



Can an e-sports league and a match-up between the sons of Niki Lauda and James Hunt help XI Racing League surmount the odds and actually launch this November?

#### :: Jaldeep Valdya

**T**he wild success of the Indian Premier League cricket tournament has spawned a number of franchise-based leagues across different sports. India now has professional leagues in hockey, football, kabaddi, tennis, badminton, wrestling, boxing, table tennis and volleyball—all enjoying varying levels of viewership, success and sponsor interest.

The traditional snake boat racing in Kerala has also come under a franchise-based league backed by the state government. The latest entrant into this rich and widening offering of sporting action is a new league in motorsports, which has a small but passionate following in the country.

The XI Racing League, a project promoted by Indian racers Amaan Ebrahim and Aditya Patel, is trying to set aside the ghosts of failed motorsports projects in the country to hold races in late November and early December across two weekends at the Buddh International Circuit in Greater Noida and the Madras Motor Racing Track in Chennai.

The league will have six franchises, all of whom will compete on a custom-built, 1,400-cc, 170-bhp car with a top speed of 240 kmph (the top speed set by an F1 car is 372.6 kmp). Narain Karthikeyan, the first Indian to drive in Formula One, and Sheikh Tahnoon Bin Saeed Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, grandson of a prominent member of Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan family, are among the team owners. Each team will have four drivers — one international male, one international female, one Indian international and one domestic driver.

Formula One fans will get a chance to see the reincarnation of the famed Niki Lauda versus James Hunt rivalry via their sons Mathias and Freddie, who are among the international drivers. "It's like Rush 2.0," said Ebrahim, referring to the 2013 movie on the Lauda-Hunt rivalry.

#### CROWD-PULLERS

##### Indian Premier League

**SPORT:** Cricket  
**LAUNCH:** 2008  
**SEASONS:** 12  
**TEAMS:** 8

**CELEBRITY OWNERS:**  
 Shah Rukh Khan, Juhi Chawla, Preity Zinta, Nita Ambani



##### Indian Super League

**SPORT:** Football  
**LAUNCH:** 2014  
**SEASONS:** 5  
**TEAMS:** 10

**CELEBRITY OWNERS:**  
 Sourav Ganguly, MS Dhoni, Virat Kohli, Abhishek Bachchan, John Abraham, Ranbir Kapoor, Chiranjeevi



##### Pro Kabaddi League

**LAUNCH:** 2014  
**SEASONS:** 7  
**TEAMS:** 12

**CELEBRITY OWNERS:**  
 Abhishek Bachchan, Sachin Tendulkar, Ailur Arjun

##### Premier Badminton League

**LAUNCH:** 2013  
**SEASONS:** 4  
**TEAMS:** 9

Prior to the start of the league, the organisers are also launching a digital simulator-based racing competition with a prize pool of ₹1.5 crore.

The e-sports competition will take place in malls and colleges across the six franchise cities — Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad. The winner of the competition will not only get a cheque of ₹1 lakh but also have a chance to train as an actual race-car driver for a year.

XI Racing plans to invest ₹25 crore per year over the next decade purely on execution and production, exclusive of marketing and other expenses, CEO Abhinandan Balasubramanian told *ET Magazine*. "We are giving ourselves five to seven years to break even. Luckily, we've got a great team on board with the right mix of stakeholders."

The league has already received investment from the likes of Mohit Burman, vice chairman of Dabur India; Jitendra Gupta, founder of Citrus Pay; Kunal Shah, founder and CEO of Freecharge; Raghunandan G, co-founder of TaxiForSure; and Anupam Mittal, founder of Shaadi.com.

#### Dejà Vu

While all this may sound great on paper, followers of Indian motorsport would remember that this is not the first time such a league has been planned. In 2011, a company called Machdar Motorsports had announced the iI Super Series, a franchise-based league with nine teams and races planned across India, the UAE, Malaysia and Thailand. Cricketer Sachin Tendulkar was reportedly a stakeholder and actor Shah Rukh Khan was one of the team owners. The first season was supposed to be held in 2012 but was delayed by a year. In the end, the league never saw the light of the day.

It all went downhill for the iI Super Series after one of its main investors, the Deccan Chronicle

media group, went through a financial crisis in 2012. "It was a tsunami that also swept this league away," said Darshan M, former CEO of Machdar Motorsports, who wished the organisers of XI Racing the best but warned that motorsport will not be the easiest sport to sell in India. "Primarily, the issue for motorsport in India is that it is not considered a sport," said Darshan. "The government looks at it as a game for the rich; it's not something for the masses."

Darshan took the example of the Indian Grand Prix in Formula One, which was launched amid much fanfare in 2011 but folded after three editions because of financial problems stemming from a tax dispute with the Indian government. "The system, the infrastructure, the government rules and regulations in India don't support it," he said.

Ebrahim, who was supposed to be one of the drivers in the iI Super Series, does not think that it can be compared with XI Racing, saying they are two completely different entities. "While conceiving XI Racing, we have considered the pros and cons of not just the iI Super Series but other leagues too such as the AI Grand Prix, Superleague Formula, and domestic series in Japan and Australia," he added.

Not just motorsport, but the organisers of XI Racing also got to learn from the failings of a league from a different sport. In his previous avatar, Balasubramanian was the CEO of Premier Futsal, a franchise-based league that had to shut shop after two seasons because of financial and administrative problems, primarily stemming from the fact that it was not sanctioned by the All India Football Federation.

"A professional structure overall always helps," said Balasubramanian, regarding the learnings he took from Premier Futsal. "Secondly, it helps to have a large capitalisation table in something like this. It's just the network effect—someone knows somebody, everybody can open some door. Thirdly, being cost-effective is important. And, of course, with the motorsports federation of India backing us here, it helps a lot," he added, laughing.

#### Breaking the Barrier

Balasubramanian agreed that motorsport is an elite sport but believes XI Racing can break the barrier in terms of participation via the e-sports league. "But in terms of our production values and target audience, of course we are going to go after the premium market first—the guys who watch NBA, WWE, and the Champions League. You cannot go after cricket and kabaddi fans, and try educating them about motorsports ground-up."

The organisers of XI Racing are optimistic, but are aware of the odds. The league has not found a broadcast partner yet without less than two months to go for the launch, although the CEO says talks are in final stages and he hopes to close a deal before the end of October.

Apart from the two circuits being used for the first season, India also does not have too many decent tracks where the league can be held. The organisers are planning to have street races in the future but that will come with its own hurdles.

The main challenge is not in the league or its format but in the sport, which is not designed to become mainstream in India. It's going to take a lot more than Lauda versus Hunt and an e-sports competition to make this click.

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