

Bheke stands out on the wing

The 25-year-old Mumbai lad is one of the top 10 defensive players in Season 3 of the Indian Super League.

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MUMBAI: Indians are winning respect from foreign players in the Indian Super League's Season 3. It was the other way round in the first two seasons, before foreign coaches managing each one of the eight participating squads started giving first-team places to capable local hands. Chennaiyin FC head coach Marco Materazzi went a step further, naming Mehrajuddin Wadoo from Kashmir as skipper in one match. Each team can play a maximum of six foreigners, allowing five Indians to grab remaining spots in the playing XI.

Spain's Antonio Habas, head coach at FC Pune City, is showing similar faith in Rahul Bheke at wing back, and the 25-year-old from Mumbai is responding with performances. Paris Saint Germain midfielder Mohammed Sissoko is team captain. Thirteen matches into ISL 2016 with FCPC desperate to qualify for the play-off phase (top four teams), the Indian is already one of the top 10 defensive players in the event, ahead of experienced Indian internationals and reputed foreigners.

Sissoko, from Mali and designated as marquee player by Habas, is only one among many big-timers in the squad. Bheke's teammates include Jonathan Lucca (Brazil), Anibal Rodriguez (Mexico), Jesus Tato (Spain), Edel Bete (Cameroon), Eugeneson Lyngdoh (India). The defender from Mumbai, taken on loan for three ISL months from East Bengal, is getting noticed for an efficient job. At this rate of progress, Bheke may end up being counted among the most valued players in the squad.



RISEING STAR: Bheke was overlooked in the players auction by all ISL teams. — PHOTO COURTESY: ISL

Habas handed the Indian a first-team place, allowing him time to establish a place as tough-tackler in the back-line. "I follow the duty given to me by the head coach and keep working on it. Our coach talks to us on and off the pitch, telling each one what his role is. Each game is treated differently," said Bheke, for whom getting chosen for ISL 2016 by FCPC is an achievement. He was overlooked in the players auction by all ISL teams and was out of the loop.

East Bengal, with whom he is registered for the I-League and other domestic competitions, agreed to loan the defender to FCPC and Bheke is currently sixth among defensive players overall in this season. Kerala Blasters FC had similarly taken him on loan from the Kolkata club for ISL 2015, the team flopped and players bore the brunt. Be-

tween two stints on loan, dealing with rejection and uncertainty post-ISL, Bheke aspires to don the national colours. "I want to help Pune City get into the play-off, keep improving and represent India one day."

The Spanish head coach at FCPC is a hard taskmaster and demands performances from players as per his gameplan. Sissoko, skipper and centre-half, controls the flow of play by moving tirelessly on the pitch, linking

up with defenders, bringing the midfielders into the game with precision passing and sending strikers on the goal hunt. The pace is unrelenting, deliver or be substituted. For a player toiling away in the local leagues for remaining nine months every season, the instant adjustment to ISL level is remarkable.

Asked about Habas's expectations and the change in his game playing alongside Sissoko (coach-player

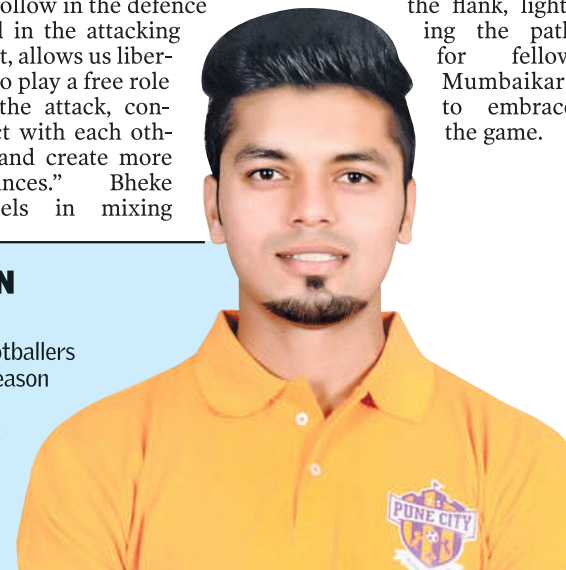
at Valencia in La Liga before teaming up again at FCPC), the wing back explained: "Habas wants his orders to be followed. In a match situation, he is more focussed on the tactical part we have to follow in the defence and in the attacking part, allows us liberty to play a free role in the attack, connect with each other and create more chances." Bheke excels in mixing

defensive discipline in own half and relishes overlapping.

He credits the captain's solidity, like a midfield-general, to the freedom allowed to him for launching surprise attacks. "Sissoko's work rate and ability to play box-to-box helps each player. The load he takes as centre-half gives freedom to wing backs like me to move up and down. I am free to join the attack, because he is always there behind us. The work he does creates difficulties for opponents to attack through the middle." Football as a career option is a tricky decision, owing to ISL contract being part-time in nature before players return to the grind in domestic leagues.

Bheke is willing to take the risk, taking feedback from coaches for guidance. "Three coaches stood by me from my school days - Bhaskar Maity, Amjad Khan and Sunil Poojary - who keep in touch between ISL matches," said the FCPC wing back, for whom career decisions mirror his over-

lapping runs down the flank, lighting the path for fellow Mumbaikars to embrace the game.



FACT FILE

Rahul Bheke represented St Augustine HS, Nerul, followed by Pillai College of Commerce & Arts, Panvel. He joined Mahindra United U-19, other clubs played for were Air India in Mumbai, East Bengal in Kolkata. ISL clubs: Kerala Blasters FC and FC Pune City (both times on loan from EB).

LOCAL TALENT ON THE RISE

Apart from him, Indian footballers making an impact in ISL season three are Kean Lewis, C K Vineeth (forwards), Souvik Chakraborty, Sehenaj Singh (defence), Subrata Paul, Laxmikant Kattimani (goalkeepers).