COACHES CIRCLE

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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH TREVOR MORGAN

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EDITORIAL

A DECADE OF DEVELOPMENT

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director



Frontline coaches and Technical Directors have different timelines and contrasting perspectives. The former tries to win the next game, qualify for the next final tournament and capture the next title; while the latter focuses on the long-term implementation of development strategies, including the nurturing and education of tomorrow's players and coaches. Football results, league tables and competition outcomes provide tangible evidence of a practising coach's performance. But judging the quality of development programmes is more complex and requires an evaluation which is both factual and subjective. When considering the AFC's comprehensive technical programme there is valuable data and expert opinion to suggest that progress is being made.

The success of development projects and technical education activities is in no small measure due to the leadership at the top of any organisation.

During the last decade, during which the AFC has introduced a Coaching Convention, a Grassroots Charter and an Elite-Youth Scheme, not-to-mention numerous technical events and initiatives, AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa and AFC General Secretary Datuk Seri Windsor John have provided steadfast, enthusiastic and inspirational

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support for all aspects of technical development: Coach Education, Grassroots, Elite-Youth Football, the Women's Game, Futsal and Beach Soccer. Their messages have been unequivocal. Referring to the grassroots of the game, the President stated: 'Only by focusing on strategic, long-term and inclusive programmes can grassroots football develop and expand. The AFC is committed to ensuring every Member Association has the opportunity to implement such initiatives and to consequently enjoy the fruits of their labour.' Meanwhile, the General Secretary emphasised the importance of elite-youth football when he declared: 'Asia is a goldmine of football talent. But, that talent needs to be identified, nurtured and refined. With AFC support, the Member Associations and their clubs implement progressive player development programmes that find, train and inspire young footballers of potential. The future success of Asian football depends on it.'

At the time of writing, the numbers relating to AFC's technical projects make for impressive reading; The Grassroots Charter has 44 MAs in membership, 11 of them endorsed at the Gold benchmark level; The Coaching Convention has 43 MAs on board, 21 of them capable of delivering the Professional Diploma; and the Elite-Youth Scheme, which started later than the others, has 27 MAs enrolled, eight of them recognised at the advanced 3-star level. It is significant that Uzbekistan and Jordan have both embraced the youth scheme, invested substantially in this area, and have recently qualified for the FIFA World Cup 2026 in Canada, USA and Mexico. The intense implementation of the aforementioned projects has only been possible through the sterling efforts of the AFC's specialist panels (i.e. Coach Education, Grassroots and Elite-Youth), along with the commitment and dedication of the MAs and their Technical Departments. In recent years, a significant change has taken place with the MAs accepting full responsibility for their development work, albeit with guidance and support from the AFC.

We often say that 'competitions drive development', and the increase and improvement in competitions organised by world, continental and domestic bodies has raised the bar in terms of the demands and the standards required by coaches and players at all levels of the game. The administrative efficiency and technical know-how necessary to deliver global-standard courses, youth academies and development programmes has become a major challenge for Asia's football family, and the AFC is committed to providing the help and guidance required by national associations. Through major events, courses and online sessions, we will continue to provide further education for MA staff and, with the use of our technical projects which require criteria compliance and regular re-evaluations, we will contribute to the raising of standards in coach education and player development.



Investment does not always yield a successful outcome, but it does demonstrate a concern for the future and a commitment to the next generation. Like all big undertakings, football development on a national and continental basis requires detailed planning, effort, energy, funding, risk-taking and patience. In this context, a Chinese proverb offers valuable advice: 'Be not afraid of growing slowly - be afraid only of standing still'. The aim is to make steady progress but, at some point, the effort needs to translate into results. In the words of legendary Belgian coach Guy Thys: 'Education is always indispensable, but the match still remains the ultimate examination'. Asia has the potential to succeed at the highest level of world football and the foundations for that have been laid by MAs during the last decade of coach and player development. The future is already taking shape!

> Education is always indispensable, but the match still remains the ultimate examination
>
> **Guy Thys**

THE BIG INTERVIEW

FOOTBALL ON THE FRONT FOOT



He is, in all senses of the word, a champion of youth football. During a career where the common denominator has been dedication to the detection and development of emerging talents, he has coached at just about every level from grassroots to FIFA World Cups. He has worked at youth academies; his portfolio of skills includes a two-year spell as technical director; and, in recent years, he has supported every one of his country's national teams as head coach or assistant coach, leading the U17 team to the semi-finals of the AFC Asian Cup in 2018 and producing a repeat performance with the U23s in 2022. A familiar face at the AFC thanks to his role on the AFC Youth Panel – and Technical Observer at the most recent AFC Asian Cup™ in Qatar – his face also became extremely familiar in the media when, a few months ago, he led his country to a historic victory in the AFC U20 Asian Cup™ which also earned a place at the FIFA U-20 World Cup. He is, of course...





TREVOR MORGAN

THAT TITLE WAS AUSTRALIA'S FIRST IN AGE-LIMIT COMPETITIONS SINCE JOINING THE AFC IN 2006. WHAT WAS THE REACTION WHEN YOU RETURNED HOME FROM CHINA PR?

There was a lot of excitement. And great pleasure in seeing a team win. There were two main points that came out of the media feedback. The first one was how hard it had been to win, bearing in mind that these competitions in Asia are getting better and better. So it was such an achievement. The second was that the reflection by a lot of people to say how much they enjoyed the way the team did it – how they played and how well they reflected the culture in Australia and how we like our teams to play. Everybody likes to celebrate the win. A large portion of our population follow sport in general – as opposed to being just football fans – so the greater attention you receive after winning a tournament means a larger audience and greater discussion around football and the development of young players.

YOU ALSO WON THE FAIR PLAY TROPHY. HOW DID YOU INFLUENCE THE BEHAVIOUR OF A GROUP OF YOUNG, ENTHUSIASTIC PLAYERS?

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.

YOU TALKED ABOUT PLAYING ON THE 'FRONT FOOT'. WHAT DID THAT TRANSLATE INTO IN TERMS OF PLAYING PERFORMANCE?

One of the important parts of this sort of tournament is to try to get young players to express themselves, show who they are and take on the journey to the senior national team. So our mantra has always been about making positive mistakes. If you see an opportunity to make something happen you try to explore it. If it doesn't come off, you won't be punished by the coaching staff – they'll rather be praising you. In terms of our style of football, we encourage them to make decisions, to think ahead in the game and anticipate situations. We tried to see a lot of the ball and play forward if we could. In the decisions we make, we tried to be open in the game and challenge the opponent's decision-making.



YOU MENTIONED DURING THE TOURNAMENT THAT IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR YOUR TEAM NOT TO BE PREDICTABLE. AND YOU CERTAINLY SCORED A LOT OF GOALS AND IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. WHAT DID YOU DO TO DEVELOP/ ENCOURAGE THIS?

It's certainly positive to have more than one way of scoring. We were fortunate to have a balanced squad. Some players were very dynamic in transition moments and a couple were really great at set-play deliveries so we could pose different problems and it was certainly good that we could score in different ways and I could make changes with different players coming in and out to make different impacts. I think that was valuable for us during the tournament.

STATISTICS EMPHASISE THE VALUE OF WING-PLAY AND CROSSING. BUT IS THERE IS A PREDICTABILITY FACTOR ATTACHED TO IT? AND HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO AVOID IT?

We didn't play a formation that had a lot of width in the final third, so we tended to play quite close together. It meant that some of the goals that were cut-backs or crosses were not delivered from a particularly wide area. That's how we chose to play and, even though

getting behind the defence and crossing is a great way to score goals we were fortunate to find ways to penetrate more centrally, which opened up much better angles for the shot.

DID YOU REHEARSE PENALTY SHOOT-OUTS?

I think that managing emotions in the shoot-out situation is extremely challenging. We didn't specifically practise penalties when we got into the final rounds. But we do organise a lot of competitions all the time – and sometimes those need to be settled by a penalty shoot-out. We like to always create a competitive environment so if, in training, we needed to decide something with a shoot-out, there always had to be something on it – something to play for rather than just going through the motions. And that did happen prior to the final. But we thought it might be detrimental to morale if we suddenly introduced something into training that hadn't seemed to be important before.

SOME OF YOUR PLAYERS WERE BASED IN EUROPE. HOW DID YOU FIND THEM, AND HOW DID YOU INTEGRATE THEM INTO THE SQUAD?

Asia is such a big Confederation and we certainly had a mix of players from right down in our corner and some based right through Europe. Some were already known to us because they started their football journey in Australia and some who were playing in our league. So it was important to reach out to their clubs and have good relationships to secure the release of players



for these tournaments. We had already used a lot of players over time so we had opportunities to check out a lot of options in case we had set-backs and needed to test our depth. Integrating a group is challenging because we only had FIFA windows together over a period of two years. And we actually used 65 players – in matches, not just selected for a camp. We try to be very consistent with our key footballing principles and aspects that we try to train and repeat. Then we play as many tournaments as possible so that they can experience situations for themselves. All coaches know that, in national team football, preparing a team in two or three days when we haven't seen each other for three or four months can be extremely challenging. So the key is to have a consistent way of playing and to give the players little refresher sessions, sometimes using video clips, just to remind them about the basic principles.

WHEN DEALING WITH THE CURRENT GENERATION OF YOUNG PLAYERS, ARE THERE THINGS YOU HAVE TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHEN COACHING THEM?

I think youth players are looking for leadership and they are looking for direction. So we try to engage with the players on and off the pitch, using technology to deliver technical or tactical information, team-building aspects and giving them confidence – making it clear that we believe in them. We deliver a very strong message all the time: that if we have selected you, we believe in you. We believe that you have qualities that will help us win matches. One of the key factors with this particular group has been to present challenges in training and really taking time for observation rather than jumping in straight away to correct them. It's important to see

what decisions they make for themselves and how they react in certain situations. Rather than over-coach, we possibly under-coach, preferring to observe so that, over time, they are prepared to take risks.

DURING THE TOURNAMENT YOU HIGHLIGHTED THE TEAM'S MENTAL RESILIENCE. WHAT DID YOU DO TO CREATE IT?

You need to be very consistent with your messaging. We were fortunate that the first matches we played with this team in June 2023 were against England, Portugal and Norway and I saw quality in the group from that stage. They revel in a really big challenge. Sometimes against an opponent that's really above their level they show a lot of self-belief and willingness to try and play. I was really encouraged by that and it emerged as one of the characteristics of the squad. It's important not to expect to be perfect but to take on a challenge and show themselves when there is pressure.

YOU ALSO TALKED ABOUT ENCOURAGING RISK-TAKING AT THIS DEVELOPMENT LEVEL?

I think it's legitimate in any age group, especially when margins between teams and between winning and losing can be very small. So what I like to see among future senior-team players is a willingness to be brave. Without the readiness to take risks and believe in themselves it becomes more difficult to play on the front foot and you tend to be reactive – to focus more on what the opponent does. You need to work with an attitude of 'I'm here to represent my nation and I'm going to do the best I can'.



WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES YOU ENCOUNTER WHEN MANAGING OR COACHING AN AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL TEAM?

A very big challenge for us within our own country is to organise a talent-detection scheme. When distances are so big it's difficult to have enough scouts to view players every week. If I could just drive to watch our best players every weekend it would be good. But it's just not possible to do. It means that scouting work has to be very much technology-driven and based on videos. Then we have players in Asia and in Europe and watching them in person is not just about time, it's also about cost. And when you bring a team together… well, we don't often play at home – almost always in other countries – so you could be in any part of Asia with just two or three days to prepare to compete during a period when some of the players are having to adjust to a different time-zone. In such a short time together it's often hard to measure one player against another. That's why I was extremely proud of their capacity to perform in the tournament in China because the level of so many of the teams was so high.

TOURNAMENT PLAY IS SPECIAL. WHAT DID YOU DO TO KEEP MORALE HIGH AND TO KEEP EVERYONE INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS?

Firstly, you need to back up your words with your actions. We told the players we believed in them and trusted them. And by the end of the group stage we had already used 22 of our players. Only our third goalkeeper hadn't played. That's the first thing. The players, when you're brave enough to use them, feel valued and feel part of the process. It would have been harder if I'd not had so much depth in the squad and felt that I couldn't use everybody. Within the group, we watched how they interacted with each other, how they treated each other on and off the pitch. In training and back at the hotel. We tried to give them a lot of activities to engage in – always involving winning and

losing. You might not be in the starting line-up but your side won the small-sided games, you won the trivia night... We always try to keep them competing – and using the activities to distract from the pressures of matchplay. We knew we were going to be together for 30 days, so days off were pre-planned. We had to work on the assumption that we were going to make it all the way to the final, so we were measuring in steps: when you would rest certain players; when you would do certain things. Off the pitch there were times when we tried to let the players unwind and not just focus on training. Relaxing on their own or doing things like playing table-tennis or cards in groups, walking outside the hotel - just to break things up.

HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THE EMOTIONAL DEMANDS ON YOURSELF AND ON YOUR PLAYERS?

There are expectations attached to performing for Australia so we really focused on how we wanted to play and how we wanted to do things. The first thing was to make sure we were well-organised – getting good food, getting good sleep, training well. The next thing, through the leadership group and through the staff, was goal-setting and positive messaging. Instead of using the word 'if', we would say 'to win the game we will do this'. The narrative was 'you will do well today'. And we tried to show as much belief as possible in the team. The mantra was 'you're not going to play the perfect game. You're going to be tested by very good opposition. When things become difficult, that's when you need to keep going'. We tried to create an environment



where the boys were happy to embrace challenges and happy to embrace adversity.

YOU MENTIONED A LEADERSHIP GROUP. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

Yes, we had some processes for reviewing games, reviewing training sessions and it's good to have a group containing a representative from each line in the team – a goalkeeper, one or two defenders, some

> If you see an opportunity to make something happen you try to explore it. If it doesn't come off, you won't be punished by the coaching staff – they'll rather be praising you.

midfielders and forwards who are ready to take a lead when we review clips and, in particular, their role is to help the coaching staff to step back from time to time and let them manage their own behaviour or come back to us with requests about small changes to, for example, schedules or menus. They're the conduit between the whole group and the coaching staff. And every couple of days they help us to review what they thought about training, about the video session, about their recovery time and so on. It makes it clear that if we can do something to make things better for the players then we will.

SO THEY PLAY A PART IN HELPING YOU TO CREATE A TEAM CULTURE IN A SHORT SPACE OF TIME?

We were fortunate that Football Australia supported us over a two-year period leading into the Asian Cup and our objective was to learn as much as we could through matches. So we rotated the squad. And when you're changing people over, it's important to keep reminding players about the core principles. We tried to lead that culture. For example, I carry bags when we get off the plane. I carry bags when we get off the bus. It's important for the coaching staff to show willingness to help. With regard to how they treat each other, the leadership group was important in that. Sometimes a player needs to take responsibility for doing a wrong thing. So it's good for the players themselves to put mechanisms in place to help team-mates avoid doing the wrong thing. We try to create that culture and we definitely try to have a lot of fun in camp. We have some rivalry, we have some laughs and the players get to experience how to manage things like the anger you might feel when you don't win. We try to keep the schedule clean yet busy enough so that there was always something happening – giving them time around each other or giving them a break. We had some key things we had to do – and one of those was representing our country properly and, when you're wearing the national team jersey, what are you going to do that will draw the interest of the senior team. If you're not the type of person who's going to make other players play better, then you have to be something pretty special on your own to progress.



AS YOU LOOK FORWARD TO THE FIFA U-20 WORLD CUP IN CHILE, WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS?

The expectation is that we show that we can grow. The Asian Cup is history. We performed well at the tournament and so did some of the other teams. It's not about resting on laurels. Now the challenge is to see what football we can play, to examine the challenges we might need to overcome and to think about an event that could be influential in maybe getting some of the players into the Under-23 or senior team camps. It'll be about evolving a bit in terms of our style of play and getting everybody fit and firing for another challenging tournament.

> In the decisions we make, we tried to be open in the game and challenge the opponent's decision-making.

COACH EDUCATION CONFERENCE

COACHING THE COACHES OF THE FUTURE



"As tutors, we are not preparing coaches for the game of 20 years ago but equipping them to deal with the challenges of football in the next 10 to 20 years". This was one of the first messages to appear on the giant screens during the keynote presentation by Technical Director Andy Roxburgh in the opening session at the three-day 5th AFC Coach Education Conference in Kuala Lumpur under the banner of "Shaping the Future of Coach Education". Even though participants from six Member Associations (MAs) in West Asia were unable to travel due to conflict in the region, the event was attended by more than 100 coach educators from the other AFC territories.

Anticipating future challenges is not, of course, about driving forward without glancing in the rear-view mirror. As Confucius wrote: "to define the future, one must study the past". And a rewind of AFC Coach Education Conferences reminds us that, at the second one in 2018, the major over-riding topic was the launch of the AFC Coaching Convention. The dynamic advancement of the project since then serves as a reminder of how rapid evolution can be – and invites us to reflect on the changes in football, education and society we have seen in the last seven years. The future is approaching at great speed. The question to ask is which of the changes that are taking place today will have an impact on the next generation of coaches?

Apart from casting the eyes at the rear-view mirror, Andy Roxburgh invited the audience to engage the brain in thinking 'backwards' rather than 'forwards' – to look at a problem from the opposite perspective. For example, to anticipate the reasons liable to lead to 'failure' in coaching and then prepare ways of avoiding those potential threats and pitfalls. Most coaches

would start their lists with purely footballing aspects such as – obviously – bad results, a run of injuries, poor team selection or coaching errors.

But the list might easily be dominated by off-the-pitch issues such as relationships in the dressing-room or the boardroom, the public image, media relations, financial constraints, levels of expectations and patience or, quite simply, extreme stress. If there are reasons to argue that the bottom half of the list might escalate its domination in the future, how can the coach find antidotes? And how will the changing environment affect coach education? How can coach educators help to develop competencies that enable coaches to thrive in a changing world?

Words by the AFC General Secretary Datuk Seri Windsor John provide a concise answer: “The front-line coach of the future will need to be knowledgeable about new technology; understand the way young people learn; and have empathy with the players they lead. They will also have to acknowledge and appreciate the role of football's key stakeholders, those who contribute to the game's promotion, protection and progress, such as officials, organisers, referees and sponsors, because football is a team game, on and off the pitch.”

The relevance of technological competence was an issue raised when AFC Consultant Robin Russell stepped on stage to pose questions to the participants about, for example, the extent to which AI might become a useful tool for administrators, coach educators or working coaches. And computer literacy featured among the future skills mentioned by Andy Roxburgh, along with self-sufficiency, language abilities, adaptability or personal ingredients such as leadership skills,





empathy and enough curiosity to engage in continuous professional and personal development.

The theme was picked up on the second morning of the Conference by UEFA Technical Advisor Frank Ludolph, who emphasised that, even if the Coaching Convention in Europe is further along its pathway than the AFC equivalent, the key is “the pursuit of excellence versus stagnation”. His in-depth review of the Convention’s evolution underlined the need for MAs to build solid administrative platforms to support and maintain coach education mechanisms – and to cope with duties which, in his presentation, ran to six full pages. He also stressed the importance of educating the educators. “The future of football is shaped by qualified coach educators,” he stated. “Therefore it is our duty to invest in a competent workforce.” He outlined the content of a UEFA-endorsed Coach Educators Course based on a two-day introductory module; two days devoted to the application of principles; and three to five days of practical training in a UEFA course environment.

While on stage, Ludolph also reported on the imminent operational and technical agreement between UEFA and the AFC with regard to the recognition of Coaching Diplomas. After the final meeting of the combined UEFA-AFC task force in Switzerland in November 2024 formal agreements had been finalised and, at the time of the Conference, were awaiting formal signature procedures.

He also mentioned the programmes designed to address the statistic that, of the 534,000 UEFA-endorsed licences, only 27,000 correspond to female coaches, along with the efforts being made to increase the percentage of female tutors in the continent’s

coach education landscape. This was later followed-up by the AFC Deputy Technical Director Takeshi Ono, who outlined the details of the AFC-JFA Pro Diploma Course for Elite Female Coaches organised on a hub basis with 20 coaches from 14 MAs about to conclude a course based on a blended-learning structure mixing on-site and online modules with visits involving practical work on the training ground. Faye Chambers, Coach Education Instructor at Football Australia, commented "a lot of work is being done to empower more women coach educators through exclusive courses, and the impact can clearly be seen, as over the years, more and more women are taking up leadership roles in football, which is a clear indication of the progress being made on the Continent."

In the meantime, the AFC Head of Coach Education, Wim Koevermans, reviewed the AFC Tutor Courses (Pro Licence, Women's, Fitness Coaches and Goalkeeper Coaches) which have been completed – most of them during the recent post-pandemic years – and went on to analyse the qualities which make up the profile of today's Coach Educator, listing them under six headings:



The Instructor: A football expert with the ability to give detailed instructions
The Teacher: An expert in teaching styles that match the needs of the candidates
The Facilitator: The person who facilitates the educational process for the others involved
The Manager: Prior to and during the course, responsible for managing structures, systems and procedures to create a positive learning environment
The Assessor: Evaluates performance using a competency model and provides feedback in an appropriate manner
The Mentor: An experienced person who, through counselling, coaching and mentoring, offers advice and support to student coaches through listening, questioning and sharing experience and expertise.

Another of the key elements, he added, is to be very clear about assessment procedures at the beginning of the course, focusing on the way practice work is assessed and making sure that all tutors use the same criteria.

The final session of the Conference opened up with further case histories presented by two very different footballing countries. An in-depth description of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation's coach education programme was presented by Technical Director Nasser Larguet, backed by Head of Coach Education Franck Thivilier. Among the many topics addressed was the interesting project of, as Larguet put it, "establishing a complete network of partner clubs across the kingdom,



committed to our training approach. These clubs, selected for the quality of their technical supervision and their infrastructure, regularly welcome our candidates in training for periods of observation and practice. And we regard this immersion in the professional clubs as an essential complement to the theoretical training, anchoring the learning in the concrete reality of coaching."

> To define the future, one must study the past
>
> **Confucius**

He also emphasised the importance of CPD Refresher Courses. “Coach education doesn't end with graduation,” he maintained. “Our mandatory refresher system ensures that knowledge and skills are constantly updated. These regular sessions allow the introduction of pedagogical, tactical and scientific innovations, while offering a space for the exchange of experiences.”

Niall O’Reagan, Head of Education & Development at the Football Association of Ireland, explained how smaller MAs can be highly progressive in their coach education and development programmes, tracking through from grassroots coaching to individual development and the transition from player to coach. Interestingly, he rounded-off his presentation by referring to the relevance of self-discovery and stating that “empathy is the key to success” – a comment which dovetailed neatly with a panel discussion on the previous day devoted to the AFC’s ‘Emotions in Football’ project with, on stage, Qatar’s Fahad Abdullah Al Zarraa, the Aspire Academy’s María Ruiz de Oña, AFC Grassroots and Youth Football Development Consultant Robin Russell, and Education 4 Peace Foundation founder Mark Milton.

They were asked for their views on how best to deliver this topic in coach education courses and how, globally, clubs and MAs are approaching the subject. Mark Milton was asked whether he agreed (he did) with the opinion expressed by many top coaches that you should listen more than you talk – and he also revealed plans to make the digital version of his groundbreaking book ‘Football:





A Path to Self-Awareness – becoming master of your emotions' freely available to Federations that commit to promoting it within their football family.

The aftermath to this session was a series of questions posed to the participants in discussion groups. The basic question was the same; what are the emotional challenges facing grassroots coaches? And how can tomorrow's coaches be prepared to deal with these issues? The word 'grassroots' was then replaced by 'elite-youth' and, finally, 'professional'.

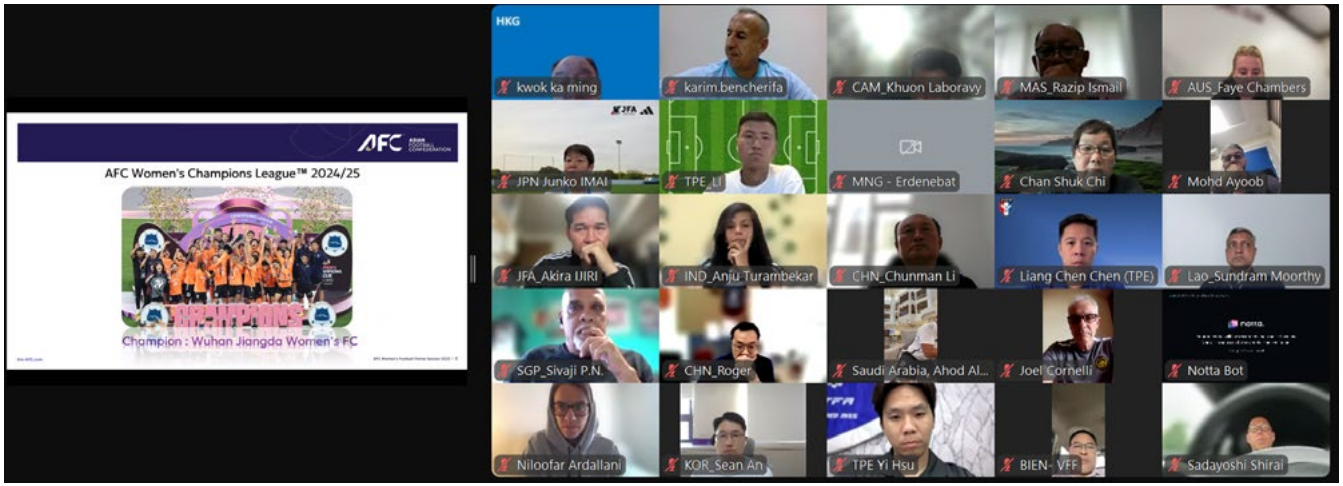
These round-table discussions on various topics emerged as one of the standout features of the Conference with the participants enthusiastically engaging in, as the reporter for the AFC website put it, "spirited conversations" and "lively exchanges". The reporter also recorded a comment by Hasney Aljofree, Head of Coach Education & Development at the Football Association of Singapore: "It's been a fantastic few days and all the information we have received has been first-class. We've had an opportunity to share our collective knowledge, which has clearly demonstrated what we're all trying to achieve together."

> The future of football is shaped by qualified coach educators
>
> **Frank Ludolph, UEFA**



ONLINE SESSIONS

NETWORKING



For the last five years, online meetings have become the 'new normal'. The recent AFC Coach Education Conference underlined the fact that, in terms of atmosphere, team spirit and the interchange of ideas, meeting 'in the flesh' has unparalleled appeal – not only in the conference hall but also during downtime, meal times and coffee breaks. But the pandemic highlighted the value of online meetings as a lifeline to community spirit and a vital communication tool – which is why, five years on, AFC's online sessions are still going strong.

Two of the most recent sessions, dedicated to Grassroots and Youth football, are covered in the Project Updates section of this publication. The third was the AFC Women's Football Online Session which highlighted the Confederation's commitment to developing the women's game in Asia and focused, in particular, on the first-ever AFC Women's Champions League™ – an event which, as the AFC Head of Women's Football, Bai Lili told an online audience of almost 100 representatives from 41 MAs, "was a great indication of how far women's football has come in Asia. With incentives such as substantial prize money and the inclusion of the VAR system, the AFC clearly underlined its determination to set a high benchmark right from the inaugural edition."

From a footballing perspective, the competition represented an opportunity for the majority of participants – players and coaches – to measure themselves for the first time against opponents on the international stage. It also clearly mapped the strata within women's club football in the AFC territories (evident domination by clubs from the East, for example) and served to clarify the technical, tactical and physical requisites for competing at elite level.

During the 25-match competition, one of the challenges facing AFC's Technical Observers was the lack of precedents. Comparisons with previous years were impossible. But their comments based on past experience in other competitions did identify a tendency among the top teams towards a greater focus on refining defensive strategies, with more teams equipped to adjust structures and tactics according to the characteristics of the opposition. Differences in playing styles were corroborated by statistics – such as the 27 crosses per game delivered by Hyundai Steel Red Angels and Urawa Red Diamonds compared with six and four respectively from the two clubs from the West to figure in the top eight: IR Iran's Bam Khatoon and Abu Dhabi Country Club from the UAE. Similarly, the Red Angels and silver-medallists Melbourne City posted figures in excess of 70% in the accuracy of passing in the final third, while the duo from the West were hovering around 40%.

The fact that the coaches of the teams at the Finals tournament of the AFC Women's Champions League™ in Wuhan were male led the online session towards a review of the AFC-JFA Pro Diploma Course (involving 20 female student coaches from 14 MAs) aimed at providing opportunities for women who do not have access to AFC Pro courses in their own country. To complete one of the modules, the students were in Wuhan to analyse the performances of the Confederation's top clubs.

Talking of analysis, the observations and talking points to emerge from the new competition can be found in the AFC Technical Report on the event – alongside similar reports on the men's AFC Champions League Elite™ and, turning to national-team football, a joint report on the AFC U20 and U17 Asian Cups, all of which are or will shortly be available on the AFC website.

Going back to the inaugural AFC Women's Champions League™, Chang Weiwei, the head coach of winners Wuhan Jiangda, commented to the AFC's Technical Observer Team after the final, "everyone sees this tournament as a milestone — a step for women's football in Asia towards a more global and competitive stage. For clubs and national teams alike, this is an excellent platform for growth, learning, and experience. The potential is massive but we still have a long way to go. In Europe, most national associations have well-structured women's leagues. In Asia, out of 47 member associations, fewer than half have regular league systems. That's why this tournament matters. We need consistent, high-level competition. That's how you build value. That's how you build careers. And that's how Asia can keep up with Europe and the Americas."







> For clubs and national teams alike, this is an excellent platform for growth, learning, and experience... That's why this tournament matters. We need consistent, high-level competition. That's how you build value. That's how you build careers. And that's how Asia can keep up with Europe and the Americas
>
> **Chang Weiwei**

PROJECT UPDATES

A BUZZ OF ACTIVITY



The statistics that reflect the growth of the AFC's development projects are, in themselves, impressive. And maybe the buzz of activity, the energy and the sense of enterprise that surround the numbers in our regular overview are even more inspiring. But let's start with the updates.

With regard to the AFC Coaching Convention, the number of Member Associations equipped to deliver the AFC Professional Diploma rose to 21 – not far short of the halfway milestone – when the Oman FA was endorsed at AFC Pro Level membership, successfully achieving 'promotion' from the AFC B Level. A few weeks later, the endorsement of the Myanmar FF's application to move up from B Level brought the membership total at AFC A Level to 15 while the number of B Level members remains static on seven. Meanwhile, assessment visits have been conducted in the Korea Republic (a Pro Level renewal) and Bahrain, where the aim is to move up from A to Pro Level. In the pending tray are renewal evaluations in Australia, China PR and Uzbekistan (all at the Pro standard) along with the Philippines at A Level.

The Philippines also take pride of place in the updates to the AFC Elite Youth Scheme by successfully receiving endorsement as a 1-Star member, thus becoming the 12th at that level and the 27th MA to join the programme. Renewal procedures have been completed in 3-Star Uzbekistan with the ratification of the FC Bunyodkor and Nasaf FC Academies at 2-Star status and the 1-Star membership of the Andijan Academy. Ongoing activities also include applications from the Football Association of Malaysia for 3-Star status (the Akademi Mokhtar Dahari) along with assessments for 1-Star membership in Hong Kong China, Lebanon (the Athletico FC, SAFA FC and Beirut Football Academies) and Myanmar (the Academy Yangon-Mandalay). In the meantime, the Jordan FA is bidding for an upgrade from 2-Star to 3-Star membership.

With regard to the AFC Grassroots Charter, the headline news is the ratification of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the 11th MA at Gold level – an achievement which brings the membership total in the programme to 44. The upgrading of Laos to Silver standard means that there are also 11 MAs on that rung of the ladder, while the Bronze memberships of Macau, Myanmar and the Northern Mariana Islands have been successfully renewed. Several other applications are currently under assessment, notably bids by Jordan and Tajikistan to upgrade their memberships from Silver to Gold; requests by Kuwait and Syria to move up from Bronze to Silver; and Korea Republic and Chinese Taipei have applied to renew their Gold and Bronze memberships, respectively.

In the meantime, an AFC Grassroots Online Session attended by more than 120 participants from the AFC's MAs focused on the key qualities required by grassroots coaches – and the impact of emotional components at that level of game. AFC Grassroots and Youth Football Development Consultant Robin Russell highlighted the various factors that frequently lead to youngsters quitting the sport with, at the top of the list, the coach's attitude; parent behaviour; and over-emphasis on results – all of which combine to create an environment where football is no longer fun.

Russell invited participants to react to scenarios – for example the parent who loudly disagrees with substitutions or coaching decisions and shouts instructions which only serve to confuse the players and undermine the coach's authority. "The challenge is to remain calm and professional," he commented, "while safeguarding the player's experience in a situation where you feel frustration, perhaps embarrassment, or question your own coaching ability. There's a temptation to react by becoming overly instructional or critical". Football Australia's Head of Member Federation Relations and Community, Will Hastie added "It is important for community coaches to not react negatively but to meet all challenges with empathy and the well-being of the child as the foremost priority."

> The challenge is to remain calm and professional, while safeguarding the player's experience in a situation where you feel frustration, perhaps embarrassment, or question your own coaching ability.
>
> **Robin Russell**



The issue of managing the expectations, demands and behaviour of parents underscored the pivotal role played by coaches during the vital periods of a young player's early football experience when their ability to handle emotions – their own and those of the children – is a fundamental factor in the creation of a safe, inviting and enjoyable environment.

Hence the great potential value of the newly-introduced AFC Children's Coach Certificate – an equivalent to a 'D Diploma' which aims to equip grassroots coaches with the knowledge and tools for work with youngsters, while staying in alignment with the rungs of the AFC Coaching Convention ladder. The basic module (two half-days on site and two online sessions) is designed to fit easily into the diaries of grassroots coaches from diverse walks of life and there are further options for three additional credits – each of them comprising one half-day on site and one online session. The content of the Children's Coach Certificate is tailored to providing guidance on safeguarding, teaching methods, player development, and other key areas beyond technical instruction which help to create a safe and wholesome environment for children to enjoy their football.

The AFC Online Session dedicated to Youth Football featured an insight into what coaches need to know

when working in this vital development sector. María Ruiz de Oña, Lead of Neurophysiology Football Performance and Science Department at the Aspire Academy in Qatar, discussed the self-awareness required by coaches who, in their work, are frequently faced with scenarios likely to provoke fear, anger – often related to feelings of injustice – and moments of sadness, depression or despair. "An experienced coach is not someone who has a lot of experience," she stated, "but someone who has critically reflected a lot on their experiences. And 'critically' means that there has been self-questioning and a change in outlook and actions. The coach needs to bear in mind that 'what I think, what I feel and what I do is what is projected outwards and determines the impact I will have on the performance of the player'."

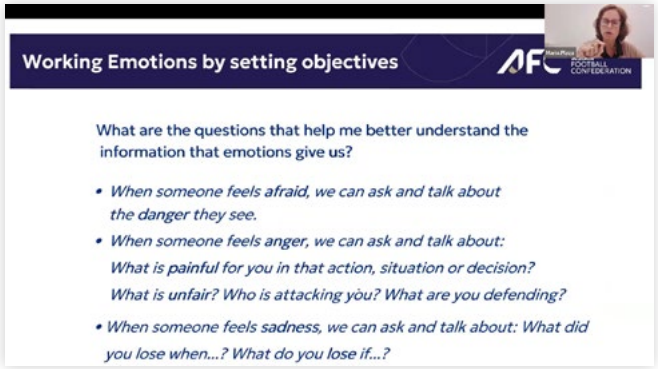
The implications for coach education were reviewed by Fahad Al Zarraa, Director of the Development Department at the Qatar FA and member of the AFC's Technical Committee and Youth Panel. "We need to promote coaching that supports emotional as well as technical growth," he advised the online audience. "That means teaching coaches to read player reactions and adapt accordingly; enabling coaches to manage emotional dynamics in youth settings; and therefore improving empathy and clear communication skills." He went on to emphasise the relevance of understanding the psychological foundations of coach-player relationships; the knowledge required in order to foster trust, respect and motivation; the roles of empathy and active listening in strengthening bonds; and, above all, the skills required in promoting a supportive and constructive environment for player development.







By the way, the AFC Elite-Youth Bulletin – available on the AFC website – is also a valuable reference guide for all those working in youth football. It features various MAs' Good Practices in Elite Youth Football Development and Youth Academies across the diverse AFC territories and offers other MAs the opportunity to cherry-pick ideas, guidelines and practical tips which might be useful in designing programmes tailored to their individual needs. It's all part of the buzz of activity surrounding the AFC's development projects.



> An experienced coach is not someone who has a lot of experience, but someone who has critically reflected a lot on their experiences.
>
> **María Ruiz de Oña**

AFC PROJECTS

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
- KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND
- UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

A - Level

- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
- THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION
- MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA
- LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION

B - Level

- AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
- DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES
- ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE
- NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

CATEGORIES

ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR

- FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- 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
- MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE
- PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION

AFC PROJECTS

AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER

CATEGORIES

GOLD

- FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
- CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- 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
- LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND

BRONZE

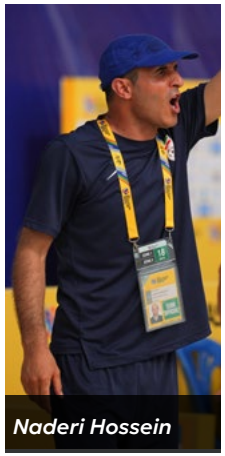
- AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
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- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF SRI LANKA
- SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN
- VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

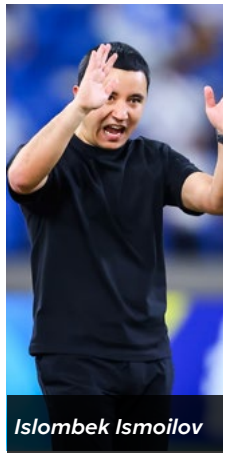
TRIBUTE TO THE WINNING COACHES

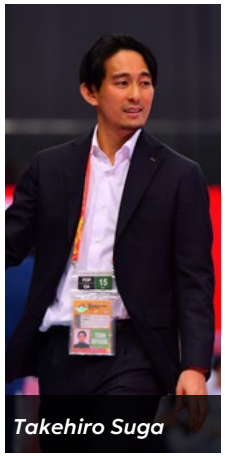
A HUNDRED DAYS = SIX CHAMPIONS

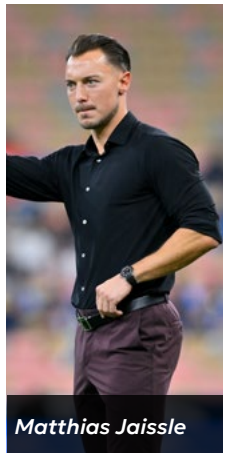
The arithmetic might not be scrupulously accurate. But there were about 105 days between the start of the AFC U20 Asian Cup™ in February and the moment when Wuhan Jiangda lifted the inaugural AFC Women's Champions League™ trophy at the end of May. If you'll excuse us for patting colleagues on the back, credit is due to all those involved in organising six top-level events in such a brief space of time – and that includes, of course, the Member Associations who hosted them. Four of them were the final tournaments of national-team championships – and the four winners were led by native coaches from AFC territories. So was one of the champions of the two club competitions with Matthias Jaissle of Germany completing the list of winning coaches. Three of the six finals, incidentally, were so closely contested that they required penalty shoot-outs to decree the champion – which is why principles of Fair Play justify the inclusion of the silver-medal coaches on the roll of honour which is set out in chronological order during the 100-day 'peak period'.


Trevor Morgan


Naderi Hossein


Islombek Ismoilov


Takehiro Suga


Matthias Jaissle


Chang Weiwei

AFC U20 Asian Cup™ in China PR
Winner: Trevor Morgan (Australia)
Runner-up: Marco Soares (Saudi Arabia)
The interview earlier in this publication reveals the philosophy of the head coach who led Australia to a first-ever victory in AFC age-limit competitions, coming through the final tournament unbeaten and earning the title with a 5-4 penalty shoot-out win after a 1-1 draw.

AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup™ in Thailand
Winner: Naderi Hossein (Islamic Republic of Iran)
Runner-up: Talib Hilal (Oman)
An emphatic 8-1 victory in the final allowed Naderi Hossein's team to become the first to successfully defend the title and edge ahead of Japan in the all-time honours list with four gold medals. The Asian champions and third-placed Japan were subsequently beaten in the Quarter-Finals of the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup while Oman fell in the Group Stage.

AFC U17 Asian Cup™ in Saudi Arabia
Winner: Islombek Ismoilov (Uzbekistan)
Runner-up: Mário da Silva (Saudi Arabia)
Six straight wins with a goal tally of 17 scored and three conceded amounted to an impressive campaign. But Islombek Ismoilov's greatest challenge was overcoming personal and collective dismay when his team was reduced to nine just before half-time in the final which they won with astute tactical changes, extraordinary team spirit and two second-half goals.

AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup™ in China PR
Winner: Takehiro Suga (Japan)
Runner-up: Thanatorn Santanaprasit (Thailand)
The coach who had begun his career in 2005 led Japan's women to their first title in a final against the team who had defeated them in the Group Stage. He praised his players' composure after bouncing back from 3-2 behind during extra time to draw 3-3 and then winning 3-2 in the penalty shoot-out scenario they had assiduously practised in training.

AFC Champions League Elite™ final in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Winner: Matthias Jaissle (Al Ahli Saudi FC)
Runner-up: Shigetoshi Hasebe (Kawasaki Frontale)
Within three months of media hints at his dismissal, Matthias Jaissle had re-balanced his team and, during the Finals in Saudi Arabia, was praised for a tactical masterclass in a 3-1 semi-final win against pre-season favourites Al Hilal SFC. This was followed by a dominant first-half display in the final which secured a 2-0 victory and the Saudi Arabian club's first title.

AFC Women's Champions League™ final in Wuhan, China PR

Winner: Chang Weiwei (Wuhan Jiangda Women's FC)
Runner-up: Michael Matricciani (Melbourne City)
After edging into the Knockout Stage as the best third-placed team in the Group Stage, Chang Weiwei made shrewd signings and tactical adjustments prior to the Finals tournament on home territory where, remaining unbeaten during both the semi-finals and final, his side clinched the inaugural title after drawing 1-1 with Melbourne City and emerging as 5-4 victors in the decisive penalty shoot-out.









WORDS OF WISDOM

At the time of writing the AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum was poised to commemorate its 10th anniversary. The first four were held as in-person meetings in Shanghai and, triggered by the pandemic, the others have been online. Around 150 top coaches have participated, including AFC Champions League™ winners, UEFA Champions League champions, and FIFA World Cup coaches – a truly international guest list. And their discussions have been linked to top competitions, technical trends, management and leadership. Over the years, the event has accumulated quite a library of words of wisdom. But it's not just about the words themselves. Some of the quotations provoke thoughts, reflections and ideas about how the game could be played or coached. Here are selected samples…



"To be successful in top football today, balance and intensity are the key elements."

Rafa Benitez (ex-Dalian Yifang and UEFA Champions League winner with Liverpool FC)



"Don't rely too much on your coach education. You must never stop your self-education. In addition, we need more knowledge exchange between East and West."

Mahdi Ali (UAE and ex-Shabab Al Ahli)



"Asian football needs to be more aggressive, more possession orientated and more attack minded."

Ange Postecoglou (ex-Australia and Yokohama F. Marinos)



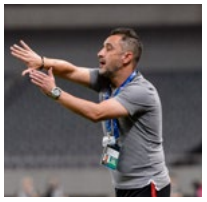
"The AFC Champions League has a strong characteristic of its own. But I do admit that the European competitions can be a useful reference for us in Asia."

Choi Kang-hee (two-time champion of the AFC Champions League™ with Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors)



"Too much analysis leads to paralysis."

Branko Ivankovic (Head Coach of China PR and ex-Persepolis)



"Japanese teams have embraced neat combination play as a footballing culture. They are great technically - they play beautifully!"

Vítor Pereira (ex-Shanghai SIPG)



"Some are satisfied, some are never satisfied. The latter are the winners."

Dragan Stojković (Serbia and ex-Guangzhou R&F)



"Regarding the media: don't lose twice. If you have lost the match, don't also lose at the press conference."

Sven-Göran Eriksson (ex-England and Shanghai SIPG)



"Chinese coaches find it difficult to get the trust of foreign players. But coaches definitely benefit from the status of being an AFC Champions League Coach."

Li Xiaopeng (ex-Shandong Taishan)



"Possession doesn't guarantee a result. Some teams keep the ball; some keep the result."

Gérard Houllier (ex-France and Liverpool FC)

The 2025 edition of AFC's Elite Club Coaches Forum in September represents an anniversary to be celebrated. No doubt it will be a milestone which provides us with more words of wisdom from the elite coaches who work in Asia's top club competitions.

COACHES CORNER



CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC U20 ASIAN CUP™ CHINA 2025 AND AFC U17 ASIAN CUP™ SAUDI ARABIA 2025 TECHNICAL REPORTS



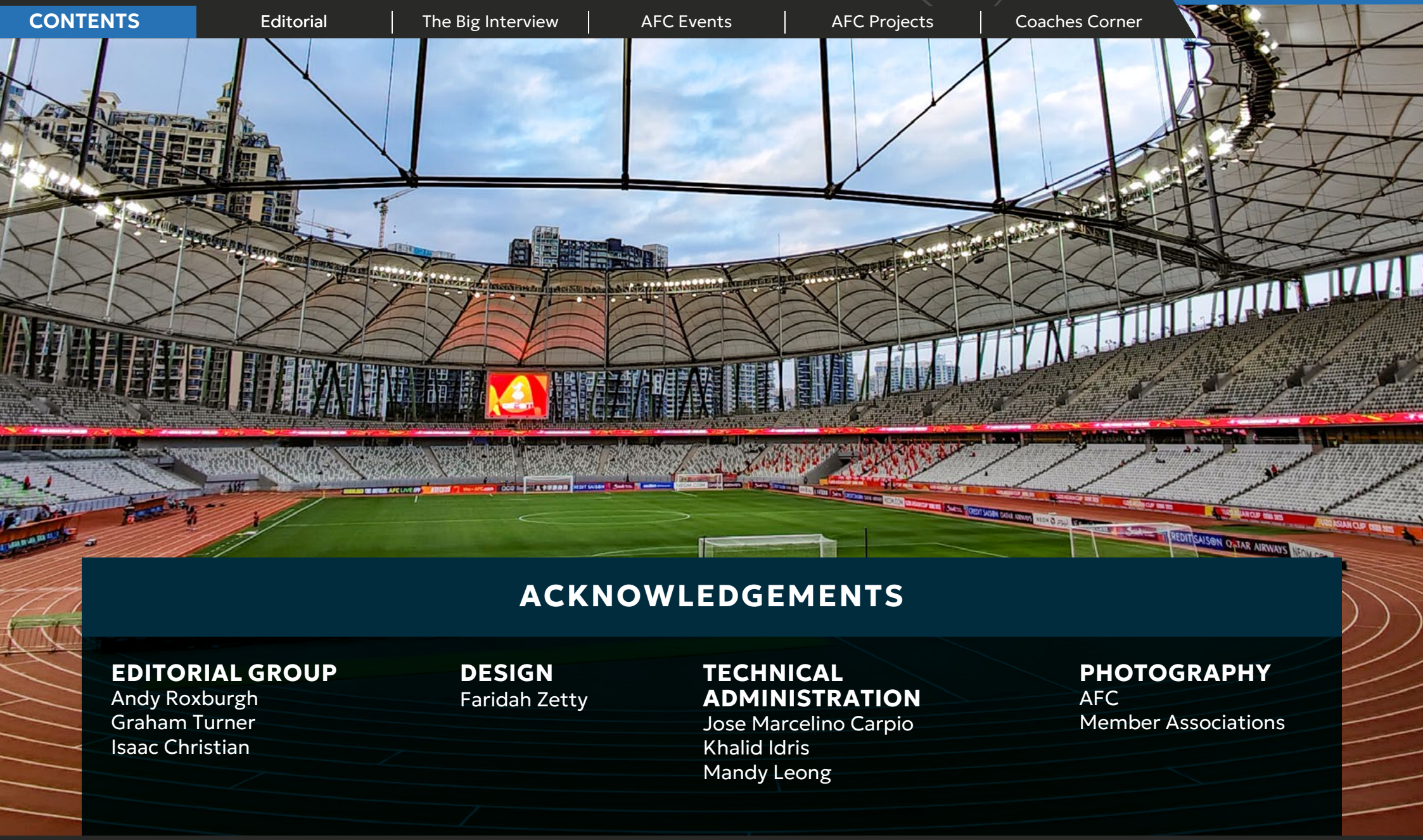
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CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2024/25 TECHNICAL REPORT



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