

The Times of India

Title : ISL-2 - Gutsy ATK defy all odds

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Location :

Kolkata:

Article Date : 10/14/2015

Beat Blasters 2-1 In First Home Tie; Mehtab Sent Off, Gurwinder Injured

At home, Atletico de Kolkata look hale and hearty again.

Brushing off the 'handicap' of missing a number of key players, Antonio Lopez Habas' defending champions pulled off an odds-defying 2-1 win over last year's finalists Kerala Blasters at the Salt Lake Stadium on Tuesday .

Arata Izumi and Javier Lara scored on either side of halftime to help ATK get off to a perfect start at home. Blasters did pull one back through Chris Dagnall in the 81st minute, and came close on a few more occasions, but they didn't threaten to change the script, especially after key midfielder Mehtab Hossain was sent off following a second booking.

With two wins and a draw, ATK went to the top of the table, ahead of FC Pune City (6 points) who have a game in hand. Blasters, on the other hand, remained on four points.

With the legendary Pele watching the game from the stands, ATK got off to a dream start when Arata found the target, for the second game running.

Habas effected a major overhaul in the defence with Spaniard Juan Calatayud coming under the bar for the first time and Josemi returning to the heart of backline, while N Mohanraj replaced Tiri as left-back.

It was, however, the introduction of Nadong Bhutia on the right, in place of the suspended Baljit Sahni, which gave the home team's attack a fresh impetus.

Nadong, using his pace and nice body balance, gave a harrowing time to veteran leftback Saumik Dey . Against the home team's usual 4-2-3-1 formation, England's former under-21 coach Peter Taylor employed a five-man defensive line with two East Bengal sidebacks Saumik and Rahul Bheke given the licence to advance as attacking reinforcements.

However, ATK's threepronged attack of Nadong, Arata and Lara kept pressure on the rival box on the back of some intelligent inter-play and sweeping movements.

Just like in their previous two matches, the defending champions succeeded in executing their plan. Lara fired the warning shot in the fifth minute with a piledriver from 25 yards, which rebounded off the crosspiece. Within seconds, ATK went ahead.

Last season's Golden Ball winner Hume chested down a long ball from the middle and turned back to fire a left-footed shot which was partially parried by former West Ham goalkeeper Stephen Bywater. However, Arata pounced on the opportunity to drive home the rebound despite facing a lastgasp challenge from defender Gurwinder Singh, who was injured in the process and had to be taken to hospital for treatment.

Although Mehtab tested Calatayud with a long-ranger and Bheke's intended lay-off found Dagnall a little far from striking distance, the first half clearly belonged to the hosts.

Their domination continued and Lara made it 2-0 soon after the break. Set up by Hume, the Spaniard cut past Bruno Perone with elan before unleashing a goalbound low volley which took a slight deflection off centre-back Peter Ramage before going in through his legs.

As Blasters staged a fight back in the final quarter of the game, Habas responded by crowding his midfield with the introduction of Sushil Singh and Valmiro Rocha in place Nadong and Lara. Dagnall eventually made it 1-2 in the 81st minute, turning Ramage's cross in, although the ATK goalie should have negotiated the challenge more convincingly after coming out of his line.

The Spanish goalkeeper, however, kept his team's hopes alive with back-to-back saves, denying Sanchez Watt and Dagnall.

Mehtab's second yellow for halting Rocha's run, which led to his dismissal, put a spanner in the visitors' ambitions as ATK got the better of the rivals for the second straight time after last season's final.



Javier Lara scores ATK's second goal against Kerala Blasters at the Salt Lake Stadium on Tuesday