



STADIUM ECHO

The Indian Football Magazine



HERO I LEAGUE PREVIEW: A NEW DAWN

INTERVIEW WITH ASHWIN
RAMAN, THE 17 YEAR
OLD FOOTBALL ANALYST

ISL ROUND-UP: BACK
WITH A BANG

ISSUE 5 | DECEMBER 2020

Editor's Note

With Indian (and World) football back in full flow, our task becomes considerably easier. There is no shortage of content in the Indian Super League and there is much excitement over what is to come in the Hero I-league. The ISL continues to improve its quality of football and gives much hope to football fans like you and me over the sport's future in India. Bala Devi's exploits in Europe are perhaps more noteworthy for their overall social impact. Indian football seems to be headed back on the right path after the minor hurdle of a pandemic.

Stadium Echo is a humble attempt by a group of young people to cover the fascinating transition of Indian football from a footballing minnow to hopefully an Asian force to be reckoned with in the coming years. We not only cover the current happenings but also stories that have shaped the sport in the country over the past century or so. Quality coverage of the sport is a prerequisite to building a culture and this magazine aims to achieve that to an extent.

It is of great personal pride that we publish this issue. I am grateful to the writing team and my co-editor, all of whom worked very hard on this project to bring the readers engaging pieces and I would like to thank the designing team which has given this idea an aesthetically pleasing form. Lastly, I would like to thank you, the reader, for taking time out of your life to read and support Indian football

Ritwik Khanna



I-league Trophy - 90min

Hero I-league Preview: A New Dawn

Ishaan Takkar

In these difficult times, football has suffered a lot as all sporting activities were ground to a halt. With ISL being conducted successfully in Goa so far, hopes for some level of normalcy returning in Indian football are high, even if it is without fans. The AIFF has thus taken on the mantle of being the frontrunner in resuming sporting activities and their next major task is the 14th edition of the I-league which is set to start from January 9th, 2021.

Last season Mohun Bagan were named champions after the cancellation of the last round of fixtures, due to Covid- 19 pandemic and rightly so, since they were mathematically impossible to catch. However, the Mariners have since moved on to the ISL following their merger with ATK, leaving the playing field wide open for the upcoming season.

What changes are there due to the Covid -19 pandemic?

A major change is that this season's league has been modified and shortened. Every team will face each other once in the first leg of the tournament. After completion of the first round, teams will be divided into two different groups. The top six teams, according to the points table of the first leg, will play each other again in the Champions stage where the team who manages to get the highest points (Cumulative of first leg and Champions stage) will be crowned as Champions and will qualify for the 2022 AFC Cup group stage. Whereas the bottom five

teams of the first leg will play each other in the relegation stage, where the team with lowest points (Cumulative of first leg and relegation stage) will be relegated and will move to 2nd Division league.

Further, due to the Covid- 19 pandemic, AIFF decided in favour of all matches to be played in Kolkata. Matches will be played in Salt Lake Stadium, Kishore Bharati Kirangan and Kalyani Stadium.

What general changes are there?

AIFF has implemented the 3+1 foreign players rule, in which a team can play four foreign players, but one of these four necessarily has to be from an AFC affiliated nation. Moreover, there have been major changes in the participating teams. Following Mohun Bagan and East Bengal's shift to the ISL, AIFF issued an invitation to accept bids from non-participating cities like: Mangalore, Delhi, Ranchi, Jaipur amongst others to join the league from 2020-21 season. The invitation meant the entity which wins the bid will have the right to own and run a new football club that will be playing in the league. In August, Sudeva FC of Delhi and Sreenidhi FC based in Hyderabad, were announced by AIFF as the new clubs joining the league. While Sudeva will join the league from this season, Sreenidhi is scheduled to join it from the 2021-22 season. There were no clubs relegated last season and one club, Mohammedan SC was promoted from 2nd Division.

Teams

Aizwal FC from Mizoram, champions in 2016-17 had a disappointing season last time around, but they'll look to bounce back to winning ways and challenge for the title.

Tamil Nadu based, Chennai City FC, who were champions in 2018-19 season but lacked the same form in the next season, have an exciting squad coming into the league. If they can recapture their form from the 2018-19 season, they are a lock for the Champions stage at least.

Goa based, Churchill Brothers are a club with a rich history in Indian football. They've won the I-league

twice and finished runners up twice as well, along with three Durand Cups to their name. In recent seasons however, their form has not been what we expect from one of India's legacy clubs. They have lingered around the foot of the table since their last I-league win in 2013 and will be looking to change that after seeing their 'peer group' has moving on to bigger things.

Kerala based, Gokulam Kerala had a good 2019-20 season and would look to build on that and move forward. Their good form in the league was not an outlier as it followed their Durand Cup victory in 2019. Gokulam certainly cannot be ruled out and are among the dark horses for the title.

Indian Arrows, based in Goa, was made with the motive of nurturing young Indian football talent. The squad is in constant rotation with their brightest stars being snapped up by bigger clubs that pay more and the same is the case this season. They are immune from relegation, given their developmental status, but would still be looking to improve upon their 11th placed finish last season.

One of Kolkata's traditional big-three, Mohammedan SC was promoted from 2nd division last season after five years out in the wilderness. They may have some semblance of a home advantage but without their considerable number of fans it is effectively a neutral venue. Substantial resources have been invested into the team and it will be intriguing to see whether they can be competitive back in the big leagues.

Manipur based Neroca FC made its debut in 2nd division as recently as the 2015-16 season, but the club has since made huge strides. Although they've never been crowned as champions, they came very close in the 2017-18 season, finishing as runners up to Minerva Punjab.

Srinagar based Real Kashmir FC are fast turning into one of India's emerging football powerhouses. They have performed well in the last two seasons, finishing fourth behind Punjab FC and the two Kolkata clubs. They also won the recently concluded IFA Shield and are strong challengers for the title. A small community-based club from a troubled area, Real Kashmir will be every football romantic's bet to win the I-league.

TRAU FC of Manipur was last season's promoted side and finished a strong sixth. While their players give their all in each match, it is hard to see them challenging for the title due to a lack of quality in the squad.

Delhi based Sudeva FC are new to the competition. Having a lot of academy players on their side, they are a young side as well. Being a new club to such an elite level competition under these circumstances may be hard for them especially with a huge dearth of experience.

Punjab based Roundglass Punjab FC, formerly known as Minerva Punjab, were champions in the 2017-18 season under their previous ownership of Ranjit Bajaj. Punjab has consolidated its position among the big names in the I-league and finished third last season. They are one of the favourites for the title thanks to their well-developed youth structure and shrewd management.

Predictions

While there is a lot to be seen, the newcomers, in my opinion, will find it hard to adjust in the league, particularly Sudeva. Mohammedan remain a curious case and their large scale changes make it tough to predict their season. Talking about the top three, my bet is on Real Kashmir FC to be crowned champions this time followed by Chennai City FC and Roundglass Punjab.



After ISL's first Kolkata Derby - Scroll

ISL Review: Back with a Bang

Ritwik Khanna

With just over a month of the league underway, the 2020-21 ISL season is well poised for the last round of matches before the knockout stage. Mumbai City FC and ATK Mohun Bagan have predictably emerged as the frontrunners, and are well-clear of the chasing pack. Sergio Lobera's Mumbai have dominated the league, having scored the joint most goals and conceded the joint lowest. It is no less than what was expected of them after the massive rebuild the side underwent with large scale arrivals (most of them from FC Goa) and departures. ATK Mohun Bagan have followed the set template from last season with a rock-solid defence from Sandesh Jhingan, Tiri and Pritam Kotal, and the brilliant attack of David Williams and Roy Krishna. While the side has lacked some creativity from the centre, their expertise, combined with their discipline has made them very difficult to beat.

Behind these two in-form sides, there is a large cluster of clubs who are vying for the two remaining knockout spots. Bangalore and North East United with their pragmatic approaches have lost only one game each. A solid defence is always a good foundation to build a season upon, and both Carles Cuadrat and Gerard Nus have managed to achieve that. However, if they are to secure passage into the knockouts and perform well, then they need to offer more going forward.

Almost tangentially opposite to Bangalore and North East United is free-flowing, attack oriented

FC Goa. Fuelled by the midfield dynamism of Jorge Ortiz and Brandon Fernandes, and led by the league's top scorer Igor Angulo, Goa have the second highest number of goals scored. Their defence requires some organising, and they have found clean sheets hard to come by. Jamshedpur and Hyderabad are still in the mix, but they are all heavily reliant on individual performances and are plagued by inconsistency. It is difficult to see either of them overtaking teams above them in the table. Chennaiyin have played a game less, and have a relatively easier run-in to the end of the season, and will be in the hat for qualification come the final matchday.

East Bengal's first season in the ISL has been one to forget. With just three goals scored (lowest in league) and 11 conceded (highest in league), it has been a rude awakening for Robbi Fowler's side. They are already looking at the next season, and considerable changes are expected in the squad from January itself. For Odisha and Kerala Blasters, it has been a case of the same old, same old. With faltering squads devoid of much technical skill and having their hopes overwhelmingly pinned on foreign attacking players, it is not difficult to see why they have both struggled. Fans of both sides continue to wonder when they will evolve from also-rans to genuine challengers.

A month into the league, it is safe to make some judgement about the players, managers and the teams. Here is my purely subjective season round-up so far. A more comprehensive list is to come at the end of the season.

Signing of the Season

Igor Angulo (FC Goa)

It was a toss-up between the Goa duo Jorge Ortiz and Igor Angulo, but the latter just edges it just for his instinctive ability to find the net. Replacing ISL's highest ever top-scorer was going to be challenging, but Angulo has made it look like a piece of cake. In what was expected to be a season of transition, the Spanish striker's goals have been instrumental for Goa in the race for the knockouts. His

latest strike – a 93rd minute winner against Jamshedpur – epitomized his skills. Despite knowing little about it, Angulo threw himself into the mix, and the ball bounced off the back of his head, past a helpless TP Rehenesh, to give Goa another crucial three points. His goals are not the most aesthetically pleasing, but they count the same. If Goa are to go deep into the tournament, Angulo is their key man.

Honourable Mentions: Jorge Ortiz (FC Goa), Sandesh Jhingan and Tiri (ATK Mohun Bagan), Adam le Fondre and Ahmed Jahouh (Mumbai City FC), Nersjus Valskis and Stephen Eze (Jamshedpur FC), and Kwesi Appiah (North East United).

Match of the Season

FC Goa 1-2 Chennaiyin

Unsurprisingly, it's the highest scoring fixture in the league's history that gave us the most exciting match of the season so far. A breathless end-to-end encounter saw Chennaiyin beat Goa, thanks to Rahim's winner after Crivellaro and Ortiz had exchanged early goals. The game's opening quarter of an hour had more action than most matches have in the entire ninety minutes. Crivellaro's fifth minute goal, straight into the net from a corner, is a strong contender for goal of the season. Whether it was intended or not, only he knows. Even if it wasn't, Crivellaro is unlikely to admit that. I know I wouldn't. In fairness, the scoreline flatters Goa partially. Chhangte missed two absolute sitters, one in each half, which should have made it more comfortable for Chennaiyin. For the neutral viewer, the misses were all the more engaging. The second half was relatively quieter once Chennaiyin had a lead to protect, but the thrust and riposte of Goa's attacks and Chennai's counters were as entertaining as the league has been this season. The somewhat unfair yet intriguing individual sub-plots of Thapa vs Brandon and Crivellaro vs Ortiz added another level of excitement to the game. If one were to present an advertisement for ISL and Indian football, this match would be it.

Honourable Mentions: Bangalore 2-2 Goa, Hyderabad 3-2 East Bengal, Jamshedpur 2-2 Odisha

Mumbai City 1-0 Goa, and Bangalore 4-2 Kerala Blasters.

Save of the Season

Gurpreet Singh Sandhu vs Kwesi Appiah (Bengaluru FC vs North East United FC)

With teams uninclined to using up a foreign spot in goal, Indian goalkeepers have had plenty of opportunities to prove their mettle. There have been some revelations in recent years like Mohammad Nawaz at FC Goa but Sandhu has time and again reminded everyone why he is the Indian number one. This wonderful save from Appiah's header was reminiscent of Gordon Banks' infamous save from Pele for England. Sandhu's consistency and physical superiority takes him a notch above everyone else in the league. ATK Mohun Bagan's Arindam is very unlikely to be in the same age group as him. In any other time over the past few decades, Arindam would have walked into the national team, but such is Sandhu's quality that there are no questions about who should start in goal for Igor Stimac.

Goal of the Season

Halicharan Narzary- Hyderabad FC (3)-1 East Bengal

Admittedly, this is the most subjective category of all. Some people enjoy long range strikes, some enjoy acrobatics, and others enjoy long passing sequence goals more. Personally, quick well-executed counter attacks are the most visually appeasing. The third strike that eventually proved to be decisive for Hyderabad was all about young Liston Colaco. The 22 year old ran circles around the East Bengal defence after coming off the bench, and his assist for this goal was the highlight of an exceptional performance. He received the ball wide on the left from Yasir, turned his man inside out and served the ball up on a platter for Narzary to tap-in to an empty net. This was his second assist of the evening.

Honourable Mentions: Diego Mauricio - Odisha (2)-2 Jamshedpur, Vignesh - Mumbai (1)-0 Hyderabad, Crivellaro - Chennaiyin (1)-0 FC Goa.



In Conversation With: Ashwin Raman, the 17 year old Football Analyst

Speaking to Arnav Chawla

"The stats many, many times are like an incredible piece of meat or fish but badly cooked. It doesn't tell me much." Jose Mourinho's words reflecting on Liverpool's statistical dominance in the recent encounter against his Spurs side take us back to his dig at stats in 2018 when he claimed "those who don't understand football use statistics to analyse it."

Jurgen Klopp wouldn't lose much sleep over these statements just as he wouldn't have when Jose told him that the "best team lost" in the aftermath of the aforementioned encounter. This is because Klopp works closely with what has been described as the dream data analytics team, and would attribute much of Liverpool's recent success to the efficient scouting of players and analysis of performances using statistics. Moreover, the case studies of clubs overperforming their shoestring budgets like FC Midtjylland and Brentford are a testament to how satisfactory the statistical 'piece of meat' can be if properly cooked.

There is no better way to capture the rise in data driven decisions in modern football than the awe-inspiring story of Ashwin Raman - a 17 year old Indian who is working remotely as a part time scout/analyst for Scottish football club, Dundee United.

The Bengaluru based wonderkid who is perhaps the youngest member of his club's backroom staff

has also made it to the most popular football management simulation game- Football Manager.

Shattering geographical, experience and age barriers along the way, Ashwin's path-breaking journey is yet another reminder that the cream always rises to the top. It certainly gives hope to everyone looking to get involved in the football industry and makes Indians feel incredibly proud. It was a pleasure to chat with him and get an insight about his story and work.

The Interviewer (T.I.): What drew you to blogging about football? And what got you interested in scouting/analytics in particular?

Ashwin Raman (A.R): It started back in 2015/16 when I came across a few books like Soccernomics, The Numbers Game and Socceromatics that dragged me into the rabbit hole of using smarter methods like analytics in football. Then, I started to delve deeper into it through the Twitter analytics blog sphere consisting of the likes of StatsBomb and AnalyticsFC. All of this tempted me to give writing a shot.

T.I: How did you land the role at Dundee United?

A.R: After about four years of blogging, I amassed a pretty large following of about 12-13K followers on Twitter and consequently made a lot of friends along the way. One of them happened to be Stevie Grieve - the Head of Analysis at Dundee United. He also worked here in India a lot and had his own show on Ten Sports. In October last year, I got a DM from him on Twitter asking me if I wanted to join the team at Dundee United. It was completely out of the blue.

T.I: Could you shed some light on your day to day proceedings at Dundee United? What exactly does your role involve?

A.R: My work essentially involves two roles- Scouting and Team Analysis. I look for players that we can sign using data and videos- more videos than data as data can tend to be reductive. Apart from that, I make use of data visualisation- charts, graphs etc to encapsulate, compare and review our performances. I try to point out

where and how we can improve.

T.I: How would you rate your experience at Dundee United so far? What are some of your biggest takeaways?

A.R: I am absolutely loving it! It's great to get paid for stuff I've been doing enthusiastically for a long time for free (chuckles). Jokes aside, the fact that I'm doing something I'm extremely interested in and what I'm doing is making an impact on a club in real life feels good. I'm getting better at getting straight to the point with my analysis and making it easier to comprehend for others. I have a good grasp of how it's going to be working in a job later on. I also have a much better understanding of how the football world works on the inside.

T.I: Are there any unique traits that you like to pay attention to while scouting players? How do you go about traits like decision making that are not quantifiable?

A.R: I don't really look for unique traits per se due to the sheer amount of players I'm looking at across different leagues and divisions all over the world. I look for players that would fit in many different roles. It's all related to the kind of position and type of player required. As for traits like decision making, I don't think analysing intangibles is my biggest strength unless there's context with respect to positions. Eg- Analysing how a full back reacts to another playing overlapping on the wing in a 1v1 duel. I try to look for places where the intangible traits have a larger visible impact. It's something I hope to get better at with time.

T.I: How do you strike a balance between the eye test and what suggests while making decisions?

A.R: The main function data plays for me is to make sure I'm watching the right players and not wasting my time on every single player on the planet. After the initial data check, I spend most of my time on video scouting. Essentially, data helps me identify players and videos help me evaluate players. This can sometimes lead to false negatives - where a player who's actually good has poor underlying numbers. But this issue is taken care of by the large number of players available for scouting as there's

invariably an alternative player for a player missed due to the data check.

T.I: Which analytical tools/apps have you found to be the most useful and convenient? Is there anything you would like to add to your skill set?

A.R: Wyscout is what I use the most at work. Even outside work, I spend a lot of time on Wyscout just watching players. It's got inaccuracies here and there because of issues in data collection and a couple of their features but I absolutely love it; it's extremely useful and convenient. Apart from that, I've been using Tableau Public for the last four years to create data visualisation. It's extremely easy and helps to create visually exciting stuff without any coding. It's just drag and drop. As for what I'd like to add to my skill set, there's actually a lot. I'd like to learn how to code- maybe learn either R or Python. I've made some progress on R with the help of an online course but I haven't reached a good enough level yet.

T.I: How important do you think coding is for someone looking to get into football analytics?

A.R: I think it's essential because the complexity of data being used is increasing every year. Coding is extremely useful to automate processes that help to deliver insight quickly. Most football analytics job roles require either Python or R nowadays. It's practically impossible to get into a completely analytics driven job in football without a good grasp of R or Python.

T.I: How does it feel to be a part of Football Manager? Has playing the game helped you in your journey in any way?

A.R: It's a game I adore. I am absolutely thrilled to be on it! To put it plainly, it's a massive flex. It makes me feel like what I'm doing is all legit; it feels like I've really achieved something. I feel indebted to Stuart Milne for adding me to the game. I've actually not played that much; I only started playing FM 20 onwards. I don't think it's helped me in my journey that much. Rather, it's often the other way around- I end up signing a lot of the players that I've scouted in real life on my FM saves.

T.I: Which football writers/analysts do you

personally look up to?

A.R: My absolute favourite analytics writer ever is Thom Lawrence. His blogs back in 2015/16 were groundbreaking in analytics at the time. The range of stuff he's shed light on using data is amazing. Apart from him, there's Stevie Grieve whose e-course "Tactical Teacher" really helped me understand the game a lot better. The most notable among others would be René Marić (now assistant manager at Borussia Monchengladbach). My favourite right now would be Jon Mackenzie who's a close friend so I'm a little biased here. He's the guy I look up to the most. As for more analytics writers, there's James Yorke, Ben Torvaney, Tom Worville, Sam Gregory, Bobby Gardiner, Paul Riley and of course Michael Cox who's an inspiration for many looking to get into analytics. Loads of writers I'm extremely inspired by.

T.I: Do you intend to get into analytics full time? Would you also like to explore other areas of football going forward?

A.R: I haven't made up my mind about that. I'm not sure if I want to work in football as my main career path. I'm just gonna continue doing what I do, see where it takes me and make up my mind then. As for other areas of football, I'd love to explore coaching. It's something that interests

me even though I don't think I can actually end up doing it as my playing ability is quite limited.

T.I: What advice would you give to someone looking to get into scouting/analytics in football?

A.R: I'd say write as much as you can. Of course, prioritise quality over quantity but keep putting your work out there and keep trying to learn new stuff. Throw a bunch of darts at the target and see which one hits the bullseye. Try everything possible. Post all of it on blogs or Twitter- anything that can get you in the public eye. And be patient. I don't think I'm the best person to offer advice on getting into scouting/analytics as I've been immensely lucky. Probably the most pessimistic take but football's an extremely unforgiving field if you're looking for a full time job- the pay is low, the postings are rare. It's pretty difficult to get a job. So just hit and hope, basically. Post as much as possible, try to make connections and wait it out. The good news is that clubs are a lot more interested in scouting and analytics now than ever before and we'll see many more success stories on social media. There's already several analysts who are working for clubs and are getting well-paid but haven't disclosed it. It's not a great field right now but hopefully it'll get better. Just throw your work out there and see if it sticks.



The Prestigious IFA Shield - Goal

Real Kashmir: IFA Shield Winners 2020

Ritvik Khanna

The romance of the cup has, over time, undeniably faded. Big English clubs like Arsenal and Manchester City are now criticized for over-celebrating the success of “smaller” cup competitions, like the League Cup or even the FA Cup. However, even if they don’t earn you the best of income or respect, a trophy is a trophy at the end of the day. It boosts the morale of the entire team and bolsters their confidence going into larger competitions. On the rare occasion, the fairytale story comes true, like Wigan Athletic that beat Manchester City in the 2013 FA Cup and got relegated in the same season, or Swansea and Birmingham City winning the League Cup in 2011 and 2013 respectively. These cups offer pride and cultural heritage to the winners. In today’s widely unbalanced football ecosystem, cup competitions are a relatively even playing ground wherein anyone can beat anyone on the night. One such example of an underdog success story was seen in this year’s prestigious IFA shield tournament as the four-year-old Real Kashmir Football Club (RKFC) were crowned champions for the first time in their history.

The IFA shield is a short club competition in India organized by the governing body of football in the state of West Bengal, The Indian Football Association (IFA). Established in 1893, it is the fourth oldest football competition in the world and the second oldest in the country, offering a plethora of historical heritage. It mainly comprises teams from the I-league, the Calcutta

Premier Division and a few foreign teams. The number of teams that compete varies each year, but the format is predominantly the same. It starts with the group stages where the top two teams qualify for the knockout stages. East Bengal (now playing the ISL) have won the cup a record 29 number of times. Overseas teams are permitted and promise a sense of excitement and curiosity, and the Bayern Munich II squad has won the cup in 2005. Since 2015, the Shield has been contested as a youth tournament for U19 squads but this year an exception was made, on account of the pandemic which also prevented the participation of foreign teams.

The tournament this year saw four I-league teams, namely Mohammedan Sporting, Gokulam Kerala and Indian Arrows in addition to the champions RKFC, compete with eight Calcutta Premier Division teams. The competition was played in the iconic Salt Lake Stadium, East Bengal Ground, Mohun Bagan Ground, Sailen Manna Stadium, Rabindra Sarobar Stadium and the Kalyani Stadium.

Mohammedan and Real Kashmir FC topped their respective groups as Gokulam finished second to United Sports Club. Indian Arrows, a team consisting of only U19 players, were unable to pass the group stage. The remaining three I-leaguej teams were pooled into the same subset of the knockout stages. This first quarterfinal saw Gokulam fail to find the net vs Mohammedan who emerged victorious thanks to an eight minute penalty. Real Kashmir F.C, who beat Southern Samity by a goal to nil in the quarterfinal, thumped Mohammedan 4-0 in the semifinal. Elsewhere, George Telegraph from the Calcutta Premier Division beat Peerless and United S.C to reach the final. The final took place on the 19th of December in the Salt Lake Stadium. Real Kashmir came out victorious in a hard-fought encounter as they beat George Telegraph 2-1 thanks to a 60th minute goal from the Scottish defender Mason Robertson (the son of their manager David Roberston) and a man of the match performance from their keeper, Mithun Samantha. Samantha made a number of crucial saves including one from

the penalty spot from George Telegraph's Tanmay Ghosh in the 80th minute. The striker Lukman Adefemi of RKFC bagged the golden boot with five goals in five matches, including a hat-trick in the semifinal and the opener in the final.

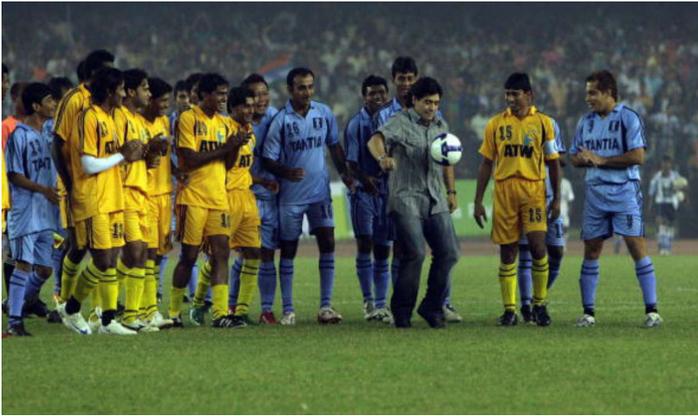
Real Kashmir F.C must have gained some much needed match practice heading into the I-league that kicks off on the 9th of January, and a trophy never hurts. The club is the first professional club from the conflicted state of Jammu & Kashmir to compete in a first division league. They have had international media coverage for the same as well and have a BBC documentary under their name. They've also played overseas in Scotland, having found their head coach and defender from the same country, and have had pre-season training with the likes of Borussia Dortmund. Having achieved promotion into the I-league

after winning the I-league II in 2017-18 and the IFA shield this year, it is safe to claim that the club is on the right track. The coach is aiming for the sky and is keen to win the I-league this season. He credits the magic of the yellow jersey and the badge for the players' character on the pitch and will not give up until this newly formed giant reaches the ISL. With the two Kolkata big clubs now in the ISL, it is open season in the I-league and there are no outright favourites. Real Kashmir have certainly shown that they are not to be discounted this season.

Difficult circumstances blossom the tightest of bonds, and whether or not these local Kashmiri players stay in the team as RKFC moves onwards and upwards, they vow to support and give the club their everything till the end of time. Maybe that's why, like the banner seen inside Anfield and all-around Liverpool, this means more.



Real Kashmir celebrating their win - The Away End



Maradona in India - DNA

Maradona's Romance with India

Siddhant Agarwal

Diego Maradona, arguably the greatest footballer to have ever played the sport, died on 25th November, 2020 in Argentina and left his fans all over the world devastated. A legend is usually considered to be someone whose actions transcend the limitations of time and space to impact other people's lives. Despite a few differing opinions, Diego Maradona was already a legend, but the fact that his death made a cricket-crazy nation like India mourn his loss gestures at the immortal status the footballing magician had attained in his lifetime.

Having people call someone 'God' is no mean feat. There are only a handful of individuals who have had the honor of being addressed and treated as one. Talking about India, there is no doubt that there has been one for a long time now, Sachin Tendulkar. A fellow with a short, rather stout figure and curly hair who produced magic on the cricket field with a bat in his hand.

But there has been another one, one before Sachin, another short and stout fellow with curly hair who created magic with a ball at his feet and made the whole country call him and treat him as God. He was none other than Diego Maradona. No football historian or specialist would even remotely mention India as a part of Diego's life, and rightfully so; yet the impact that Diego had over the people of the subcontinent cannot be emphasized enough. Whether it be watching him sway and sizzle through the field in the 1986 Mexico World Cup,

or watching a rather oversized version of him huffing and puffing while playing against kids in a friendly, the people of this country have only showered him with love and appreciation.

Indians have had the fortune of welcoming Maradona to their country on multiple occasions. His maiden visit to the country was back in 2008 and it naturally had to be in the football capital, Kolkata. He landed late at night in Kolkata and outside the airport was a crowd of about 15,000 fans ready to welcome the legend and watch him with their own eyes. He was to inaugurate a football academy outside the city. That was a time when Maradona was in much better shape and his legendary skills were on display when he was invited to play a small match with the Mohun Bagan juniors.

The next time Maradona visited the country was in 2012, and it was quite literally a god-send opportunity for the football-mad fans in Kannur, Kerala. He was there on a two-day trip. Though he visited for a private business engagement and to inaugurate a jewelry store, a crowd gathered in thousands wherever he went. The last and final time he visited the country was in 2017 when he was invited by now BCCI president, Saurav Ganguly for a charity match.

The 'Diego vs Dada' exhibition match was announced and the stadium was filled to the brim just to have a glimpse of their hero. Sadly, due to an injury on his right arm, Diego was not able to play the match; but he did make it a point to address the crowd, appreciate the love he has received from the city and the country, and bid adieu with a promise to bring football to India.

"I'm here for football. It is a big step that we take with the minister -- to uplift football in India. India really has good players and a football school with boys. Your minister and I must stop this notion that football wants India and India wants football. Together with the minister and the people we will bring a football. I have always been very well received in India. Thanks and kisses!", Maradona had said.

The loss of Diego Maradona has definitely left the country and its many football fans sad, frustrated, and in disbelief. Fans have flooded social media with tributes to the legend. One such tribute, made by a senior minister from the Goa government, claimed that they will install a life-sized statue of the late Argentine football legend in the coastal belt by early next year. Even many celebrities and prominent sports personalities like Sourav Ganguly, Virat Kohli, Sunil Chhetri, and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi displayed their sadness over the demise of the great footballer. Diego Maradona will always be remembered as a magician, who did things on the field no one could dream of. He spread his magic everywhere, and even though he might have left us, we know that his magic never will.



Maradona with Ganguly - Outlook



'16 year old Gaurav Mukhi' - Sportskeeda

“How Old Are You Really?” Age Fraud in Indian Football

Guest Article by Upmanyu Sharma

The Scandal

In November 2018, as Gaurav Mukhi celebrated becoming the youngest goal scorer in ISL history at the age of 16 many onlookers had doubts over his 'real age'. As it turned out, the mustachioed youngster was definitely not 16 and definitely shameless. The concept of real age may be a shock to an outsider, but as it turns out this is a very common concept in the youth levels and now (as we can see) even in the professional and senior level of Indian football.

There are three important aspects of this scandal. Firstly, this is not the first time Mukhi has committed age fraud. He was suspended for a year in 2015 after he falsified his age in the Sub Junior National Football Championship for Coca Cola Cup. His defense, that he was coerced into declaring that he was over-age in 2015, was rejected by the Disciplinary Committee which held him in violation of the Disciplinary Code. Secondly, while the AIFF suspended Mukhi for 6-months they did not hold him liable for Age Fraud because doing so would mean admitting that he had broken the law under Section 12 of the Passport Act, 1967 (wherein the minimum punishment is imprisonment for a year plus fines). Thirdly, Mukhi will be eligible to represent club and country after the suspension and given his past conduct we may never know his real age. This incident also shows how the AIFF handled this glaring violation of not only the

Disciplinary Code but also the statute.

The Current State

The prevalence of this issue can be summarized in the following statement by Arka Bhattacharya writing for The Scroll,

"In 2012, 72% of the probable players selected by the AIFF for the U17 World Cup were found to be overage. According to the people in the industry, this percentage is lower than what they think is going on in some academies. They believe that the percentage of over-age players may be as high as 90-95%."

The primary factor for this issue is the lack of a structured youth system, i.e. no specialized experts for different age groups. This has led to two outcomes. Either the player cheating at a senior level underperforms or an older player continues to mature slowly at a junior level by getting more exposure. Whereas average players continue to succeed at an age level for several years. The problem is aggravated by the coaches, most of which know the real ages of the players and are therefore complicit in this violation. Moreover, officials at all levels are also aware and usually ignore this issue.

Why is it done?

We need to understand that these age cheats are basically minors in need of a livelihood. These kids who have given up on their academics are encouraged by their schools/parents to pursue the sport and make it to the big leagues. Parents of these kids are coerced by the coaches/agents to consider age cheating by giving their child the hope of a lucrative professional contract or a national team call-up.

As mentioned earlier the coaches have vested interests in the players falsifying their ages. They prefer a player without documentation because then they would have a stronger team leading to a better salary/reputation and would also boost their ego. It can also be seen that at the U17 and U19 levels the coaches are usually of the opinion that their rivals are going to cheat so they should also do the same. The agents who supply over-age players exploit this apprehension.

How is it done?

Educators, enablers, coaches, parents, schools, and universities facilitate this practice which is protected by an unwritten 'Code of Silence' where everyone knows about this violation but chooses not to talk about it. The Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969, is the primary law governing the registration of births in the country. The provisions of this act are used to commit age fraud. This statute empowers the local registrars including the ones from Nagar Pallikas (Municipal Departments) to correct earlier entries made and also allows the citizens the opportunity of registering a birth at a later date by the order of a magistrate.

This virtually makes it easy for age cheats to create forged documents. Even documents such as a Passport cannot be relied upon and even players having possession of originals can get an order of the magistrate to alter the records. Coaches and club owners alter the player's documents in the hope to win trophies, agents who act as middlemen supplying over-age kids change letters in the name of the player in accordance to the need of the club, and even State associations are in on this entire racket, staying silent so as not to disrupt the momentum of youth development.

There have even been cases where players have gone abroad or disappeared for a few years, only to return a few years younger. Prominent academies have systemized this practice. They usually have a clear set of guidelines and a go-to address for its players to fabricate age proof documents.

The standard penalty for a club is a year's ban from that particular age group only for that season, which is not stringent enough. The detection is always dependent on the complainant proving the age fraud, which is extremely difficult. In 2016, AIFF instituted a central database for registering a player's correct information and his age proofs. However, even this is not full proof. The system correctly catches matching names but the cheats are now giving the names of their younger brothers or changing their parent's information to

beat the system. Furthermore, the test initiated by FIFA in 2009 (MRI Wrist Bone Scan) cannot determine a person's age and this expensive test can only be conducted after the selection has been done. Expensive and unreliable, this test has failed to solve the problem.

What is Being Done About It?

The Legislature has taken note of this issue. The Prevention of Sporting Fraud Bill, 2013 was drafted in the backdrop of the 2013 IPL spot fixing scandal. Justice Mudgal had been assigned the task to draft this bill, which was then sent to the Law Ministry in 2015. It was then returned to the Sports Ministry after some amendments and since then there has been no progress.

The Union Sports Ministry introduced the National Code Against Age Fraud in Sports in 2011. The Code mandated a date of birth certificate instead of any other document but the provisions of this code have not been implemented properly. The CBI had also set-up a Sports Integrity Unit to address the situation which found specific instances of age fraud but because sport is a State subject, they were unable to charge any of the offenders. A report by the Sports Law and Policy Centre has also given specific recommendations with respect to this problem. These include a more comprehensive system of carding all the athletes and including sports in the Concurrent List.

A positive initiative taken by the All India Football Federation is the start of the Baby League in India. This is a platform where kids from the ages of 6-13 are encouraged to play a shorter version of the game and make sure they play a certain number of matches. In doing so, the league creates a database from an early age and seeks to fill

the void that exists in the youth level till the age of 13. This concept is based on the Uruguayan Baby Football system, a system that has produced great footballers like Cavani, Suarez, Recoba, and many others. Uruguay was also a country plagued by age-fraud issues but has in recent years managed to turn the tide around.

Conclusion

We have seen how the practice of age fraud is not only prevalent in the youth levels but also how the acts of these age cheats are causing a hindrance to the development of the sport in the country. When we look at the initiatives taken by the legislature, it can be inferred that there is a lack of political will to implement the draft bill. Moreover, the response by the AIFF has not been adequate enough to deter age fraud. The issue of age fraud is like a disease that has not been recognized by the people who love the sport. By staying silent and allowing the age cheats to distort the game at youth levels, the players of the country are losing out on a healthy level playing field.

Sport is not entirely like a business. While businesses thrive on trying to eradicate or minimizing competition, sports expands on effective competition amongst the opponents. This competition is imperative for the survival of sports itself. Indian football will always lack an effective competitive atmosphere if age fraud continues. One solution to this problem could be initiatives by the football clubs whether in the ISL or the I-League. These clubs can focus on creating comprehensive youth leagues that will promote their youth players and discourage age fraud. It is, however, a deep-rooted structural issue and no quick fix will be very effective. A deep attitude change is the primary thing required in the federation and only then, will India's young stars be truly young.



PSL Noida Monthly Review

Ritwik Khanna

After the success of the PSL Octet, the Noida leg of the Premier Sports League kicked off on November 29 in the Gaur City Sports Complex. In a departure from the league-only format of the previous edition, PSL Noida will be played over two stages. The first stage has seen the 12 teams be divided into two groups of six. The second stage will be a knockout phase - the top two teams of each group will battle it out for the PSL Cup, the third and fourth placed teams from each group will fight for the PSL Shield, and the bottom two teams from the groups will contest for the PSL Plate.

Participating Teams

Ruby League - GTFC, Monks FC, Storm FC, Wishwa Kings FC, Village Soccer FC, Royal Rangers FC

Sapphire League - Storm Youth FC, Phoenix FC, Noida City FC, Monarchs FC, Warriors FC, Rajpur FC

Royal Rangers and Rajpur FC have emerged as the early favourites in their respective groups. Storm FC and Noida City FC are in hot pursuit of the leaders with virtually nothing to separate the top two sides in both groups. Storm and Royal Rangers have already qualified for the PSL Cup knockout phases along with Rajpur from the Sapphire League but Storm Youth can still overtake Octet champions Noida City FC on the last matchday in what would be a major upset.

Some of the new rules in the league include a penalty of starting a goal down if the team fails to show up on time, and the option of loaning or signing new players in an eight day window between 16th and 24th December.

Player of the Month Nominations

Ruby League: Saeed (Storm FC), Shorya (Monks FC), Mujtaba (Royal Rangers), Arsh (G Traders FC)

Sapphire League: Negi (Noida City FC), Vikas (Storm Youth FC), Hamza (Rajpur FC), Aadil (Monarchs)

POS	TEAM	P	W	L	D	GD	PTS	FORM
1	RAJPUR FC	4	3	0	1	7	10	W W D W
2	NOIDA CITY FC	4	3	1	0	4	9	W W W L
3	STORM YOUTH FC	4	2	2	0	0	6	W W L L
4	FC MONARCHS	4	1	2	1	-1	4	L L D W
5	WARRIORS FC	4	1	2	1	-5	4	L L D W
6	PHOENIX FC	4	0	3	1	-5	1	L L D L

Sapphire League Standings

POS	TEAM	P	W	L	D	GD	PTS	FORM
1	ROYAL RANGERS FC	4	3	0	1	12	10	W D W W
2	STORM FC	4	3	0	1	4	10	W W W D
3	MONKS FC	4	1	0	3	2	6	W D D D
4	WISHWA KINGS FC	4	2	2	0	1	6	L W L W
5	G TRADERS FC	4	0	3	1	-9	1	L L D L
6	VILLAGE SOCCER FC	4	0	4	0	-10	0	L L L L

Ruby League Standings



STADIUM ECHO

The Indian Football Magazine

A first of its kind digital magazine, Stadium Echo was started with the intention of filling the huge gap that exists in the coverage of Indian Football. Stadium Echo is an all-encompassing magazine for the modern Indian football fan. We cover not just the premiere leagues of the country but also grassroots football, women's football, the history of football in the country and much more.

Stadium Echo's first priority is delivering quality content that is accessible to all and so we adopt a pay what you want mechanism. Use any UPI Payments App to scan the QR Code



<https://www.stadiumecho.com/>



StadiumEchoMag



stadiumecho