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Page No: --

Man United to open Indian cafes

English football champions Manchester United are to open their first cafe in the western Indian city of Mumbai (Bombay) later this year.

The venture is the first of several the club plans for Indian cities.

Leading English football clubs are now poised to aggressively target India, where they see a huge untapped marketing opportunity.

Last month, a soccer academy in nearby Pune was opened with the backing of Liverpool Football Club.



Stars like Wayne Rooney are hugely popular in India

Video screens

Manchester United, English Premier League champions and last season's UEFA Champions League finalists, have never visited India.

But they are the most popular foreign football club in the country.

In recent years, the club has strengthened its ties with India. Earlier this year, the country's telecoms giant, Bharti Airtel, became the first Indian company to strike a sponsorship deal with the club.

Now Manchester United Food and Beverage, the club's hospitality arm, has announced it is rolling out upmarket bar restaurants in several Indian cities. Mumbai's famed nightlife makes it the obvious first choice.

The cafes will feature large video screens on the walls to screen matches, and booths selling players' shirts and club memorabilia.

In cricket-crazy India, where the game is followed like a religion, football is making rapid in-roads.

Former Man Utd players such as Cristiano Ronaldo and David Beckham have proved more popular among the youth than local cricketing heroes.

Replica shirts of the clubs and famous footballers are becoming a common sight on India's streets.

Commercial interests

While football mania is mostly seen during World Cups, club competitions, such as the English Premier League, also have a significant following on television, with an estimated weekly TV audience of more than 50 million.

English clubs look at India's billion-plus population as a huge potential fan base with massive marketing opportunities.

Last month, the opening of a football academy backed by Liverpool, marked the latest chapter in the quest by Premier League teams to gain a foothold in India.

However, India's national coach, Englishman Bob Houghton, has often said that European clubs are more interested in promoting their commercial interests than helping the game grow in India.

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