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Title : ISL PREVIEW - ATK keen to set record straight

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Defending Champions Eye Three Points Against Bottom-Placed NEUFC

Professional sport does not often offer players a second chance. Mohammad Rafique must consider himself lucky to have got another chance to prove point, or two, in an Atletico de Kolkata jersey Rafique, who emerged from obscurity to become an overnight hero by netting a last-gasp winner for ATK against Kerala Blasters in the final of the ISL last year, was subsequently released by the defending champions. Surprisingly, he also failed to attract a single bid at the players' auction earlier this year.

Rafique was heart-broken, but he refused to give up. A string of impressive performances for East Bengal and a string of injuries to key players in ATK paved the way for his return to the fold earlier this week.

“Rafique is a good player and more importantly, a good human being. It's good to see him earn his place (in my team) the way a footballer should do -with fight and determination,” ATK coach Antonio Lopez Habas said of the player. Rafique, on his part, refused to dwell on the past. “As players we simply love to play whenever we get a chance. I'm ready to make the most of this opportunity,” said the midfielder. Rafique's determination is what Habas requires in abundance as his team enters the second phase of the competition. Having roared back to winning ways with a 4-1 rout of Mumbai City FC after a string of three defeats, ATK will be keen to build on the momentum as they take on bottom-placed NorthEast United FC in a return-leg clash of the ISL at the Salt Lake Stadium on Saturday.

More importantly, ATK will be driven by the challenge of setting the record straight against the visitors, following a painful 0-1 loss suffered in Guwahati. Habas insisted that winning would be his team's top priority in a bid to push up the table.

ATK, with 10 points from seven games, are in the mix with other title contenders. NEUFC, with seven points from as many games, may be lying at the bottom of the table, but they remain a dangerous side.

Interestingly, both ATK and NEUFC will be looking to finish their league engagements strongly as both teams are slated to play their four rounds of the second phase at home.

Iain Hume, who fashioned ATK's remarkable win against Mumbai City FC with a hat-trick, will again be the focal point of the home team's attack. With Javi Lara and Arata Izumi both still recuperating from injury, Rafique and South African Sameehg Douthie will operate on the wing to support the Canadian striker.

Habas, however, is likely to rejig his defence, in a bid to keep his players fresh. Arnab Mondal could get a look in.

NEUFC, on the other hand, will be going into the match after a creditable 1-1 draw against the Delhi Dynamos on the road. Simao's brilliant free-kick ensured a point for NEUFC and coach Cesar Farias hinted that the former Portuguese World Cupper may again be used as a second-half substitute in order to create an impact.

Given their form and pedigree, ATK will start as favourites on Saturday, but they can ill-afford to take NEUFC lightly. Postiga to return on November 15 ATK coach Antonio Lopez Habas confirmed that the

team's marquee player Helder Postiga will return to the city on November 15, adding that the Portuguese World Cupper is recovering well. "Postiga suffered a hamstring injury in the ISL-2 opener after scoring a brace in the 3-2 win against Chennaiyin FC. He flew back to Portugal and later to Atletico Madrid's medical centre for rehab and recovery. He could be available for ATK's last three matches of the group stage, all at home, provided he is found to be match-fit. TNN

Pradip Datta



ATK players during a practice session on Friday, eve of their match against NEUFC