



# COACHES CIRCLE

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



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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH ►  
**BRANKO IVANKOVIĆ**

## TOP PLAYERS: BORN OR MADE?

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

It is a perennial question: are top footballers born or can they be developed? For football associations this is not an academic debate, peppered with myth and the bias of those who think that you can either play or you can't. Because, if everything is innate, a gift, then you simply wait for the next 'golden generation' of players to appear (chance) and forget about player development programmes (design). However, it is generally accepted that talent, natural or nurtured, is not enough to be an elite player. You need desire; football know-how; physical and mental strength; and a commitment to practice and constant improvement.

The best players in the world showed potential at an early age. But even they had to work on their skills. Thierry Henry, a French footballing legend and prolific goalscorer at the highest level, once said: "I wasn't born with a gift for goals - I had to work at it". His 'gift', he argued, was his physical make-up, in particular his speed and power. One-time teammate, Lionel Messi, with his low centre of gravity, was exceptional as a child with his precocious ability to dribble with a football. But he had growth problems and FC Barcelona came to his rescue with the necessary treatment. Meanwhile, the academy coaches developed his understanding of the game, his ability to combine with others and his knowledge of a club style that was mutually



beneficial to him and the Catalan giants. Messi's former teammate, the Brazilian Maxwell, described the young maestro and future world champion as: "A very shy, humble guy, but someone who could win you the game, even in the toughest moments, with a goal or an assist". Lionel Messi was a special talent, but one that matured as a player by being a pupil in a very special learning environment.

When we think about some of Asia's best players, their development stories provide further evidence of the

value of specialist guidance, especially when they are in their middle-to-late teens. For example, the Player of the Tournament at the recent AFC Asian Cup™, Akram Afif of Qatar and Al Sadd FC, came from a 'football family' which was led by his father, an ex-player and coach. In 2015, Akram graduated from the renowned Aspire Academy in Doha before gaining invaluable experience in Spain and Belgium. The 'flower was in full bloom' when he inspired Qatar to back-to-back AFC Asian Cup™ titles. Another who benefited from a spell in Spain was

Salem Al Dawsari of Al Hilal SFC and Saudi Arabia. An outstanding player of his generation, he will always be remembered for his brilliant goal against Argentina at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and for a number of spectacular finishes in the AFC Champions League™. With Afif and Al Dawsari, endless hours of practice went into fine-tuning the technical brilliance of each player's right foot.

When Son Heung-min was 16 years old, he went to Hamburg in Germany with five other promising youngsters as part of an educational exchange project of the Korea Football Association (KFA). Like Afif, his father was a former player and coach, and all his grounding came to fruition when he moved from Bayer Leverkusen to Tottenham Hotspur for a fee that made him, at the time, the most expensive Asian player in history. Two-footed, quick and with an eye for a goal, Son's rise to stardom was the result of talent, exposure to high-intensity competitions, expert guidance and, crucially, his intense desire to be a great player. Talent, plus football intelligence, plus desire is a magic formula in football development.

While others debate the existence of a gift, of natural talent, each national association needs to be practical: to scout for young players with footballing potential and then to nurture them. Why? Because there is no transfer market in international football. You can't buy players; you can only produce them. There is no doubt that Asia has an abundance of talented young players, but identifying them, giving them the opportunity to fulfil their promise, providing appropriate competitions and immersing them in highly-developed youth programmes - these are the challenges. And waiting is simply not an option.



## COMPACT, ATTACK- MINDED AND DIFFERENT

Some careers are not easily condensed into a few lines – especially when more than three decades of coaching were preceded by 12 seasons and 263 games in midfield for his hometown team NK Varaždin, or NK Varteks as it was known at that stage of the Croatian club's history. It was also the starting point of a coaching adventure which led him through seven other countries, five of them in AFC territory. The first turning point was the decision by the legendary Miroslav Blazević to recruit him as assistant when Croatia made a global impact by taking third place at the FIFA World Cup in 1998. After a spell in Germany, he followed Blazević to Islamic Republic of Iran, eventually succeeding his friend and mentor as head coach and leading the national team into the FIFA World Cup finals in Germany in 2006, having previously secured a bronze medal at the 2004 AFC Asian Cup™ after losing a penalty shoot-out against China PR in the Semi-final. Then, after heading home for two seasons in charge of Dinamo Zagreb, his affinity with Asian football was welded by a Chinese Super League title with Shandong Luneng, two spells in Saudi Arabia with Al Ettifaq and Al Ahli, a season at Al Wahda in the United Arab Emirates and, returning to IR Iran, four seasons rich in league and Super Cup successes at Persepolis accompanied by a run of Coach of the Year awards. Then, after 14 years of club competition, he returned to national team football, leading Oman into the final tournament of the AFC Asian Cup™ earlier this year and then stepping into his current role as head coach of China PR. He is, in case you haven't guessed...



BRANKO IVANKOVIĆ

## TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOUR PLAYING EXPERIENCE AS A MIDFIELDER INFLUENCE YOU AS A COACH?

To have been a player is very important. From my experience as a player, you realise that one of the key things is to be able to solve problems on the pitch. Problems that the coach didn't foresee because football is all about the unexpected. This was the main thing that I carried with me when I moved from player to coach and it helped me to explain some details that can become important when you need to solve problems and solve them quickly. Today we have many more coaches who haven't had a top-level playing career and that doesn't matter too much. At lower levels you are still playing on a football pitch, learning to deal with situations and gaining experience in the subtleties of the game. Of course, in my generation we were basically street players so we had to think about how to control the ball on difficult surfaces, how to fall over without getting injured...many factors that you had to learn to deal with. And one aspect that I think is important in the modern game, you have to learn to play 1v1. As kids we were always keen to dribble with the ball and show that we were better than the others. Today we emphasise teamwork but, at the same time, we can see that players with good 1v1 skills can be the ones who make a difference when it comes to getting results. We sometimes forget that.

Neither should we forget that in our street football, we were basically training for five hours. Not continuously of course. Maybe two or three hours at the club and the rest of the time with our friends in the street. It was not organised football, but we created a football environment with fun, jokes and so on. I think this is something that

is so often missing from our player development these days. An hour or an hour and a half of training is, in my opinion, not enough if you're thinking of playing high-level football.

## WHO WERE YOUR MAIN INFLUENCES DURING YOUR EARLY COACHING CAREER IN CROATIA?

When I started, I had the good fortune to work at a club and the national team at the same time. Miroslav Blazević was the head coach and, working with him, I was able to learn a lot about football, life and important aspects like styles of communication. He was an amazing coach with experience in different countries. I was lucky that



he chose me to be his assistant and we worked together for eight years – seven in Croatia and one in IR Iran. We never had a fight! I identified with his philosophy; I did my best to help him and, of course, I benefitted a lot from our relationship. We also happened to be working with outstanding players such as Robert Prosinečki, Zvonimir Boban, Igor Stimać, Davor Šuker, Slaven Bilić and so on. It was very interesting to see how he communicated with them and to experience his playing philosophy. I also learned from Tomislav Ivić and Ivica Osim, very good coaches in the former Yugoslavia. It was wonderful to sit round a table with them discussing aspects of football and ideas about how to build and coach a team.

## WHAT IS THE PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY THAT HAS DEVELOPED FROM THIS BACKGROUND?

I would describe myself as a coach who likes to play offensive football. But not just attack. I like to pay attention to each phase of the game in defence, midfield and attack. My vision is to attack the opponent and to do that I am ready to take risks. Even with teams from relatively small countries like Oman. I remember we travelled to Japan with an offensive game plan – and we beat them 1-0. My other basic concept is to try to offer something that is different from other teams. What we see mostly these days is a 4-2-3-1 or a 5-3-2, so, for example, I play 4-4-2 with a midfield diamond and attacking full-backs. And attacking moves that end with at least three or four players in the penalty box. That is what I set out to do. Sometimes it's possible, sometimes not.

The add-on benefit to this philosophy is that the players become more confident. If you over-emphasise staying back and playing defensively, the players end up taking

the field feeling scared, short of confidence and self-belief. During my career, I've seen that playing attacking football with a high press creates a positive atmosphere.

**HAVING COACHED IN SO MANY COUNTRIES WITH CLUBS AND NATIONAL TEAMS, HAVE YOU TRIED TO IMPLEMENT THE SAME PLAYING PHILOSOPHY? OR HAVE YOU NEEDED TO CHANGE?**

What I have tried to do is to stay in touch with trends. I feel that team structures are not that important. The important thing is that, whatever the shape, the team should stay compact. This is a common denominator among today's top club sides such as Manchester City. If you stay compact you have a much better platform for the high press and risk-taking style that I mentioned. For example, you can press hard to one side and leave one-third of the pitch open. But that's a risk I don't mind taking. You can be aggressive and give time and space for players to create something with a minimum level of danger. This is something I explain to the players because I have found that it's easy for players in Asia to develop a complex when they are faced with opponents they have seen on TV! They want a selfie with the opponents! I prefer to develop self-confidence – and this is something that has brought me success in almost 40 years of coaching.

**FROM A MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVE, WHAT IS MORE CHALLENGING: LEADING A CLUB OR AN INTERNATIONAL SIDE?**

I would say I prefer coaching a club. It's easier to establish my philosophy, my vision, my culture when



I have daily contact with my players. But I also enjoy working with a national team – partly because you have to take fast decisions. Maybe occasionally you make the wrong decision. But this is better than making no decision at all. So, the challenge is to have good eyes – to see and analyse things clearly and quickly and to make good decisions. And this is something that is difficult to develop because it comes with experience. I remember a match against Singapore. I was about to make two substitutions when the referee brought out the red card. So, I made a different change – and then another player went down injured. It all happened within two minutes. As a coach, you have to prepare yourself to react quickly to unexpected situations by imagining your response to, say, a centre-back being red-carded, a midfielder taking an injury, a key player not performing very well, the need to chase a result in the final minutes and so on.



As a coach, you have to prepare yourself to react quickly to unexpected situations

**Branko Ivanković**



When I started as a coach, people often told me that everything depended on the quality of the players. This is true. But I think that all coaches aim to find and develop players and create a team that can express their playing philosophy. As I said, I also try to develop a team that does something different from the others and can overcome the opposition in this way. I never give special tasks to the players such as a man-to-man marking mission. I prefer to impose my own style rather than let the team be dominated by the opponent. I certainly talk to players about the opponent's good points, but I emphasise that we should try to snuff out danger by staying compact and working as a team. A well-organised and well-balanced team that doesn't, for example, rely on attacking along the left side or the right wing. As a coach, I try to create a balance in terms of quality in all departments. Also, I have to mention the importance of working on set pieces because, even

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on days when everything seems to be going wrong, a well-worked set play can decide the result.

### SINCE YOU WENT TO THE FIFA WORLD CUP IN 1998, HOW HAS THE GAME CHANGED?

Well, thinking back, we went to that World Cup with an excellent squad containing the players I mentioned before – most of them playing in Europe's top leagues like Spain, Italy or England – and seven or eight who had been champions with Yugoslavia at the (FIFA) U20 World Cup in Chile in 1987. What Miroslav Blazević did was to assign players to be leaders of the different departments in the team. Honest leaders rather than 'celebrity' leaders. These days, Luka Modrić is the perfect example of the honest leader, a true professional without airs and graces. In 1998, we had a very difficult game – and a bit of luck – against Japan. But we beat them 1-0 and got out of the group. It was a turning point as, from that moment on, we played the knockout games with passion, belief and concentration. We produced an incredible performance to beat Germany 3-0 and the strange thing was that our easiest game was the Semi-final against France, which we lost because Lilian Thuram, who I'm sure had never scored even on the training ground, got two goals against us.

I had been with the Croatia team at EURO 96 in England but the (FIFA) World Cup in France was a big experience as it gave me a chance to see all the different aspects of a major tournament – the hotels, transportation and so on. It taught me how important it is to adapt to a different culture – a valuable lesson as I went from Croatia to Germany and then to IR Iran, China PR, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and now, China PR again. Some coaches

make the mistake of thinking that countries will adapt to them. The truth is that the coach must adapt to the country very quickly. Culture, tradition, religion...you need to understand these aspects, but not interfere with them. Don't expect changes overnight. But I think the AFC Asian Cup™ in Qatar showed that Asian football is coming up. We have to accept that, while countries like Japan, Korea Republic or Saudi Arabia have strong leagues, they cannot compare with the top five leagues in Europe. But now we see Japanese, Korean, Iranian or Australian footballers at European clubs playing top-level football every three or four days. Intense games with aggressive physical duels and fast thinking. This is valuable experience.

### WHAT ARE THE BEST AND THE WORST ASPECTS OF COACHING?

I really like coaching! I came into it as a professor of physical education. I had been teaching for five years and I have not stopped learning during all these years on the training pitch. I haven't lost my interest in coaching and am always looking for new ideas. I enjoy being on the field. I enjoy working with players. I enjoy reading books about the game. And I always have the feeling that this is my perfect environment. I never tire of it.

### WHAT WOULD YOU SELECT AS YOUR BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT SO FAR? AND YOUR BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT?

I've enjoyed a lot of success and special moments. I mentioned the World Cup in France but I've also earned



titles and memories in China PR, in IR Iran... Most of all, I remember how the people celebrated in the streets when IR Iran qualified for the 2006 World Cup.

### FINALLY, IF YOU HAD TO GIVE ONE PIECE OF ADVICE TO COACHING COLLEAGUES ABOUT BEING SUCCESSFUL IN TODAY'S TOP-LEVEL FOOTBALL, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

I do detect a problem among today's coaches if they try to reach the top too early. They need more time to prepare for a coaching career at a high level. They don't have enough patience to climb the ladder step by step. And it's important to have a good mentor to give advice, to help to form a philosophy and develop the good communication skills that you need in the modern game – the ability to convince players and encourage them to keep learning about football.



## EMOTIONS PROJECT

## EMOTIONAL COMPONENTS

“Football is an emotional game and the ability to control your emotions and express yourself in a positive way is fundamental for the success of the individual and the team. It is our duty to support Asian coaches and players in this vital aspect of their development.” The comment by AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa has been emphatically endorsed during recent AFC club and national team competitions – including the AFC Asian Cup™ played in Qatar at the beginning of the year. As the technical report on the event noted “the tournament provided some graphic illustrations of how emotional states can exercise a strong influence on concentration, confidence and even technical quality”. Takeshi Ono, one of the technical observers in Qatar, added “emotions sometimes surpass factors such as technique, tactics or physical strength and can determine the game”. As a result of all this, the topic of Emotions-in-Football has been written into the AFC Coaching Convention and, from now, is a required component in the Coach Education Programmes conducted by Member Associations (MAs).



### IMPLEMENTING THE CONCEPT

Introducing Emotions-in-Football modules into Pro, ‘A’ and ‘B’ level coach education courses was the topic addressed early in June when 140 participants zoomed into an online session dedicated to practicalities and answering basic questions. Modules, for example, can be equally well-organised in a meeting room, on a training pitch or during a visit to a club. Emotions-in-Football work is not to be evaluated as a separate subject but can be integrated into overall assessments of a student’s attitude. And one of the most pertinent issues is who should be involved in the delivery of the modules. A coach educator? An outside specialist in the topic? Or both? The response was that all three options are valid within a framework where flexibility is the key word.



Emotions sometimes surpass factors such as technique, tactics or physical strength and can determine the game

Takeshi Ono



The online session featured one of the leading specialists in the field. María Ruíz de Ona, a member of the AFC Emotions-in-Football Working Group and responsible for psychological aspects of the development work done by coaches and players at the Aspire Academy in Qatar. “Coaches are part of a player’s emotional experience,” she maintains. “So the more emotional self-knowledge the coaches possess, the higher the quality of interaction with players. The coach has to be equipped for a responsible role in which, for example, stress and other emotional states can easily be transmitted to players. We cannot learn and progress as professionals without acknowledging our own emotions.” As she pointed out, the coach needs to be emotionally balanced in leading staff meetings or conducting one-to-one

conversations. She also gave some practical tips – such as the importance, when organising Emotions-in-Football sessions, of arranging groups in circles, so that everyone can see each other.

Encouraging coaches to develop empathy was another issue addressed during the online session. Mark Milton, another leading specialist in the Working Group, commented “communication skills are at the heart of the matter and one of the key elements is to develop the ability to listen”.

### DESIGNING THE CONTENT

From a practical standpoint, the quintessential question focused on the content of the Emotions-in-Football



Communication skills are at the heart of the matter and one of the key elements is to develop the ability to listen.

Mark Milton



modules in Coach Education courses. Again, flexibility emerged as the key word. “There is rapidly increasing interest in this topic,” AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh commented. “While tactical and technical topics are being dealt with in great depth, the mental and emotional aspects are relatively unexplored. The AFC is ready to help MAs define the content of Emotions-in-Football modules. But the way the sessions are angled and labelled is entirely on an individual basis, bearing in mind all the cultural differences within the Confederation.”

One of the challenges is to overcome a relatively common denominator in football circles: a reluctance to discuss feelings. As María Ruíz de Ona remarked, “sometimes a player can be like a wall. So, you need to be able to look for cracks.” This was illustrated by a video screened during the online session showing an imaginary conversation between a player and a coach who has detected a drop



in performance levels and is keen to discover whether there are underlying personal problems. The coach, face-to-face with the player and looking him straight in the eye, uses a reflection technique to prise open the crack in the defensive wall and encourage the player to finally admit to an off-the-pitch problem. Once the difficulty has been pinpointed, solutions can be found.

The video illustrated the sort of role-play scenario that can be a useful 'serious fun' component when groups of student coaches get together for Emotions-in-Football sessions. The other video showed a coach having his ability to manage emotions severely tested by a media reporter during an outrageously hostile post-match interview. Again, the topic was serious (post-match comments transmit important messages to the dressing-room, boardroom and beyond) but it was addressed

in a light-hearted fashion. Role-play based on student interaction is a valid option for an area where an academic approach is less appropriate.

### FINDING THE RIGHT RESPONSE

Handling media criticism and dealing with personal problems are among the myriad situations where the coach is required to find an emotionally balanced response. Role-play interviews could easily include a stressful conversation between a high-profile star player and the coach who has to break the news that he or she has been dropped from the team – an example of the sort of tough decisions the student coach will need to be equipped to manage without provoking emotional reactions from either party. Likewise, there is a need to explain in the boardroom the reasons underlying a run of poor results. How does the coach behave during half-



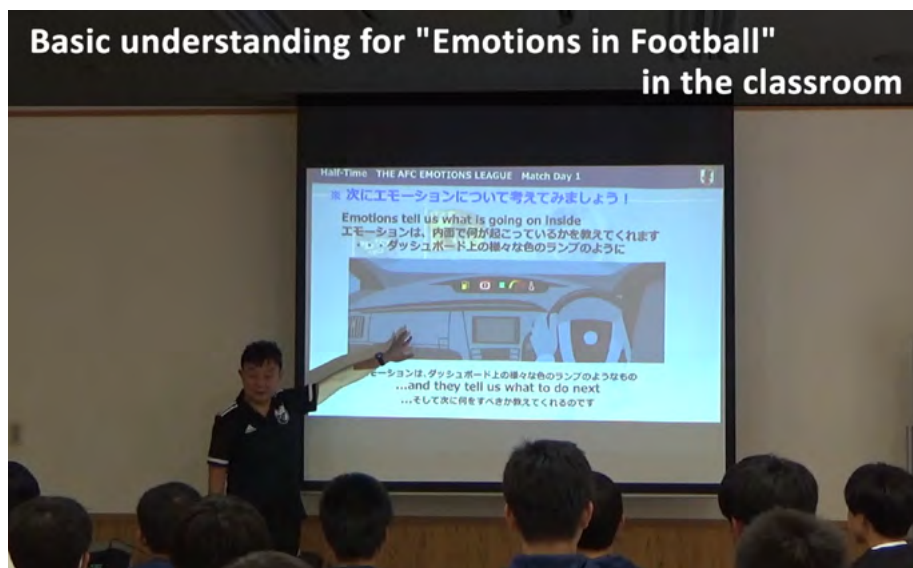
In the end, it is attention to detail that makes the difference.

David Noonan



time when the team is trailing and under-performing? How does the coach help players overcome disappointment, losses of confidence or fear of failure? How does the coach stimulate motivation among players who are habitually on the bench? How does the coach address lapses in concentration that lead to disappointing results? What guidance can a coach offer when it comes to avoiding excesses of anger or euphoria on the field of play? And what is the coach's response to disharmony in the dressing-room? As María Ruíz de Ona mentioned, "especially when you are dealing with star performers, you sometimes need to work on helping or persuading them to accept other players' mistakes."

The last word comes from the AFC General Secretary. "As a footballer or as a coach, technical know-how is not enough," says Datuk Seri Windsor John. "You need to understand your emotions and to behave appropriately in the game. AFC's Emotions in Football project addresses the various aspects of emotional intelligence and offers practical advice for coaches (and their players) at all levels of the game."



## AFC NATIONAL COACHES CONFERENCE

### QATAR AND BEYOND



The 3rd AFC National Coaches Conference in Kuala Lumpur, described by the AFC website as a star-studded event, brought together national team coaches and technical directors from the four corners of the Confederation. It aimed, as the AFC's Technical Director Andy Roxburgh said as he welcomed participants to the three-day conference, "to examine lessons from the AFC Asian Cup™ and look ahead to the expanded FIFA World Cup in 2026."

The in-depth review of the AFC Asian Cup™ staged in Qatar at the beginning of 2024 featured a revealing session in which Harry Lowe, FIFA's Lead Football Performance Analyst presented data that endorsed some of the key elements highlighted by the AFC technical observers at the competition. They had noted, for example, that "direct attacking which bypassed the midfield emerged as one of the standout features of the tournament". FIFA statistics confirmed that the AFC Asian Cup™'s balance of 75.9 lofted passes per 60 minutes of ball-in-play time was significantly higher than the 62.8 during the FIFA World Cup played at the same venues. "The use of aerial passes, he added, "was a frequent response when teams were subjected to a high press." Statistics revealed a 25.8% usage of the lofted pass as the answer to high pressure by AFC Asian Cup™ teams – over one-third more than the 19.2% registered at the FIFA World Cup. Use of the long ball, he pointed out, also led to a higher percentage of ball-in-contest time (neither team in possession) and, as he put it, "direct styles of play led to an increased relevance of the ability to win aerial duels". Data reveal that eight out of ten matches were won by the team that enjoyed aerial supremacy – doubling the proportion registered at the FIFA event.

"The trend towards directness at the Asian Cup," Lowe commented, "also led to teams spending more time in

transition and less time in the final third.” This was reflected by a statistic of 13.6% at the Continental tournament, 32% less than the 20.1% posted at the FIFA World Cup.

Topic	AFC Asian Cup™	FIFA World Cup
Ball-in-play time	52%	58%
Lofted passes	75.9	62.8
Second-ball receptions	84.1	67.7
Ball-in-contest	13%	11%
Pass length in build-up	22.1m	20.2m
Pass completion rate	79.5%	84.1%
Time in final third	13.6%	20.1%

### CROSS REFERENCES

The AFC’s technical report on the final tournament commented “although wing play produced goals, there were reservations about the quality and effectiveness of the end product. Korea Republic, for example, delivered 130 crosses during their six games and were rewarded with two goals. One of the tournament’s eye-catching statistics was Palestine’s total of 54 crosses against UAE – one of which was headed into his own net by a defender. Questions debated by the technical observers included the number of crosses which failed to clear the first defender or the predictability factor of attacks through the wide areas finalised with a cross that posed few problems to alert centre-backs.”



FIFA’s statistics validate the viewpoint. Harry Lowe pointed out that, although the number of crosses per 60 minutes at the AFC Asian Cup™ (27.7) was almost identical to the 27.8 at the FIFA World Cup, the success rate in terms of goals was 1:85 compared with 1:41. The AFC Asian Cup™ produced one goal per 11.1 cross-generated attempts; the FIFA World Cup one per 4.8. “Surprising statistics,” commented Japan head coach Hajime Moriyasu when he was on stage later in the conference. “I thought that the Asian standard was rising but we are evidently still short of World Cup standards.” On stage with him, Australia head coach Graham Arnold added “it’s true that the defensive blocks set up by a lot of nations are hard to break down these days. But I agree there’s sometimes



We must believe that we are a Confederation that can reach for the stars – and not go to tournaments feeling that we don’t really belong there.

Graham Arnold



a lack of individual calmness about putting the ball into the net. A lot of finishing is too emotional.”

## TACTICAL FLEXIBILITY

At the AFC Asian Cup™, eight of the 24 teams used a three-centre-back structure as their default setting, with several others equipped to set themselves up in this way according to opponents or match situations – champions Qatar among them. Fahad Al Zarraa, technical observer at the final tournament on his home territory, discussed the pros and cons of this trend on the second day of the conference, focusing on coverage of wide areas, the numerical impact in midfield and aspects such as giving centre-backs opportunities to push forward without compromising defensive security.

He also looked at the waning importance of ball-possession at a tournament where seven of the 11 Knockout matches that produced a result (i.e. not drawn) were won by the team with a lesser share of the ball. In addition, he invited



Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

Soren Kierkegaard



discussion about the fatigue/concentration/compactness factors that might be underlying the extraordinary fact that 22% of the goal times at the AFC Asian Cup™ had a + sign in them. And, as Harry Lowe later pointed out, 65% of the goals scored during added-time at the end of the second half had an impact on the result, compared with 27% at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. What can be done, Fahad Al Zarraa asked, to minimise these lapses in the future?

The AFC's Wim Koevermans, also in the team of technical observers at the Continental showpiece, focused on a sharp rise in successes from counterattacking compared with the previous final tournament in 2019, highlighting the relevance – especially at a tournament marked by direct back-to-front attacking – of well-organised 'rest

defence' to counter the counter after losses of possession in advanced areas. There were sessions dedicated to the Team Behind the Team and the leadership qualities required by today's top-level national coaches. And, of course, there was a tribute to Qatar's outstanding feat of winning back-to-back titles. Luis García, recruited as assistant by Qatar head coach Bartolomé 'Tintín' Márquez, was on stage to outline working priorities when the duo had taken charge of the defending champions just 19 days before their title defence kicked off. And Tim Cahill, the record-holding Australian international currently engaged in technical direction as Chief Sports Officer of Qatar's Aspire Academy, was on hand to explain the continuity and the playing philosophy which had underpinned the national team's success.

## FORWARD THINKING

The conference, however, was more about dialogue than presentations. The schedule featured (very) lively round-table discussion sessions aimed at giving the participants opportunities to air their concerns, exchange their ideas and design a blueprint for the continued development of Asian football.

Preparation time is high on the list of the challenges that many national team coaches need to address. Whereas Jørn Andersen (still head coach of Hong Kong, China at the time of the conference) had six weeks to prepare his AFC Asian Cup™ campaign, the then India head coach Igor Stimać had only eight days, while other colleagues had to contend with the increasingly frequent scenario of star performers flying in from Europe or elsewhere on the eve of the competition. “Some of the favourites went home early from the Asian Cup,” Stimać reflected, “and I wonder how much that had to do with short preparation times.” “One of the major issues,” Andersen commented, “is that, in many Asian territories, the level of league football is low. So, when we got the squad together, we had to work hard on raising the quality and tempo of our game.”

“We depend heavily on the work that the club coaches are doing,” Stimać agreed. “So, you need to establish good relationships and use them as a platform to encourage coaches to do individual work with national team players. We also need to work on structures at development levels – well-organised competitions. In India, the pandemic put a stop to youth league projects – and that obviously has had an impact.” China PR’s Branko Ivanković added “even where you see professional leagues, the standards are not always truly professional. Should we bring in specialists to educate our local coaches to work with



youth teams? Should we try to send coaches to see the work being done in Europe?” “I agree that youth development is generally better in Europe,” Andersen remarked, “and the other problem is that if a player from the Under-18s can’t get into the first team at his club, there is no further development.”

On the final morning of the conference, Hajime Moriyasu and Graham Arnold were invited to step on stage, along with Yaya Touré who, after a 101-match international career with Côte d’Ivoire that included three FIFA World

Cups, is currently assistant to Roberto Mancini at the head of the Saudi Arabia national team. The trio was asked for their views on Asia’s perspectives at the 2026 final tournament to be staged at 16 venues in Canada, Mexico and the United States. “The expansion to 48 teams is great,” said Graham Arnold. “But qualifying is not easier. The teams in the third phase have a 16-game schedule – plus another two if you end up in the play-off. The amount of travelling is a big challenge, especially when you have to bring players from Europe. We need to work out if we can do something to make it less strenuous.”

On the previous day, Igor Stimać had mentioned “it’s a problem if you always have the same four or five AFC teams at a World Cup. So, more places mean a greater incentive to gain experience of competing at world level” – a message that Yaya Touré picked up. “Up till now, you could be unlucky in a draw or in a qualifying game and it meant that a Confederation has not always been represented by all its top teams. The expansion could remedy that.”

“The expansion is positive,” Moriyasu agreed. “But there will be a greater burden on players and there will be logistical challenges. In Qatar, all the venues and training facilities were so compact geographically. Now it will be a question of three countries and three climates.”

The main question, however, is whether the AFC teams can build on the successes achieved in individual matches in Qatar. “We had three teams in the top 16,” Arnold commented, “and Saudi Arabia’s performance against Argentina showed us the way. Asian football is climbing. But the issue now is to achieve greater consistency over a major tournament. And I think it’s largely a question of mentality – of controlling emotions after a game and working on playing the next game as well, if not better.

And not looking at social media, as that can have a mental effect on the next performance.”

The expanded tournament is scheduled to be played over a 39-day time-span which will oblige coaches to deal with the man-management issues of keeping a large group together over such a long period of time. “As Hajime says, Qatar was easy because the compactness meant it was no problem to bring family and friends,” Arnold remarked. “In 2026 there will be greater onus in terms of travel – and the altitude in Mexico might be tricky. Managing downtime will be important. The players will be physically fit, so you won’t need to get them any fitter. It’s all about taking the pressure off them between games and devising a strategy to do that.” “From personal experience,” Touré commented, “it’s a huge challenge for players to maintain full commitment during a month in a hotel. So, you have to make sure they have opportunities to focus on things other than football.”

“Relaxation and environment are the key words,” Moriyasu agreed. “You have to create a positive environment and choose days when you can do things to reduce stress levels and make the players feel comfortable. It’s an important aspect because the level in Asia has definitely risen. We are ready to develop further by competing against the best in the world. But we need to give our everything to increase the quality of our game – the intensity, the physicality...we must aim to move up one or even two levels. Europe has strength in its leagues and its Champions League – and we now have players who are immersed in this. We must try to use this to strengthen ourselves to world standards.”

Asked whether Asia could win a world title within the next quarter-century, all three oozed optimism. “As a competitive force, Asia maybe started to count about 10 years ago,” said Arnold. “To continue moving up, it’s down to individual MAs to work on the standards of national



You have to create a positive environment and choose days when you can do things to reduce stress levels and make the players feel comfortable.

Hajime Moriyasu



leagues. We should look at Japan as an example of how to upgrade competitions and establish development pathways. And everyone should be optimistic. Mentally, we must believe that we are a Confederation that can reach for the stars – and not go to tournaments feeling that we don’t really belong there.”

After the conference, Igor Stimać commented “It has given us the chance to voice our opinions, share our ideas and analyse past competitions together. After all, we are all here for the same purpose: to see Asian football reach greater heights.” And, as AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh said, “Our pursuit towards excellence is an ongoing process. The AFC remains committed in its Vision to ensure the success of our national teams on the biggest stages in world football.”

## DEVELOPMENT PROJECT UPDATES

### WORK IN PROGRESS

In football, numbers are useful, but they don't tell the full story. This is certainly the case with the updates on the three main AFC coaching projects which have become a regular feature in the pages of Coaches Circle. Issue by issue, the growth of the AFC Coaching Convention, the AFC Elite Youth Scheme and the AFC Grassroots Charter has been largely measured in numbers. Newcomers have been welcomed; upgrades have been recorded. Updates have regularly featured the phrase 'since our previous issue' – which is a temptation to ignore the longer-term perspectives. So, it's interesting to flick back to Issue 4 of Coaches Circle, published early in 2020 when we were about to be knocked groggy by the pandemic. A total of 19 MAs had been endorsed as members of the AFC Coaching Convention, five of them qualified to issue AFC-endorsed 'Pro' diplomas. Less than five years later and in spite of Covid's best efforts, 16 MAs are equipped to deliver 'Pro' diploma courses and the overall total has risen to 43. In 2020, a total of 24 MAs had become signatories of the AFC Grassroots Charter, three of them with Gold status and four at the Silver level. The current balance sheet shows 41 endorsed MAs, eight of them at



Gold level and seven at Silver. The newly-launched AFC Elite Youth Scheme had only two members: Qatar with a 3-Star rating; and Japan at the 2-Star level. Currently, 22 MAs are on board.

The extraordinary growth within a period of just over four years has brought the numbers to a level where they no longer tell the whole story. Since the last Coaches Circle, for example, the number of signatories to the AFC Coaching Convention has remained stable at the total of 43. But this does not signify inactivity in a

situation where the 'onward ever upward' motto could be appropriate. MAs are slowly but surely upgrading, with the endorsement of Thailand at 'Pro' level bringing the total to 16. As the graphic shows, 18 are currently at 'A' level, with the result that the 'B' section is steadily emptying out. In other words, the global total remains unchanged but dynamics are at work within the overall framework.

Reinforcing that viewpoint, the evaluation process is bubbling. Bhutan, IR Iran, Iraq, Philippines, Tajikistan,

Turkmenistan and the UAE are bidding to upgrade to 'Pro' level, along with Oman who are aiming to jump directly from 'B' to 'Pro'. Another five (Brunei Darussalam, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Timor-Leste) are pressing onward ever upward to 'A' level while Guam and Sri Lanka have sights on 'B' status. Pakistan and Yemen are the only absentees.

The Grassroots landscape looks similar. The recent ratifications of China PR and Uzbekistan have expanded the Gold contingent to eight, while the addition of Cambodia has increased the Bronze group to 26. But, again, there is renewed energy in the wake of the pandemic with IR Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE bidding to lead the Gold squad into double figures while Palestine's application for Silver status is also in the pending tray. After the pandemic-induced hiatus, there are also no fewer than 11 renewal procedures currently under way, leaving only DPR Korea, Pakistan and Yemen as the sole absentees from the list of signatories to the AFC Grassroots Charter.



The AFC Elite Youth Scheme is also on the move, even though the numbers reveal no major change to the status quo. Incidentally, an Elite Youth event was one of five online sessions staged by the AFC in June. It featured a presentation by Japan's Technical Director Kageyama Masanaga outlining the benchmarking



youth development work (for both boys and girls) being undertaken at four JFA academies in Kumamoto, Sakai, Imabari and, especially, Fukushima – in addition to the introduction and promotion of an Under-18 Premier League. During the online session, the AFC also announced the introduction of Elite Youth Awards, the first of which are to be presented during the AFC Women's Football Conference in Kuala Lumpur, scheduled for November. The Awards are in three categories: Youth Academy of the Year (boys and girls); Youth Coach of the Year (male and female); and Youth League of the Year. Going back to the AFC Elite Youth Scheme, China PR and Oman have applied for upgrading to 2-Star membership, while the UAE is aiming to jump on board at the top 3-Star level. At the same time, no fewer than 18 renewal processes are under way.

The sheer numbers related to the three major AFC Projects evoke classic images of the swan gliding gracefully over the water while, under the surface, a lot of energetic paddling is going on.



Football is more than just a game, it serves as a universal language.

Taher El-Sonni (UN)



## AFC COACHING CONVENTION CATEGORIES

### PRO - Level



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

### A - Level



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

### B - Level



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE

## AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME CATEGORIES

### ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

#### 3 - STAR



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QFA QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FA THAILAND THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VFF VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

#### 2 - STAR



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JFA JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

#### 1 - STAR



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



KFU THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

#### PROVISIONAL



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

## AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER CATEGORIES



### GOLD



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA  
KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QFA  
QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

### SILVER



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



Jordan Football Association



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FA THAILAND  
THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND

### BRONZE



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



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MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



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ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



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OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF SRI LANKA



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE



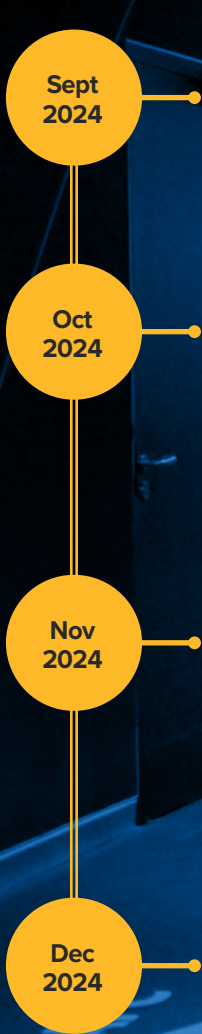
FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

## KEY DATES

COACHES CORNER



Sept 2024	Sept 4	AFC Elite Club Coaches Online Forum								
Oct 2024	Oct 1	AFC Coach Education Online Session	Oct 3	AFC Youth Online Session	Oct 8	AFC Grassroots Online Session	Oct 18 - 26	AFC/JFA Pro Diploma Course for Asian Elite Women Coaches – Module 1	Oct 29	AFC Annual Awards, Seoul, Korea Republic
	Nov 5-8	AFC Goalkeeping Coaching Tutors Course, KL, Malaysia	Nov 11	AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting, KL, Malaysia	Nov 12	AFC Coach Education Panel Meeting, KL, Malaysia	Nov 12-14	AFC Women's Football Conference, KL, Malaysia	Nov 14	AFC Youth Panel Meeting, KL, Malaysia
Nov 2024	Nov 25-29	AFC Coach Education Tutors' Course – East, Thailand								
	Dec 1-6	2nd AFC Futsal Technical Workshop, KL, Malaysia	Dec 9-10	AFC Coach Education Tutors' Course – West, Saudi Arabia						



## COACHES CORNER

### THE AFC'S REVAMPED CLUB COMPETITIONS

The determination to propel Asian football to new heights while fostering greater growth and inclusivity was further reinforced in August 2023 when the AFC Executive Committee heralded a new era for Asian club football by unveiling the names of the three new club competitions – the AFC Champions League Elite™ (ACL Elite), the AFC Champions League Two™ (ACL Two) and the AFC Challenge League™ (ACGL) – alongside significant increases in funding for all participating teams as well as the introduction of the AFC Women's Champions League (AWCL) from the 2024/25 season.

These landmark revamps reinforce the AFC's ambitions, through its Vision and Mission, to stage world-class competitions for its Member Associations and showcase the very best of the Continent's talent.

#### AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE™

Taking place against the backdrop of Asia's biggest cities, the 24 teams in the prestigious ACL Elite embody diverse



cultures and over 1 billion football fans are expected to witness the most entertaining spectacle that the Continent has to offer.

A pivotal change sees the traditional Group Stage make way for the League Stage format, featuring two leagues of 12 teams across the West and East regions where each team plays against eight different opponents – four matches at home and four away.

The top eight teams from each League will advance to the double-legged Round of 16, scheduled from March 3 to 12, 2025, which will be followed by a unique centralised Finals. This will see all matches, from the Quarter-finals

onwards, being contested at a single host MA, with Saudi Arabia having been confirmed for the 2024/25 and 2025/26 seasons.

Teams entering the ACL Elite League Stage are guaranteed a minimum of USD 800,000 and the champions will receive at least USD 12 million.

#### AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO™

An exciting new competition designed to showcase the talent of the Continent's top 32 rising teams, the ACL Two promises fierce and thrilling action, as well as the added incentive of an indirect slot in the next season of the ACL Elite.

The 32-strong cast will be split into eight groups of four sides to start their quest for ultimate glory, with matches to be played in a round-robin, home-and-away format from September 17 to December 5. The top two finishers from each group advance to the Round of 16, which takes place from February 11 to 20, 2025. Thereafter, the Quarter-finals and Semi-finals will be played between March 4 and 13, 2025 and April 8 and 16, 2025 respectively, before the ACL Two 2024/25 culminates in a single-leg Final on May 17, 2025.

Clubs in the ACL Two Group Stage receive a minimum of USD 300,000 and the winners can take home at least USD 3.28 million.



## AFC WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™

Heralding a new era of success and progress for women's football in Asia, the highly-anticipated showcase of top-class women's club football will see the Continent's top 12 teams divided into three groups of four teams each. The top two finishers of each group and the two best third-placed sides progress to the Quarter-finals, to be played on March 22 and 23, 2025.

A Knockout Stage draw will be conducted prior to the Quarter-finals to determine the four pairings, which will be contested in a single-leg format, with the higher-ranked team of each tie to serve as the home side.

This will be followed by a centralised Finals, which will see the Semi-finals and Final – all single-leg ties – being played out from May 21 to 24, 2025. With an attractive prize purse on offer, the first ever champions of the prestigious AFC Women's Champions League™ can expect to be rewarded with at least USD1.3 million.

## AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE™

The new third-tier Continental men's competition will bring together 18 aspiring teams to contend for glory. Set to be played over three Matchdays between October 26 and November 2, each of the five groups in the Group Stage – three comprising four teams from the West in each group, two involving three teams from the East in each group – will feature a centralised host and see each side play their opponent once.

Eight teams will progress from the Group Stage – the three Group winners and best-ranked runners-up from the West, and the top two finishers of each Group from the East – to the Quarter-finals, which will comprise double-legged ties to be contested between March 5 and



13, 2025. The double-legged Semi-finals are scheduled to play out from April 9 to 17, 2025 and the winners will advance to the showdown Final on May 10, 2025.

All participating clubs will be supported by significant increases in financial distribution, as teams entering the Group Stage are guaranteed a minimum of USD100,000, with additional monies available based on their eventual placings, meaning that the champions will receive at least USD1.3 million.

## TRIBUTE TO THE WINNING COACHES

### SIX MONTHS, SIX CHAMPIONS



Bartolomé 'Tintín' Márquez



Go Oiwa



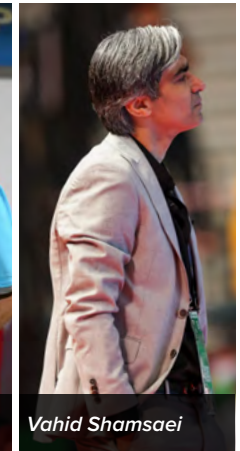
Hernán Crespo



Ri Song ho



Song Sung Gwon



Vahid Shamsaei

The first half of 2024 was a period of intense activity with five final tournaments for national teams and the outcome of the AFC Champions League™ not only producing champions but also deciding places in imminent FIFA and Olympic competitions. In the four AFC men's competitions, the common denominator among the winning coaches was an extensive career as a player. Coaches Circle briefly pays tribute to the coaches who lifted trophies.

#### AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023™

**Winner: Bartolomé 'Tintín' Márquez (Qatar)**

The former Spanish international achieved the remarkable feat of joining the national team from club side Al Wakrah 19 days before the hosts' opening fixture and leading them to a second successive title with shrewd tactical variations, substitutions and mental resilience.

#### AFC U23 ASIAN CUP QATAR 2024™

**Winner: Go Oiwa (Japan)**

The former centre-back, who had coached Kashima

Antlers to the AFC Champions League™ title in 2018, could feel proud of four clean sheets at the final tournament, including the hard-fought 1-0 victory over Uzbekistan in the Final. He was quick to credit the title to hard work by his staff and great team spirit within the squad.

#### AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2023/24™

**Winner: Hernán Crespo (Al Ain)**

The record-breaking Argentina striker bounced back from the psychological trauma of a 7-0 defeat in the previous season's Semi-final to lead the UAE club to victory over Yokohama F. Marinos in a high-scoring final. He signalled the players' heart and mental strength as key features in ties they were not expected to win.

#### AFC U20 WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP™ UZBEKISTAN 2024

**Winner: Ri Song ho (DPR Korea)**

Having defeated Japan in the Group Stage, a second victory against the same opponent in the Final ended a run of five successive silver medals and was the reward

for a meticulously-structured five-month preparation programme led by a man with 25 years of coaching experience after injury had ended his playing career.

#### AFC U17 WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP™ INDONESIA 2024

**Winner: Song Sung Gwon (DPR Korea)**

The 2-1 victory over Japan in the Final in Bali reversed the result that had given his team silver medals in 2019. The recipe for success included 60 days' work in two training camps and a strong emphasis on the importance of mental strength. He attributed the victory to a good blend of teamwork and individual talent.

#### AFC FUTSAL ASIAN CUP™ THAILAND 2024

**Winner: Vahid Shamsaei (Islamic Republic of Iran)**

Losing the 2022 Final to Japan was a major incentive for the record-breaker who, with 392 goals in 189 internationals, was a three-time winner of the AFC Futsal Player of the Year award. The 4-1 victory over Thailand secured a 13th title and rounded-off an unbeaten campaign with 25 goals scored and nine conceded.

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