

EXCLUSIVE ● MATTER OF JUST ONE MORE GAME, SAYS PRINCIPAL OWNER SANJIV GOENKA

Gut feeling, confidence & ATK

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Calcutta: Sanjiv Goenka, principal owner of Atletico de Kolkata (ATK), spoke to **The Telegraph** in the lead-up to Sunday's final, the ISL franchise's second entry into the title round in three seasons. ATK, it may be recalled, won the inaugural edition in 2014.

Harshavardhan Neotia, Utsav Parekh and the iconic Sourav Ganguly are the co-owners of ATK.

Excerpts...

Q In the build-up to this year's ISL, you'd said the 2016 squad was the best. Well, ATK have made the final...

A I knew we had a balanced side, good strikers coupled with smart midfielders... Then, there's science involved in the way coach (Jose) Molina goes about things... We've had a game plan and, so far, it has worked. I must add that the fans' support has also contributed, though much fewer could be accommodated at the Rabindra Sarobar Stadium.

What gave you the confidence without even a match being played?

Purely because of the balance and a gut feeling. We'd been targeting 20 points (in the league stage), realising that would be enough to make the semi-finals. As it turned out, we got just that many... You've got to remember that this edition has been the most competitive of the three. Generally, little has separated the teams.

But ATK's passage was anything but smooth...

We did make mistakes, but the trick lies in not repeating them. We made mistakes in

the first two seasons, but I'd put those down to learning about the franchise and about the league itself. We were all new to it.

Going by ATK's and your experience of the inaugural edition, in 2014, what would make the one difference in the final against the Kerala Blasters?

All finals are high-on-pressure affairs, so match temperament would matter. The coach's strategy would also count as would sticking to a game plan... Yes, Kochi is the Blasters' base, but Mumbai City FC, playing at home, couldn't beat us in the second-leg semi-final. Even though ATK had only 10 players on the park from late in the first half itself. Having gone to Mumbai with a one-goal advantage, our strategy had been to pack the side with defenders/defensive players. It worked... There's a strategy for Blasters as well.

[Sunday's final would actually be a repeat of 2014, when ATK got the better of Blasters.]

Are all first-choice players available for selection?

We have depth in the squad and the best team

would be fielded. I have that confidence. **Your take on the Blasters...**

Look, we treat every team with respect. The Blasters are a good team, even great I'd say, but so is ATK. As they say, may the best team win. **Some words on coach Molina... You'd been very impressed by his vision during the pre-appointment interview...**

I'm happy that the confidence in Molina has paid off. He's not your conventional coach, but is very organised... He's passionate and, as important, a good human being. For me, that's an important quality. **Did you meet Antonio Habas, ATK's coach in the first two seasons who is now with FC Pune City, during this edition?**

I wanted to meet Habas when Pune were in Calcutta, but he moved away as I went towards him.

Was that deliberate?

Can't say... I don't know for sure whether Habas had seen me coming towards him. So, let's leave it at that.

Owing to the 2017 U-17 World Cup, ATK had to relocate to the Sarobar, a much smaller ground.

Did that challenge the players too or only the franchise?

Challenged both... The players felt the switch heavily, missing the Salt Lake Stadium... The franchise had to spend Rs 7.5 crore to get the Sarobar in shape. Then, we lost Rs 4 crore in sponsorship and gate receipts were hit by another Rs 3 crore... To be set back by Rs 14.5 crore is massive... The franchise also had to be sensitive to the environment, so much so that the ATK anthem was never played. The team's anthem adds to the atmosphere, adds to the fans' involvement. After being at the top in the first two seasons on social media, we've slipped to No.2, behind the Blasters.

You'd spoken of systems having been put in place. Did they work to your satisfaction or there's still room for improvement?

One becomes wiser after every mistake. I'm happy to say that we made fewer this season. Bottom line is that we put together a team for all conditions. It's now a matter of just one more game.

Moving to cricket... Faf du Plessis has been having an outstanding time as South Africa's Test captain (in addition to leading in T20Is)... He's one of your Rising Pune Supergiants players in the IPL...

Absolutely delighted... It's a privilege to have three captains — Mahi (Mahendra Singh Dhoni), Faf and Steve Smith.

And, finally, Ravichandran Ashwin is in the form of his life...

Indeed... Believe me, Rising Pune will look and play very differently in IPL 2017. Finishing second from the bottom on our debut hurt, but that's over. Right now, it's about looking ahead.



Sanjiv Goenka



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