

Title race down to the wire

East Bengal Beat Minerva 1-0, Throw Down The Gauntlet To Chennai City

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Panchkula: I-League's future may be in doubt, but East Bengal made sure that the title race in India's premier football competition will again be decided on the final matchday.

East Bengal forward Enrique Esqueda's brilliant finish in the 75th minute was enough to fetch them three points against defending champions Minerva Punjab at the Tau Devi Lal Stadium in Panchkula on Sunday.

I-LEAGUE

With this win, the red and golds moved up to 39 points from 19 games — one point behind leaders Chennai City (40). The table toppers, having defeated East Bengal in both home and away fixtures this season, hold a slight advantage in the title race on account of their superior head-to-head record. However, in order to make the issue absolutely safe, Chennai must beat Minerva Punjab in their last match.

For East Bengal, the equation is simple. They must defeat Kerala FC and hope that Chennai City fail to register a win over Minerva Punjab on Saturday, in order to claim a



Pritam Thakur

Enrique Esqueda (No. 9) celebrates with Landanmawia Ralte and Brandon Vanlalremdika (right) after scoring East Bengal's winner against Minerva Punjab in Panchkula on Sunday

maiden I-League title.

East Bengal coach Alejandro Menendez had asserted

on the eve of their match against Minerva that his team could still win the title.

His boys delivered the goods in Panchkula.

East Bengal clearly had more of the ball in the first half, but failed to break down Minerva's well-drilled defence. The best chance of the half, however, fell to Minerva in the 31st minute when Juan Quero slipped past East Bengal's defender Lalram Chulova, but his shot bounced off the post.

It was not until the 40th minute that East Bengal came calling. Jaime Santos timed his jump to perfection to reach a floated cross by Toni Dovale, but his header from close range struck the post.

Esqueda, Santos and Ralte combined well to come close twice thereafter, but their shots were saved brilliantly by Minerva's goalkeeper Arshdeep Singh. The woodwork also played a crucial role in ensuring that the first 45 minutes of the game remained goalless.

East Bengal started the second-half with much more poise and Arshdeep was called into action in the very first minute after the break. Esqueda found Danmawia Ralte with an inch-perfect cross but Minerva Punjab goalie effected a brilliant

save.

After a shaky start, Minerva settled down and created a couple of chances but Syrian international Mahmoud Al Amna and Spanish striker Quero had their shots saved brilliantly by East Bengal goalkeeper Rakshit Dagar. The deadlock was finally broken in the 75th minute.

After some good inter-link play between Danmawia and Esqueda, the former picked out the latter in the box. Esqueda made it count by poking the ball into the bottom, far corner of the net from a tight angle.

East Bengal continued to hog possession in the final quarter of the match and went close twice in the final 10 minutes, but some exceptional goalkeeping by Arshdeep denied them a second goal.

Late in the game, Minerva's Kalif Alhassan tested East Bengal's goalkeeper Dagar with a curling free-kick but the keeper managed to punch the ball away.

SUNDAY'S OTHER RESULT

In Kozhikode: Kerala FC 2 (Daniel Addo 46, Marcus Joseph 82) Neroca FC1 (Felix Chidi 23)

MONDAY'S FIXTURE

In Aizawl: Aizawl FC vs Shillong Lajong FC.