Mizoram, with a population of a little over a million, boasts of half a dozen players called up to the Indian national team. Srinivasan Ramani reports on the unique communitarian approach to the game that has transformed the State into India’s football powerhouse.

The football ground in Hnahthial in southern Mizoram is a picture of contrast to the small census town that hosts it. The town is nestled, as many habitats in the largely forested State are, in lush green vegetation. The ground, on the other hand, is hard, has no grass, and is full of pebbles. But that does not deter the 30 or so youngsters undergoing training at the summer camp here by the Hnahthial Football Association.

The footballers are practising their drills under the watchful eyes of guest coach and Indian international and local product, Isaac Vanmalsawma. They learn the basics: dribbling, passing and tackling on the hard surface. It was this very ground that served as the nursery where players such as Vanmalsawma and Jeje Lalpekhlua, one of the stars of the Indian national team, were groomed. Clearly, the lack of grass has not hampered the growth of soccer talent in Hnahthial.

Hnahthial epitomises Mizoram’s success in grooming professional footballers. A large contingent from the State plays for major clubs in the highest echelons of Indian football — the Indian Soccer League (ISL) and the I-League. At least six Mizo footballers, Lalpekhlua, Vanmalsawma, defender Jerry Lalrinzuala, left back Lalruatthara, striker Daniel Lahllimpuia, and midfielder Laldanwamia Ralte, were recently called up to play for the Indian national team. For an otherwise underdeveloped State, also India’s least populous barring Sikkim (only about a million people), this is a rich harvest of football talent.

Mizoram has been going through its most productive phase in football over the last decade. In 2014, the State won the country’s premier inter-State Santosh Trophy. In 2015, it triumphed in football at the National Games. Aizawl FC, Mizoram’s largest football club, was revived early this decade. To everyone’s surprise and the Mizos’ delight, it not only went on to qualify for the I-League but also won the league as an underdog last season.

Every village has a ground
So how did this tiny forested State with hilly terrain make it so good in football? Adam Sapinsanga Halliday, the editor of Frontier Despatch, a weekly published from Aizawl, says that Mizoram was taken over by the football craze in the 1980s. But it took the professional efforts of the Mizoram Football Association (MFA) to tap the already well-established passion for the game in the villages and hamlets and take the State to where it stands today. “The love for sport, not only football, is everywhere in the villages. You would be surprised by how competitive the games played by loosely organised sports associations in the villages are. Almost every village, even those located in hilly terrain, has a rudimentary playing field,” he says.

A host of top professional players have cut their teeth on the game in the football fields of Mizo villages, says Halliday. If at one end of the spectrum you have Shylo ‘Mama’ Malsawmtluanga, a 33-year-old veteran winger, regarded a pioneer among professional footballers in Mizoram for taking his talents to East Bengal club in the 1990s, at the other end is Lalpekhlua, arguably the best player in India after the experienced forward, Sunil Chhetri. Mama grew up in a scenic village in South Vanlaiphai, near the Myanmar border, while Jeje belonged to a football-crazy family in Hnahthial, which is only a three-hour drive from South Vanlaiphai.

Hnahthial is 172 km from the State capital Aizawl, and it takes nearly six hours on a constantly zigzagging hill road to get there. Lalpekhlua is a proud son of the small town, an icon every youngster looks up to. True to Halliday’s claim, the villages near Hnahthial have their own football fields, and the nurseries of Mizoram’s best. In Thitlang, for instance, which is 15 km from Hnahthial, the football ground overlooks the hills and is the first milestone as one enters the village.

Says Lalpekhlua, “I honed my football skills in Hnahthial till Class X. We actually had a football team when I was in Class IV. We played in many tournaments in my village. I learned to train myself despite the lack of facilities. I worked hard in the little spaces around my house and in the small ground in my village, along with other friends. As I grew up, I looked up to my talented relatives, my uncle [Lianhmingthanga], and other Mizo footballers. It was when I saw Mama [Malsawmtluanga] on TV playing for East Bengal on TV that I made up my mind to take up football as a profession, just like him. After my Class X, I came to Aizawl to join a football academy, and from there, I went on to play for the State under-19 team. That was the start of my professional football journey.”

Lalpekhlua might have become Hnahthial’s most successful footballer, but there were talented players even in the 1980s, says C. Lalramdinsanga “Rda”, honorary secretary of the Hnahthial Football Association. Lalpekhlua’s uncle played for Mizoram in the Santosh Trophy. While others too from his generation were talented footballers, many of them lacked the Lalpekhlua’s professional discipline, Rda says. Fzosangliana, editor of the local Mizo daily, Calathea, echoes this point: “The older generation had good footballers too but they also suffered from other vices, alcohol addiction, even drugs. This generation of footballers, inspired by Jeje, lack those bad habits. They think professionally and of themselves as athletes.”

Football in Hnahthial has evolved since the 1980s, says Rda, adding that the town now had eight games and sports associations representing small localities within the town. The football association conducts tournaments regularly. “Such is the passion for the game. Villagers and the townspeople do not just consider the game of football as a leisure activity, they see it as a community-bonding effort,” he says.
Lalpekhlua has also helped the association secure funds to lay a new ground with artificial grass, the eighth such football ground in Mizoram. The picturesque ground is coming up on the town’s outskirts. Says Rda: “It took us a few years to get permissions and buy land for the ground. Villagers voluntarily sold us some of their individual holdings even without charge to build the stadium.” Clearly, the new ground is a product of community effort, and in this respect, not unlike the State’s achievements in football.

Just as Mama’s pioneering efforts were an inspiration for Lalpekhlua, the latter’s success has, in turn, caused other young footballers to follow in his footsteps. Vanmalsawma is 21 years old and a native of Hnahthial. He was until recently playing for FC Pune in the ISL and will be soon be turning out for Chennaiyin FC, just like his idol Lalpekhlua. Vanmalsawma got his first call-up to the national team for a match against Kyrgyzstan last year, but did not get a chance to play. His father, who used to be an amateur footballer, has high hopes from him.

Vanmalsawma and other footballers recently participated in an exhibition game in Hnahthial organised by the football association. He also helps organise a summer camp for other youngsters in the town and neighbouring villages. Dozens of young children and teenagers turn up for the morning camp before they go to school. They practise drills in the grass-less Hnahthial ground, and eagerly soak up tips and encouragement from the young professional. The ground is full of stones and quite uneven, but this is where Lalpekhlua and the others first made their mark and refined their skills.

Vanmalsawma has followed a similar professional trajectory as his mentor. Spotted early by talent scouts, he trained at the All India Football Federation’s (or AIFF) Elite Academy in Goa before turning out for the India U-19 team in 2013. He looks the typical Mizo footballer — diminutive, fit, full of energy. “As I grew up, I looked up to Mama and Jeje, and decided to become a professional footballer. My early training in technical skills and physical skills was done here, in Hnahthial. Later, when I was a little older, I went to school in Kolasib district, and from there to the AIFF academy. Other players from Mizoram, such as Jerry Lalrinzuala, have had similar career trajectories,” Vanmalsawma says.

“Village footballers like me always want to go to the city whenever we get a chance, to show them how we can play,” he adds. “You get into professional football by representing the State in age-specific tournaments, so that is always our first aim. Mizo footballers are mentally strong, and that always helps. It is difficult to win at the highest level, so we have to constantly improve ourselves as players.”

A thriving domestic structure
For the Mizo footballer, the journey from village football field to professional league is not an easy one. It would not be possible without an effective structure that allows for the development of players and an administration that organises regular State-wide tournaments. One person credited with building such a structure in the State is “Tetea” Lalnghinglova Hmar, the honorary secretary of the Mizoram Football Association (MFA).

“Tetea”, a journalist, has been serving in this position for the better part of a decade. Footballers and sport enthusiasts give him credit for a lot of the current success, but he shrugs it off, saying, “I was at the right place at the right time. Mizoram already had a decent structure consisting of teams belonging to State institutions such as the police, the PWD [Public Works Department], and so on. It was in the 1980s that a non-State club, Aizawl FC, was formed for the first time, by an
entrepreneur named Benjamin Khiante. Ironically, interest in football dipped a bit with the advent of cable TV in the 1990s, but the current popularity of the sport is also a consequence of the cable TV boom.”

Other Northeastern States including Meghalaya, Manipur and Assam, have long had professional football leagues but Mizoram lacked one when “Tetea” took over as the MFA secretary in 2010. He explains: “We focussed on three areas. Building a proper professional league, improving the standards of coaching, and better refereeing. We established an eight-team Mizo Premier League (MPL) with a revived Aizawl FC as one of the participants. We were very fortunate to get Zonet, a cable TV station, as a partner to telecast the games. We had a unique agreement with Zonet. They got a commercial licence to telecast the games, and paid us a certain amount of money for it [Rs. 30 lakh to run the league]. They also arranged a sponsor on their own. I don’t know if they broke even on their investment, but it has been a win-win arrangement for both of us. We managed to secure funding while Zonet got a dedicated set of viewers and cable TV subscribers due to the popularity of the league. We now have coaches with different levels of expertise, including one ‘A’ licensed coach, 3 ‘B’ and more than 20 ‘C’ licensed coaches in the State.”

Most of the teams in the league are community-owned. Chanmari FC, which is based in Aizawl, is one such. Its players are paid by the people living in the Chanmari area, which includes well-to-do individuals in the city. “The clubs are seen as representative of the communities,” says “Tetea”. This has helped build cohesion among the supporters, a fact pointed out to me by a member of the Young Mizo Association (YMA), a large non-government organisation in Mizoram. Football also helps mitigate some of the big problems in our State, such as alcoholism and drug use among the youth, for [if] you want to play football, you need to be fit and free of such influences. We also request spectators to avoid consumption of tobacco during games.”

The MPL permits different ownership models: private ownership (Aizawl FC), community ownership (Chanmari FC and the reigning champion Chhingaa Veng FC), and State-ownership (Mizoram Police FC). By allowing a diversity of ownership structures, the league has managed to provide a platform for many young footballers to showcase their wares, hone their skills, and get paid. It has succeeded in turning the State-level league into a launching pad for many a professional footballer. “My aim when I took over was to help footballers take up the sport as a profession rather than just a hobby. Players like Mama and later Robert Laltlamuana succeeded through their individual efforts. My challenge was to get other youngsters to receive proper football education and become professionals, just like Mama and Robert did. I think we have succeeded here,” “Tetea” says. “Take, for instance, Lalruatthara, the emerging player of the year in the ISL this year. He started off by playing five seasons in the MPL. Today he is an Indian international. Also, a big factor in Aizawl FC’s success in the I-League was that the team gelled really well. This was possible because the players came together in the MPL, which pre-dates the I-League. They were far more cohesive as a unit compared to other teams in the I-League, and this eventually helped them win the League.”

What made it click

Mizoram’s success in football is clearly the outcome of the State’s communitarian emphasis. There is a unity of purpose among the Mizo people that is evident to the first-time visitor. In this respect, it is unlike other Northeastern States, which are still marked by ethnic divisions, strife, and even insurgency. Social peace in the State, where insurgency ended in the mid-1980s, has
been important in fostering this communitarian spirit. “Tetea” agrees, adding that besides the community emphasis on sport, the State government too has pitched in. In 2011, it helped install the first artificial turf in Lammual in Aizawl. Since 2016, the Tata Trust has partnered the Mizoram government in providing grass-root-level training to children and in April this year, announced an academy for 12-14-year-old children in Aizawl. It was a confluence of many good things happening at the same time, he says.

The challenge for Mizoram now is to sustain this success in football. That will be difficult, “Tetea” says, as the State doesn’t have a significant corporate presence and, therefore, lacks big financial support. “If there is an investor who wants to promote football in the country, he must look at Mizoram. Also, football structure-wise, the presence of two parallel leagues in the ISL and the I-League is an issue for us. We would prefer a unified, multi-division league. Hopefully, this will happen soon. This would help Mizo footballers in a big way by offering them a clear professional path at the national level.”

At the Lammual football ground on a cool Monday evening, Lalpekhlua conducts a training workshop for children between five and eight years. He teaches them to pass, tackle, and score as they play a quick game. But he also tells the children to celebrate every goal. The children oblige. Some do the ‘Usain Bolt pose’ while others pick the dab dance or some other complicated move. It is clear that Lalpekhlua wants them to first enjoy the game. After all, that is what football is all about. All said and done, that is perhaps the most significant factor behind the small State’s big success in the sport.