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MESSAGE FROM THE **AFC PRESIDENT**

Dear friends

It gives me great pleasure to present to you the AFC U23 Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2026™ Technical Report, which once again provided an unrivalled platform for our Participating Member Associations as Asia's rising stars left their mark on the Continental stage.

Held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for the first time, this report captures the developing trends and key technical analysis of a tournament that continued to set new records and benchmarks.

Our heartfelt congratulations must go once again to Japan, who added another chapter to their rich legacy by becoming not only the first back-to-back champions, but the most successful side in history with three titles, and their richly deserved triumph is indeed a tribute to the Japan Football Association.

Whilst our commiserations are offered to China PR, we have to also applaud them for reaching the Final for the first time, and special praise is likewise directed towards this edition's debutants Kyrgyz Republic and Lebanon, who gave a commendable account of themselves.

We must also convey our utmost appreciation to the Saudi Arabian Football Federation for providing the state-of-the-art infrastructure that once again reinforced the AFC's commitment, as outlined in its Vision and Mission, to deliver top level competitions for its members.

With an impressive 73 goals scored, this report methodically outlines the latest technical developments, tactical evolution and learnings that surfaced from the competition and we extend our sincere thanks to the Technical Observers' Group for their dedication and expertise in identifying the key insights.

The seventh edition of the tournament also reinforced the AFC's desire to enhance the foundations of the sport across all levels, and this was emphasised by the increasing representation of our AFC Referee Academy graduates appointed amongst the 56 match officials, whose journeys are also outlined in the subsequent pages that follow.

For our collective success, I must acknowledge the instrumental contributions of the AFC Competitions Committee, the AFC Technical Committee and the AFC Referees Committee.

We also extend our sincere thanks to all our broadcast, sponsors and media partners for sharing our belief to expand the reach of Asian football to new territories and audiences as we seek to grow the love of our great game.

I am confident this report will serve as a valuable reference as we continue to strengthen our ability to transform our most promising stars into future icons of the Asian game and beyond.



Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



STORY OF THE TOURNAMENT

AFC U23 ASIAN CUP SAUDI ARABIA 2026™



The AFC U23 Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2026™ was held from January 6 to 24, 2026.

Matches were played in the cities of Riyadh and Jeddah, with Japan emerging as champions after defeating China PR 4-0 in the Final at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium in Jeddah.

It was an unprecedented third title for Japan, having also lifted the trophy in 2016 and 2024.

Vietnam clinched third place with a 7-6 penalty shootout defeat of Korea Republic, after the Playoff ended 2-2 following extra-time.

GROUP A

Vietnam topped Group A with a perfect record of three wins, defeating Jordan 2-0, debutants Kyrgyz Republic 2-1 and Saudi Arabia 1-0.

Advancing as the runners-up were Jordan, who beat Saudi Arabia 3-2 and Kyrgyz Republic 1-0 to book their Quarter-final ticket.



GROUP B

Defending champions Japan were peerless in Group B, defeating Syria 5-0, United Arab Emirates 3-0 and Qatar 2-0 to stay on track for a record-extending third title.

Joining them in the Quarter-finals were UAE, who sealed their spot with a 2-0 victory against Qatar and a 1-1 draw with Syria.



GROUP C

Uzbekistan opened their campaign with a 3-2 win against Lebanon and were then held to a goalless draw by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Chasing a second title, Uzbekistan were back at their best in the decider against Korea Republic, turning on the power in the second half for a 2-0 win that confirmed the top spot.

Korea Republic advanced despite the defeat, with their 0-0 draw with IR Iran and 4-2 defeat of Lebanon enough to take them through.



GROUP D

Australia claimed the Group D top spot with virtually the last kick of the ball as they came from behind to defeat Iraq 2-1 in their concluding match.

Both goals were scored in second-half stoppage time as Australia finished the Group stage on six points.

China PR took the second Quarter-final spot with five points as the East Asian side advanced to the Knockout Stage for the first time in six attempts.



QUARTER-FINALS QUARTER-FINALS QUARTER-FINALS



QUARTER-FINALS

JAPAN 1-1 JORDAN (A.E.T., JAPAN WON 4-2 ON PENALTIES)

Japan defeated Jordan 4-2 on penalties to advance to the Semi-finals, with the last-eight tie having ended 1-1 after extra-time.

Goalkeeper Rui Araki was the hero, saving two spot-kicks as the defending champions stayed on track for a third title.

Ali Azaizeh gave Jordan the lead in the 30th minute with his fourth goal of the tournament.

It was the first goal Japan had conceded in the tournament, but the two-time champions had to wait till the 50th minute for the equaliser, with Jordan's Anas Al Khab diverting Shusuke Furuya's grounded effort into his own net.

Both sides failed to find the back of the net for the remaining minutes and in extra-time, with Araki rising to the occasion in the shoot-out – first denying Mohammad Taha's opening spot-kick and then diving the right way to stop Mohammad Al Shatti as Japan took their place in the Semi-finals.



VIETNAM 3-2 UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (A.E.T.)

Vietnam held off a spirited fightback from the UAE to advance to the Semi-finals with a 3-2 win after extra-time.

A valiant UAE fought back to level twice, but the tie was finally settled by Pham Minh Phuc in the 101st minute.

After both sides squandered several guilt-edged opportunities, Vietnam opened the scoring in the 39th minute after Nguyen Le Phat tapped home Nguyen Dinh Bac's cross.

It turned out to be a short-lived lead as UAE drew level in the 42nd minute when Junior Ndiaye nodded in from close range after Mansoor Al Memari's initial header had bounced off the top of the bar.

Vietnam restored their lead in the 62nd minute, with Dinh Bac heading Minh Phuc's cross beyond the reach of UAE custodian Khaled Tawhid.

UAE only needed six minutes to equalise again, scoring with a stunning header of their own through Mansoor Al Menhali.

Vietnam upped their tempo but spurned chances to win the tie in the dying minutes of regulation time with Vo Anh Quan's downward header saved by Tawhid before Nguyen Thanh Nhan steered wide from close range as the match went into extra-time.

Vietnam finally put the tie to bed in the 101st minute when Thanh Nhan's waltz into the box was stopped, only for the ball to roll to Minh Phuc, who composed himself before blasting past Tawhid to send his side into the Semi-finals.



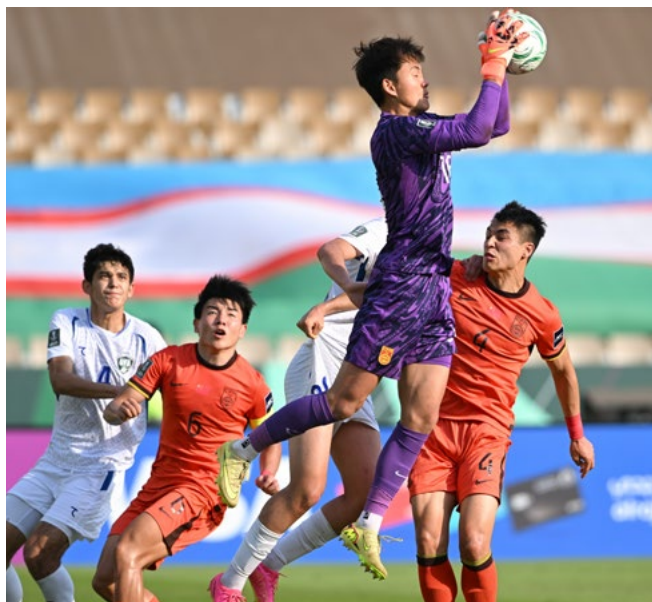
QUARTER-FINALS QUARTER-FINALS QUARTER-FINALS

**UZBEKISTAN 0-0 CHINA PR
(A.E.T., CHINA PR WON 4-2 ON PENALTIES)**

Goalkeeper Li Hao starred for China PR as they defeated Uzbekistan 4-2 on penalties to advance to the Semi-finals, with their last eight tie ending in a goalless draw after extra-time.

Li Hao made eight saves during the match, with Uzbekistan having dominated the tie but remaining unable to find a way through despite 28 shots, eight of which were on target.

China PR, who had no shots on goal, proved sharper in the penalty shoot-out, converting four of their five attempts, with Li then denying Dilshod Abdullaev's spot-kick to take his team into the Semi-finals for the first time.



AUSTRALIA 1-2 KOREA REPUBLIC

Korea Republic edged Australia 2-1 to book their Semi-final spot, with the winning goal scored in the 89th minute of the pulsating last-eight tie.

Both sides went in search of an early goal, with Korea Republic gradually dominating possession.

The 2020 champions' perseverance paid dividends in the 20th minute, with Baek Ga-on finishing Lee Hyun-yong's cross with a stunning volley.

Australia looked to respond and thought they had earned a penalty in the 38th minute when Kang Min-jun was flagged for a handball but the decision was overturned following a VAR review.

Australia were a different side after the break and their aggressive approach paid off in the 51st minute with Jed Drew setting up Luka Jovanovic, who rounded goalkeeper Hong Seong-min and buried the ball in the net.

Aydan Hammond could have completed the comeback for Australia when he was put clear on goal in the 86th minute, only to drill his effort straight at Hong.

It was to prove costly as Shin Min-ha rose highest three minutes later to power home Kang Seong-jin's corner to seal the win for Korea Republic.



SEMI-FINALS SEMI-FINALS SEMI-FINALS SEMI-FINALS



SEMI-FINALS

JAPAN 1-0 KOREA REPUBLIC

Japan held off a strong fightback from Korea Republic to advance to the Final with a 1-0 win.

In a match of two halves, Japan dominated the first 45 minutes with Korea Republic dictating terms after the break.

Japan's Yutaka Michiwaki had the first big chance in the 11th minute after he was sent through by a great pass from defence by Shuto Nagano, but the forward lifted his effort wide of Korea Republic custodian Hong Seong-min's goalmouth.

Michiwaki was again involved in the next Japan chance 13 minutes later, this time running onto Kosei Ogura's through pass, but his first touch let him down as Hong safely gathered the ball.

Korea Republic had their first sight at goal two minutes later when Kim Yong-hak got to the end of Kang Seong-jin's free-kick but saw his header clawed away by Rui Araki.



Hong then tipped the ball over following Kaito Koizumi's swerving cross, but it was a momentary reprieve for Korea Republic.

The ensuing corner saw Japan break the deadlock in the 36th minute, with Koizumi tapping home the rebound after Hong could only parry Nagano's header.

It was a different Korea Republic who appeared for the second half, with Kang dragging a shot wide from inside the box and Jang Seok-hwan's effort from distance smacking the bar, requiring Rion Ichihara to make a last-ditch block to thwart Kim Tae-won.

Goalkeeper Araki then came to Japan's rescue in the 63rd minute, reacting to parry Kang's close-range volley after his side failed to clear a corner delivery.

Japan, however, regained their composure, and, despite Korea Republic's continued dominance, they stayed defensively firm to move within one match of defending their title.

VIETNAM 0-3 CHINA PR

China PR went into overdrive in the second half to beat Vietnam 3-0 and book their place in the Final.

It was a well-deserved victory as China PR dominated the Semi-final, with strikes from Peng Xiao, Xiang Yuwang and Wang Yudong taking them into the Final for the first time.

Vietnam, who had won all four of their preceding matches, went into the Semi-final as the favourites but it was China PR who started on the front foot, with Kuai Jiwen's shot from inside the box blocked by Nguyen Hieu Minh in the fourth minute, while Chen Zeshi couldn't get his effort from long range on target.

Another attack saw Vietnam goalkeeper Tran Trung Kien having to go low to deny Xiang's effort from close range in the 15th minute.

Having absorbed the early pressure, Vietnam created a great chance in the 24th minute as Khuat Van Khang forced a brilliant save from Li Hao with his free kick, with the China PR goalkeeper then having to be at his best to keep out Nguyen Cong Phuong's swivelling shot moments later.

Bao Shengxin wasted a golden opportunity to give China PR the lead in the closing seconds of the first half when he misjudged Yang Xi's cross into the box, with Vietnam almost conceding immediately after the break when Xiang's aggression inside the box almost led to an own goal, with Tran forced to tip Pham Ly Duc's header over the bar.

The ensuing corner, however, saw China PR taking the lead as Peng recovered from being jostled to the ground to nod the ball home past a rooted Vietnam defence.



Boosted by the goal, China PR went in search of a second, with Kuai pulling his effort wide of the left post three minutes later.

The second, however, did arrive in the 52nd minute with Xiang showing composure at the top of the box to control Kuai's pass before wrong-footing three defenders and tucking the ball into the bottom right corner.

China PR thought they had scored their third in the 73rd minute through Peng's deflected effort, only for the goal to be overturned by a VAR review for offside, but there was no respite for Vietnam as Pham received a straight red in the aftermath of the disallowed goal.

To their credit, Vietnam kept pushing but it was China PR who scored again in the eighth minute of added time through Wang to advance to the Final in style.

THIRD-PLACE PLAYOFF THIRD-PLACE PLAYOFF



THIRD-PLACE
PLAYOFF

THIRD-PLACE PLAYOFF THIRD-PLACE PLAYOFF

VIETNAM 2-2 KOREA REPUBLIC (A.E.T., VIETNAM WON 7-6 ON PENALTIES)

Vietnam defeated Korea Republic 7-6 on penalties after the third-place playoff ended 2-2 following extra-time.

Vietnam took the lead in the 30th minute when Nguyen Duc Anh intercepted a counter-attack and fed Nguyen Quoc Viet, who played the ball to Nguyen Dinh Bac.

Quoc Viet continued his run and was perfectly placed to receive Dinh Bac's pass to squeeze the ball home from a tight angle past Korea Republic goalkeeper Hwang Jae-yun.

Korea Republic looked sharper after the break and drew level in the 69th minute after substitute Kim Tae-won picked up a loose ball inside the box and curled his shot past a despairing Cao Van Binh.

Korea Republic's joy was short-lived as Vietnam restored their advantage with Dinh Bac's spectacular free-kick two minutes later, as his strike beat the wall and flew into the bottom right corner of the net.

Dinh Bac, however, endured an early end to the game after he was sent off with four minutes of regulation time remaining for a reckless challenge on Lee Chan-ouk.

Korea Republic looked to capitalise on their numerical advantage and did just that with 15 seconds of added on time remaining when Vietnam failed to deal with a cross into their box, allowing Shin Min-ha time and space to control Lee Hyun-yong's cushioned header to slot the ball into the bottom right corner to force the game into an additional 30 minutes.

Korea Republic, despite dominating possession in extra-time, failed to find the winning goal as the tie went into a penalty shootout.

Both sides converted their first six spot-kicks, with goalkeeper Van Binh then denying Bae Hyun-seo, which allowed Nguyen Thanh Nhan to slam home the winner as Vietnam took third place.



FINAL FINAL FINAL FINAL FINAL FINAL FINAL



FINAL

CHINA PR 0-4 JAPAN

Japan were at their scintillating best as they cruised past China PR 4-0 in the Final at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium.

A brace from Kosei Ogura and strikes from Yuto Ozeki and Ryunosuke Sato meant Japan became the first team to defend the title and lift the coveted trophy for a third time.

Japan applied pressure from the first blow of the referee's whistle, with Brian Nwadike forcing China PR goalkeeper Li Hao into making a save with his strike from close range.

China PR slowly began to see more of the ball but wasted a chance in the seventh minute when Xu Bin sent a cross into the box for Xiang Yuwang, but the forward mistimed his header with the ball falling right into the gloves of Japan goalkeeper Rui Araki.



Sato was named the Most Valuable Player while teammate Araki picked up the Best Goalkeeper award. Vietnam's Nguyen Binh Dac won the Top Scorer award.





WINNING COACH

GO AND GO AGAIN

When the final whistle sounded in Jeddah, Go Oiwa became the first coach to win back-to-back AFC U23 Asian Cup™ titles – a feat which is, as the saying goes, easier said than done.

In club football, the equivalent would be something akin to winning the AFC Champions Elite™ in successive seasons with two different clubs. Because, by definition, he won the U23 competition with totally different squads.

Travelling to Saudi Arabia with a brief to build a team to compete at the Olympic Games in 2028, his squad therefore featured no players born in 2003 or 2004. Of the 11 players who started the Final in Jeddah, one was 21; seven were 20; two were 19; and his goalkeeper, Rui Araki, had celebrated his 18th birthday three months earlier.

“We had won the previous tournament,” he said, “but we came with a different group of players who have shown development and I told them that I wanted the progress they had made to be shown on the pitch.

“We came to the tournament with a very young squad and that itself was already a challenge. The other challenge was for them to perform to the best of their abilities. And they did very well.”

His squad, although young, was not altogether short of experience. Nine of them had been in Yuzo Funakoshi’s squad at the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Morocco four months earlier, and, after sailing through the Group Stage without conceding a goal, learned that football can be a cruel game when, in the Round of 16, they were beaten by France thanks to a penalty timed at 120+3.

That big-tournament experience stood them in good stead against more mature opponents in Saudi Arabia.



"My ideal football," he had stated after winning the 2024 U23 title in Qatar, "is about solid defending and being efficient in offensive play."

WINNING COACH

WINNING COACH



His team's performance in Saudi Arabia (scoring 16 goals and conceding one) rounded off with four goals against a China PR team who had not conceded any during their run to the Final demonstrated that his ideal could be attained.

"I was very happy to reach the Final," he admitted, "because we managed to pass some tough tests. And we knew that China PR were a well-organised defensive team who had shown great resilience. They were a unique team in comparison with the others, and I had a lot of respect for them. We analysed them very carefully.

"Taking an early lead and then scoring a second goal allowed us to control the Final effectively. And I was very satisfied that we stayed fully focused until the final whistle and never let our guard down. I was, of course, happy to win the championship and happy to see the progress made by our players. This shows our programmes are bearing fruit."

It also showed that, in a tournament of great diversity, Go Oiwa managed to achieve a balance between results and longer-term player development.



TECHNICAL TOPICS

A TOURNAMENT WITH MANY FACES

The last AFC U23 Asian Cup™ to be played in a non-Olympic year turned out to be a unique event. It stood like a monument to be seen from many angles. The Under-23 denomination, for example, was interpreted in different ways.

In the Japan and Uzbekistan squads, players born in 2003 and 2004 were conspicuous by their total absence. By contrast, 19 of the Vietnam list and all but one of the Lebanon squad were born in those two years. The result was a so-called age-limit tournament that, paradoxically, involved players from a seven-year time-span ranging from the Class of 2003 to Australia's reserve goalkeeper Lachlan Allen, who travelled to Riyadh three months short of his 17th birthday.



In other words, some Member Associations (MAs) focused on the Under while others concentrated on the 23. Some – as clearly illustrated by Japan and Uzbekistan – treated it as a development tournament with, essentially, Under-21 squads and with sights set on medals at the 2028 Olympic Games. Korea Republic were preparing their U23 team for the Asian Games later this year. Others placed the emphasis fairly and squarely on results in Saudi Arabia.

The end product was a 32-match event of huge diversity which gave the AFC Technical Team plenty of food for thought while, at the same time, adding a degree of difficulty to the task of pinpointing overall trends and tendencies.

RISK AND REWARD?

For the sake of argument, the game of football could be simplified into three skillsets: the art of attacking; the art of defending; and the art of making transitions from one to the other.

On balance, it was the art of defending that had the upper hand in Saudi Arabia. "Teams were reluctant to take risks," said Usmon Toshev after watching one of the tournament's five goal-less draws. "They played for the result, and it seemed that both were satisfied."

The Technical Team agreed at the end of the Group Stage: "This tournament has seen a clear division between teams such as Japan, Jordan, Korea Republic or Uzbekistan that have displayed a highly proactive approach, and those that have employed extremely cautious tactics. It will be interesting to see how these respective strategies manifest themselves in the Knockout ties during the latter stages."



As the tournament unfolded, one of the main talking points centred on the remarkable fact that the China PR team progressed as far as the Semi-final stage while conceding zero goals and scoring one – from an indirect free kick. It added up to three goal-less draws and no open-play goals in six and a half hours of football – and made Antonio Puche's team the obvious choice when it came to selecting an example of 'cautious tactics'.

Post-match data related to their goal-less Quarter-final against Uzbekistan (decided by a penalty shoot-out) reveal how opponents were overtly challenged to break down a deep defensive block based on a five-man defence holding a line measured at an average distance of 15.2m from their goal. They were protected by a trio and a tandem at distances that allowed TV cameras to comfortably show all 10 outfielders in one shot.

Seventy per cent of the match action took place in the China PR half of the pitch. They totalled 51 clearances (kicking the ball clear rather than passing towards a team-mate), made five ball recoveries in Uzbekistan territory – none in the attacking third – and played their way into the opposition's penalty area four times during a match when, as throughout the tournament, over 20% of their passing was in excess of 30m.

China PR registered no on-target goal attempts in two hours. Their opponents had 71% of the ball and were challenged to do something with it. The 'collective low press' (ball recoveries were at an average of 26.8m from the China PR goal-line) meant that numbers were in place to deal with overloads in wide areas and to crowd out potential incursions via solo runs.



The defensive block dealt with a tournament total of 137 crosses. When all else failed, the net was protected by the acrobatics of goalkeeper Li Hao.

Even though the Quarter-final was a monologue, the young Uzbekistan team joined Iraq, Australia and Thailand in failing to find a solution to the problems posed by Antonio Puche's team's defensive arts.

"It was a valuable experience on learning curves," Usmon Toshev remarked, "and it gave players and coaches plenty to think about."

China PR's successful run to the Final – the furthest they had ever progressed in this competition – raised a number of inter-related topics.



THE FINISHING TOUCH?

A low-scoring tournament inevitably raised questions about the efficiency of finishing.

"We could have finished the match in our favour had we taken advantage of some of the chances," lamented Jordan's head coach Omar Nadji.

"I'm really upset with this result because we had 20 or more opportunities to score," said Omid Ravankhah after a 1-0 defeat against Lebanon sent his Islamic Republic of Iran side home without scoring a goal in their three matches.

After the 1-1 draw with Iraq, Thailand head coach Thawatchai Damrong-Ongrtrakul said, "we had a lot of chances after the break but could not produce a goal until the end."

After the 1-0 Semi-final defeat by Japan, Korea Republic's Lee Min-sung rued, "rather than saying the opposition goalkeeper was good, I would say it's more down to our finishing. We did not do that well."

And, despite a creditable fourth place, he added, “we need to be sharper and more effective in the final third.”

After the 1-0 loss to Vietnam that eliminated the hosts, Saudi Arabia’s Luigi Di Biagio said, “we had many goal-scoring opportunities, but we were punished by practically the first shot on target by our opponents. This is part of the team’s growth, but I agree the stats are embarrassing - 26 shots to four.”

Lamenting a lack of efficiency in front of goal was a common denominator among the coaches in Saudi Arabia. Overall statistics reveal that (even including penalties) only one in three of the 772 goal attempts was on target. The average, however, concealed considerable variations.

IR Iran’s seven on-target efforts represented an efficiency rating of one-in-five (19% to be exact). Only 15% of the Kyrgyz Republic’s finishing was accurate. By contrast, 50% of Lebanon’s attempts were well-aimed; Vietnam posted 46%; Australia 45%; and the Final pitted Japan’s 40% against the 24.5% of China PR, who generated 13 on-target finishes in their six games, seven of them during the Semi-final against Vietnam.

As one of the technical directors at the tournament mused, “is it time to bring in specialised finishing coaches?”



A STRIKING TENDENCY?

The Technical Report on the previous tournament in 2024 mentioned ‘debate about how much of a priority is given to goalscoring in the job description of today’s striker’. The Technical Observers in Saudi Arabia wondered if it was a coincidence that, of the four players who topped the tournament’s scoring chart with four goals, none was an out-and-out striker?

Jordan’s Ali Azaizeh, Lebanon’s Leonardo Shahin and Vietnam’s Nguyen Dinh Bac were all wide attackers in the Akram Afif mould, while Japan’s Ryunosuke Sato was the most adventurous of the champions’ impressive midfield set-up.

During the Group Stage, one of the Technical Observers noted, “Syria’s central striker [Muhannad Fadel] worked tirelessly in both attack and defence, contributing significantly to his team’s efforts. His ability to steal the ball when leading the team’s pressing was particularly noteworthy and valuable but, unfortunately, his work did not lead to goals.”

“Focusing on defensive duties,” Nasser Larguet added, “meant that strikers were not always in the box to finish.”

Discussions after the Final also highlighted that, while Japan’s No9 Brian Nwadike did not appear on the scoresheet, he had performed a valuable role in working the three China PR centre-backs, opening channels between them and the wing-backs, and creating spaces around the edge of the box.

All of Japan's goals in the Final were scored by midfielders.

"There were moments when the lack of strikers was disappointing," the Technical Observers admitted, "though some MAs faced player-release problems and were unable to call up the best strikers in this age-group."

SEARCHING FOR CREATIVITY?

"We controlled the whole game and had so many opportunities," said Ravshan Khaydarov after his Uzbekistan team had laboured for two hours and generated 28 goal attempts (18 of them from outside the box) against China PR's well-organised defensive set-up during the goal-less Quarter-final.

"But we lacked creativity in the final third and we need to improve on this.

"He was not alone in referring to creative elements in a tournament where coaches were quick to praise qualities such as discipline, resilience or team spirit. The Technical Observers noted an across-the-board improvement in defensive organisation and discipline compared with the past. "These qualities certainly made the Group Stage more competitive, and some good teams were not able to get into the Knockout rounds," they remarked. "And better discipline opens the door for a future shift towards more creative approaches to attacking play."



They agreed that, when national teams have limited time together, it becomes inevitable for coaches to focus on collective rather than individual aspects. "But," Usmon Toshev added, "we must be careful about taking easy options based on defend-and-counter if counterattacking is predictable and based on direct supply to the front. I wonder whether we are paying enough attention to developing the creative aspects of team play."

THE VOICE FROM THE BACK

In discussions about low scoring, goalkeepers also had a word to say. The Technical Team in Saudi Arabia highlighted goalkeeping as one of the defining features of the tournament, with the overall standard reaching an exceptionally high level.

Errors were rare, and, as the Technical Observers put it, "goalkeepers consistently played a decisive role by denying clear scoring opportunities and keeping their teams competitive" – as illustrated by the quartet of keepers who picked up MVP Awards.

Vietnam epitomised the general improvement with second-choice keeper Cao Van Binh coming in for the Third-place Match – and winning the MVP Award – after Tran Trung Kien had performed crucial shot-stopping in the games against Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Team strategies, evidently, showcased different profiles. The Final, for instance, featured the China PR guardian Li Hao's exceptional shot-stopping abilities behind a low defensive line (and readiness to launch instant counters) while Japan's Rui Araki (winner of the AFC's Best Goalkeeper Award) was required to combine shot-stopping (such as a vital save from a volley that preserved the 1-0 advantage in the Semi-final against Korea Republic) with sorties to cover behind a high back line and contributing accurate short and long passing to the team's building from the back.

Mai Hoang, in charge of Coach Education at VFF, commented on how long-term structured efforts in this field are now bearing fruit. "The AFC Coaching Convention played a big role in pushing us and giving MAs the chance to develop from inside. Over a decade, we have focused strongly on developing goalkeeper coaches and, especially in the last five years, we have involved local clubs more actively in developing high-quality goalkeepers."



LOW FIVES AND HIGH FOURS

A general feature of the tournament was that all teams set out to play in a compact block – some in midfield with a higher back line; others retreating into solid, deep defence with lines close together.

Like China PR, Jordan, Thailand and Vietnam operated with three centre-backs at some stage, with the latter – despite a proactive attacking philosophy – dropping especially deep in a final Group fixture where their opponents, Saudi Arabia, needed the three points to stay in the competition. Kim Sang-sik's team defended close to their box, inviting the hosts forward, enticing them into stretching their formation and hitting them on the break – a ploy which China PR used against Vietnam in the Semi-final.

Among the teams who preferred a back four, Tony Vidmar's Australia held a very high line and were alone in playing twin strikers. Among centre-backs, even when defending as a trio against a solitary striker, positional discipline was the keynote. Although many were required to contribute playmaking abilities – in terms of constructive forward passing when the team was building from the back – upfield runs by centre-backs in open play were a rare occurrence.

Attacking duties occupied more space in job descriptions among full-backs and wing-backs. A salient feature was the use of inverted full-backs – notably two right-footed left-backs: Australia's Aidan Simmons, who produced exhilarating infield runs and goal attempts, or Japan's No2 Rei Umeki, who set up his team's vital equaliser in the Quarter-final against Jordan with a crossfield run through midfield and a pass to the goalscorer Shusuke Furuya.



CROSS-CHECKING

The Goalscoring section of this report reveals that, as usual, the wide areas were the most fertile source of goals, producing 21 in open play during a tournament where, if set plays are included, there were 1,067 deliveries from the wings.

The fact that only seven open-play goals were headers (three of them in the Vietnam vs UAE Quarter-final) was symptomatic of a shift away from reliance on the traditional high cross and a greater variety in deliveries from the wide areas. Korea Republic's wide attacking, for example, produced all four of their goals against Lebanon (two cut-backs, one cross and a corner resulting from wing play).



Likewise, two of Vietnam's three goals against the UAE – the second of them (a clever glancing header after a left-footed cross from the right) illustrating the increasing frequency of inswinging deliveries by inverted wide players cutting inside to use their 'better' foot. Lebanon provided another example of this trend with their opening goal against Uzbekistan – a right-footed delivery from the left.

PRESS CUTTINGS

The use of the high press was sporadic. Not least because the heat and humidity in the coastal city of Jeddah acted as a deterrent, especially during the early-afternoon matches.

Japan, Korea Republic, Uzbekistan and Australia were the teams who used it to the greatest effect. The latter produced their winning goal against Thailand after their pressing led to a high regain. Japan's pressing in numbers prompted a costly mistake at the back by Qatar and, in the Final, the crucial second goal when Kosei Ogura won the ball and fired past the China PR keeper from the edge of the box.



Saudi Arabia and Jordan occasionally used high collective pressing – and when the two teams met, a high regain by the hosts led to the penalty that brought them back to 2-2.

However, apart from the teams who focused on rapid retreat into a deep defensive block, the more common scenario for intense collective pressing was the midfield area – as graphically illustrated by Jordan, who were adept at springing forward in numbers after ball-winning in the middle of the pitch.

Prime examples were the brilliantly executed direct counterattack which put them ahead in the Quarter-final against Japan and the equaliser against Saudi Arabia that changed the team's mindset in the tournament.



EMOTIONAL MOMENTUM

That swift reaction to a midfield regain and the stunning long-range strike by Ali Azaizeh came after Jordan's opening game against Vietnam had, in the words of the Technical Observer, "fallen short of expectations".

Conceding an early goal in the second game against the hosts created "a similar sense of frustration". Ali Azaizeh's goal, the observer commented, "did more than bring his team level. It decisively swung the momentum of the match in their favour. They began to play with greater belief and intensity. While Saudi Arabia appeared to hold the edge technically and tactically, it was Jordan's emotional power that proved decisive".

Similar remarks emerged from Qatar's fixture against the UAE. "Qatar seized the initiative," the observer noted, "winning a penalty after a superb solo run one minute into the match. But when the UAE keeper saved the spot-kick, the momentum of the game shifted completely in the UAE's favour".

The technical team emphasised that "the emotional aspect can significantly influence the game."

DEFEND...AND COUNTER?

That Ali Azaizeh goal also underlined the value of direct counterattacking. Fast breaks provided 18% of the tournament's open-play goals – but a total of nine maybe fell short of expectations at an event where deep defending was so prevalent.

Only three goals came from classic back-to-front counterattacking. The first, on Matchday 1, was when Uzbekistan players flooded forward after a Lebanon corner to meet a low cross and put 2-0 on the scoreboard. Lebanon then took a 2-1 lead against Korea Republic with a long-range finish after a high-quality through pass. And Jordan's opener in the Quarter-final against Japan was a well-worked box-to-box counter culminating in a skilfully controlled finish.

Four collective counters included the fast break that produced a 4v2 scenario in the Iraq box and the goal timed at 90+7 that took Australia to the top of Group D. And the long-range goal by Kyrgyz Republic against Vietnam – a rapid response to a loose pass.



Vietnam's winner by Nguyen Dinh Bac against Saudi Arabia was the only counterattack to culminate in a solo run. Successful counters from advanced positions were Australia's winner by Mathias Macallister against Thailand and the important goal by Kosei Ogura which put Japan 2-0 up in the Final after the midfielder's high regain.

BLOCK-BREAKING

The final paragraphs complete the full circle by going back to the question of deep defensive blocks – and the strategies adopted by teams who set out to break them down.

Coaches can evidently 'shake the tree' by making substitutions – although the Technical Observers agreed that, in Saudi Arabia, changes were much more about sending on fresh legs than about making tactical adjustments. Substitutions did make an impact, however – for example, Go Oiwa's decision to inject Shusuke Furuya at half-time when Japan were struggling to break through the Jordan defence was rewarded when the right-winger was instrumental in producing an equaliser within five minutes.

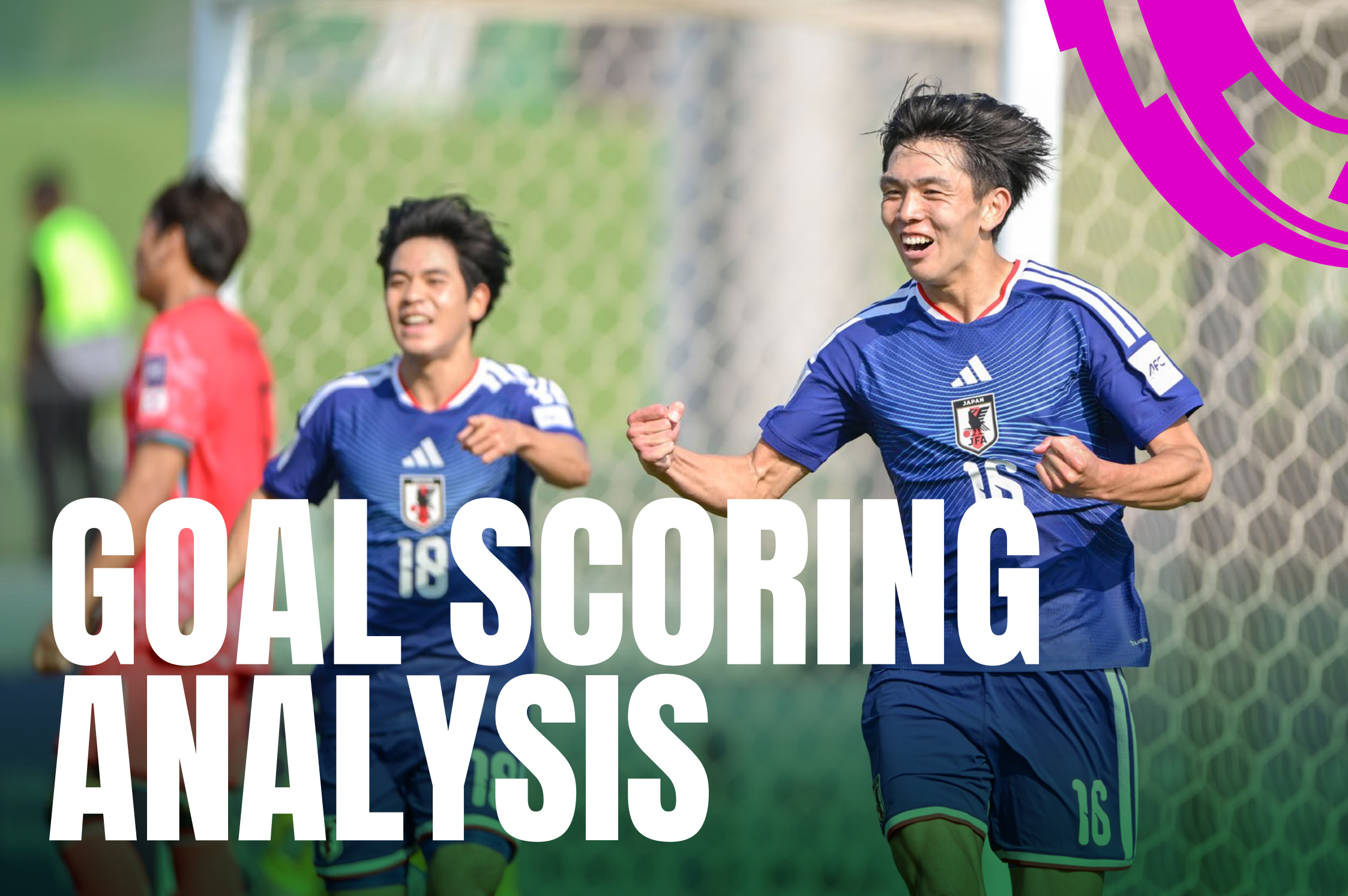


Significantly, during a tight schedule when squad rotation was a factor in coaches' thinking, Tournament MVP Ryunosuke Sato and Top Scorer Nguyen Dinh Bac both spent time on the bench – and made an impact when coming off it.

"Many teams circulated the ball around the outside of defensive blocks," the Technical Observers noted, "but ultimately failed to break through them and score. Saudi Arabia and Japan were notable exceptions in that they varied the angles of attack and deliberately attempted to penetrate into tight spaces within the central areas of the block, luring defenders out of position and using neat combinations – dummies, run-overs or back-heels included – to break through the back line."

AFC's Deputy Technical Director, Takeshi Ono, has the last word.

"This carries the risk of counterattacks by opponents. But, as the saying goes, 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. At a tournament where breaking down deep-laying defensive blocks was one of the main talking points, Japan's willingness to take calculated risks was one of the keys to their success."



GOAL SCORING ANALYSIS

GOAL SCORING ANALYSIS

Eight goals in the last two matches applied a coat of varnish that embellished a tournament that had threatened to undercut the all-time low of 69 goals in 2020. Otherwise, the norm had been a tally in excess of 80 goals – and the not-so-grand total of 73 in 2026 represented a 13% downturn on the 84 goals that had hit the net in the previous tournament in 2024.

The AFC's Technical Team in Saudi Arabia saw the goalscoring data as a two-sided coin. Calling 'tails', they felt that the modest total reflected a trend towards defensive vocations and risk-management philosophies. Calling 'heads', they interpreted the figures as a symptom of a highly competitive event disputed by teams that were, by and large, evenly matched.

There were nine drawn games compared with three in 2024, and five of them were goal-less. Only four matches were decided by a margin of more than two goals – and three of them were won by Japan (5-0 v Syria, 3-0 v UAE and 4-0 v China PR in the Final). The fourth was the 3-0 posted by China PR in the Semi-final against Vietnam that signified an oasis in a goalscoring desert where their remaining eight hours of football generated one goal.

Almost half of the tournament's total (35 to be precise) were scored in matches involving Japan or Vietnam. The other 20 fixtures produced only 38 goals. Two teams – Qatar and the Islamic Republic of Iran – went home without scoring a goal. The average across the 24 Group games was 2.13, leaving the two games that decided the podium places to haul the final balance up to 2.28 goals per match – well short of the 2.63 at the previous tournament.



Excluding the two own goals, the remaining 71 were shared among 47 different players, a quartet of whom finished level at the top of the scoring chart with four successes apiece.

Among the modest total of 12 matches in which both teams scored, four were comeback victories for the team that conceded the first goal. Four others fought back to draw.

The 73 goals were harvested from 772 attempts. In other words, the success rate was 1 : 10.58. If penalty kicks are removed from the equation, the ratio is adjusted to one goal per 12.24 attempts. Both figures represent a downward trend in comparison with the previous edition – which is why the issue of efficient finishing is raised in the Technical Topics section of this report.

SET PLAYS

"Unfortunately," rued Australia's head coach Tony Vidmar after the Quarter-final defeat by Korea Republic, "one area that let us down was defending set-pieces. We conceded from them in every game and that's something we need to reflect on moving forward."

Dead-ball successes played a major role in the Knockout Rounds of the tournament, yet the overall return in terms of goals was relatively modest and represented another branch of the game which registered a downturn in comparison with the 2024 event.



GOAL SCORING ANALYSIS

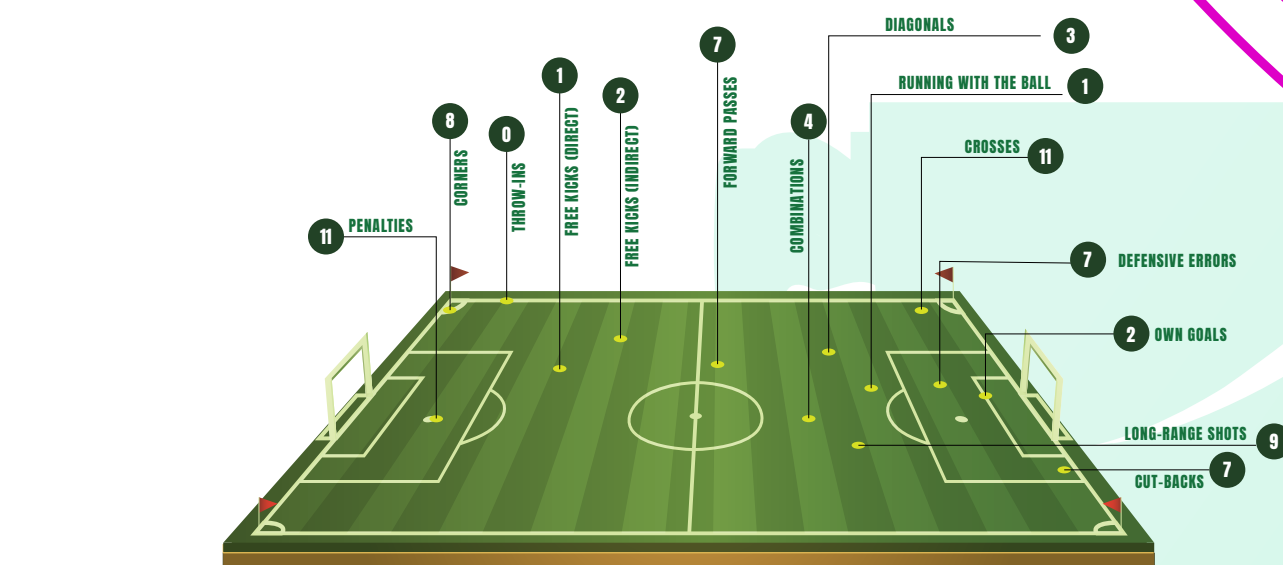
GOAL SCORING ANALYSIS

On that occasion, set plays accounted for 36% of the tournament's goals. In Saudi Arabia, the figure dropped to 30%, and each of the five dead-ball categories posted a lower total. What's more, penalty kicks provided exactly one half of the set-play total – and the quota could have risen to 54% had the spot kicks taken by Qatar and Saudi Arabia hit the back of the net.

To see a goal from a direct free kick, fans had to wait until the 71st minute of Match 31, when Vietnam's Nguyen Dinh Bac drove a right-footed strike through the Korea Republic wall to put his team 2-1 ahead – and earn the tournament's Top Scorer award on the basis of more assists than the other three players who had struck four goals.

Successes from indirect free kicks were also rare sightings – and there were none beyond Matchday 2 of the Group Stage. Lebanon fought back to a 2-3 deficit against Uzbekistan with a comprehensive back-post header. And China PR defeated Australia 1-0 when a headed clearance fell nicely for centre-back Peng Xiao to drive home. Both were derived from inswinging deliveries – the former left-footed from the right; the latter right-footed from the left.

Although the renaissance of the long throw-in was confirmed by a number of teams in Saudi Arabia, defences were alert to the danger, and none resulted in goals. This meant that eight of the 11 non-penalty successes stemmed from corners, including crucial goals at the sharp end of the competition: Korea Republic's late winner in the Quarter-final against Australia; the only goal of the Semi-final when a corner from the right was headed goalwards and parried by the Korea Republic goalkeeper – only for Japan's Kaito Koizumi to turn in the loose ball; and China PR's vital first goal in the Semi-final against Vietnam when centre-back Peng Xiao was allowed to head in at the near post.



GOALS FROM SET PLAY

ACTION	GUIDELINES	GOALS
Corners	Direct from / following a corner	8
Free kicks (direct)	Direct from a free kick	1
Free kicks (indirect)	Following a free kick	2
Penalties	Spot kick (or follow-up from a penalty)	11
Throw-ins	Following a throw-in	0

GOALS FROM OPEN PLAY

ACTION	GUIDELINES	GOALS
Combinations	Wall pass / combination move	4
Crosses	Cross from the wing	11
Cut-backs	Pass back from the bye-line	7
Diagonals	Diagonal pass into the penalty box	3
Running with the ball	Dribble and close-range shot / dribble and pass	1
Long-range shots	Direct shot / shot and rebound	9
Forward passes	Through pass or pass over the defence	7
Defensive errors	Bad back-pass / mistake by the goalkeeper	7

The corner kick added another line to the list of downward trends. The 2026 tournament featured a 17% drop in the sheer number of corners compared to 2024 – arguably another pointer towards more defensive vocations. There was only a minimal variation in the conversion rate: eight goals from 271 corners represented one goal per 33.88 as opposed to 32.6 in 2024. But appearances can be deceptive. Korea Republic claimed three successes; Japan two; leaving Vietnam, Thailand and China PR one apiece. Was it pure coincidence that the teams from the West failed to convert any of their 127 corners into a goal?

The bottom line in this section is that, excluding penalties, set plays created 11 goals in 52 hours of football. Are teams improving their defending against dead-ball situations? If so, is this because more training-ground time is devoted to defensive aspects than to the creative element and the development of specialists?

OPEN PLAY

Although open play accounted for a seemingly normal 70% of the tournament's goals, 51 in 32 matches (1.6 per fixture) represented a modest return, especially when nine could be chalked up as own goals or clear defensive errors. Goal attempts were 7% down on the 2024 total, and the overall balance (for set plays and open play, but excluding penalties) was that it required just over 12 attempts to secure a goal. The efficiency of finishing is one of the issues addressed in the Technical Topics section of this review.

The wide areas, as usual, provided the most productive route to goal. Crosses, cut-backs and diagonals into the box jointly accounted for 41% of the open-play goals. There was a slight variation in comparison with the previous tournament in that the number of goals from traditional crosses fell while successes from cut-backs and diagonals increased. The figures could be inflated still further with, for example, Japan's penalty in the Final stemming from a cut-back from the right which was handled by a defender.

Saudi Arabia were the most prolific suppliers of crosses, averaging 26.67 per match. Korea Republic took second place with 22.5 while champions Japan's tally was 19.5 per match. Interestingly, China PR delivered fewer crosses per game than any other team, averaging 10.83. Looking at the top four, who played six games apiece, Korea Republic crossed the ball 136 times; Japan 117; Vietnam 86 and the silver-medallists 65.

Goals derived from combination play were, once again, at a premium, and provided only 8% of open-play goals. And Japan, once again, were the leading exponents, looking for neat interchanges through central areas in addition to their penetrating wing play.

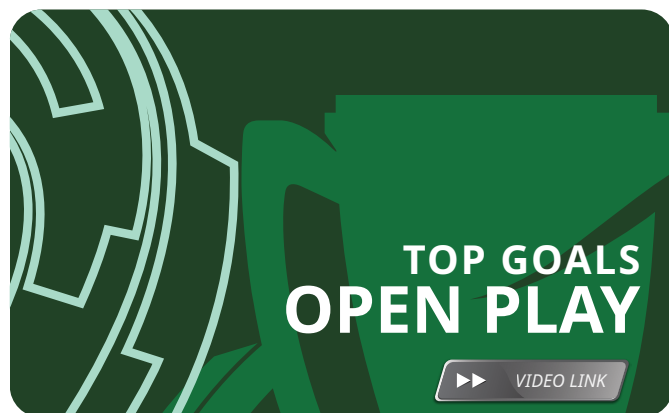
Successes stemming from through passes, however, showed a sharp decline in comparison with 2024. The most notable exception was the lofted forward pass over Australia's high defensive line by defender Lee Hyun-yong which allowed the exquisite first-touch lofted volley over the keeper to put Korea Republic 1-0 ahead – and earn acclaim as the tournament's Best Goal. Saudi Arabia beat the Kyrgyz Republic thanks to a penetrating forward pass but were then defeated by Vietnam via a quick through pass following a high-midfield regain.

The most significant increase in comparison with the previous tournament corresponded to long-range shooting, which supplied almost one in five (18% to be exact) of open-play goals – and some of the most spectacular. The prime example was the stunning left-footed strike by Ali Azaizeh which not allowed his team to equalise against the hosts but also, after a stuttering start, to change the emotional momentum of Jordan's campaign. The success rate at the tournament underlined the potential value of shooting from distance when aiming to lure opponents out of deep defensive blocks or creating chaos via deflections or rebounds.

The alternative interpretation was that teams felt obliged to resort to shooting from long range when they found themselves unable to penetrate compact blocks with a back line of – at least – five players. Of the 92 goal attempts made by China PR's six opponents, 50 were from outside the penalty area. Long-range shots were second to crosses as the most productive source of open-play goals.



TOP GOALS TOP GOALS TOP GOALS TOP GOALS



Ranking		GF	GA	Scorer	No
1	M28	KOR	AUS	BAEK GA-ON	15
2	M10	JOR	KSA	ALI AZAIZEH	23
3	M31	VIE	KOR	NGUYEN QUOC VIET	9
4	M7	AUS	THA	MATHIAS MACALLISTER	23
5	M17	VIE	KSA	NGUYEN DINH BAC	7
6	M28	AUS	KOR	LUKA JOVANOVIC	16
7	M3	JPN	SYR	SENA ISHIBASHI	13
8	M25	JOR	JPN	ALI AZAIZEH	23
9	M5	UZB	LBN	RAVSHAN KHAYRULLAEV	6
10	M32	JPN	CHN	KOSEI OGURA	6



Ranking		GF	GA	Scorer	No
1	M31	VIE	KOR	NGUYEN DINH BAC	7
2	M5	LBN	UZB	LEONARDO SHAHIN	19
3	M2	VIE	JOR	NGUYEN HIEU MINH	4
4	M30	CHN	VIE	PENG XIAO	15
5	M12	KOR	LBN	LEE HYUN-YONG	5



TALKING POINTS

PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS?

The number of interwoven issues to arise from the tournament in Saudi Arabia, along with the diversity of attitudes and philosophies among the participating teams, provided a cue for reflection on development pathways as opposed to a search for short-term success in terms of results at a final tournament.

"We need to think about visions and strategies for developing the level of our Asian players so that we can compete seriously at the major international events like the FIFA World Cup or the Olympic Games," Nasser Larguet commented.

"The development scenario has changed. We have the Under-17 World Cups every year; an Under-20 World Cup every two years; and now the pre-Olympic U23 tournament every four years. So, the challenge is to design strategies based on the number of international matches that we feel are needed to improve skills and to compete with other continents."



Discussion among the members of the Technical Team was not so much about the competitions themselves as about filling the gaps between them – especially the crucial step between U20 football and the senior national team game. And there was no universal answer.

The general tendency is for clubs not to run U21 or U23 teams. Some MAs report that promising candidates for the senior national team spend a great deal of time training and a great deal of time sitting on benches. Talented footballers are sometimes desperately short of playing time – especially in leagues more densely populated by non-native players. Is it time for individual MAs to do some serious thinking about how best to bridge the gap between the Under-20s and the senior team?

ON THE SAME PAGE?

An interlocking question emerged when the spotlight swung from the pitch to the technical area. In Saudi Arabia, seven of the U23 teams were led by non-native head coaches. But the talking point, it has to be said immediately, had nothing to do with the colour of passports. It was about working relationships among the technicians at the top end of the development pathway.

Compiling a list of the coaches of each country's U23 and senior national teams revealed that only six pairs were of the same nationality. These included Jordan, whose U23 and senior coaches were both Moroccan, while Vietnam's Kim Sang-sik from the Korea Republic was the only technician to coach the national teams at both levels.



Australia's U23 coach Tony Vidmar doubles-up as assistant to the senior team's Tony Popovic. The only other MAs to operate both teams with coaches of the same nationality were Japan, Korea Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Coaching abilities, of course, were not questioned. The only proviso raised during discussions among the Technical Team was that, at development levels – especially the lower ones – where empathy and emotional issues can have greater importance, the need to use an interpreter is perhaps not ideal.

But the debating point is whether it is positive or negative for the national teams on the top two rungs of the ladder to work with coaches from different countries, continents or cultures? How important is it to make sure that the coaching staffs are reading from the same page?



EXTRA OR EXCESSIVE?

"When three of the four Quarter-finals and the Third-Place match went to extra-time," Fahad Al Zarraa remarked, "it showed us clearly that there was nothing wrong with the teams' physical conditioning. But I wonder if it is appropriate to play the extra half-hour during a tight tournament schedule where some teams have less rest-and-recovery time than their opponents and some had to change venues between the Group Stage and the Quarter-finals?"

Conflicting evidence was provided by the Semi-final where Korea Republic, who had not played extra-time during their Quarter-final, were beaten by Japan, who had. Though it could be argued that there might have been a fatigue element when Go Oiwa's team struggled to defend their one-goal advantage against the late onslaught by the Korea Republic. Those who regard the U23s as an 'adult' tournament would argue that the players should be prepared to play the additional half-hour – and, as the competition will, in the future, be pegged to Olympic years, they would point out that extra-time is required during the Knockout Rounds at the Games.



Voices on the other side of the debating table might mention that, in all competitions, the number of goals scored during extra-time is minimal – and their opinion could be endorsed by the fact that the only goal scored during two hours of extra-time was Vietnam's winner against the UAE in the Quarter-finals.

Going directly to penalty shoot-outs, they might add, offers young players valuable exposure to the high-stress realities of the scenario – and encourages teams to concentrate their efforts on winning games within the 90 minutes rather than rely on Lady Luck during a shoot-out.

"Personally," said Al Zarraa, "I would prefer to do away with extra-time and let the players save their energy for some good football." Do you agree?

FIGHTING YOUR CORNER?

The diversity of the tournament was reflected by strategies at corners. There were interesting cameos – such as China PR's totally zonal marking system in front of their goal during the Quarter-final against Uzbekistan whose attackers lurked beyond the far post and out of the defenders' line of vision. But those images of two groups of players with distance between them were far from the norm during a tournament when referees often had to contend with hands-on physical duels which, if searching for comparisons with other sports, would probably fall somewhere between rugby and sumo wrestling.

Discussion about defensive mechanisms at set plays was fuelled by the vital opening goal in the Semi-final when China PR delivered a right-footed corner on their left into a near-post area where their four players found themselves in a tight cluster with eight Vietnam outfielders plus, obviously, the goalkeeper – all packed into a space within about 3m of the goal-line.



As was often the case during the tournament, man-marking was being taken to its extreme by defenders who were bear-hugging opponents and paying no attention to the ball. In this case, one of the bear-hugs was dedicated to China centre-back Peng Xiao with a view to preventing him from jumping to meet the cross. The defender achieved this successfully. However, despite the hug, and even with both feet firmly anchored to the ground, Peng Xiao's 1.89m frame was sufficient to allow him to head the ball into the net.

The talking point is, when defending set plays, to what extent is it productive to encourage or instruct players to focus exclusively on blocking an opponent while literally and figuratively taking their eyes off the ball.



AWARDS

AWARDS AWARDS AWARDS AWARDS AWARDS AWARDS



BEST GOALKEEPER : RUI ARAKI (JPN)

TOP GOAL SCORER : NGUYEN DINH BAC (VIE)

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER : RYUNOSUKE SATO (JPN)

AFC FAIR PLAY AWARD : KOREA REPUBLIC





PLAYERS TO WATCH

PLAYERS TO WATCH PLAYERS TO WATCH PLAYERS TO WATCH

FORWARDS



LEONARDO SHAHIN
LBN
NO.19



NGUYEN DINH BAC
VIE
NO.7



ALI AZAIZEH
JOR
NO.23



YAYA DUKULY
AUS
NO.11



SAIDUMARKHON SAIDNURULLAEV
UZB
NO.9



ASILBEK JUMAYEV
UZB
NO.11

PLAYERS TO WATCH PLAYERS TO WATCH PLAYERS TO WATCH

MIDFIELDERS



KHUAT VAN KHANG
VIE
NO.11



RYUNOSUKE SATO
JPN
NO.10



MUSAB AL-JUWAYR
KSA
NO.10



YUTO OZEKI
JPN
NO.8



KANG SEONG-JIN
KOR
NO.7



KIM DONG-JIN
KOR
NO.8



KOSEI OGURA
JPN
NO.6



XU BIN
CHN
NO.6



JORDI VALADON
AUS
NO.8

DEFENDERS



AIDAN SIMMONS
AUS
NO.2



RION ICHIHARA
JPN
NO.5



PENG XIAO
CHN
NO.15



REI UMEKI
JPN
NO.2



LEE HYUN-YONG
KOR
NO.5



NGUYEN HIEU MINH
VIE
NO.4

PLAYERS TO WATCH PLAYERS TO WATCH PLAYERS TO WATCH

GOALKEEPERS



TRAN TRUNG KIEN
VIE
NO.1



LI HAO
CHN
NO.16



RUI ARAKI
JPN
NO.23

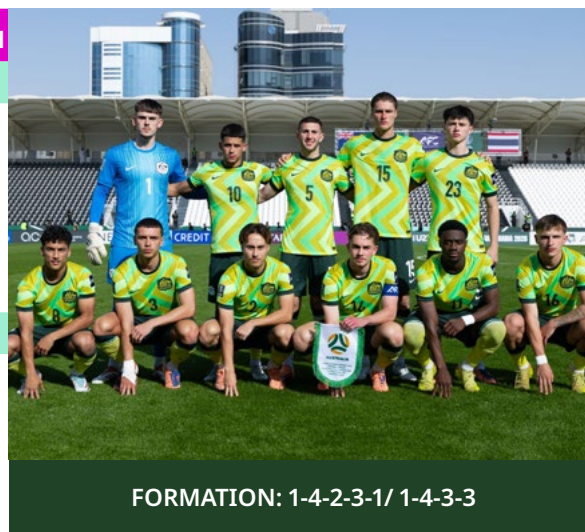


TEAM PROFILES

TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES



SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	STEVEN HALL	16-01-2005
12	LACHLAN ALLEN	04-04-2009
18	DYLAN PERAIC-CULLEN	25-07-2006
2	AIDAN SIMMONS	26-05-2003
3	JOSHUA RAWLINS	23-04-2004
DEFENDER		
4	KANE VIDMAR	04-06-2004
5	GIUSEPPE BOVALINA	11-11-2004
6	KAELAN MAJEKODUNMI	21-02-2004
15	NATHAN PAULL	21-08-2003
21	JAMES OVERY	09-11-2007
22	MARCUS HUMBERT	14-07-2004
8	JORDI VALADON	04-03-2003
MIDFIELDER		
10	AYDAN HAMMOND	23-12-2003
14	ETHAN ALAGICH	18-12-2003
17	JAYLAN PEARMAN	18-04-2006
20	LOUIS AGOSTI	02-03-2005
FORWARD		
7	JED DREW	29-08-2003
9	NATHANAEL BLAIR	15-03-2004
11	YAYA DUKULY	17-01-2003
13	ARIATH PIOL	11-10-2004
16	LUKA JOVANOVIĆ	20-05-2005
19	MARCUS YOUNIS	03-07-2005
23	MATHIAS MACALLISTER	12-04-2007



FORMATION: 1-4-2-3-1/ 1-4-3-3

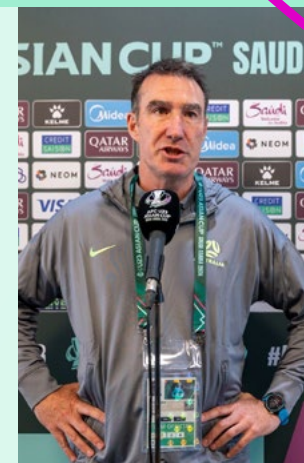


COACH

Antony Vidmar (Australia)

Vidmar served as Assistant Coach for both Australia's senior and U23 men's teams before becoming Head Coach of the U23 side four years ago. The team departed after the Group Stage of the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ in 2024, following their best-ever performances of third place in 2020 and fourth in 2022.

Vidmar made 91 appearances for the Socceroos, and was part of four FIFA World Cup qualifying campaigns and the 1992 Summer Olympics squad. With Rangers, he won the Scottish Premier League twice, the Scottish League Cup twice and the Scottish Cup three times.



KEY FEATURES

- 1-4-2-3-1 or 1-4-3-3 formation; possession-based approach, ball circulation through the midfield and effective exploitation of wide channels
- Displayed high technical proficiency in the pivot and attacking midfield roles, with a clear commitment to structured build-up play from the defensive third
- Patient build-up play from the back through the midfield
- Good options for the player in possession, effective combination play between target and deep-lying striker
- Good wing plays using width
- Disciplined, well-organised defence; tried to keep compact defence and close the gaps; good in 1-on-1 situations
- Mid-field pressing and sometimes high pressing
- Rapid transition from attack to defence
- Immediate pressure after losing possession, sometimes retreating to own half
- Quick forward movement to exploit the space behind the defensive line when regaining possession



SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	LUAN YI	16-08-2005
12	HUO SHENPING	26-11-2003
16	LI HAO	06-03-2004
DEFENDER		
2	HU HETAO	05-10-2003
3	HE YIRAN	17-02-2005
4	WUMITIJIAN YUSUPU	28-02-2004
5	LIU HAOFAN	23-10-2003
15	PENG XIAO	28-07-2005
19	ZHANG AIHUI	27-05-2005
21	BAO SHENGXIN	01-08-2003
23	YANG ALEX	13-06-2005
MIDFIELDER		
6	XU BIN	02-05-2004
13	WANG BOHAO	18-07-2005
14	YANG HAOYU	25-05-2006
17	BAO SHIMENG	02-07-2003
18	CHEN ZESHI	21-02-2005
20	LI ZHENQUAN	16-12-2003
FORWARD		
7	XIANG YUWANG	18-12-2003
8	MUTALIFU YIMINGKARI	18-03-2004
9	BAIHELAMU ABUDUWAILI	08-03-2003
10	WANG YUDONG	23-11-2006
11	KUAI JIWEN	28-02-2006
22	MAO WEIJIE	28-05-2005



COACH

Antonio Puche (Spain)

Puche oversaw a remarkable journey that saw China PR reach the Final without conceding a single goal, following five campaigns that did not advance beyond the Group stage.

In 2014, he led Kuwaiti Premier League side Qadsia SC to an historic AFC Cup™ triumph in his first year with the club as well as the Kuwait Super Cup. Puche joined the China PR U20 squad in 2022, and, in 2023, he guided them into the AFC U20 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2023™ Quarter-finals.

A former player who made his first-team debut at 16, Puche transitioned into professional coaching with an assistant coaching role in the 2008/09 season with the club Hercules CF.



KEY FEATURES

- A rather defensive approach, with a well-disciplined, very deep, 5-3-2 defensive block that eliminated the space between the goalkeeper and the defensive line
- Directed play strategy in attack with long-balls
- Leveraged the speed and strength of the upfront attackers (No.10 Wang Yudong and No.9 Baihelamu Abuduwaili) to target counter-attacks without committing too many players
- Directed play strategy with long-balls
- Disciplined, well-organised defence while staying compact
- Constantly looked for opportunities to press and apply high-intensity pressing
- Both transitions (D-to-A and A-to-D) are quick, creating numerous chances from counter-pressing immediately after losing possession

TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES



SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	MASATAKA KOBAYASHI	20-09-2005
12	TOMOYASU HAMASAKI	10-04-2005
23	RUI ARAKI	14-10-2007
DEFENDER		
2	REI UMEKI	25-08-2005
3	KAITO TSUCHIYA	12-05-2006
4	SHUTO NAGANO	15-04-2006
5	RION ICHIHARA	07-07-2005
15	SOICHIRO MORI	29-06-2007
16	KAITO KOIZUMI	19-04-2005
21	KANTA SEKITOMI	23-10-2005
22	TARIQKANI HAYATO OKABE	05-07-2006
MIDFIELDER		
6	KOSEI OGURA	09-04-2005
7	NELSON ISHIWATARI	10-05-2005
8	YUTO OZEKI	06-02-2005
10	RYUNOSUKE SATO	16-10-2006
14	TOKUMO KAWAI	03-03-2007
17	YUDAI SHIMAMOTO	26-10-2006
FORWARD		
9	UCHE BRIAN SEO NWADIKE	07-07-2005
11	YUMEKI YOKOYAMA	23-09-2005
13	SENA ISHIBASHI	22-04-2006
18	HARUTA KUME	07-04-2005
19	YUTAKA MICHIIWAKI	05-04-2006
20	SHUSUKE FURUYA	26-01-2005



COACH

Go Oiwa (Japan)

Oiwa led Japan for the third consecutive edition of the AFC U23 Asian Cup™, becoming the first coach to win the title twice after defeating China PR in the Final. Japan also became the first back-to-back champions of the competition.

With his side securing 3rd position in the 2022 edition, Oiwa led them to the trophy in 2024 with a victory over Uzbekistan. He had previously led Kashima Antlers to the AFC Champions League™ title in 2018.

As a player, he won the J1 League four times with Kashima Antlers and the Emperor's Cup twice with Nagoya Grampus, before transitioning to take on an assistant coach role with the former in 2011.



KEY FEATURES

- Playing style based on 1-4-3-3 (and sometimes 1-4-2-3-1); combined creativity with discipline, playing in a collective style both in attack and defence
- Suddenly shifted tempo from a possession-based style
- Fluidly shifted positions while breaking into the opponent's block to seek opportunities to break through
- Assured combination plays and effective use of full-backs
- Disciplined, well-organised defence while staying compact
- Constantly looked for opportunities to press and apply high-intensity pressing
- Both transitions (D-to-A and A-to-D) are quick, creating numerous chances from counter-pressing immediately after losing possession

TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES



SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	MURAD ARAFAT ALFALUJE	27-12-2003
12	SALAMEH ALI SALMAN	07-05-2005
22	ABDEL RAHMAN SULEIMAN	12-04-2003
DEFENDER		
2	JA'FAR MOHAMMAD SAMARAH	08-06-2004
3	ALI AHMAD HAJABI	02-05-2004
4	ARAFAT FAHID HAJ IBRAHIM	17-04-2003
5	AHMAD AYMAN ABDALLAH	24-11-2004
13	MOHAMMAD AHMED TAHA	13-07-2005
14	MOHAMMAD AHMAD ALSHATTI	30-11-2006
18	AYHAM ZEYAD ALSAMAMREH	09-05-2006
21	ABDALLAH ABDUL-HAFEZ AL-MNAYYES	17-06-2005
MIDFIELDER		
6	YOUSEF HUSSEIN QASHI	15-04-2005
8	HASHEM ZAID ALMBAIDIN	24-12-2003
15	SALEH MOHAMMAD FRAJ	03-11-2006
16	SEIF KHALIL SULEIMAN	22-09-2004
FORWARD		
7	AMIN FARID AL SHANAINEH	07-04-2003
9	BAKER KAMAL KALBOUNEH	14-08-2003
10	ODEH BURHAN FAKHOURY	22-11-2005
11	MAHMOUD MOHAMMAD THEEB	08-09-2005
17	KHALDOON MOHAMMAD SABRA	05-07-2004
19	MO'MEN ALI ALSAKET	08-07-2005
20	ANAS ASHRAF ALKHOB	01-02-2006
23	ALI AHMAD AZAIZEH	13-04-2004



FORMATION: 1-5-2-3 and 1-3-4-3



COACH Omar Najhi (Morocco)

Appointed manager of Jordan's U23 side in 2025, former midfielder Najhi is also the Assistant Coach to the senior side. Jordan's best result at the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ came in 2013 when they finished third, but the side did not make it through the Group Stage in 2024.

Najhi transitioned into professional coaching in 2016, starting as Assistant Manager at Al-Khor SC, and also working with clubs such as Al-Markhiya SC, Wydad AC, Mouloudia and Ittihad Tanger. He led Wydad AC to both the CAF Champions League and Moroccan Championship titles in 2021/22.

In his playing career, Najhi won the national championship, the Botola Pro, in 2009 and 2011 with Raja Club Athletic, and was the leading goalscorer with 11 goals.



KEY FEATURES

- Playing style based on 1-5-2-3 and 1-3-4-3 formations
- Alternate between short passes and direct play
- Sought to play from behind
- Direct play style: "play forward" was always the priority
- Sought out the wings and 1-on-1 situations – able to strike from all positions
- Well-organised and disciplined mid-field pressing for quick counterattacks, with physical aggression
- High intensity in duels
- Rapid transitions in both defensive and offensive phases are their signature, especially for counterattacks

TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES



KOREA REPUBLIC

SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	MOON HYUN-HO	13-05-2003
12	HWANG JAE-YUN	18-03-2003
21	HONG SEONG-MIN	29-09-2006
DEFENDER		
4	JO HYUN-TAE	27-10-2004
5	LEE HYUN-YONG	29-12-2003
20	PARK JUN-SEO	26-04-2004
22	JANG SEOK-HWAN	11-10-2004
23	SHIN MIN-HA	15-09-2005
MIDFIELDER		
2	KANG MIN-JUN	08-04-2003
6	LEE CHAN-OUK	03-02-2003
8	KIM DONG-JIN	30-07-2003
10	KANG SANG-YOON	31-05-2004
16	KIM HAN-SEO	14-02-2003
FORWARD		
7	KANG SEONG-JIN	26-03-2003
9	KIM TAE-WON	11-03-2005
11	JOUNG JI-HUN	09-04-2004
14	JUNG SEUNG-BAE	09-11-2003
15	BAEK GA-ON	23-01-2006
17	KIM YONG-HAK	20-05-2003
18	JEONG JAE-SANG	25-05-2004
DEFENDER/MIDFIELDER/FORWARD		
3	BAE HYUN-SEO	16-02-2005
13	KIM DO-HYUN	12-05-2004
19	LEE GEON-HEE	11-03-2005



FORMATION: 1-4-3-3 (1-4-4-2)



COACH

Lee Min-sung (Korea Republic)

Lee was part of the coaching staff when Korea Republic won the gold medal at the 2018 Asian Games and the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ title in 2020. Appointed manager in 2025, his target was to improve the side's Quarter-final results from both 2022 and 2024.

Lee began coaching in 2010 with spells in China PR as well in Korea Republic, and he guided Daejeon Hana Citizen FC to promotion to K League 1 during his tenure as Head Coach from 2020 to 2024.

A highly respected figure in Korean football, Lee earned 67 caps and played in the 1998 and 2002 FIFA World Cups.



KEY FEATURES

- Playing style based on 1-4-4-2; strict and well-disciplined, with full dedication
- Constructive build up play and individual strength in 1-on-1 situations
- Strength in set pieces
- Created chances, particularly on the flank, by utilising off-the-ball movement and individual breakthroughs
- Always compact and well-disciplined defence with collective movement
- Intensive high-pressing occasionally
- Transition between defence and attack was very fast. When attacking they use the entire width of the field, and in defence they are compact and reliable

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

SQUAD DATE OF BIRTH

GOALKEEPER

1	MARZOOQ RASHED ALBEDWAWI	02-06-2004
17	ADLI MOHAMED	15-09-2004
22	KHALED TAWHID	16-02-2004

DEFENDER

2	MUBARAK AHMED BANI ZAMAH	29-11-2003
3	LEONARD OFFOE AMESIMEKU	25-11-2003
4	KHAMIS AHMED ALMANSOORI	15-01-2004
6	AHMAD MALALLA YADOO	20-11-2003
12	HAZA SHEHAB ALHAMMADI	31-07-2003
13	YOUSIF AHMED ALMARZOOQI	07-03-2005
18	MANSOUR SALEH BARGHASH ALMENHALI	12-11-2004

MIDFIELDER

5	MATAR ZAAL ALSHAMSI	02-03-2004
8	ALI ABDULAZIZ ABDULLA	16-07-2003
14	SOLOMON SOSU	05-03-2005
15	MOHAMED ABDALLA ALWAFI	01-07-2003
20	HAZIM ABBAAS	18-03-2005
21	SAIF SALEH ALMENHALI	01-02-2003

FORWARD

7	ALI MOHAMED AL MEMARI	17-10-2004
9	EISA KHALFAN	12-03-2003
10	MANSOOR SAEED ALMENHALI	29-09-2003
11	MOHAMED KHALIL ALHAMMADI	27-02-2003
16	JUNIOR SALIF NDIAYE	29-03-2005
19	MAYED ALKAS	06-05-2003
23	RICHARD AKONNOR	06-02-2004



FORMATION: 1-4-4-2 (1-4-1-4-1)



COACH

Marcelo Broli (Italy)

Broli led UAE for the second time at the AFC U23 Asian Cup™, reaching the Quarter-finals for the fourth time after the side's disappointing Group-stage exit in 2024.

Broli began his professional coaching career in Uruguay, leading Penarol's U19/U20 side to victory in the 2022 CONMEBOL U20 Copa Libertadores in his second year. The following year, he guided Uruguay's U20 team to qualification and ultimately to its first-ever success at the FIFA U-20 World Cup 2023.

A former defensive midfielder, Broli played for 18 years, representing clubs including Penarol, Nacional, Montevideo Wanderers, Rampla Juniors, Miramar Misiones and Chilean side Audax Italiano.



KEY FEATURES

- Characterised by 1-4-4-2 and sometimes 1-4-1-4-1 formations
- Played cautiously from a safe build-up outside the opposition's block, then accelerated the attack with long forward or diagonal passes
- No.8 Ali Abdulaziz Abdulla created the tempo of the attack, No.10 Mansoor Saeed Almenhali generated creativity in the forward line, and No.16 Junior Salif Ndiaye built momentum towards the goal
- Effective use of full-backs, especially No.23 Richard Akonnor on the left side
- Formed a compact block in midfield, applying pressure to win the ball when it arrives, and transitioned swiftly into a counter-attack
- When shifting defensively, even more solid block in a 1-4-1-4-1 shape
- Always looked to launch swift counter-attacks immediately after winning possession

TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES

UZBEKISTAN

SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	MAKSIM MURKAEV	21-02-2005
12	UMAR RUSTAMOV	06-05-2005
21	SAMANDAR MURATBAEV	03-03-2005
DEFENDER		
2	SAIDKHON KHAMIDOV	20-01-2005
4	GIYOSJON RIZAKULOV	20-02-2005
5	OZODBEK ERGASHOV	18-09-2006
13	ISLOM ANVAROV	19-04-2006
14	AZIZBEK TULKUNBEKOV	10-02-2007
15	MEYIRBEK REJABALIEV	25-01-2005
16	BEHRUZJON KARIMOV	07-08-2007
19	MUKHAMMAD-BOBUR KARIMOV	13-03-2006
20	DILSHOD ABDULLAEV	09-05-2006
MIDFIELDER		
3	DILSHOD MURTAZAEV	03-09-2006
6	RAVSHAN KHAYRULLAEV	21-08-2005
7	SARDORBEB BAKHROMOV	16-02-2005
8	MUKHAMMEDALI REIMOV	26-06-2006
10	RUSTAMBEK FOMIN	09-07-2005
11	ASILBEK JUMAEV	25-03-2005
18	SHOKHJAKHON YORKINBOEV	20-01-2005
22	NURLAN IBRAIMOV	29-08-2005
FORWARD		
9	SAIDUMARKHON SAIDNURULLAYEV	13-04-2005
17	AMIRBEK SAIDOV	01-02-2006
23	ABDUGAFUR HAYDAROV	16-02-2005



COACH

Ravshan Khaydarov (Uzbekistan)

A former player, Khaydarov is currently the Head Coach of Uzbekistan's U20, U21 and U23 men's teams, and his coaching career has also included time at Pakhtakor Tashkent, Termez Surkhon, Uzbekistan U19, and Uzbekistan.

Most notably, Khaydarov led Uzbekistan to glory at the AFC U23 Championship 2018™, and the runners-up position in the 2022 and 2024 editions.

Khaydarov was also at the helm when the U20 team lifted the AFC U20 Asian Cup™ trophy on home soil in 2023. He has won domestic trophies with Uzbek powerhouse Pakhtakor Tashkent, winning two Uzbek League and two Uzbek Cup titles respectively.

- KEY FEATURES
- 1-4-2-3-1 formation, with positional play based on good passing and short, medium forward passes
 - Proactive plays both in attack and defence
 - Often played on the counter-attack, but practiced positional attack, since the players are good with the ball
 - Invited pressing from 2nd balls, wing plays by effective use of full-backs
 - Team defence backed each other up and were selfless; they understood their responsibilities
 - From compact block, always looked for the chance of intensive high-pressing
 - Placed a lot of emphasis on transitions; they liked to attack after intercepting the ball, and, when losing the ball, they quickly engaged in a fight to regain it. They were good at retuning behind the ball

TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES TEAM PROFILES



SQUAD		DATE OF BIRTH
GOALKEEPER		
1	TRAN TRUNG KIEN	09-02-2003
13	PHAM DINH HAI	29-03-2006
23	CAO VAN BINH	08-01-2005
3	PHAM LY DUC	14-02-2003
DEFENDER		
4	NGUYEN HIEU MINH	05-08-2004
5	NGUYEN DUC ANH	16-05-2003
15	LE VAN HA	01-07-2004
16	NGUYEN NHAT MINH	27-07-2003
21	PHAM MINH PHUC	07-02-2004
MIDFIELDER		
6	NGUYEN THAI SON	13-07-2003
8	NGUYEN THAI QUOC CUONG	06-03-2004
11	KHUAT VAN KHANG	11-05-2003
12	NGUYEN XUAN BAC	03-02-2003
17	NGUYEN PHI HOANG	27-02-2003
18	NGUYEN CONG PHUONG	03-06-2006
20	VO ANH QUAN	07-05-2004
FORWARD		
2	NGUYEN LE PHAT	12-01-2007
7	NGUYEN DINH BAC	19-08-2004
9	NGUYEN QUOC VIET	04-05-2003
10	LE VAN THUAN	15-07-2006
14	LE VIKTOR	10-11-2003
19	NGUYEN NGOC MY	20-02-2004
22	NGUYEN THANH NHAN	28-07-2003



FORMATION: 1-5-4-1



COACH

Kim Sang-sik (Korea Republic)

Appointed manager of Vietnam's senior and U23 mens' teams in 2024, Kim led his team to its second-best result at the AFC U20 Asian Cup™ after finishing Runners-up in 2018.

A former Korea Republic international who appeared in the 2006 FIFA World Cup and helped the Taegeuk Warriors finish third in the AFC Asian Cup™ in 2000 and 2007, Kim first ventured into coaching as Assistant Coach and then Head Coach at Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC.

Kim led Jeonbuk to the K League 1 title in 2021 before taking them to victory in the 2022 FA Cup. He had previously won the K League title three times, and the FA Cup title once as a player.



KEY FEATURES

- Characterised by patient, deep defensive block defence, yet always possessing the mindset to transition bravely into attack
- Excellent team spirit, hard work is the basis of the team
- Rapid counter-attacks, by skilful players with pace
- Excellent breakthrough in the flank and finishing ability in and around the box
- No.11 Khuat Van Khang and No.7 Nguyen Dinh Bac made an impact
- Well-organised, disciplined, deep-lying, solid defensive block
- Several dangerous moments saw the goalkeeper make superb saves to rescue the team
- No.4 Nguyen Hieu Minh led the defending aspect with strong leadership
- Very quick transitions in both phases
- Quick counterattack was one of their best weapons



RESULTS

RESULTS

RESULTS

RESULTS

RESULTS

GROUP A

Group A	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
VIETNAM	3	3	0	0	5	1	4	9
JORDAN	3	2	0	1	4	4	0	6
SAUDI ARABIA	3	1	0	2	3	4	-1	3
KYRGYZ REPUBLIC	3	0	0	3	1	4	-3	0

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
06 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	VIETNAM	2-0 (2-0)	JORDAN
06 Jan 2026	7:00 PM	SAUDI ARABIA	1-0 (0-0)	KYRGYZ REPUBLIC
09 Jan 2026	5:00 PM	KYRGYZ REPUBLIC	1-2 (1-1)	VIETNAM
09 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	JORDAN	3-2 (2-1)	SAUDI ARABIA
12 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	SAUDI ARABIA	0-1 (0-0)	VIETNAM
12 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	JORDAN	1-0 (1-0)	KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

GROUP C

Group C	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
UZBEKISTAN	3	2	1	0	5	2	3	7
KOREA REPUBLIC	3	1	1	1	4	4	0	4
LEBANON	3	1	0	2	5	7	-2	3
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN	3	0	2	1	0	1	-1	2

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
07 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	KOREA REPUBLIC	0-0 (0-0)	ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
07 Jan 2026	5:00 PM	UZBEKISTAN	3-2 (1-0)	LEBANON
10 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	LEBANON	2-4 (1-1)	KOREA REPUBLIC
10 Jan 2026	5:00 PM	ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN	0-0 (0-0)	UZBEKISTAN
13 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	UZBEKISTAN	2-0 (0-0)	KOREA REPUBLIC
13 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN	0-1 (0-0)	LEBANON

GROUP B

Group A	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
JAPAN	3	3	0	0	10	0	10	9
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	3	1	1	1	3	4	-1	4
SYRIA	3	1	1	1	2	6	-4	4
QATAR	3	0	0	3	0	5	-5	0

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
07 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	JAPAN	5-0 (1-0)	SYRIA
07 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	QATAR	0-2 (0-2)	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
10 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	0-3 (0-2)	JAPAN
10 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	SYRIA	1-0 (0-0)	QATAR
13 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	JAPAN	2-0 (1-0)	QATAR
13 Jan 2026	7:30 PM	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	1-1 (1-0)	SYRIA

GROUP D

Group C	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
AUSTRALIA	3	2	0	1	4	3	1	6
CHINA PR	3	1	2	0	1	0	1	5
IRAQ	3	0	2	1	2	3	-1	2
THAILAND	3	0	2	1	2	3	-1	2

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
08 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	AUSTRALIA	2-1 (2-1)	THAILAND
08 Jan 2026	5:00 PM	IRAQ	0-0 (0-0)	CHINA PR
11 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	CHINA PR	1-0 (1-0)	AUSTRALIA
11 Jan 2026	5:00 PM	THAILAND	1-1 (0-1)	IRAQ
14 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	IRAQ	1-2 (0-0)	AUSTRALIA
14 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	THAILAND	0-0 (0-0)	CHINA PR

QUARTER-FINALS

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
16 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	JAPAN	1-1 a.e.t. (1-1,0-1) 4-2 PSO	JORDAN
16 Jan 2026	6:30 PM	VIETNAM	3-2 a.e.t. (2-2,1-1)	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
17 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	UZBEKISTAN	0-0 a.e.t. (0-0,0-0) 2-4 PSO	CHINA PR
17 Jan 2026	6:30 PM	AUSTRALIA	1-2 (0-1)	KOREA REPUBLIC

SEMI-FINALS

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
20 Jan 2026	2:30 PM	JAPAN	1-0 (1-0)	KOREA REPUBLIC
20 Jan 2026	6:30 PM	VIETNAM	0-3 (0-0)	CHINA PR

THIRD-PLACE PLAYOFF

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
23 Jan 2026	6:00 PM	VIETNAM	2-2 a.e.t. (2-2,1-0) 7-6 PSO	KOREA REPUBLIC

FINAL

Date	Time	Team A	Score	Team B
24 Jan 2026	6:00 PM	CHINA PR	0-4 (0-2)	JAPAN





REFEREEING

1. SUMMARY

A delegation of 56 match officials from across 20 Member Associations was appointed for the AFC U23 Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2026™. This elite group comprised 16 Referees, 24 Assistant Referees, and 12 Video Match Officials (VMOs), supported by two Standby Referees and two Standby Assistant Referees. The delegation also included one woman Referee, one woman Assistant Referee, and one woman Video Match Official, reinforcing the AFC's continuous commitment to advancing women's officiating across the Continent. Furthermore, nine graduates of the AFC Referee Academy were appointed to the competition, including one who took charge of the Final, underscoring the AFC's ongoing success in developing top-class match officials. Performance and physical standards were maintained by a dedicated team of instructors, comprising eight Referee Assessors and two Fitness Instructors, who ensured the highest officiating standards throughout the tournament.

1.1 AFC MATCH OFFICIALS

Referees	MA
Alexander George King	AUS
Ammar Ebrahim Hasan Mahfoodh	BHR
Fu Ming	CHN
Thoriq Munir Alkatiri	IDN
Heidari Payam	IRN
Zaid Thamer Mohammed	IRQ
Tanimoto Ryo	JPN
Choi Hyun Jai	KOR
Ms. Kim Yujeong	KOR
Faisal Sulaiman A Albalawi	KSA

Abdullah M M H M H Jamali	KUW
Tuan Mohd Yaasin Bin Tuan Mohd Hanafiah	MAS
Qasim Matar Ali Al-Hatmi	OMA
Abdulla Ali A A Al-Marri	QAT
Yahya Ali Mohammad Hassan Almulla	UAE
Nadjafaliev Asker	UZB
Assistant Referees	MA
James Andrew Lindsay	AUS
Kearney John Robinson	AUS
Mohamed Jaafar Mohamed Salman	BHR
Cao Yi	CHN
Bangbang Syamsudar	IDN
Ali Ahmadi	IRN
Farhad Farhadpoor	IRN
Ameer Dawood Hussein Alwindawi	IRQ
Hayder Abdulhasan Ali Ubaydee	IRQ
Takebe Yosuke	JPN
Takeshi Asada	JPN
Cheon Jinhee	KOR
Jang Jongpil	KOR
Ms. Park Mi Suk	KOR
Faisal Nasser R Alqahtani	KSA
Ibrahim Abdullah M Aldakhil	KSA
Ali T H A Jraq	KUW
Muhammad Shafiq bin Ahmad Said	MAS
Nasser Salim Abdullah Ambusaidi	OMA

Juma Mohammed K H Al-Burshaid	QAT
Khaled Aiad S H Khalaf	QAT
Saeed Rashed Mohamed Abdulla Almarzooqi	UAE
Serazitdinov Ruslan	UZB
Shavkatov Bakhtiyorshuja	UZB
Video Match Officials	MA
Ms. Jacewicz Katherine Margaret	AUS
Jin Jingyuan	CHN
Luk Kin Sun	HKG
Iida Jumpei	JPN
Kim Woosung	KOR
Abdullah Dhafer A Alshehri	KSA
Abdullah M E A H Arab	KUW
Khamis Mohammed S A Al-Marri	QAT
Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari Bin Jahari	SGP
Sivakorn Pu-Udom	THA
Mohammed Obaid Khadim Mohammed	UAE
Norsafarov Firdavs	UZB
Standby Referees	MA
Wiwat Jumpaon	THA
Sultan Mohamed Saleh Yousif Alhammadi	UAE
Standby Assistant Referees	MA
Ali Muhammad	PAK
Kuo, Chan-Yu	TPE

Technical Instructors / Assessors	MA
Hakan Anaz	AUS
Ismail Adnan Ismail Alhafi	JOR
Ms. Yamagishi Sachiko	JPN
Altraifi Ali Ahmed I	KSA
Subkhiddin Bin Mohd Salleh	MAS
Chia Eng Wah John	SGP
Mohammed Abdulla Hassan Mohamed	UAE
Kovalenko Valentin	UZB
Fitness Instructors	MA
Choi Youngin	KOR
Ganesan S/O Maniam	SGP

1.2 SUPPORT TEAM

- **Referees' Liaison Officers:** A team of Liaison Officers supported the coordination of all logistics related to refereeing activities. The RLOs played a crucial role in facilitating communication with the hosts, ensuring smooth operations and addressing any logistical issues that arose during the event.
- **Players' Team:** A dedicated local team comprising 34 players and two coaches took part in the referees' practical training sessions to simulate different incidents that could arise during a match.
- **Technical Support:** A specialised team from the System Technology Provider (STP), supported by dedicated local camera operators, facilitated the implementation of the Mobile Video Assistant Referee (MVAR) and Instant Feedback system during the practical sessions. Additionally, VAR simulator sessions were also conducted at the tournament Headquarters (HQ).

- **Physiotherapist/Masseurs:** One physiotherapist and four masseurs were readily available to assist match officials with recovery and injury prevention, ensuring that they received proper care to maintain their peak physical condition throughout the competition.
- **Medical Team:** A dedicated Medical Doctor was stationed at the official AFC HQ throughout the tournament, providing medical assistance when needed. For daily field operations, an ambulance and a team of paramedics were positioned at the training venue to deliver immediate emergency response and first aid.

2. PREPARATORY COURSE

From January 3 to 5, match officials engaged in an intensive three-day preparatory course consisting of theoretical sessions, fitness checks, practical MVAR training, and simulator sessions, all of which were aimed to equip the match officials with the technical and physical readiness required for the competition. Additionally, led by technical instructors, Team Arrival Meetings (TAMs) were conducted with participating teams to provide an accurate understanding of how matches would be managed, and player safety and integrity of the competition would be protected during the tournament.

2.1 FITNESS CHECKS

All match officials were declared physically qualified to cope with the match demands upon the successful completion of the following fitness checks:

- Referees Yo-Yo Intermittent Test (target: 18.8)
- ARIET - Assistant Referee Intermittent Endurance Test (target: 15.5.4)



2.2 PRACTICAL SESSIONS

With the integration of the MVAR system and the Instant Feedback, match officials engaged in a comprehensive practical training programme. The technology provided live integration during on-field training sessions and enabled full-scale VAR simulator exercises at the tournament HQ, ensuring officials' proficiency in decision-making with technological assistance.

- **MVAR Practical Session:** Under the guidance of instructors, 24 players and two coaches simulated real match incidents on a full pitch. Match officials rotated to familiarise themselves with the integration of the VAR technology and to ensure clear communication with the VMOs inside the Video Operations Room.
- **Instant Feedback Session:** Working on a half-pitch with 10 players, the match officials received immediate feedback from dedicated instructors. This allowed for real-time correction of positioning, movement, and foul recognition.
- **Simulator Session:** In addition to MVAR sessions at the practical training field, VMOs were asked to undergo simulator sessions and review key match incidents at the HQ, focusing on quality and accurate decision-making, which are essential during a live match.

2.3 THEORETICAL SESSIONS

The theoretical sessions were designed to further enhance the technical knowledge of the officials and optimise the level of consistency in their application of the Laws of the Game. Numerous match incident videos were reviewed and discussed to encourage active analysis and reach consensus on key decisions.

At the conclusion of the course, the officials received important feedback and information regarding both fitness and technical aspects to enhance their preparation ahead of matches.

- Technical Topics:
 - Game Management
 - Handball
 - Offside
 - Positioning and Reading of the Game
 - Tactical Fouls
 - Penalty Area Incidents
 - Challenges
 - Attacking Possession Phase
- Fitness Topics:
 - Weight control
 - Fitness Check
 - Recovery Exercises

2.4 TEAM ARRIVAL MEETINGS

TAMs, led by technical instructors, were initiated with each participating team to promote a shared understanding and transparency of how matches will be officiated during the tournament. At the same time, the TAMs were aimed at encouraging the teams to protect the image of football by acknowledging the match officials and opponents with respect and fair play.

The session provided the participating teams with recent updates on the Laws of Games and a wide array of technical topics to ensure the best quality of football throughout the tournament.

Technical Topics:

- Players Safety
 - o Challenges
 - o Illegal Use of Arms
- Tactical Fouls
 - o Stopping a Promising Attack
 - o Denying an Obvious Goal Scoring Opportunity
- Penalty Area Incidents
- Handball
- Offside
- Protect the Image of Football
 - o Respect & Fair Play



2.5 PREPARATION IN NON-REFEREEING TECHNICAL TOPICS

In preparation for the tournament, different functional units' topics were covered to equip referees with the necessary tools and guidance prior to the start of the tournament. These sessions aimed to enhance referees' awareness of the crucial roles and discipline required both on and off the pitch during the competition.

Competition Overview & Match Procedures:

- Technical Topics
- Encompassed rules, regulations, and procedures governing the competition from start to finish
- Included competition format, scheduling, venues, match operations, and incident management

Football Technology:

- Implementation of VAR technology
- Communication System & Camera Plan
- Replay Operators Introduction
- Digital Substitution Tablet

Sports Integrity:

- Disciplinary procedures
- Prevention of Match-fixing

3. DURING COMPETITION

During the tournament phase, the training program shifted to an operational cycle, ensuring that match officials remained physically fresh while maintaining a high “technical rhythm” through consistent use of technology.

3.1 PRACTICAL SESSIONS

Daily training was not limited to physical work; it incorporated the MVAR system and Instant Feedback systems to ensure officials remained sharp between match appointments.

- **MVAR Maintenance (Full-Pitch):** To replicate the intensity of the competition, 24 players and two coaches simulated match scenarios, allowing appointed match officials to practice “live” communication and synchronisation between the on-field referee and the VOR.
- **Instant Feedback (Half-Pitch):** Using a 10-player setup, instructors provided real time “coaching”. This allowed match officials to refine their positioning and reading of the game based on trends observed during the tournament.
- **VMO Simulator Drills (HQ):** VMOs continued ad-hoc basis simulation sessions at the headquarters. These sessions focused on maintaining technical speed with the VAR interface and ensuring consistency in decisions across all refereeing matters.



3.2 PHYSICAL CONDITIONING & MAINTENANCE

The physical program was customised according to the Match Day (MD) schedule to ensure peak performance for every match.

- **Conditioning (MD-2/MD-1):** High-intensity sessions were tapered as match day approached. Training included speed drills, agility, and cardiovascular maintenance specifically designed to mirror the movement patterns required on the pitch.
- **Resilience & Strength:** Ongoing focus on core stability and flexibility to prevent fatigue-related injuries during the high-density match schedule.

3.3 POST-MATCH RECOVERY PROTOCOLS

All match officials underwent a mandatory post-match recovery programme to facilitate rapid physical and mental recovery:

- **Active Recovery (Gymnasium) & Massage:** Included light aerobic work, dynamic stretching, and scheduled massage appointments to reduce muscle soreness and restore range of motion.
- **Hydrotherapy (Pool) & Ice Bath:** Match officials utilised cold baths and swimming sessions for hydrotherapy which was essential for reducing systemic inflammation and promoting psychological relaxation after the high stress of match officiating.

3.4 MATCH ASSESSMENT

The arrangement of a remote monitoring room at the HQ and on-site referee assessor appointments played a pivotal role in ensuring quality officiating standards.



Remote Referee Assessor: All match footage was analysed live by a remote referee assessor at the Remote Monitoring Room located at the HQ. The video referee assessor tracked the match situations, compiling all relevant details: time and nature of incidents, decisions and sanctions, officials involved, and subsequent inputs for discussions.

Referee Assessor: On-site referee assessors were appointed to observe the performance of match officials live at the venues, who closely monitored the team’s officiating capabilities and decisions made throughout the match and provided first-hand feedback.

3.5 MATCH DEBRIEFING SESSIONS

The match debriefings served as a vital learning tool for the appointees, whereby significant incidents from the previous matches were analysed to prepare the officials for upcoming challenges.

By addressing specific match incidents and providing guidance on officiating standards, the instructors highlighted areas for improvement and provided advice to ensure consistency and uniformity in foul recognition and interpretation of the Laws of the Game.

3.6 MATCH PREPARATION SESSIONS

Mr. Takeshi Ono, AFC Deputy Technical Director, presented insights related to team tactics, individual players' styles and behaviors, which proved to be beneficial for the match officials' preparation and understanding of football dynamics and trends. Overall, this allowed match officials to gain deeper insights into teams and improve game management and officiating standards.

4. VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE IMPLEMENTATION

The VAR system was fully integrated for all 32 matches at the AFC U23 Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2026™, utilising a decentralised operational model, whereby each respective venue was equipped with a dedicated VOR.

4.1 MATCH PREPARATION SESSIONS

1. Technical Infrastructure Set Up

Venue Integration: The VORs were located within the stadium's broadcast compound. This proximity allowed for the seamless, high-speed distribution of raw camera feeds directly from the Host Broadcaster to the VOR.

System Technology Provider: Media Pro was chosen to manage the hardware and software interface, ensuring that VMOs had access to synchronised multi-angle replays for precise incident review.

Operational Setup: Each VOR was configured to support the VAR and Assistant VAR, providing a controlled environment optimized for rapid communication with the on-field refereeing team.

Referee Review Area (RRA): Each stadium featured a dedicated RRA with a pyramid monitor located next to or behind the fourth official's bench in case of any On-field Reviews using the VAR output provided by VMOs.

4.2 VAR IMPLEMENTATION STATISTICS

The implementation of the VAR system across all tournament matches ensured a high level of accuracy in match-changing decisions. The following data summarises the interventions that led to a formal review and subsequent correction.

VAR REVIEW	TOTAL	DECISION CHANGED	DECISION CONFIRMED
TOTAL REVIEWS	17	17	-
On Field Reviews	14	14	-
Only VAR Reviews	3	3	-
Penalty area incidents reviewed	10	10	-
Goals reviewed	4	4	-
Encroachment by GK in PK reviewed	-	-	-
Potential red card incidents reviewed	3	3	-
Mistaken identity situations reviewed	-	-	-
Average reviews per match	0.53		
1 Review every # matches	1.88		

5. TECHNICAL SUMMARY

5.1 GENERAL PERFORMANCE

The referee assessors and instructors' team, through their match reports and close monitoring, rated the match officials' performance as "good". The daily training, match debriefings, and other activities and resources organised to raise the refereeing standards contributed significantly to decision-making as the tournament progressed.

5.2 GENERAL MANAGEMENT

A total of 111 disciplinary sanctions were issued at the AFC U23 Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2026™, of which 106 were cautions (yellow cards), and five direct red cards were shown, representing a match average of 3.31 yellow cards and 0.16 red cards per game.



EXTRA TIME

AFC U23 ASIAN CUP™ SAUDI ARABIA 2026



WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED

1.1 BILLION
IMPRESSIONS

349 MILLION
VIDEO VIEWS

1 MILLION
FOLLOWERS ON TIKTOK

3 MILLION
FOLLOWERS ON FACEBOOK

AFC LIVE APP



18,628
ACTIVE USERS

197,338
VIEWS

591,003
SESSIONS

THE-AFC.COM

2,018,598
USERS

5,056,978
PAGE VIEWS



AFC COMMITTEES

AFC TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
MR. KOHZO TASHIMA	CHAIRPERSON	JFA
MR. ADNAN DARJAL MOTAR	DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON	IFA
MR. MOHAMMAD YOSUF KARGAR	Member	AFF
MS. HEATHER GARRIOCK	Member	Football Australia
MR. CHENG XU	Member	CFA
DR. SEYED MIRSHAD MAJEDI	Member	FFIRI
DR. LEE YOUNG SOO	Member	KFA
MR. TIN MYINT AUNG	Member	MFF
MR. FAHAD ABDULLA AL ZARRAA	Member	QFA
MR. MOHAMMED AMEEN HAIDAR	Member	SAFF
MR. MUHANNAD ALFAKEER	Member	SFA
MR. BAKHTIYOR DADAMATOV	Member	UFA

AFC REFEREES COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
MR. HANY TALEB B S AL-RAEESI	CHAIRPERSON	QFA
MR. RAVSHAN IRMATOV	DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON	UFA
MR. CUI ENLEI	Member	CFA
MS. KENJI OGIYA	Member	JFA
MR. MUN JIN HEE	Member	KFA
MR. NURDIN BUKUEV	Member	KFU
MR. WIDIYA HABIBAH SHAMSURI	Member	FAM
MR. ALI ALTRAIFI	Member	SAFF
MR. SALEM ALI ALSHAMSI	Member	UAE FA



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