AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE™

TECHNICAL REPORT




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1937
وعبر الزمان سنمضي معًا
الأهلي
AL AHLI


نادي الدحيل الرياضي
AL DUHAIL SC
QATAR
2009






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GANGWON
FC
GREAT UNION
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FC MACHIDA
ZELVIA
SINCE 1989


MELBOURNE CITY
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FC
FOOTBALL CLUB


1986
FC NASAF


SINCE 1992
SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA


شباب الأهلي
SHABAB ALAHLI
DUBAI
1958


上海海港足球俱乐部
SHANGHAI PORT FC


SHENHUA
SFC
SINCE 1993
SHANGHAI


نادي الشارقة لكرة القدم
SHARJAH FC


TRACTOR
1970


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ULSAN


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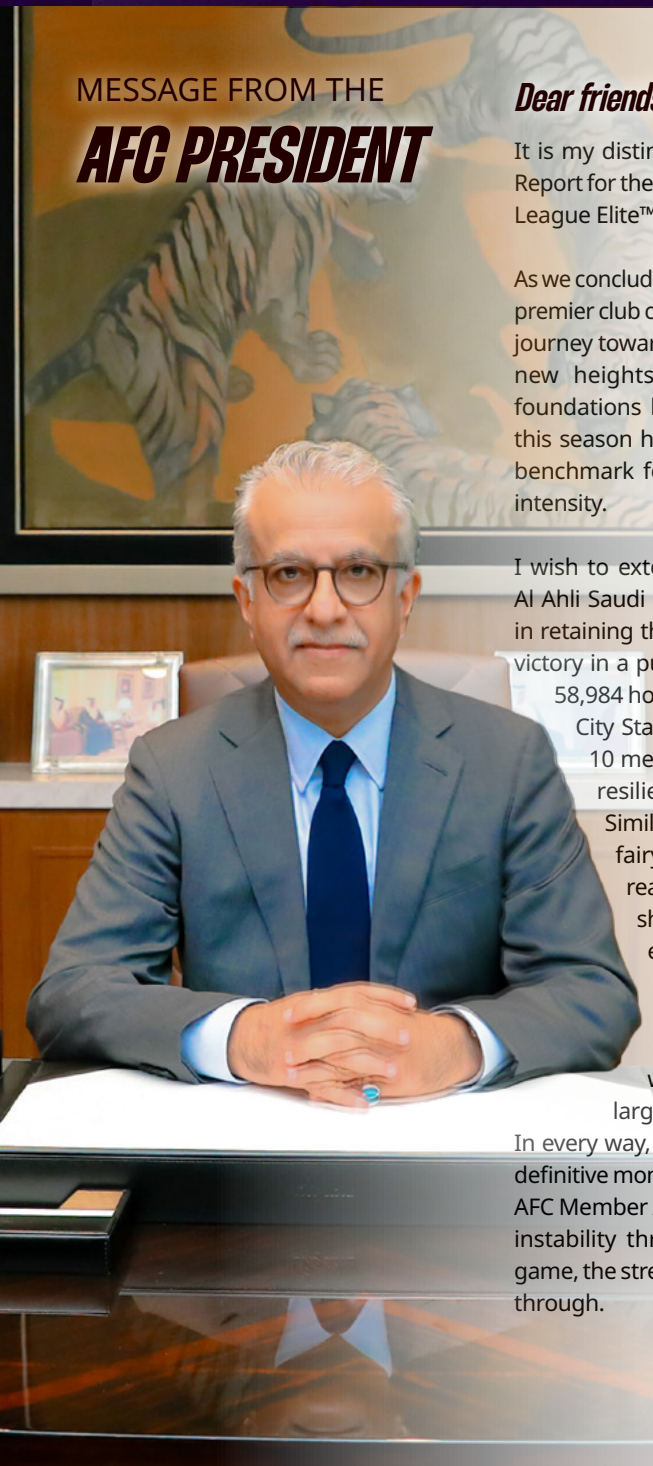
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83 AFC COMMITTEES

86 PREVIOUS WINNERS

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MESSAGE FROM THE

AFC PRESIDENT

Dear friends,

It is my distinct privilege to present the Technical Report for the 2025/26 season of the AFC Champions League Elite™ (ACL Elite).

As we conclude this second edition of Asia's revamped premier club competition, it is clear that our collective journey toward Continental excellence has reached new heights. Building upon the monumental foundations laid during the inaugural campaign, this season has solidified the ACL Elite as a global benchmark for tactical progress and competitive intensity.

I wish to extend my heartiest congratulations to Al Ahli Saudi FC for their remarkable achievement in retaining their title. Their thrilling 1-0 extra-time victory in a pulsating Final in front of a passionate 58,984 home crowd at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium—achieved despite playing with 10 men for nearly an hour—epitomises the resilience we strive for in Asian football. Similarly, we must recognise the incredible fairytale run of FC Machida Zelvia, who reached the Final in their debut season, showcasing the immense depth of talent emerging from our East Region.

The enormous determination displayed by both finalists on the pitch was matched by the resilience of our larger Asian football family off the pitch. In every way, this season will be remembered as a definitive moment of unity and solidarity among our AFC Member Associations (MAs). When geopolitical instability threatened the continuity of our club game, the strength of our football family truly shone through.

During this complex period, the patience, cooperation, and mutual understanding shown by all MAs, clubs, and stakeholders exemplified the core values of our Confederation, and this collective resilience enabled the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) to brilliantly step forward, rearranging the calendar and streamlining the tournament into a highly successful centralised single-leg knockout format for the West Region clubs in Jeddah.

This year's analysis highlights several key trends that have shaped the 2025/26 campaign. But above all, these data points and metrics are not merely numbers; they are the pulse of our game, reflecting the AFC's Vision and Mission to ensure our clubs remain competitive on the global stage.

On that note, I would like to put on record my sincere thanks to our dedicated Technical Observers Team (TOT) and support group for their comprehensive analysis. This report serves as an invaluable benchmark for coaches, technical directors, and MAs across the Continent to dive deeply into the strategic trends, physical metrics, and tactical evolutions that defined the tournament.

Similarly crucial to the success of any elite competition is the integrity and professionalism of those who manage the 90 minutes and I would like to express my deepest appreciation to our match officials, whose journeys and performances are also captured in this report.

Furthermore, our continued investment in technology - such as the Semi-Automated Offside Technology - has ensured that our competitions remain at the forefront of integrity and professionalism. These advancements, paired with our rigorous Club Licensing Regulations, are essential pillars in our Mission to become the world's leading Confederation.

Looking ahead, the AFC remains dedicated to further expansion and inclusivity, driven by the overwhelming talent and commercial potential witnessed this season. The decision to expand the League Stage from 24 to 32 clubs starting from the 2026/27 campaign ensures that more players, clubs, and fans than ever before can experience the magic of elite continental football.

This ambitious growth and our milestone reforms have been made possible through the tireless efforts of my esteemed AFC Executive Committee colleagues, our Standing Committee members, and our valued commercial, broadcast, and media partners, and I wish to offer my sincerest thanks to them for their support in delivering another breakthrough edition.

And just as important, my gratitude goes to the SAFF for their world-class hosting of the West Region Round of 16 ties and the centralised Finals, and to all our Participating Clubs as well as our fervent fanbase for their unwavering commitment in ensuring that the growth of the Asian game remains steadfast regardless of the external circumstances and challenges.

I trust this report will serve as both a record of our achievements and a catalyst for further innovation. Let us continue to work together to unlock the true potential of Asian football.

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



COMPETITION OVERVIEW

COMPETITION OVERVIEW

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE 2025/26™



The AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ was contested between August 12, 2025 and April 25, 2026.

Al Ahli Saudi FC of Saudi Arabia were crowned champions following a 1-0 win in extra time against Japan's FC Machida Zelvia at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Al Ahli became just the second team, after fellow Saudi Arabian side Al Ittihad Club, to win back-to-back titles.

WEST ZONE

Al Hilal SFC led a trio of clubs from Saudi Arabia that advanced to the Round of 16 from the League Stage.

For the second consecutive season, Al Hilal topped the West Zone League Stage with defending champions Al Ahli Saudi FC second.

A goalless draw with Shabab Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) denied Al Hilal a perfect record of eight wins.

Al Ahli had to endure a tougher passage, accumulating 17 points with five wins, two draws, and a defeat suffered against UAE's Sharjah FC.

Tractor FC denied Saudi Arabian sides a top-three finish for the second consecutive season, with the Islamic Republic of Iran team finishing level with Al Ahli but settling for third on goal difference.

Al Ittihad Club overcame a slow start, which saw them lose their opening two matches, to finish fourth with 15 points.

Al Wahda FC were one of two UAE sides to progress, accumulating 14 points to finish fifth, with Shabab Al Ahli three adrift in sixth.

Qatar's Al Duhail SC and Al Sadd SC took the remaining two Round of 16 berths from the West Zone, with both tied on eight points but the latter finishing seventh on superior goal difference.















EAST ZONE

Japanese clubs flexed their muscles in the East Zone, with all three cruising past the League Stage.

FC Machida Zelvia topped the standings, with the tournament debutants accumulating 17 points from eight matches.

Vissel Kobe finished a point adrift in second while Sanfrecce Hiroshima completed a top-three sweep for Japanese sides with a haul of 15 points.

Buriram United impressed with a fourth-placed finish, with the Thailand champions collecting 14 points.

Melbourne City FC were level on points with Buriram, with the Australian side finishing fifth on goal difference.

Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim FC defeated Vissel Kobe 1-0 in their concluding tie to confirm a sixth-place finish.

Korea Republic sides FC Seoul and debutants Gangwon FC took the seventh and eighth spots, with the former garnering 10 points - one more than the latter.


AKITO
29
NAKAMURA
39
ROUND OF 16

WEST ZONE

The West Zone's Round of 16 was played as a single-leg affair in the centralised venue of Jeddah, with matches contested on April 13 and 14, 2026.

Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA) 1-0 (A.E.T.) Al Duhail SC (QAT)

Al Ahli stayed on track to defend their title with a 1-0 win against Al Duhail.

Al Ahli, however, needed extra time to see off the challenge of Al Duhail, with Riyad Mahrez's stunning free-kick three minutes from the end ensuring they stayed on track for back-to-back titles.





Al Hilal SFC (KSA) v Al Sadd SC (QAT) *(3-3 A.E.T., Al Sadd won 4-2 on penalties)*

Al Sadd came from behind three times to hold Al Hilal to a 3-3 draw before advancing to the Quarter-finals with a 4-2 win in the penalty shootout.

Strikes from Sergej Milinkovic-Savic, Salem Al Dawsari and Marcos Leonardo were cancelled out by Claudinho, Rafa Mujica and Roberto Firmino, respectively, as Al Sadd forced the tie into a penalty shootout.

Firmino failed to convert Al Sadd's opening spot-kick but misses from Karim Benzema and Saimon Bouabre saw the Qatari side advancing, with captain Akram Afif tucking home the winning penalty.





Tractor FC (IRN) 0-3 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE)

Shabab Al Ahli booked their place in the Quarter-finals with a 3-0 win over 10-man Tractor FC to set up a clash with Thailand's Buriram United.

Goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand's 52nd-minute sending off for a foul on Sardar Azmoun turned the game in favour of Shabab Al Ahli, with Yuri Cesar scoring from the penalty spot 13 minutes later before Saeid Ezatolahi doubled the lead 10 minutes from time.

Mateusao put the seal on Shabab Al Ahli's victory with his side's third eight minutes into stoppage time.







Al Ittihad Club (KSA) 1-0 (A.E.T.) Al Wahda FC (UAE)

Al Ittihad edged Al Wahda 1-0 in extra time to advance to the Quarter-finals.

Backed by a partisan home crowd at King Abdullah Sports City Stadium, Al Ittihad started brightly but were frustrated by Al Wahda's resolute defending.

The UAE side's resistance was, however, finally ended in the closing seconds of extra time with Fabinho scoring the winner from the penalty spot.





EAST ZONE

Sanfrecce Hiroshima (JPN) v Johor Darul Ta'zim FC (MAS) *(Johor Darul Ta'zim FC won 3-2 on aggregate)*

Johor Darul Ta'zim advanced to the Quarter-finals for the first time with a 3-2 win on aggregate against Japan's Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

The Malaysian champions won the first leg 3-1, thanks to strikes from Ager Aketxe, Bergson and Marcos Guilherme.

Nene's 86th-minute own goal saw Sanfrecce Hiroshima pulling one back, but the Japanese side could only carve out a 1-0 win in the return leg as they exited the competition.





Vissel Kobe (JPN) v FC Seoul (KOR) *(Vissel Kobe won 3-1 on aggregate)*

Vissel Kobe battled their way into the Quarter-finals after they came from behind to beat FC Seoul 2-1 in the second-leg of their Round of 16 tie.

Patryk Klimala's first half strike was cancelled out by Yuya Osako and Yosuke Ideguchi after the break to give the Japanese outfit a 3-1 aggregate win as they advanced to the Quarter-finals after having fallen at the Round of 16 hurdle in 2024/25.

Matheus Thuler's 23rd-minute goal had secured Vissel a 1-0 win in the first leg played in Seoul.







Buriram United (THA) v Melbourne City FC (AUS)

(Aggregate 1-1, Buriram United won 4-2 on penalties)

Goalkeeper Neil Etheridge was the hero with two saves in the shootout as Buriram United defeated Melbourne City 4-2 on penalties in their Round of 16 second-leg tie.

Custodian Etheridge stepped up after the match at Buriram Stadium - which saw both sides reduced to 10 men - ended in a goalless stalemate after 120 minutes, having played to a 1-1 draw in the first leg.

Melbourne City needed a stoppage time goal from Benjamin Mazzeo to cancel out Guilherme Bissoli's 37th-minute opener in the first leg.



FC Machida Zelvia (JPN) v Gangwon FC (KOR)

(FC Machida Zelvia won 1-0 on aggregate)

Machida Zelvia squeezed into the Quarter-finals with a 1-0 aggregate win against Gangwon FC in a meeting between two tournament debutants.

With the first leg having ended in a goalless draw, Hotaka Nakamura's 25th-minute header earned the Japanese side their place in the last eight at the expense of their Korea Republic rivals.







QUARTER-FINALS







Al Sadd SC (QAT) 3-3 Vissel Kobe (JPN)

(A.E.T., Vissel Kobe won 5-4 on penalties)

Vissel Kobe booked their place in the Semi-finals with a 5-4 penalty shoot-out win over Al Sadd after a thrilling 3-3 draw after 120 minutes.

Substitute Jean Patric scored the winning penalty for Michael Skibbe's team after Claudinho had fired his attempt high over the bar in the third round of spot-kicks for the Qatari side.

Rafa Mujica had given Qatar's Al Sadd a sixth-minute lead and the Spaniard restored his side's advantage in the 61st minute after seeing Yuya Osako level for the Japanese club in the 24th minute.

Roberto Firmino added a third for Al Sadd in the 65th minute, but Yusuke Ideguchi's strike with 16 minutes remaining gave Kobe hope, and Yoshinori Muto's header in the third minute of stoppage time took the game into an additional 30 minutes.

Vissel Kobe goalkeeper Daiya Maekawa made a series of saves to deny Al Sadd the winner, with Claudinho then blazing his attempt in the penalty shootout over the bar to set up Jean Patric to fire the winner into the top corner.

QUARTER-FINALS

Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA) 2-1 Johor Darul Ta'zim FC (MAS)

Ten-man Al Ahli came from behind to edge Johor Darul Ta'zim 2-1 to advance to the Semi-finals.

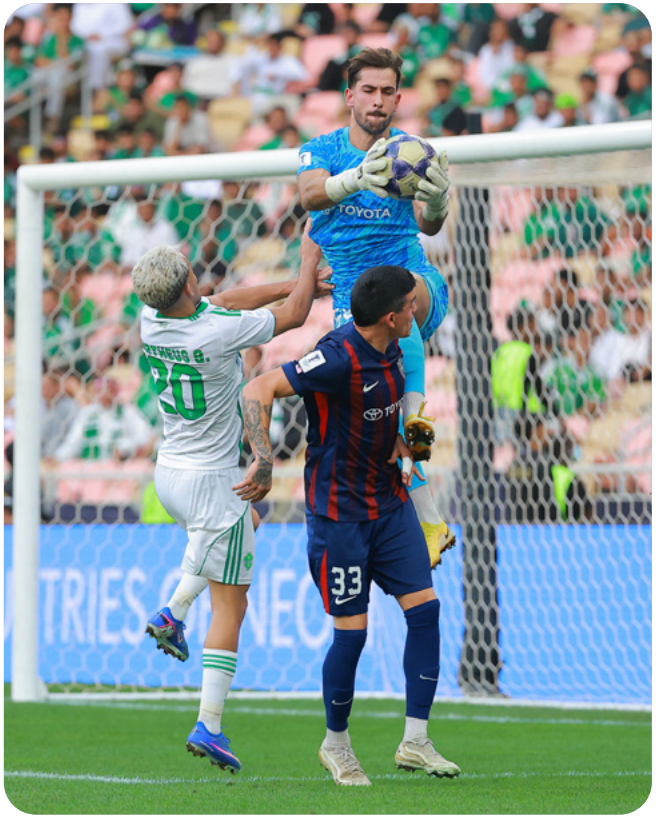
Johor Darul Ta'zim stunned Al Ahli with the opener from an Ali Majrashi own goal in the 19th minute.

The right-back was then sent off in the 37th minute after his overhead kick caught Jairo in the face, with the JDT striker stretchered off and replaced by Ager Aketxe.

Al Ahli refused to drop their heads as they continued pressing and were rewarded with the equaliser in the third minute of first half added time when Franck Kessie rose unchallenged to thump home Galeno's in-swinging corner.

Galeno then produced a brilliant piece of magic with his superb long-range strike in the 54th minute, sending Al Ahli through to the Semi-finals.





FC Machida Zelvia (JPN) 1-0 Al Ittihad Club

Machida Zelvia advanced to the Semi-finals as Tete Yengi's deflected strike earned the Japanese side a 1-0 win over former champions Al Ittihad.

The Australian forward struck in the 31st minute to take the J1 League side into the last four for the first time.

Machida Zelvia's win came after an eventful second half that saw Al Ittihad hit the woodwork twice, but Go Kuroda's tournament debutants held on to progress.





QUARTER-FINALS

Buriram United (THA) 2-3 (A.E.T.) Shabab Al Ahli (UAE)

Shabab Al Ahli needed extra time to see off Buriram United as the UAE side advanced to the Semi-finals with a 3-2 win.

Shabab Al Ahli squandered a 2-0 lead, which forced the Quarter-final into extra time and had Renan Victor's 93rd-minute strike to thank for taking them through to the last four stage for the first time since 2015.

The UAE side took the lead in the 13th minute when Igor Gomes beat Neil Etheridge to Federico Cartabia's in-swinging corner delivery and saw his powerful header bounce off the post before hitting a rooted Peter Zulj and settling in the net.

Shabab Al Ahli doubled their lead through another set-piece in the 49th minute, with Cartabia's delivery flicked on by Victor for Saeid Ezatohali to head in from close range.

Ezatohali, however, gave Buriram a lifeline in the 64th minute when the midfielder used his hand to block a Supachai Chaided header, with Guilherme Bissoli easily placing the ensuing spot-kick past Al Meqbali.

Buoyed by the goal, Buriram pressed forward and pulled themselves level six minutes later thanks to Zulj, who waltzed his way to the edge of the box before placing the ball in the bottom corner.

The Emirati side needed only three minutes of extra time to find the winner when Buriram half-cleared a set-piece, with Guilherme Bala's header back into the box finding Victor, who had ghosted beyond the backline to scoop home from close range.









SEMI-FINALS

Vissel Kobe (JPN) 1-2 Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA)

Second half goals from Galeno and Ivan Toney saw Al Ahli overcome a first half deficit to defeat Vissel Kobe 2-1 and book their place in the Final.

The defending champions launched a dramatic turnaround following the interval after Yoshinori Muto had given the J1 League side a 31st-minute lead.

Vissel Kobe made the brighter start with Muto seeing his early attempt blocked while Yosuke Ideguchi's 12th-minute effort was gathered by goalkeeper Edouard Mendy.

But it was the hosts who created the first real opening in the 26th minute when Zakaria Hawsawi's wriggling run down the left threatened the Vissel Kobe backline.

Twice, Vissel Kobe defenders failed to dispossess the Saudi full-back as he stormed along the flank, and he eventually rolled his pass across the face of the area to Franck Kessie, whose goal-bound strike was parried clear by Daiya Maekawa.

The danger remained, however, with the ball landing at the feet of Riyad Mahrez, but his low shot was comfortably collected.

Five minutes later, Vissel Kobe took the lead as a cleverly worked free-kick unlocked the Al Ahli defence.

Katsuya Nagato's delivery from midway inside the Al Ahli half found Yuya Osako after the former Japan international had timed his run to perfection to avoid the offside trap, and his astute header across goal left Muto to slot gleefully past Mendy.



Vissel Kobe's advantage survived a double scare in the dying seconds of the half, Rayan Hamed arriving late at the far post to head Galeno's free-kick from the left corner of the penalty area against the woodwork while Toney's flick from close range was inches wide.

Al Ahli continued pushing after the break, with Kessie nodding Millot's centre across the face of the goal moments into the second half and Toney's attempt ruled out for offside as the home side continued to test the Vissel Kobe defence.

Daiju Sasaki should have hit a second for Vissel Kobe in the 54th minute when they were gifted possession deep inside the Al Ahli half, substitute Mitsuki Hidaka cutting the ball back to his unmarked teammate, who could only rattle the crossbar.



Vissel Kobe were to rue that miss eight minutes later when Al Ahli pulled level. Maekawa had already saved Millot's header from a Mahrez corner, and the ball was eventually worked to Galeno, who hit a trademark strike from distance beyond the goalkeeper's reach.

Eight minutes later, Al Ahli were in front when Maekawa flapped at Galeno's cross from the left, and the ball landed at the feet of Toney, the Englishman threading his finish past three Vissel Kobe defenders on the line to win a thrilling tie for the Saudi Pro League side.





FC Machida Zelvia (JPN) 1-0 Shabab Al Ahli (UAE)

Yuki Soma's goal earned Machida Zelvia their spot in the Final after defeating Shabab Al Ahli 1-0.

It took Soma, who missed the Quarter-finals, 12 minutes to make his impact on the game, taking advantage of Bogdan Planic's underhit backpass to intercept the ball and shift away from goalkeeper Hamad Almeqbali to slot the ball home.

Another lapse in concentration almost cost UAE's Shabab Al Ahli a second goal three minutes later when they struggled to deal with Soma's free-kick, with Almeqbali needing a strong left arm to claw away Erik's effort from close range.

As their early nerves settled, Shabab Al Ahli started to grow into the game with Guilherme Bala forcing a save from Kosei Tani before a quick breakaway move ended with Kauan Santos clipping the top of the crossbar with a thunderous strike.

The Emirates' side escaped going further behind in the 40th minute after referee Shaun Evans overturned his decision to award a penalty for Federico Cartabia's foul on Soma following a VAR review.

After the interval, Shabab Al Ahli went in search of the equaliser with Bala nodding the ball onto the ground, which then bounced into the arms of Tani before sending a cross into the box, which Sultan Adil headed over unchallenged.

The UAE side thought they had drawn level in the 64th minute when Bala glanced in a header from Yuri Cesar's cross, only for the effort to be chalked out for offside.

The game became more open as it headed into the final 20 minutes, with glaring misses at both ends, with Mohammed Jumah steering an effort wide while Shota Fujio could not get his shot away despite only having Almeqbali to beat.

Shabab Al Ahli had another effort disallowed in stoppage time when Bala's strike from the edge of the box was ruled out following a VAR review as Machida Zelvia hung on to claim a dream Final against Al Ahli Saudi FC.



FINAL



Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA) 1-0 FC Machida Zelvia (JPN)

Substitute Feras Al Brikan struck six minutes into extra time to earn 10-man Al Ahli a 1-0 win over Machida Zelvia as the Saudi Pro League side retained their title at the AFC Champions League Elite Finals Jeddah 2026™.

Al Brikan hit the winner from close range after Matthias Jaissle's side had seen Zakaria Hawsawi sent off in the 68th minute and the title holders were forced to battle on against the Japanese side.

Both head coaches named unchanged line-ups from the Semi-final wins and, with the bulk of the 58,984 crowd inside the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium behind them, it was Al Ahli who dominated the early exchanges.

Roger Ibanez launched a speculative effort from distance with 90 seconds on the clock that flew harmlessly wide of Kosei Tani's right post as the home side signalled their intent, while Galeno's attempt moments later was also off target.

Machida managed to make it through that opening unscathed before, in the ninth minute, Hotaka Nakamura was given a sight of goal by the Al Ahli defence, but his header from eight yards out looped into the hands of Edouard Mendy.

The J1 League side were cut apart soon after when Enzo Millot's pass from deep released Galeno into space behind Nakamura, only for the Brazilian's shot to be kept out as Tani dived to his left. Daihachi Okamura then cleared to prevent Ivan Toney from slotting in the rebound.

With three minutes left in the first half, Galeno's in-swinging cross from the left caused panic in the Machida defence with Valentin Atangana's miskick falling to Merih Demiral, but the defender's effort clipped the top of the crossbar.

Al Ahli dominated the opening exchanges of the second half but, despite monopolising possession, the champions were unable to force their way through Machida's well-organised and disciplined defence.

Toney shinned the ball wide in the 66th minute, but two minutes later Hawsawi succumbed to a moment of madness, headbutting Tete Yengi in full view of the referee to leave Ilgiz Tantashev with no option but to show the red card.

With the man advantage, Machida started to impose themselves in the Al Ahli half. Hiroyuki Mae unleashed a shot from 25 yards in the 73rd minute that needed Mendy to palm the ball to safety.

Mendy then kept out Yuki Soma's curling effort, with Yengi blocking Mae's follow-up strike from outside the area as Machida continued to press to no avail as the match went into extra time.

Six minutes into the additional 30, the winner finally arrived. Riyad Mahrez cut in from the right to clip the ball towards the far post, and Franck Kessie's layoff was thumped home first time by Saudi international Al Brikan to the delight of the home fans.

Henry Mochizuki almost levelled when he met Soma's cross from the right with a downward header, but Machida were to end the game frustrated and empty handed as Al Ahli prevailed once again.

Al Ahli's Kessie was named the Most Valuable Player, while Machida's Tani picked up the Best Goalkeeper Award. Qatari side Al Sadd SC's Rafa Mujica took the Top Scorer Award with eight goals.







THE WINNING COACH

THE WINNING COACH

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES



At the tender coaching age of 38, Matthias Jaissle became the first to win back-to-back titles in the AFC's premier club competition.

But the success in 2026 was not a repeat performance. The previous AFC Champions League Elite™ season had been a triumphal march of 12 wins and a draw. The defence of the title in the 2025/26 campaign proved to be much more of an obstacle race and, simultaneously, the team was struggling to keep pace with the leaders in the Saudi Pro League. Goalscoring became less prolific in both competitions. As the time-honoured football saying goes, staying at the top is often more difficult than getting there. For the coach, the challenges were different.

The season represented another gradient in a learning curve spanning less than a decade. The former centre-back had kicked off his coaching career in his late 20s, working as assistant coach in Denmark and then at academy level in Austria where, after a spell at second-tier FC Liefering, he attracted Al Ahli Saudi FC's attention by leading RB Salzburg to two League and one Cup titles and making club history by reaching the knockout rounds of the UEFA Champions League.

Asked what he had added to his learning curve during 2025/26, he replied: "the importance of maintaining tactical discipline in every moment of the game."

There were also other disciplinary issues to address. Red cards during the Quarter-final against Johor Darul Ta'zim FC and in the Final against FC Machida Zelvia added up to 105 minutes of numerical inferiority. Jaissle shrewdly made tactical and positional adjustments, bravely continued to play for victory – and won both matches by scoring goals while one man short.

He was also required to deal with issues of mental and physical resilience. During the Round of 16 match against Al Duhail SC, Al Ahli Saudi failed to convert a penalty, and earned a hard-fought victory thanks to a free kick by Riyad Mahrez three minutes before the end of extra-time.

"We faced very strong opponents," he conceded afterwards, "and had to overcome many challenges. Plus, we also have injury concerns. But we have to strive to improve our level. There was fatigue in the closing stages but that was due to the irregularity of some players in training and due to Al Duhail's strength."



THE WINNING COACH





In two of the knockout ties, the mental challenge was to bounce back after going a goal down. In the Semi-final against Vissel Kobe, Jaissle responded by withdrawing centre-back Merih Demiral; sending on Feras Al Brikan as a second striker; and adopting a more direct approach.

"Small details are turning things more on our side or on the opponents' side," he said afterwards. "In the second half we were more aggressive and collected the second balls. When both teams put pressure on the ball it's normal to sometimes play the long ball. It was clearly better because we created more chances." He made sparing but effective use of substitutions, using only seven of his 16 options during the final three matches – and only two of six in the Final itself. But it was substitute Al Brikan who scored the title-winning goal.

Jaissle had no hesitation in naming Machida Zelvia as his most difficult opponent. "They are a well-disciplined team, with a really high work rate. Out of possession, there's top effort from every player on the pitch. It's not easy to score goals against them. They didn't concede many goals in the whole campaign – only seven in 12 matches. That shows how well-structured they are." Whereas he had shown great composure during the previous year's Final, Jaissle was visibly more agitated as Go Kuroda's stubborn team took the game into extra-time.

"Obviously a part of winning it again was because we played in Jeddah," he commented after the victory, "in front of our fans who pushed us and gave us extra energy. We had opportunities to score but it became harder after (Zakaria) Hawsawi was sent off for an unnecessary action. But we showed the right mentality, the players kept believing and I felt really proud of what the team achieved and how every player was committed to the journey. This year was special because we needed to overcome more obstacles along the way."



TECHNICAL TOPICS

TECHNICAL TOPICS

INDIVIDUAL TALENT AND COLLECTIVE POWER

The Finals in Jeddah showcased many of the key features in a competition where changes of format and regulations have, figuratively speaking, moved the goalposts. "The AFC Champions League Elite presents an overall high technical level," AFC Technical Observer Nasser Larguet commented, "driven by the influx of international stars into the Gulf clubs and the rising strength of East Asian football. We have a blend of sustained physical intensity, careful tactical organisation and individual technical quality. The recruitment of world-class players with high levels of passing and finishing abilities has made an impact, especially on attacking statistics, while the teams with fewer decisive profiles at the global level respond with collective virtues, relentless intense pressing and well-drilled automatisms. So, we see sophisticated playing systems, structured defensive blocks and rapid transition play, with the direct knockout formula heightening the pressure on every match and revealing the true level of the teams."





The event in Jeddah brought together clubs from six countries and vastly different resources. The Final between Al Ahli Saudi FC and FC Machida Zelvia highlighted the contest between individual talent and collective power. An extra-time goal secured victory for the team which had, in the words of Al Ahli Saudi head coach Matthias Jaissle, "quality players who can make one moment count."

FUNCTIONAL UNITS

The technical observers cited the two Japanese teams as examples of this contest pitting collective strength against opponents of great individual quality. FC Machida Zelvia made no pretensions to dominate possession (their 48.6 per cent of the ball in the Final was actually higher than their 37 per cent against Al Ittihad and 30 per cent against Shabab Al Ahli), and overtly focused on defensive compactness and keeping a clean sheet. Vissel Kobe, on the other hand, dealt with different scenarios during their two matches in Jeddah. With 61 per cent of possession against Al Sadd SC, they adopted a more expansive approach reflected by a tally of 38 crosses. In the Semi-final against Al Ahli Saudi FC (with 41 per cent of the ball), the emphasis was much more on out-of-possession play.

"This is where their collective strength posed significant problems for their opponent," the Technical Observers remarked. "Defensively, their compactness and coordinated, continuous pressing disrupted rhythm and space. In attack, their approach involved multiple players, constantly creating a variety of options and forcing the opposition to defend dynamically.

"After falling behind in the second half, Al Ahli Saudi shifted to a more direct style, including greater use of the long ball – and demonstrated that, even in this situation, their technical quality, underpinned by physical strength, could prove decisive. Even when play involved more high-intensity duels, their level did not drop and, ultimately, individual talent made the difference."

THE CREATIVE KEYS

Al Ahli Saudi FC's performances also indicated that creativity has drifted out towards the wings – arguably because congested central areas have made life more difficult for the traditional playmaker. Operating as inverted wingers, Riyad Mahrez on the right and Galeno on the left emerged as the key figures in the final tournament. During the Final, they created more chances than anyone else, with Mahrez delivering more passes in the final third than any other player and supplying the cross that produced the winning goal. Although classed as wingers, their priority was not to get to the by-line and cross the ball but rather to act as wide schemers playing wall passes, making solo runs or cutting inside.

Relationships with full-backs were finely-tuned: when Mahrez stayed wide, for example, the right-back would make underlapping runs and, if the winger cut in, would exploit his space created on the flank.

TECHNICAL TOPICS

Similar set-ups were employed by other teams. FC Machida Zelvia relied heavily on the combined work of winger Yuki Soma and left-side midfielder Kotaro Hayashi in their creative play; Shabab Al Ahli on Guilherme Bala and Federico Cartabia, wingers who contributed heavily to their passing game in the attacking third. Al Sadd SC's Akram Afif, who ended the season with one goal and five assists, provided another prime example, creating several decisive scoring opportunities from his position wide on the left, notably when he stayed high in out-of-possession play and offered himself as a key catalyst in transition moments.

This tendency entailed an adjustment to the role of the central striker. While Al Sadd's Rafa Mujica performed as a more traditional 'front man', the Final illustrated how Machida Zelvia's Tete Yengi would drop into a deep, roving role – less advanced than the two wide men – but would rapidly appear at the front when a cross seemed imminent. Al Ahli Saudi's Ivan Toney was also prepared to drop into a deeper role – and, significantly, the central striker ended the competition with two goals and three assists.



THE FINAL TOUCH

Discussion about the evolution of the striker's role could use the goalscoring chart as fuel for debate. Al Sadd SC's Rafa Mujica topped the chart with eight goals, many of them with one-touch finishing or, as the Technical Observers remarked, "clinically finishing counterattacks with precise shooting".

Elsewhere, however, there was a different pattern to goalscoring. Al Ahli Saudi FC's 27 goals were shared by 11 players; FC Machida Zelvia's 18 by nine; Shabab Al Ahli's 19 by 10; Vissel Kobe's 21 by 11. For Al Ittihad Club, Karim Benzema scored four in as many games before he left the club, leaving Houssem Aouar to become their top scorer with six goals in eight games from a 'shadow striker' position behind Youssef En-Nesyri.

This prompted the Technical Observers to review efficiency rates in front of goal and wonder whether the notion of sharing goals around the team is necessarily praiseworthy if it involves players who are not adept at the art of finishing. As evidence, debate could focus on Al Ittihad's three on-target efforts from 13 attempts against Machida Zelvia; Buriram United's three from 12 against Shabab Al Ahli (who posted three from 17 against Machida Zelvia); or Vissel Kobe's four from 22 against Al Sadd.

"At this level," the Technical Observers commented, "the ability to convert when it matters most emerged as a defining factor for success. In an era where youth development increasingly leans toward positional play, this serves as a timely reminder that in terms of scoring goals, efficiency remains the ultimate currency."



TRANSITION PHASES

"In tightly-contested matches," the Technical Observers also noted, "it was clear that one of the decisive factors was speed of transition. Defensively, almost every team reacted instantly upon losing possession with high-intensity attempts to regain possession. The key difference between succeeding or failing to do so lay not only in the action of the nearest player in pressing the ball-carrier, but in whether the entire team reacted collectively, the slightest delay by a player positioned far from the ball left space for opponents of this calibre to exploit. Synchronisation away from the ball became a clear key to success."

They pointed out that in the critical phase of the competition, a considerable number of goals originated from moments immediately after turnovers of possession. As examples, they cited all three of Al Sadd's goals in the Quarter-final against Vissel Kobe; Buriram United's 70th-minute equaliser against Shabab Al Ahli, when counter-pressing and a high regain by Peter Zulj allowed him to break clear and score; or the only goal in the FC Machida Zelvia vs Shabab Al Ahli Semi-final when the Japanese team's readiness to press high provoked the defensive error which allowed Yuki Soma to beat the Shabab Al Ahli goalkeeper.

TECHNICAL TOPICS

The AFC's Technical Report on the 2024/25 competition had remarked: "The inaugural AFC Champions League Elite suggested strongly that the ability to counterattack at speed is now an essential item in the top teams' tool kits. One in five of the season's open-play goals could be directly attributable to fast breaks." The exact figure was 21 per cent of the total, which represented a significant increase on the 15 per cent in the preceding seasons and contrasted starkly with the 9 per cent in the pandemic-affected 2021 competition. Despite enhanced awareness of the importance of countering the counter, the 2025/26 season maintained a high level of success, with 41 goals (18 per cent of the open-play total) directly attributable to counterattacking.



There was, however, a shift in the pattern. Classic back-to-front breaks from deep positions, having been the most productive category in the previous season, played a less preponderant role in 2025/26. The majority of successful counters (30 to be precise) were launched from positions higher up the pitch, suggesting greater willingness and ability to press high. Having said that, there were some outstanding classic counters from deep positions. For example, the two-pass break that allowed PFC Nasaf to lead 2-0 away to Al Ahli Saudi FC on Matchday 1. Or a similar two-pass move that rounded-off a 4-1 away win against Al Shorta by ten-man Al Ittihad Club. Or the break which allowed Masoud Kazemayni to run clear and seal Tractor FC's 5-0 away win against Sharjah FC. Or the long-ball counterattacks that provided two of Al Duhail SC's four goals against Al Ittihad on Matchday 5.

Interestingly, successes among the teams from the East were much less frequent – one of the few examples being the long ball from the right-back area that allowed Um Won-sang to score Ulsan HD FC's goal in the 3-1 defeat by Machida Zelvia on Matchday 6. Stretching the point, the penalty converted by FC Seoul against Sanfrecce Hiroshima on Matchday 8 stemmed from a fast break-out from a corner in favour of the visitors. And, hitting the fast-forward button to the Round of 16, the goal by Marcos Guilherme that sealed Johor Darul Ta'zim FC's 3-1 home win was a quick response to an indirect free kick taken by Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

The final balance from the 2025/26 season reveals 11 successful classic counters, 18 collective counters after midfield regains; and 12 goals resulting from ball-winning in advanced areas.

THE FIRST LINE OF ATTACK?

A total of 11 goals clearly attributable to defensive errors represented 5 per cent of the open-play tally and illustrated the harsh fact that mistakes by goalkeepers rarely go unnoticed – or unpunished. An unsuccessful sortie gifted Al Ahli Saudi FC their opening goal against PFC Nasaf on Matchday 1. An error in the build-up allowed Al Gharafa SC to take the lead against Al Shorta on Matchday 2, while the goalkeeper's over-confidence on the ball gave Al Ahli Saudi a 2-1 lead against Al Duhail SC; and a careless pass by the goalkeeper paved the way for Vissel Kobe to defeat FC Seoul with a lob into an unguarded net.

The Technical Observers at the Finals, however, noted that the quality of goalkeepers had a direct, decisive and positive impact on results. FC Machida Zelvia's Kosei Tani, they explained, not only maintained defensive stability - keeping clean sheets from the Round of 16 through to the Final - but also played a crucial role as the starting point of attacking moves, influencing both phases of the game. They also highlighted the value of goalkeepers who, bearing in mind the general trend towards high pressing, were capable of inviting the opposition to stretch their formation by moving forward to press and then exploiting spaces with intelligent and accurate passing.

"A prime example was Edouard Mendy of Al Ahli," they remarked, "whose action in the 19th minute in the Semi-final against Vissel Kobe turned the opponent's high press into an attacking opportunity for his own team. This moment highlighted not only technical excellence but also a high level of tactical insight and fast decision-making."

TECHNICAL TOPICS



ADAPTABILITY COUNTS

Al Ahli Saudi FC's run to the title was something of an obstacle race. In the Quarter-final against Johor Darul Ta'zim FC, a first-half red card for defender Ali Majrashi forced a tactical reshuffle. Switching to a 1-4-4-1 formation, Matthias Jaissle moved centre-back Rayan Hamed to right-back, with holding midfielder Franck Kessie dropping in at centre-back. He organised the defensive line with authority while the team strategy was to form a compact, slightly retreated block, looking to win the ball back and launch counter-attacks from the midfield area. It meant that several players were required to operate outside their usual positions or to play different roles. Attacking specialists Riyad Mahrez and Galeno took on significant defensive responsibilities.

"What stood out was not just their adaptability," the Technical Observers reported, "but also their ability to maintain their specialist qualities at the same time. Mahrez remained a constant attacking threat, Kessie delivered a crucial equaliser and Galeno sealed the game with a trademark right-footed strike. At the highest level, the question is no longer about developing specialist skills - it is also about having all-round skills."

In the Semi-final against Vissel Kobe, they struggled in the first half against the opponent's pressing and conceded from a set piece. Again, the defensive commitment of Mahrez and Galeno impressed the observers "because they contributed fully without any drop in work-rate or loss of attacking quality. Their decisive impact in the second half was a demonstration of international-level class".

While the champions' default style was based on structured build-up play, the second half saw a clear tactical adjustment towards a more direct approach, which proved effective. The coach made a bold decision to withdraw a centre-back and introduce a striker to switch into a two-forward system. The strategic in-game decisions, combined with the players' ability to execute them, ultimately led to victory.

Shabab Al Ahli head coach Paulo Sousa provided another example of shrewd decision-making when his team surrendered a two-goal advantage in the Quarter-final against Buriram United. The observers noted that he "returned to the bench to think quietly and subsequently made two substitutions. The players he sent on lived up to expectations, restoring stability to the team, ultimately paving the way for a winning goal".

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

Shabab Al Ahli's response to the 'losing a lead syndrome' was matched by the mental strength of Al Ahli Saudi FC who failed to convert a penalty and needed an extra-time free kick by Riyad Mahrez to defeat Al Duhail SC; who made life difficult for themselves by having a player dismissed in the Quarter-final and the Final; and who needed to come back from a goal down in the two matches leading up to the Final. Aided by home support, they found the emotional resilience to go for victory even when playing in numerical inferiority. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, of the 57 matches where both teams scored, only 21 were won by the team scoring first. The season demonstrated that in the AFC Champions League Elite™, emotional resilience in adverse situations is an essential quality.





GOALSCORING ANALYSIS

GOALSCORING ANALYSIS

A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Let's kick off the review of goalscoring with a few facts and figures. They may appear to be trivial but some might provide food for thought. The League Stage of the 2025/26 AFC Champions League Elite™ produced 260 goals at an average of 2.71 per fixture. Almost one-quarter of the goals (21.3 per cent to be precise) was scored by the three clubs from the Saudi Pro League who claimed three of the top four places in the West standings. The three teams from Japan's J1 League who topped the ranking in the East shared 39 goals. In other words, clubs from those two domestic competitions shared 38 per cent of the goals.

Whereas East had outscored the West in 2024/25, the figures were comprehensively reversed in 2025/26. During the League Stage, 155 goals hit the net in the West; 105 in the East – a difference of 32 per cent. In the overall goalscoring chart, FC Machida Zelvia and Vissel Kobe were the only clubs from the East to appear in the top ten. The three teams from China PR who propped up the league table in the East shared 14 goals in their 24 fixtures. The Knockout Stage produced 43 goals at an average of 2.26 per game – a low figure, especially bearing in mind that seven of the 19 matches ran into extra-time.





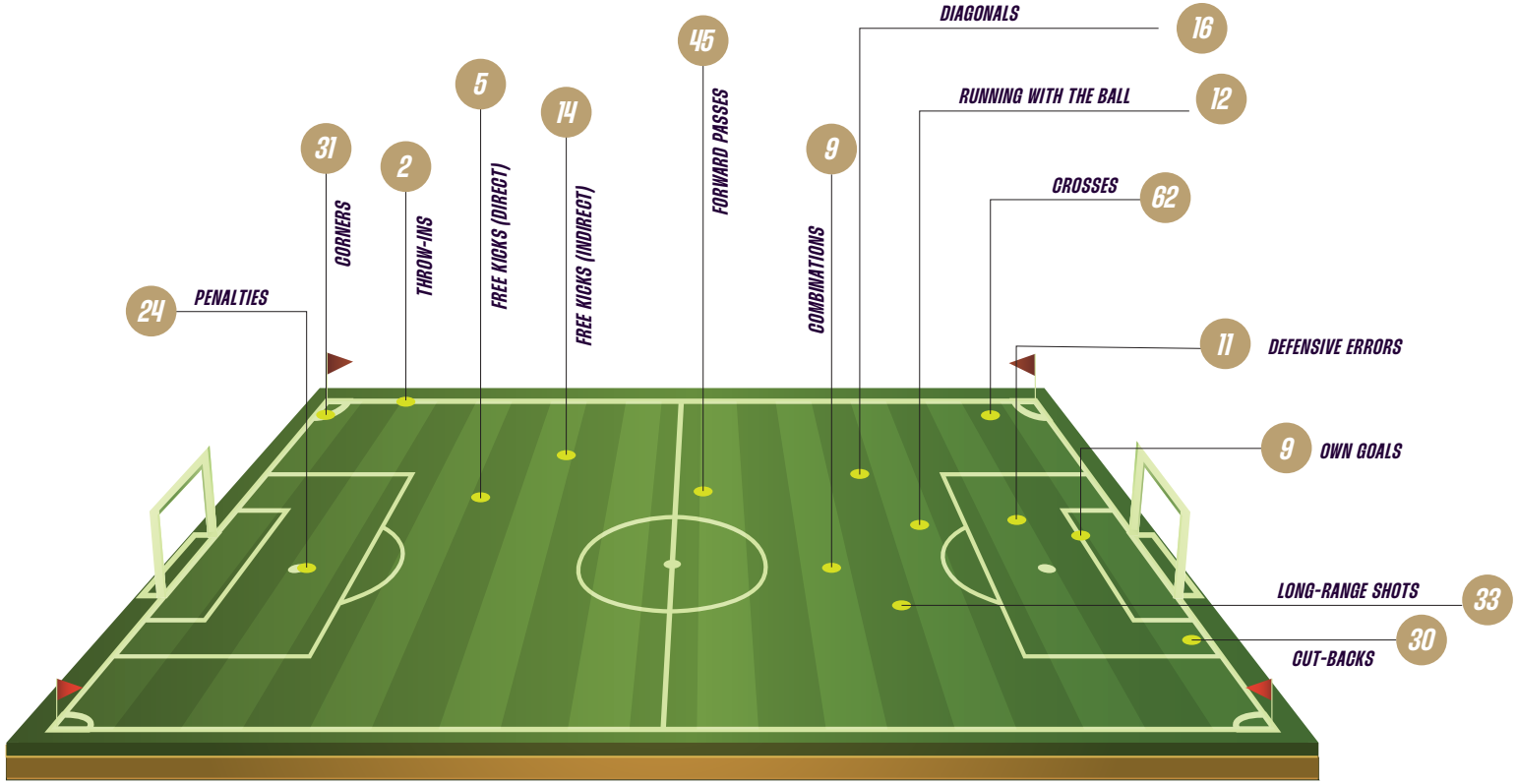
Saudi Arabian clubs took three of the top four places in the competition's overall goalscoring chart, with Vissel Kobe's total of 21 earning them third place among Al Ahli Saudi FC (27), Al Ittihad Club (23) and Al Hilal SFC (20). Runners-up Machida Zelvia scored 18 but only three of those hit the net during their five knockout matches. Interestingly, of the 57 matches in which both teams scored, only 21 ended in victory for the team scoring first.

The bottom line, however, is that the season generated a grand total of 303 goals – 57 fewer than in 2024/25. There was a marginal difference in the number of matches (115 compared with 118 in the previous edition) but the telling statistic is that the average dropped from 3.05 per game in 2024/25 to 2.63 in 2025/26 – a downturn of almost 14 per cent.

The number of goal attempts also fell by 6.4 per cent to 24.6 per match, while the accuracy ratio faded very slightly from 35 per cent to 34.3 per cent in terms of on-target finishing. It required 9.35 attempts to score a goal, compared with 8.4 in 2024/25 and 8.1 in 2023/24. Of the on-target attempts, one in 3.2 found the net compared with one per 2.97 in the previous season. The statistical trend towards goals becoming more expensive invites debate about standards of attacking creativity or, on the other side of the coin, levels of defending and goalkeeping.

The goalscoring graphic breaks down the season's 303 goals into 14 set-play and open-play categories.

GOALSCORING ANALYSIS



GOALS FROM SET PLAY

ACTION	GUIDELINES	GOALS
Corners	Directly / indirectly from a corner	31
Free kicks (direct)	Directly from a free kick	5
Free kicks (indirect)	Indirectly from a free kick	14
Penalties	Spot kicks, including rebounds	24
Throw-ins	Following a throw-in	2

TOTAL GOALS SCORED : 303

GOALS FROM OPEN PLAY

ACTION	GUIDELINES	GOALS
Combinations	Combination moves involving 2/3/4 players	9
Crosses	Crosses from the wing	62
Cut-backs	Backward passes from the goal-line	30
Diagonals	Diagonal passes into the penalty box	16
Running with the ball	Dribbling and finishing or providing an assist	12
Long-range shooting	Shots from outside the penalty box including rebounds	33
Forward passes	Penetrating or aerial passes	45
Defensive errors	Exploiting mistakes by goalkeeper or defenders	11
Own goals	Players scoring against their own team	9

GOALSCORING ANALYSIS

SET PLAYS

Although the number of goals generated by dead-ball situations was 13 lower than in the previous season, this was largely motivated by eight fewer goals from the penalty spot. The percentage of set-play goals remained static at 25 per cent. As AFC Technical Observer Takeshi Ono commented, "it is often said that, the closer a match becomes, the greater the importance of set-pieces – and the Finals in Jeddah provided a prime example of that. Shabab Al Ahli scored three goals from corner kicks to reach the Semi-finals whilst, in the hard-fought clash between Al Ahli Saudi FC and Vissel Kobe, every single goal came from a set piece. The Vissel goal came from a perfectly-timed free kick, with Yuya Osako initiating the move and the ball being delivered at precisely the right moment to break the offside line".

During the season, corners accounted for 41 per cent of the set-play goals – or 60 per cent if penalties are excluded – and were sometimes decisive. Apart from Shabab Al Ahli's 'hat-trick' against Buriram, corners led to all four of Gangwon FC's goals in the 4-3 win against Vissel Kobe on Matchday 3 – two of them second-phase finishes after the corner was partially cleared. The majority of the successful deliveries were inswinging – such as the one by Federico Cartabia, which put Shabab Al Ahli ahead in the Quarter-final and illustrated the importance of a high-quality delivery.



Although 13 of the goals could be credited to the time-honoured formula of corner kick + header, there were examples of well-rehearsed moves, such as the neat corner on the right which allowed Roberto Firmino to set up the Tarek Salman goal that brought Al Sadd SC back to 2-2 in that crazy ending to the home game against Shabab Al Ahli on Matchday 6 when the hosts scored three times between 90+5 and 90+13 to win 4-2. Or the short corner on the left played back to the taker and crossed for Tetsushi Yamakawa to head in the goal that sealed a 2-0 away win against Shanghai Shenhua on Matchday 5. Overall, however, the success rate was one goal per 35 corners – pretty much in line with the 1:32 in 2024/25 and 1:37 in the season before that.



Slim pickings from free kicks have raised eyebrows in AFC technical reports in recent years and the 2025/26 season was no exception. Successes from direct free kicks were, once again, conspicuous by their scarcity. The balance from the previous season had been four goals in 118 games and this was followed-up by five in 115 in 2025/26.



The most important was arguably the strike by Riyad Mahrez (Algeria) that gave Al Ahli Saudi the extra-time victory over Al Duhail SC in the Round of 16 and kept their title defence alive. The others were the free kick by Rey Manaj (Albania) that brought Sharjah FC level at 3-3 in their 4-3 win against Al Gharafa SC on Matchday 1; the strike by Sergej Milinkovic-Savic (Serbia) which Al Hilal SFC's 3-1 victory over Al Sadd on Matchday 3; the hit by Fabinho (Brazil) that put Al Ittihad Club 2-1 up away to Al Shorta on the same Matchday; and the left-footer by Hokuto Shimoda (Japan) in FC Machida Zelvia's 3-1 away win against Gangwon on Matchday 5. As you may have guessed, the nationalities have been deliberately given to raise the question about whether, bearing in mind that honing and practising are generally done at club level, enough attention is being paid on training grounds and at academies to the art of striking a dead ball.

Although indirect free kicks led to 18 per cent of set-play goals, the only success in the Knockout Stage came in the Semi-final when a left-footed delivery from the right was headed on by Yuya Osako for Yoshinori Muto to apply the finishing touch and put Vissel Kobe 1-0 ahead against Al Ahli Saudi. The renaissance of the long throw-in as an attacking weapon was mostly led by teams from the East, with Johor Darul Ta'zim FC, Vissel Kobe and Machida Zelvia featuring it in their repertoire – and the latter employing it to score the only goal in their Quarter-final against Al Ittihad.

GOALSCORING ANALYSIS

OPEN PLAY

The season's total of open-play goals was 44 lower than in 2024/25 – a significant downturn of 16 per cent to a fraction under two per game. The most notable numerical reductions appeared in two categories: goals from long-range and combination play through central areas.

Although shooting from distance generated 33 goals compared with 50 in 2024/25, it still supplied 15 per cent of open-play goals – some of them decisive, such as the two spectacular strikes by Galeno that brought Al Ahli Saudi FC back to level terms in the Semi-final against Vissel Kobe and provided the winner in the Quarter-final against Johor Darul Ta'zim FC. Other stunning examples that highlighted the relevance of shooting from distance included the strike by Ryohei Shirasaki that put FC Machida Zelvia 2-0 ahead against Chengdu Rongcheng FC on Matchday 8 or Sardorbek Bakhromov's equaliser for PFC Nasaf in their 3-2 home defeat by Al Hilal SFC on Matchday 2.

Season after season, the relative scarcity of successes attributable to combination play has prompted debate – and 2025/26 was no exception. Sixteen goals represented 17 per cent of the open-play total or, to put it bluntly, it meant watching seven games to see one. Al Sadd SC provided two examples during their brace of 3-3 draws in the Knockout Stage: when Claudinho, assisted by Romain Saiss, brought the Qataris back to 1-1 against Al Hilal; and when Roberto Firmino and Rafa Mujica put the finishing touches to their second goal against Vissel Kobe. The comparatively rare successes in the 96-match League Stage included the slick move which allowed Jesse Lingard to put FC Seoul 1-0 ahead in their 3-1 away win against Shanghai Port FC.

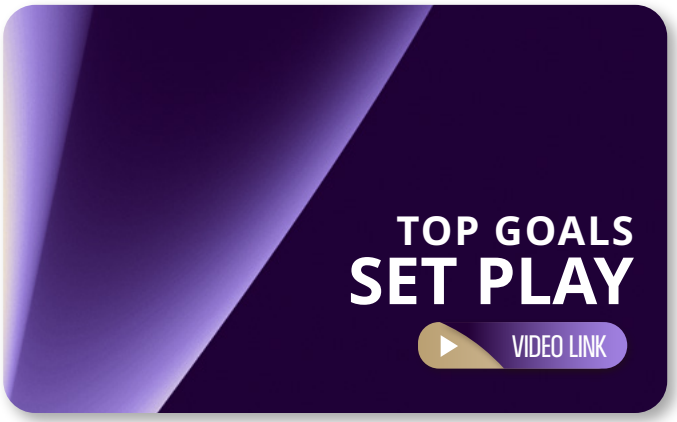


With through passes maintaining 2024/25 levels by providing 20 per cent of open-play goals and 9 per cent attributable to own goals or defensive errors, wing play again proved to be the most productive route towards the net, with crosses, cut-backs and diagonals into the box accounting for 44.5 per cent of the competition's open-play goals. But the season echoed the general trend towards a greater degree of variety in deliveries from the wide areas. The number of crosses declined (but still provided 27.3 per cent), while cut-backs were more successful than in the previous season. Although the traditional cross + header formula produced a positive outcome on 19 occasions (15 in the League Stage), there was a notable tendency towards low deliveries into the box – as illustrated by three of Al Ittihad Club's seven goals against Al Gharafa SC on Matchday 7 or the two Melbourne City FC goals (one cross and one diagonal pass) against Buriram United on Matchday 3.

As mentioned elsewhere, the Final brought together two clubs of contrasting characteristics – and this also applied to their goalscoring patterns. Machida Zelvia, newcomers to the competition, prioritised clean sheets and, during their five knockout games, scored three goals and conceded one. The three successes were down to a defensive error, a long throw and a header after a right-footed delivery from the left. The wide areas (and set plays) were, overall, the main attacking or counterattacking options for Go Kuroda's team, who capitalised on five crosses, three cut-backs and one diagonal. Extremely unusually for a Japanese team, none of their goals came from combinations, through passes or solo runs through central areas.

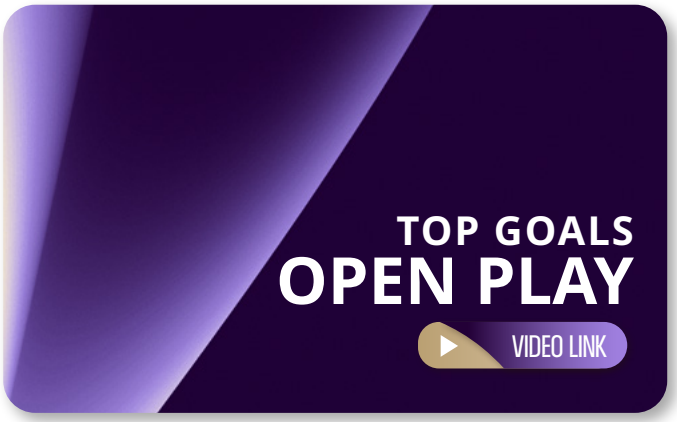
By contrast, Al Ahli Saudi ticked boxes in 13 of the 14 goalscoring categories – the exception being a zero from indirect free kicks. Their open-play goals included four crosses, three cut-backs and one diagonal from the wide areas (plus an own goal from a cross) along with five goals from through passes, two individual runs and one combination through central areas. In other words, the title was won by a team with a wide range of goalscoring options.





SET PLAYS

Ranking	Player	No.	Match	Time	Type
1	Riyad Mahrez	7	Al Ahli (v Al Duhail)	117’	Direct Free Kick
2	Hokuto Shimoda	18	Machida (v Ulsan)	6’	Corner Kick
3	Tetsushi Yamakawa	4	Vissel (v Shanghai Sh.)	39’	Short Corner Kick
4	Darwin Nunez	7	Al Hilal (v Al Wahda)	19’	Indirect Free Kick
5	Rey Manaj	9	Sharjah (v Al Gharafa)	90+1	Direct Free Kick
6	Akito Suzuki	29	Sanfrecce (v Johor)	47’	Indirect Free Kick



OPEN PLAY

Ranking	Player	No.	Match	Time	Type
1	Galeno	13	Al Ahli (v Vissel)	62’	Long-range Shot
2	Guilherme Bissoli	7	Buriram (v Melbourne)	37’	Through Pass
3	Sergej Milinkovic-Savic	22	Al Hilal (v Al Sadd)	29’	Cut-Back
4	Galeno	13	Al Ahli (v Johor)	54’	Long-range Shot
5	Salem Al Dawsari	29	Al Hilal (v Al Sadd)	55'	Combination Play
6	Hotaka Nakamura	88	Machida (v Gangwon)	25’	Diagonal Pass



TALKING POINTS

TALKING POINTS



GAME, SET-PLAY AND MATCH?

Is it worth spending training-ground time on set plays? This has become one of the game's Frequently Asked Questions. And, before asking for an answer, let's try to assemble a few pieces from the Technical Topics and the Goalscoring section into a compact block of evidence.

Even though dead-ball scenarios accounted for a quarter of the goal tally during the 2025/26 season, Shanghai Port FC and Shanghai Shenhua FC, the bottom two clubs in the East section of the League Stage, scored none of them. Neither did Ulsan HD FC, PFC Nasaf or Johor Darul Ta'zim FC. Al Duhail SC scored three – all penalties. JDT reached the Quarter-finals but, by this stage, the other five had been eliminated.

During the Knockout Stage, a direct free kick by Riyad Mahrez gave Al Ahli Saudi FC their 1-0 extra-time victory over Al Duhail SC. A long throw-in on the right earned FC Machida Zelvia their 1-0 win over Al Ittihad Club. Vissel Kobe's 1-0 away success against FC Seoul was thanks to a corner. Dead-ball situations also sealed 1-0 victories for Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Al Ittihad against JDT and Al Wahda FC. Four of the five goals in the Quarter-final between Buriram United and Shabab Al Ahli stemmed from set plays. And Al Ahli Saudi reached the Final when, after an inswinging free kick had allowed Vissel Kobe to take the lead, a corner on the left was played short and the ensuing cross allowed Ivan Toney to apply a back-post finish and clinch the 2-1 win.



In other words, reviewing the season's set plays is not just about counting numbers. It's also about assessing their value – especially in closely-contested matches. All of the games mentioned above were decided by one-goal margins.



Do you agree that the evidence in favour of dedicating time to set plays looks quite compelling? If so, what percentage of training time should focus on dead-ball rehearsals? How much of that time should be spent on delivering set plays and how much on defending against them? What aspects should be covered? Delivery? Off-ball movement? Finishing? And, with the specialised role of Set-Play Coach gaining ground among the top clubs in Europe, is this a trend worth considering?

SEEING RED?

The season's action led to 414 yellow cards and 24 dismissals. But the overall statistics conceal a thought-provoking fact. While the League Stage produced 323 cautions at an average of 3.36 per match, during the Knockout Stage, the average shot up to 4.79. The main talking point, however, is generated by the stats related to red cards: 14 in the 96 League Stage fixtures at around one per seven games. Followed by 10 in 19 knockout matches – one in every two games. Why?

TALKING POINTS

"Since It's fair to argue that the competitive temperature rises at the top end of the competition. It might be fair to discuss the influence of VAR. Al Ahli Saudi, energised by home support, managed to win despite playing with 10 men in two of their four matches. Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Tractor FC, on the other hand, paid a higher price, with red cards (during the first half and shortly after the break respectively) contributing to elimination.



The Final highlighted another dimension. After defender Zakaria Hawsawi had been dismissed for violent conduct, one of Al Ahli Saudi's unused substitutes, Mohammed Abdulrahman was also red-carded. Is the head coach responsible for behaviour on the bench? If not, who is? And what can the coach do to minimise losses of emotional control out on the pitch?



DEVELOPING THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL?

In the Semi-finals, the four teamsheets featured 18 players from Brazil. In the Final, Al Ahli Saudi FC fielded winger Galeno and influential attack-minded centre-back Roger Ibanez, with 19-year-old Ricardo Mathias making a brief appearance as a substitute. The FC Machida Zelvia line-up included 31-year-old wide attacker Erik. The Vissel Kobe squad contained four Brazilian names. And Shabab Al Ahli's 10-strong Brazilian contingent included Renan da Silva, scorer of the dramatic winner against Buriram United and Guilherme Bala, who thought he had scored an equally dramatic stoppage-time equaliser in the Semi-final against Machida Zelvia – only to have it ruled out after a VAR review. Elsewhere, Roberto Firmino plays an influential role at Al Sadd SC; Felipe Silva at Chengdu Rongcheng FC, Marcos Leonardo at Al Hilal SFC ... the list could go on and on.

It raises two talking points. Firstly, what makes Brazil a benchmark-setter in terms of developing players – and, notably, creative attacking players? And, secondly, how can the Brazilian model be replicated?

Interestingly, an answer to the first question can be found in a 2018 interview with World Cup-winning coach Carlos Alberto Parreira in the AFC's Coaches Circle publication.



"Firstly, it is about mass participation," he said. "Many, many people playing football. In Brazil, there are 28 states and each state has its own league, with first, second and third divisions. Plus there is a multitude of youth leagues at different age levels. With so many players, you can find quality. It is a football factory which never stops – it is running twenty-four hours a day. From the age of two or three years old, the kids have a passion for football. There is a love for the game – it is in the blood."

How can the AFC MAs replicate that?!



TEAM TALK

"Since 2017, the club has been working to grow a group of young players, investing a lot in it. Since my time here, my idea has been to create a winning mentality, a culture of winning, looking mainly to be the protagonist in the match. We always want to offer attacking football. We always want to score a lot of goals."

Shabab Al Ahli head coach Paulo Sousa

"We are sad about the result because we played a good game. We knew we were facing a lot of quality but we did well. We almost reached penalties and that could have been a different story. We spoke about the moments in a game with lots of challenges. We knew we wouldn't create a lot but we knew we could create something and we had to be clinical. We did the first part but could not do the second part."

Al Wahda FC head coach Darko Milanic after the extra-time defeat by Al Ittihad Club in the Round of 16





"The players were really passionate and motivated and we were able to keep our shape and discipline, especially in the first half. Our team suffered because for 40 days we had been away from training. We managed our energy in the first half with our strategy and we created opportunities.

"After we went behind we did our best to come back and we played high-risk football to score an equaliser. But our opponents were able to use the space behind our defence and score more goals."

Head coach Mohammad Ali Rabiei after Tractor FC, in mid-conflict, had made their way from the Islamic Republic of Iran to take on Shabab Al Ahli in Jeddah in the Round of 16

"The truth is that we feel disappointed as we didn't achieve what we were aiming for. We delivered a great match away from home; prepared for it well; and expected it to be tough. In the end, we lost to a free kick."

Al Duhail SC head coach Djamel Belmadi after the 1-0 extra-time defeat by Al Ahli Saudi FC

"The team played with commitment, tried everything and scored three goals. We also had many opportunities to take the lead - both in regulation time and extra time – but the opposing team was resolute. We need time to overcome this loss but, in football, you have to have targets and now we must focus on achieving our next objectives."

Al Hilal SFC head coach Simone Inzaghi after the penalty shoot-out defeat by Al Sadd SC



"Our opponents had more quality in the final third but we competed and were always in the game. We are sad but we will try to work hard and push ourselves again next season because it's important to understand how we can do better.

"We didn't control the important moments. We need to mature a little. But I'm not disappointed because we know how difficult it is to play against such a solid defence. We tried to make some transitions in the last line but their players did well. We tried to find solutions but their full-backs were better than our wingers and we couldn't penetrate in the middle either. They were compact and made it difficult for us. We conceded the first from a set piece and the second one was a great goal. The difference was that their keeper stopped our shots and we didn't."

Johor Darul Ta'zim FC head coach Xisco Munoz after the 2-1 Quarter-final loss to Al Ahli Saudi FC

"If you had said before the game that we were going to lose the game through three set-piece goals, it would have been a surprise because that is an area we have done well in this season. Everything our opponents brought to the game were things we had planned for. Including the set plays. It comes down to concentration, keeping focus in those moments. That's where we fell short because we set up the team expecting those. It's about the collective defending as a team and ultimately that cost us."

Buriram United head coach Mark Jackson after three corners had allowed Shabab Al Ahli to win the Quarter-final 3-2



"We had to find solutions. We tried to control the middle because in the first half there was no threat on our goal and that's why we didn't change anything. Then we made some substitutions and did better. We were more dangerous and we had more threats on goal. Everything went well but we weren't successful."

Al Ittihad Club head coach Sergio Conceicao after the 1-0 Quarter-final loss to FC Machida Zelvia

"These long throws are one of our tactics. It's unusual for them to be seen in the world game and it was probably a surprise for our opponent, but it made an impact because we managed to score. It was a situation that was the culmination of something we work on every day. We were aware we weren't going to have many chances, so we made the most of our chances and kept a clean sheet. This is our game and I'm very proud of the team. In football there is a winner and a loser. This time we won but sometimes we lose as well. I think we were lucky today."

FC Machida Zelvia head coach Go Kuroda after a long throw-in on the right had produced the only goal of the Quarter-final against Al Ittihad Club

"It is the mentality of Japanese teams to never give up. We tried to score until the last second and in the last second we did it."

Head coach Michael Skibbe after a goal timed at 90+3 had earned Vissel Kobe a 3-3 draw and extra-time against Al Sadd SC



"I think we played a fantastic game because after the 120 minutes three days ago we produced a very good performance. We deserved to win because it was 3-1 and they scored in the last second. But this is football. When I took over the team we were out of the AFC Champions League Elite. We were at the bottom of the league table. But we qualified for the Finals and I can say nothing about the players. I was very proud of them. They were fantastic in these two games."

Al Sadd SC head coach Roberto Mancini after defeat by Vissel Kobe in the second of two games that required extra-time and penalty shoot-outs

"This is the first time that Machida Zelvia are challenging in Asia and the players are performing really well. Today's opponents were great to play against. We had intended to play compactly and press in the middle. The players stayed focused till the end and that was great. To keep a clean sheet is our motto and we managed to achieve that, so it gives us confidence."

FC Machida Zelvia head coach Go Kuroda after the 1-0 Semi-final victory over Shabab Al Ahli





"It was a completely away environment for us. The players faced a lot of mental pressure and they tried not to get overwhelmed. The players played well and listened to the strategy. We had some opportunities but we could not hit the target, so it became a difficult match for us. We conceded because we didn't pick up the loose balls. We tried to come back but couldn't. We were near but yet still so far away.

"After they had a player sent off, they retreated into their half and focused more on defence. They used lots of high balls as well and used height to their advantage. We knew they were exhausted so we tried to play in the middle more. But we could not hit the target as often as we wanted. Maybe it was a difference in skills. It's a great achievement to be finalists. Experience is important and we gained a lot reaching this stage of the competition. For us staff and the players. We will take this and look to step forward."

FC Machida Zelvia head coach Go Kuroda after the Final

"We knew we were facing opponents who are so disciplined when out of possession. We had opportunities to score but it became harder after Hawsawi was sent off for an unnecessary action. But we showed the right mentality and the players kept believing. That makes me so proud as a coach. We talked about it at the break that, with a man down, we had to suffer more and work harder. However, we have quality players who can make one moment count."

Head coach Matthias Jaissle after the 1-0 extra-time win that secured a second successive title for Al Ahli Saudi FC





AWARDS



TOP GOAL SCORER
RAFA MUJICA | AL SADD SC (QAT)

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER
FRANCK KESSIE | AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)

BEST GOALKEEPER
KOSEI TANI | FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)

AFC FAIR PLAY AWARD : SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)



ALL-STAR SQUAD

FORWARDS



21 | **Youssef En-Nesyri**
(Al Ittihad Club)



19 | **Rafa Mujica**
(Al Sadd SC)



99 | **Tete Yengi**
(FC Machida Zelvia)



10 | **Yuya Osako**
(Vissel Kobe)



9 | **Roberto Firmino**
(Al Sadd SC)



10 | **Enzo Millot**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)

WINGERS



7 **Yuki Soma**
(FC Machida Zelvia)



13 **Galeno**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



77 **Guilherme Bala**
(Shabab Al Ahli)



7 **Riyad Mahrez**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



10 **Federico Cartabia**
(Shabab Al Ahli)



11 **Yoshinori Muto**
(Vissel Kobe)

MIDFIELDERS



8 **Fabinho**
(Al Ittihad Club)



7 **Yosuke Ideguchi**
(Vissel Kobe)



79 **Franck Kessie**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



2 **Danilo Pereira**
(Al Ittihad Club)

DEFENDERS



2 | **Zakaria Hawsawi**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



6 | **Curtis Good**
(Buriram United)



13 | **Renan**
(Shabab Al Ahli)



3 | **Roger Ibanez**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



3 | **Gen Shoji**
(FC Machida Zelvia)



24 | **Gotoku Sakai**
(Vissel Kobe)

GOALKEEPERS



16 | **Edouard Mendy**
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



1 | **Kosei Tani**
(FC Machida Zelvia)



13 | **Andoni Zubiaurre**
(Johor Darul Ta'zim FC)



TEAM PROFILES



AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)

One of the most successful clubs in Saudi Arabia, Al Ahli Saudi FC have won nine Saudi Pro League titles, eight King's Cups and six Crown Prince Cups. The Jeddah-based club won the AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25™ title after an unbeaten campaign, making a resounding comeback after their last AFC Champions League™ appearance in 2021 ended at the Group Stage.

Back for the 14th time on the Continental stage, the defending champions finished second in the 2025/26 League Stage. They then beat Al Duhail SC of Qatar 1-0 in the Round of 16 after extra-time, overcame Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim FC 2-1 in the last eight and registered a similar scoreline against Vissel Kobe of Japan in the Semi-finals. Playing in front of their home fans in the Final, Al Ahli Saudi were made to dig deep after going down to 10 men before dispatching Japan's FC Machida Zelvia 1-0 in extra-time to clinch their second consecutive title.



KEY FEATURES

- Individual brilliance, united as a team
- Even when reduced to ten men, they still bravely attacked — and were rewarded
- Patient build-up play from the back with the goalkeeper involved
- Full-backs push high, while the holding midfielder covers vast areas
- Wingers Riyad Mahrez and Galeno created attack and finish — constant threat from wide
- Compact and well-organised, with flexible block control
- High-intensity ball recovery, especially led by Franck Kessie
- Strong defensive commitment from all, including attackers
- Swift transitions to counter-pressing were a shared priority within the team
- Fast, direct counter-attacks exploited front-line speed



HEAD COACH: MATTHIAS JAISSLE (GER)

A former TSG Hoffenheim and Germany U23 national team player, Matthias Jaissle began his managerial career as assistant coach of Danish Superliga side Brondby IF in 2017 before stints in Austria with Red Bull Salzburg's U18s and FC Liefering. In 2021, he became head coach for RB Salzburg and not only won the domestic double, but also led the club to the UEFA Champions League knockout stage for the first time in their history.

The 38-year-old took over the helm of Al Ahli Saudi FC in 2023, after they had won promotion back to the Saudi Pro League. He led his side to third place in the 2023/24 season, earning them qualification for the AFC Champions League Elite 2024/25™. He subsequently guided them to their first-ever Continental title and then remarkably engineered their second trophy-winning campaign 12 months later.



AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)

The Jeddah-based Al Ittihad Club is amongst the most successful Asian clubs at domestic and continental levels, winning the AFC Champions League™ title twice (in 2004 and 2005), and the Asian Cup Winners' Cup in 1999. A semi-finalist in the 2005 FIFA Club World Championship, Al Ittihad have also won 10 Saudi Pro League titles, 10 King's Cups and eight Crown Prince Cup titles.

Playing in the Knockout Stage for a 10th time in 13 AFC Champions League™ appearances, the 2024/25 Saudi Pro League champions advanced to the Quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™, only to be knocked out by Japan's FC Machida Zelvia by a solitary goal.



KEY FEATURES

- A direct style of football characterised by quick transitions between attack and defence, combining physicality with technical skill
- With their pace down the flanks, they drive the ball forward in one swift move; once in the final third, their outstanding individual ability creates a wide variety of attacking options
- Strengths lie in duels and their organised defensive structure
- Benefits from an experienced senior player leads the defence
- Transitioning to a counter-attack through swift transition from attack
- In defence, quickly retreat and re-establish a compact defensive block



HEAD COACH: SERGIO CONCEICAO (POR)

With 56 caps for Portugal, Sergio Conceicao played in top-tier clubs in Italy, Belgium, Kuwait and Greece before switching to coaching in 2012, with one-year stints in Braga, Portugal and Nantes, France. His crowning achievement was with Porto from 2017-2024, winning a total of 11 trophies, including three Primeira Liga titles and the domestic double in 2019/20 and 2021/22.

The 51-year-old joined AC Milan in 2024 and in the Supercoppa Italiana the same year, led his team from two goals down to beat rivals Inter 3-2. Conceicao then left for his first non-European coaching job when he signed with Al Ittihad Club in 2025.



AL SADD SC (QAT)

Al Sadd are the most successful club in Qatar, holding a national record of 64 official championships, and are the only Qatari team to win the AFC Champions League™. Their Continental win in 2011 also saw them qualify for the FIFA Club World Cup, where they finished third. Al Sadd have numerous records to their name, including 19 Qatar Stars League titles, 19 Emir of Qatar Cups and nine Qatar Cups.

Al Sadd took the eighth and last spot in the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ League Stage, and, in the Round of 16, came from behind three times to beat Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal SFC 4-2 on penalties after their tie ended 3-3 in extra-time. Their Quarter-final clash against Japan's Vissel Kobe also ended 3-3 after extra-time, but this time Al Sadd finished second best in the penalty shoot-out and lost 5-4.



KEY FEATURES

- A direct playing style towards the goal
- Akram Afif plays as a free spirit, making up for his defensive shortcomings with his attacking prowess; in particular, the counter-attacks he initiates pose a real threat to the opposition
- Roberto Firmino brings together a line-up of attackers, each possessing outstanding individual ability, and channels this into collective strength
- The attacking contributions from Paolo Otavio and Claudinho, who make deep runs, add depth to the team
- Whilst committing more players to attack often leaves them exposed to dangerous situations at the back, the centre-backs and goalkeeper make crucial blocks to prevent goals
- Transition from defence to attack is remarkably swift, and they have scored many goals from high-speed counter-attacks



HEAD COACH: ROBERTO MANCINI (ITA)

A former international with 36 caps, Roberto Mancini is most known for his time at Sampdoria from 1982-1997, helping the team win their first Serie A title, four Coppa Italia titles and the European Cup Winners' Cup. At Lazio, he won the Serie A, Coppa Italia, the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup and UEFA Super Cup from 1997-2001.

The 61-year-old was equally successful as a coach, with winning stints at Fiorentina, Lazio, Inter Milan, Manchester City and Galatasaray. Mancini, who was in charge of Italy's national team from 2018-2023, was appointed head coach of Saudi Arabia in 2023 and signed on with Al Sadd SC two years later, guiding them to the Qatar Stars League title in 2025/26.



BURIRAM UNITED (THA)

By far the most popular and successful football club in Thailand, Buriram United made off with a record 12th Thai League 1 crown in 2025/26. The 56-year-old club, who romped to four trophies in 2024 by adding the ASEAN Club Championship title to their domestic treble, have made the AFC Champions League™ Quarter-finals twice since their debut in 2012 (2013, 2024/25).

Making their 10th appearance in the Continental showpiece, Buriram again qualified for the Quarter-finals at the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ after defeating Melbourne City FC 4-2 on penalties in the Round of 16 second leg following a 1-1 draw in the first. They exited the tournament after a 3-2 extra-time loss to UAE's Shabab Al Ahli.



KEY FEATURES

- Direct playing style
- Well-disciplined, hard-working players
- Attack through the width and effective use of full-backs
- From a safety U-shape build-up, seek entry points into the attack by driving down the line or with vertical passes to the target
- The English coach introduces a well-disciplined defence
- Drop back to the mid-field zone and form a compact defensive block, then challenge for the ball with high intensity whenever the opposition plays it forward
- Attempt swift transitions between attack and defence
- However, there is sometimes a disconnect between the players closest to the ball and those further away, which the opposition often exploits



HEAD COACH: MARK JACKSON (ENG)

Mark Jackson started his playing career at Leeds United from 1995 until 2000, earned four caps for the England U23 national team in 1997, and ended his playing days at Farsley FC in 2015. The Englishman rejoined his hometown club Leeds in 2015 as their U15/16 coach before being promoted to the U18, U23 and finally the senior side's assistant coach in 2022.

In 2023, Jackson became head coach of reigning A-League champions Central Coast Mariners and in his first season, won the 2023/24 AFC Cup and the A-League Premiership and A-League Championship in 2023/24. The 46-year-old was appointed head coach of Buriram United in 2025 and helped them defend their domestic title in the 2025/26 season.



FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)

Established in 1989, FC Machida Zelvia claimed the J2 League title to win promotion to the top flight in 2024, finishing third in their debut season to qualify for the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™. They claimed their first major honour in 2025 when they won the Emperor's Cup with a 3-1 victory over Vissel Kobe.

Making their Continental debut, Machida topped the League Stage on 17 points with five wins, defeated Korea Republic's Gangwon FC 1-0 on aggregate in the Round of 16, swept past Al Ittihad Club of Saudi Arabia 1-0 in the Quarter-finals and repeated the scoreline against UAE's Shabab Al Ahli in the last four. Their inspirational fairytale run came to an end in the Final where, in a reversal of fortune, they lost by a solitary goal to Al Ahli Saudi FC.



KEY FEATURES

- A playing style constructed by reverse engineering from the pursuit of victory
- Disciplined, organised, and driven by relentless work rate and team spirit
- Good wing plays using the width, always overloading by three players on the flank (with 2 midfielders and a wide attacker)
- Well-organised set pieces, including long-throws
- From a very compact defensive block in mid-field, then shifting to high-intensity pressing with collective movement
- Duels played with shared intensity across the team
- Fast reactions to regain the ball high
- Strong collective awareness in counter-pressing



HEAD COACH: GO KURODA (JPN)

Appointed ahead of the 2023 campaign with FC Machida Zelvia still in Japan's second division, Go Kuroda made his debut in professional football following three decades in the country's high school football scene. His impact was immediate, as Machida won the J2 League title in his first campaign and finished third in the J1 League standings in his second season.

While Machida slipped to sixth in their 2025 season, Kuroda led the club to their first trophy by helping them lift the prestigious Emperor's Cup and capped off a highly impressive run by steering them to the Final of the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™.



JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)

Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT) FC have won a record 12 consecutive Malaysia Super League titles, the latest secured in 2025/26, and five FA Cups. They became the first Malaysian club to win a Continental title - the AFC Cup™ in 2015, and remain the only Malaysian side to participate in the AFC Champions League™, reaching the Round of 16 for the first time in 2022 and again in 2024/25.

JDT made the Quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ after defeating Sanfrecce Hiroshima of Japan 3-2 on aggregate in the Round of 16. Their historic first-time showing in the last eight, however, saw them fall 2-1 to eventual champions Al Ahli Saudi FC, who came from behind to advance.



KEY FEATURES

- A proactive and aggressive playing style in both attack and defence
- Characterised by a direct playing style that focuses on driving towards goal
- Prioritise vertical passes, especially to target player Jairo
- Quick counterattacks with well-timed running
- A defensive style that aggressively challenges for the ball to win back, without fear of resulting fouls
- However, made things difficult for themselves sometimes with unnecessary fouls
- The fast break immediately after winning the ball is the focus of the team's strategy
- Immediately after losing possession, attempt counter-pressing, but sometimes lack a collective approach



HEAD COACH: FRANCISCO MUNOZ (ESP)

A former youth international, Francisco Munoz won the 2004 UEFA Cup with La Liga side Valencia and ended his playing career with second-tier Spanish side Gimnastic Tarragona in 2016. His first full coaching stint was in 2020 as head coach of his former club Dinamo Tbilisi before moving on the same year to help Watford gain promotion to the English Premier League.

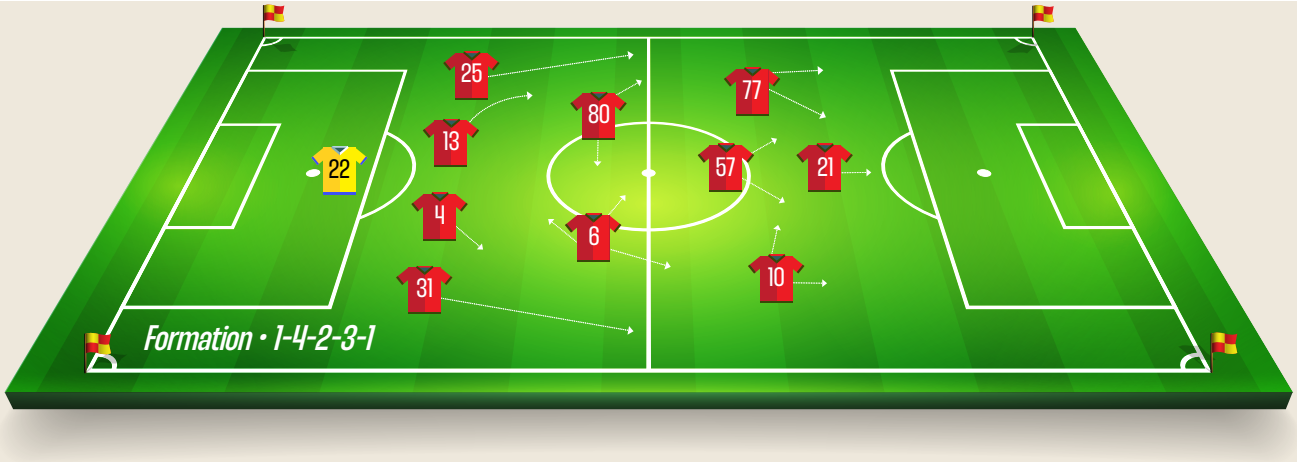
Munoz joined Sheffield Wednesday for four months in 2023 and then took on a year-long stint with FC DAC 1904 in Slovakia. The 45-year-old joined Johor Darul Ta'zim FC in 2025 and led them to the 2025/26 Malaysia Super League title and Malaysia FA Cup the same year.



SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)

One of the most successful clubs in the UAE, Shabab Al Ahli have won nine domestic league titles, including the 2024/25 UAE Pro League, and a record 11 UAE President Cup titles, all in all claiming 36 titles domestically and regionally to become the second-most successful team in their country.

Runners-up in the AFC Champions League™ in 2015, they reached their fifth Knockout Stage at the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ in what was their 10th tournament appearance. After defeating Tractor FC of Islamic Republic of Iran 3-0 in the Round of 16 and Thailand's Buriram United 3-2 after extra-time in the Quarter-finals, Shabab Al Ahli went out after losing 1-0 to FC Machida Zelvia of Japan in the last four.



KEY FEATURES

- The squad is made up not so much of big names as of young, talented players expected to shine in the future, with the coach bringing them together as a unit
- From constructive build-up play, shifting into accelerated attacking play
- Patient, constructive build-up from the back
- Fluid attacking movement with strong 1-on-1 ability
- Highly dangerous on set pieces, with excellent delivery by Federico Cartabia
- Compact structure transitioning into collective pressing
- High-intensity defending driven by total team effort
- Quick defensive transitions as a default team setting
- Fast counter-attacks through pace in the front line



HEAD COACH: PAULO SOUSA (POR)

A member of Portugal's "Golden Generation", Paulo Sousa appeared with the national team at the FIFA World Cup in 2002 and in two European Championships. At the club level, he won the UEFA Champions League with Juventus in 1995/96 and with Borussia Dortmund in the following edition.

Sousa began his coaching career with the Portugal U16s in 2005 and had stints in Leicester City, Fiorentina, Bordeaux and the Poland national team in 2021, among others. After a spell with Serie A side Salernitana in 2023, the 55-year-old came on board with Shabab Al Ahli in 2024 and led them to the league title, UAE President's Cup and UAE Super Cup in his first season.



VISSEL KOBE (JPN)

Founded in 1966 and making their J1 League debut in 1997, Vissel Kobe claimed their first top-tier league title in 2023 and went on to defend the crown the following year, claiming their second Emperor's Cup title in the process. The club qualified for their first AFC Champions League™ in 2020 as winners of the Emperor's Cup, and made their way into the Semi-finals before losing to Korea Republic's Ulsan Hyundai.

At the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™, Vissel Kobe - in their fourth Continental showing - again made the final four following a 5-4 Quarter-final penalty win in a thrilling 3-3 tie with Al Sadd SC of Qatar. The J1 League side, however, fell again in the Semi-finals, bowing out 2-1 to Al Ahli Saudi FC.



KEY FEATURES

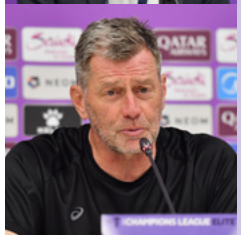
- Collective football at its core, powered by local players and team unity
- Tremendous resilience and winning mentality
- Patient build-up, then rapid vertical acceleration through Yuya Osako
- Dynamic wide play with overlapping full-backs and fluid midfield movement
- Well-disciplined, compact defensive block with high awareness
- Shifted into high pressing with 1-4-4-2 when needed
- Excellent team spirit to win the ball collectively and consistently
- Counter-pressed, as one of the key weapons, created several chances
- Immediate attacking intent after regaining possession



HEAD COACH: TAKAYUKI YOSHIDA (JPN) – until December 2025

A former youth international midfielder, Takayuki Yoshida began his coaching career at Vissel Kobe as assistant coach in 2015, taking charge as head coach in 2017. He departed in 2020 for J2 League club V-Varen Nagasaki before returning in 2022, leading them to consecutive J1 League titles in 2023 and 2024 as well as the 2024 Emperor's Cup.

The 49-year-old's time at Vissel came to a close following a 2-2 draw with Chengdu Rongcheng FC in their AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ tie, with Yoshida taking over at Shimizu S-Pulse for the 2026 season.



HEAD COACH: MICHAEL SKIBBE (GER)

Michael Skibbe became the Bundesliga's youngest-ever head coach at the age of 32 with Borussia Dortmund. After stints with the national team and various European clubs, he found great success with Sanfrecce Hiroshima. Taking charge in 2021, he led them to third place in the J1 League, the runners-up spot in the Emperor's Cup, and their first-ever J.League Cup title, which saw him named J.League Manager of the Year in 2022 and 2024.

Skibbe took over the reins of Vissel Kobe in December 2025, leading the side until their Semi-final defeat against eventual champion Al Ahli Saudi FC.



RESULTS

LEAGUE STAGE

WEST

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
15 Sep 2025	SHARJAH FC (UAE)	4-3 (0-2)	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)
15 Sep 2025	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)	2-1 (0-1)	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)
15 Sep 2025	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	4-2 (0-2)	PFC NASAF (UZB)
15 Sep 2025	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	1-1 (1-0)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
16 Sep 2025	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)	1-1 (0-1)	TRACTOR FC (IRN)
16 Sep 2025	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	2-1 (0-1)	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)
29 Sep 2025	PFC NASAF (UZB)	2-3 (1-2)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
29 Sep 2025	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)	2-0 (0-0)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
29 Sep 2025	TRACTOR FC (IRN)	0-0 (0-0)	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)
29 Sep 2025	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)	2-2 (1-2)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
30 Sep 2025	AL SADD SC (QAT)	1-1 (1-0)	SHARJAH FC (UAE)
30 Sep 2025	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)	0-1 (0-1)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)
20 Oct 2025	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)	3-1 (2-1)	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)
20 Oct 2025	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	1-4 (1-2)	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)
20 Oct 2025	SHARJAH FC (UAE)	0-5 (0-4)	TRACTOR FC (IRN)
20 Oct 2025	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	4-0 (3-0)	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)
21 Oct 2025	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)	4-1 (3-1)	PFC NASAF (UZB)
21 Oct 2025	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	3-1 (2-0)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
3 Nov 2025	PFC NASAF (UZB)	1-2 (1-0)	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)
3 Nov 2025	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)	4-1 (2-1)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)
3 Nov 2025	TRACTOR FC (IRN)	1-0 (1-0)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
3 Nov 2025	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)	1-2 (0-1)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
4 Nov 2025	AL SADD SC (QAT)	1-2 (0-1)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
4 Nov 2025	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)	3-0 (1-0)	SHARJAH FC (UAE)

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
24 Nov 2025	PFC NASAF (UZB)	0-1 (0-1)	TRACTOR FC (IRN)
24 Nov 2025	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)	4-2 (2-0)	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)
24 Nov 2025	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)	2-0 (2-0)	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)
24 Nov 2025	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	0-1 (0-0)	SHARJAH FC (UAE)
25 Nov 2025	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)	3-1 (0-1)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
25 Nov 2025	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	4-0 (1-0)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
22 Dec 2025	TRACTOR FC (IRN)	2-1 (0-1)	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)
22 Dec 2025	SHARJAH FC (UAE)	0-1 (0-0)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
22 Dec 2025	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	0-5 (0-1)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
22 Dec 2025	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)	1-0 (0-0)	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)
23 Dec 2025	AL SADD SC (QAT)	4-2 (0-0)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)
23 Dec 2025	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)	1-0 (0-0)	PFC NASAF (UZB)
9 Feb 2026	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)	0-0 (0-0)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
9 Feb 2026	PFC NASAF (UZB)	1-1 (1-0)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
9 Feb 2026	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)	1-1 (0-1)	SHARJAH FC (UAE)
9 Feb 2026	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)	0-0 (0-0)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
10 Feb 2026	TRACTOR FC (IRN)	0-2 (0-0)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
10 Feb 2026	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)	7-0 (2-0)	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)
16 Feb 2026	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	4-3 (3-0)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)
16 Feb 2026	SHARJAH FC (UAE)	1-2 (0-1)	PFC NASAF (UZB)
16 Feb 2026	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	2-1 (1-1)	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)
16 Feb 2026	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	3-2 (1-2)	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)
17 Feb 2026	AL SADD SC (QAT)	1-4 (1-3)	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)
17 Feb 2026	AL GHARAFA SC (QAT)	0-2 (0-0)	TRACTOR FC (IRN)

EAST

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
16 Sep 2025	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)	0-2 (0-0)	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)
16 Sep 2025	GANGWON FC (KOR)	2-1 (0-1)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
16 Sep 2025	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	1-1 (0-0)	FC SEOUL (KOR)
16 Sep 2025	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	2-1 (0-1)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
17 Sep 2025	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	2-1 (0-1)	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)
17 Sep 2025	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	0-3 (0-3)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
30 Sep 2025	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)	1-1 (1-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
30 Sep 2025	FC SEOUL (KOR)	3-0 (2-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
30 Sep 2025	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)	1-0 (1-0)	GANGWON FC (KOR)
30 Sep 2025	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	0-0 (0-0)	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)
1 Oct 2025	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	1-0 (0-0)	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)
1 Oct 2025	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	1-1 (0-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
21 Oct 2025	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)	0-2 (0-1)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
21 Oct 2025	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)	2-1 (0-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
21 Oct 2025	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	1-0 (1-0)	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)
21 Oct 2025	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	0-2 (0-2)	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)
22 Oct 2025	GANGWON FC (KOR)	4-3 (3-0)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
22 Oct 2025	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	2-0 (0-0)	FC SEOUL (KOR)
4 Nov 2025	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)	1-0 (0-0)	GANGWON FC (KOR)
4 Nov 2025	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	1-2 (1-1)	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)
4 Nov 2025	FC SEOUL (KOR)	0-0 (0-0)	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)
4 Nov 2025	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	2-0 (1-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
5 Nov 2025	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	1-0 (0-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
5 Nov 2025	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	3-1 (0-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
25 Nov 2025	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	1-3 (0-0)	FC SEOUL (KOR)
25 Nov 2025	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)	2-0 (1-0)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
25 Nov 2025	GANGWON FC (KOR)	1-3 (0-3)	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)
25 Nov 2025	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)	1-1 (1-0)	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)
26 Nov 2025	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	0-0 (0-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
26 Nov 2025	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	0-2 (0-2)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
9 Dec 2025	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	2-2 (1-1)	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)
9 Dec 2025	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	3-1 (2-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
9 Dec 2025	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	2-2 (0-1)	GANGWON FC (KOR)
9 Dec 2025	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	0-0 (0-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
10 Dec 2025	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)	1-0 (0-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
10 Dec 2025	FC SEOUL (KOR)	1-1 (1-0)	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)
10 Feb 2026	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	2-0 (0-0)	FC SEOUL (KOR)
10 Feb 2026	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)	2-1 (1-1)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
10 Feb 2026	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	0-2 (0-1)	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)
10 Feb 2026	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)	0-1 (0-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
11 Feb 2026	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	1-2 (0-1)	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)
11 Feb 2026	GANGWON FC (KOR)	0-0 (0-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
17 Feb 2026	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	3-2 (2-1)	CHENGDU RONGCHENG FC (CHN)
17 Feb 2026	FC SEOUL (KOR)	2-2 (2-0)	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)
17 Feb 2026	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	2-0 (2-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
17 Feb 2026	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	1-0 (0-0)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
18 Feb 2026	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	0-0 (0-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
18 Feb 2026	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)	0-0 (0-0)	GANGWON FC (KOR)

ROUND OF 16

1ST LEG

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
3 Mar 2026	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)	1-1 (0-1)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
3 Mar 2026	GANGWON FC (KOR)	0-0 (0-0)	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)
4 Mar 2026	FC SEOUL (KOR)	0-1 (0-1)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
4 Mar 2026	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	3-1 (0-0)	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)

1ST LEG

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
10 Mar 2026	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	1-0 (1-0)	GANGWON FC (KOR)
10 Mar 2026	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	0-0 a.e.t. (0-0,0-0)4-2 PSO	MELBOURNE CITY FC (AUS)
11 Mar 2026	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	2-1 (0-1)	FC SEOUL (KOR)
11 Mar 2026	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA (JPN)	1-0 (0-0)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)

R16 (Centralised)

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
13 Apr 2026	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	1-0 a.e.t. (0-0,0-0)	AL DUHAIL SC (QAT)
13 Apr 2026	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	3-3 a.e.t. (3-3,1-1)2-4 PSO	AL SADD SC (QAT)
14 Apr 2026	TRACTOR FC (IRN)	0-3 (0-0)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)
14 Apr 2026	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)	1-0 a.e.t. (0-0,0-0)	AL WAHDA FC (UAE)

QUARTER-FINALS

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
16 Apr 2026	AL SADD SC (QAT)	3-3 a.e.t. (3-3,1-1)4-5 PSO	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
17 Apr 2026	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	2-1 (1-1)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
17 Apr 2026	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	1-0 (1-0)	AL ITTIHAD CLUB (KSA)
18 Apr 2026	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	2-3 a.e.t. (2-2,0-1)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)

SEMI-FINALS

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
20 Apr 2026	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	1-2 (1-0)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
21 Apr 2026	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)	1-0 (1-0)	SHABAB AL AHLI (UAE)

FINAL

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
25 Apr 2026	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	1-0 a.e.t. (0-0,0-0)	FC MACHIDA ZELVIA (JPN)








ALSADD
1969
QATAR AIRWAYS
KELME
AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

REFEREEING

LEAGUE STAGE

1. SUMMARY

A total of 79 referees, 81 assistant referees, and 28 Video Match Officials were appointed to officiate the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™.

Referees	MA
Adam Peter Kersey	AUS
Alexander George King	AUS
Daniel John Elder	AUS
Alireza Faghani	AUS
Casey Lisa Reibelt	AUS
Shaun Robert Evans	AUS
Ammar Ebrahim Hasan Mahfoodh	BHR
Dong Fangyu	CHN
Jin Jingyuan	CHN
Ma Ning	CHN
Shen Yinhao	CHN
Zhang Lei	CHN
Liu Kwok Man	HKG
Tam Ping Wun	HKG
Thoriq Munir Alkatiri	IDN
Payam Heidari	IRN
Syedvahid Kazemi	IRN
Mooud Bonyadifard	IRN
Mohanad Qasim Eesee Sarray	IRQ
Yousif Saeed Hasan	IRQ
Zaid Thamer Mohammed	IRQ
Adham Mohammad Tumah Makhadmeh	JOR
Ahmed Faisal Mohammad Alali	JOR
Yusuke Araki	JPN
Hiroki Kasahara	JPN
Koki Nagamine	JPN
Ryo Tanimoto	JPN
Yoshimi Yamashita	JPN
Mederbek Taichiev	KGZ
Chae Sang-hyeop	KOR
Choi Hyun-jai	KOR
Kim Dae-yong	KOR
Kim Hee-gon	KOR
Kim Jong-hyeok	KOR
Ko Hyung-jin	KOR
Abdullah Dhafer A Alshehri	KSA
Shukri Hussain A Alhunfush	KSA
Faisal Sulaiman A Albalawi	KSA
Khalid Saleh H Alturais	KSA
Majed Mohammed H Alshamrani	KSA
Mohammed Khled S Al Hoish	KSA
Abdullah M M H M H Jamali	KUW
Ahmad Kh Y Y A Alali	KUW
Ammar I S A M Ashkanani	KUW
Saud M M T A Alsamhan	KUW
Hussein Abo Yehia	LBN
Muhammad Nazmi Bin Nasaruddin	MAS
Razlan Joffri Bin Ali	MAS
Tuan Mohd Yaasin Bin Tuan Mohd Hanafiah	MAS
Ahmed Abu Bakar Said Al Kaf	OMA
Mahmood Salim Said Al Majarafi	OMA
Omar Mubarak Mazaroua Al Yaqoubi	OMA
Qasim Matar Ali Al-Hatmi	OMA
Yahya Ahmed Ibrahim Al Balushi	OMA
Abdulhadi Alasmar M A Al-Ruaile	QAT
Abdulla Ali A A Al-Marri	QAT
Abdulrahman Ibrahim Y J Al-Jassim	QAT
Mohammed Ahmed K D Al-Shammari	QAT
Salman Ahmad Falahi	QAT
Ahmad A'Qashah Bin Ahmad Al'Badowe	SGP
Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari Bin Jahari	SGP
Hanna Hattab	SYR
Mongkolchai Pechsri	THA
Torphong Somsing	THA
Abdullo Davlatov	TJK
Sadullo Gulmurodi	TJK
Nasrullo Kabirov	TJK
Resul Mamedov	TKM
Adel Ali Ahmed Khamis Alnaqbi	UAE
Ahmed Eisa Mohamed Darwish	UAE

Omar Mohamed Ahmed Hassan Alali	UAE
Sultan Mohamed Saleh Yousif Alhammadi	UAE
Yahya Ali Mohammad Hassan Almulla	UAE
Rustam Lutfullin	UZB
Asker Nadjafaliev	UZB
Akhrol Riskullaev	UZB
Akobirkhuja Shukurullaev	UZB
Ilgiz Tantashev	UZB
Ngo Duy Lan	VIE
Assistant Referees	**MA**
Andrew Meimarakis	AUS
Ashley Warwick Beecham	AUS
James Andrew Lindsay	AUS
Kearney John Robinson	AUS
George Lakrindis	AUS
Madelaine Ruth Allum	AUS
Owen Goldrick	AUS
Bradley Wright	AUS
Abdulla Saleh Abdulla Mohsen Alrowaimi	BHR
Mohamed Jaafar Mohamed Salman	BHR
Guo Jingtao	CHN
Shi Xiang	CHN
Xie Lijun	CHN
Zhang Cheng	CHN
Zhou Fei	CHN
Ali Ahmadi	IRN
Farhad Farhadpoor	IRN
Farhad Moravveji	IRN
Alireza Ildorom	IRN
Ahmed Sabah Qasim Al-Baghdadi	IRQ
Ameer Dawood Hussein Alwindawi	IRQ
Hayder Abdulhasan Ali Ubaydee	IRQ
Watheq Mdallal Obaid Al-Swaiedi	IRQ
Ahmad Moannes Nadi Alroalle	JOR
Mohammad Mustafa Hassan Alkalaf	JOR
Makoto Bozono	JPN
Chihiro Ikki	JPN
Jun Mihara	JPN
Isao Nishihashi	JPN
Takumi Takagi	JPN
Yosuke Takebe	JPN
Asada Takeshi	JPN
Kota Watanabe	JPN
Bang Gi-yeol	KOR
Cheon Jin-hee	KOR
Jang Jong-pil	KOR
Park Kyun-yong	KOR
Park Sang-jun	KOR
Mohammed Maki A Alabakry	KSA
Hesham Mohammed A Alrefaei	KSA
Khalaf Zaid M Alshammari	KSA
Abdulrahim Habeeb T Alshammari	KSA
Omar Ali A Aljamal	KSA
Yasir Abdullah S Alsultan	KSA
Abdulhadi M O A B Alanezi	KUW
Ahmad S H M Abbas	KUW
Ali T H A Jraq	KUW
Saoud A J H J Alshemali	KUW
Saud M A H S Alrashedi	KUW
Ashokraj S/O Jeevaraja	MAS
Mohamad Mu Azi Bin Zainal Abidin	MAS
Mohamad Zairul Bin Khalil Tan	MAS
Mohd Arif Shamil Bin Abd Rasid	MAS
Hamed Talib Saif Al Ghafri	OMA
Abu Bakar Salim Mahad Al-Amri	OMA
Nasser Salim Abdullah Ambusaidi	OMA
Rashid Hamed Ali Al Ghaithi	OMA
Juma Mohammed K H Al-Burshaid	QAT
Majid Hudaires M A Alshammari	QAT
Ramzan Saeed M A Al-Naemi	QAT
Saoud Ahmed S A Almaqaleh	QAT
Taleb Salem H A Al-Marri	QAT
Yousuf Aref M A Al-Shamari	QAT
Zahy Snaid S A Alshammari	QAT
Abdul Hannan Bin Abdul Hasim	SGP
Andy Tan Mint Land	SGP
Manoj Kalwani	SGP
Hasan Karimov	TJK

Farkhod Kuralov	TJK
Ahmed Saeed Ahmed Alasal Alrashdi	UAE
Ali Rashid Mohamed Aljorn Alnuaimi	UAE
Jasem Abdulla Yousef Abdulla Al-Ali	UAE
Mohamed Ahmed Yousef Abdulla Alhammdi	UAE
Sabet Obaid Suroor Sabet Al-Ali	UAE
Saeed Rashed Mohamed Abdulla Almarzooqi	UAE
Timur Gaynullin	UZB
Akmal Giyosov	UZB
Ruslan Serazitdinov	UZB
Bakhtiyorkhuja Shavkatov	UZB
Sanjar Shayusupov	UZB
Andrey Tsapenko	UZB
Assistant Referees	**MA**
Katherine Margaret Jacewicz	AUS
Du Jianxin	CHN
Fu Ming	CHN
Wang Di	CHN
Luk Kin Sun	HKG
Jumpei Iida	JPN
Kim Woo-sung	KOR
Kim Yu-jeong	KOR
Lee Seul-gi	KOR
Sultan Sanat L Alharbi	KSA
Mamdouh Mufareh A Al Shadan	KSA
Sami Ahmed M Aljurays	KSA
Abdullah H A M GH H Alkandari	KUW
Abdullah M E A H Arab	KUW
Hashem S H H M Alibrahim	KUW
Khamis Mohammed S A Al-Marri	QAT
Meshari Ali A R Alshamari	QAT
Mohamed Ahmed E E Mohamed	QAT
Foo Chuan Hui	SGP
Sivakorn Pu-Udom	THA
Sayyodjon Zainiddinov	TJK
Ahmed Saeed Mohamed Ali Alnaqbi	UAE
Easa Khalifa Ahmed Khalaf Alhajeri	UAE
Mohammed Obaid Khadim Mohammed	UAE
Saqr Hamdan Saif Alalkeem Alzaabi	UAE
Sultan Abdulrazzaq Ibrahim S Almarzooqi	UAE
Abdurashid Khudoyberganov	UZB
Firdavs Norsafarov	UZB

2.1 VAR IMPLEMENTATION STATISTICS

The VAR system was deployed across 115 matches starting from the League Stage. In line with FIFA's strict standards and requirements, all Match Officials appointed as Video Match Officials were fully certified to operate the technology. Following each match, online debriefing sessions were conducted where leading AFC Referee Technical Instructors reviewed specific match incidents and provided feedback on areas for improvement.

VAR REVIEW	TOTAL	DECISION CHANGED	DECISION CONFIRMED
TOTAL REVIEWS	57	46	11
On Field Reviews	45	34	11
Only VAR Reviews	12	12	/
Penalty area incidents reviewed	27	17	10
Goals reviewed	20	20	0
Encroachment by GK in PK reviewed	1	1	0
Potential **red card incidents** reviewed	9	8	1
Mistaken identity situations reviewed	0	0	/
Average reviews per match	0.50		
1 Review every # matches	2.02		

There was a match average of 0.50 reviews per match, equivalent to 1 review every 2.02 matches.

3. TECHNICAL SUMMARY

3.1 GENERAL PERFORMANCE

Across 117 matches, including the Preliminary Stage matches, referee assessors and instructors evaluated the overall performance of match officials positively based on their assessments. The introduction of a new evaluation framework in the 2024/25 season supported ongoing performance improvement throughout the campaign. Referee assessors and instructors played a key role in this process by closely monitoring and evaluating match officials, with their detailed reports offering valuable insights that contributed to continuous development.

Match officials also gained from a series of six post-match online briefings held during the season, delivered by AFC's leading Referee Technical Educators.



3.2 GENERAL MANAGEMENT

A total of 444 disciplinary sanctions were recorded in the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26™ from the Preliminary Stage onwards, including 420 cautions (yellow cards). There were eight dismissals resulting from second cautions, along with 16 direct red cards. On average, matches saw 3.65 yellow cards and 0.21 red cards per game.

FINAL

1. SUMMARY

Since the competition's recent restructuring, the second-ever Finals were held in Jeddah between April 16 and 25, 2026, whereby a total of 28 match officials, comprising nine referees and 10 assistant referees, as well as nine video match officials, were appointed.

1.1 AFC MATCH OFFICIALS

Referees	MA
Ma Ning	CHN
Adham Mohammad Tumah Makhadmeh	JOR
Yusuke Araki	JPN
Khalid Saleh H Alturais	KSA
Ahmed Abu Bakar Said Al Kaf	OMA
Abdulrahman Ibrahim Y J Al-Jassim	QAT
Salman Ahmad Falahi	QAT
Omar Mohamed Ahmed Hassan Alali	UAE
Ilgiz Tantashev	UZB
Assistant Referees	**MA**
George Lakrindis	AUS
Zhou Fei	CHN
Mohammad Mustafa Hassan Alkalaf	JOR
Jun Mihara	JPN
Mohammed Maki A Alabakry	KSA
Abu Bakar Salim Mahad Al-Amri	OMA
Ramzan Saeed M A Al-Naemi	QAT
Taleb Salem H A Al-Marri	QAT
Mohamed Ahmed Yousef Abdulla Alhammadi	UAE
Andrey Tsapenko	UZB
Video Match Officials	**MA**
Fu Ming	CHN
Khamis Mohammed S A Al-Marri	QAT
Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari Bin Jahari	SGP
Technical Instructors/Assessors	**MA**
Ali Ahmed I Altraifi	KSA
Subkhiddin Bin Mohd Salleh	MAS
Vladislav Tseytlin	UZB
Fitness Instructors	**MA**
Khamis Mohamed K A Al-Kuwari	QAT
Ganesan S/O Maniam	SGP

1.1 SUPPORT TEAM

Referees' Liaison Officers: A dedicated team of Liaison Officers supported the coordination of all logistical arrangements.

Players Team: Local teams participated in practical training sessions for referees.

Medical Team: A medical doctor was based at the AFC HQ hotel throughout the competition, while a team of physiotherapists and masseurs supported the referees' physical conditioning. In addition, an ambulance and paramedic team were deployed daily at the training venue to provide emergency and first aid services as required.





2. PREPARATORY COURSE

The referees and assistant referees participated in a three-day preparatory course from April 13 to 15, 2026, consisting of theoretical sessions and practical training sessions with an Instant Feedback set-up.

2.1 PRACTICAL SESSIONS

Two teams, along with a coach, supported the simulation of match incidents in accordance with the instructors' training plan. Fitness training was conducted in parallel with Instant Feedback sessions to ensure that Match Officials were adequately prepared for their upcoming appointments.

2.2 THEORETICAL SESSIONS

The theoretical sessions were aimed at strengthening the match officials' technical knowledge and improving consistency in the application of the Laws of the Game. A range of match incident videos - particularly from the four single-leg Round of 16 (West) fixtures - were reviewed and discussed to encourage active participation, analysis, and alignment among the officials. To complete the preparations, key information related to fitness and administrative matters was also provided.

3. DURING COMPETITION

3.1 PRACTICAL SESSIONS

Daily practical training sessions were conducted to emphasise fitness conditioning and maintenance. Referees and assistant referees appointed for matches performed customised exercises planned for matchday minus 2 (MD –2) and minus 1 (MD –1). Gymnasium and pool recovery sessions were also delivered as part of their post-match programme.

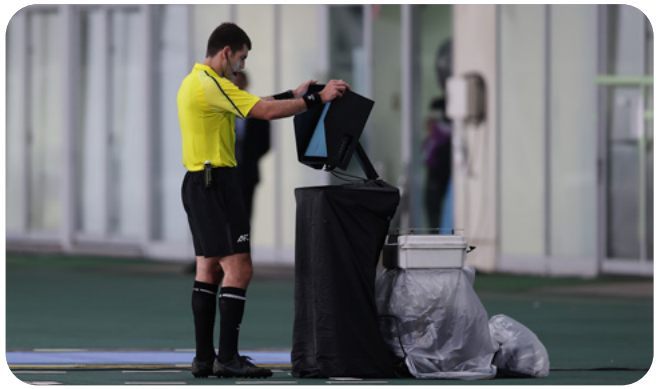
3.2 MATCH ASSESSMENT

All matches were analysed in real time by a video referee assessor based in the Remote Monitoring Room at the referees' hotel. The assessor monitored key match situations and compiled comprehensive details, including the timing and nature of incidents, decisions and disciplinary actions, and other relevant observations for review.

In addition, referee assessors were assigned to observe performances live at the match venues. They closely evaluated the officials' decision-making and overall teamwork throughout the match, providing immediate, first-hand feedback.

3.3 MATCH DEBRIEFING SESSIONS

The match debriefings held for the appointed officials served as an essential learning platform, with key incidents from previous matches analysed to better prepare them for upcoming challenges. By examining specific situations and reinforcing officiating standards, the instructors identified areas for improvement and provided guidance to promote consistency and uniformity in foul recognition and the application of the Laws of the Game.



4. VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE (VAR) SYSTEM

The VAR system was implemented for all seven matches.

4.1 TECHNICAL SETUP

A decentralised system was implemented for the competition meaning that there was a Video Operations Room (VOR) located at each venue from where the VMOs operated. Each VOR was situated in a room within the stadium, near the broadcast compound to allow camera feeds to be easily provided to the VAR System.

- Technology Provider
  - Hawk-Eye Innovations Ltd (video and audio)
- Video Operation Room
  - Located at each stadium
  - Reception of all camera feeds from the Host Broadcaster
- Referee Review Area
  - Pyramid Monitor
  - Located next to or behind the fourth official's bench at each venue
  - Displays VAR output screen for Referees to review incidents in the case of an On-field Review

4.2 VAR IMPLEMENTATION STATISTICS

VAR REVIEW	TOTAL	DECISION CHANGED	DECISION CONFIRMED
TOTAL REVIEWS	6	5	1
On Field Reviews	5	4	1
Only VAR Reviews	1	1	/
Penalty area incidents reviewed	3	2	1
Goals reviewed	3	3	0
Encroachment by GK in PK reviewed	0	0	0
Potential **red card incidents** reviewed	0	0	0
Mistaken identity situations reviewed	0	0	/
Average reviews per match	0.86		
1 Review every # matches	1.17		

There was a match average of 0.86 reviews per match, equivalent to 1 review every 1.17 matches.

5. TECHNICAL SUMMARY

5.1 GENERAL PERFORMANCE

Based on their match reports and close monitoring, the referee assessors and instructors evaluated the overall performance of match officials positively. The combination of daily training sessions, match debriefings, and other developmental activities and resources played a significant role in enhancing decision-making as the tournament progressed.



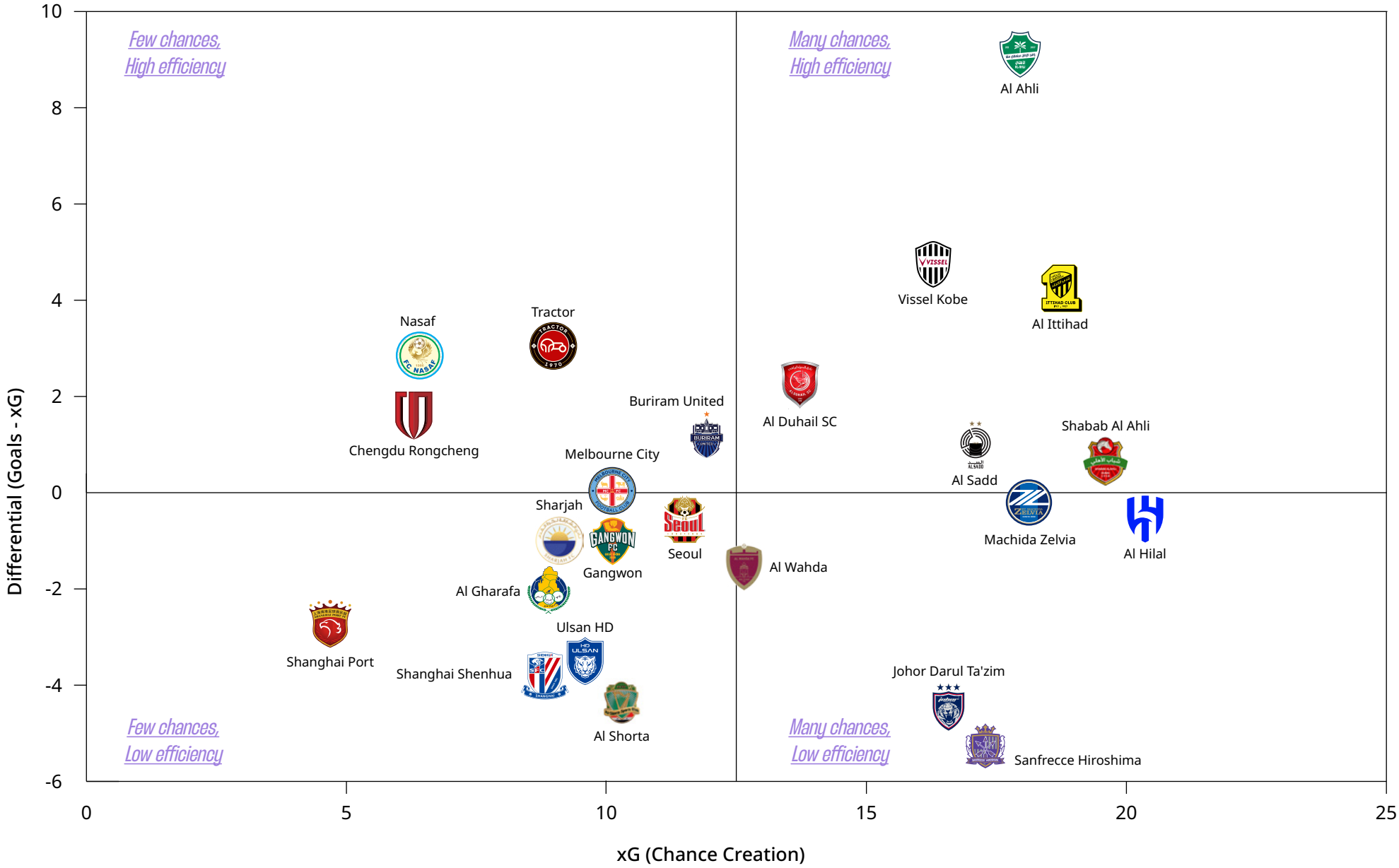
5.2 GENERAL MANAGEMENT

A total of 41 disciplinary sanctions were recorded during the AFC Champions League Elite Finals Jeddah 2026™, including 35 cautions (yellow cards) and six direct red cards, with match averages of 5.00 yellow cards and 0.86 red cards.



EXTRA TIME

CHANCE CREATING - GOAL EFFICIENCY METRICS (Goals–xG vS xG)



GOAL DIFFERENTIAL

Rank	Team	Expected Goals	Goals	Differential (Goals - Expected Goals)
1	Al Hilal SFC	20.4	20	-0.4
2	Shabab Al Ahli	19.6	20	0.4
3	Al Ittihad Club	18.7	23	4.3
4	FC Machida Zelvia	18.1	18	-0.1
5	Al Ahli Saudi FC	17.9	27	9.1
6	Sanfrecce Hiroshima	17.3	12	-5.3
7	Al Sadd SC	17.1	18	0.9
8	Johor Darul Ta'zim FC	16.5	12	-4.5
9	Vissel Kobe	16.2	21	4.8
10	Al Duhail SC	13.7	16	2.3
11	Al Wahda FC	12.6	11	-1.6
12	Buriram United	11.9	13	1.1
13	FC Seoul	11.5	11	-0.5
14	Al Shorta	10.4	6	-4.4
15	Melbourne City FC	10.1	10	-0.1
15	Gangwon FC	10.1	9	-1.1
17	Ulsan HD FC	9.5	6	-3.5
18	Sharjah FC	9.1	8	-1.1
19	Tractor FC	9	12	3
20	Al Gharafa SC	8.9	7	-1.9
21	Shanghai Shenhua FC	8.7	5	-3.7
22	PFC Nasaf	6.3	9	2.7
23	Chengdu Rongcheng FC	5.3	7	1.7
24	Shanghai Port FC	4.7	2	-2.7

PPDA: PASSES PER DEFENSIVE ACTION

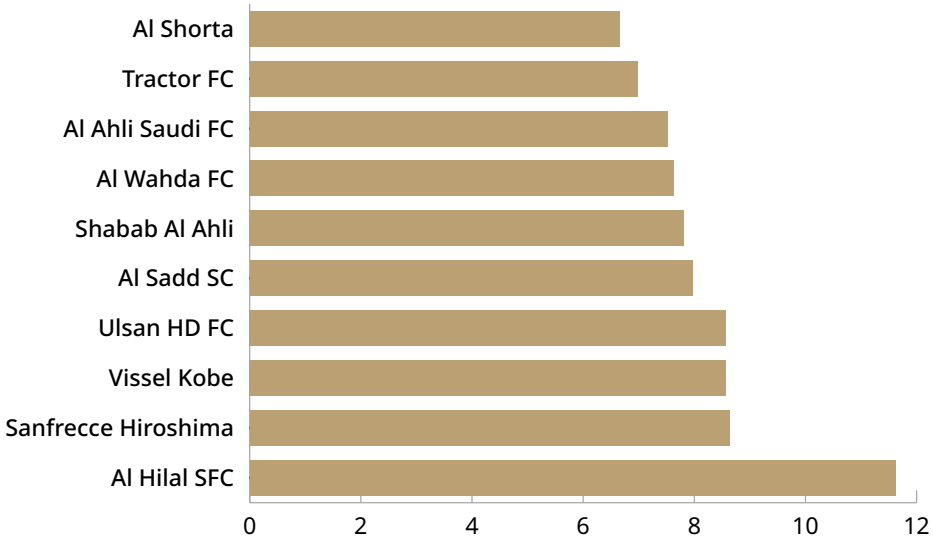
Retreating Block Strategy



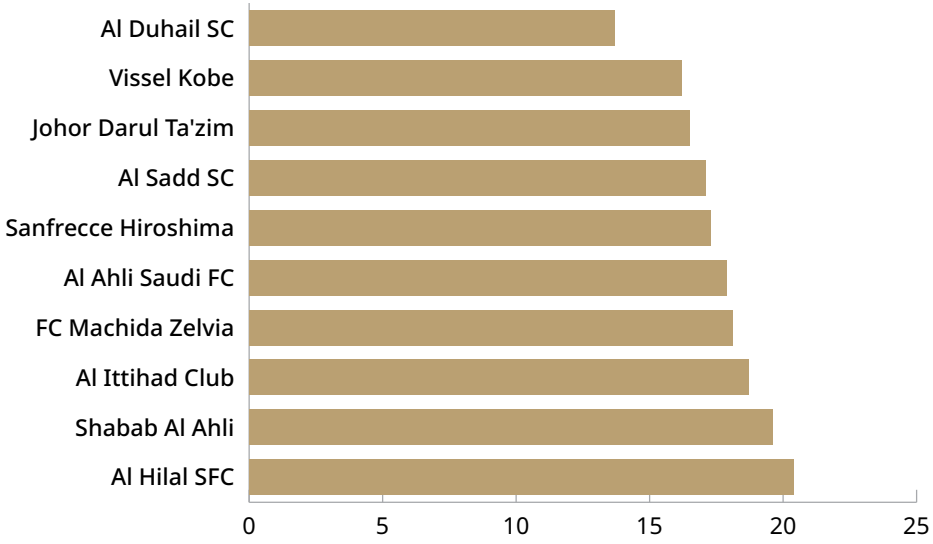
High Pressing Strategy

ATTACKING

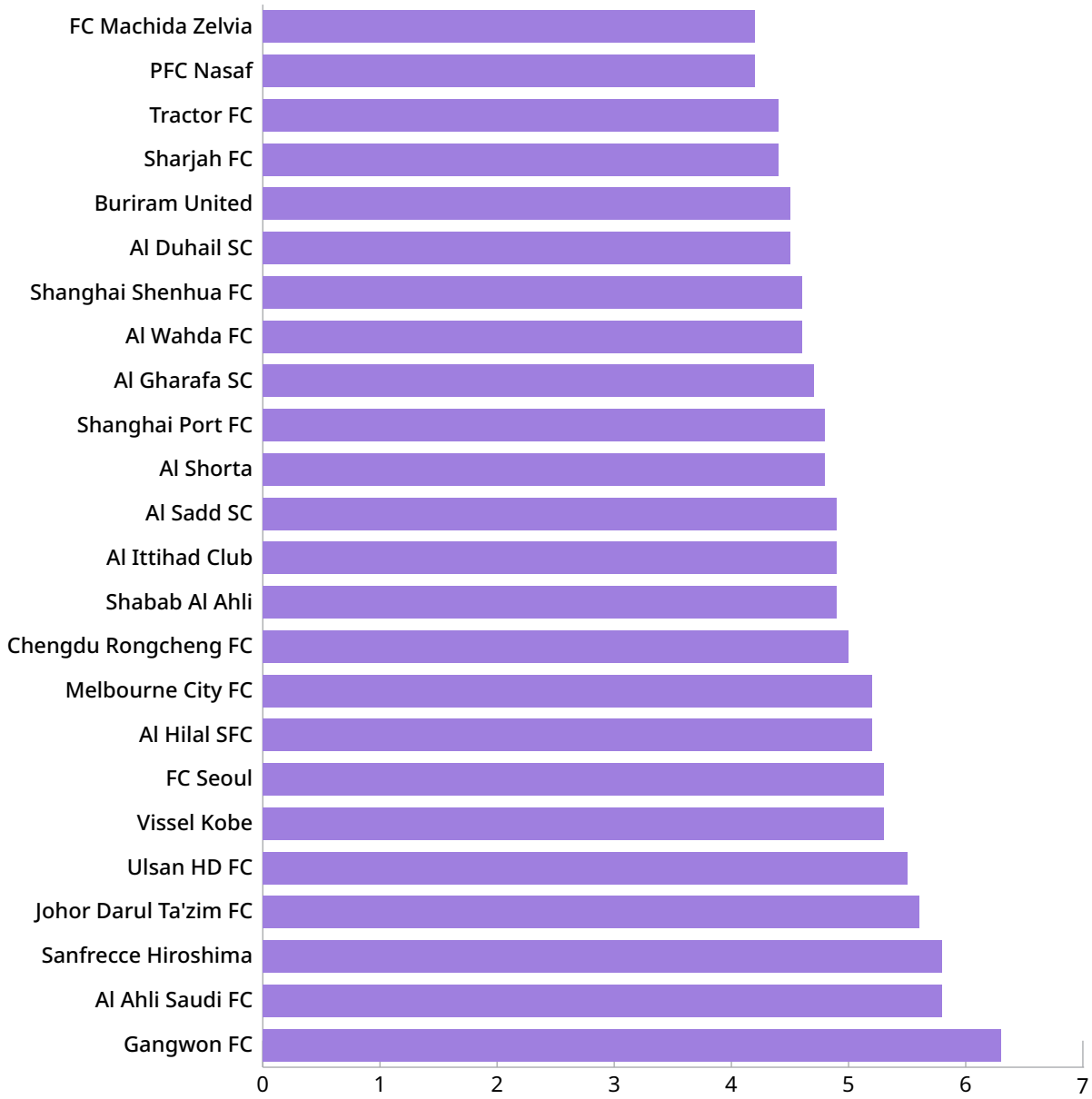
DEEP COMPLETION per 90 minutes



xG: EXPECTED GOALS

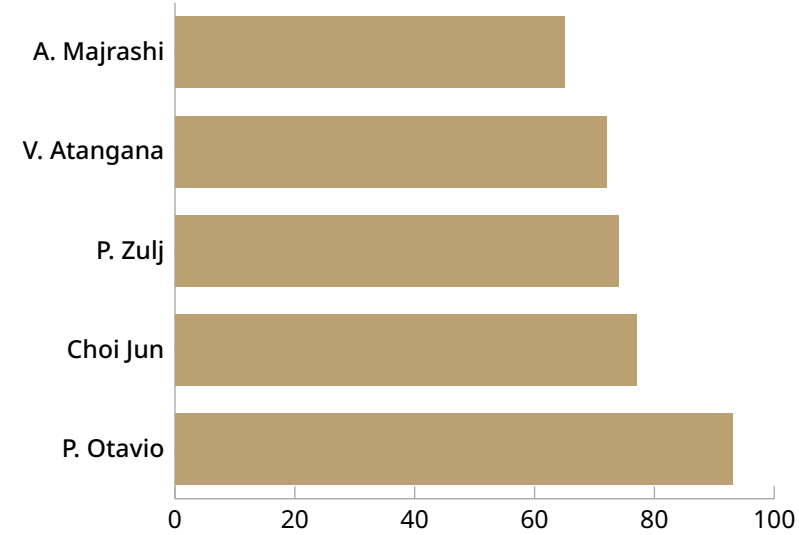


PPDA: PASSES PER DEFENSIVE ACTION

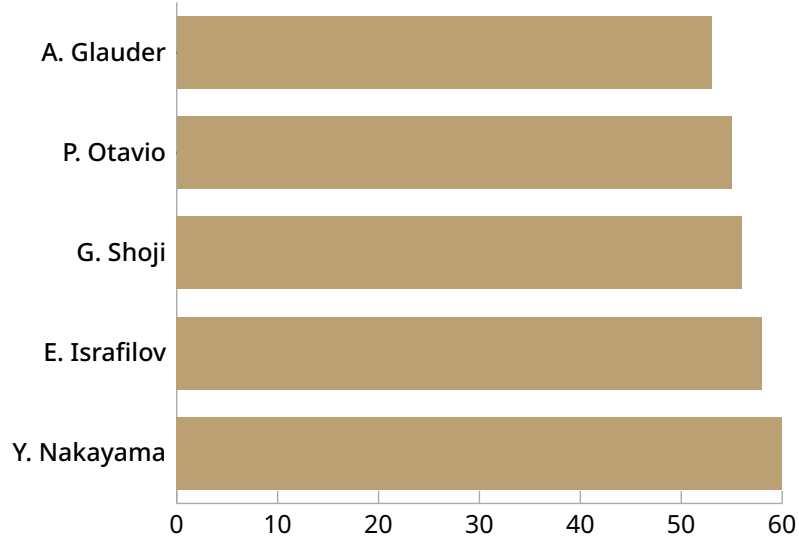


INDIVIDUAL

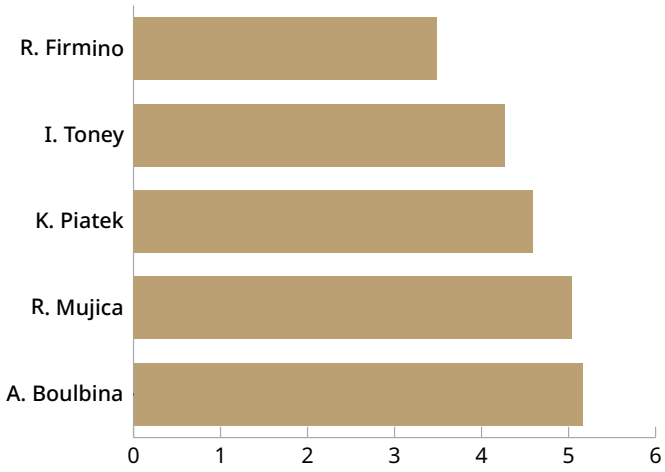
DEFENSIVE DUELS



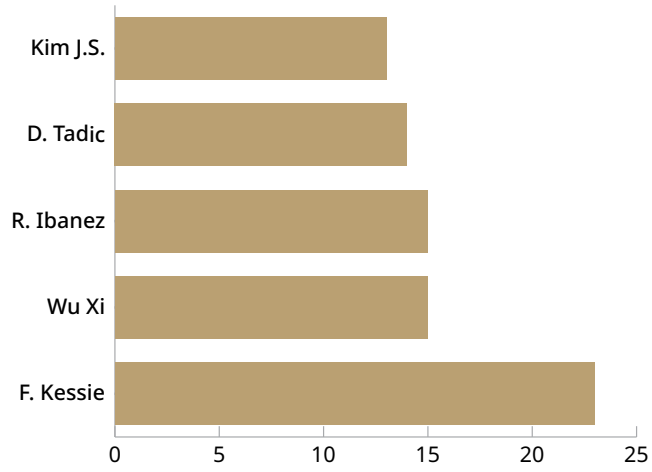
INTERCEPTIONS



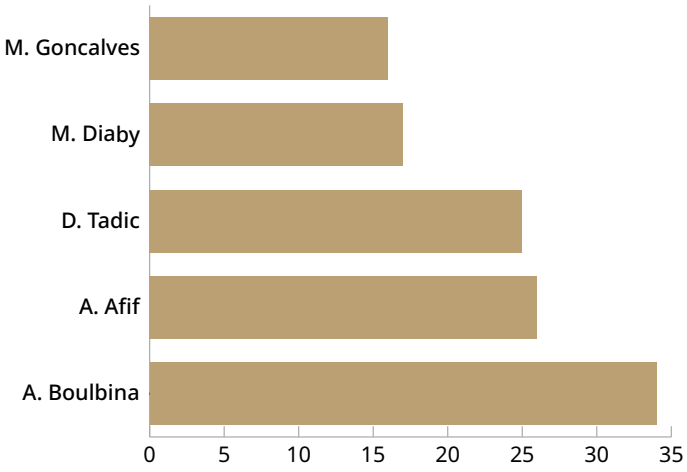
xG



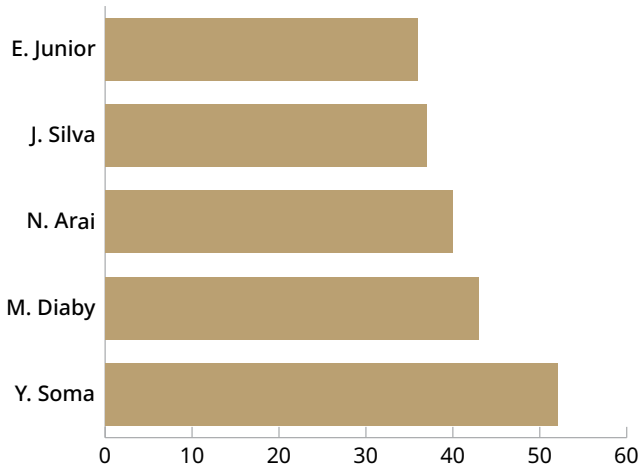
THROUGH PASSES



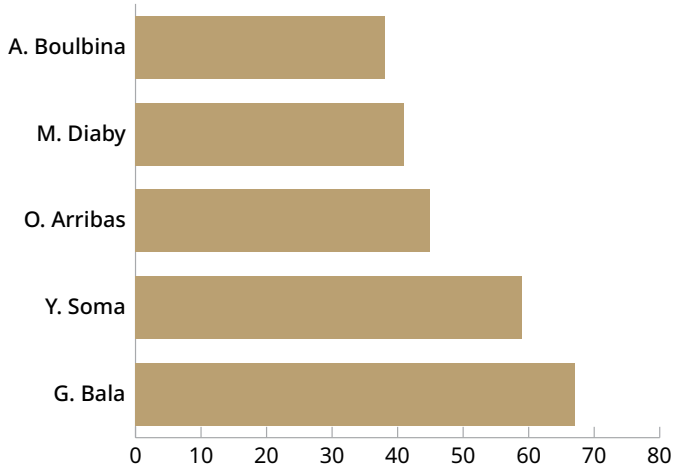
DEEP COMPLETION



CROSSES



1v1 AND DRIBBLING



DIGITAL STATISTICS

DIGITAL STATISTICS



SOCIAL MEDIA

Impressions: 1,771,674,535

Video views: 476,193,075

THE-AFC.COM

Users: 1,119,915

Page views: 2,452,472



AFC COMMITTEES

AFC COMMITTEES

COMPETITIONS COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
DR. TRAN QUOC TUAN	CHAIRPERSON	VFF
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MR. GARY MORETTI	Member	Football Australia
MR. KAZI MD. SALAHUDDIN	Member	BFF
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MR. CHUN HANJIN	Member	KFA
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MR. DAVLATMAND ISLOMOV	Member	TFF
MR. PAIRIT TANPAIREE	Member	FA Thailand
MR. MOHAMMED ABDULLA HAZZAM ALDHAHERI	Member	UAE FA

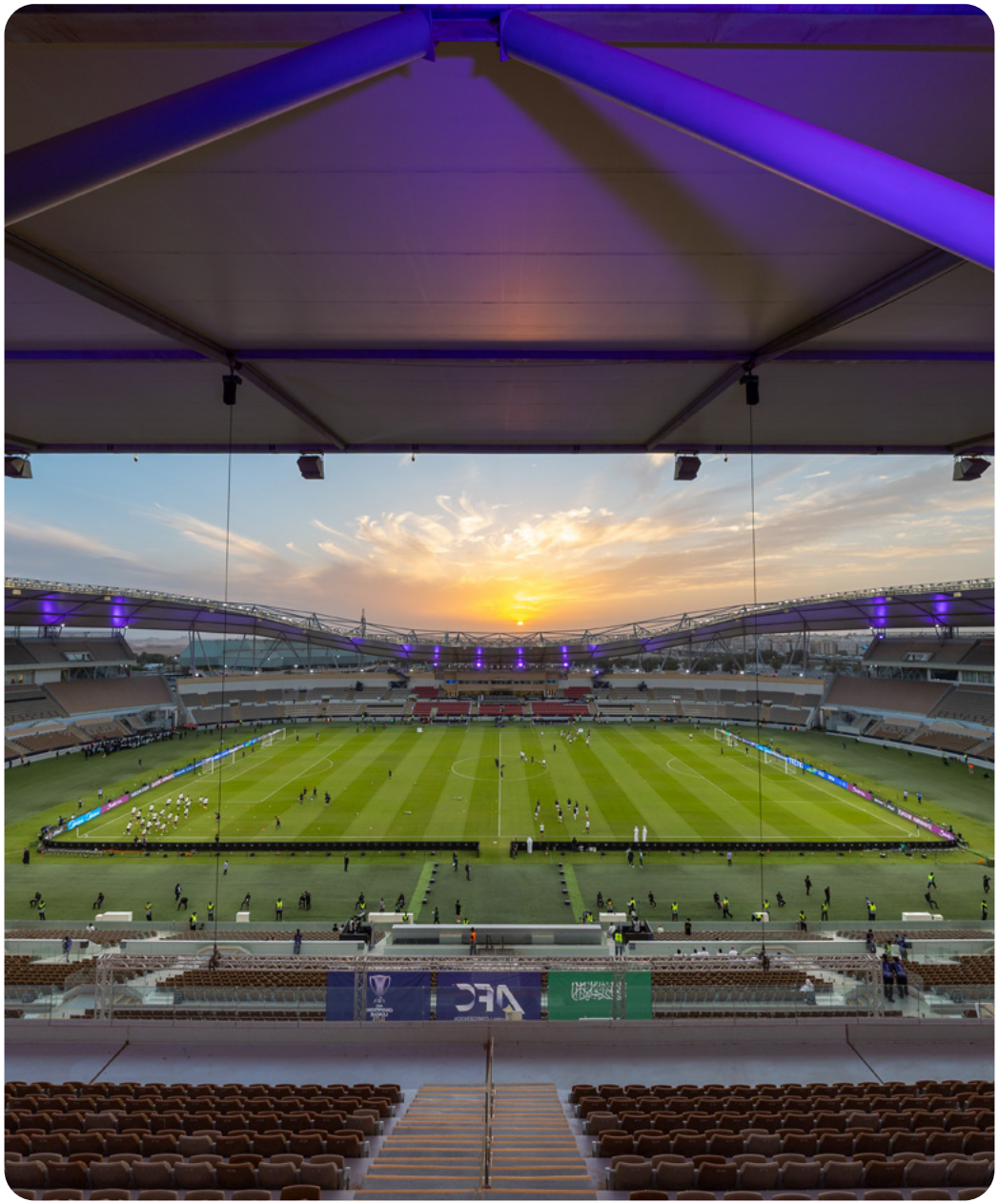
AFC TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
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MS. HEATHER GARRIOCK	Member	Football Australia
MR. CHENG XU	Member	CFA
DR. SEYED MIRSHAD MAJEDI	Member	FFIRI
DR. LEE YOUNG SOO	Member	KFA
MR. FAHAD ABDULLA AL ZARRAA	Member	QFA
MR. MOHAMMED AMEEN HAIDAR	Member	SAFF
MR. MUHANNAD ALFAKEER	Member	SFA
MR. BAKHTIYOR DADAMATOV	Member	UFA

AFC COMMITTEES

REFEREES COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
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MR. KENJI OGIYA	Member	JFA
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MR. NURDIN BUKUEV	Member	KFU
MS. WIDIYA HABIBAH SHAMSURI	Member	FAM
MR. ALI ALTRAIFI	Member	SAFF
MR. SALEM ALI ALSHAMSI	Member	UAE FA





PREVIOUS WINNERS

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2024/25

Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA)

FINAL			
03/05/25	**Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA)** Galeno 35’ Franck Kessie 42’	2-0	**Kawasaki Frontale (JPN)**

King Abdullah Sports City Stadium (Jeddah)

2023/24

Al Ain FC (UAE)

2-1 (0-1) Al Ain FC (UAE) won 6-3 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
11/05/24	**Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN)** Asahi Uenaka 72’ Kota Watanabe 84’	2-1 (0-1)	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Mohammed Al Baloushi 12’

International Stadium Yokohama (Yokohama)

SECOND LEG			
25/05/24	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Soufiane Rahimi 8’, 67’ Alejandro Romero 33’ Kodjo Laba 90’+1, 90’+5	5-1 (2-1)	**Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN)** Yan Matheus 40’

Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium (Al Ain)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2022 — Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)

Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN) won 2-1 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
29/04/23	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)** Salem Al Dawsari 13’	1-1 (1-0)	**Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)** Shinzo Koroki 53’

King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)

SECOND LEG			
06/05/23	**Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)** André Carrillo O.G. 48’	1-0 (0-0)	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)**

Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)

2021 — Al Hilal SFC (KSA)

FINAL			
23/11/21	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)** Nasser Al Dawsari 1’ Moussa Marega 63’	2-0 (1-0)	**FC Pohang Steelers (KOR)**

King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)

2020 — Ulsan Hyundai FC (KOR)

FINAL			
19/12/20	**Persepolis FC (IRN)** Mehdi Abdighara 45’	1-2 (1-1)	**Ulsan Hyundai FC (KOR)** Junior Negrao 45+4’, pen. 55’

Al Janoub Stadium (Al Wakrah)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2019 — Al Hilal SFC (KSA)

Al-Hilal SFC (KSA) won 3-0 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
9/11/19	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)** Andre Carrillo 60’	1-0 (0-0)	**Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)**

King Saud University Stadium (Riyadh)

SECOND LEG			
24/11/19	**Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)**	0-2 (0-0)	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)** Salem Al Dawsari 74’ Bafétimbi Gomis 90+3’

Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)

2018 — Kashima Antlers (JPN)

Kashima Antlers (JPN) won 2–0 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
3/11/18	**Kashima Antlers (JPN)** Léo Silva 58’ Serginho 70’	2-0 (0-0)	**Persepolis FC (IRN)**

Kashima Soccer Stadium (Kashima)

SECOND LEG			
10/11/18	**Persepolis FC (IRN)**	0-0 (0-0)	**Kashima Antlers (JPN)**

Azadi Stadium (Tehran)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2017

Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)

Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN) won 2-1 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
18/11/17	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)** Omar Khribin 37’	1-1 (1-1)	**Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)** Rafael Silva 7’
King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)			
SECOND LEG			
25/11/17	**Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)** Rafael Silva 7’	1-0 (0-0)	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)**
Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)			

2016

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors Motors FC (KOR)

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR) won 3-2 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
19/11/16	**Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR)** Leonardo 70’, 77’	2-1 (0-0)	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Danilo Asprilla 63’
Jeonju World Cup Stadium (Jeonju)			
SECOND LEG			
26/11/16	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Lee Myung-joo 34’	1-1 (1-1)	**Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR)** Han Kyo-won 30’
Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium (Al Ain)			

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2015 Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)

Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN) won 1-0 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
07/11/15	**Al Ahli FC (UAE)**	0-0 (0-0)	**Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)**

Rashid Stadium (Dubai)

SECOND LEG			
21/11/15	**Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)** Elkeson 64’	1-0 (0-0)	**Al Ahli FC (UAE)**

Tianhe Stadium (Guangzhou)

2014 Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)

Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS) won1-0 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
25/10/14	**Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)** Tomi Juric 64’	1-0 (0-0)	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)**

Parramatta Stadium (Sydney)

SECOND LEG			
01/11/14	**Al Hilal SFC (KSA)**	0-0 (0-0)	**Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)**

King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2013 — Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)

Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN) won on away goals

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
26/10/13	**FC Seoul (KOR)** Sergio Escudero 11’ Dejan Damjanovic 83’	2-2 (1-1)	**Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)** Elkeson 30’ Gao Lin 58’

Seoul World Cup Stadium (Seoul)

SECOND LEG			
09/11/13	**Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)** Elkeson 30’	1-1 (0-0)	**FC Seoul (KOR)** Dejan Damjanovic 83’

Tianhe Stadium (Guangzhou)

2012 — Ulsan Hyundai (FC) (KOR)

FINAL			
10/11/12	**Ulsan Hyundai (FC) (KOR)** Kwak Tae-hwi 13’ Rafinha 68’ Kim Seung-yong 75’	3-0 (1-0)	**Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA)**

Ulsan Munsu Football Stadium (Ulsan)

2011 — Al Sadd SC (QAT)

FINAL			
04/11/11	**Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR)** Eninho 19’ Lee Sung-hyun 90+2’	2-2 (1-1) After extra-time. Al Sadd won 4-2 on penalties	**Al Sadd SC (QAT)** Sim Woo-yeon O.G. 30’ Abdul Kader Keita 61’

Jeonju World Cup Stadium (Jeonju)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2010 Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)

FINAL			
13/11/10	**Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)** Sasa Ognenovski 29' Cho Byung-kuk 53' Kim Cheol-ho 83'	3-1 (1-0)	**Zobahan FC (IRN)** Mohammadreza Khalatbari 67'

National Stadium (Tokyo)

2009 Pohang Steelers (KOR)

FINAL			
07/11/09	**Al Ittihad Club (KSA)** Mohammed Noor 74'	1-2 (0-0)	**Pohang Steelers (KOR)** No Byung-jun 57' Kim Hyung-il 66'

National Stadium (Tokyo)

2008 Gamba Osaka (JPN)

Gamba Osaka (JPN) won 5-0 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
05/11/08	**Gamba Osaka (JPN)** Lucas 37' Yasuhito Endo 43' Michihiro Yasuda 68'	3-0 (2-0)	**Adelaide United (AUS)**

Expo '70 Stadium (Osaka)

SECOND LEG			
12/11/08	**Adelaide United (AUS)**	0-2 (0-2)	**Gamba Osaka (JPN)** Lucas 4', 14'

Hindmarsh Stadium (Adelaide)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2007 — Urawa Reds (JPN)

Urawa Reds (JPN) won 3-1 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
07/11/07	**Sepahan (IRN)** Mahmoud Karimi 47’	1-1 (0-1)	**Urawa Reds (JPN)** Robson Ponte 45’

Foolad Shahr Stadium (Fuladshahr)

SECOND LEG			
14/11/07	**Urawa Reds (JPN)** Yuichiro Nagai 22’ Yuki Abe 71’	2-0 (1-0)	**Sepahan (IRN)**

Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)

2006 — Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR)

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR) won 3-2 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
01/11/06	**Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR)** Yeom Ki-hun 59’ Botti 90+1’	2-0 (0-0)	**Al Karamah SC (SYR)**

Jeonju World Cup Stadium (Jeonju)

SECOND LEG			
08/11/06	**Al Karamah SC (SYR)** Iyad Mando 54’ Mohanad Ibrahim 60’	2-1 (0-0)	**Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors FC (KOR)** Ze Carlo 88’

Khaled Ibn Al Waleed Stadium (Homs)

2005

Al Ittihad Club (KSA)

Al Ittihad Club (KSA) won 5-3 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
26/10/05	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Ali Msarri 50’	1-1 (0-0)	**Al Ittihad Club (KSA)** Mohamed Kallon pen. 85’

Tahnoun Bin Mohammed stadium (Al Ain City)

SECOND LEG			
05/11/05	**Al Ittihad Club (KSA)** Mohamed Kallon 2’ Mohammed Noor 33’ Joseph-Desire Job 57’ Ahmed Dokhi 69’	4-2 (2-0)	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Shehab Ahmed pen. 55’ Luis Tejada 90’

Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium (Jeddah)

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2004 — Al Ittihad Club (KSA)

Al Ittihad Club (KSA) won 6-3 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
24/11/04	**Al Ittihad Club (KSA)** Redha Tukar 28’	1-3 (1-1)	**Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)** Denis Laktionov 27’ Kim Do-hoon 81’ Jang Hak-young 90’

Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium (Jeddah)

SECOND LEG			
01/12/04	**Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)**	0-5 (0-1)	**Al Ittihad Club (KSA)** Redha Tukar 27’ Hamzah Idris 45’, Mohammed Noor 55’, 78’ Manaf Abushgeer 90’

Tancheon Sports Complex (Seongnam)

2003 — Al Ain FC (UAE)

Al Ain FC (UAE) won 2-1 on aggregate

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
03/10/03	**Al Ain FC (UAE)** Salam Jawhar 40’ Mohammed Omar 75’	2-0 (1-0)	**BEC Tero Sasana FC (THA)**

Tahnoun Bin Mohammed stadium (Al Ain City)

SECOND LEG			
11/10/03	**BEC Tero Sasana FC (THA)** Therdsak Chaiman pen. 60’	1-0 (0-0)	**Al Ain FC (UAE)**

Rajamangala National Stadium (Bangkok)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE 2025/26™

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