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The Arena: How one stadium looks set to change the future of Indian sports

TransStadia's "The Arena" is paving the future for India's budding sports sector

by **Anirudh Menon** @animenon19 Opinion / 19 mins ago



No, really, that's a football stadium

"How do we allow one of the biggest tournaments we've organised in this country to be held in a place that is even ready, yet?"

When Star Sports' head honchos were given the VIP tour in early 2016 of a still under construction stadium complex in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, they must surely have thought there was no way they'd let the inaugural [PKL-style] Kabaddi World Cup - an event for which they'd gained

Then Udit Sheth started speaking.

By the end of his tour, the MD of SE TranStadia had breathed life into the 60,000 Tonnes of Cement and 12,000 Tonnes of steel that were being poured into the earth smack-bang in the middle of the bustling city of Ahmedabad and what he had christened "The Arena" stood tall in front of the visitors.

The Star Sports people were convinced. Just as the then CM of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, had been back in 2009.

It was then that Sheth and his father, the head of Setco Automobiles (one of the largest manufacturers of automotive clutches) and Lavacast (a fully automated cast-iron foundry) signed a MoU to take over the defunct Abad Dairy from the State Government and transform it into a stadium. Not just any stadium, but one that can be addressed by one of our governments', and the private enterprises' (that build these mammoth projects), favourite terms - "world-class".



The interiors live up to the swanky exterior

The Sheths sold him the fantasy of having a genuinely A-grade, "state-of-the-art" (another of one those favourite state-sponsored catchphrases) sports stadium that would be a far cry from the dilapidated, decaying hunks of cement and steel that pass for stadiums today in the nation, and the big man was convinced.

What now stands tall and proud on the shores of the historic Kankaria lake is that fantasy come to life; a PPP project built in the best traditions of the business model that has put India on the development fast track.

When we quizzed him about how he was successfully able to rope in Star Sports he gave a self-effacing shrug and said "we had dinner with them, and we talked to them about the advantages we could offer them" - simple words spoken with the simple, all-powerful, conviction of a man who knows his future is in his own hands.

The advantages he spoke of were rather unique - The Area is one of the few stadiums in India that allows broadcasters to simply "plug and play"... there's no need for miles of wires to be dragged from one corner to the other or a manhunt to look for the nearest connection point, everything has been setup in the Stadium's broadcast boxes and the TV crews need merely turn up. Add to this two of TransStadia's patented technologies, T-box (a modular, retractable, seating system that allows a 5000 seater arena to be set up in less than a day) and StadiArena (a roll-down door that allows an open arena to be converted into a completely indoor one at the press of a button - this can be done in under six minutes as we witnessed ourselves) and you've got a Kabaddi World Cup standard indoor arena set up across 34,444 odd sq.ft. of pillarless space.



The Arena played host to India's triumph in the 2016 Kabaddi WC

Augmenting the physical infrastructure is a sports science center the likes of which the nation's athletes have been craving for. Covering a range of tests that accurately measure an athlete's inherent attributes and abilities while stretching them to their very limits, the doctors/scientists at this centre are fully confident that they'll be able to bring out the very best in anyone who passes through their facility.

through their facility.

In fact, for the World Cup, they ran these tests on the participating athletes and came up with some pretty cool results - predicting all 4 semi-finalists and having an 85% success rate on their predictions of who'll perform well.

They've already tested this out on Railways sports personnel and are currently in the process of rolling out a comprehensive plan for the elite of the elite that are enrolled with the Sports Authority of India.



The sports science section covers recovery & rehab, nutrition planning, noninvasive treatment of sports injuries, assessments and interventions. (The best thing? They plan to make these facilities open to the general public soon!)

But it's not just the already-got-to-the-top elite that the Arena wants to address... they will be running a program that allows schoolchildren across various age groups to pass through this facility and are putting the finishing touches on a schedule that will allow for this to happen smoothly around-the-year. A mobile van outfitted with the testing equipment is already touring the state - the facility is built on the same premise that has driven China to Olympic glory in the past decade; catch them young, identify the unique attributes of the children and channel them into a sport where those attributes will be maximised - after all, this was all intended as a grassroots programme when it all started out.

more details on this fascinating aspect of the stadium - as well as the various Academies they intend to start with this scientific methodology being its foundations - will be covered by my colleague Shaurya

Pride of place, though, was occupied by a 20,000 seater football stadium that's got a pristine green pitch (*carefully made of the finest Bermuda grass, we're told*) that's protected by another one of their patented technologies - the Turf Protector; an interesting piece of technology that enables them to hold any function they want - *dandiya nights included* - on the pitch, without it damaging the pitch (*Here's the company's pitch for the protector: [it is the] world's only turf protection system manufactured from truly translucent HDPE material, it allows for continuous photosynthesis, which ensures optimal turf health, together with a 30-year UV degradation guarantee*).

When Prime Minister Modi came a-visiting to inaugurate the facility, it hosted the massive crowd that came to see him without much of a fuss - with the majority of them stood, or seated, on the football pitch, the Turf Protector ensured not a blade of grass was harmed. Some tech, that.

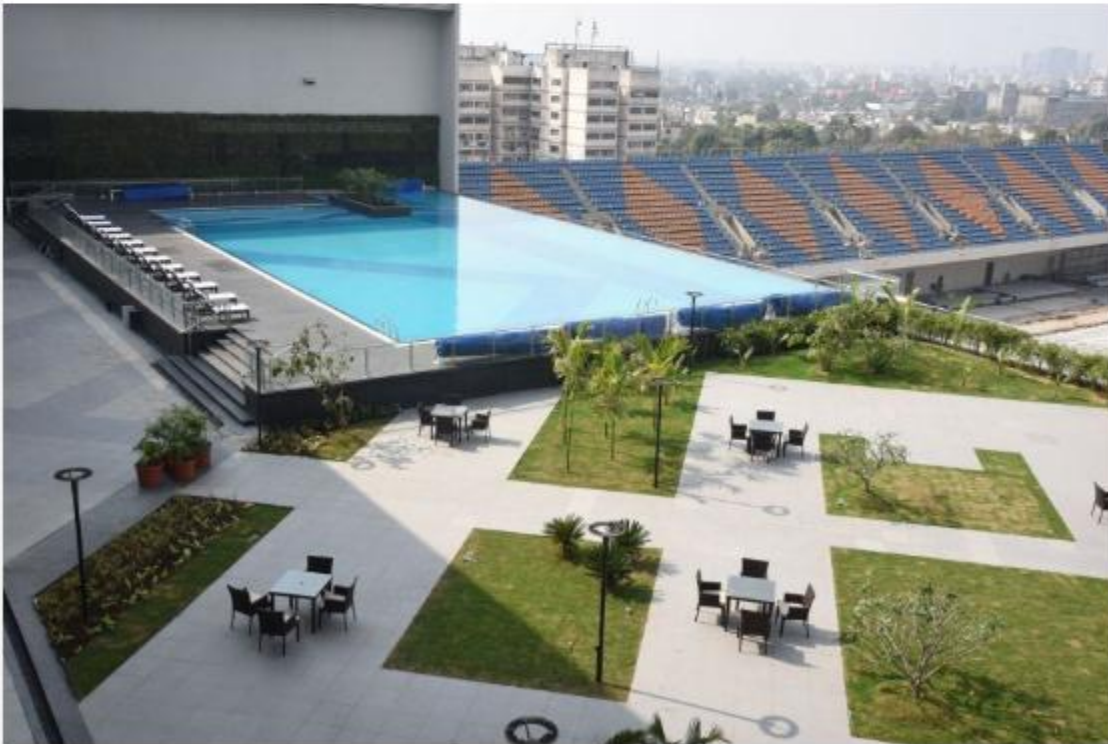


PM Modi waves as he addresses the crowd gathered on the football pitch, and on the stadium seats

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The FIFA-approved pitch was put in place too late for it to be in contention for the FIFA U-17 World Cup, *if* Praful Patel and the AIFF do win their *reported* bid for the U-20 bonanza, you can be sure the Ahmedabad Arena will be one of the stadia that play host to one of FIFA's biggest events.

As we continued the tour of the facility one thing was becoming glaringly apparent - sure it was the keen interest of sport that Sheth has that drove the project on, but it's the canny businessman within him that gave us the feeling that this venture success - apart from the sports facilities, there's a high-end club called EKA that has already attracted over 1,000 memberships from across Ahmedabad. The club offers access to facilities that can host 14 sports (*futsal, volleyball, basketball, badminton, squash, tennis, table tennis, et al*) and a rooftop infinity pool that overlooks the football stadium.



has led to many-a-promising venture meeting its end prematurely but there's no such lack of vision behind this.



Located smack bang in the middle of the city, The Arena is an imposing sight.

This is just the beginning... what Sheth and Modi envisaged in the beginning, and what they are working towards, is a 7-stadia network that works with the Ahmedabad Arena as the hub and the others as it's spokes (*picture a wheel, with Ahmedabad in the centre and the other cities being connected to by spokes*) allowing the reach of the facility to expand towards the very hinterlands of the state it operates in.

This is a model, Sheth assures us, that can be replicated across the nation and with the kind of environment that TransStadia are looking to promote across the nation, the only way for Indian sports is up.

After all, if the dilapidated remains of an abandoned dairy can be turned into one of the most ultra-modern sports facilities on the planet, the sky is the very limit.