



STADIUM ECHO

The Indian Football Magazine

**ISL
2020-21
SPECIAL**

**A COMPREHENSIVE PREVIEW OF
EACH TEAM**

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Editor's Note

The resumption of the Indian Super League coincides with the release of this issue of the magazine and thus, the focus of this month's edition had to be on the top of the Indian football pyramid. There is inevitably a lot of excitement surrounding the competition which will be held in a bio-bubble in Goa. Some big names have come in and some big transfers have happened over the extended off-season. The league is now more competitive than ever and it is anybody's guess as to what will happen in the coming weeks but here are our views on what can be expected from the 2020-21 season.

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



ATK Mohun Bagan

Ritvik Khanna

When you merge the reigning champions with the most popular club in India, the term 'solid' seems like an understatement. Mohun Bagan and ATK came together to become ATK Mohun Bagan FC earlier this year after Sanjiv Goenka led consortium of ATK owners bought 80% of Mohun Bagan shares. This new team will be seen competing in three competitions; the ISL, Calcutta Football League and the AFC cup. The team comprises most of the ATK squad that won the ISL last season and remain outright favourites going into this season's campaign following a very clever transfer window.

Antonio López Habas, the most successful ISL coach will be leading the team again after an impressive winning season. Habas, 62, has a plethora of experience to draw his cards from. He won the ISL with ATK in 2014 and 19/20 seasons and has previously led Bolivia to the AFCON final in 1997. He has managed Spanish clubs like Valencia and Celta Vigo and worked with top managers like Rafa Benitez and Claudio Ranieri. The former Spanish footballer is known to be bold and eccentric and is praised by the critics for the same. Whether it's the four match suspension after a spat with Robert Pires in the first campaign or benching two of his best players in the final, one never knows what to expect from this gaffer. He has named five captains that will wear the armband in rotation as he doesn't like to have a 'star' in his team. Habas likes his team to dominate games the 'Spanish way' and is likely to stick to his successful 3-5-2 formation

that is embedded into the squad from last season, considering the significant centre back depth available to him due to his new signings.

The 2020 Arjuna awardee and India's no.1 centre back Sandesh Jhingan along with the commanding Spanish centre half Tiri have been bought from Kerala and Jamshedpur respectively on free transfers and are likely to get into the XI straight away. A proper left back in Subasish Bose is also a new arrival from Mumbai City F.C and is expected to start in place of the makeshift left back Michael Soosairaj used last season. Two new foreign additions will supplement the already star-studded Spanish midfield of Edu Garcia and Javi Hernandez. The only big money signing is the striker Manvir Singh from F.C Goa for 80 Lakh rupees who will probably be a backup for an unchanged forward line of David Williams and star striker Roy Krishna, unless Habas fields an all foreign midfield. Such is the strength and versatility of the squad.

The biggest strength ATK Mohun Bagan will have going into a covid-19 season will be their squad depth. In fact, their depth is so strong that off the back of a fantastic season, the 'Emerging Player of the Season Award' winning centre back Sumit Rathi might find himself on the bench. Moreover, veteran defender John Johnson who started the playoffs and the final is not even registered in this year's squad. They also have possibly the best front two and wing backs in the league. However, they tend to get a little too defensive minded sometimes and lack domestic talent in midfield. The lack of pre-season and no friendly matches as compared to the rest of the teams could have serious implications as well. Currently, the full squad should be available for the first game but Habas fears the lack of pre-season and expects a lot of injuries going into the campaign.

The right back Pritam Kotal, left back Subasish Bose, centre mid Pronay Halder and the centre back Sandesh Jhingan will be the most important Indian players going into the season with plenty of International experience. Arindam Bhattacharya, one of the captains,

in goal will also look to match his 9 clean sheets from last season. However, ATK Mohun Bagan's most important player will undoubtedly be Roy Krishna, the Fiji Striker who wore the armband in last year's final. Roy bagged the golden boot award last season with 15 goals and was top for total goals and assists in the league. His performance could be detrimental in their title defence.

Covid-19 could prove to be a blessing in disguise for the team when it comes to player recovery.

Sandesh Jhingan has completely recovered from his ACL injury he suffered in the final quarter of 2019, and the squad has enough ability in their options on the bench to handle difficult situations, better than the rest of the teams. Their first match of the season sees them kick off against two-time finalists Kerala Blasters whom they failed to beat in the two games last season. Moreover, this game promises drama as Kerala Blasters appointed Kibu Vicuna, the manager that led Bagan to their final I-League victory before the two clubs amalgamated.

SQUAD LIST

ISL 2020

ATK MOHUN BAGAN

BHATTACHARYA • D. SINGH • PAUL • SHAIKH • LAMBA

JHINGAN • TIRI • KOTAL • DAS • BOSE

HERNANDEZ • SOOSAIRAJ • B. SINGH • REGIN • GARCIA • MCHUGH

MARTINS • HALDER • INMAN • RANE • SAHIL • N. E. SINGH

KRISHNA • WILLIAMS • SINGH • ALI





Bengaluru FC

Siddhant Agrawal

Last season was the first in the seven year history of Bengaluru FC in which they failed to win a trophy but come 2020, having made some necessary reinforcements, the team would be hoping to get back the ISL title and also make a mark in the AFC Cup.

ISL 2019/20 season was not a particularly bad season for Bengaluru FC but having finished 3rd overall and not making it to the final, it was definitely a downward curve compared to their performances in their first two seasons in the league. There were obviously both positive and negative aspects of their performance that season. On one end of the spectrum, Carles Caudrat had assembled the meanest defensive setup in the league, having conceded only 13 goals with 11 clean sheets, but on the other end, they scored only 22 goals with Sunil Chhetri being the only consistent performer in front of the goal. On both sides of the pitch, these numbers were the lowest in the Top 5 last season. It was quite evident that the team's attacking prowess is something the Bengaluru FC management needed to work on for ISL 2020/21. Yet these were not the only holes that needed to be filled. The management decided to not renew Albert Serran, who was the starting center back for the team given his age, and on top of that, Nishu Kumar, the starting left-back of the team refused to extend his contract and decided to join Kerala Blasters. Suddenly two of the four starting defensive positions were left empty and needed major reinforcements.

Needless to say, given the requirements, Bengaluru FC has been busy this transfer season. They have brought in much-needed reinforcements in both defensive and attacking positions and have created a squad which is a good mix of youth and experience. Gurpreet Singh Sandhu has been a rock in front of the goal and only a fool would talk about moving the India #1 and winner of Golden Glove of the past two seasons from his place. Ajith Kumar has been brought in from Chennai City FC would be a natural replacement for Nishu Kumar. Fran Gonzalez has also come in from I-League champions Mohun Bagan who would be adding much-needed experience to this defensive line up and partner up well with Juanan. The team also has good defensive options on the bench such as Pratik Chaudhary and the recently bought youth prospect Joe Zoherliana. The defensive players in the team are versatile and have the ability to play at multiple positions which Carles Caudrat would be happy to see and would be hoping that their performances give him a welcome selection headache.

The midfield of the team has been relatively the same as last year and rightfully so there has been no reason to make any changes. Erik Paartalu would continue doing his job as a pivot sitting in front of the defense, disrupting opposition attacks and initiating passing lanes. Dimas Delgado, the former Barcelona B player, would partner alongside him with his passing prowess and strong set-piece delivery. Despite being 37 years old, Dimas still has the much-appreciated ability to make runs into the box or stay behind and power in long balls to the running forwards. The last peg of this midfield three is Suresh Wangjyam who with the help of his excellent pressing and passing abilities complements the other two well and provides much-needed youth and fresh legs in the midfield.

The forward line has been of notable concern for this Bengaluru side and thus the franchise has invested heavily in bringing in two foreign players to the squad. Cleiton Silva, top scorer of the Thai League for the past two seasons,

and Kristian Opseth, Norway International bought from Adelaide United. Both the players add much-needed firepower in front of the goal and would be competing against each other for the #9 spot in the team. Bengaluru franchise would be hoping that the evergreen Sunit Chhetri gets much-needed support from these two strikers in terms of scoring goals instead of being a lone ranger like he was last season. Indian Internationals Aashique Kuruniyan and Udanta Singh would obviously be competing for the position of right-wing and would be hoping to take apart defenses thanks to their pace and ability to exploit space behind defenses.

Carles Caudrat is a typical Spanish school coach who likes his sides to play the way most Spanish teams do. He likes his team to play in a 4-3-3 setup where the focus is on possession and moving the ball. His teams prefer playing an attacking form of football while also keeping the defense tight. Full backs are given the license and encouraged

to move up the field, making runs to provide an attacking option and provide crossing ability. Set pieces are also an important part of his game and provide a threat to the opposition.

For the ISL season 2020/21, Bengaluru FC are good early shouts to be one of the title contenders. That the core of the team has been the same for the past few years has been a huge advantage for the team and has helped them put in consistent performances season after season. The transfer market has been largely successful and they have brought in players who suit their style of play and should, in theory, fit in seamlessly into the team and work well with the rest of the squad. Looking at all the factors discussed above, playoffs should be the bare minimum that the team is hoping to achieve. To be honest, the West Block Blues would not and should not shy away from dreaming of seeing their beloved captain Chhetri lift up the ISL trophy this season.



SQUAD LIST

ISL 2020

BENGALURU FC

G. SINGH SANDHU•L. RALTE•L. SHARMA•SHARON
A. KUMAR•DARJEE•F. GONZALEZ•ZOHERLIANA•BHEKE
JUANAN•N. BHUTIA•SRIVAS•CHAUDHARI•MUIRANG
A. CHHETRI•MORAJKAR•C. SILVA•DELGADO•T. SINGH
LALGHANCHHUAHA•PAARTALU•KHABRA•WANGJAM
D. BROWN•LALRINDIKA•OPSETH•AUGUSTIN•KURUNIYAN
N. SINGH•S. CHHETRI•HAOKIP



Chennaiyin FC

Ishaan Takkar

Two time ISL champions Chennaiyin FC are all set to start their season with some exciting new additions to their squad and some surprising but perhaps overdue departures. Chennaiyin FC has always been known for their brave style of playing and has been home to some of ISL's greatest players. They'll surely look to target a top four finish again at the very least but do they have what it takes to have a good season with competition in ISL more intense than ever?

Chennaiyin have been busy in the transfer market with Jeje Lalpekhlu and Nerijus Valskis moving to East Bengal FC and Jamshedpur FC respectively on free transfers. Lucian Goian was also released with Jakub Sylvester and Enes Sipvoic coming in to reinforce Chennaiyin's foreign options. Chennaiyin has also brought in some exciting young Indian players like Memo, Lalchuanmawia and Reagan Singh which will help in maintaining balance in the squad.

Chennaiyin has always been strong in attacking talent and have always been a high scoring team which has been possible because of their fearless game style. They managed to score 32 goals in 18 games last season. They've already stocked up their attack for this season which looks great on paper once more. What has let them down in recent seasons is their defence. Even though they have constantly brought in players to improve their defensive problems, the solution has not been found yet. Chennaiyin have conceded goals more

often than they'd like and it is an area they will look to improve in the coming season.

The club has some exciting players in their squad but their most effective player on the pitch is fan favourite Rafael Crivellaro. The Brazilian plays as a number 10 and is a very creative player with great technical abilities. He has the ability to turn any game around and had an impressive campaign last time out - scoring seven goals and assisting a further six.

Chennaiyin has also made changes in management appointing Csaba Laszlo as the head coach ahead of the new season. Laszlo, who was previously with Ugandan and Lithuanian National teams, succeeds Owen Coyle who moved on to Jamshedpur FC. Laszlo in an interview said that he's incredibly proud and happy to join the club. He has also said that football is the same everywhere the quality may differ but the language of the game remains the same. The manager's preferred formation has been a stable 4-2-3-1 due to the control offered by three players operating in the centre of the pitch. The coach has emphasized that he wants his players to play tactically efficient football with a lot of control. "I want my team to control the ball and subsequently the opponents and eventually the game," he said. He further added that this can only be possible when you're tactically strong and this is the style of play he wants his team to follow.

Chennaiyin started training together in Goa from the second week of October with some players joining late. The pre-season has not gone to plan with two defeats in two games - 1-0 to Mumbai city FC and 3-0 to FC Goa. Chennaiyin will surely look to improve and learn from the mistakes they made in these friendlies and have to do a lot of work on the training ground to get it together and win upcoming friendlies to boost their confidence for their opener against Jamshedpur on the 24th.

With the squad Chennaiyin has and a new coach coming in and making changes nothing can be said for sure. Keeping in mind the pre-season friendly results, past performances

and some new exciting teams coming in ISL things will be difficult for the Chennai side. I expect them to finish somewhere in bottom half with some mixed performances, defeating some top in form teams and losing to some out of form teams and conceding a lot of goals in the process.



SC East Bengal

Saurabh Nagpal



SC East Bengal's maiden ISL campaign is set to begin with a blast – against their arch-rivals, ATK Mohun Bagan, in India's biggest club game – the polarising Kolkata derby – on November 27 at the Tilak Maidan Stadium in Vasco.

There was immense pressure on the club to make the move to the ISL after their rivals Mohun Bagan did the same following the ATK takeover. After a fallout with previous sponsors Quess, the club was on the edge of irrelevance before intervention from Shree Cement. Even West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee did her bit in helping East Bengal secure sponsorship. The confirmation of their inclusion in this season's ISL came in late September, meaning that manager Robbie Fowler and his seven-member support team – including assistant coach, Renedy Singh, and Indian football's first specialist set-piece coach, Terence McPhillips – received a truncated pre-season to work with their squad.

In this short period, the club has moved quickly and brought in some quality domestic and foreign stars to give their team a smooth blend of experience and energy. The Liverpool legend resorted to tried and tested international players as he mainly recruited from Brisbane Roar, a club that Fowler formerly managed, and Wigan Athletic.

Brisbane Roar's right-back Scott Neville arrived first and was followed by striker Aaron

Amadi-Holloway. Seasoned centre-back, Daniel Fox, and, attacker Anthony Pilkington, were brought in from Wigan, while Jacques Maghoma and Matti Steinmann were the other overseas signings that strengthened the midfield.

From the domestic market, East Bengal's pick of the lot was the striker, Jeje Lalpekhluva - a two-time ISL champion with Chennaiyin FC. Besides bringing him on board, the Red and Gold Brigade have also elevated their quality in most areas of the pitch, at least on paper, by adding skillful players like Balwant Singh, Narayan Das, Gurtej Singh, Eugeneson Lyngdoh, and Md. Rafique among others.

Fowler has been fairly vocal about the type of football he envisions his team to play. While he doesn't want to entirely limit his team with a rigid philosophy and wishes them to adapt according to the situation, he also insists that his team will play attacking, possession-based football which would involve short intricate passes, a polyphony of runners in the attacking half of the field, constant pressing, and a relatively high-defensive line.

While Fowler and his staff were short on time, they surely aren't short of player options. Finding the right balance in the starting XI would be the manager's utmost priority. He's likely to install the likes of Fox and Singh at the heart of his defence with Neville and Das monitoring the flanks. Fowler would also be banking on his leading striker, Jeje, to form a good connection with Pilkington and Amadi-Holloway. Players like Rafique, Lyngdoh, Maghoma, and Steinmann are anticipated to be important figures in the midfield. The 21-year-old Yumnam Gopi Singh, an exciting attacking midfielder who displayed his skills for Bhawanipore FC in the recently-concluded I-League qualifiers, is another player to watch out for.

Fowler has landed on a club of enormous stature which boasts of a vast, passionate, and opinionated fan-base. The lack of in-stadia support would most definitely be a boon instead of a blessing, yet the Bangal Brigade would demand nothing short of an exciting, joyful, and respectable debut season from their team.





FC Goa

Arnav Chawla

FC Goa's last campaign exemplifies their story in the ISL so far- consistent in the league stage; crumbling in the playoffs. Making the playoffs five times in six seasons is no mean feat and requires remarkable consistency. However, failing to win the ISL even once despite getting so close raises valid questions about Goa's ability to handle pressure. Goa steamrolled their way to the top in the league last season only to bow out of the playoffs in familiar fashion against an all too familiar opposition in Chennaiyin FC- the team that has impeded their title hunt three times in the last five years now.

Last season must still be seen as an impressive one as Goa became the first Indian club to qualify for the group stages of the 2021 AFC Champions League courtesy of winning the ISL League Winners Shield. The Gaurs have played some of the most mesmerising football in the last few years becoming the team to watch having highest touches of the ball in each of the last three seasons. Major share of the credit for that must go to former manager, Sergio Lobera, who was unexpectedly sacked in January. As earlier guessed and later confirmed, the club parted ways with Lobera for 'non-footballing reasons' which are yet to be disclosed.

Lobera's departure has been exacerbated by the exodus of players who have followed him to rivals Mumbai City FC. Goa have lost captain Mandar Dessai, mainstay defender Mourtada Fall and midfield linchpins Ahmed Jahouh and

Hugo Boumous to Mumbai. The club have also ended their association with 37 year old star-striker Coro who was a fan favourite and won two golden boots in his three seasons at Goa.

Amidst these shaky changes, the club have hired Spanish coach Juan Ferrando to steady the ship. Ferrando, the second youngest coach in the ISL, joins the Gaurs on the back of back to back promotions with Greek side, Volos FC. He advocates free-flowing football which would mean Goa will not deviate from their attacking philosophy. Instead, the Spaniard would be keen to blend some pragmatism with the existing system to ensure that the team is no longer tactically outclassed in big matches.

The club's reputation of shrewd transfer business despite a tight budget is very well intact with the signings that have been made. Starting with the foreigners, Goa have signed a CB pairing in Ivan Gonzalez and James Donachie. Gonzalez is an extremely agile and quick ball-playing centre back. Being 5'9", he could find himself in trouble during aerial duels with forwards. This is addressed by his physical, aerially dominant partner, Donachie. A three-time A League champion, Donachie is vastly experienced and Goa would hope he can possess a similar threat as Fall from set pieces. On paper, the foreign CBs form a balanced and complementary pair.

In midfield, Jorge Ortiz and Alberto Noguera have been roped in to fill the huge gap left by last year's ISL player of the season, Boumous. Although predominantly a winger, Ortiz can play anywhere across the front four and is known for his crossing and shooting prowess. Noguera is another versatile craftsman who can slot in central midfield or behind the striker. He is adept at operating in tight spaces and retaining the ball and tactically astute enough to guide the press should Goa choose to do so.

Among the new signings, the maximum pressure will undoubtedly be on Coro's successor- Igor Angulo. The Spanish striker had an incredible record for Polish side, Gornik Zabrze- 109 goal contributions (88G+21A) in 154 appearances.

He's a traditional centre forward who likes to use his physique to bully defenders and possesses sharp striker instincts. Used to handling pressure back in Poland, Angulo is confident he can do the same for Goa.

Goa have stuck to a six man foreign contingent with club captain Edu Bedia rounding off the roster. The veteran midfielder brings much needed ISL experience to the side. He has a defence splitting pass in his armoury and doesn't shy away from a challenge. He also has a keen eye for goal and scored five goals in 10 appearances last season.

Moving on to the Indian contingent, all eyes will be on Lenny Rodrigues and Brandon Fernandes. Lenny is likely to feature in a double pivot with Bedia while Brandon may occupy the wings or may slot in behind Angulo. Lenny has been an important cog in the defensive midfield for Goa and is expected to flourish under the familiar humid Goan conditions. Similarly, Brandon will look to play a pivotal role for Goa and add to his Indian high tally of seven assists last season. Another player to watch out is striker Ishan Pandita. The 22-year-old who signed from Spanish 4th division side Lorca has drawn national interest after gathering a lot of international exposure. Makhan Chote, another product of the aforementioned recruitment, was a revelation for Punjab FC in the I-league and forms a part of the young Indian core that Goa is setting up. There are numerous other talented youngsters in this bunch consisting of 14 Goans blended with ISL proven and experienced Indians in the form of Seriton Fernandes, Saviour Gama and Mohammad Nawaz among others.

Ferrando is known to experiment with different formations and players and may have to do just that considering the minimum of six extra games Goa will play courtesy of the AFC Champions League. It is expected that he would resort to his preferred system of 4-2-3-1 in most games and would chop and change according to the opponents as well as the resources available.

An early start to the pre-season should prove handy for the Gaurs who have had a mixed bag

of results in the friendlies - winning two and losing one. They would be happy with the likes of Angulo, Pandita, Chote and Brandon finding the net. Goa need to hit the ground running and accumulate as many points as they can early before the AFC Champions League fixtures come in.

Home advantage, a pragmatic manager, great signings and an experienced domestic core will be Goa's biggest strengths heading into the season. Whereas, the holes left by the likes of Boumous, Fall and Coro may prove to be too big to fill. While making the playoffs is not a given like the last few seasons, you wouldn't put that past this Goa side who could benefit from not being the favourites for a change. Goa fans would also hope for a deep run in the AFC Champions League. As claimed by Ferrando, irrespective of the results, Goa promises to be as entertaining as ever.





Hyderabad FC

Ritwik Khanna

Top flight football returned after a long gap to Hyderabad last season which undoubtedly pleased many football enthusiasts in one of India's historical powerhouses, but fans in the City of Nizams would not have been satisfied with the performances with the club finishing bottom in ISL 2019/20. Hyderabad managed just two wins two wins in 18 matches last time out having conceded the most goals in the league and scoring the second lowest.

The new season brings with it an opportunity to start afresh and the wholesale changes at the club show positive signs of intent. Former Las Palmas manager Manolo Marquez has been brought in to replace Albert Roca who left to become a coach at Barcelona. Marquez has said that he will build upon Roca's work at the club and the coaching styles of the two managers dovetail nicely. The heavy influence of the Spanish school on Indian football has not escaped Hyderabad with the ownership looking to set a constant brand of possession based and confident football irrespective of personnel. Considering this, Marquez's appointment is a shrewd one given his considerable experience at not only the top of Spanish football but also at the grassroots where the foundation of this style is laid.

The changes at Hyderabad have not been limited to the dugout. Marcelinho and Marko Stankovic are two major departures from last season's squad along with Kamaljit Singh and

Rohit Kumar. Despite the exits, the squad looks stronger this time around with some smart business done by the club in the transfer market. Former Rangers and Brighton striker Fran Sandaza has been brought in to lead the line, winger Joel Chianese has been signed from A-league side Perth Glory and Lluís Sastre has come in from Cypriot side AEK Larnaca to complete the supply line.

However, it is in the Indian market where Hyderabad has impressed the most. The club has roped in four 18 year olds (Rohit Danu, Akash Mishra, Lalbiakhlua Jongte and Biaka) from Indian Arrows - as safe a bet as possible when it comes to Indian youngsters. This influx of youth has been well-balanced by the arrival of one of India's best ever goalkeepers in Subrata Paul from Jamshedpur FC. Along with Paul, Chingelnsana Singh has come in from FC Goa - providing some much needed support in the defensive department.

The improvement in the quality of players has been apparent in Hyderabad's pre-season performances as well. A defeat to Kerala Blasters in their first friendly was followed up by a draw with perennial contenders Bengaluru FC and a win against last season's table-toppers FC Goa.

Rohit Danu has emerged as one of the most exciting prospects in the ISL this season and the India U19 international is a player to keep an eye on. Spanish striker Aridane has also impressed in the friendlies and Marquez will be hoping that he can form a productive partnership with Fran up top. The hope and positivity around the club ahead of the new season is not without reason.

The club has been making moves off the field as well with exciting tie-ups with big European clubs being announced. A two-year partnership with Borussia Dortmund was announced in August wherein the focus will be on youth player development and coaching education. This was followed up with a tie-up with Spanish second division side Marbella FC which will allow Hyderabad to use the facilities and infrastructure at Marbella for medium to long term training programmes.

The focus on youth development will pay its dividends in the future while the signings of experienced players should help the club fare better in the short term. The squad however looks to be missing in some depth and a playoff berth looks unlikely this time given the league's competitiveness but the team looks exciting on paper and if pre-season form can be continued then they are in with a shout.

Hyderabad opens its campaign with a relatively easier fixture against Odisha FC on 23rd November before a tough run of matches against Bengaluru, Jamshedpur and ATK Mohun Bagan. A good start to the season can put them in a strong position for a playoff spot. There are exciting times ahead for the club and football is well and truly back in the Deccan, even if the fans are not.



Jamshedpur FC

Adibir Singh

In recent history, Jamshedpur FC have been the perfect case of 'so close yet so far'- failing to qualify for the playoffs in each of the last three seasons. An 8th place finish in the previous campaign doesn't do justice to some of their performances- both team and individual- in the bigger picture. But as they say, the table never lies.

Injuries to their star men in Sergio Castel, Piti and Noe Acosta took a toll on results throughout the year despite a promising start to their campaign, losing just one of their opening 5 fixtures. With their ailing squad falling like nine-pins, it took them seven more games to get another win, proving just how vital their personnel were for the Men of Steel.

The new season has brought in new management- with Owen Coyle now at the helm, the boardroom has been vocal about firstly getting into the play-off stages, before even thinking about the ultimate prize. Coyle and his backroom staff are no strangers to the Indian game, dragging a Chennai side from the bottom of the league to the ISL final in last years' edition. This is testament to the management of the former Bolton Wanderers boss and his ability to motivate his players and get them over that final line- something the JFC faithful have been long yearning for.

Jamshedpur have had one of the busiest windows of any team in the league- with the

signings of Jackichand Singh and Nerijus Valskis being the pick of the bunch. Fans would have been worried with the departure of their talisman in Sergio Castel, but who better to bring in as a replacement than last season's ISL top scorer- Valskis. With 15 goals to his name in 19/20, the quality up front is undeniable.

Jackichand Singh was the most surprising transfer in the entire window for many- leaving an FC Goa side that finished top of the table for a club that hasn't been nearly as competitive. Singh's on-ball ability made him one of the stand-out performers in the league, always getting the fans off their seats- and now it's in the hands of the winger to provide the goods to his Lithuanian strike partner.

New captain Peter Hartley, a former Sunderland youth player, has been brought in to lead the line and bring plenty of experience to a defence that desperately needed to shore things up if they want to mount a serious challenge for the play-off spots. Adding Stephen Eze to the mix makes Coyle's intentions even more clear.

Letting go of veterans Subrata Paul and Rafique Ali may however, prove to be costly due to the experience the two brought to the side- something which is as important as talent when the league approaches the business end of the year. The biggest departure however is arguably that of Farukh Choudhary, the most consistent performer from the Indian contingent. As much as Coyle would have liked to keep him, he has signed equally talented players to prevent any transfer setbacks.

Jamshedpur have been winless in all three of their pre-season friendlies, but the manager would brush this aside with the aim of experimenting with various back-lines and attacking trios. A flat back four seems to be the way forward for the team, and the fans will be hoping Eze is back fit in time for the opening few fixtures. The front-men haven't started firing yet- and if they're saving their goals for the big stage, we could be in for plenty of fireworks come the 20/21 opener.

Owen Coyle faces his old side Chennaiyin FC in

the opener on 24th November, and he'll be showing no remorse to his former team in the hopes of starting the season with three points. A tough test, but if they can overcome it, they have a favourable run of games to follow and build momentum.

Jamshedpur may have lost a lot of fluidity in their attack losing the likes of Piti, Acosta, Castel and Farukh- which made them one of the most enjoyable sides to watch last year- but they have plugged the holes which also made them one of the leakiest defences in the league. This, along with their attacking signings, shows they mean business and lays down a marker for anyone that wrote them off on the back of last year's showing.

We'd put our money on Jamshedpur qualifying for the playoffs at the very least, in fourth place. Anything that comes after can only be beneficial to Owen Coyle's boys.



SQUAD LIST
ISL 2020
JAMSHEDPUR FC

REHENESH • P. KUMAR • N. KUMARMAHATO • YADAV
HARTLEY • EZE • GEHLOT • LOURENCO • RENTHLEI
AMIN • GOGOI • MANDI • LALLAWMAWMA • BARUA
MONROY • LIMA • J. SINGH
FITZGERALD • VANMALSAWMA • A. SINGH
R. J. SINGH • M. SINGH PARUI • TELI • MARDI
GAURAB • B. SINGH
VALSKIS • GRANDE • JADHAV • SAPAM
K. SINGH • LALNUNFELA



Kerala Blasters

Ritvik Khanna

The story of Kerala Blasters in the ISL is like a kid trying to clench sand in his palms. The closer they are to holding the trophy, the quicker it slips from their hands. The two-time finalists have fallen prey to an extra time goal and a penalty shootout respectively in their best seasons. Ever since, they have missed out on a playoff spot due to finishing outside the top four.

However, there is a new ray of hope. Last year's 7th placed Yellow Army has been handed over to the record breaking I-League winning manager, Kibu Vicuna. Vicuna, 48, destroyed last year's I-league as Mohun Bagan triumphed to victory with a record number of games to spare. He had a 76%-win ratio with only two losses, the first of which was Vicuna's opening game. The fans will certainly be tuning in expecting a playoff finish as a result.

Kerala Blasters have undergone a massive revamp in the transfer window. They said goodbye to as many as 21 players with only 16 new players coming in. Six new foreign signings join the sole survivor from last year's international roster, Sergio Cidoncha.

The core of the squad is likely to be their Indian contingent as many of them have signed multi-year contract extensions with a few being brought in from the reserve team.

Vicuna, a Spanish manager has experience in

dealing with big personalities and has coached players like Cesar Azpilicueta, Raul Garcia, Nacho Monreal, Jon Erice and Oier Sanjurjo. His preferred formation is a 4-2-3-1 and he is likely to stick to the same, but some say he may shuffle around a 4-4-2 because of his two star strikers Hooper and Murray.

Vicuna's key player will be their most valuable player, the poacher Gary Hooper. Hooper has played for Norwich City, Sheffield Wednesday, Celtic, Leyton Orient and Wellington Phoenix. He remains the first and only player so far to score in the Premier League, EFL Championship, EFL League One, EFL League Two, FA Cup, English League Cup, Football League Trophy, FA Cup, UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, Scottish Cup, Scottish League Cup and the Scottish Premiership. With over 200 club goals in 500 games, the English striker is a serious contender for the golden boot.

Other important players include the experienced centre half Costa Nhamoinesu, who has previously played under Vicuna and has UCL and UEL experience.

Among the domestic players, wonderkid Sahal Abdul Samat will have all eyes on him. He is tipped to be the next best player of the nation and Vicuna has publicly stated his intentions of getting the best out of Samat in his preferred no.10 role.

Their biggest miss will be the loss of the commanding Sandesh Jhingan to Vicuna's former team Mohun Bagan, who the yellow army face in their first game. However, they have tried to combat his departure with two foreign centre backs with European experience.

Blasters have attacking full backs and a great finisher to break defensive minded teams but one could see them incur some problems early on due to a few players just returning from injury. Kerala Blasters have a widespread fanbase in Asia, not just the league, and have had the highest league attendance so far. The loss of fans will be a big miss and could cause some upsets along the way.

Kerala have lost one, drawn one and won two of their pre-season friendlies, with most of the Indian contingent in action. Their most recent game with striker Gary Hooper scoring stint saw them win 3-0, as a result of which the team will be on a high. In their first fixture, Vicuna will look to get one over the team he was

stripped off from, the team that snatched the title twice from the men in yellow and the team that failed to win against them last season. Winning their first game against the reigning champions and outright favourites will certainly be a statement of their intent. Regardless, we should be expecting a cracker on Friday.

SQUAD LIST

ISL 2020

KERALA BLASTERS

A. GOMES • B.H. KHAN • M. KHAN • P.S. GILL
HAKKU • KONE • NHAMOINESU • CARNEIRO
LALRUATTHARA • N. KUMAR • SANDEEP SINGH
JAYARAJ • ADHIKARI • J. SINGH • V. GOMEZ • G. SINGH
NAOREM • KARUTHADATHKUNI • RAHUL • R. DAS • R. KUMAR
SAMAD • SEITYASEN SINGH • CIDONCHA • DENECHANDRA
PEREYRA • HOOPER • MURRAY • N.M. SINGH • KHARPAN





Mumbai City FC

Arnav Chawla

All that glitters is not gold aptly sums up Mumbai City's story in the ISL so far. Despite possessing a host of reputed & talented players and coaches along the way, the Islanders have surely let fans down- only making the playoffs two times in the last six seasons. Last season was no different with the club narrowly missing out on the playoffs spot with a defeat at the hands of Chennaiyin FC in their last league game. Crashing out of the Super Cup in the Round of 16 made matters worse. Although some believe the performances were in line with the potential of the squad, the club decided to part ways with former manager, Jorge Costa.

Things are already shaping up with the newly acquired finances from the City Football Group takeover being put to use as reflected in the appointment of former FC Goa coach, Sergio Lobera followed by numerous star-studded signings to significantly bolster the squad. In Lobera, MCFC have hired one of the most successful ISL managers till date.

Under his tenure, Goa took the league by storm playing an eye-catching brand of attacking that has been as effective as it has been appealing- as many years including one final. He left Goa at the top of the table when he departed in January setting up the foundation for the Gaurs to finish top and claim the ISL League Winners Shield. It is pretty evident that Lobera was sacked by Goa for non-footballing reasons whatever they may be. As they say, one man's loss is another man's

gain- Mumbai seized the opportunity to rope in Lobera with both hands.

Strongly backed by the owners, Lobera has already caused significant damage to his ex-employers with a string of his ex-players following him from Goa to Mumbai. Mumbai have signed Goa's captain and most loyal player, Mandar Dessai, their best defender, Mourtada Fall, last year's player of the season, Hugo Boumous and well established defensive midfielder, Ahmed Jahouh.

Furthermore, Mumbai have signed two stellar international strikers in Adam Le Fondre and Bart Ogbeche. The signings of Cy Goddard and Hernan Santana complete their completely newly assembled foreign contingent. Notable Indian signings include full backs Mandar and Mohamad Rakip along with wingers Farukh Choudhary and ex-Indian Arrows starlet, Vikram Pratap Singh. Numerous other talented Indians have been retained as well added to the roster.

A-League sensation Adam Le Fondre scored 42 goals in his last 67 games for Sydney FC - averaging more than 0.6 goals per game. While his numbers put his finishing pedigree beyond doubt, he also likes to drop deep and combine with midfielders to help in build up and create chances for himself and those around him. Possessing an elite penalty conversion rate of close to 90%, he is likely to add to his tally from the spot and solve penalty issues that Mumbai faced last year.

Mumbai have their own signing of the season competition and rivalling Le Fondre is Boumous. His tally of 11 goals and 10 assists in 15 appearances last season is unmatched in the ISL and warrants every penny of the record breaking 1.6 crores Mumbai have paid to trigger his release clause.

Mourtada Fall, the man mountain as he is commonly called, is the only foreign defender in Mumbai's ranks. He will help Mumbai build from the back and provide the defensive stability for Mumbai to press high up the field. His aerial dominance in both boxes makes him

a constant threat from set pieces having already scored nine goals in 43 appearances in the ISL.

Last season's joint top scorer, Bart Ogbeche, provides another attacking outlet for the Islanders while Jahouh is expected to act as a shield in front of the defence just like he did for Goa last season. Goddard and Santana add some much needed depth considering the current circumstances and the increase in fixtures.

Among the Indian contingent, midfielder Rowllin Borges stands out as one to watch out for. Mainstay for both club and country, Borges brings energy and dynamism to this side full of flair. He is seen as a perfect partner for Jahouh in the double pivot allowing sufficient freedom for Boumous to create without worrying about defensive responsibilities. There is a good balance of experience in the likes of Amrinder Singh, Raynier Fernandes, Sarthak Golui, Rakip, Mandar and exuberance in Farukh and Vikram Partap in the squad with an extremely young overall average age of 25.3 years.

The lack of another foreign defender makes the otherwise strong squad a little lopsided. Considering their abundant midfield options, it can be argued that another foreign CB to complement would have added more balance to the side than Santana or Goddard. There seem to be a number of selection headaches as well: The most pertinent being with regards to accommodating both Ogbeche

and Le Fondre. Playing both might require Lobera to divert from his preferred 4-2-3-1 formation. A 4-4-2 diamond would make it possible for both strikers to start but would disrupt the midfield and Boumous doesn't fit in that system naturally. It might become challenging to fill all 5 foreigner places with only Fall, Boumous, Jahouh and Ogbeche/Le Fondre nailed on to start if Lobera persists with his favoured system and one of them drops to the bench.

Mumbai have had a perfect start to the pre-season friendlies, winning 3 out of 3 against Odisha FC, Chennaiyin FC and Bengaluru FC. This would provide a great boost to the squad heading into the season with some tough fixtures in the beginning.

On the other hand, as highlighted earlier, the lack of a second foreign CB may come back to haunt them. An injury to Fall would majorly dent their title hopes. Mumbai would be hoping for either Sarthak or Mehtab to slot in with Fall and ensure solidity at the back. The lack of experience among wingers could also prove to be a chink in their armour.

Accounting for the vast sum spent by Mumbai to assemble a hugely talented pool of players guided by a manager hungry to win the ISL trophy that has eluded both him and Mumbai so far, anything less than the finals would be considered a disappointment. Reaching the playoffs must be a given.

SQUAD LIST

ISL 2020



MUMBAI CITY FC

A. SINGH•SHETTY•V.SINGH•LACHENPA

FALL•DESSAI•T. SINGH•GOLUI•RANAWADE•RAKIP

M. SINGH•VALPUJA

JAHOUH•GODDARD•BOUMOUS•SANTANA•BORGES

CHOUDHARY•FERNANDES•B.SINGH•KHAN•SINGH

BHUMIJ•DAS•V.SINGH•DAKSHINAMURTHY



OGBECHÉ•FONDRE



North East United FC

Saurabh Nagpal

The 2020-21 ISL season would be the seventh season in the top flight for the Guwahati-based NorthEast United FC (NEUFC) – a club which is a representative of eight states from the north-eastern part of the county, namely: Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, and Mizoram. The Highlanders kick off their campaign against Mumbai City FC on November 21 at the Tilak Maidan Stadium in Vasco.

It has become almost ritualistic for NEUFC to begin their new season with a new manager, and such is the case for the seventh time as well. The 35-year-old Spaniard, Gerard Nus – a UEFA Pro License holder, a former member of Liverpool and Brighton's backroom staff, and ex-assistant coach at Melbourne Heart and Ghana national team – has been handed the reins of the club, making him the youngest-ever manager in ISL history.

In an attempt to mend their leaky defence, which conceded 30 goals in 18 games last season, the Highlanders spent big and ushered in seasoned overseas defenders like Dylan Fox from A-League's Central Coast Mariners and Benjamin Lambot from Cyprus' Nea Salamina Famagusta FC. Furthermore, experienced Indian players with rich ISL or I-League exposure like right-back, Ashutosh Mehta; left-back, Gurjinder Kumar; and, goalkeeper, Sanjiban Ghosh have also joined the ranks. Like a foil to these wise-heads, young, home-bred defenders

like Rakesh Pradhan and Nabin Rabha would provide the apt depth and competition to the Highlander's defensive line. If NEUFC's defense was a matter of concern last season, their output in front of the goal was downright shambolic. The Highlanders managed to net merely 16 goals in the whole of last season – the lowest in the league. Nus and his team have tried to redress that problem by bringing in the two centre-forwards: Guinea's Idrissa Sylla and Ghana's Kwesi Appiah, along with the Portuguese winger Luis Machado. The Highlanders would wish that one of them comes close to replicating Bartholomew Ogbeche's 2018-19 feat of scoring 12 goals in 18 games.

While Greece's Federico Gallego, the club's all-time top assist provider, will continue to marshall the midfield, a few exciting additions like Mauritania's Khassa Camara, formerly Mohun Bagan's Britto PM, and locally-developed, NEROCA FC's Imran Khan have been brought in to aid him in supplying the new strikers. Meanwhile, 20-year-old Lalengmawia and 19-year-old Ninthoinganba Meetei, both former starlets of Indian Arrows who broke into the first team last year, are expected to continue growing in stature.

Nus has asserted that he desires his team to play offensive football, but won't impose a hard-line, inflexible ideology on his players, rather he would base his philosophy on the type of players that are at his disposal. He has asked his team to toughen up, cultivate a fighting mentality, and make things happen by adapting to and fusing with the external situation and the culture.

NEUFC clearly do not have the resources of some of their rivals being the only club in the league not owned by a corporate entity. In their six-year stay in the ISL, the Highlanders have qualified only once for the playoffs – a feat they achieved in the 2018-19 season under Eelco Schattorie. While it's a given that they would expect to better their last season's points tally of 13, their ambition might be to cross the 20-point mark – something they've only done twice – and somehow sneak into the playoffs.

SQUAD LIST

ISL 2020

NORTH EAST UNITED FC

GURMEET•DEKA•S. GHOSH•S. ROY

A. MEHTA•LAMBOT•FOX•G. KUMAR•SHEREEF•RABHA

DORJEE•LAKRA•PRADHAN•VAZ

GALLEGO•I. KHAN•CAMARQ•LALENGMAWIA•FANAI

GOGOI•ROCHHARZELA

BRITTO•SYLLA•MEETEI•APPIAH•LALKHAWPUIMAWIA

MACHADO•VADAKKEHPEEDIKA





Odisha FC

Ishaan Takkar

Odisha FC, formerly Delhi Dynamos FC, begin their ISL 2020-21 campaign on 23 November against Hyderabad FC in Bambolim. The club after three seasons of Spanish flavour in the dugout have now switched to a British manager and former South African National team coach Stuart Baxter. Baxter is a vastly experienced manager as is evident from his impressive CV having managed teams in eight different countries.

Baxter believes that the style of playing football is the same everywhere whether it is ISL or Premier league. He has also said that he'll not completely change the style that the Spanish coaches before him had as he believes that there was some good work done. Baxter has also talked about how mentality plays an important role in a game of football and has emphasized that his Odisha players will have to be mentally strong to handle tough game situations. The former England U19 manager believes that he needs to be the coach that the squad needs and adjust according to the needs of the squad.

The squad obviously needed changes as their record in ISL has not lived up to the expectations till now. It has been an off-season of upheaval with the likes of Bikramjeet Singh, Narayan Das, Albino Gomes leaving the club and the arrivals of Marcelinho, Cole Alexander, Steven Taylor, Jacob Tratt joining the club. Marcelinho, who has previously represented Pune City FC

and Hyderabad FC, is all set to continue his Indian football journey with Odisha. Marcelinho is a player who has already made his mark in ISL and will look forward to star for his new side and guide them to glory with his exceptional vision and ability to score crucial goals. Another player to watch will be the English wall Steven Taylor. Big things are expected of the 34 year old defender in the ISL after he completed his move from the A-league.

The worry for Odisha FC is that their squad has always been a good one on paper but have underwhelmed consistently. They've had some world class players on their side like Roberto Carlo, del Piero but they've never been the team to beat. Odisha FC will surely come to this season with the aim of changing this storyline from previous seasons. Their results last season were average - winning seven and drawing four from their 18 games and failing to make the playoffs.

Odisha FC has no shortage of Indian talent with exciting young players like Bodo and Jerry Mawihmingthanga in the squad. The youngsters can flourish under the older players if the right balance of exuberance and experience can be found by Baxter in the team.

Odisha FC's Indian players started training from mid-October while foreign players and some coaches joined in the following week. This training session was very special for the players and staff because everyone sat foot on ground after a long time were the words of Head of Football Operations of Odisha FC, Abhik Chatterjee. Pre-season this time is different as teams can only play against each other in the bio secure bubble in Goa. So far Odisha FC has only played one friendly, which was against Mumbai City which they lost 3-2. They're set to play Chennaiyin FC in the coming week and will expect a victory to boost the team's confidence before the league starts.

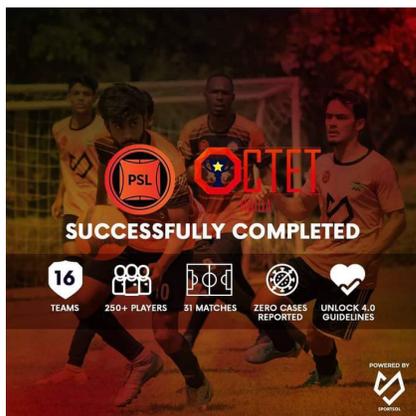
Let's now talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the team. Aridane Santana was the key player last season bagging nine goals and creating some good chances as well.

Arshdeep Singh made 29 saves and conceded only 14 goals. Manuel Onwu was another player who impressed, scoring 7 goals in 10 matches. Odisha's recruitment strategy has changed markedly and the club has invested heavily in young talent. Among the Indian players they've signed this season only goalkeeper Ravi Kumar is above 26 years of age making Odisha a young and energetic team. The team's weakness has to be consistency, which they'll surely need if they want to qualify for playoffs. The team has the quality to perform well but it remains to

be seen whether the squad can live up to their potential.

With the competition more than ever and with so many young players in the squad leadership qualities will be tested and Odisha FC has no shortage of leaders. My prediction is that it'll be a good season for them but they lack some balance and might miss out on the playoffs. However, one can never know what to expect from a team which has some exciting young talent and some experienced and immensely talented players.





Grassroots Football Resumes: PSL Octet

Ritwik Khanna

The PSL Octet was played out last month with Noida City FC being crowned champions after defeating Gladiator FC on penalties. The Octet was the first 8v8 tournament conducted by PSL and received a bright response from the Delhi football circuit which had been starved of competitive football for months.

The matches were conducted in Noida's Gaur City Sports Complex following all safety guidelines. Only registered team members registered and two management members were allowed inside the premises. All players were supposed to give their government ID on the gate for review to establish contact tracing. Players were asked to sanitize themselves and their temperature was checked through a hand IR thermometer on the gate before entering the ground. All teams were assigned specific sitting areas and only one member of the team was allowed to come for any queries. There were no hand shakes allowed pre and post match while spitting in the premises was banned.

16 teams were divided into groups of four each with two teams qualifying from each group to the quarterfinals. The first three match days saw the group stages take place while the knockouts were held on 3rd and 4th October.

Veterans FC defeated Karasuno FC 2-0 in the first quarterfinal and faced Gladiator FC, who smashed five past DME FC in their quarter, in the first semifinal. Gladiator's star striker

Rishabh Dobriyal got the winner in the first semifinal after Prashant's opener was cancelled out by Manish from Veterans. On the other side of the draw, Noida City FC beat Storm FC on penalties in the third quarter final to face Wolves FA who overcame heavyweights Goal Hunterz in a mammoth 14 penalty shootout. The semifinal was decided by an own goal by Vaibhav in the 36th minute. The tense final between Gladiators and Noida City FC was goalless at full-time and it was Noida City FC who held their nerve to emerge victorious.

The individual awards were dominated by players from the two finalist teams. Noida City FC's Ayush Rai won the best goalkeeper award thanks to his brilliant performances in the penalty shootouts while his teammate Shailesh, fast becoming one of Delhi-NCR's top defenders, was adjudged to be the best defender. Gladiator's Prashant and Rishabh Dobriyal won the best midfielder and forward awards respectively. Dobriyal, who is on the books at Odisha FC, was the highest goal scorer and the MVP of the tournament. Noida City FC's manager Mrinal S Dhar got the Best Manager award after making some smart tactical moves for his team in the tournament.

The tournament signified the first major tournament of grassroots football post the Covid-19 pandemic in Delhi-NCR. Players are looking forward to the resumption of the 11-a-side tournaments as well. With the confidence of having completed this tournament on their side, the PSL team will now plan for the restart of the PSL-Creators league in Noida.



PSL Octet Winners - Noida City FC



STADIUM ECHO

The Indian Football Magazine

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