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## The Fabulous Fable of Football in India

By: Ramita Chaudhuri, Chief Marketer – Mahou India



“Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that!” Scottish footballer and manager, Bill Shankly had once said. I feel much the same way about the game.

What do I love the most about football? The fervour, enthusiasm, vigour and passion, with which the game is played. Anecdotally, it all began back in 1877 in Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta). A 10-year old boy was mesmerized by a ball game being played by the British in the vast open grounds.

Watching from the sidelines, the ball rolled over to him and on being encouraged by the player, he kicked it back to the playing arena. The young boy was Nagendra Prasad Sarbadhikari, also known as the Father of Indian Football.

Football in India has come a long way since then. The last few years have seen a sudden spurt in interest in football in India. This is thanks to a more globally aware and connected youth population that is carrying the global passion for the game into India. From being played in schools and in neighbourhood playgrounds in West Bengal, to the first edition of ISL – Indian Super League, to the fact that the 2017 FIFA U-17 is scheduled to take place in India, the excitement around the game is palpably growing.

But it is not just all fun – the quality of the Indian football game is also improving, with India currently occupying the 147<sup>th</sup> spot in the FIFA World Rankings, a ranking far improved from 171<sup>th</sup> place in 2014. I can only see this improving further.

The iconic nature of sportsmen, passion, youthfulness and the association with active lifestyle are the top attributes for choosing a sport and football fits the bill perfectly. Football is characterized by the highest level of stamina, fitness & exuberance, and is enjoyed by people across all age groups. Like other sports, India will experiment with formats too – street-football, penalty-saving etc.

As our game gets better, Indian football is getting the necessary support from corporates too. Nike, for example, has been investing in the sport for a long time now. Nike Hypervenom Knock Out is a tournament that helps strikers hone their skills through extensive tests in a unique one-on-one format that tests their agility and speed. Coca-Cola too has taken up the onus of grooming under-15 football players with its U-15 Football Tournament. We, at Mahou India, bring a legacy of long years of global association with Real Madrid as well as Atlético de Madrid and are committed to promoting the game in India, for now, with two formats – Para Football, as it is known in Kolkata, and the 5-A-Side corporate version in Delhi-NCR.

In fact, if corporate patronage of a sport is any yardstick of its popularity then, football in India ranks very high indeed, possibly a good second to cricket. There is no dearth of footballing talent in India. Sunil Chhetri, Bhaichung Bhutia, Subrata Paul are testimony to what is possible with very little. Cricket occupies a significant portion of the sporting pie in India, but as cricket patronage reaches astronomical figures, there are murmurs around its viability. Football has a lot going for it, and I see its potential as a marketer. Corporates are ready to take the plunge and invest in the sport. With a little bit of support, who knows where Indian football can go. The ground for rolling out another success story has been laid; and this savvy sport is sure to entice. It is, after all, a beautiful game!