

ATLETICO UNVEIL GRAND PLANS

Spanish Giants To Play ISL Franchise Atletico de Kolkata, Set Up Academy

Nilesh Bhattacharya | TNN

Kolkata: After Oliver Kahn's Bayern Munich and Lionel Messi's Argentina, the city is set to host another high-profile international team. Come August, Champions League finalists Atletico Madrid are expected to visit the football capital of India to kick off the Kolkata franchise's preparation for the much-hyped Indian Super League.

"Atletico Madrid club have agreed to send their first-team to play a friendly with our franchise players here," Harshvardhan Neotia, eminent businessman and one of the stakeholders of the Kolkata franchise, revealed on Wednesday.

The city's link with the Spanish giants, who reportedly have 25 per cent share in the franchise, was made official on Wednesday when the team was unveiled and christened as Atletico de Kolkata. Significantly, Atletico Madrid's role will be more far-reaching than just providing a name to the ISL team. The players, under the supervision of a former Atletico coach, will have extensive training "for a couple of weeks" at the club's facilities in Madrid.

In the long term, the Spanish club wants to set up a football academy in the city in the hope that some of these trainees will end up playing in Spain sometime in the future.

"When you invest money, you also need a proper structure. This is why we are looking at the prospect of setting up an academy here, by involving our own technical staff. We have come to join hands with Kolkata to promote our brand in India, but our objective is also to give Indian football a structure which can help improve the standard of the game here and get them back to where they once belonged on the global stage. There may be a possibility that some of the talented kids could be sent to our main youth academy (in Madrid) to help them fulfil their dream of playing in Europe," said Emilio Gutierrez,

the club's director of marketing and international relations.

Atletico Madrid are the only football institution to have got involved in the franchise-based football tournament, which is scheduled to be held from September to November. Indian cricketing icon Sourav Ganguly and leading city-based businessmen Sanjiv Goenka, Neotia and Utsav Parekh are other partners of the consortium which won the bid for the Kolkata team.

The franchise, however, is yet to agree on the colour of the team jersey. While the Salt Lake Stadium is set to be their home ground, the practice ground is still to be identified.

In the course of a hectic day, the six-member delegation from the Spanish club visited the city's 'Big 3' — East Bengal, Mohun Bagan and Mohammedan Sporting — as well as the facility at Pailan, on the outskirts of the city.

"We will try to improve the infrastructure at the stadium as much as possible, but we need permission from the state government. We will finalise everything regarding this aspect once the process of general elections is over," Neotia pointed out.

While the team's head coach is likely to be a former Atletico Madrid coach, an Indian will be his assistant. Sporting Clube's Spanish coach Oscar Bruzon had another meeting with the Atletico officials, but he clarified that he shared his experience with them and denied having had "any direct involvement" in the franchise's team-building process.

While unveiling the team's name, which is written in white against a red background, the visiting Atletico officials handed over a La Liga ball — signed by team captain Diego Costa and head coach Diego Simeone — to the four other stakeholders. Miguel Angel Gil Marin, the Spanish club owner, also presented them with the senior team's jersey bearing No 19 on the back, which is Costa's.



Atletico de Kolkata stakeholders (from left) Harshvardhan Neotia, Utsav Parekh, Sanjiv Goenka, Sourav Ganguly and the Spanish club officials Miguel Angel Gil Marin, Ignacio Aguillo and Javier Martinez during the unveiling of the franchise's name at a city hotel on Wednesday. The Spanish club officials presented their city-based co-owners with a ball, signed by Atletico coach Diego Simeone and player Diego Costa, as well as a club jersey bearing Costa's number

Simeone was always a leader, says Atletico grassroots director

Abhishek Ganguly | TNN

Kolkata: Hosts Brazil may be the frontrunners for the 2014 World Cup but defending champions Spain must also count among hot favourites for the title, feels Juan Carlos Aguilera Martin.

The former Atletico Madrid and Spain international, who is in the city as part of the visiting Atletico Madrid delegation for the launch of the Kolkata franchise of the upcoming Indian Super League, said: "Spain have won the World Cup and the European Championship and they are certainly one of the favourites to win the World Cup."

"They have a good team and I hope they do an encore this year," said Martin, director of the grassroots programme and the head of At-

letico Academy.

Spain's national team has many players from FC Barcelona, who have not had a great season so far. The Catalan side may fail to win any major trophy for the first time in six years.

Martin, however, is confident that it would not affect the national team.

"Yes, this has not been a great season for Barcelona but they are still in with a chance of winning the La Liga. There may have been some problems. But they are brilliant players and I am sure they will do exceedingly well in the World Cup," added Martin, who was part of the Spain squad in the 1998 World Cup.



Juan Carlos Aguilera Martin

In-form Atletico Madrid striker Diego Costa's decision to represent Spain in the World Cup instead of the country of his birth, Brazil, has come as a big boost for La Rojas.

"The national team needs the best players and Costa is a great player."

"Just like the whole of Spain, I am also very happy," said Martin, who is the fourth-highest capped player for Atletico Madrid with 454 appearances.

Martin played for the Madrid-based side in two phases — 1988-1993 and 1996-2005. However, the last time Atletico won the La Liga in 1995-96, he was not a part of the squad as he was playing for Tene-

rife.

"I was not disappointed that I was not part of the squad that season. I am a professional. I have been a part of the Atletico family since I was very young and I was very happy that they won the La Liga and also the King's Cup," he said.

Martin has played with current Atletico Madrid manager Diego Simeone and it doesn't surprise him that the Argentine is doing wonders with the team.

"During his playing days, too, Simeone was a different kind of player. He always wanted to win. He was a leader. It is difficult to predict what would become of a player after his retirement, but you could tell that about Simeone. He wanted to do something big," Martin said.

A huge push for football: Sourav

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Kolkata: As a cricketer, Sourav Ganguly has been there and done that. Ahead of taking the plunge into 'alien' territory the former India captain is confident that Indian football is bracing for good times.

Sourav is one of the five stakeholders of Atletico de Kolkata, the city-based franchise which will take part in the tournament scheduled to be held from September-November.

"It's the beginning of something special, something different. It's a huge push for the sport," Sourav said of the franchise-based football tournament.

"The ISL can revolutionize football in this part of the world," he added.

One of Indian cricket's most successful captains based his belief on the involvement of Spanish giants, Atletico Madrid. "We always had the passion but didn't have enough talent to match that passion for the game. Atletico Madrid's participation (in Indian football) could change this perspective," Sourav said in reference to the Champions League finalists' proposal of setting up an academy here.

Diego Simeone's Atletico Madrid are in line for a historic 'double'. They are leading the La Liga table and will take on city-rivals Real Madrid in the Champions League final.

"They (Atletico) have a very

important month in front of them. We all want them to become champions so that we start the season saying we're already champions. Good luck to you," Sourav said with the Spanish club owner Miguel Angel Gil Marin sitting beside him during the unveiling of the Kolkata franchise's name at a city hotel on Wednesday.

Sourav said that they are hoping to have some of Atletico's "first-team players" on the franchise's roster, but he's not sure about FIFA's rule vis-à-vis availing of their service.

"We are exploring the possibility whether players can be bought on loan. We'll seek interpretation of FIFA rules. Besides, we'll also have to follow ISL guidelines. Let's see how this can be sorted out," he said.

The franchise owners are scheduled to meet IMG-Reliance, organizers of the ISL, later this month. The matter of recruiting foreigners will come up for discussion during the meeting.

Sourav reiterated that the ISL won't be something to challenge the hugely popular cricketing extravaganza, the Indian Premier League (IPL). "We are not in competition with anybody or anything. We want cricket to be as popular as it is but, at the same time, we want to develop football as well. Our focus is on improving the standard of football and I am sure popularity will follow," Sourav maintained.



Sourav Ganguly with Atletico Madrid club owner Miguel Angel Gil Marin at a city hotel on Wednesday