

Planning & perseverance help Minerva kids dodge odds

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Calcutta: The craze of the World Cup in India was in stark contrast to the national men's team's FIFA ranking (138). But while the men have quite a distance to cover before they can be counted among football's elite, a group of kids from India has sown a dream for a bright future in the game.

They are the U-12 footballers of Minerva Academy FC, who have caught the imagination of many in the country's football fraternity with their remarkable performances on the global stage.

The Minerva Academy boys overpowered RS Sports Yellow, a team from Brazil, 2-1 in the final to clinch the Gothia Cup earlier this month (July 18) in Gothenburg, Sweden.

It was no flash in the pan

stuff, the Minerva Academy kids had won the tournament twice before in 2023 and last year.

That's not all. Three Gothia Cup crowns aside, the Minerva Academy boys' international titles also include the Mina Cup in Dubai in 2022 and La Liga Youth Cup in Kuala Lumpur in 2024. Last year, they won three tournaments — Dana Cup in Hjørring (Denmark), Norway Cup in Oslo and Borneo Cup in Borneo (Malaysia).

Credit also needs to go the team owner and mentor Ranjit Bajaj, who left no stone unturned for the growth and development of these young footballers. So much so that he even took bank loan for the kids' Europe tour by mortgaging his wife's jewellery after institutional and government sponsorship fell through.



Jubilant Minerva Academy FC U-12 players, members of the support staff and team owner Ranjit Bajaj (seated, front row left), after winning the Gothia Cup in Gothenburg, Sweden, earlier this month. Picture courtesy: Minerva Academy FC

Bajaj could sense the passion and zeal in these kids and so went all out to support them. "These kids played with heart, desire and hunger," Bajaj recalled. "Basically, they didn't

have any problem taking on opponents who were almost five times their size because they are made to play with seniors during training sessions. So, that's one element which

makes them fearless.

"Besides, 80 per cent of these guys are comfortable shooting with both legs."

Extensive training methods have also been hugely instrumental to the Miner-

va Academy kids' success. Alongside fascia training, which helps improve mobility and flexibility, the kids are also made to undergo neuro and cognitive training that enhances decision-making in pressure situations and game awareness.

"This kind of training is common in clubs like Barcelona, Real Madrid and the Premier League teams," Minerva Academy physiotherapist Abhijeet Kumar Priyadarshi, a part of the team's nine-member support staff, said.

Along with focus on proper intake of carbohydrates and proteins before and after a match, the kids also go through blood screening. "It helps us check their blood parameters, whether they are lacking in iron or have any other kind of deficiency... Then we plan their diet ac-

cordingly," Priyadarshi said.

For recovery, apart from massages, the Minerva Academy kids also get a feel of the red light therapy that Norwegian star Erling Haaland takes, as it helps in reducing soreness and inflammation. "We're trying to ensure these become a part of their system so that they don't feel uncomfortable at the senior level if they get a chance in clubs like East Bengal or Mohun Bagan," the physiotherapist emphasised.

For the boys' mental performance enhancement, the team has a sports psychologist, Abdul Vajid.

Minerva Academy has not just set the benchmark. Bajaj's boys are an example of what proper support, planning and professionalism can achieve.

Has the All India Football Federation taken note?