AFC

COACHES CIRCLE

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



THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH ARSÈNE WENGER

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EDITORIAL

THE QUARTERLY REPORT

Andy Roxburgh, AFC TECHNICAL DIRECTORS

In the business world, quarterly reports are issued by companies every three months as a tool for assessing their profitability, growth and general health. When evaluating the development of football, 25 years – in other words a quarter of a century – offers a more realistic period for reflection. Technical directors, coaches, football administrators, historians and even players need to know how the game has evolved, because this helps in designing the way forward or appreciating what works and why. Changes to the Laws of the Game, tactical innovations, increases in competitiveness and advancements in coach education have all contributed to the demands on those involved in today's football.

In the third quarter of the 20th century, between 1950 and 1975, football was transformed into a professional, commercial and global business while, on the pitch, a technical revolution took place, namely 'total football'. Rigid structures gave way to flexibility in the late '60s and early '70s. "We wanted to be the masters of space," said Rinus Michels, the legendary coach who pioneered the 'total' game, and he did that by promoting interchangeability and zonal marking. Advancements in ball technology, the legitimisation of substitutes, the introduction of red and yellow cards, the commercialisation of domestic and continental competitions, along with greater TV exposure, all had a profound effect on the game.



EDITORIAL





The final quarter of the 20th century was truly revolutionary with the introduction of the back pass rule whereby goalkeepers were banned from handling the ball after it had been deliberately passed to them by a team-mate; the revision of the offside law in 1990, which allowed a player to be in line with the second last defender and still be onside; a Bosman Ruling creating the freedom of movement for players at the end of their contract; the change to three points for a win, which was adopted by FIFA in 1995 and encouraged more attacking play; and a commercial surge triggered by the establishment of the England's Premier League and the UEFA Champions League in the early 1990s. On the field of play, high pressing and zonal football championed in Italy by Arrigo Sacchi set the trend for football to be played 'on the front foot', resulting in the virtual demise of the libero/sweeper.

In the first quarter of the 21st century, football became truly global. Technology became omnipresent: the use of VAR to aid referees, smart watches to help with goal-line decisions, data analytics, sports science and worldwide scouting systems became standard. The economics of the game skyrocketed while transfer fees, players' salaries, TV rights and the sales of clubs reached unprecedented levels. On the field, further rule changes permitted five substitutions, while playing out from the back became the fashion with defenders allowed to receive the ball inside their own penalty box following a goal kick. Extreme possession ('tiki-taka') showcased by FC Barcelona and Spain slowly gave way to high-intensity, counter-pressing and fast collective counters. Meanwhile, the AFC expanded the AFC Asian Cup™, transformed the AFC Champions League™ and introduced a Coaching Convention.

The second quarter of the 21st century has begun and Asia, despite a few disappointing results at the FIFA World Cup 2026, remains optimistic about the game within the Confederation. Domestic leagues, such as the Saudi Pro League and Japan's J.League, are developing at pace; many Asian players are finding employment at elite European clubs and interest in the AFC's top competitions has reached record levels. At the same time, the AFC's Member Associations are increasingly investing in development programmes in areas such as coach education, elite player development and grassroots football.

In business, quarterly reports (every three months) summarise a company's performance for the benefit of its shareholders/investors. As presented here, football's quarterly reports (spanning 25 years) provide reassurance and proof of progress on a global scale, with AFC's stakeholders contributing significantly to this worldwide advancement.

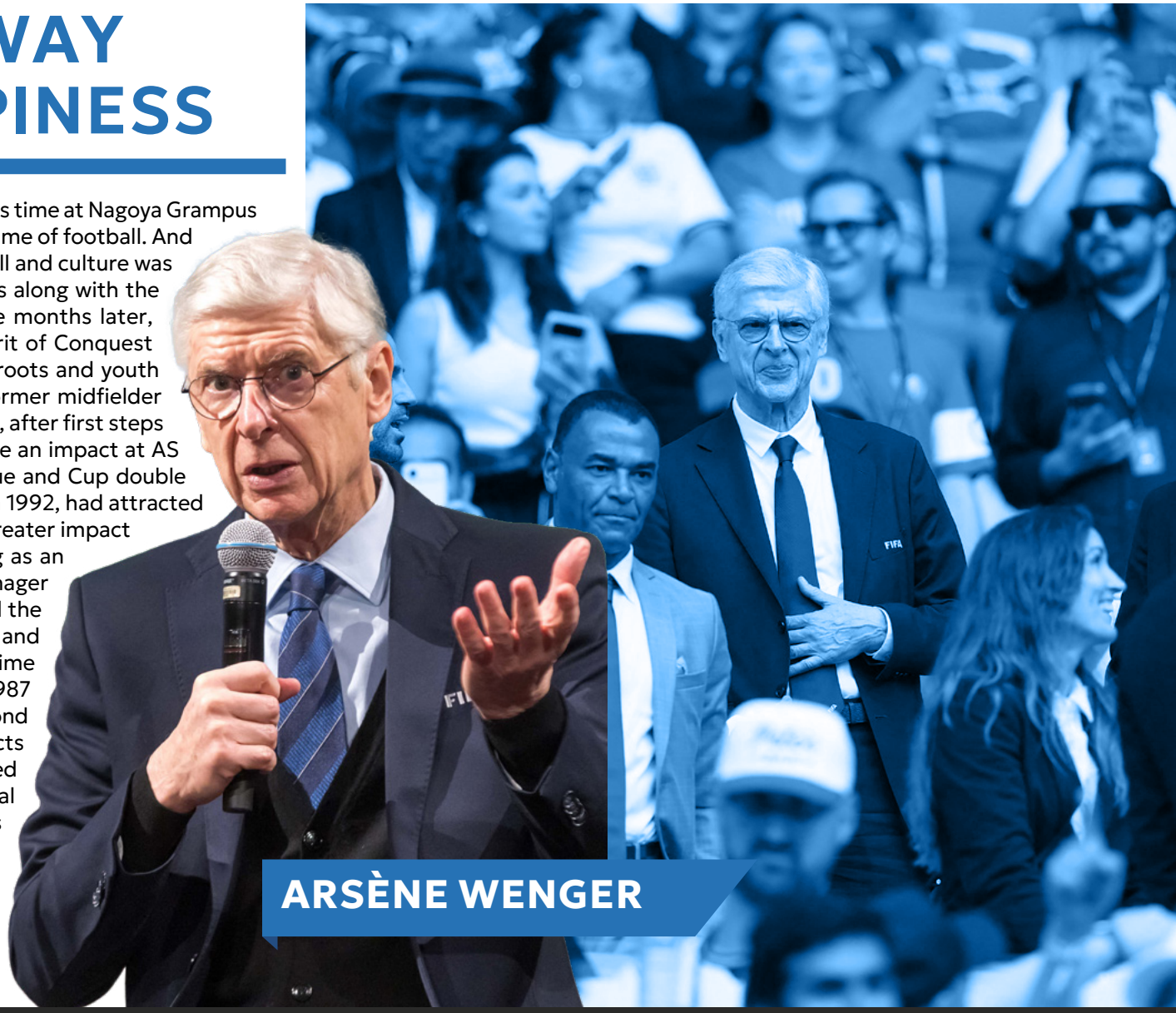
But for a moment, let's speculate. When Asia evaluates this second quarter of the 21st century, could the profit column include senior FIFA world titles? A first for men and, following Japan's success in 2011, a second for women? Remember, there is magic in thinking big!



THE BIG INTERVIEW

EFFORT IS THE WAY TOWARDS HAPPINESS

Three decades have passed since he declared that his time at Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan had rekindled his passion for the game of football. And his passionate engagement with Japanese football and culture was rewarded with Emperor's Cup and Super Cup victories along with the J.League's Manager of the Year award in 1995. Some months later, the publication in Japan of his book entitled The Spirit of Conquest outlined a philosophy which had germinated at grassroots and youth development levels in his native France, where the former midfielder had obtained his coaching diploma at the age of 32 and, after first steps as assistant coach at second-tier AS Cannes, had made an impact at AS Nancy and, in particular, at AS Monaco where a League and Cup double in 1991, followed by the first of three European finals in 1992, had attracted the attention of Nagoya Grampus Eight. But an even greater impact was to follow when he moved to London and, arriving as an 'unknown', went on to become the longest-serving manager in the distinguished 140-year history of Arsenal FC and the first non-British technician to achieve a Premier League and FA Cup double – which he did in 1998. His 22-year regime yielded 17 titles for teams which remained unbeaten in 987 of 1,235 matches. His impact, however, extended beyond results and silverware. His innovative approach to aspects such as nutrition, psychology and sports science moved the goalposts in English football while his international scouting strategy led to Arsenal being described as a 'global team'. A year after his departure from the 'Gunners', he took on his current role as FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development. The man who talked to AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh for Coaches Circle during the recent FIFA World Cup was, of course…



ARSÈNE WENGER



HAS THE FIFA WORLD CUP 2026 LIVED UP TO YOUR EXPECTATIONS?

I would say that it was much higher than my expectations because I was a bit worried before hand – a bit apprehensive. There was a big debate in the States, you know, and people were a bit critical. But it is always a bit magical when it opens, and I was pleasantly surprised by such a popular success. By the fact that so many people came to the stadiums and by the special way they have in the States to entertain people around the game. That created a great emotional experience as well. And I was also surprised at how well the whole world has improved on the footballing front. For me, the expansion to 48 teams was needed and, basically, I was disappointed when people questioned that, because, for such a long time, some confederations have been disadvantaged compared to Europe and South America, so it was necessary to give other people and other countries opportunities as well. Forty-eight is a decent number, and I'm not convinced we need to expand it further. It is still less than 25% of the countries in the world.

WHAT HAS IMPRESSED YOU MOST SO FAR DURING THE TOURNAMENT?

The sheer quality. The quality of the preparation work by the teams; the quality of the organisation, the systems and the structure of the teams. Nowadays you don't expect to win a game at the World Cup if the team is not well-organised. What has also impressed me is the physical level required if you want to be competitive here. How explosive, intense and strong you need to be, along with the capacity to make the difference in small spaces – that little burst that makes the critical difference. At the same time, I was a bit sad on that front because some players have a natural advantage and others have less. So of the three components needed – physical level, technical level and tactical level – I would say that if you come to this World Cup without your physical capacities at top, top levels, it has been difficult to survive.

DO YOU THINK THE NEW RULE MODIFICATIONS HAVE BEEN A SUCCESS?

The new rules have been fantastic. When I go home, I will say 'why did we not do that before?'. Especially the rule about feigning injuries on the football pitch. We have seen how quickly people get up. At the International Broadcasting Centre, we can hear the referee saying to the player, 'do you want to get up or do you want to go off for a minute?'! Seriously, it has speeded the game up, and the flow is good. You are not frustrated by players lying down and forcing millions of people to wait until he gets up. So, this has been a huge success, I would say. Before the World Cup, I was convinced that it would be – and that is what has happened.

WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES NEEDED TO WIN A FIFA WORLD CUP?

If you take the French players, you could say that most of them are the players of the future because they have perfect technique, explosive power and high-level understanding of the game. They have been the team that has impressed me. And I am not saying that because I am French. It's a team that has so many players who, at any given moment, can make a difference. I think that's why they were considered the favourites. To counteract that impression, I would pick out Spain. They have less individual quality, but they have top-level understanding of the game, top-level technique and a top-level flow in their play. They can create openings with the quality of their passing. Personally, I think that Asia should be inspired by Spain. They are naturally a bit less explosive, so they have to compensate with perfect technical level and speed of their play in terms of team understanding and basically, they have less power to think about how to win a game individually, so they think about how to win it collectively.

WHICH AFC TEAMS HAVE IMPRESSED YOU?

Japan. Along with Australia, they were the closest to getting through to the final rounds. Korea Republic in their first game, when they managed to win despite going 1-0 down. But Japan were the most consistent performers – and they were a bit unlucky not to have players like (Kaoru) Mitoma or (Takumi) Minamino available. They are creative players who were missed. They had great team qualities, but they have to learn how, when performances and wins are needed in the Knockout Rounds, to turn up with them.

WITH YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF FOOTBALL IN ASIA, WHAT ARE THE ASPECTS THAT NEED TO IMPROVE FOR AN AFC TEAM TO CHALLENGE FOR THE WORLD TITLE?

It goes back to something that I used to say when I was working in Japan. In Asia, you have to focus on being perfect technically. It's not enough to be right-footed or left-footed. You have to be able to use both feet. And you need to be well-equipped mentally to go into this competition. Not to wonder if you have the right to be in it. And, above all, I feel that there is a need to develop the slow-and-quick concept – the change of rhythm – at a very young age.

WHEN JAPAN PLAYED BRAZIL, ALL BUT TWO OF THE 22 WERE PLAYING THEIR FOOTBALL AT HIGH-LEVEL CLUBS IN EUROPE. DO YOU REGARD THIS AS A SIGNIFICANT FACTOR? DOES IT SUGGEST THAT ASIAN FOOTBALL NEEDS TO GET MORE PLAYERS INTO HIGHEST-LEVEL CLUBS AND COMPETITIONS?

Absolutely. You need to be confronted by the pressures of high-level demands. You need to be confronted by the intensity and by the attention to detail in every single aspect of every single game and by the mental pressures of each and every game. In Europe, you become accustomed to dealing with mental pressure in every game. Going back to the French team, their players are the best in the big clubs. Mbappé is the best at Real Madrid; Olise the best at Bayern Munich; Dembélé the best at Paris Saint-Germain. These are important individuals. And the others have to compensate for that.





IN TERMS OF DEVELOPMENT, WHAT ARE FIFA'S PRIORITIES FOR THE CONTINENT?

In the Asian continent, we want everybody on board, especially when it comes to development and education. It's as simple as that. You and I are experienced enough to know that education is the key to success, and so I would say that every Member Association needs a long-term plan to reach its full potential. And a long-term plan has to be based on youth development, taking into account the ingredients of the future player.

SO, IN YOUR OPINION, ELITE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IS THE KEY AREA?

Yes. And around elite youth development, you need good coaches, good structures, good organisation and good competitions. All of these aspects are linked. And a lot of good work is required to put it all together.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BEING A MANAGER IN CLUB FOOTBALL AND BEING A TECHNICAL DEVELOPER?

A club manager is a person who is responsible for putting his organisation into a performance environment. Basically, that means performing well and winning the next game. In other words, we're talking in the short term. A technical developer is more of a role situated above that – based more on a vision of what is needed to develop players, how to improve on the technical side. That requires a clear strategy. It is not just about thinking but also going into application mode and implementing ideas. It's about fulfilling the needs and ambitions of a country.

WHEN TALKING ABOUT PLAYERS, YOU HAVE OFTEN SAID "TALENT IS NOT ENOUGH". CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT IN MORE DETAIL?

Yes, my belief is that talent without effort doesn't lead you anywhere. Effort has to be seen as a way towards happiness – because everybody wants to be a star. That means that, when you are young, you tend to ignore the need for effort because you think 'I am talented and that's enough'. It isn't. I say that for two reasons: firstly, because it's the reality; and secondly, I've not seen many people in my life who have been able to do absolutely everything to be as good as they could be. The temptation is to go for the easy life when the important aspects are things like motivation, desire, intelligence and so on. It's important to always think about your capacities and ask 'what is my next level and how can I get there?', 'what is my full potential?' And that is where the educators have a big impact on clearly communicating ideas about what the player's next level really could be. If you don't do that, it's easy for the player to think everything is already OK, especially in this day and age when you can get good contracts. That's when you need to be pushed – to stop thinking that you will be rewarded whether you perform or not. Clubs have to put the player in a position where he has to perform and where he can continually try to improve his performance level and push himself upwards. Effort is the key.

ARE YOU OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE GAME? AND WHAT INNOVATIONS DO YOU ANTICIPATE WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE NEXT 25 YEARS?

I am very optimistic about the future of the game. I believe that football is a train that is unstoppable. And when I went to games at this World Cup, I was comforted by that idea. But we have to get Asia fully on board. China PR, India, Indonesia, Pakistan…As for innovations, I think that sports science will lead us towards individual preparation for the collective game – and I believe that we will see improvements in scientific principles applied for five to 12-year-olds. Aspects like physical development, coordination, the speed of thinking, and how to take on information during a game. I think that society is moving towards becoming purely technological, but I would like our sport to remain purely human, always capable of giving surprises. One of the reasons we love this game is that people are always able to surprise us. It will continue to be based on a combination of pace, technical quality and speed of decision-making. In a society of entertainment, sport will play an even greater role. And football, if we take good care of it, will be an even more important element in that.



ASIA AT THE FIFA WORLD CUP

REFLECTIONS ON THE FIFA WORLD CUP



On an earlier page, Arsène Wenger comments, “Personally, I think that Asia should be inspired by Spain”. And his remark, made well before Luis de la Fuente’s team lifted the trophy in New Jersey, was endorsed by the FIFA Awards: midfielder Rodri as Best Player; defender Pau Cubarsí as Best Young Player; Unai Simón as Best Goalkeeper. And Brazil’s FIFA World Cup-winning striker Ronaldo Nazário delivered further evidence. “Spain sets a global benchmark,” he said, “thanks to its possession-based approach, fluid team play and ability to dictate matches against the world’s best teams”.

Spain’s second FIFA World Cup victory also consolidated the thought-provoking statistic that, of the 84 nations to have competed in 23 final tournaments, only eight have won the title: three from South America and five from Europe. Only 32 teams have appeared in the top four: 23 from Europe; seven from South America; and one apiece from CONCACAF, Africa and the AFC – the latter being the presence of co-hosts Korea Republic in the 2002 Semi-finals.

In-depth analysis of performances by the AFC representatives at the 2026 Final Tournament has already begun – notably at the AFC’s online session for National Team Coaches, where FIFA’s Chief Analyst Tom Gardner provided data-based factual support. However, a broader overview can filter the nine AFC teams into four categories.





Firstly, Australia and Japan were the duo who successfully negotiated the group phase and were then, in the Round of 32, defeated by narrow margins: Japan by a goal timed at 90+6 against five-time champions Brazil; and Australia, 4-2 losers in the lottery of a penalty shoot-out against the Egyptian side that went on to lose narrowly to silver-medallists Argentina.

The second category is occupied by the two AFC countries who, at the end of the Group Stage, were among the third-placed teams to be eliminated on goal-difference. Korea Republic, after a promising comeback victory over Czechia, were required to take on co-hosts Mexico at altitude; were undone by a defensive error; and were eliminated by another 1-0 defeat when dropping down again to Monterrey. In the meantime, the Islamic Republic of Iran, travelling to the final tournament in testing circumstances, returned home unbeaten.



Two other AFC representatives fell victim to a time-honoured tournament malady often referred to as 'Matchday Two Trauma' – a negative reaction to substantial expenditure of physical and emotional energy in the opening fixture. Qatar, hosts of the previous final tournament, had qualified for the first time and were therefore making a debut away from home. After investing heavily in a tooth-and-nail draw with Quarter-finalists Switzerland, Julen Lopetegui's side imploded against co-hosts Canada in a match where they played 32 minutes with 11; 20 minutes with 10; and the remainder with nine. Sandwiched between creditable draws with Uruguay and the tournament's surprise package Cabo Verde, Saudi Arabia were so badly hit by Matchday Two Trauma that they were three goals down within 24 minutes against a Spanish side that overwhelmed them with 63% of possession, 22 goal attempts to three and 31 final third entries to nine.

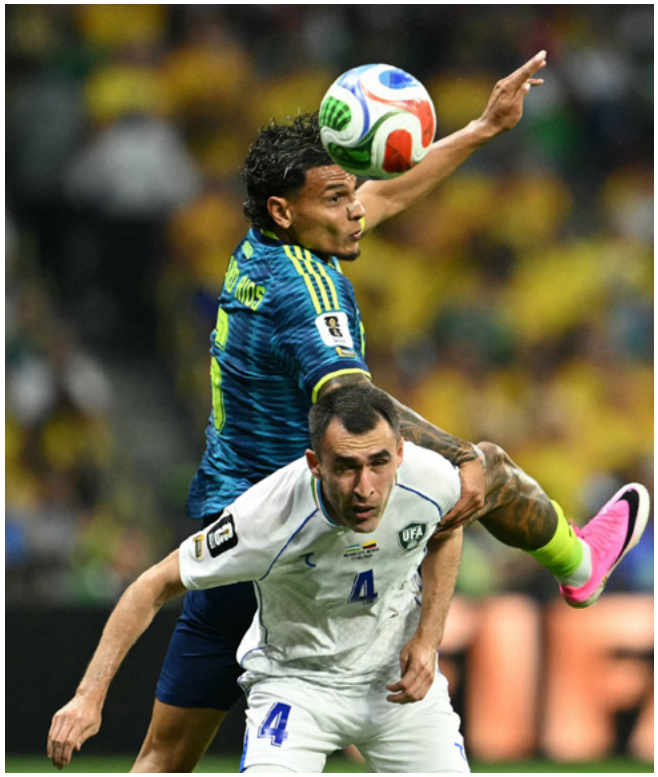


The other three AFC contestants (similarly to Qatar) clearly logged on to the final tournament in learning mode. Jordan and Uzbekistan were debutants, while Iraq, after successfully negotiating stressful play-offs, qualified for the first time in 40 years. Although all three were eliminated in the Group Stage, there were positive notes. Jordan scored in every match. Uzbekistan scored one of the tournament's most stunning goals – Eldor Shomurodov slamming a left-footed shot from a tight angle into the top corner to put his team 1-0 ahead against DR Congo. Iraq had the misfortune to be drawn into a demandingly high-quality group containing Senegal and two of the tournament's top eight teams: France and Norway. Uzbekistan's head coach Fabio Cannavaro spoke for all three when he said, "we are here to gain experience even if we lose."









In the immediate future, the big-tournament experience of the teams who competed in Canada, Mexico and the USA can be transferred to the imminent AFC Asian Cup™ in Saudi Arabia, where all nine will be participating. And, bearing in mind the context that surrounded performances at the final tournament in 2026, there appears to be no reason for not continuing to be optimistic about the AFC teams' perspectives when returning to the global stage in Morocco, Portugal and Spain at the FIFA World Cup in 2030.

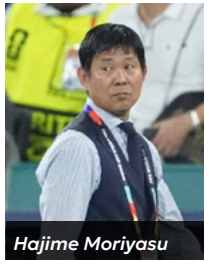
WORLD CUP QUOTES

WORDS OF WISDOM

The 104-match final tournament in three countries generated an abundance of words, images, media coverage and opinions. Coaches Circle jotted down a few samples of insightful comments made by some of those involved – and some who were not.



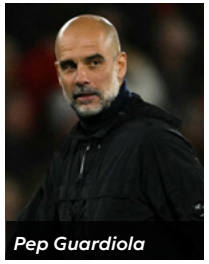




Hajime Moriyasu

"The most advanced football in the world is played in a context of very high intensity and quality. To catch up with Europe and South America it is essential to match that intensity."

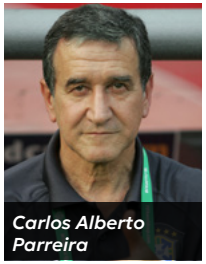
Japan's head coach **Hajime Moriyasu** delivered the clear message that global success is built on playing regularly at the highest level.



Pep Guardiola

"Football has a strange way of rewarding those who keep believing. Tonight ends with heartbreak, but I have no doubt this Japanese team will come back stronger. The foundation is there, the mentality is there, and if they continue on this path, their biggest moments are still ahead of them."

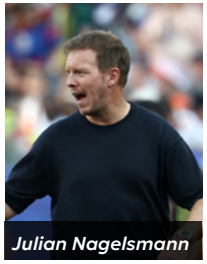
Pep Guardiola delivered morale-boosting comments after Japan's defeat by Brazil.



Carlos Alberto Parreira

"To win a World Cup, you need to have three, four or five outstanding players. You need experience and a well-defined way of playing. You must have all the components at one time: tactically, psychologically, physically and technically. You can't make mistakes."

Stimulating advice from former world champion coach **Carlos Alberto Parreira.**



Julian Nagelsmann

"As in other walks of life, it all boils down to trust. You have to have faith in your players, and you have to believe that they will perform."

Germany head coach **Julian Nagelsmann** believes that relationships are one of the keys to success in football management.



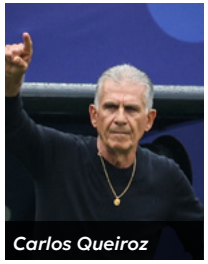
Luis de la Fuente

"I see a happy dressing room and a nation behind us."

Spain's head coach **Luis de la Fuente** emphasised that harmony and support are essential ingredients during a lengthy tournament.

"I say this with the greatest of respect: we have the best midfield in the world."

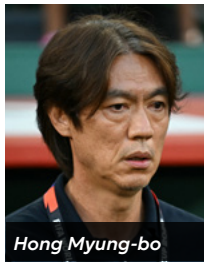
Luis de la Fuente admitted that, in a team with an attacking vocation, a high back line and the best defensive record in the tournament, sheer quality prevailed.



Carlos Queiroz

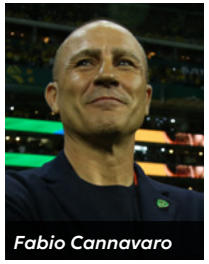
"The final outcome of football is always a mystery. There is no formula, and that is why it's still so special after all these years. But you never lose: you either win or learn."

Ghana's **Carlos Queiroz**, formerly head coach of IR Iran, UAE, Qatar and Oman, believes that coaches often learn more from defeats than from victories.


Hong Myung-bo

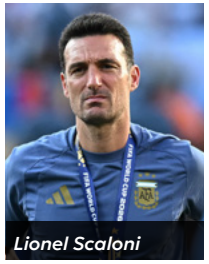
“We always talk about just the results. If we had known the results beforehand, then I probably would have made some different choices, but I had a strategy in mind. I guess I made the wrong decisions. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Korea Republic’s **Hong Myung-bo**, one of many technicians at the tournament to experience the reality that coaches are judged on results.


Fabio Cannavaro

“This is our first time at a World Cup, and I told the players that they can misplace a pass and make mistakes. I wanted to give them the confidence to try and improve. I asked them to be courageous, to play football and not to be afraid. If you have that mindset, you can grow as a team and grow individually. We are here to gain experience even if we lose.”

Uzbekistan’s head coach **Fabio Cannavaro** had a longer-term perspective on the development of the national team, based on bravely playing to potential.


Lionel Scaloni

“Out of all my 100 matches with Argentina, this is probably the one that will stay with me the most. It is the kind of game that will help me grow as a coach.”

Argentina head coach **Lionel Scaloni**, after the 3-2 victory against Cabo Verde in his 100th match in charge of the national team, emphasised the importance of never ceasing to learn.


Ange Postecoglou

“I really think that an Asian country can win the World Cup in the next 20 years. It is very conceivable. But it is about belief in being able to do it.”

Ange Postecoglou maintains that, at a FIFA World Cup, it is not just about being there but also about believing that it is possible to make a big impact.


Harry Kane

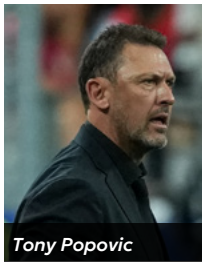
“When he sees us train and sees the closeness and what we can do, the way we attack, the one-on-ones and the skills…he just wants to see that version of us. He’s trying to drag it out of us, and we know ourselves that there’s another level we can reach.”

England striker **Harry Kane** acknowledged that the aim of head coach Thomas Tuchel was to coax the best out of every individual.


Carlo Ancelotti

“People asked me why I didn’t celebrate, but football is also about respect. Yes, we were happy to win, but I looked across and saw a Japanese team that had given absolutely everything. They fought with incredible courage, and I know exactly how painful a defeat like that can be.”

Brazil head coach **Carlo Ancelotti** underlined the abiding sporting principle of being humble in victory and gracious in defeat.


Tony Popovic

“Overall, I can only compliment the entire group and staff. We want this to inspire us to do better. Hopefully we can take a step forward in the AFC Asian Cup™ and then, in four years' time, let's have bigger targets, bigger expectations.”

Head coach **Tony Popovic** stressed the importance of building on Australia’s creditable performance.

“Messi has always had one key advantage over every other player. He gets to play with Messi every game. And Messi makes every other player in the team better.”

English sports writer **Barney Ronay** highlighted the fact that truly great players inspire others to be great.

For those who were disappointed by the results of AFC teams at the final tournament, the final words belong to **Nelson Mandela**. “The greatest glory in living,” he famously said, “lies not in never failing but in rising every time we fall.”



ONLINE SESSIONS

STARRING ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Competitions drive development. That was the golden thread stitching together the latest series of online sessions in June dedicated to Youth Development, Women's Football and Coach Education. Earlier in the year, online get-togethers also reviewed the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ and the AFC Futsal Asian Cup™. As the five-a-side game is a stand-alone discipline, let's kick off with the latter.

The session led by the AFC Head of Futsal and Beach Soccer Development, Takahiro Komori, highlighted the attempt by hosts Indonesia to upset the status quo in a competition where 14 of the 18 editions have been won by the Islamic Republic of Iran, with Japan claiming the other four. The team, coached by Héctor Souto, took IR Iran to a penalty shootout after a 5-5 draw in the Final, and illustrated how the newly-introduced qualification system has contributed to greater competitive balance and opened up new opportunities for emerging forces in the indoor game.

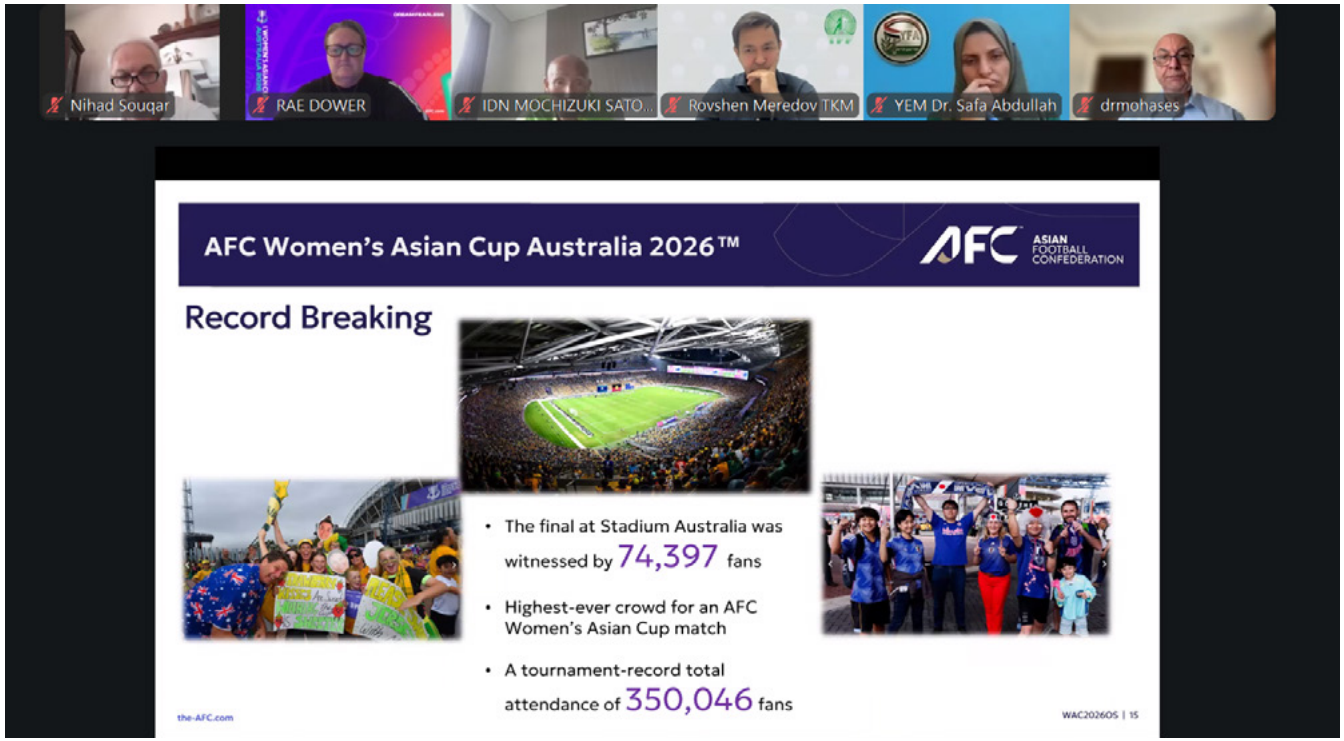
In tactical terms, the tournament confirmed the trend away from a traditional 'target' attacking pivot and greater use of more versatile attackers ready to drift wide with a view to opening central pockets of space or to drop deep and play a more proactive role in build-up play. There was also diversity in the profile of the flying-keeper and his levels of participation in attacking play, with some coaches encouraging the regular goalkeeper to be more adventurous rather than the traditional 'power play' based on deploying an outfielder wearing the keeper's jersey. In the Final, Indonesia's goalkeeper was involved 19 times in advanced areas, making five passes in opposition territory, whereas the IR Iran keeper's contribution was 67 passes – none of them more than 10m from his goal-line – and the flying-keeper was not used at all. As the Technical Report on the event noted, "this illustrated differing philosophies regarding risk tolerance and structural balance".



Turning to the 11-a-side game, one of the issues discussed at the Youth Football session was the much-applauded switch to a Grassroots Festival format at the men's and women's U17 tournaments. Although the biggest games were staged in larger stadiums, playing and training in a single sports complex offered coaches practical benefits in terms of minimising travel times, scouting future opponents and promoting interaction with colleagues from other countries in an environment where core facilities were shared. It also meant that, until the Semi-final stage, there was single-camera coverage of matches and VAR technology was not viable.

AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh reviewed the benchmarks in youth development competitions being set in Europe, where 86 teams from 50 Member Associations compete in the UEFA Youth League. Ange Postecoglou, along with former German international Sami Khedira (now a member of Jose Mourinho's coaching staff at Real Madrid) and Edin Terzić (now at Athletic Bilbao) were guest speakers at a recent Coaching Forum where key youth development issues were discussed: for example, the qualities required to reach the top in the modern game; how to manage the difficult transition from youth level to first team football; and how to combine individual development with collective issues. Luis Enrique, winner of the last two UEFA Champions Leagues with a Paris Saint-Germain team where players look comfortable in various roles, maintains "I would like players to play in all positions".





This interlocked with one of the topics raised when Bai Lili, the AFC Head of Women's Football, and her colleagues faced up to the challenge of condensing a wealth of information from the final tournaments of four competitions into a single session on Women's Football. One of the striking features had been DPR Korea's presence in three of the four Finals, winning two of them and exhibiting a uniform (and effective) playing philosophy across all four senior, age-limit and club tournaments. When Ji Yun Nam, coach of the U17 women's team that beat Japan 5-1 in the Final, was asked about talent identification criteria, he responded, "I think about what kind of player I need in each position, what skills that person must have and how she will meet the demands of the team design. Beyond the position-specific characteristics, the key qualities I look for are, if I put them in order, firstly physical strength, secondly intelligence, thirdly fast thinking and decision making." He estimated that 40% of his training was fitness-based work without the ball.

The record-breaking AFC Women's Asian Cup™ in Australia (watched by over 350,000 spectators including 74,397 at the Final between the hosts and eventual champions Japan) set the scene for the three national team competitions by highlighting the multi-tier nature of women's football in Asia, topped by an elite group of five with, on lower rungs, teams searching for viable methods of making life difficult for them. Low block versus high press (a topic which had already come to the surface at the men's U23 tournament) became one of the frequently used expressions among the AFC Technical Observers at the women's events and, as they noted in Australia, "less dominant teams often set out to use counterattacks as their main attacking strategy. However, they struggled to execute them effectively. Most ball recoveries occurred in deep defensive areas, with players positioned far from the opponent's goal. As a result, transitions frequently became clearances or long balls rather than structured counterattacks". This applied across the board and, even though successes from fast counters provided significant percentages of goalscoring, it was the top-tier teams, rather than the others, who earned the highest dividends from speedy transition play.





The presence of 11 female technicians among the 36 coaches on touchlines at the three women's tournaments indicated that significant progress is being made in terms of facilitating coach education pathways at a time when the number of professional-level female coaches has struggled to keep pace with the explosive development of women's football and the expansion of competitions.

This was one of the topics raised at the Coach Education session which closed the cycle of online gatherings. AFC Deputy Technical Director Takeshi Ono reported on the ongoing AFC-JFA Pro Diploma courses for elite female coaches, while Head of Coach Education Wim Koevermans outlined the content for upcoming Coach Education Tutor courses (men and women) to be hosted at AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. As Andy Roxburgh commented, "Coach Educators, more than anybody, need to be totally up to date in their approach to the job. After all, it's pointless to train coaches for a game that existed 20 years ago. Football has evolved very quickly, and educators have to keep pace with that."





He also announced the imminent launch of a Coach Educators Club, which aims to respect the dictionary definition of the word 'club' as 'an association of people united by a common interest or goal'. The aim is to create a collective approach to the development of coach education in Asia, to improve and intensify ongoing communications between AFC and the coach educators of its Member Associations, to share technical information and to create opportunities for greater exchanges among those involved in coach education.

However, one of the encouraging – not to say historic – items of news on the Coach Education front is the ratification of the UEFA/AFC agreement on the mutual recognition of coaching qualifications and competences, with UEFA now ready to accept the validity of AFC diplomas from an initial group of 12 MAs.

PROJECT UPDATES

THE CURRENT STATUS

The hectic sequence of final tournaments gave the AFC and a good many MAs plenty to think about during the first half of a year when conflict in the Middle East also affected travel and work schedules. All that meant that there would be plenty of evaluations and endorsements packed into the last six months of 2026 in addition to ongoing work on the 2027 edition of the AFC Coaching Convention, which will be expanded to embrace elements such as Futsal, Fitness Coaching or guidelines on minimum content requirements for an AFC 'D' Diploma. Even so, there have been further developments in the core AFC projects.

The upgrading of Hong Kong, China from 'A' level since our last issue brings the total of MAs endorsed at 'Pro' level in the AFC Coaching Convention to 25, while the recent endorsement of Yemen at 'B' level has increased the overall Convention Membership to 44. Applications to climb to the top rung from Cambodia, Myanmar and the Philippines are in the pending tray, along with a bid by DPR Korea to graduate from 'B' to 'A' status. With requests from Guam and Sri Lanka for 'B' level endorsement currently being assessed, it means that the Pakistan Football Federation now stands alone as the only MA not to have applied for membership. In the meantime, the number of renewal applications to be evaluated in the coming months runs into double figures.









In terms of the Grassroots Charter, membership remains stable at 44 – meaning that only three MAs have yet to jump on board. But Bangladesh, whose development work was rewarded by the presence of their senior and U20 women's teams at the two respective final tournaments, have now been promoted to Silver status. In the meantime, Jordan and Kuwait's applications to be upgraded to Gold and Silver respectively are currently being assessed.

Since our last issue, China PR has become the ninth MA to acquire 3-Star status in the AFC Elite Youth Scheme, with AFC endorsements for the academies of Shanghai Shenhua, Shandong Luneng Taishan and Zhejiang PFC, along with the Suzhou Football Center, which was the venue for the first 12-team AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup™ in May. In the meantime, Laos has joined the squad as Number 29 after endorsement at 1-Star level.

The charts show the state of the game midway through 2026.

AFC PROJECTS

AFC COACHING CONVENTION

CATEGORIES

PRO - Level

- FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED
- ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA
- IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA
- OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN
- UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

A - Level

- AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA
- CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN
- THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION
- LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE

B - Level

- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
- DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES
- ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- YEMEN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

CATEGORIES

ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR

- FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
- CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- 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

- ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA
- OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

1 - STAR

- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA
- GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED
- THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION
- LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES
- MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

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
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

SILVER

- BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- 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
- SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND

BRONZE

- AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA
- CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA
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- OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF SRI LANKA
- FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN
- VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

TRIBUTE TO THE WINNING COACHES

EIGHT TITLES IN TWENTY WEEKS

Eight final tournaments in a time-span of 137 days added up to an intensive workload for the AFC's organisational teams, the Member Associations who had teams in practically every tournament and the six MAs who hosted the events – notably Australia who built the AFC Women's Asian Cup™ into a grandiose occasion watched by record-breaking audiences, and Saudi Arabia who, during the segment of the season affected by conflict in the Gulf region, took on, at short notice, additional fixtures in the Knockout Rounds of the AFC Champions League Elite™.

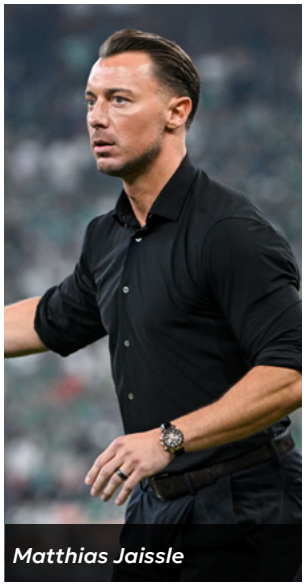
The effect on some teams' preparations and travel arrangements may have contributed to one of the standout features in the season's Roll of Honour: the scarcity of teams from the West. The other salient aspect is that every football final (as opposed to Futsal) featured a team from Japan. So, on this occasion, our annual tribute to the winning and silver-medal coaches is also a round of applause for the Japan Football Association's standards of coaching, coach education and long-term development work – epitomised by the men's AFC U17 Asian Cup™, where the coaches of the two finalists were both Japanese. The list, in chronological order, is an accolade to the technicians who stepped up to receive medals during the 137 days of intense activity.


Go Oiwa

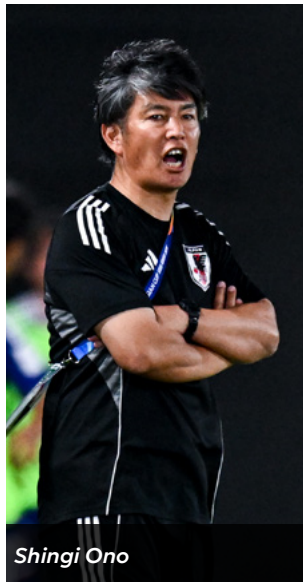

Vahid Shamsaee


Nils Nielsen


Akira Ijiri


Matthias Jaissle


Ji Yun Nam


Shingi Ono


Ri Yu Il

AFC U23 Asian Cup™ in Saudi Arabia
Winner: Go Oiwa (Japan)
Runner-up: Antonio Puche (China PR)
With a player-rotation policy that showcased the in-depth strength of the Japanese squad, Go Oiwa's team combined individual and collective qualities with strong mental resilience as they remained unbeaten on their run to the title, rounding it off with a 4-0 victory in the Final against a China PR side that had not conceded a goal during its five previous games in the tournament.

AFC Futsal Asian Cup™ in Indonesia
Winner: Vahid Shamsaee (Islamic Republic of Iran)
Runner-up: Héctor Souto (Indonesia)
Champion eight times as a player, Vahid Shamsaee lifted the trophy for a second time as a coach to give his country a record-extending 14th title in the competition. But he freely admitted that this was the most challenging campaign of them all after being tested to the limit by an Indonesia team that held them a 5-5 draw in the Final only to lose in a penalty shoot-out.

AFC Women's Asian Cup™ in Australia
Winner: Nils Nielsen (Japan)
Runner-up: Joe Montemurro (Australia)
After a total of 28 goals shared among 14 squad members during a run to the final that had showcased Japan's high-tempo combination play and collective high pressing, the Final against the host nation, backed by a record-breaking crowd, tested the composure of Nils Nielsen's team and their ability to also play on the back foot during the 1-0 victory that clinched the title for a third time.

AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup™ in Thailand
Winner: Akira Ijiri (Japan)
Runner-up: Han Chol Hak (DPR Korea)
"This is the fruit of collective labour from grassroots to youth development coaching." Akira Ijiri's comment was made prior to a Final that brought together the two teams that had dominated the tournament and provided almost half of the 93 goals. An evenly-fought contest was decided by a set play – a free kick headed into the DPR Korea net which, in their five previous games, had remained unruffled.

AFC Champions League Elite™ Final in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Winner: Matthias Jaissle (Al Ahli Saudi FC)
Runner-up: Go Kuroda (FC Machida Zelvia)
Matthias Jaissle became the first coach to successfully defend the title after a campaign that he rated as much more problematic than the previous one. After being taken to extra-time in the Round of 16, they conceded the first goal in the Quarter-final and the Semi-final. A red card then complicated a Final when mental resilience – and home support – were required as they fought for a 1-0 extra-time victory over well-organised Japanese debutants Machida Zelvia.

AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup™ in China PR
Winner: Ji Yun Nam (DPR Korea)
Runner-up: Sadayoshi Shirai (Japan)
Echoing the U20 event, the tournament was dominated by the two finalists who scored 63 of 110 goals in 25 matches. But the outcome was reversed. In the Final, Ji Yun Nam was relieved to see his team, which had been rattled when China PR bounced back from 2-0 down in the Semi-final, remain unfazed when Japan reduced the deficit to 2-1 and press forward to claim a fifth title with a 5-1 win.

AFC U17 Men's Asian Cup™ in Saudi Arabia
Winner: Shingi Ono (Japan)
Runner-up: Bin Ukishima (China PR)
Trailing Uzbekistan 1-0 in the Semi-final, Ono sent his centre-backs upfield – and one scored a 90+7 equaliser. After a shoot-out win, a 3-0 lead in the Final seemed conclusive. But his team faltered after two China PR goals and dug deep to win 3-2. "It is important to win difficult matches," he said, "but the game also exposed some of the issues we had identified before the tournament. I want to take that positively moving forward."

AFC Women's Champions League™ Final in Suwon, Korea Republic
Winner: Ri Yu Il (Naegohyang Women's FC)
Runner-up: Naoki Kusunose (Tokyo Verdy Beleza)
The first team from DPR Korea to play in an AFC women's club competition clinched the gold medal with a narrow but deserved 1-0 win against Tokyo Verdy Beleza – the team which had delivered a wake-up call by beating Ri Yu Il's side 4-0 in their opening Group C game. Working on shortcomings, Naegohyang won every subsequent game, conceding only one goal on the way to a historic victory.

TECHNICAL REPORTS

WHAT'S TRENDING NOW?

Who are we to disagree with Albert Einstein's much-quoted opinion that "information is not knowledge"? But, in a world where information is measured in gigabytes, it is plausible to argue that it can be usefully converted into knowledge. And one of the guiding principles of AFC's Technical Reports is to offer information which encourages coaches and coach educators to reflect on certain aspects of the game and broaden their knowledge. The first five months of 2026 were prolific in terms of raw material. Technical Reports on the final stages of eight competitions were compiled individually. But, if put together and read one after the other, the hope is that they offer thought-provoking insights into the trends and tendencies at the top ends of club and national-team football which can be valuable to coaches and technical directors not involved in final tournaments and, equally importantly, to those working at development levels within the game.

By the way, it might be worth clarifying that the AFC's technical publications are currently being produced in a two-tier format. As soon as possible after the final of each tournament, the core coaching elements are compiled into a digital Technical Review which is distributed to the key stakeholders in the coaching fraternity. Subsequently, a Technical Report provides a fuller, more detailed permanent record of the event, including aspects such as refereeing, media visibility and so on.

Half of the season's technical publications were related to women's football and, if read one after the other, raise a number of issues (some of them interlocking) relevant to player development. The review of the senior AFC Women's Asian Cup™ pointed out that, excluding penalties, only 10 goals (seven corners and three free kicks) were scored from set plays – a low figure which was echoed by the women's U20 and U17 tournaments. It raised questions about the amount of training-ground time dedicated to the attacking aspects of dead-ball situations and, in particular, individual work on the quality of set-play deliveries.





With wing play still leading to the highest percentages of goalscoring across all tournaments, the event in Australia illustrated the marked trend away from a hit-and-hope approach to crossing the ball and towards a greater variety in their supplies from the wide areas and the points of delivery. Champions Japan, the observers pointed out, "not only excelled in their technical ability in crossing the ball but also their decision-making in selecting the right type of delivery and their vision of the game – looking up to select the teammate and the target area". With the inverted winger increasingly commonplace, the ability to cross the ball with either foot also has greater relevance – as highlighted by Lionel Messi when he set up Argentina's winning goal in the FIFA World Cup Semi-final against England. Still on wing play, the positional roles of full-backs and wing-backs in attacking play was a stand-out topic, with the Final in Australia between the hosts and Japan showcasing different approaches.



During the two women's age-limit tournaments, the accuracy of passing in the final third provided food for thought. Participants at the U17 finals, in particular, posted low completion rates, with only one pass in five being received by a team-mate. And the multi-tier status quo in Asian women's football (headed by an elite group of five countries) provoked debate about whether, among teams lower down the ladder, there is a risk that 'development' boils down to work on defensive strategies aimed at making life difficult for stronger opponents.

Anyone reading all the Technical Reports in a single session would probably be struck by numerous referrals, in the men's and women's competitions, to the need to develop methods of breaking down low defensive blocks. Although it was also illustrated by the AFC Champions League Elite™ silver medallists FC Machida Zelvia, this aspect was particularly prevalent in the women's tournaments where teams taking on the traditional powerhouses prioritised damage limitation. Yet another prime example emerged at the men's AFC U23 Asian Cup™ where China PR reached the Semi-finals by conceding zero goals and scoring one – from an indirect free kick. It was a success built on three goalless draws and no open-play goals in six and a half hours of football.

The Technical Report mentions that opponents "were overtly challenged to break down a deep defensive block based on a five-man defence holding a line measured at an average distance of 15.2m from their goal, protected by a trio and a tandem at distances which allowed TV cameras to comfortably show all 10 outfielders in one shot". Japan, who won the Final 4-0, were alone in finding answers. And an interlocking theme – the evolving role of the striker – was another recurrent topic in technical reviews during the season. Even in the two premier club competitions: the AFC Champions League Elite™ and the AFC Women's Champions League™.





In the former, champions Al Ahli Saudi FC's 27 goals were shared by 11 players; silver medallists Machida Zelvia's 18 by nine; and, going back to the Semi-finals, Shabab Al Ahli's 19 by 10; Vissel Kobe's 21 by 11. The talking point was whether sharing goals around the team is necessarily a positive virtue, as opposed to deploying a specialised striker such as the season's top scorer, Al Sadd SC's Rafa Mújica. (Or, indeed, DPR Korea's Yu Jong Hyang, who broke records with 15 goals in six matches at the Women's U17 final tournament). The Technical Observers at the final tournament in Saudi Arabia commented, "the ability to convert when it matters most emerged as a defining factor for success. In an era where youth development increasingly leans toward positional play, this serves as a timely reminder that in terms of scoring goals, efficiency remains the ultimate currency."

Another recurrent theme was the importance of structured counterattacking strategies, mentioned earlier in this issue and highlighted at the AFC Women's Asian Cup™ where counterpunches provided 21% of the final tournament's open-play goals. The surprising fact, however, was that, as stated in the Technical Review, "the takeaway message from the tournament was that the more defence-minded sides failed to trouble their opponents with well-structured counterattacking from deep positions" – a tendency which was also noted in other competitions.

All this has been dipping a finger into the pool of information to be found in the 2025/26 Technical Reviews which have already been distributed, while the full Technical Reports will shortly become available in the Downloads section of the-AFC.com. The challenge is to convert information into useful knowledge.

COACHES CORNER



CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC U23 ASIAN CUP SAUDI ARABIA 2026 TECHNICAL REPORT



CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC FUTSAL ASIAN CUP INDONESIA 2026 TECHNICAL REPORT



CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2026 TECHNICAL REPORT



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