

Mohun Bagan in cruise control

Jumps to the top of the table; Real Kashmir fails to fire



No trouble: Mohun Bagan's players, in white, made light of the conditions and Real Kashmir's home advantage in a dominant display on Sunday. **PTI**

I-LEAGUE

UTHRA GANESAN
SRINAGAR

The stands were full and noisy, the queues outside the TRC Turf Ground stretching far and everyone waiting for Real Kashmir FC to get going on Sunday.

It never did. Barring a few isolated attempts at the goal and some desperate shooting and heading, the local favourite in its second home game appeared collectively off-colour against a better-prepared Mohun Bagan. It went down 2-0 for its first loss this year even as the visitor, after complaining about the conditions, the artificial turf and even the practice time, completed a dominant victory to top the I-League table with 10 points from five games.

RKFC so far had managed to get off to good starts this season, stumbling in the second half but managing to get away with draws in its first two games before winning the previous outing

against champion Chennai City FC. On Sunday, the team seemed to have left its plans back in the hotel.

Busy and clueless

Bagan began well, attacking early on and creating quite a few chances but couldn't find a break-through. Between them, Joseba Beitia in the middle and Ashutosh Mehta on the right, kept the RKFC defence busy and clueless. In fact, almost every attack that Bagan mounted had the imprint of one of them.

Despite physical superiority, RKFC appeared lost for possession and space. An on-field scuffle early on did not help matters. Papa Babacar Diawara, Bagan's new Senegalese signing playing his first game, came close to putting it ahead in the 17th minute but, with only the RKFC goalkeeper to beat in front of an empty goal, hit wide.

Kallum Higginbotham was the only RKFC player who appeared to find a way

to push the ball forward but could only find Mason Robertson out of position. When he was in position, Mason ended up heading wide. Danish Farooq was off-target upfront and Subhash Singh had an off-day at the back, Mehta outflanking him at will.

The second half was far more balanced. Coach David Robertson clearly had made himself heard during the break. There were more co-ordinated attempts from RKFC, more passes upfront and more breaking through the middle.

The game opened up and Bazie Armand had the best chance for RKFC in the 50th minute but sent the ball sailing over.

Deadlock broken

Gnohere Krizo came off the bench and tried to leverage his height but found a match in Bagan defender and compatriot Daniel Cyrus. It finally took a Mehta throw-in, headed by Cyrus and volleyed into the net by Beitia to

break the deadlock in the 71st minute.

Three minutes later, substitute P.M. Britto put through Nongdamba Naorem for the team's second goal. RKFC kept trying to pull one back but there appeared no sense of urgency and a complete absence of planning in its shooting.

Robertson later admitted that Bagan managed to fend off the early attacks that RKFC is known for. He added that while his team did grow in the game, Bagan always controlled the proceedings.

The host next plays Punjab FC here in what is likely to be a grudge match after the latter refused to travel last season. It would also be a chance for Robertson's boys to put Sunday's disappointment behind.

The results:
At Srinagar: Real Kashmir FC 0 lost to Mohun Bagan 2 (Joseba Beitia 71, Nongdamba Naorem 74).

At Vasco: Arrows 1 (Vikram Pratap 42) drew with Neroca FC 1 (Meitei 24).

Kashmir grows on Robertson

UTHRA GANESAN
SRINAGAR

For three years, David Robertson has been coming to Srinagar as coach of Real Kashmir. It was like jumping into something completely "raw and unique", he says, coming from the rarefied environs of the English and Scottish Premier Leagues.

Since that first visit in January 2017, when he almost quit and went back, the stays have only become longer to the extent of it becoming a "second home" for the Scot-smán.

"Everything was strange but the owners, Shamim and Sandeep, convinced me to come back and I am glad they did. From a few weeks to a couple of months to almost eight months this time,

it has been increasing and now when I go back, I miss Kashmir," Robertson said in an interaction here.

From winning the Second Division I-League to finishing third in the top flight last season, RKFC has gone from being underdog to contender in just three years. A lot of credit for that, the players feel, goes to the coach who brings a lot of positivity.

Handling turbulence

That positivity, Robertson admitted, was important when it came to handling the players during their recent outings amidst the communication clampdown.

"We had just arrived in Kolkata (for Durand Cup) and weren't sure of how the local players were going to



David Robertson.
NISSAR AHMAD

get there. For the first time in their lives they couldn't contact their homes. They didn't know when they would go back and needed support. I know the Indian culture is of coaches being tough on players but I had to be different and let them know the coach had their back," Robertson explained.

Ankita gears up for season in Australia

Hopes to play all Grand Slams and break into the top 100

KAMESH SRINIVASAN
NEW DELHI

Ankita Raina is off to Australia, to compete in the \$25,000 ITF women's tennis tournament in Bendigo, and prepare well for the Australian Open in Melbourne.

The country's No. 1 woman singles player, the 26-year-old Ankita, ranked 180 in singles and 170 in doubles, is keen to lift the profile of Indian tennis.

"I hope in future, we take tennis to the next level the way our badminton players have done," she said, when contacted.

It may take some doing and a lot of time to match the spread and progress of Indian badminton, but Ankita is focused on her job, to improve upon the last season.

"I am very happy with what I could do last season. I think it has been one of the best years so far, even though winning the Asian Games medal in 2018 was very special. Last year had its



Ankita Raina.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

own highlights. I think, playing all the four Grand Slams and winning against Grand Slam champion and finalist, Samantha Stosur and Sabine Lisicki is still fresh in my memory," said Ankita.

She has simple goals for the season.

"The goal this year is to play the main draw of all the

four Grand Slams and eventually break into the top 100 in WTA rankings," she said.

Support team

To that end, Ankita has been able to strengthen her team. Yes, she will have a team for the Australian Open.

"I have a good support team this time at the Australian Open. I am grateful that after all these years of struggle of travelling alone, I can finally travel with my team. Coach Hemant sir and Ketan sir, hitting partner, are travelling with me," she said.

Hemant Bendrey has been guiding Ankita for many years while Ketan Dhumal will ensure that she is well prepared for her matches.

Even as she is thankful for the support and guidance, Ankita believes that she needs to believe in herself and her game to get to the next level.

She had closed the season nicely in the professional circuit by winning the singles

title in the \$25,000 event in Solapur.

"Honestly, in the last couple of weeks, I am feeling that it is very close and everything just needs to come together, to click in any of the big events. Now that I have gained all the experience in the pro circuit, I feel one just needs to stay positive regardless of the results and keep working," she said.

Ankita is understandably elated about Sania Mirza returning to the professional circuit after the birth of her son, and into the Indian Fed Cup team.

"Our chances of qualifying in the Fed Cup this time look very high, considering the doubles will be stronger with Sania's come back. She comes with the aura. Everyone is inspired by her. So, her presence will give us an added advantage. Last couple of times, it wasn't easy for us when we were not able to clinch the decider doubles," Ankita recalled.

Soosairaj — a lethal weapon in ATK's armoury

ISL

NANDAKUMAR MARAR
MUMBAI

Michael Soosairaj's cartwheel celebration behind the Mumbai City FC goalpost, following his first and ATK FC's second goal in the 2-0 win on Saturday, revealed a lot about the freedom given to the players by chief coach Antonio Habas to express themselves. Coming off the bench in the 34th as replacement for midfielder Pronay Halder, who had scored the opening goal, the 25-year-old showcased his skill with a quality goal.

Talking into the television cameras at the Mumbai Football Arena, Soosairaj was asked about any advice from Habas when the substitution decision was taken. "The coach asked me to focus on my game. He told me my role was to defend, but gave me

the clearance to do what I wanted when I had the ball in front. I scored, we won the match and I am delighted." The win took his team to the top of the ISL table.

Cut, bend, curl

The goal may have been a move played thousands of times in his mind, visualising what he would do with the ball at his feet and having time in the goalmouth to execute the plan. The cartwheel celebration was as instinctive as his scoop to the right corner, turning his body in time to ensure the ball travelled the distance. "I always used to try this in practice. I cut it (the ball), bent it and curled it. It is my favourite style."

There was no way for MCFC captain and custodian Amrinder Singh to read his rival's mind, the next best thing possible was to react,



King Michael! Soosairaj was in the zone as he beat Mumbai City goalkeeper Amrinder Singh hands down. **SPORTZPICS/ISL**

flinging himself across to get his hands behind the ball. However, the ball looped beyond blocking range and lodged gently in the net. The

home team players around Soosairaj were trying to comprehend what had happened even as the goalscorer ran into space behind the post and

took off in celebration.

Since switching from Chennai City FC in the I-League and Jamshedpur FC in the ISL, the midfielder has found a place in 11 games so far this season and has scored twice. He is shaping into another big weapon in an ATK strike force that is sharp and skilful.

The coach focused on what went right on a night of celebration for the travelling ATK fans.

"I am happy with the performance and discipline. I will admit Mumbai (City) had opportunities to score goals in the second 45 minutes, but we created chances as well." Converting the opportunities is what separated ATK from MCFC. Modou Sougu, Mohammed Larbi, Diego Carlos got within sight of target for the hosts, fired wide or into Arindam Bhattacharja under the bar.

All set for KIUG launch

The Games will be held from Feb. 22 to March 1

SPORTS REPORTER
CHENNAI

Bhubaneswar is all set to host the first edition of the Khelo India University Games (KIUG) from February 22 to March 1, 2020. The KIIT University will be venue for the event which will feature around 4,000 athletes from 80-100 universities.

The games, organised by the Government of Odisha in association with the Sports Authority of India, Association of Indian Universities, National Sports Federation and Indian Olympic Association (IOA), will witness competitions in 17 disciplines: individual events - archery, athletics, boxing, fencing, judo, swimming, weightlifting and wrestling; Team events: badminton, basketball, football, hockey, table tennis, tennis, volleyball,



Behera. **SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT**

rugby and kabaddi.

Odisha has hosted a bunch of big-ticket events in the past few years, including the 2017 Asian athletics championships, 2018 men's hockey World Cup, 2019 Commonwealth table tennis championships and the Hockey Olympic Qualifiers in November 2019.

Ahead of the launch event

on Monday, Odisha's Minister of Sports and Youth Services Tusharkanti Behera said the KIUG will provide a perfect platform for the young athletes to gain National recognition.

"It is an event of a massive scale involving youth and we expect a seamless and successful execution. We are confident that the participants will demonstrate the highest level of sportsmanship and return to their States as ambassadors for KIUG and Odisha. We also feel that the athletes who shine here will get a chance to elevate their careers to the next level through recognition and thereby better access to guidance and training," Behera told *The Hindu*.

The Khelo India University Games 2020 will be telecast on Doordarshan.

'Australian Open delay valid if smoke haze worsens'

Bushfires continue to blaze across large sections of the southeast

REUTERS
SYDNEY

World No. 2 Novak Djokovic said he was concerned that smoke might cause some problems at the Australian Open later this month as bushfires continued to blaze across large sections of the southeast on Sunday.

Hundreds of fires in New South Wales and Victoria have killed at least 24 people and destroyed more than 5.25 million hectares (13 million acres) of land over the last few months.

Smoke from the blazes has also resulted in hazardous conditions in Sydney, where the final rounds of the inaugural ATP Cup will take place next weekend, and Melbourne, where the year's first tennis Grand Slam gets underway on Jan. 20.

Seven-time Australian Open champion Djokovic, who is playing in the ATP



Not ideal: Djokovic is worried about the smoke haze affecting the first Grand Slam of the year. **GETTY IMAGES**

Cup, said he hoped the crisis would "dissipate" soon but that an action plan would be needed to avoid any impact on the health of players if it did not.

"If it continues same way and if the quality of air is affected in Melbourne or Syd-

ney, I think Tennis Australia probably will be forced to create some rules about it," he told a Brisbane news conference in the early hours of Sunday morning.

"It's tough for them because ... there's a lot of different things involved. But

health concern is a health concern for me and for anybody."

Disruptions

The smoke has so far caused the most disruption to the sporting calendar in Canberra, where a Twenty20 cricket match was abandoned on Dec. 21 when conditions became too hazardous to continue.

An ATP Challenger/ITF Futures tennis tournament scheduled for next week in the capital was moved to Bendigo, while on Sunday the city's ACT Brumbies rugby team announced they would be moving their pre-season training camp to Newcastle.

The twice Super Rugby champion made the decision after their training ground at the University of Canberra was closed indefinitely "due to hazardous air quality".

'On the right path for Slam glory'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRISBANE

Elina Svitolina believes the progress she made in 2019 will help her achieve her ultimate goal of becoming the first Ukrainian woman to win a Grand Slam singles title.

Speaking ahead of the season-opening Brisbane International, the 25-year-old insisted she was ready to take the next step after promising so much over the past five years.

Svitolina has long been touted as a future Major champion, but despite reaching a career-high World ranking of three and winning 13 titles on the WTA tour, until 2019 she had never reached the semifinal stage at a Grand Slam.

However, last year she made the semifinals at both Wimbledon and the US Open and she said this showed she was on the right path.

"Making semifinals definitely brought me the belief



One step further: Svitolina has long been touted as a future Major champion, but only reached the semifinal stage of a Slam in 2019. **GETTY IMAGES**

that I could take one step further," she said.

"I had the chance to play on the biggest stages and that gave me lots of confidence at that particular point."

Svitolina had a mixed year in 2019. Although she also made the decider at November's WTA Finals, where she fell to World No. 1 Ashleigh Barty, she also failed to win a title for the first time since

2012.

"I think maybe 2019 was tough because there were more sad moments, I would say. But also, it's tough to really understand what's going on because the year is very long," she said.

"You have to lose almost every single week, so you have to take lots of positives somehow, and that's, I think, what I learned from the past

year — that you have to stay really positive in even bad moments and try to move forward."

Svitolina has brought former men's number eight Marcos Baghdatis onto her coaching team to assist Andrew Bettles in a bid to give her game an extra dimension.

"As an ex-player, he sees the game from his point and it's something different that I was looking for to add into my game," Svitolina said.

"For sure we improved massively with Andy for the past years I've been working with him and he knows me very, very well.

"(But) for me it's important to add the small things that can improve my game and that's what I'm looking for."

Svitolina, who won the Brisbane title in 2018, will open her 2020 campaign against American Danielle Collins.