

Teams eye lone Asian slot as East Bengal face Kerala Blasters in Super Cup opener

On Monday FC Goa will take on Gokulam Kerala; quarter-finals will take place on April 26 & 27, semi-finals on April 30 and final on May 3

PTI, BHUBANESWAR: Defending champions East Bengal face Kerala Blasters FC in the opening match of the Kalinga Super Cup, here, on Sunday, with 15 teams vying for the trophy and a lone slot available for next season's AFC Champions League 2.

Unlike the last two years, when the tournament witnessed a group stage followed by semi-finals, this season will be played in a knockout format

like in 2018 and 2019, meaning every game is a do-or-die affair.

Last year, East Bengal FC snatched the silverware, defeating Odisha FC 3-2 after a thrilling period of extra-time in the final. The Red and Gold brigade ended their 12-year wait for a national trophy, and are out to defend their crown on the same pitch.

East Bengal are no strangers to defending cup titles, having won back-to-back Federation

Cups in 2009-10 and 2010, while Kerala Blasters are seeking their first-ever trophy at the national level.

Both sides had underwhelming Indian Super League campaigns, ending in ninth and eighth place respectively, and this tournament presents them with a shot at glory. The winner of this clash will face Mohun Bagan Super Giant, who received a bye after I-League side Churchill Brothers' withdrawal, in the first quarter-final on April 26.

On April 21, another ISL side FC Goa, champions from 2019, will take on Gokulam Kerala FC in an inter-league showdown.

The Gaurs couldn't make it past the group stage in the last two editions and will be eager to not only win the trophy again, but also mark a return to the continental stage for the second time after the 2021 AFC Champions League.

Gokulam Kerala are also eyeing a second Asian campaign after the 2022 AFC Cup, but the Malabarians have never gone past the round of 16 of the Kalinga Super Cup. They finished without a win in the last two tournaments, including a 0-1 loss to Goa in 2023 group stage.

Later on Monday, hosts Odisha FC will face Punjab FC. Ever since making their Super Cup debut in 2023, the juggernauts have been the team to beat in the competition.

Champions in 2023 and runners-up in 2024, the Super Cup has been their favourite tournament. It also opened their doors for a maiden AFC Cup appearance in 2023-24.

Punjab FC also debuted in 2023, but have never made it past the group stage, winning just one of their six matches in the two seasons.

Bengaluru FC and Inter Kashi will meet for the third time in two seasons on April 23. They drew 1-1 in the Kalinga Super Cup group stage in 2024, before the Blues ran out 3-0 winners in the Durand Cup group stage in August last year.

The hurt of losing the ISL final is still fresh for Bengaluru FC. But that will only add to the hunger of the first-ever winners of the Super Cup in 2018 as they look to become the first club to win the tournament twice, and also end their four-year absence from Asian competitions. On Wednesday, Mumbai City FC and Chennaiyin FC will face off for the fourth time in the Super Cup, making it the most-played fixture in the tournament's brief history.

The Islanders won 1-0 in each of the last two seasons' group stage, while the Marina Machans were 2-0 victors in the round of 16 in 2019.

Mumbai City have a 13-game unbeaten streak across all competitions against Chennaiyin, who haven't tasted victory in this fixture since February 2020. Both sides have played continental football before -- Mumbai City in the 2022 and 2023-24 AFC Champions League, and Chennaiyin FC in the 2019 AFC Cup.

NorthEast United FC and Mohammedan Sporting will lock horns on April 24. The round of 16 will conclude with a clash between Jamshedpur FC and Hyderabad FC on Thursday.

The quarter-finals will take place on April 26 and 27, the semi-finals on April 30, and the final on May 3.

sportspopup

Pakistan team won't travel to India for ICC women's ODI World Cup

LAHORE: Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) Chairman Mohsin Naqvi on Saturday announced that their women's team will not travel to India for the ICC ODI World Cup later this year and play their matches at a neutral venue, following the hybrid model accepted earlier this year. "Just like India didn't play in Pakistan in the Champions Trophy and were allowed to play at a neutral venue, whatever venue is decided, we will play. When there is an agreement it has to be adhered to," he said. The PCB chief said India and ICC being the hosts of the tournament would decide on the neutral venue. India will host the tournament from September 29 to October 26 with Australia being the defending champions.

Nayar returns to KKR fold after removal as India coach

KOLKATA: Days after his removal as India's assistant coach, Abhishek Nayar on Saturday returned to Kolkata Knight Riders fold but his exact role and position has not been specified by the IPL side. Nayar was part of the KKR set up as an assistant coach and mentor when they lifted their third IPL title last year, a decade after their previous triumph in 2014. He also played a pivotal role in player development at the KKR Academy. "Welcome back home, Abhishek Nayar," KKR posted on X, confirming his re-entry into the team setup. In an earlier post KKR revealed that he was back as assistant coach but soon deleted it from X. He is expected to be in the KKR dugout when the team clashes with Gujarat Titans on Monday at Eden Gardens. He was seen training with the team, engaging closely with players, and offering inputs during discussions.

Real Madrid coach Ancelotti says he will discuss his future at end of season

MADRID: Carlo Ancelotti has eluded speaking about his future after recent reports that again linked the Real Madrid coach with a move to Brazil's national team. The veteran Italian manager was asked several times by reporters on Saturday at a pre-game press conference if he would leave the Spanish giant this summer, and each time he responded that he didn't want to speak about it. "At the end of the season we will speak about this with the club," he said more than once. The 65-year-old Ancelotti is under contract with Madrid through June 2026. Speculation regarding his career plans has once again spiked after Madrid's exit from the Champions League this week. Britain's Sky Sports has reported that he will step down following the Copa del Rey final against Barcelona on April 26.

Utd Trophy football final postponed to May 4

RAIA: United Trophy football final between Navelim Villagers Union and Cuncolim Union organised by UCT Telaulim scheduled to be played on April 20, Easter Sunday, has been postponed to May 4, at the Rosary Church ground, Navelim.

Ilhas Veterans face Verna in final today

Team Herald

sports@herald-go.com

PANJIM: Ilhas Veterans dominated from start to finish as they registered a comfortable 4-0 win against Calangute Veterans to move into the final of Santa Cruz Village Panchayat Veterans Cup football tournament, at Santa Cruz ground, on Saturday.

Scoring twice in each session of play, Ilhas nev-

er gave their opponents any room to operate and waltzed to victory. Pascoal Fernandes opened the scoring in the sixth minute, while Alexander made it 2-0 before the change of ends.

In the second half, Nevil Araujo scored the third for Ilhas, before Govind added another one as Ilhas scored an easy win.

Ilhas Veterans will now face Verna Veterans in the final on Sunday.

Sporting Clube secure 1-1 draw against FC Bengaluru Utd

Team Herald

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BENGALURU: In a closely contested match, Sporting Clube de Goa fought back from a goal down to secure a 1-1 draw against FC Ben-

galuru United in I-League 2 match played at the Dravid Padukone Centre for Sports Excellence, here, on Saturday. Despite early efforts from Doyal and Samuel, Sporting Clube found themselves trailing at half-time after an FC Bengaluru United player capitalised on a defensive gap to net the opener.

The second half saw Sporting Clube pressing for an equaliser. The breakthrough finally came in the 70th minute, when Semboi's relentless pressure inside the box drew a foul, winning the visiting team a penalty. Doyal stepped up and calmly slotted it home, leveling the match at 1-1. Despite several late pushes from both sides, neither team could find a winner and the game ended all square.

TODAY'S SPORTS

Goa Professional League (Super League): Cortlaam Villagers SWSC vs Goa Police SC, at Nagoa ground, 4.15 pm

GFA Division I League (Group A): A A De Moira vs Candolim SC, at Duler Stadium, Mapusa, 4.15 pm

GFA U-17 Division II League (South Zone) Group A: Salcete FC vs Sirlim SC, at SAG ground, Benaulim, 4.15 pm

Santa Cruz Village Panchayat Veterans Cup (final): Ilhas Veterans vs Verna Veterans, Santa Cruz ground, 4.30 pm

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