



NEW CLUB ON THE BLOCK

Football in India has been limited to Mohun Bagan and Baichung Bhutia for the common man. The Indian football lover has had to be content with emulating international global stars, considering that the Indian football scene has been stagnant and uninspiring for decades now.

But the month of November 2016 scripted a new history in the pages of the landscape of Indian Football. A club that has been in existence for almost 3 years now, took the Asian football world, and at many levels, the global football scene, by surprise. A club that was touted as an ISL-I League-level playing team is now being heralded as an Asian-level League player. The nation welcomed its first successful international-level club with open arms. BFC is not just a club anymore. It has parked itself on the higher shelves to be rightfully termed as a **'BRAND'**.



OFF TO A GREAT START

The Bengaluru Football Club (BFC) is an Indian professional football club formed on 20th July, 2013 and participates in the I-League, India's top-tier football league. A walk down memory lane will trace a successful timeline that starts with becoming the first-ever club to have won the I-League in its debut season to winning the Federation Cup in 2014-15 and then going on to win the I-League again in season, 2015-16. These achievements stand alone and would be worthwhile for any professional football club to get recognition; however it was their historic run to the finals of the AFC Cup this month that led to the meteoric rise in their popularity and had a massive impact on Indian Football in a cricket-crazy nation.

Feats like these don't come overnight. BFC is remarkably professional and ambitious; unfailingly process-oriented and player-focused; and wonderfully community-driven and self-sustaining — none of which encapsulate the actual state of football in the country. The Bengaluru-based club is a magnificent anomaly in India with its stifling ecosystem of the sport. A small instance to bring this fact to light is that it is almost impossible to find the national football jersey in India on sale while the national cricket team jerseys are being sold by a dime a dozen. And in such a scenario, BFC merchandise is almost always sold out during their home games and otherwise.



A BRAND SO INSPIRING

Bengaluru FC, owned by the JSW Group, has left no stones unturned in promoting the 'Brand Bengaluru FC'. From kitting sponsorships by Puma to local tie ups with Arbor Brewing Co. and Chisel amongst others, BFC in its operations acts as a well-oiled machine that works as an independent brand, while at the same time representing the values of the club.

What makes BFC even more remarkable is that they have truly left their stamp in the mind of an average well-read youngster. The merchandise sells out without any heavy promotions, the players turn heads in recognition at airports and after the AFC cup, every aspiring Indian footballer aims to get into BFC. The club has also turned the fate of Sunil Chetri after his failed attempts with Churchill Brothers and Sporting Club de Portugal.

Although Bengaluru FC's dream run to Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Cup may have ended agonizingly with a defeat in the finals, their achievement has triggered a new era in Indian football.

Coached by former FC Barcelona assistant coach Albert Roca, the task at hand was sustaining and furthering a legacy created by Ashley Westwood (former BFC coach); i.e. turning a national-level I-league team into an internationally-recognized club. Not only has BFC managed to instill that brand of football which is synonymous with the illustrious Catalan counterparts, but it also got the nation to stand up and take notice of the verve and vigor with which the team played, that eventually led them to making history and reaching the finals of the AFC Cup 2016.

Bengaluru FC may not have been able to etch their name on the AFC Cup trophy yet, but they would take solace from the fact that AFC adjudged them as the winners of the Fairplay award.

WINNING GOALS OFF THE FIELD

Just as a good brand and a club that is driven by the values of community, Bengaluru FC has also undertaken many social initiatives. 'BFC in the Community' is one such campaign set up to conduct coaching clinics for kids aged between 5 to 16, in various localities in the city to encourage more children to get involved with the sport and generate an emotional connect with the club from a very young age.

'BFC Cares' is another social responsibility program of Bengaluru Football Club, that works through community football clinics, awareness campaigns and other charity events aimed at supporting the local community that has shown the club tremendous support since its inception. The program also supports the causes of HIV-affected children and animal rescue.



A CLUB BEYOND A WIN, BEYOND A BRAND, IT'S AN UNDYING PASSION

Bengaluru FC has leveraged its connect with fans across the nation and managed to create an impact on sport as a whole. Indian football will ride the BFC wave into the Asian spotlight. But it will be hard to escape the irony that, in reality, Indian football isn't anything like the picture BFC will, or already has, painted to an outsider.

Here's hoping that the various clubs in the nation take a leaf out of BFC's playbook and sensitize themselves to the fact that sport is not just about the game today. A packed stadium is a sign that an emotional bond has been built with the community. A brand of beer being named after the club means that the club is gaining popularity by leaps and bounds. A team that makes other clubs envious and ensures successful season after season can be said to have 'arrived'. After all, it's all for the love of the game. And love never comes easy.

