



**Indians have played football for over 120 years. There are more than a billion of us. And yet our national team is among the world's worst, ranked lower than Ethiopia or Haiti. For decades, the beautiful game has looked breathtakingly ugly in this country... →**

... But in Goa, Dempo FC is spearheading a revival. Their dream: to get India back into the World Cup. Have they gone nuts?



**TRAINING DAY**  
One of the problems Indian football faces is the lack of state-of-the-art training facilities



**RISING TIDE**  
Dempo has bagged three national titles over a five-year span, and has won regularly on the Asian circuit as well



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**UNDER FLOODLIGHTS ON A FETID**

June night in Chennai, the best football team ever assembled to play for Tamil Nadu entered the 2009 Santosh Trophy semi-final with high expectations. Its opponent, a depleted Goan team, was missing several veterans, and the home team smelled victory. With its confidence boosted by a raucous, partisan crowd, Tamil Nadu surged up-field constantly, the entire stadium baying hysterically for a goal. But scoreless minutes ticked by, then half-time, and then, at the very end of injury-time, the fatigued defender Kali Allaudeen pulled down substitute forward Francis Fernandes in the goal mouth. A penalty kick against Tamil Nadu.

Up strolled Goa's captain, the lean, purposeful Climax Lawrence, and the stadium grew hushed. The midfielder

had been on top of the ball throughout the match, right at the heart of the action. And now he measured his steps back with uncanny calm. *Boom!* The ball angled beyond the desperate, diving Satish Kumar into the back of the net. Game over.

Instantly, a riot broke out.

The disbelieving home crowd rampaged in the stands, smashed the windows of the press box and rained missiles on to the field for more than 15 minutes. Three days later, with Lawrence again the key player, Goa won the Santosh Trophy in a penalty shoot-out (4-2) against West Bengal, leading the *Times of India* to exult, "The heart and soul of Indian football is now overwhelmingly Goan, anyone with a spirit of the beautiful game in their veins will agree."

If you were in Climax Lawrence's

boots, you might have expected more cheers when you returned home. Instead, he and his teammates got a tongue-lashing from Bob Houghton, the plain-speaking veteran international coach who has led the Indian national team since 2006. Comparing Lawrence to Liverpool and England star Steven Gerrard, he thundered: "If you are serious about qualifying for the World Cup, then you should forget playing nonsensical and stupid tournaments like the Santosh Trophy. Do you believe Steven Gerrard will play for some hotchpotch trophy at the end of the season?" Grinding the point home, Houghton laid out the grim, inescapable reality of Indian football. "After 100 years of football, you are still 147 in the world. You can sack the coach and bring another one, but you will still be 147. There is a need to change people's

perception about the big picture."

Cricket excepted, the annals of Indian sports are a bleak catalogue of disappointments and humiliations. We are a nation of a billion, now accustomed to getting thrashed on the playing field, a nation that celebrates fourth-place finishes and glorifies bronze medals the way the rest of the world gets excited about actual victories.

This collective disgrace rotates centrestage every Olympics, every World Cup. That's when global attention turns to the same question that embarrasses and bedevils Indian sports fans. Why has India not qualified? Why does India always lose? Why has this vast country won exactly five individual medals across the last 50 years of Olympic competition? The sheer scale of the problem boggles the mind: South Korea alone won 31 Olympic medals at



**LEADER OF THE PACK**  
Coach Armando Colaço has been able to attract some of the top talent in the country to Dempo

Beijing in 2008, where the island state of Cuba won 24, and even famine-struck Ethiopia tallied seven. At Beijing, the scattered nomads of Mongolia won four medals. That's right, even Mongolia – a country with a population outnumbered by the Indians riding on Mumbai's trains at any given moment – finished high above India in the medal standings. It seems almost churlish to point out that Beijing was India's best Olympics ever.

Even in this morass of mediocrity, the steep decline of Indian football stands out as a horror story. After all, football developed strong roots in India long before its popularity grew in Europe and South America – our Durand Cup (1888) is the third-oldest football trophy in the world, and many of our football clubs long predate the existence of FIFA. Take Spain's beloved

Real Madrid Club de Football, the team endorsed by FIFA as "the most successful football club of the 20th century". It was founded only in 1902, by which time Mohun Bagan and other Calcutta teams had been around for many years.

Today, hardly anyone remembers that it was football and Mohun Bagan that gave colonial India its real-life *Lagaan* moment in 1911, when a team of barefooted natives beat the East Yorkshire Regiment, firing two quick goals in the last five minutes to win the Indian Football Association Shield. Witnesses reported a standing crowd of more than 60,000, deliriously singing "Vande Mataram" for the full 90 minutes. The next day, Bengali journalist Achintya Sengupta wrote: "Mohun Bagan is not a football team. It is an oppressed country, rolling in the dust, which has just started to raise its head." →

Well into the Sixties, India was an up-and-coming football power rated among the best outside the West. Our guys qualified for the World Cup in 1950 (but didn't get to play because of a ban on bare feet in the competition), then beat Iran to win the Asian Games in 1951, and handily disposed of powerful teams from Japan and Korea to win again in 1962. Even more significant was the hard-fought fourth-place finish at the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, when India shocked the hosts 4-2, with Neville D'Souza (of Bombay and Assagao, Goa) scoring the first hat-trick by an Asian in tournament history. After the local newspapers bemoaned the "fluke", Australia was granted an unofficial rematch. Then the "little Indians" drubbed the proto-Socceroos all over again, with the imperious, unstoppable D'Souza hammering in two more goals.

Over 50 years later, that team's performance is still seen as the pinnacle of Indian football. At a ceremony honouring the surviving players from the 1956 team last February, the Union Sports Minister MS Gill used their achievements to ridicule the current state of football in India, along with Lawrence's generation of national players. "I don't know what is happening with Indian football," opined Gill. "Sometimes they are ranked 140th in the world, sometimes 120th. Now they may even get beaten by an Australian school team." Then, to a round of nervous laughter from his audience of septuagenarians, he declared, "Even now you may beat the current Indian team by two goals!"

### Combating criticism

MS Gill's slurs register like slaps on Climax Lawrence's dark, handsome face when I repeat them to him. We're sitting in the trophy room of the spotless, sprawling house where he lives with his brothers, uncles and parents, in Navelim, outside Margao in South Goa. One side of the room is floor-to-ceiling shelves, overhung with trophies, jerseys, shields and other memorabilia that testify to his family's multi-generational, 40-year relationship with football. Among the latest additions are photos of Lawrence in the colours he has worn as starting midfielder for India since 2001, raising his fists in

triumph after winning the AFC Challenge Cup in 2008, a famous victory that qualified India for the Asian Cup for the first time in a generation.

"Of course the minister is wrong," says Lawrence after a long pause. "And I do feel very insulted. From childhood, I have dreamed of wearing the India uniform, playing for India in the World Cup. That's why I work so hard, that is why the whole team plays the game. Those rankings are not a good way to judge the sacrifices and effort we put in for Indian football."

Lawrence walks me around Navelim, pointing with pride to the untended,



**The difference between me and the best players in the world is that their game is one-touch. How can anyone play like that here?** ☹️

unkempt paddy fields where he first learned to play football with his father, uncles and brothers. "Right here in Goa, where we love the game, and start to play from the time we learn to walk, it is very obvious that we start with as much talent and flair as anyone, anywhere in the world," he says. "But something happens, and our level drops." After getting to play with international players, Lawrence realized that part of the reason for the disparity was the high level of fitness training and sports nutrition in other countries. But that wasn't all. He ruminatively flexes one leg, then the other, and then, looking down at the ground, he finds the words he's been struggling to get out: "The difference between me and the best players in the world is that their game is one-touch, all one-touch." He points at the paddy fields. "How can anyone play like that here?" he asks. "You won't control the ball – you will lose possession."

Lawrence seems almost torn between his affection for the fields where

he first learned to love the game and their symbolism of all that's wrong with India's football infrastructure. "No one can tell me that we have less talent than other countries, but we don't have proper fields to play in and develop to international standards," he says. "Now that we have some facilities in Goa, I'm happy about it. But this is a small state – what about the millions of football players in the rest of our country?"

After Gill's sarcastic outburst in February, India's coach angrily turned the spotlight back on to the minister himself. "Why doesn't the minister produce facilities for the game instead of being cynical?" said a visibly irate Bob Houghton. "I want to ask him why he doesn't prepare facilities for us. We have zero facilities here. People don't believe it when I tell them that we are struggling for a decent field to practise on. Considering the facilities that we have, we are doing pretty well." He continued, "Last time, we had to practise in Gurgaon. Every day, after 5.30, different groups of boys would swarm the pitch for cricket practice, even throwing the javelin. Have you ever heard of an international football side in any part of the world training under such circumstances?" Soon after, Houghton flew the team to Dubai and Spain, forced to seek training facilities abroad because India's sole international-standard football facility in Goa is unfit for monsoon use.

### Global parity

Rankings apart, we're in an era of unprecedented global parity in football. At the last Confederations Cup in South Africa, just months ago, lowly Egypt upset Italy, and the no-name players for America ended mighty Spain's amazing run of 15 straight wins in international competition. Knowing this, it would be foolish to dismiss the determination of an unquestionably great player like Climax Lawrence to take India to the World Cup. But if those outsized dreams are going to come true, the national establishment will need to build on what is being achieved in his home state of Goa, which is quietly establishing an unprecedented set of benchmarks for success in Indian sports.

"It starts with passion," Marcus Mergulhao tells me, as we watch the rain course down his office windows →

**THINKING BIG**  
Climax Lawrence is determined to help India qualify for the World Cup, something the country hasn't done since 1950

in Panjim. “Look at me, I stopped playing football after school, but just can’t imagine doing anything else with my life other than being involved with the game.” A perceptive veteran journalist, currently working for the *Times of India* in Goa, Mergulhao covers football like no one else in the country; everything is up close and personal, he is a genuine insider in the football fraternity of the country.

Mergulhao says there’s no deep secret behind Goan teams’ rise to dominance in the national league: “It’s a professional attitude at every level of the sport, combined with an outstanding emphasis on youth player development that has been led by Savio Messias and the Goa Football Association. These factors distinguish Goa from the rest of India.” He reminds me that Goa instituted the first professional league in India in 1998. Its top teams – Salgaocar FC, Dempo FC, Churchill Brothers and Sporting Clube de Goa – have dominated national competition ever since, winning the title five out of the last six years. He also points to the sophisticated mix of tournaments and competitions for developing players in Goa, including four separate age-group classifications between the ages of 14 and 19. According to Mergulhao, the most significant development has come from the GFA rule that each team field two players under the age of 20. Ambitious young Goan players have benefitted hugely from these reserved slots – the same players who will emerge as the future of the national team.

When you see what Lawrence’s own Dempo Football Club has achieved in the past five years, those World Cup dreams seem within reach. In that time, the team has won three national titles, and has become addicted to success. Led by a dapper former player, Armando Colaço, Dempo has emerged as the first side from India to win regularly on the Asian professional circuit. Last year, Dempo stunned the continent by making a serious run at the Asian Football Confederations Cup with a series of victories that ended at the semi-finals, the first team to make it that far.

“We are going to go all the way, I’m confident of it,” says Coach Colaço. Yet another Goan football lifer, Colaço remembers chasing a ball in his bare



**SEEKING EXCELLENCE**  
Chairman Shrinivas Dempo has backed his players on the field with resources off the field

feet in front of his family’s taverna in Panjim, and smilingly recalls the thrashing he got from his older brother for stealing his football boots and cutting them to fit his feet. He is firmly in charge of the Dempo team, where he serves as secretary as well as coach. It’s an unusual overlapping of responsibilities, which has given him greater ability to choose on-field personnel. As a result, he’s managed to keep the team’s key players together for much longer than is usual in Indian football.

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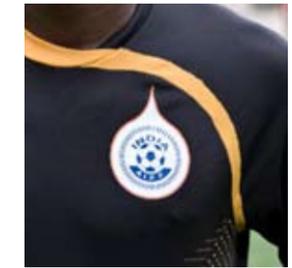


Colaço’s reputation for nurturing talent has spread throughout the sport in India, and the best players now all want to play for Dempo. His team already has six starters from the national squad, as well as two of the best foreign players ever to play in India – Beto, a Brazilian, and Ranty Martins Soleye from Nigeria. For all this, Coach Colaço is unreserved in his praise for Shrinivas “Baba” Dempo, the chairman of the Dempo Group. “Listen,” says Colaço animatedly, “I know how lucky I am to be in this situation. It is because of Baba that we’ve aimed so high. And we aren’t stopping here, we’re aiming even higher.”

Success in professional sports unavoidably hinges on the boardroom as much as the locker room. And that’s why 40-year-old Shrinivas Dempo is the man to watch when it comes to the future of Indian football. It’s becoming increasingly clear that the X factor that takes India to the next level of world football could well be this fresh-faced, sincere young Goan businessman, who is passionate about sporting excellence.



**CAPTAIN FANTASTIC**  
Lawrence is the Indian equivalent of Steven Gerrard, Liverpool’s all-action midfielder and inspirational captain



**LEADING FROM THE FRONT**  
Lawrence was instrumental in India qualifying for the Asian Cup for the first time in a generation

“Why should a great country like India, with a population as huge as ours, accept mediocrity in sports?” the chairman of Dempo FC asks me in his impressive glass-walled office high above the fast-flowing Mandovi River. “I can relate to Climax’s dream to see India in the World Cup – of course I can. Because it is my dream as well, and I want to believe that it can be achieved. I will do whatever I can to make it happen.” It’s a mission statement worth taking seriously, because Dempo has made a habit of producing championship results. Backed by funds from his companies, a series of young athletes from Goa are already producing eye-opening results – his “Goodwill Brand Ambassador” Ivana Furtado won the chess World Championship for under-8 girls and the World Schools title; 15-year-old Natasha Palha is a national title-winner who is on the verge of breaking into the top 100 in world junior tennis; and 13-year-old Talasha Prabhu won a historic gold in the 50-metre freestyle at the first South Asian Aquatic Championship in Pakistan

last year, making her India’s brightest swimming prospect in years.

Just days before our meeting, Shrinivas Dempo announced the sale of his family’s extensive mining operations in Goa to Vedanta Resources for nearly \$400 million. Now, he tells me, that move will allow him to focus on pursuing the two areas he’s passionate about: education and sports.

For him, football comes first. “I’m absolutely focused on taking our team to the next level of professional standards,” he says. “We will soon have a CEO for the team, to bring all aspects of our operations up to the best international standards. I am going to ensure that Dempo will challenge for trophies like the Asian Cup every single year. And we are going to win it, and take further steps beyond. I can’t be satisfied with anything less.”

**Better times ahead**

Until recently, playing football for India has been a thankless task. You’re condemned to play third fiddle to the spoiled cricketers. You earn next to

nothing, play in terrible conditions and have to bear the abuse of *mantris* like MS Gill. A culture of failure has taken hold, a collective crisis of confidence. But in Goan football, in the presence of the new generation of focused players, coaches and team owners, you can see real hope for a way forward, where Indian football leaves the nightmarish last few decades behind it for good.

Lawrence stands up in front of me in his *balcao*, as darkness falls swiftly over Navelim, and describes the first time he took possession of the ball for India. Staring into the village gloom, as though it holds an entire stadium, he gestures with one arm: “It came through just this high, and I could feel that the Kuwait goalkeeper was moving in that direction.” It was his first touch at the highest level of football, in the reality of a childhood dream. He shows me how he angled his body and fired low to score for India. “From that moment things have been different,” he says, his quiet voice full of emotion, eyes shining intensely in the murky light. “Now I know I can make all my dreams come true.” ☺