



May 16, 2023

VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**“WE WILL IMPROVE
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES
FOR WOMEN FOOTBALLERS”**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**GRASSROOTS
FOR BILLION**



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President's Note

Kalyan Chaubey

The growing number of women players in recent years has been a very positive sign. With a few states organising junior-level events for girls, the Khelo India Junior and University competitions and the success of last year's FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup hosted by India have all together generated a lot of interest in women's football.

We felt women's football was crying out for a revamp and some structural changes to align with AIFF's Strategic Roadmap Vision 2047.

The Indian Women's League had triggered the creation of many clubs in various cities and states and AIFF has decided to step in and create improved economic opportunities for players.

AIFF's move to make it mandatory for the top eight participating teams in the IWL, to have minimum 10 Indian players on a fully professional annual contract worth a minimum of Rs 3.2 lakhs will hopefully address the economic aspect of women players.

This along with the decision to work towards a four-tier league with the last tier being the state leagues across the country by 2025-26 will surely provide the much-needed impetus to women's football.

However, the encouraging factor in women's football has been the number of teenagers playing in the group stages of the Senior Women's NFC and the IWL. India's participation in the regional U-17 and U-20 competitions has also helped in this matter. This, together with our revamp and restructuring of club football, will positively impact the women's game in our country.



On another front, the Super Cup recently staged in Kerala and the ongoing IWL in Gujarat have provided some lessons for us.

The low turnout by fans for the highly competitive Super Cup has had a lot to do with the prevailing weather conditions.

The same can also be said of the tough conditions for players in the ongoing IWL. The 2022-23 season and calendar were affected due to our elections held in September 2022. But, learning from this experience, AIFF will avoid holding such major events in the months of April-May and this will be taken care of when the calendar is framed for the next season.

Blue Cubs programme will help build robust & vibrant grassroots

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

The upcoming months of June and July will be record-breaking insofar as the Senior Men's National Team is concerned. The team will play a maximum of 9 matches in a 25-day period. If my memory serves me right, there hasn't been a time in the last three decades when we played as many games in 30 days. Going ahead, we can also anticipate a record number of games in the calendar year – likely to be more than 18 games. That's the focus we are hopeful of putting on our National Team in preparation for the AFC Asian Cup 2023.

At the Asian Cup 2023 in Qatar, we have been drawn into Group B where we will face Australia, Uzbekistan and Syria. At this level of competition, there are no easy games, and we will take one game at a time and do our best. We are building ourselves to consistently play against high-level teams. By playing stronger teams repeatedly, we will get stronger. We have no doubt our team will do its best and challenge these top-ranked teams at the Asian Cup.

Our players will have to encounter a high level of competition at every juncture, and thus, it is imperative for us to consistently grow our top league to a higher competitive level too.

The last 40 days have been momentous for Indian football. In its last meeting on 14th April, the Executive Committee took many landmark decisions in line with our Strategic Roadmap 'Vision 2047'. One of the most important decisions was to announce the launch of 'Blue Cubs', a flagship grassroots programme that aims to engage 35 million children and 100 million children by 2026 and 2047 respectively in the age group of 4-12. This will create a robust and vibrant grassroots structure in Indian football. Developing grassroots football is one of my personal priorities and I will continue to draw more focus to enlarging the grassroots landscape in India.



With the grand success of the AFC Grassroots Day celebrations on 15 May, we demonstrated our intent on grassroots football. With record participation – 40000+ in one day – across India facilitated by our stakeholders, we could witness the energy and interest in the game at a completely different level for the first time. I would like to thank our member associations, clubs, academies, schools and others who have wholeheartedly taken part in the AFC Grassroots Day celebrations to promote and develop grassroots football. Our National Team players launching the logo of Blue Cubs on 15 May was special and when Blue Cubs will officially kick off on the pitch in June we can expect a very high level of energy and enthusiasm at the bottom of our pyramid.

The IWL and 2nd Division League have reached their business end. In Ahmedabad, the conduct of the IWL with a record number of teams has demonstrated that women's football is growing at a faster pace than ever and we could experience some mouth-watering performances from teams. This season of IWL can best be described as a qualification competition for next season's proper women's league for the first time. We now know the list of the eight teams that have qualified



for the IWL 2023-24 season. We will work closely with these teams to organise the first-ever proper league in women's football. No doubt, there were a few shortcomings this season. The weather in May is not friendly and accommodating 16 teams in one venue will always bring different levels of challenges. Cramping these many games in a shorter window also has its negative sides. The fact that for the first time, we know the full list of participating teams in the IWL before even the season starts puts us in a good situation to plan it together with teams to position the women's league at a better level and get the best out of everyone including the market.

We are at the final stages of preparation with our U-17 men's national team, our boys had a very high level of exposure in Madrid where we played six quality games and trained at the top-class facility, hosted by Atletico de Madrid. After concluding the Spain tour, the boys will be moving to Germany to play against Bundesliga youth teams. The two-week stop in Germany will give a different experience to our players and we are set to play two high-quality games before we finally land in Thailand for the AFC U-17 Championship 2023 starting on 15th June. The reports we have received from Madrid suggest that we can expect good performances from our youth side. Our boys have attracted the attention of international scouts, which is very encouraging for Indian football. Let's put all our energy and efforts to encourage our boys to do their best when they meet Vietnam, Uzbekistan and Japan in the AFC U-17 Championship in Thailand. With all our support, the Blue Colts can create history.

We are continuing to engage with our stakeholders in improving every aspect of Indian football. With FIFA's support, we have initiated the process of starting a Talent Development Scheme and when FIFA's technical team visited India earlier this month, we could bring all the top clubs and academies together to discuss the way forward to initiate 'Project Diamond', a project to redefine elite player development structure and a pathway to establish India as a talent hub for the world by 2047 and unearth a super talent who can be an iconic star player and prove to be a magnet for 1.42 billion Indians. The world will look into India as a land of high potential to mine talents with diamond features.

The new management at the Federation has crossed eight months of its tenure and it is heartening to experience that our team is only getting bigger and better and there is not a day when we are not able to take a step together with our stakeholders to improve Indian football. There is support, encouragement and assistance coming from every direction. There is a belief setting in that we are on a path to achieving greater success.



India drawn alongside Australia, Uzbekistan, Syria for AFC Asian Cup 2023

The Blue Tigers have qualified for successive Asian Cups for the first time in their history

India have been drawn in Group B of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, after the draw ceremony was conducted at the Qatar Opera House, in Doha, Qatar, on Thursday May 11, 2023.

The Blue Tigers, who are ranked 101 in the FIFA Rankings, are set to play Australia (ranked 29th), Uzbekistan (ranked 74th), and Syria (ranked 90th) in the tournament proper. AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey, Senior Men's National Team head coach Igor Stimac, and former Senior Women's Team head coach Maymol Rocky were present at the Qatar Opera House for the official draw ceremony.

Beginning from Pot 4, India were the first team to be drawn into Group B, gaining B4, after which they are successively placed alongside Syria (B3), Uzbekistan (B2) and Australia (B1), respectively

AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023™

FIXTURES

13 JANUARY 2024 | 17:00 IST
AUSTRALIA VS INDIA
AHMAD BIN ALI STADIUM

16 JANUARY 2024 | 20:00 IST
INDIA VS UZBEKISTAN
AHMAD BIN ALI STADIUM

23 JANUARY 2024 | 17:00 IST
SYRIA VS INDIA
AL BAYT STADIUM



Speaking ahead of the Official Draw Ceremony, Asian Football Confederation President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa said, *"The last time the AFC Asian Cup was played in Qatar was 12 years ago, and there has been great progress since then. We have also initiated key enhancements, there are 24 teams in the AFC Asian Cup now, a new trophy, and \$15 million in prize money. The impact is clear to see."*

"On behalf of the Asian football family, I would like to express our gratitude to the QFA and the LOC, and we also thank the 24 participating nations. The stage is now set for a truly memorable chapter in the history of the tournament. We wish all the teams the very best."

Former Senior Indian Women's Team head coach Maymol Rocky, who was present at the occasion, said, *"This is the first time that India has qualified for consecutive editions of the AFC Asian Cup, and it's a fantastic opportunity for our country to be back at this stage. I'm sure the team has prepared very well, and hope we can create history by qualifying for the Round of 16."*

The top two teams from each group will directly qualify for the Round of 16 of the AFC Asian Cup, while the four best third-placed teams will join them in the knockouts to make up the numbers.



Igor Stimac names 41-member squad for Bhubaneswar camp

India Senior Men's National Team head coach Igor Stimac named a 41-member squad for the National Camp ahead of the Hero Intercontinental Cup. The camp is set to get underway in Bhubaneswar on May 15, 2023, as the team prepares for the Hero Intercontinental Cup, which will take place June 9 onwards in the capital city of Odisha.

The Blue Tigers are on a preparation path for the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar next year and are set to play the Hero Intercontinental Cup in Bhubaneswar, before they move to Bengaluru to play the SAFF Championship, with both tournaments set to take place in June 2023.

India, who are placed at 101 in the FIFA Rankings, will face Lebanon (99), Vanuatu (164), and Mongolia (183). The Blue Tigers, earlier, had a great start to the year, winning the Hero Tri-Nation Cup in Imphal, Manipur, where they beat Myanmar (1-0) and the Kyrgyz Republic (2-0).

Goalkeepers: Vishal Kaith, Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Phurba Lachenpa Tempa, Amrinder Singh.

Defenders: Subhasish Bose, Pritam Kotal, Asish Rai, Glan Martins, Sandesh Jhingan, Naorem Roshan Singh, Anwar Ali, Akash Mishra, Chinglensana Konsham, Mehtab Singh, Rahul Bheke, Narender Gahlot.

Midfielders: Liston Colaco, Ashique Kuruniyan, Suresh Singh Wangjam, Rohit Kumar, Udanta Singh, Anirudh Thapa, Naorem Mahesh Singh, Nikhil Poojary, Yasir Mohammad, Ritwik Das, Jeakson Singh, Sahal Abdul Samad, Rahul KP, Lalengmawia Ralte, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Bipin Singh, Rowllin Borges, Vikram Partap Singh, Nandha Kumar, Jerry Mawihmingthanga.

Forwards: Manvir Singh, Sunil Chhetri, Sivasakthi Narayanan, Rahim Ali, Ishan Pandita.



Spain camp hardens mind and soul of India U-17 team

A mixed bag of results in Spain have prepared the team for a challenging AFC U-17 Asian Cup campaign in June

SOUMO GHOSH

Two wins, three losses, and a draw marked the end of the India U-17 Men's Team's training camp in Spain, as they build ahead to their AFC U-17 Asian Cup campaign in Thailand next month.

While these are a mixed bag of results for the U-17 boys as they now head to Germany, where they will camp for another two weeks, before heading to Thailand, it is a stage where the hardening of the mind and soul, and indeed, their bodies, is more important than the outcome of the matches.

Head coach Bibiano Fernandes, who did not have as many top-quality preparatory matches ahead of the qualifiers last year, sounds a much more satisfied man, as he puts in the last few touches on a team set to face the best in Asia in Group D – Vietnam (June 17), Uzbekistan (June 20), and Japan (June 23).

"I think the team looks much more set than we were last year before the qualifiers. The simple reason is that we have got so many practice matches this time, and the confidence is growing in the boys with each passing game," said Fernandes.



The India U-17s have played Atletico de Madrid U-17 (4-1), Leganes U-18 (0-2), Atletico Madrelino U-16 (2-1), Real Madrid U-17 (3-3), Getafe U-18 (1-3), and Atletico de Madrid U-18 (0-4) in their six training matches in Spain.

"We are going to face Japan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam in the Asian Cup, and they are indeed some big names in the continent. One of the things I've noticed is that even if you are good enough on the pitch, you can lose the matches in your head itself when playing a big opponent. In that regard, I think the boys have been well-prepared," said Fernandes.

"They have played some of the biggest clubs in Spain, clubs that many of them are also fans of, and I can say that we have played these matches with our heads held high," he said. *"They know how to not get bogged down against big names, and that is a very important lesson."*

While the two wins against the two junior teams of Atletico de Madrid will stick out as huge positives, a 3-3 draw against Real Madrid is also a result that has been much talked about. However, Fernandes is not one to dwell on post results.

"Yes, that was a good game against Real Madrid, and the boys played really well. But you are only as good as you perform on the pitch on a given day. We have lost the two matches after that, and it is up to us to work on the mistakes we have made and dish out better performances in Germany, in the next couple of weeks," said Fernandes.



Graciously hosted in Spain

Camped for the better part of a month in the Iberian Peninsula, the Blue Colts have had the opportunity to use some of the best facilities on offer by Atletico de Madrid.

"The facilities we have received in Spain have been top class. Right from the grounds to the gyms, the training centres, the boys have really put everything to good use," he said. "The youth coaches at Atletico, including Fernando Torres also came down to train the boys on occasions, and they really enjoyed the sessions.

"I am sure they have taken a lot from our time here, and it will go on to help them in the future."

In the last week of the India U-17 team's camp in Spain, the squad was taken to spectate a training session of the Atletico de Madrid senior team, conducted by Diego Simeone.

"That was a surreal experience for everyone. The boys got to see their heroes and the coaching staff, and I am sure they also learnt a few things. Spain has been very kind to us, but now it is time to move forward. We have exactly a month before our first match in the U-17 Asian Cup, and we want to use the next two weeks in Germany to the fullest," said Fernandes.



Federation declares PK Banerjee's birth anniversary as AIFF Grassroots Day

The Indian legend's birth anniversary, coincidentally also the Federation's Foundation Day, was marked with celebrating grassroots events across the country

June 23, the birth anniversary of Pradip Kumar Banerjee, India's captain in the 1960 Rome Olympics and popularly known as PK, will henceforth be celebrated as 'AIFF Grassroots Day', All India Football Federation announced on Friday, May 12, 2023.

Explaining the reason behind choosing PK's birthday, AIFF Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said it is a well-known fact that PK was an exemplary footballer, who played a pivotal role in India's historic Gold Medal finish in the 1962 Asian Games.

"However, we often forget Pradip da was a teacher par excellence too. Once he hung up his boots, he took up coaching and for the next 30 years, produced an array of players, who excelled at the National and International levels. While his role as a National and a club coach is much discussed, the Indian football fraternity cannot forget PK da's contribution at the grassroots level, his leadership at the Tata Football Academy, his ability to inspire and fine-tune the budding talents whenever with the junior national teams."



In 1969, when FIFA ran its first coaching course in Japan under German coach Dettmar Cramer, known as the 'Football Professor' in the international circuit, PK enrolled himself for the course and returned home with a First-Class degree.

The AIFF Grassroots Day is in keeping in line with the Strategic Roadmap 'Vision 2047', which seeks to increase grassroots participation in the country. The aim is to engage 35 million children in football by 2026 and up to 100 million by 2047. The Federation has announced the Blue Cubs programme which will collaborate with NGOs, schools, clubs, academies as well as various other stakeholders to expand the grassroots ecosystem.

AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey paid homage to PK Banerjee while announcing the AIFF Grassroots Day and said the Federation would strive to honour his memory by ensuring the constant growth of the game.

"No words I use will be enough to honour Pradip da's contribution to Indian Football," he said. "He deserves all our appreciation. There are a rare few like him, a great player, a great mentor and a great coach who was filled with passion and always wanted to see Indian Football rise. Celebrating his birthday as the grassroots day is a tribute from our end to recognise his contribution to the game."

Dr Prabhakaran emphasised its importance to the Blue Cubs programme itself. "We want more children to take part in the game and the Blue Cubs project is keyed towards increasing participation at the grassroots level.

"That in itself will also be another way for us to honour the legend PK Banerjee. It is perfect to celebrate grassroots day on his birthday because his contribution to Indian Football is huge. In this way, we will recognize his contribution to Indian Football as well as grow football at the grassroots, create a vibrant culture and develop a good ecosystem for the sport in India."

Born on June 23, 1936 in Jalpaiguri, Banerjee is widely regarded as one of India's greatest footballers and was India's highest goalscorer with four goals en route to Gold Medal in 1962 Asian Games. In a glittering international career, Banerjee played two Olympics (1956, 1960) and three Asian Games (1958, 1962, 1966) and was the first footballer to receive the prestigious Arjuna Award in the year of its inception, 1961. He was conferred with Padma Shri in 1990. In 1969, when FIFA ran its first coaching course in Japan under German coach Dettmar Cramer, known as the 'Football Professor' in the international circuit, PK enrolled himself for the course and returned home with a First-Class degree. Among many first he achieved as a coach was a football coaching course he ran on Doordarshan for many weeks. He passed away on March 20, 2020, in Kolkata.



Odisha's Hero Super Cup of Dreams

The Bhubaneswar side beat Bengaluru FC 2-1 in the final in Kozhikode to clinch their first-ever silverware

SOUMO GHOSH & AKHIL RAWAT

The Hero Super Cup might have returned after four years - in a different format and in a different location, but its love affair with Bhubaneswar still continued. The first two editions were held at the Kalinga Stadium, and this year when the cup was taken to Kerala, its return journey to the Odisha capital was already scripted in its fate.

Tuesday, April 25, 2023, was etched into the history books of Odisha FC at the EMS Corporation Stadium in Kozhikode. With a 2-1 victory over Bengaluru FC in the final, the Bhubaneswar-based side were crowned Hero Super Cup champions, their first-ever silverware.

"This is history - Odisha are champions. It's a great night and we're very happy. I scored two goals to help the team win, and I'm the best player of the tournament. It's very special," said an emotional Diego Maurício, who netted five goals, including two in the final. *"For me, it's the best season of my life,"* reckoned the Brazilian.

The breakthrough came in dramatic fashion for Odisha in the 23rd minute of the final as Gurpreet Singh Sandhu made a hash of what should've been a routine collection from a harmless-looking Maurício free-kick. The Brazilian's shot was aimed straight at the Bengaluru custodian, who had his entire body behind the ball but let it slip out of his hand and trickle past the goalline.

'Lucky', some might say, but Maurício was in charge of his own luck that night. He would go close again just a few minutes later, heading a Jerry Mawihmingthanga cross wide of the far post. But there was no stopping Odisha's talisman the next time of asking as he made it 2-0 seven minutes before half-time. It all started with a diagonal ball from Víctor Rodríguez to pick out Jerry on the right, who headed it across the face of the goal. Maurício, racing past his marker Sandesh Jhingan, tapped it in with Gurpreet wrong-footed.



"It's always great to be on the scoresheet because scoring goals isn't easy. I have top teammates behind me who set me up with passes. I work hard, and they help me work hard as well," said Maurício.

But there was plenty of time still to go. The Odisha touchline was a sea of activity during the entire final. Head coach Clifford Miranda, along with his assistants and support staff, stayed busy as they egged their players on with much excitement. They were, after all, 2-0 up. The last few minutes of the match were a nervy affair in the dugout, as Bengaluru pulled one back through a Sunil Chhetri penalty and threatened to draw level in injury time.

But Clifford Miranda was also destined to make history, becoming the first Indian coach to win the Hero Super Cup. The animated former India international was seen vigorously passing on instructions to his players, while also impatiently asking the match officials when the final whistle would come. Once it did come, Miranda, who apparently wore his heart on his sleeves for five matches in the Hero Super Cup, rushed into the pitch to hug each one of his 11 players.

"I am so happy, I can't begin to describe the feeling. This is the first trophy for the club, and I hope there will be many more to come," Miranda said once the celebrations died down, long after the game. *"This club deserves this trophy, the amount of work that has gone into building this team, every step of the way, makes this moment all the more special."*

Becoming the first Indian coach to win a major trophy for a Hero Indian Super League club, Miranda was very quick to transfer all the credit to his players.

"This victory is all down to the players, it would not have been possible without them," he said. *"The way they responded to the tactics was simply fantastic. They just did everything that we asked of them. Even in the final, where we asked them to change the way they play, with just one day of training, it was just amazing how they responded and came up with the goods."*

The Super Cup victory came with an extra prize - a Hero Club Playoff game for qualification for the 2023-24 AFC Cup Group Stage. Just four days after the final, Odisha FC lined up again, aiming to reach the continental stage for the first time ever. Up against them were the home side Gokulam Kerala FC, but Miranda's men were too strong for them. Hat-trick hero Diego Maurício's masterclass blew another opposition away, to sum up what had been a sensational month for Odisha FC, to say the least.



The Indian coach who helped Odisha climb the Hero Super Cup cliff

Clifford Miranda, the first Indian coach to win a trophy with an ISL Club, hopes to set a new precedent for his peers in the sport

SOU MO GHOSH

Not soon after the final whistle was blown in the Hero Super Cup final on April 25, did the Odisha FC players themselves, surround their head coach and lifted Clifford Miranda in unison to toss him into the Kozhikode night sky, once, twice, thrice? Perhaps more. Nobody was counting. People were just busy enjoying the moment they had been longing for.

It was not too long ago that the 40-year-old retired from football in 2017 and immediately went into coaching, to take over the FC Goa Reserves side which won the Goa Professional League under him. The Hero Super Cup triumph, however, holds a special place.

"I had won the Goa league with the FC Goa Reserves, which was my first trophy as a coach, but this win is the first for me at the national level, and I can't describe how happy I am. It's a wonderful moment, for the club, its fans, the players and staff, for myself and my family," he said.

Not many would have given Odisha FC much of a chance to even make it out of the group stage, let alone win the trophy. Yet, here they are, with their first silverware, and having a chance of making it to the AFC Cup next year.

"It's a brilliant prospect for this club. We have to win one more match and we can play in Asia, which will be brilliant for everyone. It would mean a lot for everyone associated with the club to be able to compete at that level," he said.

Miranda has been leading the cause for the Indian coaches since taking over the reins at Odisha but believes that it is something that all coaches from the country should prove to the world, rather than wait for their opportunities.

"I hope this increases the belief that club owners have in Indian coaches. Having said that, I also think that as Indian coaches, the onus is upon us to get better and work harder. It is one thing to say that we are not given opportunities, but we must be able to convince the club owners and the decision-makers that we are capable of doing good things," said Miranda.

"We will only start getting these chances when the owners see that we are capable, and for that, we need to do more than what we are doing presently. There are examples of foreign coaches that have come in, who are maybe not quite at the same level as the Indian coaches, but can convince the owners that they are the right people to take the team forward," said Miranda. "So it is up to us to work twice as hard as every other coach out there and to convince the club owners and officials that we are the ones that deserve the opportunities.





"We also need to be technically very well informed. It's not just the owners that you need to convince, it's the players too. They are very well informed these days, and they do ask questions about what could work and what could not – both Indian and foreign players. We should be able to direct them, to guide them in a proper manner," he said.

"Step by step, the club has built on a solid foundation in Bhubaneswar. The Odisha Government has helped a lot in terms of providing great infrastructure and training facilities. I believe they are the best in India," said Miranda. "It's not just football, but the state is supporting so many different sports like hockey as well.

"That, along with the step-by-step building of the team over the last year, has helped us a long way," he said. "But this club still has a long way to go. Our youth development needs to be more robust, we need to improve our scouting as well. If we concentrate on these aspects, this club can go very far," he said.

Odisha FC have come a long way since playing their first Hero ISL season in 2019-20, and Miranda believes that the support his club has received from the Government of Odisha has been indispensable in pushing the club forward.



Nandha Kumar scripts history for Odisha FC

Odisha's long-serving winger tastes first success with the club, his scoring boots the key to unlocking many crucial games in the tournament

AKHIL RAWAT

Just over an hour into the second semi-final of the Hero Super Cup at the Payyanad Stadium, Odisha FC and NorthEast United FC were locked at 1-1 when Nandha Kumar probed into the latter's penalty area from the left wing. With a well-weighted pass, he picked out Víctor Rodríguez, who deftly backheeled the ball back to Nandha. Nandha didn't have to break stride and side-footed it first time. Off the underside of the crossbar and into the net it went. What a beauty.

It was Nandha Kumar's second goal of the night and fourth in as many matches in the Hero Super Cup. He was named the Hero of the Match for this sensational goal and a first-half header, which was an absolute poacher's finish. Another clinical night from Nandha secured a historic win for Odisha, who then went on to beat Bengaluru FC and lift the Hero Super Cup, the first title in their history.



"It was a very tough game. We conceded an early goal, but everyone gave their hundred percent, and we were able to make the comeback," said Nandha.

Odisha made a thing of comebacks in the Hero Super Cup. In their last group-stage game, they overturned a one-goal deficit at half-time to defeat Hyderabad FC 2-1 and qualify for the semi-finals. Also, in their opening match, Nandha's second-half equaliser earned them a valuable point against East Bengal FC.

The Tamil Nadu-born winger, who has been part of Odisha FC since their very first Hero ISL season in 2019-20, stressed on the importance of the final before the game, *"A first-ever trophy will be historical for Odisha FC. Everyone has been waiting for this moment - reaching the final and winning the cup. The club, management and the players are very happy."*

The Bhubaneswar outfit qualified for the Hero ISL play-offs for the first time this season, with Nandha Kumar playing a big role in his side's sixth-place finish. He was the club's second-highest scorer with six goals, behind Golden Boot winner Diego Maurício, who netted 12. With four in the Hero Super Cup and one in the Durand Cup last year, Nandha's tally of 11 marked his best-ever scoring season.

"I'm so happy about my scoring form. I'm getting help from my teammates to score goals, and I help the team to win games with my goals," said the grateful 27-year-old.

A national team call-up from head coach Igor Stimac was a fitting reward for Nandha, who will now hope to earn his first India cap at the Hero Intercontinental Cup at none other than the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar next month.



Shooting Range

HERO SUPER CUP 2023







Odisha FC and ATK Mohun Bagan seal spots in AFC Cup

In contrasting fashion and running different waves of form, Odisha FC and ATK Mohun Bagan confirmed their spot in the AFC Cup Group Stage and Preliminary Rounds respectively

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

Odisha FC and ATK Mohun Bagan took contrasting routes to win their Hero Club Playoff games and seal a spot in the AFC Cup 2023-24 Group Stage and preliminary round respectively. While Odisha rode their red hot HEro Super Cup form to handily beat Gokulam Kerala 3-1, ATK Mohun Bagan went through the ordeals of a shootout to prevail against Hyderabad FC.

Insofar as Aprils go, Odisha have enjoyed a spring unlike any other. They laid siege to Kozhikode and having won the Hero Super Cup, put a continental cherry on a brilliant cake. It didn't take long for them to do so either, as they stamped their authority on the game against Gokulam Kerala right from the referee's whistle. They were quicker on the ball and even more authoritative without it.



The first chance, ironically though, didn't fall their way. Gokulam, who played most of the game as a counter-attacking unit, came at them through a Thahir Zaman corner, perfectly curled for Aminou Bouba in the six-yard area. The Cameroonian put his header high and wide.

Very soon Gokulam were made to pay for their errors, in more ways than one. In the 18th minute from a seemingly innocuous throw-in on the left touchline, Nandha Kumar dummied, Victor Romero spun and Diego Mauricio was through one-on-one. The Brazilian finished to notch his 20th goal in all competitions and give Odisha the lead. It was a goal that was built on simplicity, but also exposed a Gokulam defence that had gone to bed.

Suddenly Odisha started running riot, Mauricio, Mawihmingthanga and Romero combining to create a host of opportunities and keep the Gokulam defence on their toes. In the 31st minute, Mauricio got his second, dribbling but also bulldozing his way through Gokulam's left side to double the lead.

The second woke up Gokulam, and roused them from their inept slumber into something resembling passing football. Suddenly Zaman and Sergio Mendigutxia were playing combinations and throwing Odisha's comfortable defence off their game. When the goal arrived in the 36th minute, it came off the head of Farshad Noor, Zaman doing all the work on the right before delivering a perfect cross home.

To Odisha's relief, half time arrived just as the game's momentum had shifted, giving them a chance to breathe and reset. And reset they did, surging into halftime imperious again. Pawan Kumar needlessly tugged on and brought down Diego Mauricio on the edge of the box in the 52nd minute, giving Odisha a penalty and a chance to restore their two-goal cushion. Mauricio didn't miss it. His 22nd goal of the season was enough for Odisha to regain momentum and see the game out.

ATK Mohun Bagan win shootout prize

In keeping with ATK Mohun Bagan and Hyderabad FC encounters this season, the game provided a lot of action but



little in terms of goals. Dimi Petratos and Joel Chianese scored the goals for ATK Mohun Bagan and Hyderabad FC, respectively, before the game went into the penalty shootout, where Joao Victor was the only player to score for Hyderabad while Petratos, Liston Colaco, and Kiyan Nassiri netted their respective penalties for ATK Mohun Bagan. Meanwhile, Sahil Tavora, Chianese, Odei Zabala missed their respective penalties for Hyderabad.

Hyderabad were the ones who started off the quicker of the two, controlling the game and also passing the ball with pace in midfield, Mohammed Yasir and Joao Victor the architects of everything good for them.

ATK Mohun Bagan, though, have been known to punish even the slightest of errors and so it proved, when against the run of play to some extent, they opened the scoring. Hugo Boumous dribbled into the box from the right, before cutting the ball back on the top of the six-yard box to Dimi Petratos, who slammed it into the roof of the net to give ATK Mohun Bagan the lead.

Hyderabad, to their credit, did not let their heads drop, and if anything, took more control of the ball, constantly switching flanks, patiently building up play. The equaliser arrived two minutes before halftime. Borja was the supplier, cutting the ball back from the byline for Chianese to apply the finish.

Chances were few and far between in the second half, with the best of the lot falling to Chianese in injury time. This time the Australian shot wide from six yards, when perhaps putting it in the goal was easier. The tense finish and some tough and close refereeing calls led to tempers flowing at the final whistle. It eventually led to a red card for Hyderabad FC head coach Manolo Marquez, who was dismissed to the stands.

Both teams were cautious in extra time, the fear of making an error superseding the need to find a winner. Despite Anuj pulling off one superb save off Carl McHugh, it wasn't enough for Hyderabad, whose players collapsed in agony, missing out on a chance at history. For ATK Mohun Bagan, as has become their wont in recent years, the AFC Cup Preliminary Round beckons.



Young Tigresses make it to AFC U17 Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 2

Two hard-fought wins against hosts Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar saw the India U-17 team qualify for Round 2 of the qualifiers to be played in September

NAVANEETH K

The India U17 Women's National team spent some anxious moments before emerging 2-1 winners against Myanmar in their concluding AFC U-17 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers Round 1 tie on Friday, April 28, 2023 to seal their spot in Round 2 of the Qualifiers.

The team had earlier beaten the hosts Kyrgyz Republic, 1-0. In that game, Shibani Devi scored the all-important goal in the 77th minute. It was a low cross from the left by Viksit Bara that slipped under the hands of Kyrgyz goalkeeper Violetta Dudochkina before Sibani Devi raced at the far post and slammed it in.



Myanmar and India had both beaten the Kyrgyz Republic 1-0 and so their clash became a virtual final to determine the group winners.

The team treated it as such, racing out of the blocks hard and fast. The Indian girls looked strong from the beginning as the attacking trio of Menaka Devi, Sulanjana Raul and Pooja combined well to wreak havoc in the rival area and open the defence time and again. That Myanmar conceded two goals in a span of seven minutes spoke volumes about the dominance of Young Tigresses.

It was Sulanjana, who gave India the lead in the 26th minute after Sonibia Devi's attempt was saved by Myanmar goalkeeper Thu Zar Aung, but the rebound fell perfectly for Sulanjana to send it home with all the time in the world.

India doubled the lead seven minutes later from a counter-attack when Sibani Devi raced from the right to square the ball for Pooja to tap the ball in. Myanmar threatened to make a comeback when Ya Min Phyu reduced the margin for them in the 75th minute from a free kick – a momentary lapse by Indian custodian Anisha Oraon contributed to the goal to some extent.

The last 15 minutes turned out to be a tense affair as Myanmar pressed hard for the equaliser, but the Indian defence stood tall to thwart the rival attackers. During this period, Myanmar, looking for the elusive goal, turned physical at times and two of their players – Yu Yu Naing and Ya Min Phyu – were given marching orders by the referee for some off-the-ball fouls, leaving them with nine players on the pitch in the last few minutes.

With the victory, India qualified from Group F for Round 2 of the tournament scheduled for September later this year. In the three-team group, India won both their matches against the Kyrgyz Republic and Myanmar and finished with six points.

A visibly delighted Priya said after the match: *"It was really a good game and my girls played extremely well. I am very happy for them."* She, however, made her intention clear of playing an attacking brand of football in Round 2 to be played in September. *"Our tactics will remain the same. We will continue to play attacking football. But we will sit down and make plans for Round 2,"* she said.



Shooting Range

AFC U-17 WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS - ROUND 1







Football, football! My kingdom for football, says Ritu Rani

Hardship, injuries, marriage, and patriarchy, nothing has stopped Ritu Rani from pursuing her passion for the beautiful game

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

The routine of an average young girl in the village of Alakhpura in Haryana, is rather banal; there is no escape from the humdrum of her life. Once she grows up and completes her education, marriage, followed by a predictable family life, remains the best accepted option, in most cases.

But then, before you form a definite opinion, meet Ritu Rani, the Indian Women's National Team footballer, who defied the age-old accepted norms and pursued a dream that she managed to achieve with distinction. From a very young age, Ritu dreamt of playing for the country and finally proved it was no hallucination.

Nothing could stop Ritu Rani from playing football. As a young girl, she played with boys in her village despite the elders and conservatives in society frowning at her. She ignored them all. As the years passed, Ritu grew in stature and found a place in the National Team. But once she got married, everyone thought it would be the end of her playing career. It simply didn't happen like that.



Ritu got married a year before she joined the National Team for the SAFF Women's Championship 2023, in Nepal. When asked whether she was expected to hang up her boots after marriage, Ritu said, *"Playing football is as important as marriage and family life."*

"I agreed to get married only after my husband said he would allow me to pursue my dream. His family members also supported me and allowed me to continue playing. My husband is my biggest cheerleader and helps me in every possible way. Whenever I am training at home, he will follow me and join me in the sessions," Ritu revealed to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com) with a laugh.

"I am not going to quit playing football just because I am married now. I can't live without football. It's simple. People should realise there is nothing abnormal about it," adds Ritu.

An ardent follower of Serena Williams, Ritu argues that if the legend of women's tennis can continue to play after being a mother, then why do people in India have the problem of girls playing football in our country?

"People always have this misconception that once a girl gets married, she should stop doing what she once loved to do. Why should this be the case anyway? Everyone has the freedom to live the way they want to and I think it's high time society changed the way they look at things," said the National Team defender.

Ritu does admit she was lucky to some extent. *"I remember how supportive my parents had been throughout my journey. It wasn't easy for them either. People in our village used to talk behind our backs- 'Ladki hoke football?', but the most courageous thing my parents did was to always ignore them. For my part, I knew I loved the game dearly, and am still ready to give everything for it,"* she said.



Ritu played in the inaugural edition of the Hero IWL in 2017 and represented Alakhpura FC. She made her debut for the National Team in the same year for FIFA Friendly matches, but she suffered a knee injury that kept her out of the game for two years. She was back with the National Team after her recovery and played in the COTIF Cup. Since then, Ritu has been an integral part of the team.

"It's a different feeling altogether when I wear the national jersey. I always waited for the moment when people from my village could see me donning national colours and representing the country. It's all worth the wait," Ritu said.

Ritu has played in all the editions of the Hero IWL with different clubs and this season, she played for Mumbai Knights FC and scored a goal.

"Hero IWL has been an important tournament in my career. I get to learn every day from the players, coaches, and staff. Every season I try to perform my best because I know I have something to prove to the people in my state," she said.

"I hope people encourage their girls, married or unmarried, to pursue whatever they want to do. Society shouldn't try to stop them. Parents should motivate their children and bring them to the field to play football or any other sport they like. It will give them confidence, increase their willpower, and help them make their own decision," Ritu concluded.





Kajol Dsouza: The Pune girl who came in from the cold

The India U-20 forward has been the lynchpin of Sethu Madurai's attack in her debut Hero IWL season, scoring goals without abandon

VAIBHAV

Like any good striker Kajol DSouza cuts to the chase quickly. The conversation has turned to what bonds the young group of players at Sethu Madurai FC – the runners up in the Hero Indian Women's League last season. "We have a lot to prove," DSouza says. "It creates a stronger bond, just fighting for the same thing, the same goals and the same opportunities for our future."

Where a lot of other clubs have opted to sign big name India internationals, veterans with experience and versatile foreigners, Indian women's football's perennial club has opted for a change of style. They have focussed on youth, and many Young Tigresses from the current India U-20 side – a batch who played at the U-17 World Cup – form the crux of the unit.

DSouza, a part of that young core, has already scored nine goals in the league, four of them in the club's Hero IWL opener against Churchill Brothers where she also won the Player of the Match award. And she's happy to admit that she'd like to score some more, a fierce competitive spirit forged no doubt by her experiences as a young girl playing football in Pune.

"There are no women-only academies or coaching centres in Pune," she says. "I grew up playing small-sided games with boys. The small-sided games helped improve my technique. I had to react quicker, learn to get out of tough situations by thinking my way out of them, controlling the ball better... and playing with boys taught me how to overcome the physical disadvantage by using my brains."

Now, as she makes her debut at the top level of Women's Football in India, all those early life lessons have combined to give her an edge. Having only ever played with women who were her peers – in age as well as nationality – the Hero IWL has opened a new door, a new challenge and a new way to look at the game.

"It's a completely different challenge to play for a club," she says. "I'm super proud to have been signed by Sethu, and grateful for the chance of course. There is a different kind of pressure when you're playing day in and day out. You feel the pressure of performing every day. You're competing against others for a spot, and essentially for a job. I get to test myself as well as learn from the foreign players and the senior players. It's a real shift, and for me, who hasn't had much of that, valuable experience."





While playing with her brother's friends in Pune forms the core memory of her footballing childhood, DSouza's talent was obvious to those around her very soon. She joined the La Liga schools in Pune, as a teenager and in 2021 signed on with Parikrama FC when the club competed for qualification for the Hero IWL. It was while playing for Parikrama that she was scouted and included in the squad for the India U-17 team for the World Cup. There has been no looking back since.

"It's obviously the best moment of my life till now," she says. "Playing against international players, seeing them play in India, seeing that football has a chance to grow and as a footballer you can make a career out of this, it was very heartening." While the results didn't go the team's way, DSouza admits that it didn't take away from the experience itself.

What rankles though are results from the recent past, one shared in the Sethu dressing room by many others. DSouza was part of the India U-20 side that were knocked out of the AFC U-20 Women's Asian Cup Qualifiers on goal difference by hosts Vietnam. It was a tough pill for all of them to swallow, and DSouza admits that it's a common experience that is driving her teammates ahead.

"It still hurts," she admits. "And there's many of us in the dressing room who were part of that experience. It still rankles to have gone out on goal difference. But it also motivates us, to do better, to keep getting better..."

And there's a lot of this motivation to spread around too. DSouza shyly admits that her success – breaking into the Indian Team and with the Hero IWL – has prompted a lot of queries from friends and followers in Pune asking for information on where girls can train in the city. *"When I was growing up there weren't many players to look up to, from Pune," she says. "But now I'm happy to help more girls play the game from there. Lots of people get in touch, and I hope to help them, help the youngsters interested also in whatever way I can."*



Five contenders, two spots: Hero 2nd Division League in full swing

The season began with the Qualifiers in February and will end with the Final Round on May 26

AKHIL RAWAT

The 2022-23 Hero 2nd Division League is at a crucial juncture, with five teams currently battling it out for two spots in next year's Hero I-League. Delhi FC, Ambernath United Atlanta FC, FC Bengaluru United, United Sports Club and Shillong Lajong FC have qualified for the Final Round after progressing from the group stage, which began in mid-March and ended in late April. Before that, Shillong Lajong and Downtown Heroes emerged as the top two sides from the Qualifiers held in February in Kokrajhar.

In Group A, Delhi FC, who finished third in the 2021 Hero I-League Qualifiers, finished as toppers and qualified for the final round, pipping Downtown Heroes FC, Jagat Singh Palahi FC and Techtro Swades United FC in a closely-contested group.



The capital side, playing out of the Minerva Academy Ground in Chandigarh, got off to a slow start after losing two of their first three games. But a four-game winning run got Delhi FC back on track before a 1-1 draw with Downtown Heroes on the last day proved enough to seal their place in the final five.

In Group B, former Hero I-League regulars United SC and Shillong Lajong FC had quite a tussle to top the group, which lasted until the final day. Eventually, United, who last featured in the I-League in the 2013-14 season, wrapped up first place with a 3-2 win over The Diamond Rock FA in their last game.

However, there were no worries for Shillong Lajong as they also qualified for the final round courtesy of their 13 points in six games which was enough to help them finish as the best runners-up across all four groups. The Meghalaya side were relegated from the Hero I-League in the 2018-19 season.

Group C saw FC Bengaluru United finish five points clear of closest challengers Golden Threads FC. Built on a strong defence, with just five goals conceded in their eight games, Fernando Santiago Varela's side are targetting a first-ever promotion to the Hero I-League. 21-year-old striker Irfan Yadwad was the highlight of the group stage, netting 11 out of Bengaluru United's 21 goals.

Group D witnessed the most nail-biting and dramatic finish of all groups. Hero 2nd Division League debutants Ambernath United Atlanta scored a last-minute winner against ARA FC to win 2-1 on the final day and thus, edged the Ahmedabad-based side to finish top of the table based on a better head-to-head record. Also present in the group were five-time Hero I-League/NFL champions Dempo SC, whose tally of 14 points was only enough for third place.

The Hero 2nd Division League Final Round kicked off on May 6, with Shillong Lajong edging United SC 2-1 at home and Bengaluru United riding on another Yadwad goal to beat Delhi FC 1-0 at the Bangalore Football Stadium. On the second matchday five days later, Ambernath United Atlanta opened their final round campaign at the Cooperage with a 1-0 win over Bengaluru United, while Delhi FC picked up their first point with a goalless draw against Shillong Lajong in Chandigarh.

The Final Round is being contested in a single round-robin format, and each team is set to play two games each home and away. The top two sides after the conclusion of the Final Round on May 26 will be promoted to the 2023-24 Hero I-League.



Federation names 31 probables for National Futsal camp

The All India Football Federation named a list of 31 players for the pre-camp to be organised for the AFC Futsal Asian Cup Qualifiers to be held in October. The venue and dates for the camp will be announced later.

This is the first time India will take part in the AFC Futsal Asian Cup. The probables for the pre-camp were selected from the Hero Futsal Club Championship, which was organised successfully in Delhi in February 2023. Federation Secretary General Dr Shaji Prabhakaran said: *"In line with our Vision 2047, developing Futsal in India is also an important element and by creating the National Futsal Team we will be able to boost the development of Futsal in a big way."*

"These scouted players for the national camp will make history as this is the first time we will have a National camp for Futsal and participate in the AFC Futsal Asian Cup. We are confident that we will be able to create an encouraging prospect for the development of Futsal in India, and with the National Team, we will see significant involvement of our stakeholders in Futsal," the Secretary General added.

The probables for pre-camp:

Goalkeepers: Mohammed Ibadullah Khan, Augustin Savio D'Mello and Jagdish.

Outfield players: Ibrahim Ali, Shakir Umair, Zubair Bin Sultan, Mohammed Jawaad Hussain, Lalrinsanga Khawhrling, Lalsangkima, Raisen Tudu, Isac Zomuanpuia, David Laltlansanga, Lalpekhluva, Kashinath Subhash Rathod, Nikhil Mali, Jayesh Sutar, Abhay Gurung, Shamsad Ali, Sachin Patil, Sandeep Oraw, Rajanbir Singh, Felixson Conny Fernandes, Rajnish Rana, Bijoy Gusai, Aman Shah, Shibu Sunny, Tapi Hakhe, Nabam Peri, Techhi Tatra, Renedy Meitei Yumnam and Priyanshu.



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