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**“DREAM TO FLOW
DEFTLY LIKE A
STREAM”**

- Kalyan Chaubey
President, AIFF

**“INDIAN FOOTBALL
A GOLD MINE”**

- Arsène Wenger



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President's Note

U-17 World Cup on merit: The dream to flow deftly like a stream

Kalyan Chaubey

November was a landmark month for India. Our Senior Men's National Team, of course, have been exemplary in their performance, putting in a good start to their World Cup qualification campaign with the win against Kuwait, followed by a good showing (despite the defeat) against reigning Asian champions Qatar.

What made India's performance all the more special was that it was witnessed by none other than celebrated coach and FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development Mr. Arsène Wenger. The former Arsenal Invincibles boss not only sat through the entire match but also commended the Blue Tigers on their performance against an opponent of a much higher level.

Back in his coaching days, Mr. Wenger was well known for his unwavering approach to every game where his side would go on the pursuit of footballing perfection regardless of the pedigree of the opponents, regardless of the results, regardless of the consequences. It was the single-minded approach that has made him the highly-regarded coach he is today, and that, I believe, has rubbed off on India in more ways than one.

Watching India play was not the sole purpose of his visit, but rather a byproduct of it. Mr. Wenger, along with his team in the FIFA Talent Development Scheme was in India for a three-day visit to lend their expertise and valuable input on the development of youth football in the country. Before this, I met FIFA President Mr. Gianni Infantino thrice, in Rwanda, Paris, and Doha. We discussed at length how with FIFA's aid, India can one day qualify for the World Cup on merit.



The FIFA President took a keen interest in India's growth, and it is because of that, that he decided to send Mr. Wenger to oversee the historic launch of the FIFA-AIFF Talent Academy in Bhubaneswar, something that we hope will eventually set the base for the future stars of Indian Football. The AIFF had long and fruitful discussions with Mr. Wenger and his team to set the course of action that will take Indian Football forward.

This academy will be the home for the elite players who come through the domestic youth leagues and national football championships and will act as a centre for the scholarly development of their footballing prowess and aptitude.

The FIFA-AIFF Academy in Bhubaneswar is just the beginning. We are very much aware that one academy will not be able to make much difference in elevating the



deserving elite players to the junior national teams. This is why we have planned, through our licensing criteria for the ISL and the I-League clubs, to use their youth development facilities and set up a network of academies through which we can link their U-13 teams with the FIFA-AIFF Academy, within the stipulated budget, while FIFA continues to lend its technical support to Indian Football as a whole.

India's progression in the world of football is not something that will happen overnight. Rather, it will happen gradually over the course of time, and it is imperative for us to sow the seeds for the future. Nurturing and developing the potential stars of tomorrow is a collective responsibility – of the AIFF, of the State Associations, of the clubs, and of the academies all over India.

The FIFA-AIFF Academy/academies will be designed to be a world-class facility for the top youngsters from all clubs and academies from across the country to step up their game and take it to the next level. To make them potential candidates and possibly even stars for the senior national team in the future.

We have a dream, a collective dream, of qualifying for a World Cup someday. While that is something that may not happen soon at the senior level, it is not, altogether, an unrealistic target. There is no dearth of talented footballers in India. The area where we are lagging is infrastructure and advanced training. With FIFA's help, we can get advanced training for our elite youngsters. The Government and entrepreneurs have also taken a keen interest in the game, and we intend to collaborate with the public and private sectors to build better infrastructure. Once infrastructure and training are both world-class, there is no reason for us to not transcend to a level where we can qualify for the FIFA U-17 World Cup on merit.

The groundwork has been laid, the youth leagues are in full flow, and Indian Football is now back on its path. Let us hope for a better future.



Indian Football is a gold mine waiting to be explored, says Arsène Wenger

In a first visit to India, FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development met with AIFF President & heads of select academies at the Football House

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

Mr. Arsène Wenger, the Chief of Global Football Development, FIFA and a reputed coach, visited the Football House on Monday, November 20, 2023, and had an interaction with the heads of a select group of football academies from across the country.

Mr. Wenger also had a long and fruitful discussion with the AIFF President, Mr. Kalyan Chaubey and Acting Secretary General Mr. Satyanarayan M on setting up the AIFF-FIFA Academy and youth development in India. Mr. Wenger and his team from the FIFA Talent Development Scheme are currently on a three-day visit to India in connection with the AIFF-FIFA Academy to be inaugurated in Bhubaneswar on Tuesday, November 21, 2023. This is Mr. Wenger's first visit to India.

Welcoming Mr. Wenger, the AIFF President said, "We are so very honoured and privileged to host and welcome Mr. Wenger. His experience in football needs no introduction or explanation. I can just hope and pray that he continues to be involved with India's Talent Development Scheme project."

"We have been discussing this project for nearly three months now. Mr. Wenger's visit to India and his experience and support from FIFA, I am sure will make this project a huge success."

Commenting on India's football development, Mr Chaubey said, "Let's not only develop football in India. Rather, make a space on the map of world football, where everyone of us present in this house today can say, yes, on that particular day, November 20, 2023, at the Football House, India, we were there."

Mr. Wenger on his part, said, "I would say I was always fascinated by India. My target is to improve football in the world. And it is impossible that a country like India, 1.4 billion, is not on the football world map."

"I believe you have huge assets, fantastic qualities that make me very optimistic about what you can do here. It is absolutely fantastic to have that opportunity. And with my team, we are really highly motivated to help this country develop in the game. I'm convinced that it's possible in the very short term."

Explaining how a well-oriented talent development scheme can change the face of the game in a country, Mr. Wenger said, "I was in Japan at the start of their football in 1995. In 1998, they were at the World Cup. So that means it is possible. You have to start early."

"What will football be like in 2030? How can we imagine what our needed quality is in 2030? But what is for sure, is where we start with technique. Football is a technical sport. We have to equip the players from five to 15 with the best possible capacity to be technically at the top. That means, basically, to make it simple, is to make the ball his friend. The rest can be developed later. And this is absolutely vital."

"So, this is where we have to start and that's where we want to help people to make young players technically perfect. The start of our programme is to identify the talent and then put the best talents together," he said.

Speaking on India's potential aspirations and goals, Mr. Wenger said, "So imagine the potential that is here if we work well. And my main target here is to convince people that there is a gold mine here but at the moment it is not completely explored, exploited and encouraged."





STATE OF AFFAIRS

AIFF signs MoU with Odisha Government on FIFA-AIFF Academy in presence of Arsène Wenger

The first of its kind AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy will be set up at the Odisha Football Academy in Bhubaneswar

AKHIL RAWAT

The All India Football Federation (AIFF) and Government of Odisha, on Tuesday, November 21, 2023, in the presence of Mr Arsène Wenger, FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to set up the AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy at the Odisha Football Academy in Bhubaneswar.

The MoU between the two was signed by the AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey and Mr. R Vineel Krishna, Commissioner-cum-Secretary, Department of Sports and Youth Services, Government of Odisha. Mr. Tushar Kanti Behera, Sports Minister of Odisha was present.

In the ceremony, Mr Chaubey said, "I thank the Government of Odisha and FIFA President for his support to Indian Football in every possible way. The result of that is the presence of the legendary Mr. Arsène Wenger today in India.

"His guidance, leadership, technical plan and strategy will help India dream. Let's take a small step and qualify for the FIFA U-17 World Cup on merit, and soon the senior FIFA World Cup. I have high expectations through the AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy that we will get our best U-17 team in the coming three years," Mr. Chaubey added.

Mr. Wenger said, "I'm happy to be in India with my team. I saw the facilities and the quality of infrastructure is great here in Odisha. We've realised that among 211 countries, most have no real youth education. The best countries have good education system for young children. So, many children don't even get the chance.

"Giving every talent in the world a chance is what our programme is about. To identify the talent in India, give good education and good level of competition to make great players. How long it could take, we don't know, but without education we'll remain where we are. Our target is to get India back on the map. No country has more rights than any other to be on the top. Our huge effort is to educate children to get them as good as they can be. You cannot start to play football at 15, you need to start at five or six," Mr. Wenger said.

Mr. Krishna said, "It's a great honour to have Mr. Wenger here in Odisha. There's a lot of excitement for your visit. You've been an inspiration to football lovers across the globe. We are sincerely thankful to you and FIFA for selecting Bhubaneswar as the AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy."

Mr. Behera said, "The AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy is the first of its kind in India, which is a testament to Odisha's rapidly-growing standards as a global sports hub." After the ceremony, Mr. Wenger watched budding footballers under the FIFA Talent Development Scheme, training at the adjacent ground. He also interacted with the coaches involved in the training.





Indian football on the brink of history, agree AIFF president and Arsène Wenger

Wenger believes India's potential is unlimited but the country must play to its strengths to rise in the footballing world

SRUTI CHAKRABORTY

AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey, and FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, Mr. Arsène Wenger addressed the media in the city the day after India's FIFA World Cup Qualifier Round 2 against Qatar, to discuss the paths to develop Indian Football, and to enhance its youth development system, on Wednesday, November 22, 2023. AIFF Vice President NA Haris, Treasurer Mr. Kipa Ajay and Acting Secretary General Mr. Satyanarayan M were present on the occasion.

While Mr. Wenger said that most people want to win the next match, though that is something that needs huge preparation, Mr. Chaubey conveyed that he was not here to sell a dream but to ensure Indian football moved in the right direction in the next few years and reached its desired goal.

Mr. Chaubey, who was present at the Kalinga Stadium in Bhubaneswar on Tuesday, said that football in India is on the brink of history. They were also present for the opening of the first-ever AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy, in the Odisha capital.

“We are operating at a time that will eventually go down in history. Perhaps we do not realise it right now, but one day, these steps will be talked about,” said Mr. Chaubey.

“We feel honoured that FIFA considers our federation as one that has a huge potential for further development, and I welcome all to be a part of it. Let us all share knowledge, exchange ideas, and listen to what Mr. Wenger says,” implored Mr. Chaubey. “FIFA has not given us a magic button to develop football or qualify for the World Cup. Rather, they are here to guide and support us.”

Mr. Wenger believes that India has a massive potential in football, though he says that the country needs to play to its strengths in order to climb the ladder.

“The giant is here and is heading for hiding. No more sleeping here in this house. That’s how the AIFF is now. This creates a lot of possibilities,” he said.

“The world of football is moving forward and 20 percent of the population cannot be left behind. So, you have to come on board and move forward. We can all see that the giant of football is awake, and we will definitely see some football development.”





Arsène Wenger completes landmark visit to India

In a significant moment that shows FIFA's interest in growing the game, Wenger's visit was a significant shift towards developing Indian Football

FIFA MEDIA TEAM

FIFA Chief of Global Football Development Arsène Wenger has visited India to kick off the ground-breaking Talent Development Scheme (TDS) in the world's most populous nation, a significant moment in FIFA's efforts to grow the game and raise standards around the world.

The four-day tour included a visit to the new training academy in Bhubaneswar in the state of Odisha, which is part of a wider national initiative to identify and develop the best young talents in the country.

Launched in 2022, the TDS aims to increase global competitiveness in both men's and women's national-team football so that more countries can shine on the world stage. It focuses on investing in academies, with FIFA planning to ensure that 75 member associations have at least one high-performance academy or centre of excellence in place by 2027 through the FIFA Academies Programme. Coaching is another feature of the TDS, with FIFA supporting member associations by providing knowledge and guidance from FIFA talent coaches.

In India, FIFA will be deploying full-time FIFA Talent Coach Sergi Amezcua and has appointed the High-Performance Specialist Ged Roddy to provide day-to-day guidance and expertise on the overall planning and implementation of the talent pathway. The TDS will complement the All India Football Federation's (AIFF) Vision 2047 in partnership with the Indian Super League, the I-League, leading clubs, academies and the regional state associations.

"There are many children in the world who don't get the chance to develop their talent, and we can change that," said Wenger. "We want to develop elite players in countries where there's potential for further development and India is definitely one of them. The talent potential here is huge. We will work hand in hand with the AIFF to unlock this potential."

The FIFA delegation, which included former international footballers and High Performance Specialists Phillipe Senderos and Ryan Nelson, began their visit in New Delhi where they met the AIFF senior management and took part in a two-day workshop with local talent identification specialists. They then travelled to the new academy in Odisha, a joint FIFA-AIFF initiative which is designed to develop competitive youth national teams. Once the centre is fully operational, the AIFF will seek to supplement this development with additional regional centres around the country.





“I would like to see India develop its youth system well, that we create great players, and that India goes to FIFA World Cups,” continued Wenger. “I believe that we have an opportunity to change the world of football. Football is the number one sport in the world, and a country like India, with a population of 1.4 billion, of course has to exist in this world – and that’s why we are here.”

Finally, Wenger and the FIFA delegation travelled to Mumbai to meet local clubs, leagues and football representatives, emphasising the importance of taking a partnership approach across all areas of the football ecosystem.

AIFF President Kalyan Chaubey thanked Wenger for his visit. “His guidance, leadership, technical plan and strategy will help India dream. Let’s take a small step and qualify for the FIFA U-17 World Cup on merit, and soon for the senior FIFA World Cup,” he said. “I have high expectations that through the AIFF-FIFA Talent Academy, we will get our best U-17 team in the next three years.”



Manvir's lightning strike lights up India's World Cup Qualifiers campaign

It was a first victory in three matches against Kuwait this year, but the three points came in a match that counted the most

AKHIL RAWAT

Manvir Singh's 75th-minute left-footed strike turned India's start to Round 2 of the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 Joint Qualification campaign into a memorable one as they defeated hosts Kuwait by a solitary goal at the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium, Kuwait City, on Thursday, November 16, 2023.

It was a time of quiet and of waiting till Manvir Singh changed the very face of the game. The gigantic stadium was bathed in artificial lights but none of it could outshine Manvir in the end. What looked like a sedate contest for the majority of the 90-minute period truly became an exciting one when the lanky striker parked himself at the right place in the rival box to bang home a Lallianzuala Chhangte cross from the left with a neat and powerful left-footer to which Kuwait custodian Abdul Rahman Marzouq had no answer.

The victory was a remarkable one. Beating Kuwait in their own backyard was no mean achievement. Kuwait were completely rattled and upset.



They were left further embarrassed during the add-on time when substitute Faisal Alharbi was given the marching orders by the Australian referee for picking up his second yellow card, something the attacking midfielder could have easily avoided.

The goal made all the difference as India walked off the pitch with all three points in their pocket, which could well become a crucial factor in India's endeavour to get into the next round of the World Cup campaign for the first time in history. The huge number of Indian fans present at the stadium were truly delighted by the result and gave the Blue Tigers a standing ovation in the end.

India's head coach Igor Stimac should also receive a good amount of credit for this three-pointer; his decision to leave Chhangte out of the starting eleven raised a few eyebrows without getting deep into his scheme of things. Stimac waited till the 64th minute before he unleashed Chhangte against an already harassed Kuwait defence and he did the trick that the Blue Tigers were looking for. Chhangte's fresh legs did wonder; his cross from the left was a classic one – it had the perfect angle, the ideal height and all the ingredients to leave the Kuwait defence stranded.



Only a few months ago, India and Kuwait battled it out hard twice in the SAFF Championships in Bengaluru with India emerging the victors in tie-breakers in the final. Thursday's win was perhaps more creditable. It came on Kuwait's home turf and within the regulation period in which India certainly had more say in the proceedings. If India didn't create enough positive chances despite having the upper hand, the hosts were also in no position to take any credit away from India as they could hardly penetrate the Indian defence. India's goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu had a rather peaceful day in the office; the attacks he had to negotiate with were mostly without stings.

India, on the other hand, were far more enterprising though they too failed to open the Kuwait defence too many times. Yet, in the first half, India were doing the right things on the right, with Nikhil Poojary and Manvir Singh being the chief operators. One such foray saw Poojary floating the ball inside the box in a copybook style. Skipper Sunil Chhetri took a volley that had the required punch, but not the direction. It sailed over the bar. It was perhaps the best chance India had in the match, apart from Manvir's magical strike.



Qatar's sharpness blunts Blue Tigers' challenge at Kalinga Stadium

Asian champions Qatar's quality shone through at the Kalinga Stadium, as they beat India 3-0

Asian Cup champions Qatar proved too hot to handle for Igor Stimac's boys as the Blue Tigers went down 0-3 in their second match of the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 Joint Qualification campaign, on Tuesday, November 21, 2023.

Stimac made five changes to the starting line-up that defeated Kuwait in the first match but it couldn't stop Qatar from snatching all the three points in their away match. Amrinder Singh, who replaced Gurpreet Singh Sandhu in goal, wasn't at his best today.

Qatar, coached by famous Carlos Queiroz, did not have to wait long to take the lead. Akram Afif was all over India and the Indian defence made a mess of his corner from the right. Moustafa Mashal found the net with a quick right footer.

In the 19th minute, Sandesh Jhingan's timely block saved Amrinder the embarrassment of conceding a goal from his wrong pass. However, Amrinder was up to the task three minutes later as an exquisite back heel in the midfield by Mansour set Afif free for a solo run down the left. Amrinder blocked his shot right at the goalmouth.



Qatar's dominance can be gauged from the fact that they obtained 10 corners in the first half and India got none. India had to weather one attack after another till the 40th minute but improved towards the end of that half. Anirudh Thapa got a real chance to score in the 42nd minute as Boualem Khoukhi lost the ball just outside the box to the constant pressure from Indian captain Sunil Chhetri. He put it on well for Thapa but his shot went wide of the post despite beating Qatar custodian Meshaal Barsham.

Buoyed by those closing minutes, India could have hoped to do better in the second half. But Afif put paid to those hopes as he combined with Mashal. His cross found Afif free inside India's box on the left. Amrinder did try to block his tap but could not get the ball in full control. Almoez Ali, coming through the middle, put it past the goalline to make it 2-0.

It was all downhill for India from that point onwards. The only bright spot was a move in the 65th minute. Suresh Singh made a great turn in the midfield and found Sahal Abdul Samad free on the left. He did run into the Qatar box with only the goalkeeper to beat but he shot well wide of the second post.

Qatar made it 3-0 five minutes from time through substitute Yusuf Abdurisag's header.



Shooting Range

AFC Asian Cup & FIFA World Cup Qualifiers



TARGET 2026







Indian Football's Spiderman decides to rest his wings

One of India's most lauded and storied goalkeepers may have laid his gloves to rest, but still expects to give a lot more to Indian Football

SOUMO GHOSH

Football is a strange game, one where the guardians of its most prized rectangle seldom get their due credit. There are, however, occasions when those that are meant to stay rooted in the penalty box, take a flight to leave everyone mesmerised. Former India custodian Subrata Paul was perhaps one of those goalkeepers, who has been an inspiration to many.

The 37-year-old, in a letter to the AIFF on Friday, December 8, 2023, has announced that he will be hanging up his gloves and boots, as he dives into a new phase of his life.

"I am filled with a mixture of emotions. There's a sense of accomplishment for the journey I've been on, coupled with a touch of sadness at leaving the beautiful game behind," Paul said to [the-aiff.com](https://www.the-aiff.com). "But more than anything, there's an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for the incredible opportunities and experiences football has given me."



Paul has an incredible 67 international caps to his name, keeping 19 clean sheets, the first of which, was earned on his international debut against Cambodia in the 2007 Nehru Cup at the Ambedkar Stadium, in New Delhi.

The man who captained India on four occasions, said, "Looking back, I am incredibly proud of my career. Representing India at various levels, including the AFC Asian Cup, has been a great honour. From the highs of victory to the lows of setbacks, the journey has been a rollercoaster of emotions, but each moment has contributed to my growth as a player and as a person."

At the end of his long and illustrious career, which contains three Nehru Cups, one AFC Challenge Cup, and one Tri-Nation Cup trophy, Paul remains grateful to Providence. "Football has been the defining force in my life.

It has shaped me as a person, instilled discipline, taught me valuable lessons about teamwork, and given me the immense privilege of representing my country on the world stage. Without football, I wouldn't be who I am today," he said.

His greatest time on the pitch arguably came in 2011, when, despite not too favourable results, Paul came onto his own, making an array of acrobatic saves, putting his own body in dangerous situations. Indeed Australia's celebrated goalkeeper Mark Schwarzer famously came over to the Indian dressing room after their game against the Blue Tigers in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2011 to express his admiration for the brave performance that Paul had put in, despite the 0-4 loss at the hands of the Socceroos. It was after his performance against Australia, Bahrain (2-5), and Korea Republic (1-4), that Paul was nicknamed the "Spiderman of India", one he wears "with humility" on his sleeves.

Despite being the foremost goalkeeper of his time in the national team, Spiderman had played the crucial role of mentoring the likes of Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, who has now gone on to take up the mantle.

"Mentoring young players like Gurpreet has been immensely rewarding. I strive to share my knowledge and experience, helping them navigate the challenges and opportunities they face. Seeing their growth and success fills me with pride, knowing that I've contributed to their journey," said Paul.

The former India custodian's contribution to Indian Football does not stop, however, as he steps into a new phase of his life.

"The next chapter is an open book, and I'm excited to explore its possibilities. While I'm still figuring it all out, I know I want to remain connected to the sport in some way. Coaching, mentoring young players, or contributing to the development of Indian Football are some of the areas that interest me," he said.



Kalinga Super Cup will kick off in Odisha from January 9, 2024

The Kalinga Super Cup will be organised in Odisha starting from January 9, 2024, the All India Football Federation announced on Wednesday, November 29, 2023. The matches are planned to be held in two different venues in Odisha.

Both Indian Super League and I-League teams have been invited to take part in the annual tournament. The format of the tournament will consist of four groups of four teams each, who will play single leg matches amongst themselves. The group winners will qualify for the semi-finals followed by the final to be played on January 28, 2024.

The I-League teams will play the qualifiers to get into the group stage of Kalinga Super Cup where four slots have been reserved for them in the group stage.

The Champions of Kalinga Super Cup will be nominated to play in the ACL 2 Preliminary Stage of AFC 2023-24 season.

AIFF President Mr. Kalyan Chaubey said, "As per the decision we took earlier, the annual Super Cup tournament will now be organised in a bigger and broader perspective. The tournament will now be known as Kalinga Super Cup and will be played in Odisha in January 2024. This is a positive development for Indian domestic football. I am confident the Kalinga Super Cup will be a huge hit both in terms of organisation and spectator interest."

The All India Football Federation, on Thursday, December 14, 2023, decided to allow the participating clubs in the forthcoming Kalinga Super Cup, to be played in Odisha, to register up to six foreign participating players in the matchday squad.

The participating teams will also be allowed to start their matches with a maximum of six foreign players on the pitch. In case more than five foreign participating players are selected in the Player Selection List, then at least one of these players must hold the nationality of a Member Association of the Asian Football Confederation.

This decision has been taken in view of the fact that winners of the Kalinga Super Cup will qualify for the AFC Champions League 2 2024-25. As per the AFC club competitions regulations in the 2023-24 season, each participating club may select up to six foreign players, with one of them being from a country that is a Member Association of the AFC.

The Kalinga Super Cup is set to take place across two venues in Odisha and will commence on January 9, 2024. Both the Indian Super League and I-League clubs have been invited to take part, with the former getting direct entry.

Meanwhile, the I-League clubs will have to play the qualifiers to get into the group stage of the Kalinga Super Cup, where 16 teams will be divided into four groups of four clubs each. The winners of each group will qualify for the semi-finals, followed by the final to be played on January 28, 2024.

The draw for the tournament will be held on December 18, 2023, at the Football House.



GROUP A	GROUP B
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	KARNATAKA
MEGHALAYA	MAHARASHTRA
GOA	DELHI
ASSAM	MANIPUR
SERVICES	MIZORAM
KERALA	RAILWAYS

Draw revealed for 77th Santosh Trophy Final Round in Arunachal Pradesh

The draw for the 77th National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy 2023-24 Final Round was conducted at the Football House in New Delhi on Thursday, November 30, 2023. The dates for the Santosh Trophy have tentatively been fixed from February 21 to March 9, 2024.

Twelve teams were divided into two groups of six each. The participants include six group stage winners (Goa, Delhi, Manipur, Assam, Services and Maharashtra), three best second-placed teams (Kerala, Mizoram and Railways), and three automatic qualifiers - hosts Arunachal Pradesh, last season's champions Karnataka and finalists Meghalaya.

For the first time since its inception in 1941, the Santosh Trophy will be held in Arunachal Pradesh. The hosts were placed in Group A. The new format for the tournament will see an expanded knockout stage, with the top four teams from each group progressing to the quarter-finals.

AIFF Acting Secretary General Mr Satyanarayan M said, "It's going to be a very special edition of the Santosh Trophy as we take the tournament to Arunachal Pradesh for the first time. I thank our President Mr Kalyan Chaubey, Treasurer Mr Kipa Ajay and Hon'ble Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh Shri Pema Khandu for hosting the Santosh Trophy Final Round."





Beach Soccer to be a part of Beach Sports Festival in Diu

After the success of the inaugural National Championships in Gujarat and the National Games in Goa, beach soccer is back again.

This time, beach soccer will be a part of the Beach Sports Festival, which is being organised by the Union Territory Administration of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Daman and Diu from January 5 to 11, 2023, in Diu.

The Beach Soccer tournament at the festival is set to be a U-21 event, with eight participants. To this extent, the AIFF has formally invited Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Daman and Diu to field their team as the hosts of the event. The other seven participating teams will be decided upon the interest expressed by the various State football associations. In case of receipt of a large number of interests from states, competitive criteria (results from the National Beach Soccer Championship 2023 etc) may be considered for nomination.

Each team can register up to 12 players and three officials, with the other technical details will be announced later. The deadline for confirmation of participation is December 5, 2023. Interested State FAs can send in the intent to participate at competition@the-aiff.com.



Set pieces set the pace: Mumbai City FC suffer a narrow defeat against PFC Navbahor Namangan

Mumbai City FC's AFC Champions League campaign comes to an end

Two well-executed goals from set-piece movements paved the way for PFC Navbahor Namangan's 2-1 victory over hosts Mumbai City FC in their concluding Group D AFC Champions League 2023-24 match at the Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Complex on Monday, December 4, 2023.

While the win confirmed the Uzbek side's entry to the round of 16 for the first time, Mumbai City FC finished their campaign without a point, though they managed to score their first group league goal in this outing.

In all fairness, with a little more luck and precision, it could have been Mumbai City's night in the floodlit stadium. They not only surprised their mighty opponents by scoring first but also created enough opportunities in the second session to come close to scoring on more than one occasion.

But then, Navbahor are certainly a superior side, tighter in defence and possessing more than one plan in midfield and attack. They extracted the best out of the set piece movements and against Mumbai City FC, it helped them take home three points.

A day before the match, Mumbai City FC coach Anthony Fernandes promised to play for a win. His boys kept his word. The home side, with the sparse crowd in the stands, started on an attacking note and picked up the lead in the 15th minute. After Jorge Pereyra Diaz's attempted header was parried away by the goalkeeper, Abdenasser El Khayati, who was lurking around in the area, slammed it in. The celebrations that followed were very much there. After all, it was Mumbai City FC's first goal in the tournament.

Mumbai City could not hold on to their lead for a long time. The Uzbeks levelled the score at the stroke of half an hour courtesy of an infringement by Akash Mishra just outside the area. Jamshid Iskanderov's left-footed curling free-kick was a piece of beauty; it beat the wall and the goalkeeper Mohammed Nawaz hands down.

The Uzbek side's match-winner came moments before half-time from yet another set-piece movement. This time Jamshid was the creator, as his low corner kick eluded everyone before reaching Jovan Dokic, who beat a jungle of legs with an angular shot.

Unperturbed by the setback, Mumbai City made several inroads in the rival area in the second session. With Rahul Bheke and Vikram Partap Singh donning their respective roles with confidence, Mumbai City attackers kept Navbahor defenders busy by making inroads through the middle. Not that it produced the required effect, but things were never easy for the Uzbeks till the final whistle was blown.





Mourtada Fall plots Odisha FC's rise in AFC Cup race

Odisha FC leave it till the last matchday to book their spot in the AFC Cup knockout stage

AKHIL RAWAT

Odisha FC brightened up the atmosphere at the floodlit Kalinga Stadium when they entered the inter-zonal playoff semi-finals of the AFC Cup with a solitary goal win over 10-man Bashundhara Kings (Bangladesh) on Monday, December 10, 2023.

While the goodly crowd in the stands celebrated the home side's maiden entry into the knock-out rounds of the continental tournament, the mood in the rival camp was one of complete gloom and despair. Needing only a draw to cross the group hurdles, the Bangladesh side lost the plot partly because of their own undoing. A calmer approach to the situation could have brought them the desired result, but Bashundhara messed it up completely when they lost one of their key players, Asror Gafurov, to a red card decision minutes before the half time whistle.

Odisha FC knew there was no escape from the fact that only a three-pointer could fetch them progression to the next round. So, they decided to go for attacks from the very beginning and it certainly earned them dividends. While Mourtada Fall was the hero for the home side because of the crucial header that brought them the only goal of the match in the 61st minute, midfielder Ahmed Jahouh remained the driving force behind the Odisha side.

The Moroccan was in the thick of things from the beginning; passing, creating chances and controlling the midfield with clever movements. It was Jahouh, who took the game-changing corner in the 61st minute, a neat floater that eluded the defenders before getting in at the right place for Fall to execute the header. Bashundhara defenders, though, didn't do themselves any favour, as none of them made the effort to challenge Fall, who had all the time in the world to put the ball into the corner of the net.

Jahouh was involved in another incident, which literally put paid to the Bashundhara Kings' hopes. Minutes before the half time whistle, their Uzbek midfielder Asror Gafurov went for a crushing tackle from behind on Jahouh and was given the marching orders by the Vietnamese referee. Gafurov was earlier verbally warned by the referee for excessive physical play, but he did not heed the advice. As Bashundhara players, joined by their men at the bench, loudly protested the decision, the referee remained firm. It was a suicidal act by Gafurov that buried all the plans Bashundhara had.

All said and done, Odisha FC were the deserving winners. They played better than their rivals and created more opportunities. Had Roy Krishna or Diego Mauricio been more accurate at the goalmouth, the Bangladesh side would have returned home with a bigger defeat. Bashundhara goalkeeper Mehdi Hasan Srabon had a good day in the office, which was one of the reasons why they didn't concede more goals. Srabon is only 18 years old, but he has a mature head on his shoulders. While his teammates often lost their cool, Srabon was a picture of confidence and composure. He made several saves against rampaging Odisha strikers at regular intervals





Igor Stimac names 50-member list of probables for AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023

Senior India National Team head coach Igor Stimac, on Tuesday, December 12, 2023, announced a 50-member list of probables for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, set to take place in Doha, next month.

The Blue Tigers have been drawn in Group B, alongside Australia (January 13), Uzbekistan (January 18), and Syria (January 23). The top two teams from each group, along with the four best third-placed finishers (out of six) will make their way into the Round of 16.

India will set camp for the AFC Asian Cup from December 30 and will directly travel to Doha, Qatar, to begin their preparation.

50-member probables list:

Goalkeepers: Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, Amrinder Singh, Vishal Kaith, Dheeraj Singh Moirangthem, Gurmeet Singh Chahal.

Defenders: Naorem Roshan Singh, Bikash Yumnam, Lalchungnunga, Sandesh Jhingan, Nikhil Poojary, Chinglensana Singh, Pritam Kotal, Hormipam Ruivah, Subhasish Bose, Asish Rai, Akash Mishra, Mehtab Singh, Rahul Bheke, Narender Gahlot, Amey Ranawade.

Midfielders: Suresh Singh Wangjam, Rohit Kumar, Brandon Fernandes, Udanta Singh Kumam, Yasir Mohammad, Jeakson Singh Thounaojam, Anirudh Thapa, Sahal Abdul Samad, Glan Martins, Liston Colaco, Deepak Tangri, Lalengmawia Ralte, Vinit Rai, Ninthoinganba Meetei, Naorem Mahesh Singh.

Forwards: Sunil Chhetri, Rahim Ali, Farukh Choudhary, Nandhakumar Sekar, Siva Sakthi Narayanan, Rahul KP, Ishan Pandita, Manvir Singh, Kiyan Nassiri, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Gurkirat Singh, Vikram Partap Singh, Bipin Singh Thounaojam, Parthib Gogoi, Jerry Mawihmingthanga.



New format, longer season, closer battles: The IWL 2023-24 is up and running

The first week of action in the IWL 2023-24 has shown hints of what to expect from Indian women's football's newly-revamped top division

AKHIL RAWAT

The newly-revamped Indian Women's League 2023-24 season is up and running. The first five games of the season have been closely contested, yielding 10 goals. Big-goal thrashings had been a regular occurrence in the previous IWL seasons, but with only the seven best teams in the country battling it out home and away now, the league's plot was bound to thicken.

Three-time champions Gokulam Kerala FC may be top of the table with four points in two games, but are yet to find their feet. Only one goal so far, a well-placed Anju Tamang header at the Ambedkar Stadium against HOPS FC, must have head coach Anthony Andrews in a quandary. Lack of goals had never been a problem in their three title wins, and they will have to solve that soon as up next for them is a crucial clash against fellow contenders Odisha FC on December 20.



The Kalinga Warriors had the most comfortable opening-day outings of all teams as they flexed their muscles in a 4-0 thrashing of city rivals Sports Odisha. It was former Gokulam striker Win Theingi Tun, who scored two of those, both assisted by the energetic substitute Jasoda Munda.

Another side who looked on song were last season's finalists Kickstart as they started off with a 3-0 win over HOPS FC in the capital. Yumlembam Pakpi Devi's stunning long-range strike, already one of the contenders for the goal of the season, sealed the three points for the Bengaluru side after Karishma Shirvoikar and Sushmita Lepcha had opened the scoring.

East Bengal will also be content with their performance in the first round as their young guns left no stone unturned in a smooth 2-0 win over Sports Odisha at the Capital Football Arena. The Manipur duo of Nongmeikapam Sibani Devi and Kshetrimayum Margaret Devi added a goal in each half for the Red and Gold Brigade, who will be keen to replicate their Calcutta Women's Football League performance on the national stage.

There have been early worrying signs for Sports Odisha and HOPS FC. Both sides are yet to bag a goal, but have shown hints of quality and will be hopeful of finding form as they get more matches under their belt.

While Odisha FC vs Gokulam Kerala FC is, without a hint of doubt, the blockbuster clash of the next round, keep an eye out for a few other interesting games on the horizon. Kickstart will bank on home advantage as they take on East Bengal and Sports Odisha in the space of five days. Sethu FC, who were delighted to return with a point from Kozhikode, will look to make their experience count against Dipankar Biswas's East Bengal.

The opening week has been a treat, but sit tight. There's plenty more to come. Until March, Indian women's football is set to witness top-notch action like never before.



Shooting Range

I-League 2023-24







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