

# IFA steps in to explore India's soccer market

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NEW DELHI

The International Football Arena (IFA), a Swiss organisation that hosts symposiums to give the sport's most influential people a forum to network and exchange information on the business and development of the game, is taking its first steps to explore India's football market.

On Thursday, IFA will hold its first 'round-table'—a conference that will bring Indian corporate houses and football representatives, as well as a few top international football administrators together to discuss the state of Indian football. On top of the agenda—can football replicate the success of the Indian Premier League (IPL) in India?

"Why not?" says Ben Wells, Chelsea Football Club's head of sponsorship, and one of those attending. "I think the IPL has woken us up to the potential of what can happen in India if you can get a small group of very powerful people together."

And that's exactly what the IFA is trying to do. IFA founder Marcel Schmid will be at the conference, along with IPL team Kolkata Knight Riders CEO Joy Bhattacharya, Reliance Industries Ltd's corporate affairs vice-president Priti Singh, Adidas India managing director Andreas Gellner, former Ten Sports COO Peter Hutton, India's football captain **Bhaichung Bhutia**, and the top football administrators in India.

"The infrastructure, which is clearly at a very low level, is one of our main points of focus," says Marcel Schmid. "We will also push for professionalisation of the I-League, discuss youth development, revenue sources—it will be an intense session."

Wells recalls visiting India in 2008 with Chelsea FC's then CEO Peter Kenyon and meeting All India Football Federation (AIFF) general secretary Alberto Colaco in Goa. "There were representatives from a

big Indian company at the meeting," Wells says. "The AIFF didn't speak the language of big business, and the corporate guys did not speak the language of football. We were sitting in the middle thinking we speak both languages, we can get these people on the same platform."

Another key part of the agenda at the conference is whether India should apply to host the 2030 football World Cup, which might force the country to push the development of the sport aggressively. But Wells is not so sure. "We are hearing some very critical voices about India hosting the Commonwealth Games," he says. "So may be it's not the right time to float an idea like this. But it's good for the relevant people to explore these ideas."

The IFA, which has been hosting these high-level symposiums since 1999, shifted its focus to Asia in 2007, hosting its annual conference in Beijing that year. In 2008, the Zurich-based organisation returned to Beijing, before shifting to Kuala Lumpur in 2009. Clearly, the Asian football market is on the top of its list. Schmid says the European football market is like a family business; all the big clubs and representatives know each other and meet regularly. "In a way, our work is more meaningful here," he says, "The right people across Asian football don't know each other and don't get the opportunity to interact. We are getting these people to meet, and we are getting key people from Europe to meet them as well. We want this transfer of 'know-how'."

But big foreign clubs showing interest in India is not always a good thing, Schmid warns.

"The Indian population is more interested in who's the new left-back for Chelsea than 'what is my local club doing'," he says. "It's a big disadvantage. But you know, if I'm at an opera in Zurich, I don't care if the singers are Swiss. I just want to hear good singing."