

'We Won't Just Do One Soccer School & Go Back'

ET Q&A

Ron Gourlay, chief executive of English Premier League club **Chelsea FC**, was in

New Delhi last week to attend a roundtable organised by International Football Arena (IFA). The roundtable sought to find solutions to develop and market Indian football. Gourlay shares with ET's **Binoy Prabhakar** Chelsea's plans for India and his thoughts on Indian football. Excerpts:

Foreign clubs such as Manchester United, Liverpool and FC Barcelona have shown some interest in Indian football. We are yet to see anything from Chelsea. Why?

My view is that we would like to understand where exactly football is going in a particular country before we launch a programme. For the past two years, we've visited India by partnering IFA to figure out that. We have been hearing about the I-League (Indian football club format) and its challenges. We also heard about the agreement All India Football Federation (AIFF) signed with Reliance-IMG about developing football. There seems to be some confusion because nothing really has happened. The IFA is a great platform for getting an understanding of what is happening. Fifa (international football governing body) was also here. All the (Indian) shareholders were here. India is very important to Chelsea. We have a large fan base out here which is growing all the time and we have a responsibility to give something back. So we are trying to work out the best way to engage and develop the fan base. India is, after all, a country of 1.3 billion people.

So what do you intend to do?

I did not want to go into any short-term programmes. That would have been easy for us. We are looking for long-term grassroots programmes. It is best that we understand what the opportunities are before we design a programme.

Your thoughts on Indian football...

Infrastructure is one of the biggest challenges - there are few stadia - India faces. The fan base for football is there - there is absolutely no doubt about that. But you've got to give the fans the kind of match they usually experience (foreign league matches on TV). You can bring big-name players but that calls for a huge investment. Or one can decide that for the next 5-10 years, we are going to build one of the most successful leagues and eventually play in the World Cup by 2026.

It is interesting that you talked about bringing big names into a league because there seems to be a global debate about that. The supporters of the idea point to what David Beckham has done to popularise football in the US; the naysayers cite the example of Didier Drogba in China. What do you think Indian clubs should do?

I think you must first develop football here before you bring the big stars. I heard Jerome (Valcke, secretary-general, Fifa) talking about the potential of India hosting the 2017 U-17 World Cup. I think it is a phenomenal idea that should be the benchmark for the future. It will drive infrastructure because the criteria requires a host to have a minimum six stadia.



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That doesn't mean six new stadia; it could be five stadia that are already there, but they have to be upgraded to meet the specs. Any 11-12 year-old sitting at home has an opportunity to be in the team in five years. What more can one ask for?

What about the takeaways from the IFA roundtable?

There is no clarity where (Indian) football is going. Yet, there was an acknowledgement about the challenges everyone faces and a belief that we can do this. Now is the time for Indian football to go to the next level. But there are no quick fixes here. The fans will understand when they start seeing stadiums. There is no point creating these young players if there is no place to play or train. What will then happen is European teams will buy players and defeat the purpose of building your league.

You talked about engaging with your fans. How do you plan to do that?

We could do that through football schools and supporting academies on the ground. We are very serious about it. About how soon... will be reiterated at the end of the month when hopefully Fifa grants the U-17 World Cup to India. At that point, AIFF with the support of Fifa will start to put in place its plans. We will design our programmes around those plans.

So all your India plans depends on Indian bagging the rights...

No, no... the Cup will decide what the programmes are. We have already accepted that we will be work-

ing at the grassroots and corporate social responsibility is the route to the marketplace. So we are going to see Chelsea in India through long-term programmes across the country. It won't be just doing one soccer school and going back.

American insurance giant AIG sponsors Manchester United to target Asian consumers. In that context, how important is India to you commercially?

I think you will see a lot of supporting activities by our partners because they have to contribute a percentage of the revenues they pay the club into CSR grassroots programmes. You are going to definitely see a lot of activities by the partners of Chelsea FC, notably Adidas, Samsung and Audi, in India. Along the way, we hope to pick up some India partners as well. Chelsea can help promote their growth in other parts of the world.