

Indians in the League not Super yet

MIHIR VASAVDA
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IT'S PERHAPS a travesty that Sahal Abdul Samad, whose flamboyance with the ball at his feet made many in Indian football go weak in the knees, has not even played an entire half per game, on an average, this season in the Indian Super League. And most of whatever little he has played has been out of the position he has excelled at.

It's also a tragedy, from a fans' point of view, that arguably the three best attacking players in the country - Sunil Chhetri, Udanta Singh and Ashique Kuruniyan - could never strike a partnership that many fantasised. Predictably, it was only Chhetri who was consistent while the other two struggled so badly that between them they have just one goal and an assist in the whole season.

So when Carles Cuadrat, the manager of India's champions Bengaluru FC, cautioned Igor Stimac, the coach of the national team, he wasn't really exaggerating. "I'm Stimac, I would be worried," Cuadrat said last week.

Cuadrat was speaking in the context of the performance of Indians in ISL's league stage, which concluded on Tuesday. The former conditioning coach of Turkish giants Galatasaray has been credited with developing several Indian players during his time at Bengaluru, first as an assistant coach and now as the manager. But he fears a lot of them have stagnated.

He wasn't just concerned about players from his team, like Udanta and Ashique, but also the rest - Jamshedpur's Farukh Choudhary, Chennaiyin FC's Jeje Lalpekhlua and ATK's Balwant Singh, among others. "They all have the quality but are not having that impact... Udanta (has) only one goal and zero assists; Ashique only one assist, zero goals... it's scary."

The season has offered more of the same from the past: there is still no replacement for Chhetri upfront, or Gurpreet Singh Sandhu in goal. When it comes to defending, Indians can still get the job done. But in attack, they lack creativity and technical ability.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The ISL this season was expected to be a coming-of-age event for the new breed of players that had emerged in the last few years. The brainy Anirudh Thapa and Vinit Rai were finally being talked about as ones who could drive their teams independently; Lallianzuala Chhangte's pace and Brandon Fernandes' playmaking skills were hyped up; Samad's flair and Ashique's grit were gaining reputation; and Udanta, it was hoped, would step out of Chhetri's shadows.

These players had had a tremendous year or so with the national team. But the short-term spike achieved by the players with the national team has not translated into full-blown success in the league. And instead of taking the ISL by the scruff of its neck, most of these players have struggled for form.

Simply going by the scoring statistics, there are just two Indians among the top 20 goalscorers - Chhetri (9 goals in 15 games) and FC Goa's Jackichand Singh (five in 16) while in the list of top 10 of players who have taken a shot at goal, there is no Indian.

Some, like Samad who likes to play in the centre but has been used on the flanks, have had to play out of their natural position while a few others, FC Goa striker Manvir Singh for instance, haven't had enough playing time because coaches have preferred foreigners instead.

It's an issue Indian players have faced for several years, be it in the ISL or I-League. The coaches, under pressure to fetch results, prefer to use foreign players who can make a bigger impact in positions that form the spine of the team: centre-back, central midfield and forwards. As a result, Indian players have been employed in wider areas, where they barely have any direct influence on the game.

All this eventually comes down to the technical abilities of the players. "We use videos, discuss what we have to do, like 'go for that side of the target' etc.," Cuadrat said about training strikers like Udanta and Ashique. "But if it is still not happening, it's



Chennaiyin's Anirudh Thapa is among the few Indians who have done well. ISL

ISL: FINAL STANDINGS

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
FC Goa	18	12	3	3	23	39
ATK	18	10	4	4	17	34
Bengaluru	18	8	6	4	9	30
Chennai	18	8	5	5	6	29
Mumbai	18	7	5	6	-4	26
Odisha	18	7	4	7	-3	25
Kerala	18	4	7	7	-3	19
Jshedpur	18	4	6	8	-13	18
NE Utd	18	2	8	8	-14	14
Hyd	18	2	4	12	-18	12

Playoffs: FC Goa vs Chennaiyin;
ATK vs Bengaluru
FC Goa qualify for Asian Champions League

SHOOTING BLANKS

2 Number of Indians present in the top 20 goal scorers of the ISL after end of the league stage. Sunil Chhetri is the highest scorer among Indians with 9 goals in 15 games.

0 Number of Indians present in the top 10 of players who have taken a shot at goal this season so far.

because top level is like this."

What Cuadrat implies is India's best are still not good enough to make a sustained impact in the top division because of their perceived lack of game IQ and ball skills.

U-17 WC players shine

Thapa, with his willingness to be on the ball and vision, has been among the few Indian outfield players who has had a decent season. He has led Chennaiyin's resurgence, along with Chhangte, whose pace and ability to get into scoring positions, has constantly troubled opponents. The Goa duo of Lenny Rodrigues and Brandon Fernandes has looked the most comfortable on the ball, dominating the passing and possession stats.

For most of their generation, though, this season has been an opportunity missed. Instead, it turned out to be the one where at least half a dozen players from India's 2017 Under-17 World Cup squad had enhanced their reputation. Jamshedpur's Amarjit Singh and Shubham Sarangi of Bengaluru have been solid in midfield whenever they were called up along with ATK defender Sumit Rathie.

In exactly a month, on March 26, India will host Asian champions Qatar in the return leg of their 2022 World Cup and 2023 Asian Cup joint qualifier in Bhubaneswar. Before the start of the qualifying campaign, Stimac punted on several players without actually watching them play. Now that he has seen them, it remains to be seen if he continues to persist with them.

Top players returning from injury need funding too: Ajay Jayaram

SHIVANI NAIK
MUMBAI, FEBRUARY 25

AJAY JAYARAM recently made the semifinals of the Super 300 Barcelona Spain Masters, and was congratulated on the Badminton Association of India's Twitter handle: "Tough luck...well played Ajay! (Two Bicep emoji) Let's look at more such finishes". The former India No. 1 replied: "I certainly can, if I get support from you guys."

Indian badminton - which threw up two World Championship medalists last August - is going through restless times, with titles drying up at the highest level as the top names set sights on the Tokyo Olympics and its qualification. India's best finishes at the Olympics have been quarters in men's singles in 2012 & 2016 and bronze and silver in women's singles in those two editions, and it's looking to better those marks at Tokyo. With six months to go, there is unease simmering just below the cream of elite shuttlers, about what's the ideal system for the sport to settle into.

The federation has attempted many well-meaning - but eventually disastrous - decisions in funding, selection and season scheduling in this last Olympic cycle. Diverting funds towards women's doubles (where quality is strictly average) at the expense of men's singles (where numbers are high) was one such. An unintended victim was Ajay Jayaram who went from being a Top 20 shuttler in 2017 (considered India's golden year) to struggling for funding after returning from injury and dropping outside the Top 50.

The current World No. 53 speaks about his stinging tweet and the possible way forward:

What prompted the tweet?

I don't think my intention with the tweet was anything other than hoping that BAI would consider the struggles we as players go through and implement actions that are for the benefit of everyone. In the end, Indian badminton needs to win.

Where did lack of support sting most?

I was in the Top 20 in 2017 when I got injured. Ever since my comeback after an eight-month hiatus, I've had to fund myself entirely for all international tournaments, let alone training and other expenses. Coming back from a major injury is always a big challenge in itself physically and mentally. But with the added financial burden, it creates immense stress.

What do you make of BAI's funding system?

I understand BAI's system of a ranking cut-off but I do believe that for a (former) Top 20 and India No.1 player coming out of injury, there should have been some provision to allocate funds for a certain fixed pe-



Ajay Jayaram made the semifinals of the Super 300 Barcelona Spain Masters.

riod at least. Post my comeback in 2018, I had a string of decent results including a bronze and silver at BWF Tour tournaments, but still didn't receive any funding for tournaments.

What are the sacrifices involved for you and your family?

There have been many instances in the past decade when I believe I've had it harder than my contemporaries. But I am glad that I've stuck through and done alright at the big stage in spite of it. I've been blessed with a good support system at a personal level. My parents have made immense sacrifices of all

kinds to get me to where I am today. I've been lucky to have coaches like Tom John and now Anup Sridhar, who have believed in me at my lowest and have been indispensable to my being where I am today.

How did you manage?

One system which India has gotten right though is PSUs like the petroleum companies employing athletes. I've been with Indian Oil for more than a decade now and their support has been immense. These past couple of years, especially, I've been able to compete in tournaments only because of the salary I get from them.

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AJAY JAYARAM
WORLD NUMBER 53

Can the national coach, P Gopichand, do something about this?

Gopichand has certainly changed the status of Indian badminton for the better. He is definitely largely responsible for the amazing results we've seen over the last decade. However, concentration of power in the hands of one person and one academy has its limitations and problems. And I've certainly faced the problematic side of it. We definitely need more such centres and equal funding and support for other academies and ex-players like Anup Sridhar. India has a surplus of talent at this point but we need a more solid system in place.

Can you elaborate on the 'problematic side' and specific instances?

No, I'd not like to elaborate.

Q. Is the selection system problematic?

Coming back to the selection of players for teams sent to international tournaments, I do understand there has been a surge of Indian players competing and doing well. And hence the ranking cut-off. However, I do believe there is scope for adding provisions to fund more players, if not for all, then at least for some tournaments.

Q. How does one decide who's deserving since many stake claim to this funding pie?

For example, players who've had a good couple of results, top players who were injured, a junior who has done well (should be extended the funding). There needs to be a well-defined system and it needs to be implemented in an unbiased fashion.

Q. Badminton has its heartbreaks and anxieties. You also sketch in spare time. Does it offset the rigours of shuttle?

Sketching is something I picked up around 3-4 years back. I used to enjoy drawing as a kid but didn't pursue it much. I knew I was decent at it and wanted to get back to it to explore my creative side. Once I started, I absolutely loved it. It was cathartic of sorts. I love doing portraits and 3D sketches. I had seen 3D sketches online and the idea of how to do it just came to me. I recently started painting as well. I'm hoping to do it in a bigger way in the future, maybe.

Teenager takes all 10 wickets in domestic one-dayer

NITIN SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, FEBRUARY 25

KASHVEE GAUTAM, a 16-year-old medium pacer from Chandigarh, on Tuesday became the first Indian woman cricketer to take 10 wickets in an innings in a BCCI domestic tournament. Kashvee achieved the feat, which included a hat-trick, against Arunachal Pradesh in the BCCI Women's U-19 one-day tournament at Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh.

"I still can't believe it has happened. All I wanted was to bowl in the right area and take wickets. Bowling at the same spot consistently helped me take all these wickets. The pitch was helping seam bowlers a bit and the ball was swinging. It was only when my team-mates talked about 10 wickets after my eighth that I thought about the feat," Kashvee told The Indian Express.

She was first given a bat by her aunt and the then six-year-old began her cricketing journey in the courtyard. It was not till the age of 13 that Kashvee joined formal training under coach Nagesh Gupta at Government Model Senior Secondary School. Gupta, who is now the U-23 coach of the Chandigarh women's team, noticed her ability to swing the ball and spent hours on her action and wrist movement apart from making Kashvee bowl at the same spot.

The teenager, who had earlier played for Punjab at the U-14, U-16 and U-19 levels, made the switch to Chandigarh this season and has taken a total of 63 wickets in U-23 and U-19 cricket. She had taken a hat-trick against Arunachal Pradesh in BCCI U-23 T20 Trophy too. Six of her wickets on Tuesday were LBWs while the other four were bowled.

"When Kashvee came to my academy,



KASHVEE GAUTAM.

she had the natural ability to swing the ball. We worked on improving her action as she would fall away and her wrist position was

also not correct. Once we did that, she would practice bowling at the fourth stump spot for 7-8 overs daily. I would send her videos of Brett Lee and Shoaib Akhtar daily. She has worked a lot on her fitness in the last two years and it is helping her bowling," shared Gupta, a BCCI Level-2 coach.

Earlier in the match, Gautam hit 49 with the bat to help Chandigarh post a total of 186 for 4 in 50 overs before her spell of 4.5 overs bundled Arunachal Pradesh out for a mere 25. Kashvee, who idolises India pacer Bhuvneshwar Kumar and England's Jofra Archer, plans to watch both of them in action in the Indian Premier League.

"I missed my half-century but the knock gave me impetus for my bowling. As a swing bowler, I idolise Bhuvneshwar Kumar apart from Jofra Archer and I plan to watch them play at Mohali in the IPL and seek tips if I get a chance," she said.

[SPORTS BAR]



Khelo India: Pune lead medals tally

Swimmer Sadhvi Dhuri scooped two gold while Mihir Ambre won his second title to steer Savitribai Phule Pune University to the top of the medal table on the fifth day of the Khelo India University Games here on Tuesday. Savitribai Phule University has now won 7 gold, 2 silver and 5 bronze for a total of 14 medals. Panjab University, Chandigarh, picked up a gold through their opening day's star swimmer Siddhanth Sejwal, to be in the second spot with 6 gold, 7 silver and 5 bronze. Jain University, Bengaluru (6 gold, 5 silver, 1 bronze) and Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (6 gold, 1 silver, 5 bronze) are at third and fourth respectively. Punjabi University, Patiala, jumped to the fifth place with 3 gold, 4 silver and 3 bronze.

Need to be consistent: Harmanpreet

Indian men's hockey team vice-captain Harmanpreet Singh on Tuesday said it needs to play consistently throughout the duration of a game going into this year's Tokyo Olympics. With less than 150 days to go for the start of Tokyo Olympics, Harmanpreet said the team needs to work up in some areas. "We have paid a price in these matches for slowing down or dropping the tempo in between quarters. This is an area of concern in the lead up to the Olympic Games," Harmanpreet said. "Also coach (Graham Reid) believes we can do better in terms of circle penetration, tackling outside the circle and not concede too many penalty corners. A long camp will definitely help focus on these critical points," the drag-flicker said.

Bengaluru FC face Maziya in AFC Cup

Beaten 1-2 in their away match when they fielded non-regular players, Bengaluru FC will look to turn the tables in their AFC Cup second-leg play-off tie against Maziya S&R of Maldives on Wednesday. Head coach Carles Cuadrat fielded a few players from the academy in the away fixture in Male on February 19 but he will look to go all out in front of home supporters at the 'fortress' Kanteerava Stadium on Wednesday to seal a spot in the main draw.



Tyson Fury knocked out Deontay Wilder in the seventh round last Saturday. Reuters

Wilder will seek rematch with Fury: Reports

Deontay Wilder plans to activate his rematch clause for a third fight with Tyson Fury after his seventh-round TKO loss to the Briton, US media reported. Yahoo Sports reported Wilder would seek a rematch - and that he says a miscalculation with his ring-walk costume proved costly in the first defeat of his career. Wilder told Yahoo Sports the embossed armor-like costume, complete with a full face mask, weighed 40 pounds (18 kg), and by the time he'd made his way to the ring at the MGM Grand Garden Arena his legs were compromised. Britain's Fury knocked Wilder down in the third round with a straight right hand and the American, who lost his World Boxing Council heavyweight belt, never looked really steady after that. Wilder went down again in the third in what was ruled a slip, and Fury knocked him down with a punch to the body in the fifth. Certainly Wilder didn't have the foundation to throw his right with its usual fearsome power. "The simple fact is that my uniform was way too heavy for me," Wilder said.

Ghosal, Chinappa to lead Indian teams

Ace players Saurav Ghosal and Joshna Chinappa will lead the Indian men's and women's squads for the 20th Asian Team Squash Championships to be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from March 25 to 29. While Ghosal is a 13-time national champion and current world no. 13, Chinappa has won the national title 18 times and she is ranked 12th in the world. The other members of the squad announced by the Squash Rackets Federation of India (SRFI) include Abhishek Pradhan, Harinder Pal Sandhu and Abhay Singh in the men's section, and Tanvi Khanna, Sunayna Kuruvilla and Sanya Vats in the women's category.



Liverpool record 18th successive win in EPL

Liverpool earned a record-equalling 18th consecutive EPL win as the leaders came from behind to beat West Ham 3-2 thanks to Sadio Mane's late strike. Jurgen Klopp's side were in danger of dropping points for the first time since their draw at Man United on October 20 after falling behind in the second half at Anfield. Georginio Wijnaldum put Liverpool ahead early on but Issa Diop equalised soon after on Monday. Pablo Fornals gave struggling West Ham a stunning lead, but Lukasz Fabianski's woeful blunder allowed Mohamed Salah to equalise with his 19th goal of the season. Mane completed the fightback with nine minutes left as Liverpool moved 22 points clear of second placed Manchester City. The Reds' dramatic escape ensured they equalled Man City's English top-flight record of 18 consecutive league wins set between August and December 2017.