

Will miss playing vs Bagan & EB: Chetri

A STAFF REPORTER

Calcutta: Sunil Chetri spoke from the heart on Saturday. Whether at the investiture ceremony of a Newtown School or during an informal interaction with the media, Chetri was his articulate best.

"I will miss playing against Mohun Bagan and East Bengal. I wish they were in the ISL," the national football team and Bengaluru FC captain said when asked whether he would be missing playing against the Big Two.

"Over the last three years I've certainly enjoyed Bengaluru FC's rivalry with Mohun Bagan. It was really competitive playing against Bagan... Will miss that rivalry with my former club...

"Even if I am neutral I would love watching the last three years of Bengaluru FC-Mohun Bagan matches,"

Chetri said.

While the two-time I-League champions have decided to switch over to ISL, Bagan and East Bengal will remain in I-League which will surely lose its sheen.

Chetri, though, refused to believe that ISL is death knell for the I-League. "Why are you saying this? Personally, I think I-League will be able to retain its sheen, because 20 teams in total will be playing ISL and I-League. That means more and more Indian players will get a chance to play.

"Unlike last year when some players were unemployed, this time around every one will get enough match-time. You never know, I-League may also throw up exciting new talents."

But he agreed that ultimately one league with 20 clubs is the way forward. "The whole country would pre-

fer that any day. I would love to see 20 (teams) in first, second, third and fourth divisions... I think we can cater to that. As a captain of the national football team I would like all the players who are good enough should get an opportunity to play."

India are now 96th in Fifa rankings and according to Chetri, the real battle starts now. "From here on, we have to keep winning to remain in the top-100.

"Personally, I do not take the rankings as the barometer for a team's success, but yeah, they're important. We have been winning a lot of matches under Stephen Constantine and we would strive to keep the momentum going," he said.

And what's the secret behind the Indian team's recent success? "I think Stephen worked really hard with the boys.

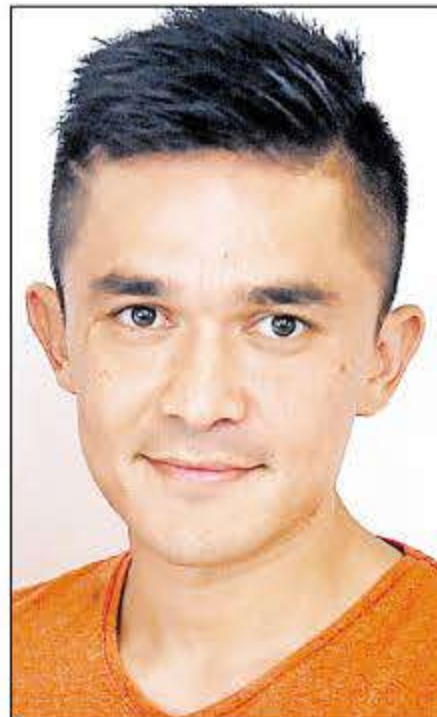
"When he came in, a lot of senior

players were retiring, so he had to bring in the new boys and give them the confidence. The players also responded very well to the challenges," India's all-time highest scorer said.

Chetri is not happy playing with more than four foreigners as that's the rule in the AFC Cup.

"Eventually I want to see four foreigners. From next year it's going to be four that's what I've been promised. It's a simple. You want to win a league or the Federation Cup because you want to compete in the AFC. This is a big price. When you play AFC, you must play with their rules, this is what I feel."

Talking about Bengaluru FC, Chetri said he is looking forward to the new season. "I am excited. We will be playing the ISL which is something new for us. But more importantly, we will have to be ready for the AFC Cup."



Sunil Chetri in the city on Saturday. A Telegraph picture