



June 19, 2023

VISION 2047

T A R G E T 2 0 2 6



**"A STEP AHEAD WITH
INTERCONTINENTAL WIN"**

- KALYAN CHAUBEY



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President's Note

Kalyan Chaubey

It gives me immense pleasure to extend my heartfelt congratulations to our Indian National Football Team for their remarkable victory in the Hero Intercontinental Cup 2023.

The tournament showcased India's growing ability to host world-class football, with the Kalinga Stadium in Odisha providing a magnificent stage for the world to witness our progress. The world-class infrastructure and the unwavering support from the fans created an electrifying atmosphere throughout the event.

The Odisha Chief Minister Shri Naveen Patnaik has been kind enough to announce a Rs 1 crore prize money for the Indian team, and I am sure everyone in the side is immensely thankful to him for it. The Government of Odisha is truly invested in growing sports through the state and indeed, the country. What they have invested to build top class infrastructure sets an example for all other states to follow.



This win is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our players, both seasoned veterans and the young talents who continue to shine brightly in the Indian contingent.

Looking ahead, we eagerly anticipate the upcoming SAFF Cup, scheduled to take place in Bengaluru. These tournaments play a crucial role in our preparations as we aim to build a formidable team ahead of the AFC Asian Cup early next year.

I want to express my gratitude to all the stakeholders, including the players, coaches, support staff, and our passionate fans, for their unwavering support and commitment towards the growth of Indian football. Let us continue working together to nurture and elevate the sport to new heights.

And now let's gear up for success in the SAFF 2022 that's kicks off in a few days.

Odisha paving the way with Intercontinental history

Dr. Shaji Prabhakaran
Secretary General, AIFF

Indian football and Odisha joined hands to create history on June 9, 2023. It was for the first time Odisha has hosted an international tournament involving India Senior Men's team at the Kalinga Stadium, and what a momentous occasion it turned out to be. Not only was the tournament hosted in a grand manner, but the ardent fans of Odisha also got to see our beloved Blue Tigers lift the Hero Intercontinental Cup after defeating Lebanon 2-0 in the final.

The Covid pandemic brought a halt to the Hero Intercontinental Cup for three years in between. But now, it has returned with a bang in Odisha, a State which is continuously engaged in redefining the sporting landscape in India in many ways. The world-class facility which the Government of Odisha created for football as part of the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup 2022, has once again presented a perfect setting for hosting this important annual football event.

Three invited teams, Mongolia, Vanuatu and Lebanon have certainly presented the required match experiences to Blue Tigers to start their preparations for the AFC Asian Cup 2023 in Qatar next year. For the first time, our national team met Mongolia and Vanuatu, which proved to be a different set of experiences for our players. They may be lower-ranked sides as per FIFA rankings, but we clearly witnessed they were no pushovers and provided us with an opportunity to evaluate our strengths.

The Hero Intercontinental Cup was also the start of a unique journey, something the Indian senior men's team have never experienced in the last seven-plus decades. Now the team have moved to Bengaluru for the SAFF Cup and from then on, it will be a non-stop action for the boys as they will also play the King's Cup and the Merdeka Cup before going to the National camp again to further sharpen their skills for the battle royal in Qatar.



This is where we are trying to put our focus and set the priorities. National teams are our prime assets and we need to do everything possible to present an encouraging set of opportunities to the players to transform the football landscape to one, where India becomes a top football-playing nation in Asia by our 100th year of Independence.

Our India U-17 men's team are currently in the middle of their campaign in the AFC U-17 Championship 2023 in Thailand. It again reflects our commitments towards our national youth side, where our players got top-class exposure in Spain and Germany before landing in Thailand early this month. In Europe, our players gained tremendous experience by playing against top talents and that made our team and players gain a new level of confidence and belief in their own ability and play a fearless brand of football.

We might achieve something remarkable for Indian Football if we manage to end up among the top four in Asia and qualify for the FIFA U-17 World Cup for the first time on merit. No matter what would be the final outcome, we will continue to invest significantly in our youth sides to create talent pools to take Indian Football in the direction set under our Strategic Roadmap Vision 2047.



We have successfully concluded the season 2022-23 and we congratulate our all stakeholders, particularly MAs and clubs for their wonderful achievements and for playing their part in the development of football.

Our special congratulations to Shillong Lajong FC and Delhi FC for their promotions to the Hero I-League with remarkable performances in the Hero 2nd Division League, where we witnessed some fierce competition till the last match day. For Delhi FC, it is going to be their maiden season in the Hero I-League and for Shillong Lajong, a comeback story after a few years of absence from the top tier football. The promotions of both the clubs will add a different dimension to Hero I-League and we can expect some transformational steps in the I-League to boost the value of club football in India.

On June 23, we will not only celebrate the AIFF Foundation Day, but also the first-ever AIFF Grassroots Day. This is going to be a very special year as we will celebrate the birthday of our legend Mr. PK Banerjee's birth anniversary as our Grassroots Day to bring greater focus to grassroots football. With the launch of Blue Cubs, our flagship grassroots programme, we have made our intention clear that we want to broaden our grassroots base and strengthen our football foundation like never before.

Nothing succeeds like success. We can soon expect our ranking to move into two digits and the day is not far when we will cross our best-ever FIFA ranking of 94. But then, more than ranking, our main focus is to stay better prepared and deliver quality games against higher-ranked sides like Syria, Uzbekistan and Australia in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

There are challenges, especially in the area of the funding gap. We are working with a strategy to overcome this very important challenge, and when we talk of this one challenge, we can never forget the support we receive from our marketing partners, FSDL. We are trying to find solutions to each of the issues and make every attempt to provide value to each of the brands associated with us through our marketing partners. We have already achieved a better inflow of funds from the Union Government this time, compared to the last financial year. It is our endeavour to increase the value of football through transparent functioning and improving governance mechanism to position the game as one which demonstrates value proposition.

In the end, we shouldn't take away our eyes and ears from the ground to get honest feedback from our stakeholders and particularly from fans and member associations. It is our teamwork that would position our football at a higher pedestal and teamwork is always the result of an open-minded dialogue and taking criticism positively to course correct wherever applicable.

Let's build together the dream of a billion to transform football in India with absolute integrity towards the beautiful game and our beloved motherland.



The Blue Tigers' Odisha odyssey

A supreme second half performance means the Blue Tigers reclaimed their Hero Intercontinental Cup title at the Kalinga Stadium

Akhil Rawat

The Blue Tigers had landed in Bhubaneswar for the first time. There were still more than three weeks to go before the start of the Hero Intercontinental Cup. Toiling away every day in trying conditions, India were camped in preparation for a long and testing month of football, with the SAFF Championship to come immediately following the four-nation meet in the Odisha capital.

For Sunil Chhetri, it was 'strange' that the Indian Senior Men's Team had never previously played in Odisha, which is dubbed as the 'Sports Capital of India'. And on Sunday evening, when the skipper had the trophy in his grasp, mission Odisha was fulfilled. With every passing game, the state got more and more hooked to the Blue Tigers. Attendances soared each day, drum beats became louder, and chants were incessant.

India didn't just win the Hero Intercontinental Cup, they dominated it. Four matches, five goals, none conceded. Less than two minutes into the first game against Mongolia, Sahal Abdul Samad lashed the ball home to hand India the perfect start at the Kalinga Stadium. Lallianzuala Chhangte added another a few minutes later, exactly what he would also go on to do in the final in nine days' time. Two poacher's goals, both proving to be insurance strikes to solidify the wins.

There were two protagonists in the tournament. Both high-profile names - Sunil Chhetri and Sandesh Jhingan. The latter was a rock at the back, to keep it as plain as possible. Nothing, and nobody managed to get past the sturdy defender. And nobody deserved the Hero of the Tournament Award more than him.

Jhingan earned his 50th Blue Tigers cap after the win over Vanuatu, and if the next two games were going to be a far bigger test against Lebanon, he was only going to pass them with flying colours. Flying into challenges, making brave blocks, harrying attackers away from his goal, you name it, he did it. The complete centre-back package.

As far as Chhetri is concerned, there isn't much he usually does on the pitch, which is new to him. An exceptional day was June 12, when he scored the 80th-minute winner against Vanuatu. He might've broken hundreds of deadlocks previously, but this one was unique, as it had meanings rooted beyond the football pitch.

With a ball-inside-the-shirt celebration, and a flying kiss to his wife in the stands, Chhetri made it known to the world that the couple is expecting a baby. "The cliché holds its way. We had to announce it like this," he smiled. Odisha will never forget Chhetri's first goal on its soil. And neither would Chhetri, who may have 87 international goals, but that one will always hold a special place in his heart.

The tournament's final was a tension-filled affair in the first 45 minutes. India were dominating with the ball, creating chances, and getting into dangerous areas, but were somehow unable to test Lebanese goalkeeper Ali Sabeh. A similar story had panned out three days earlier against the same opposition, and Stimac knew that his side could not afford any more missed opportunities.

At half-time, a switch was flipped. And 47 seconds after the restart, Chhetri got on the end of a swift and sensational move fabricated by Chhangte and Nikhil Poojary to put India ahead. After that, there was no looking back. Stimac played his cards right with the substitutions.

Chhetri, as he always does, handed over the silverware to a teammate to do the honours. The lucky one was Amrinder this time. Another unforgettable moment for the custodian, who won the Hero Super Cup for Odisha FC less than a couple of months ago, and now had the privilege to lift the Hero Intercontinental Cup into the Odisha sky at his club's home ground.



But the celebrations would not last long. There are bigger things ahead, and with the SAFF Championship kicking off with a clash against Pakistan in Bengaluru, there was no time to rest. "I've already forgotten this match. I'm looking forward to the Pakistan game," said Stimac in the post-match press conference, merely half an hour after the full-time whistle.

In the even larger scheme of things, the AFC Asian Cup, which stands less than seven months away, is what this is all building up to. The Bhubaneswar success is just a small part of the larger picture. A small step towards the nation's big dreams at the continent's biggest stage.



Anwar Ali: The man who came back from the abyss

A life in the beautiful game looked like a distant dream to Anwar Ali at one point, but the youngster has bounced back to become a mainstay at the heart of India's defence

SOUMO GHOSH

Three years ago, when the world was suffering from the mental stresses of a pandemic-induced lockdown, a young man from Adampur, Punjab, was also suffering mentally, albeit due to different reasons.

Centre-back Anwar Ali, till then, had had a promising career, coming through the ranks of junior football, and looked set as one of the brightest young defenders from India. However, he was soon diagnosed with a rare heart condition, by didn't of which he was advised by medical experts to not continue playing the game that he held so close to his heart.

"That was a very difficult phase of my life. Everything looked set before that – I had a good time in junior football, and was looking forward to playing the Hero ISL and maybe making the senior national team one day. But now I was being told that I could not play football anymore," Anwar told [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com).

“It was a very stressful time for me, and we were going door to door, in order to find different avenues for me to continue playing. There was a point when even I gave up, but my family supported me through the whole thing. I also had so much support from my club, and finally got the clearance to play in 2021,” he said.

“It’s not easy to come through such periods, but thankfully I had some very supportive people around me, who helped me through thick and thin,” said Anwar.

The promising career that once seemed to be derailed through no fault of Anwar’s, was soon back on track. After brief stints at Mohammedan Sporting and Delhi FC, Anwar got the opportunity to play at FC Goa in the Hero Indian Super League, before finally being called up to the Senior National Team for the AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers Third Round in 2022 in Kolkata.

“That was a big moment for me. Playing for the senior national team has always been a goal, ever since I was a kid, but getting the chance after all this struggle made it even more special,” he said. “But such hard times also make you wary and more levelheaded. I know that I must keep working hard in order to stay in the team. The Asian Cup next year is one of my targets, and I want to be in the squad when we play.”

Not only did he play a crucial role in helping India secure qualification for the AFC Asian Cup, but Anwar also had a moment of redemption when India lifted the Hero Tri-Nation Cup in Imphal, earlier this year – his first medal in international football.

“This last year has been nothing short of amazing. Coming from a point of absolute despair, to playing professional football again, and then playing for the national team, it’s been quite special. The Hero Tri-Nation was also a special moment for me personally. I have not yet won that many trophies in my career, and winning a medal for the National Team was a great feeling,” said Anwar.





The 22-year-old centre-back is currently with the Blue Tigers squad that is camping in Bhubaneswar, where the Indian team are training with infrastructural aid from the Government of Odisha. They are currently preparing for the Hero Intercontinental Cup (Lebanon, Vanuatu, Mongolia), which will get underway in the city from June 9. After the completion of the Hero Intercontinental Cup (on June 18), the Blue Tigers will shift base to Bengaluru, where they will participate in the SAFF Championship, where they have been grouped with Kuwait, Nepal, Pakistan.

“We are all really motivated for the two tournaments ahead. Everyone is focusing on the AFC Asian Cup, where we want to do well. Of course, we will be facing some very good sides, who have a lot of strong points, but we also have our own strengths, which we will of course, play to,” said he.

At the age of 22, Anwar has gone through some tough times in his career, and has emerged as a level-headed youngster who shows his calm in the back-four. However, the young man has faced his demons and has come back fighting in his career.

“We all face some struggles or the other, in our life. Some of us more than the others, but we should never give up. I was on the point of giving up, but had some very good people around me, who helped me out. I just hope the same for everyone else too,” he said.



Playing as a number six is what I like the most, says Apuia

India's young midfielder Apuia Ralte has progressed leaps and bounds since his own U-17 days

AKHIL RAWAT

The modern-day midfielder isn't just about good passing, playmaking and hard tackling. The ever-evolving game of football has demanded midfielders to convert themselves into tireless engines. Lalengmawia Ralte, better known as Apuia in the circuit, has been the definition of such a role in the Indian national team.

After a breakthrough 2020-21 campaign with NorthEast United FC, where he was named the Hero ISL Emerging Player of the Season, the Aizawl-born player, who learned his trade in All India Football Federation's I-League side Indian Arrows, earned his first senior team call-up in March 2021 and made his debut in a 1-1 draw with Oman in a friendly.

Apuia quickly gained prominence for his high work rate, neat footwork and fine reading of the game, all very crucial aspects of a contemporary midfielder. Flexibility on the pitch, according to the 22-year-old, is a very important asset for a midfielder. While with his current club Mumbai City FC, he is licensed to operate a bit further up the pitch, with the Blue Tigers, he has usually been the deepest-lying midfielder, sitting just above the two centre-backs.



"If I'm the coach, I would play myself as a number six," laughed Apuia. "But of course, it depends on what's the best for the team. I cannot just play wherever I want. The team is the most important thing. It doesn't matter if I'm playing as a number ten or a number eight, if the team wins, I'm always happy."

It's his composure on the ball which stands out the most. Apuia always wants the ball, build attacks, find spaces and release it for teammates. When out of possession, he is again key in breaking up attacks, covering up spaces and teaming up with the defence. In such a role, he doesn't get many opportunities to go forward in attack, but when he does, he always wants to make them count.

"Sure, I want to get more goals and assists. But even if I don't get that, I always want to help my team in such a way that my teammates play better," he said.

Speaking of teammates, Apuia is glad to have a number of his colleagues from the 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup side who have graduated to the senior team alongside him, like Anwar Ali, Suresh Singh Wangjam, Jeakson Singh and Rahim Ali. That obviously helps in their chemistry on the pitch.

"It's always good to have players you know better in the team. It's not easy to transition from the U-17s to the senior team because playing here is much more difficult. But having played with each other a lot helps us in confidence. We are always ready to help and support each other," shared Apuia.

"If there was no U-17 World Cup, there would be no Apuia. Because otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten the opportunity to play in the ISL and the senior national team as nobody would've heard about me," he said.

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Communication, preparation, acclimatisation key for Bibiano's boys

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

SOUMO GHOSH

It was just less than a year ago when dark clouds of doubt hovered over the India U-17 Men's National Team that was, at that time, participating in the SAFF U-17 Championship in Sri Lanka. A 1-3 loss in the last match of Group B against Nepal left Indian fans rather disappointed.

Fast forward another month, and not only had the Blue Colts won the SAFF U-17 Championship, beating the same Nepal side 4-0, but they had also sealed their berth on the continental stage, defeating the likes of the Maldives, Kuwait, Myanmar, and giving hosts, the mighty Saudi Arabia, a tough fight in the last match (a 1-2 defeat) in the qualifiers for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup.

On to the present day, and the same unit seems far more confident while taking on the junior teams of big clubs like Real Madrid, Atletico de Madrid, Getafe CF, UD Levante, VfB Stuttgart, and FC Augsburg in training games, as they now prepare for the tournament proper in Thailand next month. The question that plagues those closely following the matches of this particular team is, what changed? Was it really the flip of a switch?

The answer, from head coach Bibiano Fernandes, is a resounding 'no'.

“In a way, it is in our culture as Indians to be a bit reserved in certain situations, and that is one of the biggest things that my coaching staff and I work on with every batch that we are put in charge of,” said Fernandes. “It’s important to communicate with your teammates on and off the pitch in football, and that is a culture that we have had to cultivate every time. It’s very important that these players build that, so that they can be good players as they go ahead.”

Not every player in a team would be an extrovert, and it can be especially difficult when a new player comes into a team, feels the India U-17 coach. The coaching staff of the India U-17 Team has devised different off-the-field exercises to help the boys familiarise themselves with each other and break the ice, so to speak.

“We have some exercises like making them speak about themselves in front of the entire team. Once that kind of interaction happens, the players, even those who are introverts by nature, start opening up to the rest of the team, and then you see the results on the pitch,” he said.

While the core of the team that won the SAFF U-17 Championship and had a successful qualification campaign for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup last year remains the same, there have been a number of new players who have joined the team since November. However, in terms of mentality, the team has progressed in unison.

“I could see the change, especially when we went to Spain and Germany. Just in the way they carried themselves and interacted with each other and with the staff. It was really nice to see them all open up, to express themselves,” said Fernandes. “Now, even during the training sessions, if an instruction is given to them, they show their inquisitiveness, they ask questions, which I always want from them as a coach.





“It’s of no use if a coach explains things to them and it just goes over their heads. If they are asking questions, it means that they are thinking about the game, that they are trying to work it out in their heads, and that ultimately leads to comprehension,” he said. “When they understand and finally see it working out on the pitch, then they begin to trust the coach’s judgement even more.”

One of the ways that the India coaching staff is cultivating a healthier environment for the boys is by giving them a sense of responsibility on and off the pitch.

“We have been teaching the boys about taking responsibility for oneself. Nothing speaks better than what happens on the pitch, and they have learnt that in a game of football, every team member has to be responsible for his own role in order for the team to do well,” he said. “The boys have really taken to this approach in both training and in matches.”

In fact, the taste of the big responsibility has been rotated around the boys during the training matches in Spain and Germany, with the captain’s armband being donned by multiple players.

“Rotating the captain’s armband is just one example. Other than that, we also rotate responsibilities in the bus, in the hotel, or regarding equipment,” said Fernandes.

SPAIN, GERMANY TOUR PUT INDIA U-17S IN GOOD STEAD'

The Blue Colts have played training games against the junior teams of some of the best football clubs in Spain and Germany. However, the main focus remains, and possibly now intensifies on the AFC U-17 Asian Cup.

"As far as preparations go, the matches in Spain and Germany were two of the best that AIFF has organised as long as I've been a part of it," said Fernandes. "We played a lot of quality teams in Spain, and in Germany, teams like Stuttgart had a lot of players who were not only in the Bundesliga, but also in the junior Germany National Team."

The team also had the opportunities to be coached by local coaches at Atletico Madrid, VfB Stuttgart, and FC Augsburg, which ended up being a big learning experience.

"We had sessions on the training pitch from coaches in Spain and Germany, and also had some informative workshops where the boys learnt about nutrition and psychology. These are important aspects which they need to learn from this age itself," said Fernandes.

"Fernando Torres (former World Cup winner with Spain, and current head coach at Atletico Madrid Juvenil A) also paid us a visit during a training session in Spain, and the boys loved interacting with him. They picked the brains of these coaches, which was really pleasing to see."



THE ACCLIMATISATION FACTOR

The India U-17 Men's National Team has been on the road for a month and a half now, and after the completion of the matches in Germany are now in Thailand, where they are participating in the AFC U-17 Asian Cup.

"Going there two weeks ahead will be a big factor in terms of acclimatisation. Of course we got to play a lot of top level teams in Europe, but the conditions will be quite different in Thailand. The kind of surface where the matches will be played will also be different, so the two weeks will be very useful for us to acclimatise to the local conditions," said Fernandes.

India have been drawn in Group D of the championship, where they will face Vietnam (June 17), Uzbekistan (June 20), and Japan (June 23).

"After playing in Spain and Germany, I feel that the boys are not too far from the level where we need to be. We have worked very hard to get to the level, and it's now up to us to maintain that for the next few weeks," Fernandes said. "It's a tough group, but our goal still remains to get a few wins and emerge into the knockouts."

India's hawk-eyed coach has been closely following the fortunes of the three opponents over the months, and feels that his boys are hungry to do well in the tournament proper.

"We have played against Uzbekistan and Vietnam before, and they are, of course, good teams. Japan are a good team too, and they have quality players in every generation. They are playing somewhat of a different style this time, so it will be a different experience, but the boys are hungry to perform. I'm sure we'll have some good matches for India," he said.





India U-17s left-back Malemngamba Thokchom dazzled in the Group D opener of the AFC U-17 Asian Cup, scoring a fine goal against Vietnam

SOU MO GHOSH

The India U-17s were down; by one goal, to be precise. But they were not out. It was with a little over 20 minutes to go, with India relentlessly trying to get the equaliser, that Malemngamba Thokchom dropped back a few yards to collect a pass from Gurnaj Singh Grewal, thus creating some space in front of the Vietnam defenders at the Thammasat Stadium in Pathum Thani, Thailand, in their first match of Group D.

Seeing the opposition goalkeeper slightly out of position, Thokchom let one fly, fishing for the top corner. And indeed, it sailed into the top corner, well out of the reach of the opposition goalkeeper. The distance was around 25 yards, but that the goal took India in the context of their AFC U-17 Asian Cup campaign is immeasurable. It was a goal that put him on the Asian Football Confederation's list of Future Stars of Matchday 1 in the AFC U-17 Asian Cup.

"I didn't really think much of it when I scored. There was some space, so I thought I could take my time and go for it," said Thokchom. "Their goalkeeper was also a bit out of position, and I felt I could chip it in. Maybe he did not expect me to try my luck from that distance and angle, but it worked."

It was soon after the end of the match that Thokchom realised what he had done. "I wasn't prepared for all the attention and love that I received after the final whistle. Everyone was talking about that goal, and so many people came up to me and asked me about it. It was only then that I realised I had done something special," he smiled.

The 15-year-old, who has been with the India U-17s since the team started training in February last year, has played an integral role for his side's SAFF U-17 Championship victory, and successful qualification for the AFC U-17 Asian Cup. The son of a fisherman from the Awang Mamang Leikai area of Manipur, Thokchom would probably be following his father out on their fishing boat, had football not happened in his life.

"Fishing has been the lifeline for our family ever since I remember. My father goes out to fish, and when I'm at home, I also go out with him on our boat. It's quite peaceful. I like to go fishing," he said.

The calm and collective boy, who has a perpetual smile on his face, began playing the beautiful game with his friends at a young age, and soon joined the Thoubal Youth Development Association, which gave him the platform to move on to the Sports Authority of India, Imphal. It was at SAI where he honed his skills till he got selected in the trials for the India U-17 National Team.

"I was so happy after being selected. I promised myself to work hard and do everything possible to become a successful professional footballer," said Thokchom.

The India U-17s currently are in a tight spot in Group D of the AFC U-17 Asian Cup where anything can happen. All four teams – Japan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and India are tied on one point each, and the next match against Uzbekistan (June 20) could prove to be crucial for the Blue Colts' quarter-final chances.

"Our target is solely on making it out of the group stage right now. We play Uzbekistan next, and we need to bring our best game to the pitch against them," he said. "It's all one game at a time now. We just need to back ourselves and go out there and perform," said the youngster.





Shooting Range

AFC U-17 ASIAN CUP THAILAND 2023







Gokulam Kerala steamroll Kickstart to complete hat-trick of Hero IWL titles

Gokulam Kerala have established their dominance in women's football by winning a hat-trick of Hero IWL titles

In a final, and maybe even a league played to their tunes, Gokulam Kerala beat Kickstart FC Karnataka 5-0 to become the Hero Indian Women's League champions for the third season in a row. In a dominant performance at the TransStadia that was as much a display of their brilliance as it was an indication of how far behind how their rivals are, Gokulam Kerala's women are the benchmark for women's football in India.

Any talk of benchmarks though must begin and end with Sabitra Bhandari, the Nepalese striker without par, who has in this one season taken over any scoring record that she didn't already own. Bhandari, already the highest scorer in Hero IWL history, surpassed Bala Devi's record for a single season in the semi finals, and in the final she extended it further (29), into a realm where it might be extremely difficult to overcome.

The manner of that first goal should have served as a warning for everything that was to follow. Gokulam had taken control of possession right from the start and in the fifth minute Dangmei Grace danced around a static Kickstart midfield to release Bhandari into space on the right of the box. The threat of a goal was non-existent, boxed as she was by a defender, but more importantly the angle and the distance.



None of that has ever mattered when 'Samba' is on the ball, and she proved it once again. Letting fly from almost the right corner of the box towards the far post. Maibam Linthoingambi's desperate dive was in vain. Gokulam had a lead from which they never looked back.

From there, it became a matter of who could best who – within the Gokulam team themselves. In the 22nd minute, Sandhiya Ranganathan picked up a pass on the Gokulam right and drove into the box. Once inside she dummied, wrong-footing Linthoi who was expecting a cutback, before blasting through at the near post to double her team's lead. By the time Kickstart had their first shot at goal, Gokulam were two to the good. And soon it was three, an inadvertent handball in the box gifting Gokulam a penalty. Indumathi Kathiresan did not miss.

Kickstart went into the break three goals down, their morales and egos probably more bruised than anything else. They were the team with an almost unbreakable defence – their six clean sheets the most by any team in the league. And yet, against the irresistible force of Gokulam they had conceded as many goals in 45 minutes as they had in the eight games prior.

Kickstart came out for the second half, renewed, and even registered a first shot on target via a Wangkhem Linthoigambi pile driver in the 47th minute. Five minutes after though, Gokulam scored again, and again Bhandari was at the centre of the action. The striker collected the ball on the left side of the Kickstart box, feinted to go one way and with a swift turn of the hips went in another, leaving Dalima Chhibber in her wake. Her cross was perfect, and Sandhiya rose to head it in.

The game had become a procession – attack vs defence – well before the fourth, but from thereon, all pretence of a contest faded away. Roja Devi added a fifth in the 80th minute, as Gokulam romped to a third title in three seasons.



From Dhar to Dinamo: Jyoti Chouhan paves the way for girls in Madhya Pradesh

Jyoti Chouhan is currently living the dream in Dinamo Zagreb, but her journey to get there has been an arduous one

SOU MO GHOSH

Just a few days back, ZNK Dinamo Zagreb forward Jyoti Chouhan's name was on the lips of every Indian Football fan, as she became the first footballer from the country to score a hat-trick in a European league, after she netted three against Agram Zagreb in the Croatian First Women's League.

While she made the move to the Balkans last year, Jyoti would barely have thought of playing professionally just about a decade earlier.

“It was indeed a special moment for me to score that hat-trick against Agram. We had lost our previous match against them 0-2, and we were all determined to do well,” Chouhan told the-aiff.com. “I had already scored two in the first half, and received a lot of motivation from the coaches and my teammates, and soon completed the hat-trick after the restart.

“The reaction I got, especially from everyone back at home, was just so overwhelming,” she recalled. “It was a fine moment, but it also humbled me to think that there was a point in my life when I would never have thought that I would ever be at this stage,” Jyoti said.

Hailing from the Sardarpur township of the Dhar district in Madhya Pradesh, Jyoti grew up in an environment that was far from ideal for an aspiring young female footballer. Her father, a local businessman, had played a big part in her initial interest in the beautiful game, but tragically passed away when she was still in her formative years.

“That was an extremely difficult time for our family. My mother had to take up work as a daily wager to support the family. Also, my immediate family around us did not want me to play football. Them and our neighbours would often try and dissuade my mother from letting us go out and play with the boys, but I am so thankful to my mother for keeping up her support,” she said.

“I learnt so much from her. Whatever I am today is because of my mother and the sacrifices she made during those difficult years,” Jyoti recalled. “She is the one who shielded us from the prying eyes and sneering faces of society and helped us grow without any fear.”

In fact, it was Jyoti, who played the role of a pioneer in her school and encouraged other girls to band together to form a team and play. The young forward gradually improved her game as she moved on, and was soon selected in the state team to participate in the Nationals.





“That was a turning point for me. After I made the state team, the Government of Madhya Pradesh really took care of us, and the financial burden on my mother eased up in some way,” she said.

Since then, the forward has gone on to represent her state in countless National Championships, and has also been the top scorer for Kenkre FC in the Mumbai Women’s League and the best player for Gokulam Kerala in the Kerala Women’s League. Subsequently, she had also been called up for the National Team camps on two occasions in 2016 and 2018, before making the move to the Croat capital last year, with her former Kenkre and Gokulam teammate Soumya Guguloth.

“My mother was so happy when I first got the offer from Dinamo Zagreb. Of course, I’m the first girl from Madhya Pradesh to do this, and she was so proud to hear it,” said Chouhan. “That also changed the perception of the rest of my family, and of the neighbours as well. They now encourage their daughters to play football as well. If I, a girl from Sardarpur can do it, so can many others.”



Treble-winner Dangmei Grace loves to lead from the front

Dangmei Grace has had the most unique season, having won the league and cup titles in Uzbekistan and the league title in India in 2022-23

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Six months ago, Dangmei Grace returned to India after winning both the league and cup titles with PFC Sevinch Karshi in Uzbekistan.

On home soil, she added another trophy to her cabinet recently - she was the proud captain of the mighty Gokulam Kerala FC, who won the Hero Indian Women's League title for the third time in a row.

"It's a great feeling and I am truly happy that I could achieve this for the team as the captain," Grace told [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com) from Kochi. "It all comes down to hard work. The result in the final (5-0 against Kickstart FC) was a little beyond expectations, but we knew that winning the third consecutive title would surely be the best thing to happen for Gokulam Kerala as a club. I want to salute all my teammates for everything they did - on and off the pitch," she added.



The Blue Tigresses winger moved to Uzbekistan in 2022 and won the Uzbekistan Women's League and the Women's Cup in the same season, scoring four goals. When asked about the most important reason behind her success of winning three titles, Grace said that maintaining discipline remained the highest point in her career.

"Discipline. It's a must if anyone wants to achieve his or her goals -- this is the most important thing I have learned in all these years. Defending the title was important, but another thing that we as a team were able to maintain was discipline."

Conferred with the Football Player's Association of India's (FPAI) Player of the Year award recently, Grace emphasised that carrying the mantle of captaincy is never an easy task. She was the captain for KRYPSHA FC, Manipur, in the inaugural year of the Hero IWL in 2017 and finished as the second runners-up.

"Lifting a trophy as the captain is surely exciting, but the task has its own responsibilities too. You wear the armband on the pitch and everyone looks up to you. It's not at all easy. The whole team goes through a lot of ups and downs, which, normally, not many people can spot from the outside. When the team is down, I have to make sure each and every player stays motivated and pulls themselves up for a better show the next day. I have to be there and push players in every situation to give their best on and off the field."

She mentioned the most challenging moment she faced as the captain of Gokulam Kerala FC. "The most challenging was the aftermath of the unexpected draw against Misaka United FC. Everyone was feeling low and the environment was quite depressing on that particular day. But I personally went to each and every player to talk about things that went wrong. Coach entrusted me with the responsibility of lifting the mood of the team and I think it was the most difficult task of all. I never knew what was going on in everyone's mind after the unexpected result. But I tried my best to make everyone comfortable and talk about positive things," she said.

Grace said that her stint in Uzbekistan also helped her be a better player in all aspects. "The dressing room atmosphere in Uzbekistan is different; they attach a lot of importance to discipline. And that's what I find unique about the foreign players. Here also, with three foreign players in Gokulam Kerala FC, I have observed one thing, they listen very carefully and then they perform. Something to learn from them," she concluded.



India qualify for FIFAE Nations Cup 2023

India qualified for the FIFAE Nations Cup for the second straight season, on Friday, May 19, 2023. The tournament is considered the pinnacle event of FIFAE esports among the Member Associations of the governing body of world football.

India first participated in the FIFAE Nations Series in 2021, and have done extremely well to qualify twice in three years for the tournament, widely known as the 'World Cup of FIFAE esports'.

India were knocked out at the group stage of the FIFAE Nations Cup 2022 held in Denmark in July 2022. The #eTigers will be looking to better their record this time among the 24 nations, who will qualify for the FIFAE Nations Cup 2023.

Apart from India, three other nations -- Australia, Malaysia and Singapore have qualified from the Asia and Oceania region for the final event. They will be joined by 11 teams from Europe, three from Middle East and Africa, three from South America and two from North and Central America along with the host nation, which has not been announced yet.

India started their FIFAE Nations Series 2023 journey in December, 2022, in the Play-Ins stage and played the Online Qualifiers Main Stage in April before qualifying for the Playoffs. In the Playoffs stage, represented by the #eTigers Charanjot Singh, Saransh Jain, Siddh Chandarana and Saksham Rattan, they lost the first round of the double elimination bracket by an aggregate score of 2-3 to Indonesia in a close encounter, but fought back with back-to-back victories against New Zealand (0-9 on aggregate) and Japan (1-2 on aggregate) thanks to an injury-time goal to seal their spot in the FIFAE Nations Cup 2023.

Charanjot Singh, the captain of the Indian team, said: "It is an amazing feeling to make the FIFAE Nations Cup for the second time in a row. I am proud of the way everyone performed. Hard work has paid off for us, finally. We practiced hard to achieve this and now it's time to get even better and work harder for the off-line event".



Creating an institutional league will encourage departments to invest in football, says IM Vijayan

The glory days of old are set to return, as the Federation looks to bring institutional teams back into action

VAIBHAV RAGHUNANDAN

The Federation's announcement of an Institutional League, to create more avenues for competition for footballers playing in PSUs, state departments, and police units, has provoked conversation within the community in the country. For many the league will come as a boon, offering them a chance to play competitive football and showcase their talent for selection to the higher echelons of the game.

For one man, one who knows all about the benefits of a government job, the talent present within a department team, and success that can be achieved with it, the announcement has jogged back old memories.



“I was drafted into Kerala Police when I was a teenager,” IM Vijayan says. “It’s only after I played for Kerala Police that I went on to play for Mohun Bagan, JCT, East Bengal and all. My entire journey started with Kerala Police, who gave me a job, and a chance to play and show my game at high levels.”

Considered by many to be the silkiest player India has ever produced, Vijayan, in a storied career, went on to win several titles, and accolades, which included two Federation Cup titles when he was part of the Kerala Police team.

“In my time the Kerala Police team was a legendary team,” Vijayan says. “We had Sathyan, Chacko, Sharaf, all great players. Playing with them really honed my skills too. I credit them with really kick starting my career and owe them a lot.”

Vijayan, who is currently the director of the Kerala Police Football Academy, an Executive Committee Member of the AIFF and Chairperson of the Technical Committee at the All India Football Federation, believes the Institutional League will revitalise investment in department teams and benefit players in the long run.

“One of the big complaints by a lot of departments, including SBI, SBT, FCI, was that there were no tournaments and competitions for them to play in through the years,” Vijayan says. “They didn’t see the benefit of putting together a team just to be in training. This will encourage them to recruit more players also.”

The India legend believes that creating more avenues for game time, more tournaments and competitions will lead to greater and truer realisation of the Federation’s target of the roadmap ‘Vision 2047’.

“The truth is that not every footballer in the country is going to play the Hero ISL and the Hero I-League. But that doesn’t mean they do not deserve to play in tournaments, get game time, and employment for their skills. I’m glad that the Federation has taken this decision to launch the Institutional League, it will do a lot for young players who have sports quota jobs with different units. It will also encourage more to take up the sport knowing that they can play it and also gain employment through it.”



India drawn with UAE, Maldives and China in AFC U23 Asian Cup Qualifiers

The India U-23 Men's Team were placed alongside United Arab Emirates, Maldives and China PR in Group G of the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ Qatar 2024 Qualifiers after the Official Draw held at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Thursday, May 25, 2023. Group G of the Qualifiers will be hosted by China between September 6-12, 2023.

The draw saw 43 teams divided into 10 groups of four and one group of three. Each group will be played at a centralised venue in a single round-robin format, with the 11 group winners and four best second-placed teams qualifying for the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ Qatar 2024. They will join Qatar, who have received automatic qualification as hosts, to form the final cast of 16 at the tournament, to be played between April 15 to May 3, 2024.

The AFC U23 Asian Cup™ Qatar 2024 will also serve as a qualifier for the Men's Olympic Football Tournament Paris 2024. The top three teams will directly qualify for the Olympic Games as the AFC representatives, while the fourth-best team will play in the AFC-CAF Play-off.

AFC U23 Asian Cup™ Qatar 2024 will be the competition's sixth edition, and India will attempt to make it to the final tournament for the first time.

INDIA'S QUALIFYING FIXTURES

September 6: India vs Maldives

September 9: China PR vs India

September 12: United Arab Emirates vs India



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