

## TOUGH GOALS

# Who can help Indian football?

**Corporate houses, top football clubs and Indian football authorities meet to discuss the way ahead**

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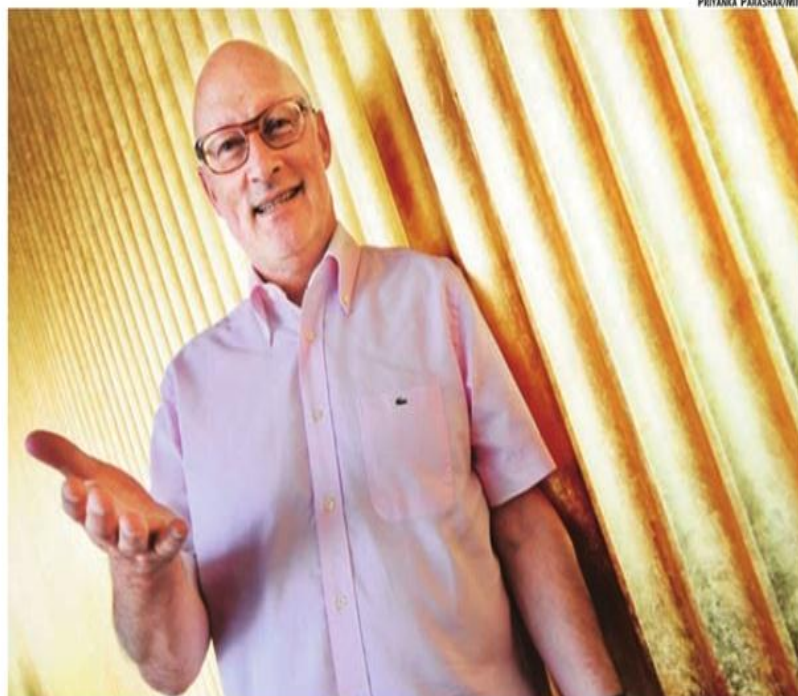
India's rapid economic growth may bring good tidings in its wake for the development of football in the country. At least that's what the International Football Arena (IFA), a Swiss organization that provides a platform for the sport's most influential people and corporate houses to discuss the business and development of the game, hopes.

IFA's second round table conference in India began on Thursday in Gurgaon, with representatives of English Premier League's Chelsea Football Club, German Bundesliga club Bayern Munich, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (Fifa), which is the global governing body for the sport, and the All-India Football Federation (AIFF).

Representatives of **Reliance Industries Ltd**, US-based sports management group **IMG**, and **Vijay Mallya's United Breweries Ltd** were also among the attendees.

On the agenda for the two-day meet are discussions on replicating India's successful cricket development model for football, and the need to improve the country's football infrastructure.

"Infrastructure was our focus at the last round table as well (on 9 September 2010),"



PRIVANKA PARASHAR/MINT

**On the ground:** Marcel Schmid, founder and chairman of the International Football Arena, says that improving India's football infrastructure will be key for the development of the sport in the country.

said IFA founder and chairman Marcel Schmid, in India for the conference. "Not much has happened in the few months since then, but infrastructure is not just about building stadiums for the I League—it's about upgrading the very basic facilities to develop young players and that is definitely the highest priority."

The I League is India's top-flight football league.

Chelsea Football Club is represented by former Chelsea and England player Graeme Le Saux, who has been an ambassador for the club's corporate social responsibility programmes (CSR) since retiring in 2005. "I grew up in a very small island called Jersey, which has a population of just 80,000 people," Le Saux said.

"And for me to still become an international footballer just goes to show you can succeed against the odds.

"It naturally upsets me to see that a lot of youngsters don't have the coaches or the facilities needed to develop into professional players in India, and that's where Chelsea's CSR programmes can help."

Chelsea has been running football development programmes in China since 2008, another country where it made inroads with the help of IFA. The club also runs health, literacy and education programmes in London, where it is based, and Le Saux believes similar programmes will translate well to the Indian context.

"We've only started keeping direct tabs on Indian football

since last year, so we are continuing to explore to see how we can fit into the overall development plans for Indian football," he said. "But the commitment will be a long-term one."

Bayern Munich's head of international affairs Martin Haegele, too, said his club will be in India for the long haul if it can find right corporate partners. "We are absolutely committed to it," Haegele said. "And it's important to start, whether the programme eventually succeeds or not."

Bayern's first engagement with Indian football was not pleasant. The club had signed a deal with the West Bengal sports ministry in 2008 to set up and run a dedicated Bayern Munich football school in the

state and drew up plans for a training centre.

"But we got no response at all from the government after we complete the plans," said Haegele. "So we were forced to drop the project."

Bayern's primary sponsors—Audi, Adidas and Allianz—have booming businesses in India, so the club continues to search for an avenue to get involved in the development of football in the country despite the earlier setback.

Fifa, too, has been struggling to make inroads in developing the sport in India, despite initiating a special programme in the country in 2008.

"We invested \$8 million in infrastructure mainly to build artificial football turfs in Kolkata, Mumbai, Pune, Imphal and Shillong, and to renovate stadiums in Mumbai," said Thierry Regenass, director, member associations and development, Fifa. The project, which was to be completed by the end of 2010, is only half finished till date.

"India is famous for its bureaucracy so it took us a lot of time to get these projects off the ground," Regenass said. "But once this is done we will look at football management in India and revenue generation. Our performance programme will tackle these issues working directly with the AIFF."

Schmid said China and India, the two Asian giants who underperform in football (China is 68 in Fifa world rankings, and India 127), have similar problems with grassroots programmes and infrastructure.

"Three years ago, China believed that getting the best quality coaching staff for their national team will make everything else fall into place," Schmid said. "India has quite a similar attitude. But this does not work. You need to build a big, solid base first and then work upwards."