



Bhaichung Bhutia and Robin Singh (left) show off tricks with the ball at the Calcutta round of Pepsi T20 Football at City Centre Salt Lake. Picture by Sanat Kumar Sinha

AND NOW, T20 SOCCER: IPL-struck Calcutta changed the game last weekend and how! Sixty-four teams signed up for Pepsi T20 Football, a shorter, snazzier form of football, played inside a metal 'cage'.

On Sunday, while KKR took on Kings XI Punjab at the Eden Gardens, soccer fans crowded around a cage in City Centre Salt Lake as 32 teams kicked off for the Calcutta crown. The 20-minute knockout matches (including a five-minute break) is based on a points system rather than just number of goals scored. Each goal fetches two points. Then there are two Pepsi zones, scoring from where fetches four or six points, depending on the distance from the goal. Since the ball never leaves the court, there's no throw-in, which means the game never stops.

Calcutta was the third city to host the tournament after Bangalore and Chennai. One team each will be selected from Delhi, Mumbai, Lucknow and Ludhiana too, while another will be picked through an online video contest.

On Sunday, Bhaichung Bhutia dropped by to motivate the players. "The campaign 'Change The Game' has generated a lot of interest. The shorter, quicker format of T20 football will motivate new players and help us find fresh talent," Bhaichung told t2 in between showing tricks with the ball. Also present at the fast-and-furious tourney was East Bengal striker Robin Singh and goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu. After a frenetic day of football and fun, Team Royal Blues won the Calcutta finale with a 4-2 scoreline against Team BSAC.

"Our research showed that young India is into football, either in terms of playing or watching foreign leagues. We got a fantastic response during registration from Calcutta, the mecca of football, but could only accommodate 64 teams. Through T20 football, we want to bring a refreshing change to the format and take the sport a step forward," said Homi Battiwalla, executive vice-president, PepsiCo India.

Calcutta team Royal Blues will compete in the national finals at New Delhi in June. The winning team will be crowned the "Game Changers" and will be coached by a football star before taking on some of the biggest names from the Indian cricket team in a 'grand football finale'.

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