

Fans & players overcome by emotions after East Bengal win their maiden ISL crown

Champions, after 22 years of solitude

SAYAK BANERJEE

Calcutta: Champions after 22 years. As emotions overflowed from the stands onto the ground, with the entire Kishore Bharati Stadium pitch choc-a-bloc with the East Bengal fans, the trophy distribution for the Indian Super League had to be shifted from the actual podium to the VIP stand. The fans' joy was spontaneous, uncontrolled, ineffable.

East Bengal beat Inter Kashi 2-1 on Thursday to win their maiden ISL crown and emerge national champions after more than two decades.

None of these footballers were there when East Bengal, coached by Subhas Bhowmick then, won the National Football League in 2003-04 — the last time they emerged national champions. Yet, one could feel the immense joy that the current group of players were filled with after the final whistle.

Mohammed Rashid, who scored the winner, was joined by a few of his teammates as



East Bengal players lift the ISL trophy as supporters from the stands above bask in the glory following their triumph at the Kishore Bharati Stadium on Thursday. (PTI)

he sang "Champions" on way to the dressing room. Even Brazilian Miguel Ferreira joined in with "Campeones".

These players could feel the pain East Bengal and their fans have had to bear

all these years.

"I had a feeling since today (Thursday) morning itself that we will win this game and lift the trophy," said Palestinian-origin Rashid, with the Palestine flag draped on his

chest and shoulders.

"The loss to Jamshedpur FC (in February) and the drawn result versus Kerala (Blasters) spurred us on to turn things around. Rather, it was the Kerala game (in



Mood at the Kishore Bharati Stadium after East Bengal beat Inter Kashi to win the 12th season of ISL. (PTI)

March) that made us a more determined unit," Rashid, one of the most consistent players for East Bengal in this ISL, emphasised.

Former defender M. Suresh, one of the members of that 2003-04 East Bengal squad, was nostalgic. "That day when we won the national league, there was a similar kind of elation. Those days were largely different, though. Nowadays, maybe there's more glamour involved.

"But yes, the feeling remains the same when you see your club finishing as the best in the country... Can't get any better. They are deserving winners," Suresh, who was in the VIP stand, told **The Telegraph**.

Coach Oscar Bruzon was a favourite of the fans as some of them even bowed down to touch his feet as he made his way to the dressing room.

"We crossed all hurdles and obstacles with grit and showed a lot of resistance. There were interruptions in the form of uncertainties over the league, but we kept focusing on our practice and daily hard work without delving into what's happening behind the scenes. That effort bore fruit," Bruzon said.



An East Bengal supporter flaunts his colours. (PTI)