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Title : ISL PREVIEW - ATK have an eye on SF

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Defending Champions Look To Seal Berth With A Win Vs Pune City

The equation for Atletico de Kolkata to become the first team to seal a semifinal berth in ISL-2 is quite straightforward -they have to beat FC Pune City at the Salt Lake Stadium on Friday .

As expectations among home fans rise, coach Antonio Lopez Habas remains guarded against complacency , insisting the “job still remains unfinished.“

Three wins in the last four matches have not only put ATK's campaign back on track, but, more importantly , helped them get back their mojo, giving them the look of the champion again.

With 20 points from 12 games the defending champions have earned their place atop the standings the hard way and Habas is doing his best to keep the players focused and the momentum going.

FC Pune City , on the other hand face a tall order. David Platt's boys were the early pace-setters, but a winless run in the last five games has made their job difficult now With 15 points in their kitty in 11 games, former England midfielder Platt admits that “it's a challenge to make the play-off cut.“

The 59-year-old, however, is drawing inspiration from the nature of the league. “The situation is fluctuating daily and a new scenario is thrown up everyday . If we manage to win back-to-back matches on the road (vs ATK followed by NorthEast United FC on December 2), we'll be back in contention,“ the former England under-21 manager observed on Thursday .

Besides the qualification aspect, Habas and Co will also look to conquer another 'frontier' as FC Pune City are the only team among their seven ISL rivals that ATK have not beaten so far in the two seasons. The defending champions will surely try to put that record straight against the visitors.

They have both form and momentum going in their favour. South African Sameehg Douthie -who scored three and provided assists in three more goals in the last couple of matches -represents ATK's new-found spirit and resilience. Iain Hume has already crossed his previous season's tally of five goals and with Borja Fernandez leading the side with confidence and character, Habas' team looks on course for another magical journey.

FC Pune FC, however, have shown that they have it in them to half ATK's charge. In the first leg, they took the lead through Jackichand Singh as early as in the second minute and then rode a resilient show to keep ATK at bay .

The visitors, however, will miss a couple of key Indian players. While defender Gourmangi Singh has been ruled out of the tournament with a ligament injury , Sushanth Matthew won't be able to take part in Friday's match either.

FC Pune City's defensive mainstay and former Ivory Coast captain Didier Zokora described Friday's match as a `massive challenge.' “A lot is at stake for us. They (ATK) are the in-form team and we need to be at our best to deal with the challenge.“

Given the teams' recent performance, ATK will start favourites. But FC Pune City have history on their side and it remains to be seen how they go about protecting it.



FC Pune City players warm up ahead of a practice session at the Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation ground on Thursday, the eve of their return-leg clash with Atletico de Kolkata