



# COACHES CIRCLE

KEEPING COACHES IN ASIA UP TO DATE WITH TECHNICAL NEWS AND DEVELOPMENTS



**ISSUE 13**  
**JAN 2025**

THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH  
**KEVIN MUSCAT**



## MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

Now we know. With the Saudi Arabian Football Federation being awarded the hosting rights of the 2034 FIFA Men's World Cup, Asia will, for the third time, organise the greatest football show on earth. In 2002, Korea Republic and Japan joined forces to deliver a truly memorable event, while the unique environment of Qatar provided the stage for a World Cup that FIFA President Gianni Infantino described as the 'best ever'. There is no doubt that the SAFF will provide the infrastructure and organisation required for a final tournament of this magnitude and prestige. But the burning question is not about hosting, but rather the possibility of an Asian team actually winning the FIFA World Cup, host or otherwise. It should be noted at this juncture that only six hosts have won the title and none of them was in the 21st century. France was the last to do so, and that was back in 1998.

The odds against winning the FIFA World Cup are relatively high, no matter which continent a team comes from. Following 22 editions, only eight teams have lifted the trophy, three from South America (Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay) and five from Europe (Germany, France, England, Spain and Italy). With 211 FIFA Member Associations, this translates to a success rate of less than 4%. Asia's biggest achievement was a fourth-place finish by Korea Republic in 2002 when they co-hosted the finals with Japan. The latter has four times



reached the Round of 16, while Australia celebrated its membership with AFC in 2006 by qualifying for the Knockout Stage. Meanwhile, Asian teams at the 2022 final tournament displayed grounds for optimism with spectacular victories over eventual winners Argentina, European powerhouses Germany, Spain and Portugal, plus experienced competitors Denmark, Wales and Tunisia. However, to be title contenders in a relentless and demanding global tournament requires a consistency of high-level performances and not just a few well-earned, but surprising results.

'To win the World Cup, you need to have three, four or five outstanding players who will bring quality to the team. You need experience and a well-defined way of playing.' These are the words of Carlos Alberto Parreira who was world champion with Brazil in 1994. He went on to add that 'you must have all the components at the one time: tactically, psychologically, physically, technically. It is very difficult to become World Champion because you have to implement so many things at exactly the right time.' Implicit in these words of wisdom is that a major football country, one capable of winning the world title, has a football environment that provides top-class player development and elite-level coach education. The six winning countries since the turn of the century (Brazil, Italy, Spain, Germany, France and Argentina) can all claim to be very progressive in their development work. From a coaching perspective, it is interesting to note that the 21 FIFA World Cup winning coaches to date (Vittorio Pozzo of Italy won it twice in the 1930s) have all been home-grown.

To be a contender on the world stage, a country's players need to play regularly in challenging competitions, either at home or abroad. The value of extensive domestic competitions was highlighted by Carlos Alberto Parreira

when he said: 'In Brazil, there are 28 states and each has its own league, with first, second and third divisions. Plus, there are 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.' While the South Americans are immersed in the game, the Europeans have sophisticated development programmes and elite-level professional leagues. These two continents dominate the FIFA Men's World Cup winners' rostrum and it is not by chance. Other continents, including Asia, need to recognise the gap and design their way forward using all means at their disposal to disrupt the balance of power that has existed since the inception of the FIFA World Cup in 1930.

The FIFA World Cup winning scoreboard reads: UEFA 12, CONMEBOL 10 and Asia 0. But, Ange Postecoglou, an AFC Asian Cup™ winner with Australia in 2015 and the champion of the J-League with Yokohama Marinos, predicted a change in fortunes when he stated: 'I really think that an Asian country can win a World Cup in the next 20 years. It's very, very conceivable the way world football is going. But it is about belief in being able to do that.' He added: 'I know Japan has said that it can win a World Cup by 2050, but I have seen the talent in that country and I honestly believe it can be achieved before that. They can become a real force.'

For ambitions to be realised, for an Asian team to be crowned Champions of the World, for Asia to be more than just a good host, countries with winning aspirations will need top players, a great coach, a fantastic support team, the full support of the public, the total dedication of those involved in the development programmes, and of course, an element of luck.

Turning 'Mission Impossible' into 'Mission Possible' is a daunting task for Asia's finest teams, but something that is not inconceivable. Being a great host and becoming a world champion are not mutually exclusive goals.

## CREATING A POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Not many people could claim to have emigrated at the age of six months. But, born in England to parents of Maltese origin, he was carried as a baby into a new life in Australia. At that stage, he was too young to even dream that he would return to England 22 years later as a professional footballer. After a season at Crystal Palace, he wore the shirt of Wolverhampton Wanderers for five years and, ultimately, returned to London to join Millwall after a successful season with Rangers in the Scottish league. In the meantime – despite operating as a defender – he had scored 10 goals in 46 appearances for Australia which included three FIFA Confederations Cups. Returning to Australia, he eventually ended his playing career with a sentimental return to Sunshine George Cross – his first club. But Melbourne Victory shaped his career. Joining them in 2005 as a player, he graduated to playing assistant coach; then assistant coach; then caretaker manager; and finally, when Ange Postecoglou left the club to take over the Australian national team in 2013, he started to fly solo in the managerial role. Postecoglou later enrolled him in the national team’s coaching staff for the FIFA Confederations Cup in 2017 and, four years later, it was no surprise when, after an interlude in Belgium, he was seen by Yokohama Marinos as a natural replacement when Postecoglou left to join Celtic. After winning the J-League and the Super Cup, he embarked on an ongoing adventure in China PR. At the recent AFC Coach Education online session and the AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum, Coaches Circle caught up with...



KEVIN MUSCAT

## AS THE HEAD COACH OF SHANGHAI PORT, WHAT ARE THE MAIN TASKS THAT YOU CARRY OUT IN A NORMAL WEEK?

From one week to the next there are obviously many different things and you can't really structure your work that much because there is almost always something new to challenge you. And there might be two games, there might be three games...But over a week one thing you know is that it's going to be about managing all the people who, directly and indirectly, are within touching distance of the team. Physical, technical, medical, right across the board. But my main focus is on making sure that we've got a positive environment that gives the players the best possible opportunity to bring our football to life at the weekend. It's focusing on the environment that can equip the team to be successful. We could talk for a very long time about what goes into that. It's about managing a wide variety of people within a structure, aiming to give the players the best possible environment and to prepare the next game. So, communication is an important element that, over a week, can take up a lot of your time.

## YOU WERE A HIGHLY COMPETITIVE PLAYER – HOW HAVE YOU GONE ABOUT PERSUADING YOUR PLAYERS TO BE EQUALLY PASSIONATE?

I don't really see it as a challenge. To be completely honest, it's not something that I've openly addressed with them. Again, our behaviour comes back to the environment. It relates to the way we train, the way we play, the way we make our drills competitive, because if you want to be a highly competitive team on matchday, you have to be competitive in the way you train.

## HOW DO YOU LIKE TO SEE THE GAME PLAYED?

Well, we could talk about the technical side, but I think that, in general, in the coaching profession we all appreciate different things. We all know that there's no one way, no right way, no wrong way of playing the game. But for me, what excites me is...you know, if there's a list of games for you to choose from, I always ask myself which one is going to excite me. Which are the games I really want to watch. I like teams that play with a high tempo, teams that are attacking at every opportunity, teams that are playing the ball forward, teams that aren't passive when they lose the ball, teams who are prepared



to take risks by pressing high – basically teams with a lot of energy and a lot of attacking intent.

## WHO HAVE BEEN THE MAIN INFLUENCES ON YOUR CAREER AS A COACH?

As a boy, I got into the game via my dad. And during my journey in playing and coaching he has been a constant presence. Nowadays I look at the game in a way that excites me, and I always keep an eye on coaches who have similar traits because you're always learning. And Ange has obviously been a big part of my thinking – working with him for so long and following his journey. He's had a really big influence on me.

## WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENTS AS A PLAYER AND A COACH?

If you ask me to talk about myself, my answer has to be that my greatest achievements have yet to come. I'm working on them! It's always a difficult question because the obvious thing that comes into people's minds is the silverware they may have won. The trophies. Fortunately, I've had some success in that aspect. But when I look back to when I was a young kid watching the only football that was on television at that time – you know, the English FA Cup Finals and those sorts of big games, I realise how proud my dad was when I became a professional and signed for Crystal Palace. At the time, I didn't make too much of a big thing about it. But, looking back, I now understand how proud he was of me and realise that it was actually one of the better moments in my career – the most rewarding. Representing Australia as well – we both felt proud about that.

## WHAT DO YOU RATE AS THE MOST DEMANDING ASPECT OF THE JOB?

This is a question that can touch on quite a few things within the framework of the job. But I suppose that for me the elements that become the most demanding are the ones that don't directly affect the performance of the team. Things like media work, for example, that you think doesn't have an impact on the way you perform at the weekend. On the one hand, you recognise that it's an important part of the job, just like speaking to the owner, the president or the board of directors. But what I really want to do is to put all my energy into relating with the players and focusing on preparing them to perform as well as possible in the next game. So, if I class the other aspects as 'demanding' it's not because they are hard to do but it's rather down to my personal mindset and my outlook on things. I like to channel all my energy into helping the team to perform.

## TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU DELEGATE?

I think that creating the sort of environment that I aim for is something that's impossible for one person to do. So, the solution is to surround myself with competent people. Professional competence is obviously the prime requirement but it's important that they are also good people. It's not enough these days to be good and efficient in your work. To do the job well you also need to be a good person. If we want to achieve an environment and implement a programme to our satisfaction, having a team that you know and trust is imperative. I've got people like my assistant Ross [Aloisi] and head of physical performance Greg [King] who both worked with me at



Yokohama. Then you've got your analysts and so on. There are so many aspects to deal with these days that to have people you can trust and to delegate work to them has become absolutely imperative.

## HOW DO YOU HANDLE POTENTIALLY DIFFICULT SITUATIONS WITH PLAYERS – TEAM SELECTION, SQUAD ROTATION, SUBSTITUTES AND SO ON?

The way we – the coach and the staff – conduct ourselves links up with what I was saying about creating an environment. The environment dictates what is acceptable and what is not. If someone steps out of line, he must realise that he's done something that is not accepted by

the team as a whole – not just me as the coach. There are times when you need to have discussions and that's when I prefer to remove myself from the conversation and let the group do the talking. If I need to have an individual talk to a player, I refer him to what is acceptable and not acceptable to the team as a whole. It's important to be able to say, 'this is what the team expects' or 'this is what is required within the team environment', rather than making it something personal. It's something I picked up some years ago and it has definitely helped me to deal with difficult conversations. There are other important aspects like the simple courtesy of being honest. From my experience as a player, I realised that it's important for the coach to be honest about why someone is not playing or issues like that. A person's lack of honesty can stay with you for a long time, whereas the honest truth might

sting for a while, but it will heal very quickly. It's important for everybody to know where you stand. When I arrived in Shanghai, for example, the first thing was to set out the parameters of how we wanted to play and how we wanted to behave. It wasn't so much about creating a list of rules as about principles that are created by the team environment. Again, it's something that works better if it doesn't get personal.

When it comes to dealing with aspects like substitutions or team selection, it's difficult to generalise. I think it's better to approach these things case by case. If I sense a player is upset because he was expecting to play, for example, I prefer to speak to the individual on the day before the game or two days before if I think it's necessary and, basically, deliver a message that protects the team environment. When it comes to substitutions during a game, I'm not one to insist that the player coming off comes over and gives me a hug. That's not what I'm about. You also have to remember that you're not only dealing with people, but you're also dealing with emotional people. They have different reactions to being substituted, picking up an injury or whatever it may be. There are always cases that crop up with players expressing frustration. Each individual is different and if you try to treat everybody in exactly the same way, you're asking for trouble.

### FROM A COACHING PERSPECTIVE, WHAT ASPECT OF THE TECHNICAL WORK IS HARDEST TO PRODUCE THE RESULTS YOU WANT?

Basically, I prefer to focus on the enjoyment. And what I particularly enjoy is finding the ways to implement your vision of how you want the game of football to be played.



We all come into the profession thinking that we want to play like this or like that, we want to be this sort of team or that sort of team. But the important challenge is implementing that concept and, more importantly, persuading the players to believe in it and buy into it. So that's actually the hardest part. Fortunately, I worked with Ange when I was a young, inexperienced coach and saw first-hand how he totally reformed the way the team

played. The way he implemented training and shaped the daily habits of the group to implement that vision, that philosophy.

### FOR YOU WHAT IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS AS A PROFESSIONAL COACH?

It's a question that we get asked, that we ask ourselves or we ask others. But definitions of the word success can be so different in different circumstances or in different stages of your career. You start off thinking that you want to win games, you want to win leagues, you want to win trophies or that you don't want to be relegated. Everybody has objectives but successful outcomes can be totally different. At Shanghai, I would probably value aspects like people coming to our games and identifying with our football. OK, we all want success in terms of results, but I'd like people to see that we have an identity as a team and as a club. It comes back to a clear environment in which the players can see and understand the way we want to play, the way we train to achieve that, the duration of training sessions and the sort of drills that we do on the training ground.

### AS SOMEONE WITH GREAT KNOWLEDGE OF FOOTBALL IN EUROPE AND ASIA, WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE IN THE PERFORMANCE LEVEL BETWEEN THE CONTINENTS?

The one thing that stood out and really struck me during three years in Japan was the high standard of what they were doing to raise the level. But, for me, the biggest difference was the physicality. I'm not talking just about strength but all the other physical aspects like tempo, speed, intensity or repeated effort. In Japan, they made

a conscious effort about 10 or 15 years ago. Technically, they could see that their players were able to compete at any level. But they were not quite making it in physicality. They made a conscious decision to set about improving those sides of the game. It wasn't something they could achieve over a couple of years. But nowadays, if a player leaves Japan to play in Europe, he doesn't come back. In the past it wasn't like that. Going back to Ange, people had the idea that Japanese players wouldn't be able to compete physically in the Scottish League. They were proved to be wrong. And I spent some time in Belgium where I discovered that the physicality of the league outweighed anything you could see in Scotland. Again, what people believed about Asian players was not what they actually saw.

### WHAT ASPECTS OF TODAY'S FOOTBALL ANNOY YOU?

I think that there are areas where we have still got a bit of a way to go if we want to bridge the gap. One is the ball-in-play time. Time-wasting during games is certainly an issue – the time taken with goal kicks or free kicks, for example. It has a totally negative effect on the matchday experience in terms of offering value to the people who come to the stadium, generating corporate dollars, encouraging pay-per-view subscriptions... In any other industry nobody would tolerate a scenario of paying for entertainment and then getting only half of what you had expected it to be. Can you imagine going to the cinema and finding the screen going blank halfway through the movie? You would certainly want a refund, to say the least. OK, you can argue that it's something that can happen anywhere in the world. But I think that in the Confederation where we are working it is definitely something that needs to be addressed.



### ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE TOP LEVEL OF THE PROFESSIONAL GAME IN ASIA?

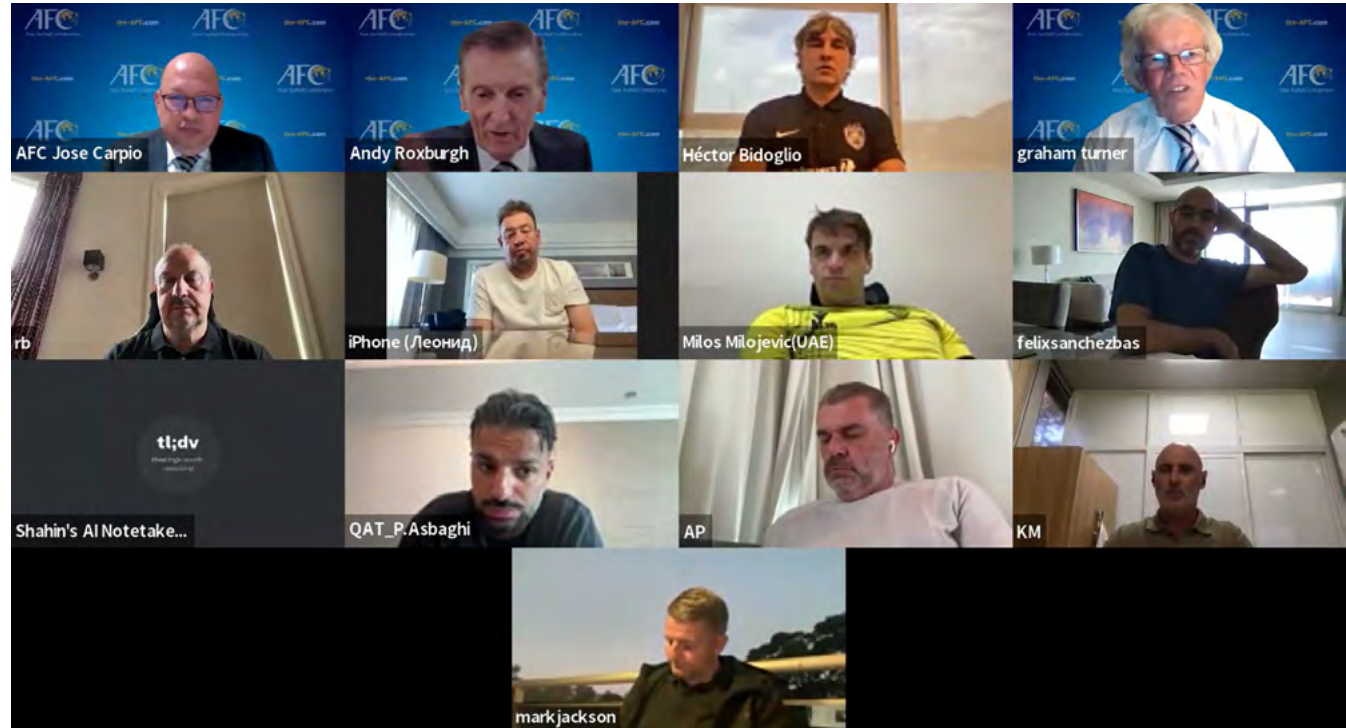
Without a doubt. Let's take Japan again as an example. Because so many players are now gaining experience in the top leagues overseas, the national team has become more than competitive on the global stage. And we had

some really good stories in the last FIFA World Cup involving nations from various parts of Asia. In recent years, there have been some really strong forward strides. It's a case of raising awareness and gaining in self-belief. Now is definitely not a time to stand still because if you stand still, you're going backwards. Other people will overtake you. I'm really looking forward to seeing what happens in Asia over the next 10 years. Without a doubt.

## THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE AFC ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM

Believe it or not, a UEFA Champions League Final played in Istanbul almost two decades ago provided a red thread during the 9th AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum. And Liverpool fans will be quick to point out that the colour was appropriate. In 2023, Carlo Ancelotti and Hernán Crespo were the champion club coaches of Europe and Asia. In Istanbul in 2005 they were together in the AC Milan dressing room – the former as head coach; the latter as the scorer of two of the goals that put the Italian side



3-0 up at half-time. A few metres along the corridor, Rafa Benítez was the Liverpool manager faced with the task of lifting his team from the floor and laying foundations

for the astonishing comeback that led to a penalty shoot-out victory. “The main thing was to encourage the players because they obviously came in with their heads down,” he



Mark Jackson  
Central Coast  
Mariners FC  
(AUS)



Kevin Muscat  
Shanghai Port  
FC (CHN)



Leonid Slutsky  
Shanghai  
Shenhua FC  
(CHN)



Javad  
Nekounam  
Esteghlal FC  
(IRN)



Yahya Gol  
Mohammadi  
Foolad FC (IRN)



Juan Carlos  
Garrido  
Persepolis FC  
(IRN)



José Morais  
Sepahan SC  
(IRN)



Ahmed Salah  
Al Shorta SC  
(IRQ)



Daniel Poyatos  
Gamba Osaka  
FC (JPN)



Ranko Popovic  
Kashima Antlers  
FC (JPN)



Park Taeha  
Pohang Steelers  
FC (KOR)



Héctor  
Bidoglio  
Johor Darul  
Ta'zim FC  
(MAS)



Poya Asbaghi  
Al Rayyan SC  
(QAT)



Félix Sánchez  
Al Sadd SC  
(QAT)



Luis Castro  
Al Nasser FC  
(KSA)



Osmar Loss  
Vieira  
Buriram United  
FC (THA)



Miloš Mirojević  
Al Wasl FC  
(UAE)



Maksim  
Shatskikh  
Pakhtakor FC  
(UZB)

recalled. “I couldn’t hear the fans, but they gave a little bit of belief to our players and I told them that if we scored one goal we would be back in the game. Also, going to three at the back helped us to gain greater control in midfield and prevent them from playing between the lines.”

Rafa Benítez and Hernán Crespo teamed up with Ange Postecoglou to form an illustrious trio of special guests at a Forum where intensity, emotional responses, match analysis and set plays were among the issues that were addressed. Benítez was quick to underscore the relevance of the latter – remembering that, in Istanbul, AC Milan’s early opener came from a free-kick. “We could argue about our zonal marking,” he admitted. “I was a UEFA technical observer at last season’s Champions League final between Real Madrid and Borussia Dortmund,” he added. “And from a coaching perspective it was interesting to see Dortmund passing the ball, working between the lines, going in to press and playing counterattacks. They created chances. But they made a couple of mistakes at corners and that’s how Madrid scored the first goal, attacking the near post and creating space. Set pieces can make the difference – and they did.”

This provided a cue for Crespo, still at the helm of Al Ain at the time, to reflect on the qualities that had propelled the UAE side to the AFC Champions League™ title. “Everybody knows that we were the underdogs of the competition,” he commented, “and we had to meet teams with great players capable of making the difference and making history. It’s not easy to play against them but the key is to respect them, to respect yourselves and to respect the competition. And to recognise that it’s a great opportunity to face players and teams of such quality. At the end of the game the important thing is to feel proud of what you have done. It’s about believing in the work done in training,

believing in your team-mates. We need to accept that there will be moments when opponents are better than us. But we mustn’t stop believing in ourselves. It’s not about exercise levels. It’s not even about results in themselves. We need to understand that the result is a consequence of the work that we did to prepare for the match. Sometimes you achieve your goals, sometimes not. But the important thing is return to your bed and try to sleep, knowing that you gave 100% of yourself and 100% for the team. We can all talk about tactics, about strategies...everybody knows that there is no single way to win. We achieved something special which is very difficult to repeat.”



**ANGE POSTECOGLU**  
Tottenham Hotspur FC



**HERNÁN CRESPO**  
Al Ain FC



**RAFAEL BENÍTEZ**  
ex-Liverpool FC

## The Analyst/ Data Revolution



How do you see the role of the analyst today?

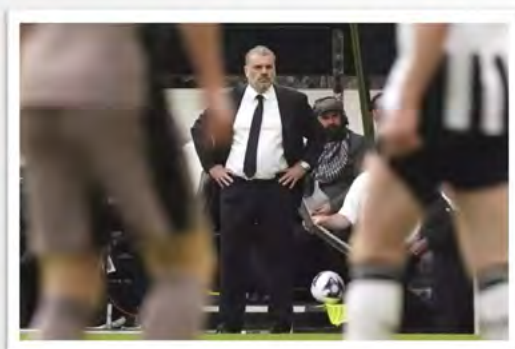
And to what extent are they influencing the game?

Rafa Benítez, when asked to explain the globally-admired successes of Spanish football – men’s and women’s – highlighted the quality of coaching at youth levels and the pathways from academy teams to senior competitions. “It makes me think back to when I was coaching at the youth level at Real Madrid,” he commented. “We had six teams and the idea was to get players into the Under-18s as quickly as possible and have them playing against opponents who were stronger than them. I think one of the key features is the methodology of the coaches working at these levels. Playing in the lower divisions or in the second division made them even stronger and we have youngsters who, at 16 or 17, are already playing

and competing with the top players. There are leagues in Europe where there is not enough money to buy top players. So, you develop them. It means that there are more young players coming into the system whereas in the top leagues, like the Premier League, young players simply don’t have the same opportunities.”

One of the questions thrown at Ange Postecoglou was about the qualities required by anyone aiming to become a winning coach at the benchmark levels of the game. “That’s a difficult one,” was his response, “because the world is constantly changing and there’s a widespread lack of understanding these days about what it takes

to create a winning team or a winning club. We have to accept that, all around the world, we’re working in an environment where patience is not necessarily a virtue. So, you need to work fairly quickly to get your process in place. This means that clarity of ideas and simplicity in the messages that you pass on to the players and to the staff are key elements. You also need to try to block out the noise around you when you’re working at the highest level. The game has never been short of opinions but, these days, opinions have so many more platforms and have become overwhelming. I’ve been around for quite a while now and I believe that I’ve come to know what is really important and it’s easy for me to blot out the noise.



*Ange:*  
What in your opinion does it take to be a winning coach at the benchmark level of the game?



It’s important to stay strong as a leader and be aware of the way you present yourself on a daily basis and focus on what you believe is really important for the development of a winning club.

**Ange Postecoglou,  
Tottenham Hotspur FC**



## An ACL Snapshot 2023/2024



**Goals: 468**  
(+ 3 awarded)

- Combination Play (8%)
- Crossing (26%)
- Roaming Wingers
- Building from the Back
- High Pressing / Counter Pressing
- Inverted Fullbacks



We need to understand that the result is a consequence of the work that we did to prepare for the match. Sometimes you achieve your goals, sometimes not. But the important thing is return to your bed and try to sleep, knowing that you gave 100% of yourself and 100% for the team.

**Hernán Crespo, Al Ain FC**



But staff and players can be affected by the noise as well, so it's important to stay strong as a leader and be aware of the way you present yourself on a daily basis and focus on what you believe to be really important for the development of a winning club. I'm an emotional sort of person but I'd like to think that if anyone came to the club and saw me on a day-to-day basis, they wouldn't know whether we had won, drawn or lost at the previous weekend. There are so many things that come into your sights as a manager these days and make the job really challenging. That's why I focus on who I am and what I believe in without wavering in any way. That doesn't mean that there's one approach to everything because part of modern football is about evolving in a game that's changing all the time. New trends, new coaches with new ideas...you need to keep an open mind. But how you are as a person becomes really important and if you want

people to follow you it's important that they believe in you as a person as well as a manager. That's something I've worked really hard at in 26 years of coaching."

The Tottenham Hotspur manager was also challenged to explain what makes England's Premier League so special – and how it compares with the top club competitions in Asia. "I think the main thing that makes the Premier League special is that it's absolutely global," he replied. "Everyone scrutinises it. Everyone has an opinion on it. Nothing gets under the radar. That's the biggest difference with the top club competitions in Asia and elsewhere. Within that context, I have to accept as a manager that everything I do, every decision, everything I say, every reaction will go out to the wide world. Tactically, there's nothing to compare with it. Every week is an absolute challenge, facing the best managers in the world, the best

players in the world. There are no easy games. There's just a relentlessness about it and you've got to be on the top of your game every week. You're not only talking about the absolute elite in technical ability but also the physicality is becoming more and more prevalent. Speed, dynamism, strength, size are all important in the modern game. In the Premier League you get this combination of physical and technical standards. I think that's the difference. But when I look at the top club competitions in Asia it's absolutely clear that the gap is closing with relation to some of the top leagues in Europe and I think it will continue to do that."

His comment provided a heartening last word in this brief summary of the online meeting which allowed 18 top coaches from as many different clubs to exchange ideas and experiences.

## WOMEN'S FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

# WOMEN'S FOOTBALL IN FAST-FORWARD MODE



Energy. Dictionary definitions of the word tend to focus on physical aspects such as ‘capacity for intense activity’ or engineering concepts related to the powering of machinery. It needs deeper digging to find a mention of ‘determination and enthusiasm for getting things done’ – a much more accurate description of the collective energy generated at the third AFC Women’s Football Conference in Kuala Lumpur, a gathering which ran well into three figures (with a clear majority of women, it has to be said). They formed a diverse assembly of coaches (including Japan’s Norio Sasaki, winner of the FIFA Women’s World Cup in 2011), former players, administrators and organisers – and a varied programme for the three-day event catered for all of them and, more importantly, gave them opportunities to speak up.

And they certainly did – especially during the roundtable sessions when discussions focused on a wide range of the issues facing women’s football at a key stage of rapid, not to say explosive, development. There was a huge variety of energetic responses to questions such as: In terms of branding, marketing, publicity, TV coverage and attracting spectators, what can be done to make the women’s game more visible to the general public? With the AFC Women’s Champions League™ now into its inaugural season, how can the AFC’s women’s competitions be improved even further? As the continuing development of women’s football will require more investment, how can this be achieved? What are the factors restricting the development of women’s football? And what are the possible solutions to those negative aspects? What can be done to attract more young girls into football?

As AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh commented on the opening day of the Conference, “for the development of the women’s game, the education of women coaches

is a priority,” So how can doors be opened with a view to increasing the number of female coaches?

From a coaching perspective, a heartening answer to the last question on the list was provided by the AFC’s Head of Coach Education, Wim Koevermans, and Deputy Technical Director Takeshi Ono during a session on the second day dedicated to coaching at Elite Youth and Pro levels. The former looked back at the AFC Women’s Pro Licence Tutor Course staged in Thailand at the end of 2023 and pushed the fast-forward button to November-December 2024 when similar Tutor Courses at the ‘A’ and ‘B’ levels took place in Thailand (for MAs in the East) and Saudi Arabia (West). And, with regard to coaching diplomas, the main question was whether it is easy or difficult for women to gain access to Pro Level courses in their own MAs.

Takeshi Ono provided a follow-up by explaining the ins and outs of a concept known as The Hub – a Women’s Pro Level course jointly organised in Japan by the AFC and the JFA for a group of 20 elite female coaches from 14 different MAs. The course, running from 2024 to 2025, is based on ‘blended learning’ – a mix of on-site and online tuition (the former prioritising practical modules; the latter focusing more on theory) supplemented by visits to clubs with a view to increasing the reality-based components in the education of would-be top-level coaches. The question for individual MAs is whether to create more opportunities for female coaches on their courses; to organise courses designed specifically for women; or to examine the feasibility of echoing the Hub concept on a regional basis.

At the inaugural Hub event in Japan, a vast majority of participants from MAs in the East provided an indicator of the degree of imbalance between the two main AFC



zones – a topic addressed during a Forum session by Japan’s Junko Imai, a member of the AFC Women’s Football Committee, the head coach of the Chinese Tapei women’s national team Chan Hiu Ming and Noura Abdulla Saif Al-Mazroui, the former UAE international goalkeeper currently on the coaching staff of the women’s national team. It coloured their assessments of the level of women’s football in Asia; the priorities for advancement; and what can be learned from comparisons with other Confederations, their competitions and their player development pathways. “Other Confederations are also making great progress,” said Junko Imai, “so we have to work harder to keep up.”

The two-tier reality of women’s football in Asia has been endorsed by a six-to-two majority for teams from the East in the Quarter-finals of the AFC Women’s Champions League™ and is statistically reflected by FIFA rankings featuring five AFC nations (Japan, DPR Korea, Australia,

China PR and Korea Republic) in the world’s top 20 plus four more from the East zone in the top 50, ahead of Uzbekistan, the highest-ranked team from the West. AFC’s Head of Women’s Football Development, Bai Lili, reviewed DPR Korea’s benchmark-setting achievements of winning the AFC and World titles at both U17 and U20 levels, beating Japan by a one-goal margin in the finals of the two AFC tournaments. Asked during one of the Forum sessions to pinpoint their benchmarking qualities, the then Australia U20 head coach Leah Blayney replied: “I would say their sustained intensity over 90 minutes.” Chan Hiu Ming, whose team had recently taken on DPR Korea, highlighted “their movement, their mentality and their solid technical ability. They are a disciplined unit executing a well-designed plan.”

The follow-up came on the final day of the Conference when Harry Lowe, FIFA’s Lead Football Performance Analyst, presented data related to the 12-team women’s football tournament at the Olympic Games. The statistics posted by the two AFC representatives, Australia and Japan, provided food for thought. Over the whole event, the time devoted to build-up play and progression was higher than at the FIFA Women’s World Cup, but lower when it came to the final third – hinting at a more widespread use of the long pass. While Australia were fifth in terms of the proportion of time dedicated to in-possession build-up play, Japan were next-to-last among the dozen teams – suggesting a more direct, purposeful transition through the thirds. When it came to successfully progressing into the final third, Australia and Japan occupied third and sixth places respectively and, in terms of culminating build-up play with a goal attempt, Japan were third and Australia fourth. Examining wing play, the AFC teams earned the top two places related to their ability to break the opponent’s defensive

line in the wide areas while Japan also out-performed the other contestants in making runs aimed at receiving a pass behind the back line and converting them into goal attempts. In other words, their attacking play against global opposition ticked a lot of boxes.

On the other hand, statistics revealed that, in applying direct pressure on the ball in opposition territory, the AFC and African teams occupied the bottom four places. “That is not necessarily negative,” Leah Blayney commented. “For example, the Australia team has some good transition players. So, there is a preference for coming quickly out of a mid or low block. What’s more, looking at the statistics, it’s extremely pleasing to see evidence of the positive brand of football that we’re playing in Asia – a front-foot way of playing football.”

While co-hosting the FIFA Women’s World Cup, Australia’s head coach Tony Gustavsson had commented: “our team can inspire the next generation; they can unite a nation; and they can leave a legacy that is much bigger than 90 minutes of football”. National teams make a major contribution in terms of creating role models and

attracting young girls into playing football. But are we properly prepared to welcome them? In addition to the elite levels of the game, the Conference also stressed the importance of solid construction at the base of the footballing pyramid.

AFC specialist grassroots consultant Robin Russell highlighted the importance of an attractively-named grassroots plan with specific, measurable, realistic and achievable objectives based on formats that work best for parents, coaches, clubs, schools and, most importantly, for the girls themselves. He also invited the participants to work out if and at what age, according to customs and cultures in individual MAs, it is appropriate to operate mixed teams and to organise league and cup competitions or one-day festivals.

He was followed on stage by Takeshi Ono who explained that ‘Always Start Well’ is a good motto to work with bearing in mind that children’s first encounter with football is crucial. “If they don’t enjoy it, they might never come again,” he said, “so grassroots coaches are the treasures of our MAs.” Hence, he went on to explain, the introduction in Japan of

a ‘D-Certificate’ designed mainly for parents or teachers who don’t necessarily have much, if any, experience of football; who don’t necessarily have much time to spare; but who want to learn how to share fun football with groups of children. The emphasis has been on providing easy access to more than 400 courses per year organised on a regional or local basis within the MA. Interestingly, the format has evolved because, after experimentation with courses of two or three full days, “we found that more days led to less participation among the grassroots coaches that we really wanted to involve”. The result is a D-Certificate course of one day or two half-days divided between work on the pitch and indoor sessions covering important topics such as safeguarding, respect and physical welfare.

The word ‘welfare’ was picked up by Soleen Al-Zoubi, the former Director of Women’s Football in Jordan currently working with the national team in Malaysia. Having coached male and female teams, Chan Hiu Ming had earlier commented: “I have observed that the tactical and technical sides of women’s football are getting closer to the men’s and I see aspects similar to professional levels in men’s football.” Soleen Al-Zoubi made the point that this entails much greater pressure on players, especially when football needs to be combined with academic or career development. “We mustn’t forget that well-being and mental health are also really important, so clubs, academies and national teams need to provide the right support.

After the need to receive support and change perceptions among the game’s decision-makers had emerged as one of the recurring themes of the Conference, the final words belong to Junko Imai: “Women’s football,” she said, “can add value, not just to the women’s game but to football in general.” Her statement earned an energetic round of applause.



## PROJECT UPDATES

### SCALING THE HEIGHTS

Increasing a total from four to six signifies a 50% increase. If we add the same number to 25, the extra two amount to an increase of 8%. The reason for opening with that statement of the blindingly obvious is to reiterate that when it comes to our regular updates on the AFC Coaching Convention, the AFC Elite Youth Scheme and the AFC Grassroots Charter, statistics become increasingly less eye-catching – and increasingly less relevant than the content they conceal. A glance at the figures related to the AFC Coaching Convention (the 2024 edition of the Convention Regulations has now been published, by the way), provides a prime example. Our last two issues have revealed that membership has remained static at 43 while the same two MAs (Pakistan and Yemen) are the only ones yet to jump on board. But the pattern has changed. The statistics hide the fact that MAs are making steady upward progress. Since our last issue, the number endorsed at Pro Level has risen from 16 to 20 with Bhutan, Iraq, Turkmenistan and UAE moving up to the highest echelon. In the meantime, IR Iran, Oman, the Philippines and Tajikistan are bidding to join them. If their applications are successful, more than half of the AFC family will be on the top rung of the coach education ladder.



The other two major AFC projects follow a similar storyline. But at grassroots and elite youth levels, the vital component is that a great deal of unsung-hero work is being done. So the major news item in these sectors has been the presentation of the AFC Special Elite Youth Awards, first introduced in 2019 to not only recognise achievements but also to increase the visibility of the behind-the-scenes work that underpins the men's and women's game – and centre-stage belonged to the 2024 winners during the opening session of the recent AFC Women's Football Conference in Kuala Lumpur.

Vietnam's PVF Academy in Hanoi, endorsed at 3-Star status by the AFC since 2020, earned the Youth Academy

of the Year (Boys) award not only for its work with 150 potential talents but also the strength of its technical staff and its attention to the development of qualified elite youth coaches. Travelling north to China PR, the Suzhou Football Center emerged as the winner of the parallel award for girls. Although founded as recently as 2022, the Academy has already become established as a national youth training hub, staging development events in a wide range of age groups and delivering more than 100 elite youth players to provincial teams, professional clubs and China PR's age-limit national teams. Like the PVF Academy, the Center also promotes the education of elite youth coaches, organising workshops and developing leaders for the younger age-groups.

Similarly, there were awards in Male and Female categories for the AFC Youth Coaches of the Year. The former was presented to Nozomi Hiroshima, the ex-professional midfielder who amassed over 400 appearances for clubs in four different Confederations, headed Japan's benchmark-setting Fukushima Academy from 2014 to 2018, and has since been working with players in the age-limit national teams. "Watching them grow every day," he told the-AFC.com, "is my biggest achievement".

Another former midfielder, Miyo Okamoto, won the Youth Coach of the Year (Female) award for her youth development work in Thailand and her native Japan, not



least leading the latter's U20 team to the finals of the AFC Women's Asian Cup™ and the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup. As she explained to the AFC website, her ambitions for the development of women's football focus on "strengthening the various national teams, enhancing youth development and improving coaching courses." "I hope that I can continue to highlight the many ways football benefits us," she adds, "from keeping us physically fit to expanding our minds and enriching our societies." Still in Japan, the Youth League of the Year award went to the Prince Takamado U15 Regional League.

In the interim, an online session devoted to Elite Youth Football, with a three-figure attendance from 41 MAS, had focused on the crucial issue of equipping talented youngsters to make the potentially problematical transition from academy-based youth football to the realities of the top professional game. In terms of searching for best-practice methods, one of the highlights was an insight into the Long-Term Player Development Strategy designed by the European Club Association (ECA) and, in particular, case studies based on clubs such as AFC Ajax, Arsenal and RSC Anderlecht who, over the years, have been widely regarded as leaders in the youth development field.

Meanwhile, the revised 2024 edition of the Elite Youth Scheme Regulations has been published and membership has increased from 22 to 26. The UAE have been endorsed at 3-Star level; China PR and Oman have brought the 2-Star group to eight; and Guam has joined the family with 1-Star status. In addition, the 3-Star membership of Vietnam's award-winning PVF Academy has been successfully renewed along with the 1-Star membership of the Kyrgyz Football Union and the Asylbek Momunov Football Academy.



In the Grassroots sector, the latest online session emphasised the importance of a positive response by children to their first encounter with the game and examined best practices when it comes to developing early engagement into a lifelong enthusiasm for football. Interestingly, representatives from the Leeds Beckett University in England indicated that their 'Attracting Children to Football' research project had revealed that over-high expectations among coaches and parents were among the most common reasons for young people to disassociate themselves from grassroots football, along with increasing academic pressures.

In terms of the AFC Grassroots Awards, Vietnam made an impressive showing. The Vietnam Football Federation's 'Football for All' initiative was named Best Grassroots Project, while Nguyen Hoang Phuong stepped on stage to receive the Best Grassroots Leader award. China PR's Tianjin Pengcheng took the Best Grassroots Club honour, while Malaysia's Liga Suparimau, which has involved some 14,000 youngsters in 12 age groups, was selected for the Best Grassroots Competition accolade. Previously, at the AFC Annual Awards ceremony in Seoul, the AFC President's Recognition Awards for Grassroots Football had been presented – one for each of the three categories of membership. Among the 10 MAs who enjoy Gold status, Football Australia received

the 2024 award, not least for their 'Club Changer' programme that has been hailed as a 'Global Leading Innovative Project'.

The All India Football Federation took pole position among the 10 endorsed at Silver Level, with special mention for the ambitious Blue Cubs grassroots project. And, among the 23 MAs ratified at the Bronze standard, Vietnam emerged as the award-winner, not only for their extensive on-the-pitch grassroots initiatives but also in recognition of their various social responsibility projects. Incidentally, fuller information about the Grassroots and Elite Youth awards can be found in the Grassroots and Youth Development sections of the-AFC.com.



In the meantime, the 2024 edition of the AFC Grassroots Charter Regulations has been published and membership has increased to a total of 43. Of the other four, IR Iran has applied for Gold membership, meaning that only three MAs have yet to sign on. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have recently been endorsed at Gold Level while India, Mongolia and Palestine have successfully upgraded to Silver. It means that, since our last issue, the total with Gold or Silver status has increased from 15 to 20. In other words, the positive news for Asian football is that MAs are steadily scaling the heights...

## AFC COACHING CONVENTION CATEGORIES

### PRO - Level



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

### A - Level



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

### B - Level



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE

## AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

### CATEGORIES

#### ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

##### 3 - STAR



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

##### 2 - STAR



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

##### 1 - STAR



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

##### PROVISIONAL



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

## AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER CATEGORIES



### GOLD



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

### SILVER



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND

### BRONZE



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



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KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF SRI LANKA



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

AFC PROJECTS



## KEY DATES

Jan 2025	Jan 17 – 23 AFC/JFA Women's Pro Course 2024 - Module 2 Kumamoto & Miyazaki, Japan			
Mar 2025	Mar 6 3rd AFC Coach Education Panel Meeting (Term 2024/25) Online	Mar 11 3rd AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting (Term 2024/25) Online	Mar 13 3rd AFC Youth Panel Meeting (Term 2024/25) Online	Mar 31 – Apr 4 AFC Futsal Level 3 Technical Workshop (1) Japan
May 2025	May 18 – 25 AFC/JFA Women's Pro Course - Module 3 TBC	May 27 3rd AFC Technical Committee Meeting Malaysia		
Jun 2025	Jun 3 AFC Grassroots Online Session Malaysia	Jun 5 AFC Women's Football Online Session (1) Malaysia	Jun 10 AFC Youth Online Session Malaysia	Jun 17 – 19 AFC Coach Education Conference 2025 Malaysia
July 2025	Jun 28 – Aug 1 AFC Women's Futsal Tutors Course Malaysia			

## AFC ANNUAL AWARDS SEOUL 2023

### TECHNICAL AWARDS



#### PRESIDENT RECOGNITION AWARDS FOR GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL



**Gold**  
Football Australia



**Silver**  
All India Football Federation



**Bronze**  
Vietnam Football Federation

## FUTSAL



**AFC Futsal Player of the Year**  
Saeid Ahmad Abbasi (IRN)

## WOMEN AWARDS



**AFC Coach of the Year (W)**  
Park Youn-Jeong (KOR), Korea Republic U20  
National Team

**AFC Youth Player of the Year**  
Chae Un Yong (PRK)

**AFC International Player of the Year (W)**  
Ellie Carpenter (AUS), Olympique Lyonnais (FRA)

**AFC Player of the Year (W)**  
Kiko Seike (JPN), Urawa Reds (JPN)

## MEN AWARDS



**AFC Coach of the Year (M)**  
Oiwa Go (JPN), Japan U23 National Team

**AFC Youth Player of the Year (M)**  
Abbosbek Fayzullaev (UZB), CSKA Moscow (RUS)

**AFC International Player of the Year (M)**  
Son Heung Min (KOR), Tottenham Hotspur FC (ENG)



**AFC Player of the Year (M)**  
Akram Hasan A Y Afif (QAT), Al Sadd SC (QAT)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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