

DUTY CALLS: At 40, football icon Chhetri is back

Coach Manolo's list of 26 players includes Sunil for the March FIFA's international window

PTI, NEW DELHI: Indian football icon Sunil Chhetri has decided to come out of his international retirement to help the national team in the FIFA friendly assignment scheduled this month, the sport's apex body in the country said on Thursday. Chhetri returns to the team, which he led for more than a decade, aged 40.

"Sunil Chhetri is back. The captain, leader, legend will return to the Indian national team for the FIFA International Window in March," the All India Football Federation (AIFF) wrote on its official 'X' handle.

Chhetri, who made his international debut in 2005 and left the scene as India's all-time top scorer and most-capped player, has been included in coach Manolo Marquez's list of 26 players for the March FIFA international window.

The move comes less than a year after he announced his retirement after a glorious career, leaving a huge void that is yet to be filled.

Having played at the top level until he was 39 years of age and ending his career as one of the game's leading scorers with 94 international goals, Chhetri's departure

had made headlines with FIFA, world football's global governing body, leading the outpouring of tributes for the talisman.

FIFA had earlier in 2022 released a documentary on the long-serving Indian captain titled 'Captain Fantastic', it had three parts - kick off, mid-game and extra time.

Chhetri is the fourth-highest goalscorer in men's football, after Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi and Ali Daei. Chhetri had called it a day after the FIFA World Cup qualifying match against Kuwait in Kolkata on June 6 last year.

The Blue Tigers will play a friendly match against Maldives on March 19 in preparation for the opening match of the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 Qualifiers Final Round against Bangladesh on March 25.

Marquez said, "The qualification for the Asian Cup is very crucial for us. Given the importance of the tournament and the matches ahead, I discussed with Sunil Chhetri about making a comeback to strengthen the national team. He agreed, and so we have included him in the squad."

Since his retirement, he had continued playing for Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super League. He has so far scored 12 goals from 23 matches this season to become its highest Indian goal-scorer.

Shillong's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium will

host the Indian senior men's team's two matches that they will play during the FIFA international window this month.

India have been placed in a qualifying group alongside Bangladesh, Hong Kong, and Singapore for the Asian Cup. In the tournament's previous edition, India had a disappointing run, failing to progress past the group stage after losing all their matches.



INDIA'S 26-MEMBER SQUAD FOR MARCH 2025 FIFA INTERNATIONAL WINDOW

GOALKEEPERS: Amrinder Singh, Gurmeet Singh, Vishal Kaith.
DEFENDERS: Asish Rai, Boris Singh Thangjam, Chinglensana Singh Konsham, Hmingthanmawia, Mehtab Singh, Rahul Bheke, Roshan Singh, Sandesh Jhingan, Subhasish Bose.
MIDFIELDERS: Ashique Kuruniyan, Ayush Dev Chhetri, Brandon Fernandes, Brison Fernandes, Jeakson Singh Thounaojam, Lalengmawia, Liston Colaco, Mahesh Singh Naorem, Suresh Singh Wangjam.
FORWARDS: Sunil Chhetri, Farukh Choudhary, Irfan Yadwad, Lallianzuala Chhangte, Manvir Singh.

We're ready for scrap: NZ skipper

PTI, DUBAI: New Zealand skipper Mitchell Santner on Thursday acknowledged India's familiarity with the slow pitch here at the DICS, but said his side is ready for a "scrap" in the Champions Trophy final.

The Kiwis arrived here on Thursday evening ahead of the ICC showpiece's title clash against India on March 9.

"They've played all their games here in Dubai and know that surface. Obviously, the surface will dictate a little bit of how we want to operate. It might be a little bit slower than what we got in Lahore. It might be more of a scrap, but we're down to scrap," Santner said after touching base in the city.

However, Santner said New Zealand can take some solace from their experience of playing against India during the group stage.

On that instance, India had beaten New Zealand by 44 runs in a Group A match that only carried an academic interest.

"We've come against a good side. I think we'll be better for the run we had the other day against them. We've had a bit of a roll on. Hopefully, it continues," he added.

The Antipodeans had to shuttle between Pakistan and Dubai for their last group match, semifinal and the final in a short span.

But the left-arm spinner said the team has adapted to a busy schedule in the last few days.

"It's just the general feel of this tournament, moving around a lot. It's all part of the challenge. I think we've been to every place here."

"Obviously, in Pakistan and Dubai. I think the guys understand it's part of it these days. As long as you're ready to go for the game, it's fine," he said.

sportspopup

Bangladesh's Mushfiqur Rahim retires from ODIs

DHAKA: Veteran Bangladesh wicket-keeper batter Mushfiqur Rahim has retired from ODI cricket with immediate effect. He made the announcement on social media. "I am announcing my retirement from the ODI format as of today. Alhamdulillah (Thank God) for everything. While our achievements may have been limited on a global level, one thing is certain: whenever I stepped onto the field for my country, I gave more than 100 per cent with dedication and honesty," Rahim wrote on his official Facebook page. "The last few weeks have been very challenging for me, and I have come to realise that this is my destiny." Rahim made his ODI debut almost 20 years ago and ended up representing the country in 274 ODIs, aggregating 7795 runs at an average of 36.42. Only Tamim Iqbal (8357 runs) has scored more ODI runs than him for Bangladesh. He has also played 94 Tests and 102 T20s. Rahim has already retired from the shortest format but in the longest format, he is on course to become first from his country to play 100 Tests.



Reiffel, Illingworth to be on-field umpires for Champions Trophy final

DUBAI: Australia's Paul Reiffel and England's Richard Illingworth will be the on-field umpires, while Sri Lanka's Ranjan Madugalle will be the match referee for the Champions Trophy final between India and New Zealand, here, on Sunday. Reiffel, 58, a former Australian fast bowler with more than 200 Test and ODI wickets, was one of the on-field umpires during South Africa's semifinal against New Zealand in Lahore. Illingworth, 61, a former England left-arm spinner, was part of the action in India's last-four clash against Australia in Dubai. List of officials: On-field Umpires -- Paul Reiffel and Richard Illingworth; Third Umpire -- Joel Wilson; Fourth Umpire -- Kumar Dharmasena; Match Referee -- Ranjan Madugalle.

Will need to adapt on unknown Dubai pitch: Ravindra

LAHORE: Dashing New Zealand opener Rachin Ravindra feels adapting to the conditions will be key to succeed on an "unknown" Dubai surface in the Champions Trophy final against India on Sunday. "We don't quite know what the Dubai pitch is. We saw in our (group) game against India the ball turning but the other day didn't turn so much. We found ourselves adapting and playing according to situations, which we will need to do on Sunday again. "We will see in the next couple of days and hopefully it's a good cricket wicket," said Ravindra after an emphatic 50-run win over South Africa in the semi-final here. "You get out pretty much every time you bat. Hopefully I can bat for a longer period of time and continue to play well for my team," he said. He is also aware about the expectations from the side in any big ICC event. "Whenever you approach a tournament, you expect hopefully to be among the top four teams and lucky enough we have been consistently good over a period of time." "We are happy with our preparation, coming here early, we can see we are cooking reasonably well. Trust and ability around the group is great."

We are still evolving as a team: South Africa coach after another knockout punch

LAHORE: Yet another knockout stage heartbreak at yet another ICC event. But perennial bridesmaid South Africa remains on the right track two years before the ODI World Cup at home, feels the team's head coach Rob Walter after its semifinal exit from the Champions Trophy here. "You know, in the wins, we managed to put some significant partnerships together. We had guys contributing significantly with the bat. From a bowling point of view, I think our biggest development was our accuracy. We were able to be very accurate as a seam unit," said Walter. The 2027 ODI World Cup will co-hosted by South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

India have real clarity on how they want to operate in Dubai: Kane

PTI, LAHORE: New Zealand batting mainstay Kane Williamson reckons India have "real clarity" on how they want to operate in Dubai, having played all their Champions Trophy games at the same venue but his team will also be reasonably well-prepared for the tournament finale due to

its limited past familiarity with conditions.

Williamson did not specifically say that India had an advantage of playing at one venue, choosing to compare it to New Zealand's understanding of conditions in Lahore, where they beat South Africa on Wednesday to set up a fi-

nal clash against the Rohit Sharma-led side in Dubai on Sunday.

New Zealand had played two games in Lahore during the preceding tri-series involving Pakistan and South Africa.

"I suppose having played there on a number of occasions; there's real clarity

in how they want to operate," said Williamson when asked if India go into the final with an advantage of knowing the conditions.

"A little bit like our opportunity here, having played a number of times at this venue as well and I think that's part and parcel in cricket," he added.

Having scored a hundred in the semifinal, Williamson is high on confidence and looking forward to the final.

"It is what it is (India play all games in Dubai). Our focus is the next match, the location of that match, the opposition, they're all factors. Obviously, we played

India once there," he said.

"The conditions are different, so it's important that we try and take away some of those positives and be nice and clear in how we're trying to operate come two or three-days' time in the final," he said referring to New Zealand's loss to India in the group stage.

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