by his team and thrown into the sky. He could finally afford a smile.

Chencho Gyeltshen, who was named the Hero of the Match, seemed almost reluctant to leave the celebrations and pick up his award. *"I was flying when I heard the full-time whistle,"* the Bhutanese said.

Amidst Khaiminthang Lhungdim hugging and lifting everyone in front of him and Juan Nellar running across the pitch crying out 'vamoos!', club captain Aleksandar Ignjatović was one of the more emotional ones, shedding tears of joy. He was held in a warm embrace by his Slavic teammate Majcen.



POINTS TABLE

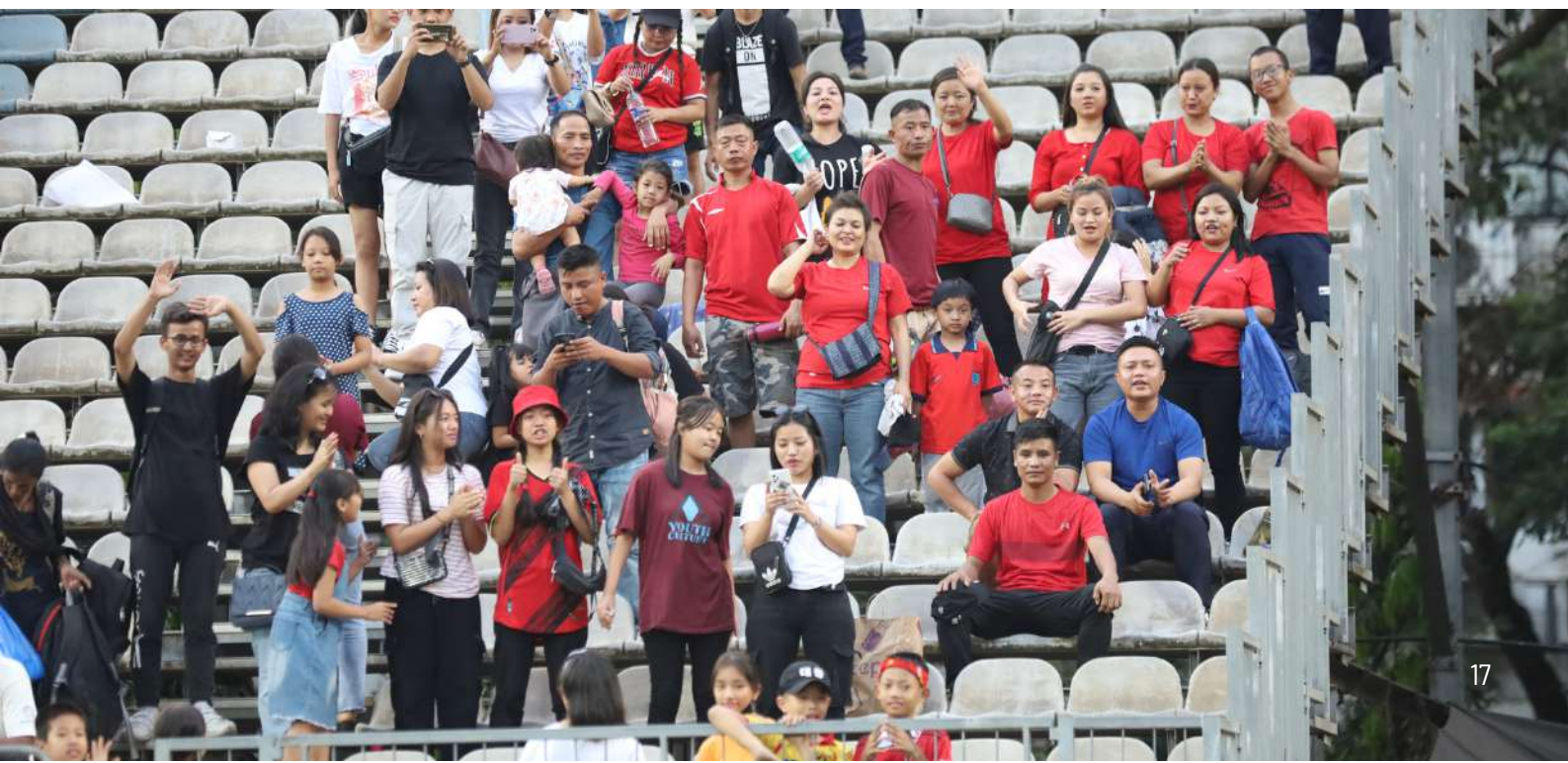
2022-23

#	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	RoundGlass Punjab FC	22	16	4	2	+29	52
2	Sreenidi Deccan FC	22	13	3	6	+15	42
3	Gokulam Kerala FC	22	12	3	7	+12	39
4	Tiddim Road Athletic Union	22	11	2	9	0	35
5	Real Kashmir FC	22	9	7	6	+2	34
6	Churchill Brothers FC Goa	22	9	6	7	+10	33
7	Aizawl FC	22	6	8	8	-2	26
8	Mohammedan Sporting Club	22	7	5	10	-1	26
9	Rajasthan United FC	22	7	4	11	-13	25
10	NEROCA FC	22	7	4	11	-4	25
11	Mumbai Kenkre FC	22	3	8	11	-17	17
12	Sudeva Delhi FC	22	3	4	15	-31	13



Shooting Range

HERO I-LEAGUE 2022-23







We will give everything to win the Hero Tri-Nation tournament, says Igor Stimac

The National Coach analyses the opponents, talks about his four-year journey as India coach and the he all-important preparations for the AFC Asian Cup 2023

AKHIL RAWAT

The Indian Senior Men's Team will be back in action on home soil after nine months, in the Hero Tri-Nation Football Tournament from March 22, 2023, and Head Coach Igor Stimac has asserted that his side will do everything to win it.

Imphal will welcome the Blue Tigers (106 in FIFA Rankings) for the first time, and the tournament will also feature Myanmar (159 in FIFA Rankings) and the Kyrgyz Republic (94 in FIFA Rankings). A week before the first game, the-aiff.com caught up with Stimac in the National camp in Kolkata. He spoke at length about his expectations from the tournament, analysis of the opponents, his four-year journey as India coach, the all-important preparations for the AFC Asian Cup 2023, and much more.

Excerpts from the interview:

Q: You emerged in the Indian Football scene a few months after India played the 2019 AFC Asian Cup final rounds. You have succeeded in leading the team to another Asian Cup qualification. Does it fully satisfy you?

Stimac: No, it does not. That's only the first step in what we're trying to achieve. When I joined, the main goal was to reconstruct the team, to play a different type of football, and to win the hearts of the Indian people with the style of play. I would say that we were quite successful in that, having in mind that our work was disrupted by the pandemic for almost two years. We didn't have a chance to play any home games. There were no friendlies and no qualifiers.

Last year in Kolkata, we played three beautiful games where we proved to everyone that when we get proper time to work, we can achieve better and play good football. But it's the second step that is the most challenging one. We are well aware that we're going to face the continent's best teams in the 2023 Asian Cup. And to do well in such a competition, we need to organise ourselves in a different way, with different style of football and maintain verticality in our game.

Q: In another two months, you will complete four years as India's head coach. Looking back on it, how eventful has your journey been?

Stimac: It has been a difficult journey. I say that because the expectations are huge on India. It's wonderful to have dreams. There is no life without dreaming about achieving things. And to succeed, time is precious. You can count on fulfilling your dreams if you are provided time to work. I just hope that the next eight or nine months will serve us well to prepare for the Asian Cup. The calendar for the next season is going to be difficult. We want to utilise the September, October and November international windows well, and I hope all stakeholders of Indian Football get involved and help the national team.



STIMAC
in National Team



Q: In 2019, you said your job is to awaken the hearts of the Indian people and we can do that only if we play stylish football. How far have you managed to achieve your goal?

Stimac: I would again say that the qualifiers in Kolkata proved that we can play good football. I'm quite sure that I'm not arrogant in saying that everybody was happy after those games, satisfied with the football India presented. And we are going to stay on that path – not losing our souls, whoever is on the opposite side. We are not going to go out on the pitch with fear, that's for sure. It's something I've been pointing out from the very first day of my arrival here. Now, we have a different mindset. We are looking to find a way to win the games without the fear of making mistakes, of passing the ball and going forward.

Q: We are now 10 months away from the 2023 Asian Cup. Are we ready? Are we moving in the right direction?

Stimac: At the moment, we are not completely ready for the Asian Cup. In this March window, we will be crediting players for their achievements this season, recognising their performances, and giving them a chance to fight for a place in the team. The competition for places in the final squad for the Asian Cup will go all the way until the end. The spots are open for everyone with an Indian passport, and not only those involved in the Hero ISL.

Our focus now is on all players involved in Indian Football – whether it is the Hero Santosh Trophy or the Hero I-League. So, I'm using this opportunity to invite all these boys who are dreaming about representing their country in the Asian Cup to work on themselves and put in lots of hard work. Our scouting team will go everywhere in the next eight-nine months to watch everyone. We're going to give an opportunity to all those who we think might help us in the Asian Cup.

Q: Introducing new faces, and trying out youngsters has been your style from the beginning. But now, we find the core group of your squad is slowly undergoing a change. What's your take on this?

Stimac: In my first two years, we gave the chance to many players. It seemed to many people and followers of football in India that we were somehow experimenting. No, we were looking for those players who can handle the pressure of international football. We were giving chances to everyone who was doing well domestically. As simple as that. The door of the national team was wide open. We were looking for players with more technical ability, more strength, with a good mindset, with a positive attitude, good behaviour and a strong character. And to check that, you need to give everyone a chance.

There were occasions where we suffered heavy defeats like against the UAE, and we were not ashamed of it. That game served its purpose. It proved to us who can and who can't (handle the pressure). Now, we are at a point where we have a very clear picture of all players individually in India at the moment. There will be competition between them to make it to the Asian Cup team. In the remainder of the year, they will be playing for their clubs in the league, representing them in the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup.

Regarding the change in the core group of players, we need to understand that some of them are of a certain age now. It's difficult to say, but goodbyes need to come sometime.

Sunil Chhetri was nowhere to be seen this season. He was on the bench, waiting, preparing himself, working to take his weight down a few kilos, which is very difficult to handle at this age. But when it was most needed, he was there for his club, helping them, and taking them to the finals. He scored the most decisive goals. At his age, this will probably be his farewell from football. I'm quite sure that the upcoming months will be the best for Sunil Chhetri.

Along with him, Sandesh (Jhingan) and Gurpreet (Singh Sandhu) are the core strength of our team. I've never hidden that. I was never running away from the truth. They are free guys, with great characters, strong mindsets and a good mentality, which is a basic platform for us to build the team around. But of course, we need to keep their age in mind. Obviously, Sunil may be playing his last season, and definitely his last Asian Cup. Gurpreet and Sandesh may be there for four, or five years. But the rest of the team is just comprised of youngsters. They are our future, which is amazing because that's something which we can build on. We need to be patient with them. And I'm quite sure that the experience our young players have got in the last four years will serve them well at the Asian Cup.

Q: Surely, you have already made your assessment of the two rival teams. Is it possible to share some insight?

Stimac: Yes, we have analysed our opponents. Myanmar are the lower-ranked one but they have changed their approach to the game in the last few years. They try to play middle-press football, which could be challenging because if you don't break them down in the first 45 minutes, it gets more and more difficult. It's all about patience, quick passing and going into the final third with quality against such teams. Playing simple football, passing the ball vertically, and winning the yards behind the defenders will be the most important and crucial things.

Kyrgyz Republic are a very well-organised side. They are better ranked than us. They play very good quality football. I was watching their game against Russia. They played wonderful football against such a strong and competitive side. They have many quality players with strength and speed. It's going to be very interesting.

Q. What are your expectations and targets from the Hero Tri-Nation International Football Tournament?

Stimac: Winning it. We are the hosts, and we're going to do absolutely everything to win the tournament. Obviously, it's not going to be easy because we've got a lot of players who will be involved in the Hero ISL Final, who will be physically and mentally exhausted. Half of them will be in a worse position because they will be defeated in the final. And my job is to regenerate them, help them bounce back and find the strength and ability to play these two games and represent India in a good way.

Q. Lastly, what's your message to the fans in Imphal?

Stimac: From our part, we're going to do everything, and use the time given to us properly and wisely to represent this beautiful country at the upcoming Asian Cup. Let's dream together. I hope we're going to do well. I can guarantee one thing for sure - we're going to give everything we have on the pitch, wherever we go and whoever we play against.





Football a painkiller for Jharkhand girl Sumati

The 19-year-old winger hopes to leave her mark for the India Blues

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

"Football has the power to change people's lives," an oft-quoted phrase that not many take too seriously sometimes. But Sumati Kumari, the India U-20 Women's Team's dynamic winger refuses to fall into this category.

To Sumati, football is the true life-changer – it gives her deep mental peace and satisfaction. Football, more than anything else, provides them with positive vibes.

Still a teenager, she has already suffered a lot in her life. But every time she was hit by a tragedy, all she did was cling more to football. It erased a lot of her agony and made her more determined to become a better footballer.

Hailing from the Gumla district in Jharkhand, Sumati is an unusually strong girl. Back in 2019, she suffered a massive personal tragedy as her mother passed away when she was in the National camp in Goa. As her village had no telephone connection, the news of her mother's demise reached her two days later. A devastated Sumati had a choice to make - to go back home to her family or stay in the camp and represent the nation. She decided to stay since she knew playing for the country would definitely have made her mother proud.

"When I was in Goa, I got the news of my mother passing after two days. I was helpless and couldn't do anything about it. My coaches told me to leave for home, but I decided to stay and play for the country because that's what gave me the mental peace I was looking for," said Sumati.

"That was really a difficult phase of my life. But being on the field with all my teammates gave me the strength to forget my pain to some extent," she said.

Sumati is one of the most important members of the Indian team. If not for her agility and pace on the flanks, the Young Tigresses would not have been able to create the number of chances they did in the U-17 women's tournaments in 2019. Such was Sumati's impact that India's U-17 Women's World Cup team coach Thomas Dennerby was hugely impressed by her talent and picked her for the Senior Women's team for the AFC Asian Cup 2022.

But tragedy and misfortune struck Sumati once more. She fractured her right knee and couldn't play football for a few months. She scored her first goals since returning from injury in the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers – first, a well-placed header against Singapore, and then two brilliant goals against Indonesia - a solid right-footed volley and a neat one-on-one finish.

"I am happy to contribute to the team in whatever manner I can. I have been with both the senior and junior teams, and I feel amazing wearing the India jersey. I missed playing my favourite sport for a few months, but now that I am back, it gives me immense joy and happiness. And I know that my mother is looking from the sky and feeling proud of me. Whatever I do, it's for her," said an emotional Sumati.





Shubhangi Singh leads the line for India in Vietnam

Despite being knocked out of the qualifiers, the Young Tigresses display won hearts and accolades

NAVANEETH K

Right-back Shubhangi Singh has been one of the first names on the India U-17 and U-20 women's teams over the past few months. She played every single minute of India's FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup campaign in October last year and the SAFF U-20 Women's Championship in Bangladesh last month.

At just 16 years old, Shubhangi has gathered a lot of international experience already. She is blessed to have something not many girls do in our country - the support of her family to pursue football. "My mother, father and brother have always supported both my education and football as well," she said.

Hailing from Gujarat, Shubhangi began playing football at the age of 12 with her brother. "I played with boys and began participating in local tournaments.



"I used to play in my school, where I received good support from my coach. I later joined an academy in Gujarat, where I've been practising for four years," said Shubhangi.

Without a doubt, Shubhangi's selection in the Indian camp brought elation to everyone in her family, as making the national team had always been her aim.

Shubhangi feels lucky to have trained under a highly-experienced coaching name in the women's football circuit like Thomas Dennerby. *"We learned a lot by training under coach Thomas for eight months, going on exposure tours and participating in the World Cup. Our game changed a lot under his guidance. He's such an experienced coach,"* she stated.

Shubhangi herself underwent a change in her playing position on the pitch - from right wing to right back. The 16-year-old has also focused a lot on her dead ball abilities and has become the set piece specialist of the team.

The Young Tigresses may have returned empty-handed from the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup, but it was in no way a tournament to forget for the girls. *"We got the opportunity to play against some of the best teams in the world like USA, Brazil and Morocco, and took a lot of learnings from the tournament,"* said Shubhangi.

Despite the team crashing out in Round 1 of the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers in Vietnam next week, there was much to be proud of. Not only did the Young Tigresses remain unbeaten, but they also ended up equal on points as Vietnam, losing out on qualifying on goal difference.



Shooting Range

U20 WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS ROUND 1



Hero Super Cup kicks off on April 3 in Kerala

Kozhikode and Manjeri will host the tournament which is set to return after four years

The Indian Football calendar is a burgeoning one, and the 2022-23 season has seen it grow further. Now winding down towards the business end of the season, Indian Football fans are all set to be treated with yet another top tournament – the Hero Super Cup, the draw for which was held at the Football House in New Delhi on Tuesday, March 7, 2023.

For the first time ever, the Hero Super Cup will be held in Kerala. Sixteen teams are set to fight it out for India's premier cup competition, and in an unprecedented move, the winners of the Hero Super Cup will also get a chance to play at the continental level. The champions of the Hero Super Cup will fight it out in a play-off against last season's Hero I-League champions Gokulam Kerala FC, to determine who will get an entry into the AFC Cup South Zone group.

The tournament will see participation from 11 teams from the Hero Indian Super League and ten teams from the Hero I-League. The eleven teams of the Hero ISL and the winners of the Hero I-League get a direct entry into the group stage of the competition.

Seven teams from the Hero I-League (those ranked from second to eighth) will have a set of play-off qualifiers to get into the group stage of the tournament. Furthermore, the teams ranked ninth and tenth will play a qualifying play-off and the winners will get a place in the qualifiers.

The four group winners will qualify for the semi-finals. The final will be held on April 25 at the EMS Corporation Stadium in Kozhikode.



The image shows the official match schedule for the Hero Super Cup 2023. It features the Indian Football Federation logo, the Hero Super Cup logo, and a red and white striped graphic. The schedule is organized into four groups (A, B, C, D) with their respective teams and qualifiers.

GROUP A	GROUP B
BENGALURU FC	HYDERABAD FC
KERALA BLASTERS FC	ODISHA FC
ROUNDGLASS PUNJAB FC	EAST BENGAL FC
WINNER Q-1	WINNER Q-3

GROUP C	GROUP D
ATK MOHUN BAGAN	MUMBAI CITY FC
FC GOA	CHENNAIYN FC
JAMSHEDPUR FC	NORTHEAST UNITED FC
WINNER Q-2	WINNER Q-4



Obituary: Tulsidas Balaram

Balaram, part of a golden trio in the forward line when India won gold at the Asian Games in 1962, passed away at the age of 85

The All India Football Federation mourns the demise of the legendary former India forward Tulsidas Balaram, who passed away in Kolkata on Thursday, February 16, 2023. A prominent member of the golden generation of Indian football in the 1950 and 1960s, Balaram, who lived in Uttarpara, West Bengal, died in a city hospital in Kolkata. He was 85.

As a mark of respect for Balaram, who played a huge role behind India's historic gold medal triumph in the 1962 Asian Games and several other memorable victories at the international level, the AIFF has announced a three-day mourning period. While the federation will fly flag at half-mast during this period, a one-minute silence will be observed before the start of all competitive matches in India.

AIFF President Mr Kalyan Chaubey said in his condolence message, "He was a blessed child of the football god. I am sure Balaram-da has returned to him, leaving us mourning for one of the most gifted players in Indian Football history. He truly was from a golden generation of Indian Football. He was one of the best we had ever seen. My thoughts go out to his family." Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said, "The entire Indian Football fraternity is shattered and heart broken by the passing away of Tulsidas Balaram. My condolences go to his family. May his soul rest in peace."

In Tulsidas Balaram, Indian Football has now lost one of the few remaining members of the 1962 Asian Games Indian team, who took the continent by storm by defeating South Korea 2-1 in the final played at Jakarta. Balaram was a member of the famous trio in the Indian forward line, the other two being PK Banerjee and Chuni Goswami. Balaram played 36 matches for the nation, scoring 10 goals in the process, before his career came to an abrupt end because of illness. However, his overall impact on Indian Football as an international player cannot be judged by mere statistics.



The 1962 Asian Games gold medallist had also represented India in other prestigious tournaments like 1956 and 1960 Olympics, the 1958 and 1962 Asian Games, the 1959 Merdeka Cup, and much more. Apart from winning the gold medal in the 1962 Asian Games, Balaram also finished 4th in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics and runners-up in the 1959 Merdeka Cup.

At the domestic level, Balaram was a four-time Santosh Trophy champion with Hyderabad (1956), and with Bengal (1958, 1959, 1962). On the last of these occasions, he had also captained Bengal to a victory.

Balaram had also made his name in the Red and Gold threads of East Bengal, where he won a plethora of trophies, including the CFL (1961), IFA Shield (1958, 1961), Durand Cup (1960), Rovers Cup (1962), and many more. He had the distinction of winning the CFL and IFA Shield as captain in 1961, when he also won the Golden Boot in the CFL. He had also played for BNR, where he won the IFA Shield (1963), and Rovers Cup (1964).

At the peak of his form, Balaram was awarded the Arjuna Award in 1962. After retiring from active football, he remained involved in the game, serving as a National Selector and Talent Spotter for the AIFF.

Balaram was simply unstoppable during his heydays, even at the highest level of international football. The famed Hungary defence failed to stop him in the 1960 Rome Olympics. His ball control, distribution, scoring prowess and ability to rise to the occasion in difficult situations made him a part of Indian soccer folklore. Balaram's biggest trademark is his ingrained, uncompromising sense of propriety, something he always maintained on and off the field. Born on October 4, 1937, Balaram started his career in Hyderabad, then travelled to Kolkata in 1957 and joined East Bengal. For the next five seasons, he was the darling of the crowd, one of the biggest stars in Indian football. In 1963, he joined the Indian Railways. The same year, the curtain abruptly came abruptly down on his roaring career.

"Having joined South Eastern Railways, I had to play for BNR in the Kolkata league. Midway through the season, I found I was getting unusually tired. A few tests at the Railways hospital confirmed my lungs were heavily infected," Balaram revealed many years later in an interview.

"The doctor, who was a huge fan of my game, said playing football could cost my life. That was the end of my career. I was 27 then," he said.



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