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Going local and keeping it tight

This season, there was a bit of concern shown about the level of the competition at the start of the Indian Super League (ISL) and that raised a few questions. In my view, however, it all depends on the angle from which you see things.

I feel that this is a time of transition. All the franchises, apart from Bangalore, brought in new coaches, and a new generation of local players is rising up. And, don't forget, this year the number of foreigners playing is less. Still, for those asking the questions, spectators and others alike, the teams are responding in the right way by keeping the League tight.

The first round of the tournament is coming to an end, and things are becoming interesting. Enthusiasm is going to grow over the next two months as pressure mounts to stay on top of the table, and things will get harder and harder for the teams. Despite what the table says, there is not much of a difference between the teams and I feel that the top seven (at the moment) are still very much in the race for a last-four berth.

Bangalore has a good core combination; they retained their local players and thus had less problems gelling than the other clubs. Goa, as usual, keeps playing their entertaining brand of football, a style that keeps their approving fans supporting them. Pune is the side that works hard as a team, and depends on the brilliance of last season's Golden Ball winner Marcelinho.

Chennai are another team which has great fighting spirit, and are very clear about what they want. The fact that Jeje is in good form is big asset. Mumbai has a mature team, and had to overcome some problems with injuries and lost two of their first three games. But they now look a focused and resurgent side.

Jamshedpur is a resistant side and looks determine to do anything to go through to the knockout stage. Defending champions ATK had a hard start to the season and seemed to be finding it difficult to get the right formation. They, however, look stronger now and I'm sure the spirit of Kolkata will help them along.

So, let's keep enjoying the Beautiful Game and see what happens!

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### **Good to see the youngsters unfazed under pressure**

This edition of the Indian Super League is turning out to be one of the most exciting ones yet. As I write this, just one point each separates the top three on the table – Bengaluru are leading with 24 points, followed by Chennaiyin and Pune. The race is tight, which makes the tournament more exciting as we begin to reach the business end of it. We might even see Kerala and Jamshedpur, who are fifth and sixth at the moment, fight their way into the semi-finals if they push themselves.

At the bottom we find Delhi Dynamos, whose extensive pre-season training doesn't seem to be paying off as their defence seems to be a bit scattered, though they are quite good in attack. A goal difference of 16 in 12 matches is not good.

What I'm very happy to see is how the youngsters are coping. They don't seem to be fazed by the big stage they are playing on and are handling the pressure very well. One of these is Len, whose hattrick against Chennaiyin was NorthEast United's first ever, and the first by an Indian this season. Other players to look out for are Jamshedpur's Jerry, Chennaiyin's Anirudh Thapa, and Bengaluru's Udanta who are all shining in what is a very tough competition. If they can keep this up, their futures look bright.

I'm also so happy to see that most of the clubs are playing with Indians goalkeepers. This is good as this as it is going to influence and inspire a lot of upcoming goalkeepers.

I cannot but mention the astonishing form of Sunil Chhetri here, who is the tournament's leading scorer with eight goals. Breathing down his neck are Chennaiyin's Jeje Lalpekhlua and Mumbai City's Balwant Singh, so the competition is tough.

As mentioned earlier, Kerala could push for a top four spot. They really needed a win and they got that on Saturday with a fantastic come-from-behind over Delhi. Yet another youngster, 19-year-old Deependra Singh Negi, played a big part in helping them make that push with a goal of his own to level things before being brought down inside the box to help his side get a penalty which was converted by Iain Hume. It was a wonderful reaction from Kerala, and even though I feel their coming fixture, against Pune, doesn't favour them, you never know what can happen!

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### **Tough fights ahead will keep fans at edge of seat**

The Indian Super League has reached a point where every fan is holding their breath in anticipation. Every game is now being played like a final – with commitment, attitude and passion. We can see the matches are costing the players much more energy, and emotional balance from every player will be very important at this stage.

The ISL initiative to lengthen the season was a fantastic idea, giving the format not only breathing space but also the players more days to rest in between and prepare better for their next games. This is helping the teams maintain a high level of football.

Recently, I went to visit a friend of mine at one of the franchises and the effort they are putting in during the business end of the league stage is fantastic. It makes me really happy to see our Indian players taking part in such a great learning experience and professional environment.

Bengaluru FC keep going from strength to strength and, after Friday night's 2-0 win over Goa, have become the first team to qualify for the semi-finals. My compliments to the players and also to coach Roca for the fantastic compactness displayed over the three zones of his 4-4-2 strategy.

They are playing with one of the best attacking line-ups in the competition and the goal difference they have is a sign that their defense is also outstanding. Miku and Sunil have scored 20 of their 30 goals so far this season, and they have been crucial to Bengaluru's performance in the competition.

Looking at the table, we can see that a lot of jostling will be taking place over the next couple of weeks among at least five clubs – Pune, Chennaiyin, Jamshedpur, Kerala and Goa – for the other three places in the semis. This is going to keep the group stage alive and interesting for the fans. The competition is going to be fierce, and it might just come down to the last day of the league before we really know who the last four will be! It's amazing to see the way the clubs are fighting. This is going to be a real test of the players' calibre and perseverance.

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### **Calculations take a backseat, performance the only factor**

Watching games like Friday night's one between Chennaiyin and Kerala Blasters makes one's heart race. Both teams have such different styles of playing, and it was clear that their main objective was to go for the win. In the event, after squandered chances and a missed penalty, the match ended in a draw. Though the one point earned by Chennaiyin has strengthened their chances of cementing a place in the top four (they are third on the table at the moment), the draw has done no favours for Kerala (fifth on the table) as they have made it just that more difficult to qualify. Their last league match, against Mumbai at home next Saturday, is a must win if they want to stay in the fray.

Sunday will see Pune in action against Goa, while ISL newcomers Jamshedpur take on Bengaluru. For Goa, Ferran Corominas has been the top scorer with 13 goals, and hopefully we will see more from him. Goa also have the second best attack in the competition, while Pune have the second best defence. And we cannot forget that Marcelinho, who won the Golden Boot last season, is there for Pune, too.

Jamshedpur will face Bengaluru on Sunday, and will be another decisive match especially for the home team. It will be the best defence in the competition against Miku and Sunil Chettri, and the attack has to take their chances and play their role too. A win here and against Goa on March 4 will ensure Jamshedpur a place in the play-offs. On the other hand Goa, who have three matches left, need to win all three to seal a place in the last four.

Mumbai City find themselves in a similar position, and needed to beat NorthEast United, which they did 3-2 last week. They now need wins from their last two games, against Delhi and Chennaiyin, to stay in contention for a play-off berth.

So, this last week of the league is going to be one full of emotion for the fans and the players of the clubs who can still make it. We can see it in the face of the players, the coaches, fans, and even the stake-holders. They know that calculations will not be enough to make the semi-finals; what will count is their performance which is the only way to reach their target. It's exciting to see so many teams still in with a chance and it looks like it will come right down to the wire. We, the spectators, are enjoying every moment of it and could not ask for anything more!

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### **Of numbers and nail-biting finishes**

Kerala Blasters faced Bengaluru away on Friday night and it was as dramatic a match as I expected it to be. Kerala needed a win to at least keep their chances of a semi-final place in the ISL alive but two stoppage-time goals by Bengaluru sealed their fate. For almost 90 minutes Kerala kept Bengaluru at bay. Things changed in the first minute of stoppage time, with Miku charging in on a counter attack and slotting in the first goal of the match. That itself was all that was needed to keep Kerala out of the last four but before anyone could quite realise what was happening, Udanta Singh made it 2-0 two minutes later to add salt to the wound.

It's fantastic, however, to see that two more teams – Goa and Jamshedpur – will still be fighting for one spot on the last day of the league stage. Goa, of course, moved closer to sealing the fourth spot after their 5-1 win over ATK on Wednesday. Goa are currently in fourth place and will need just a point against Jamshedpur on Sunday to qualify for the next round.

ISL debutants Jamshedpur have won only three matches at home so far, showing that they are either not very comfortable playing at their home ground or perhaps it's because they have to change their style of play to attacking football. Goa have collected 13 points from their away matches and in the last one against Pune they showed their potential in away games with their 4x0 strategy.

Match day 17 of the Indian Super League saw Mumbai FC slump to a resounding 1-5 defeat to a resurgent Delhi Dynamos and move out of the race for a play-off place. It was Delhi's day on Tuesday, with coach Miguel Angel Portugal pushing his players closer to the goal. The Indian youngsters Nandhakumar Sekar and Lallianzuala Chhangte kept their cool and showed precision in the finishing.

The last few days of the league stage have kept players, team owners, and fans all on the edge of their seats. It has been filled with emotion and we may be in for yet another nail-biting finish when Goa take on Jamshedpur on Sunday evening. What better way to bring the first round to an end?

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### **Fowards at the fore, exciting game ahead**

The first match of the Indian Super League semi-finals will kick off in Pune, with the hosts facing Bengaluru in the first leg. Both teams are playing in this stage of the competition for the first time, so it's a new space for them. The two coaches – Albert Roca for Bengaluru and Ranko Popovic for Pune, respectively – have done a fantastic job so far to keep the motivation high amongst the players and that requires a lot of skill.

Roca has been the brilliant mind behind Bengaluru's performance. Strategically, he is one of the best coaches in the competition. He knows the strengths and qualities of his players which help a lot in his final decisions, like how the team should be functioning, and the players believe and execute the plans marked out by him. Bengaluru play a good compact game in the zones; they don't give the opponent many chances to create space especially in middle and they are able to wait patiently to win the ball back. They move with good speed in the counter attack, and this is where we get to see great versatility from Sunil Chhetri, Miku and Udanta Singh.

In the league stage, Bengaluru won four points from their two opportunities against Pune. The first time they met, in Pune, Bengaluru won 3-1, and later they played out a draw. What is interesting, however, is that Pune had lead in both games.

Ranko, on the other hand, looks more a defensive expert. Maybe his thinking is that "with good defending you can win titles". It looks that he has worked intensively to make the team resistant without the ball but has also trained his players mentally to make the transition from defence to attack where he and the team believe in the brilliant goal-scoring abilities of the Marcelo and Alfaro up front. Pune are an opportunistic team and are able to speed up the game when they want, and this was proved when they confronted Bengaluru in their league matches. His philosophy has obviously worked so far as Pune find themselves in their maiden ISL semi-finals.

The question is: Who will win? There is not much difference in the playing styles of either team. However, things can change when they face each other in a knock-out situation for the first time. Much will depend on the brilliance of both teams' forwards, and maybe we will also see some brilliant play from our Indian youngsters like Udanta and Adil Khan. At the end of the day, I'm expecting a great game. (Gameplan)

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### **All about Goa aggression vs Chennaiyin defence**

It's good to see a side like Goa FC in the ISL semi-finals. They are aggressive, and build good speed when attacking. I like their precise style of play, and the way they keep the ball and wait for the right moments to penetrate. The numbers talk for themselves – 42 goals in 18 games show that they were the best attacking line-up in the first round, with Lanzarote and Corominas having scored 12 and 18 goals, respectively.

What is a concern is their defence, and it's something that almost cost them their place in the last four, as they conceded goals at crucial moments in the competition. This is an area that Chennaiyin will be looking to take advantage of. Kattimani, their 'keeper, hasn't been in the best of form and he will have to step it up, if he lines up of course, because in the game against Jamshedpur the youngster Naveen Kumar had done quite well. This is something Goa will have to think about if they are to stay in the hunt for a place in the final.

Chennaiyin, on the other hand, are a physically strong side. They have good presence on ground, and are a team that has confidence in the process of keeping the ball. Mailson Alves and Raphael Augusto, the Brazilian players in the middle, are always involved and in the centre of all the action; both are very creative and smart players, so it will be safe to say that they will be 'marked men' and will be getting a lot of attention from their opponents.

Chennaiyin are very strong in defence, an area that Alves, Sereno, Calderon, and Lalrinzuala, work very hard to preserve. They don't explore the option of counter-attack much, but are very strategic with good control in pace. I think Jeje who, despite not having scored for them in a few matches, will play an important role for them in the semis. He has already scored seven goals so far in the competition and will surely be looking for more.

So, here we have two teams with different qualities, and the side that puts their particular qualities to better use may well be the one to make the first impact in this game. They finished 1-1 head to head at the end of the league stage, the visiting team having played better both times. Goa playing the first leg at home could be an advantage but not conceding an 'away goal' to Chennaiyin will be the bigger challenge for them.

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### **Ambition, strategy, defence and Chhetri's hat-trick take Bengaluru to the finals**

Sunday night's match between Bengaluru and Pune was the top attraction of the weekend matches of the Indian Super League semi-finals. With four goals and a brilliant performance from both teams, and stars like Sunil Chhetri, Miku, Alfaro and Marcelinho shining.

Pune showed great commitment with good ball control but had difficulty finding the opportunities to score as Bengaluru, with their plan to regroup fast and defend in numbers, made it difficult for the opponents to penetrate and get chances of finishing.

And of course, one must compliment the Bengaluru supporters who cheered on their boys with gusto right through the match, something I feel played an important role in favour of the home side.

Pune went into the match knowing that it was going to be a hard one for them. They understood that in the first leg at Pune where Bengaluru showed they were strategically and defensively very strong, and a team with ambition, forcing Pune to fail in their plan of going all out. Pune put all their hopes in their brilliant strikers Marcelinho and Alfaro on Sunday but the magic was on another side, in the feet of Chhetri who wrapped up Bengaluru's place in the final with a brilliant hat-trick.

On Saturday, Goa and Chennaiyin finished their first leg 1-1, the latter bagging that priceless away goal. I don't see any obstacles for Goa to score goals in Chennai: the way they operate with the ball creates situations to score but also keeping possession for a long time consumes more energy from the players and is maybe the reason Goa sometimes looks fragile in defence. An important factor for Goa is that they are a highly motivated team, and this can continue to make the difference.

Chennaiyin players work in a good system, where they all complement each other and work very hard for each other. They give their best out on the ground, in whatever position they play. They will depend on flashes of brilliance as we saw from Gregory Nelson, who superbly assisted Anirudh Thapa. So it will be a high-risk Goa versus an opportunist Chennaiyin. It's very difficult to predict who will win this battle because those very qualities that have bought them all the way to this point in the tournament can also take either one of them to the final!



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**Pitch all set for a tricky, and perfect, final**

Bengaluru, at the moment, are showing us that they are a team which is in perfect tune. They have built up a professional environment from the very start, and it's paying dividends now. We have to admit that they are a successful team, and I think it was both a dream and the plan to reach the final. This could turn out to be a perfect year for Bengaluru.

Coach Albert Rocas showed that he meant serious business in every game throughout the competition. He didn't let the players lose their focus in a single match, and thought it better not to take risks thereby keeping the winning flow going. He has been really successful with his formation so far – and I think we can call it an effective formation when the objective is to protect the defence and explore the speed and efficiency of the attack. Let's not, however, forget one important thing: Bengaluru have Gurpeet Singh, who has been leading the team from the back, and a good team starts with a good goalkeeper. I feel Bengaluru have a bit more ambition than Chennai: they defend well and they also know they have strength in the attacking zones with Udanta, Sunil and Miku.

On the other side, we have Chennaiyin who have a strong defence in Calderon, Mailson, Sereno and Jerry. These guys are really gladiators in the back and are determined to control their area at any cost. This team has reached the final because each and every single player has fighting spirit. With Bikramjit Singh and beside him home boy Dhanpal Ganesh at 1.86m, what we get is a very determined team that operates more through the middle using Rafael and Gregory Nelson's creativity with the ball. They handle these moments very well, keeping the ball for a longer time to drag the defender out of position and explore the gaps with good passes to the other players.

Sunil and Jeje will be there on the ground, and both are opportunistic players. It's a moment that both of them have dreamt about, and it will be all about proving who is the more efficient in the final.

We can expect Chennaiyin to come out playing a more physical game, and be more intimidating. But I don't think it will be a surprise for Bengaluru; they proved in their last confrontation at Chennaiyin's home ground that they are strong mentally and that they could deal with it. So, on Saturday, we can expect a tricky game, and a perfect final!