

# *TECHNICAL REPORT & REVIEW 2024/25*



AFC  
CHAMPIONS  
LEAGUE  
ELITE™



**AFC**  
**CHAMPIONS**  
**LEAGUE**  
**ELITE™**



上海海港足球俱乐部  
SHANGHAI PORT FOOTBALL CLUB



上海申花足球俱乐部  
SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC



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AFC PRESIDENT

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MESSAGE FROM THE

# AFC PRESIDENT



*Dear friends,*

On behalf of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), I am delighted to present the Technical Report and Review for the inaugural season of the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25, which, in every way, marked the beginning of a new dawn for Asian club football.

Those of us who were privileged to be amongst the 58,281-strong fortress of green at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium on May 3, 2025, witnessed a stunning spectacle befitting the historic new chapter of the Asian club game and we must congratulate Al Ahli Saudi FC not only for clinching their first-ever title, but becoming the fifth team to win the Continent's most coveted club crown unbeaten.

We also commend first-time finalists Kawasaki Frontale on their exceptional campaign, particularly in the centralised AFC Champions League Elite™ Finals Jeddah 2025, and I am confident their impressive run to the decider will serve as an inspiration for all our teams.

By all accounts, the maiden 2024/25 season was, without a doubt, our best edition in history and our success is a tribute to the most transformative reforms ever to be introduced to the Asian club game.

The strategic reforms were conceptualised to achieve three main outcomes: to improve the technical performance of our clubs, to drive greater commercial value for our partners, and to further excite and expand Asia's passionate fanbase.

Thanks to the steadfast support of the AFC Member Associations (MAs), I am pleased to report that we delivered on our shared outcomes: the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 season set new attendance records, strengthened our fan engagement on our digital channels, broadened our coverage globally, and raised the intensity and quality of matches.

The heightened competitive standards underscored the importance of analysing the latest developments and I am confident you will agree that our expert Technical colleagues have done an exceptional job in capturing the key talking points, technical trends, and innovations of the season.

We are deeply grateful for their commitment to producing this valuable resource, which will serve as a foundation for identifying potential areas for improvement, particularly as we look to usher even greater success in the coming years.

In the subsequent pages, you will also find comprehensive insights on our world-class match officials, offering a technical perspective and we appreciate their unwavering dedication to excellence during a season that reaffirmed our commitment to embracing the latest technological advancements through the introduction of the Semi-Automated Offside Technology system in the final stages.

I would also like to thank all our MAs and their clubs for raising their technical standards, and we also deeply value the support of our commercial and broadcast partners, media stakeholders, and the millions of passionate fans who consistently enhance the prestige of the Continent's premier club competition.

Furthermore, we extend our gratitude to the Saudi Arabian Football Federation and the Kingdom's leadership for their exceptional hosting of the centralised AFC Champions League Elite™ Finals Jeddah 2025, which added a new dimension of excitement in the decisive stages of the tournament.

Finally, we offer our sincere thanks to the AFC Technical and AFC Competitions Committees, as well as my esteemed colleagues on the AFC Executive Committee, for their invaluable leadership and guidance in spearheading and bringing to life our breakthrough reforms.

I trust you will find this Technical Report insightful, reflecting yet another outstanding season that underscored the AFC's Vision and Mission of establishing an unrivalled stage for our MAs, clubs and players to shine brighter and scale even greater heights in the years to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Salman'.

**Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa**  
AFC President



# COMPETITION OVERVIEW



# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE™ 2024/25

The AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 concluded with the AFC Champions League Elite™ Finals Jeddah 2025 which was held from April 27 to May 3, 2025.

The tournament kicked off with the Preliminary Stage 1 on August 6, 2024, with the League Stage starting on September 16, 2024.

The Finals were contested as single leg matches in the centralised venue of Jeddah with the thrilling battles held at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Stadium and King Abdullah Sports City Stadium, which also hosted the Final.

Al Ahli Saudi FC of Saudi Arabia emerged champions for the first time, defeating Kawasaki Frontale of Japan 2-0 in the Final played in front of more than 58,000 fans.

# PRELIMINARY STAGE

The opening Preliminary Stage match in the West saw Islamic Republic of Iran's Foolad Mobarakeh Sepahan FC host UAE's Shabab Al Ahli, with the away side registering an emphatic 4-1 win at the Naghsh-E Jahan Stadium in Isfahan. That took them to a meeting with Qatar's Al Gharafa SC, who advanced to the League Stage after a 1-0 win courtesy of Ferjani Sassi's strike.

In the East Zone, China PR's Shandong Taishan FC welcomed Bangkok United of Thailand to the Jinan Olympic Sports Center for what proved to be a titanic battle. Proceedings ended 1-1 and after neither team could find the winner in extra time, the hosts prevailed 4-3 in the penalty shootout.

However, this result was eventually voided – as well as all their matches in the League Stage (East) – when Shandong Taishan were considered to have withdrawn from the competition on February 19, 2025, after not reporting for their final match.

# LEAGUE STAGE

## West

Al Hilal SFC led a trio of Saudi Arabian clubs who advanced to the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 Round of 16 with two matches to spare as the four-time Asian champions topped the standings ahead of Al Ahli Saudi FC on goal difference after both sides concluded their League Stage campaigns unbeaten on 22 points.

Al Nassr Club were the third side from Saudi Arabia to book their Round of 16 spot after accumulating 17 points. Also booking early slots after Matchday Six were Qatar's Al Sadd SC and UAE's Al Wasl FC, having collected 12 and 11 points respectively.

Meanwhile, Esteghlal FC saved their best for last with the IR Iran side defeating Qatar's Al Rayyan SC 2-0 on



Matchday Eight to finish sixth in the standings with nine points.

Al Rayyan also secured their place in the Round of 16, with their 2-1 win over Al Ain FC to end the UAE side's hopes of defending their title on Matchday Seven proving vital as the Qatar Stars League side finished on eight points.

Similarly, Pakhtakor confirmed their spot in the knockout rounds of the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 on the final Matchday with a 2-1 win over already-qualified Al Sadd as the Tashkent-based club moved into the top eight with their first victory of the campaign.



## East

The East Region was a much tighter affair with all eight Knockout Stage spots still available before Matchday Seven.

Four teams went on to confirm their berths in the Round of 16, led by the Japanese trio of Yokohama F. Marinos, Vissel Kobe and Kawasaki Frontale as all picked up victories. Continental debutants Gwangju FC of Korea Republic also impressively sealed their Knockout Stage spot, leaving four more spots to be up for grabs in the final Matchday.

Australia's Central Coast Mariners had become the first team to be eliminated after Matchday Six and they would go on to finish with just one point. With Korea Republic's Ulsan HD FC seeing their campaign ended

after Matchday Seven following their defeat to Thai side Buriram United, it meant that six teams were still in the running to make it to the Round of 16 on the final Matchday.

Malaysian champions Johor Darul Ta'zim secured their place in fine style with a comprehensive 5-2 home win against Korea Republic's FC Pohang Steelers, while Buriram did just enough to advance as they hung on to a 2-2 draw away in Korea Republic to Gwangju.

Chinese pair Shanghai Shenhua FC and Shanghai Port FC took the remaining Round of 16 berths as the former clinched a 4-2 win against Vissel while the latter's defeat to the Mariners did not prove costly with the Chinese side also sealing their berth in the decisive stages.



# ROUND OF 16

## Esteghlal FC (IRN) v Al Nassr Club (KSA)

**0-0, 0-3 (Al Nassr won 3-0 on aggregate)**

Al Nassr Club turned on the power in the return leg of their Round of 16 tie to seal a 3-0 victory against Esteghlal FC.

With the first leg having ended goalless, Jhon Duran put Al Nassr on the road to glory with the opening goal in the ninth minute of the return leg.

Cristiano Ronaldo doubled the advantage in the 27th minute and Duran capped a fine evening for himself by scoring his second in the 84th minute.

## Al Wasl FC (UAE) v Al Sadd SC (QAT)

**1-1, 1-3 (Al Sadd won 4-2 on aggregate)**

The first leg ended in a 1-1 stalemate, with Ali Saleh giving Al Wasl FC of the United Arab Emirates side a third minute lead.

Al Sadd fought back and a thumping header from Abdulla Al Yazidi off Akram Afif's cross saw the Qatari side drawing level in the 68th minute.

That set the stage for a nail-biting second leg, with Fabio Lima giving Al Wasl a dream start with his 10th minute goal.

Al Sadd, however, showed resilience and determination to score three times in 11 minutes. Mostafa Meshaal drew them level on aggregate in the 26th minute and strikes from Youcef Atal (30th) and Afif (37th) sealed their Quarter-final spot with a 4-2 win on aggregate.



## **Pakhtakor (UZB) v Al Hilal SFC (KSA)**

**1-0, 0-4 (Al Hilal won 4-1 on aggregate)**

The first leg witnessed a stunning result as Flamarion scored the only goal of the game in Pakhtakor's 1-0 defeat of Al Hilal SFC.

It was the Uzbekistan club's first win in nine meetings with Al Hilal.

The Saudi Arabian side were back to their best in the return leg, drawing level on aggregate through Hamad Al Yami in the 31st minute.

With the floodgates open, Malcom put Al Hilal ahead in the 42nd minute with Salem Al Dawsari (51st) and Nasser Al Dawsari (90+2) sealing their place in the Quarter-finals.

## **Al Rayyan SC (QAT) v Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA)**

**1-3, 0-2 (Al Ahli Saudi FC won 5-1 on aggregate)**

Al Ahli seized control of the Round of 16 tie from the first blow of the whistle, taking the lead in the first leg through Galeno's 30th minute strike.

Riyad Mahrez doubled their advantage four minutes later with Roger Guedes giving Al Rayyan hope with his 71st minute goal.

Feras Al Brikan, however, ensured Al Ahli had a good advantage to take home with his effort in the fifth minute of time added on.

Mahrez stole the show in the return leg, with the Algerian striking in the 77th and 83rd minutes as Al Ahli advanced in emphatic fashion.

## **Shanghai Port FC (CHN) v Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN)**

**0-1, 1-4 (Yokohama F. Marinos won 5-1 on aggregate)**

Yokohama F Marinos took a 1-0 lead into the second leg of their meeting with Shanghai Port after Anderson



Lopes earned the 2023/24 runners-up a narrow-but-deserved victory.

Lopes struck in the 30th minute as the Japanese outfit took a step towards progressing to the Quarter-finals for the second season in a row.

That was achieved by an impressive return leg, with their spot all but sealed after Daiyo Tano opened the scoring in the second minute.

Lopes widened their advantage in the 29th minute, with Leonardo pulling one back for Shanghai Port in the 35th.

The Japanese side, however, comfortably booked their Quarter-final ticket through further strikes from Yan Matheus (44th) and Lopes (56th).

## **Buriram United (THA) v Johor Darul Ta'zim (MAS)**

**0-0, 1-0 (Buriram won 1-0 on aggregate)**

Having already met in the League Stage, the first leg ended in yet another stalemate as Buriram United and Johor Darul Ta'zim cancelled each other out.

The second leg proved to be an equally tight affair, with Johor Darul Ta'zim failing to put away their chances despite dominating.

The Malaysian side were made to pay in the 58th minute as Suphanat Muenta struck the only goal of the game as Buriram advanced to the Quarter-finals for the first time since 2013.

## **Vissel Kobe (JPN) v Gwangju FC (KOR)**

**2-0, 0-3 (Gwangju FC won 3-2 on aggregate)**

This Round of 16 tie served up a classic with Japan's Vissel Kobe taking a 2-0 advantage from the first leg through goals from Yuya Osako (20th) and Haruya Ide (29th).

Tournament debutants Gwangju pulled one back through Park Jeong-in the 18th minute of the second leg but try as they did, a second goal that would have drawn them level on aggregate remained elusive.

That, however, changed in the 85th minute as Jasir Asani yet again proved he is a player for the big moments, with the Albanian forcing the tie into extra-time with his strike.

The striker wasn't done yet, scoring a spectacular winner with just two minutes remaining as Gwangju deservedly advanced.

## **Shanghai Shenhua FC (CHN) v Kawasaki Frontale (JPN)**

**1-0, 0-4 (Kawasaki Frontale won 4-1 on aggregate)**

A Kota Takai own goal gave Shanghai Shenhua a 1-0 lead after the first leg, but it proved to be not enough as Kawasaki Frontale turned on the power in the return leg.

The Japanese side, who had never progressed beyond the Quarter-finals in their previous appearances in the tournament, drew level on aggregate through Asahi Sasaki's 24th minute effort.

Erison put them firmly in control of the tie with his 64th minute strike and their Quarter-final spot was confirmed with further goals from Tatsuya Ito (68th) and Marcinho (90+1).

# QUARTER-FINALS

## Al Hilal SFC (KSA) 7-0 Gwangju FC (KOR)

Al Hilal SFC showed their strength and depth with seven players getting their names on the scoresheet as the Saudi Arabian powerhouses cruised to a 7-0 victory over Gwangju FC.

Goals from Sergej Milinkovic-Savic, Marcos Leonardo and Salem Al Dawsari gave the four-time champions a healthy lead heading into the break.

Aleksandar Mitrovic, Malcom, Nasser Al Dawsari and Abdullah Al Hamddan added to Al Hilal's haul in the second half.

A lightning start by the side from Saudi Arabia led to Gwangju conceding a corner in the fifth minute after Joao Cancelo's cross into a packed six-yard-box was cleared to safety - but only briefly.

The ensuing corner saw Milinkovic-Savic rise highest to nod Al Dawsari's delivery past the flailing hands of Gwangju keeper Kim Kyeong-min.

Al Hilal's high pressing approach kept causing Gwangju problems with custodian Kim keeping them in the game when he denied Al Dawsari's stinging shot, which was followed by Mitrovic's headed attempt from close range and Milinkovic-Savic's effort from distance.

Gwangju were, however, caught napping in the 25th minute after Malcom's run down the right flank was left unchallenged, allowing the Brazilian to cut the ball back to Leonardo to slam the ball into the bottom right corner.

Al Hilal showed their quality again in the 33rd minute with Leonardo finding captain Al Dawsari, who surged into the area from the left flank to net their third.



Al Hilal ended whatever hopes Gwangju had of a comeback in the 55th minute when Milinkovic-Savic's cross found the unmarked Mitrovic inside the box, with the forward coolly slotting home.

The Saudi Arabian side remained relentless, adding their fifth in the 79th minute after Malcolm latched onto Mitrovic's through pass before shooting past Kim with Nasser Al Dawsari finishing off Mohamed Kanno's assist for their sixth in the 84th minute.

Al Hamddan then made it 7-0 three minutes later from above the box to complete the emphatic win.



## Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA) 3-0 Buriram United (THA)

Al Ahli Saudi FC produced a sparkling display to cruise 3-0 past Buriram United in their Quarter-final.

The Saudi Arabian side turned on the power in the first half, racing to a three-goal lead as they set up a Semi-final encounter with Al Hilal SFC.

Al Ahli made Buriram pay when a mistake from Sasalak Haiprakhon in the fourth minute saw Roberto Firmino gain possession before setting up Riyad Mahrez to drill the ball into the bottom left corner.

Buriram barely had time to regroup as they fell further behind two minutes later after a neat through pass from Ibanez found Galeno, who nutmegged keeper Neil Etheridge to slot the ball into the back of the net.



Buriram thought they had been handed a lifeline when Merih Demiral's foul on Martin Boakye prompted referee Ahmed Al Kaf to point to the spot, but their joy was short-lived as the decision was overturned following a VAR review.

The Thai side had a narrow escape in the 27th minute when Marcelo Taritolay's poor clearance allowed

Galeno to slip the ball through to Firmino, whose effort was foiled by Etheridge.

Clearly missing injured duo Theerathon Bunmathan and Suphanat Mueanta, Buriram conceded a third at the half hour mark with Firmino tapping home Merih Demiral's header with Al Ahli content to sit back and defend their lead in the second half.

## Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN) 1-4 Al Nassr Club (KSA)

Al Nassr Club scored thrice in 11 first half minutes to take their place in the Semi-finals with a 4-1 win over Yokohama F. Marinos 4-1 in their last eight tie.

Jhon Duran netted two with Cristiano Ronaldo and Sadio Mane bagging one each as the Saudi Arabian side advanced to the Semi-finals for the third time in five seasons.

Al Nassr missed a good opportunity in the 22nd minute when Sultan Al Ghannam fed Duran in the box, only for the Colombian to slice his shot wide but the forward redeemed himself five minutes later.

Mane was given space to deliver a cross from the left which led to Thomas Deng miskicking the ball onto the post. The lurking Duran was quick to slot the rebound home.

Buoyed by the goal, Al Nassr pressed harder and doubled their lead in the 31st minute with a surging Otavio laying the ball off for Mane to apply a low finish past keeper Park Il-gyu.

It was one-way traffic with Al Nassr striking again in the 38th minute - Marcelo Brozovic's shot took a wicked deflection off Riku Yamane which custodian Park did well to tip away, but the ball fell kindly for Ronaldo to smash home his eighth goal of the campaign.

Despite the Japanese side making attacking changes at the break, it was Al Nassr who further widened their lead just three minutes into the restart, with Duran slotting home the rebound after Ali Hassan's curling shot was palmed away by Park.

Kota Watanabe narrowed the deficit in the 53rd minute but Al Nassr comfortably saw out the remainder of the tie.



## Kawasaki Frontale (JPN) 3-2 (AET) Al Sadd SC (QAT)

Yasuto Wakizaka's extra time goal earned Japan's Kawasaki Frontale a historic Semi-final berth after they defeated Qatar's Al Sadd SC 3-2 in their Quarter-final.

Having been denied at the last eight stage in three of their previous five appearances on the Continental stage, Frontale showed grit to reach the Semi-finals, setting up a date with Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr Club.

Frontale got off to a fabulous start, taking the lead after only four minutes when Yuki Yamamoto dispossessed Mohamed Camara, before releasing Akihiro Ienaga on the right, whose cross was then swept home by Erison.

Their lead, however, only lasted five minutes as Al Sadd drew level when Akram Afif put Paulo Otavio through with Frontale custodian Louis Yamaguchi failing to handle the Brazilian's shot at his near post.

With both teams opting to play free-flowing football, it was only a matter of time before another goal was scored with Frontale regaining their advantage in the 21st minute when Marcinho ran onto Yamamoto's perfectly weighted pass and lifted the ball over advancing Al Sadd goalkeeper Meeshal Barsham.

Al Sadd injected more urgency into their game after the break and their relentless pressure paid off in the 71st minute when Giovanni sped away from his marker on the right flank and his subsequent cross was stepped over by Hasan Al Haydos, allowing Claudinho the chance to smash home to take the tie into extra time.

The winning goal came in the 98th minute when Guilherme's underhit pass was pounced on by Yusuke Segawa who quickly relayed the ball to Shin Yamada who, in turn, cut back for Wakizaka to strike past Barsham to take Frontale through.

# SEMI-FINALS

## Al Hilal SFC 1-3 Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA)

Al Ahli Saudi FC were at their best as they advanced to the Final with a well-deserved 3-1 win against domestic rivals Al Hilal SFC.

With both sides chasing continental glory, the match got off to a tense start with yellow cards for Al Ahli's Ezgjan Alioksi and Ali Majrashi in the opening five minutes.

The Jeddah-based club, however, were undaunted by the early cautions and their pressure paid off in the ninth minute.

Roger Ibanez played the ball over the Al Hilal defence and a determined Galeno kept it in play, with his cutback finding Roberto Firmino who side-footed the ball home.

Al Ahli went two up in the 27th minute, Riyad Mahrez brilliantly picked up Ivan Toney's run with the England forward then evading on-rushing Al Hilal goalkeeper Yassine Bounou to slide the ball into the net.

Al Hilal looked to bounce back and captain Salem Al Dawsari narrowed the deficit in the 42nd minute, pouncing on a poor touch by Franck Kessie to blast home his 10th goal of the campaign.

Al Hilal's hopes of a comeback, however, suffered a massive blow in the 59th minute after Senegalese international Kalidou Koulibaly picked up a second yellow card.

Al Ahli capitalised on their numerical advantage and Feras Al Brikan came off the bench to score their third in time added on as Al Ahli moved within one match of lifting the trophy for the first time.



## Al Nassr Club (KSA) 2-3 Kawasaki Frontale (JPN)

Kawasaki Frontale clinched a well-deserved spot in the Final with a 3-2 win against Al Nassr Club.

Japan's Frontale played brilliant counter attacking football to advance to the Final for the first time, having previously not even featured in the Semi-finals.

Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr got off to a fast start, with Frontale custodian Louis Yamaguchi forced into a sprawling save to deny Jhon Duran's effort from inside the area in the opening seconds.

The Japanese side responded in the sixth minute when Marcelo Brozovic was outmuscled by Marcinho, who surged into the box but pulled his effort wide.



Frontale, however, found themselves ahead four minutes later when a headed clearance fell invitingly for Tatsuya Ito, who struck a wonderful volley from just above the box into the top left corner.

Al Nassr looked to bounce back and had a chance in the 16th minute with Sadio Mane on the end of a fast break, only for the Senegalese forward to pull his effort wide from inside the area while Cristiano Ronaldo tried his luck from distance.



The Saudi Pro League side drew level with their next attack, with Mane weaving his way through before unleashing a shot, with the ball hitting Yuichi Maruyama and sailing past the diving Yamaguchi.

With the wind in their sails, Al Nassr continued pressing with Ronaldo seeing his header in the 33rd minute bouncing off the woodwork.

Al Nassr paid a heavy price for the miss, with Frontale retaking the lead in the 41st minute through 20-year-old Yuto Ozeki who struck after Tatsuya Ito's initial effort had been blocked by Al Nassr keeper Bento.

Al Nassr continued to dominate the ball after the break, but it was Frontale who widened their advantage in the 76th minute after the surging Erison sprinted past Aymeric Laporte down the byline before cutting back to Akihiro Ienaga for a simple finish.

Aiman Yahya reduced the deficit in the 87th minute and Al Nassr had their fans at the edge of their seats with Ronaldo having three chances in the closing moments, but Frontale thwarted them all to take their place in the Final.



# FINAL

## Al Ahli Saudi FC (KSA) 2-0 Kawasaki Frontale (JPN)

First half strikes from Galeno and Franck Kessie steered Al Ahli Saudi FC to a 2-0 win over Kawasaki Frontale in the Final of the AFC Champions League Elite™ Finals Jeddah 2025.

It was a richly deserved triumph, with the side from Saudi Arabia completing their campaign with an astonishing 12 wins and one draw to end their long wait for the continental title, having twice emerged runners-up.

With their fans spurring them on, Al Ahli settled quickly and had a close look at goal in the fifth

minute with Ivan Toney forcing Louis Yamaguchi into a sprawling save before the Frontale custodian made himself big to deny Ziyad Al Johani from point-blank range.

Frontale were far from being overawed and just as they had against Al Nassr Club in the Semi-finals, looked to hit on the counter.

One such move in the 11th minute saw Yuki Yamamoto setting up the surging Marcinho, who wriggled his way into the box before unleashing a shot which forced goalkeeper Eduardo Mendy into action.

Al Ahli, however, continued to hold the upper hand and Frontale were let off the hook in the 18th minute after the Saudi Arabian side's quick transition left



the Japanese club trailing in their wake, but Ibanez couldn't get enough curl on the ball as it sailed wide of the right post.

With Frontale continuing to frustrate them, Al Ahli needed a moment of magic to open the scoring, and it came in the 35th minute through Galeno, with the Brazilian collecting Roberto Firmino's pass before unleashing a looping strike from just outside the box over a despairing Yamaguchi.

It didn't take Al Ahli long to double their advantage as they caught Frontale out with a counter-attacking move with Firmino assisting again by delivering a pinpoint cross for Kessie to nod home from close range.

With the onus on Frontale to chase the game, Al Ahli were content to sit back and soak up the Japanese side's pressure after the break.

Frontale, however, had to wait till the 57th minute for a sight on goal with Yasuto Wakizaka floating the ball into the box but Sai van Wermeskerken failed to get his header on target.

Substitute Tatsuya Ito pulled his effort wide from just above the box in the 76th minute, before squandering another chance from inside the box moments later as Al Ahli saw out the remainder of the Final to lift the coveted trophy for the first time.



Firmino, who had been at the forefront of their campaign all season long, was named the Most Valuable Player while Mendy received the Best Goalkeeper award.

Al Hilal captain Salem Al Dawsari won the Top Goalscorer award, having netted 10 goals as his side advanced to the Semi-finals.

A man in a black polo shirt is the central focus, smiling and looking towards the camera. He has a watch on his left wrist and his hands are clasped in front of him. The background is a large, brightly lit stadium filled with spectators, many wearing green. Other people in various colored shirts (green, red, orange) are visible on the pitch. The overall atmosphere is one of celebration and success.

# *WINNING COACH*

# QUALITIES AND PERSONALITIES

"It's nice to give something back to the supporters," said Matthias Jaissle after the 2-0 victory over Kawasaki Frontale. It was a significant comment, bearing in mind that less than four months earlier, media hints at an imminent dismissal had prompted banner-waving fans to express their support for the head coach at the training ground. The club rapidly confirmed his continuity. It was not the only delicate moment during a campaign he described as "a crazy journey". After starting the season with three wins from nine games, Jaissle realised that a signing was needed to give the team greater balance in attack. But the arrival of left winger Galeno from FC Porto passed the German technician the hot potato of explaining to Roberto Firmino that, to make room for the newcomer, he would no longer be registered to play in the Saudi Pro League. Two nice episodes to write into the biography of a young coach who, at the age of 37, has already woven a rich texture of experience.

An early start in coaching interlocked with an early retirement from a playing career at centre-back that had been kick-started in the youth teams at VfB Stuttgart and ended with seven seasons at TSG 1899 Hoffenheim during a period when the club gained promotion and worked hard to establish itself in the Bundesliga. One of his colleagues in the dressing-room was Roberto Firmino.

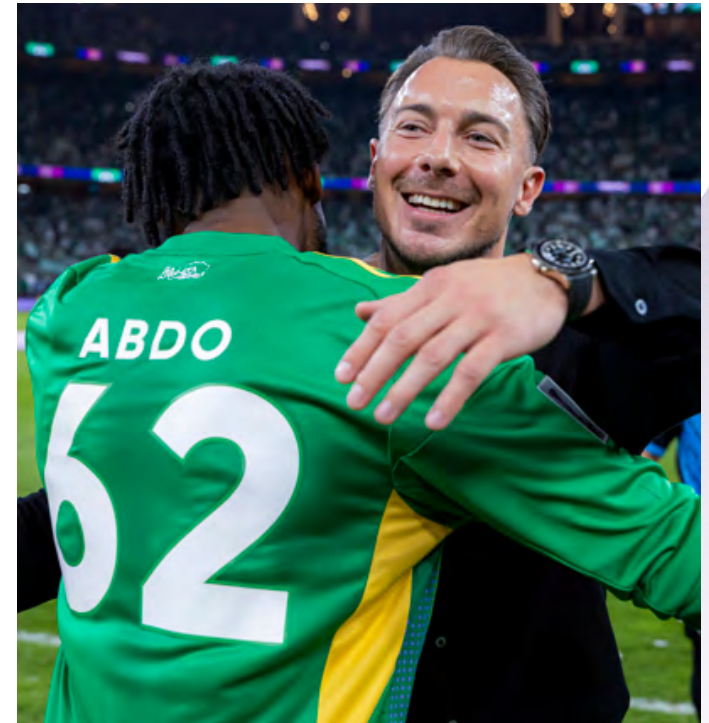
Jaissle's coaching career officially started two days before his 29th birthday, when it was confirmed that he would take the role of assistant coach to his compatriot Alexander Zorniger at Brøndby IF in Denmark. When he left, in the summer of 2019, he stepped into youth development as head coach of



//  
*It's nice to give something back to the supporters*  
//

the U18 academy team at RB Salzburg in Austria before, 18 months later, reverting to the senior game as head coach of second-tier club FC Liefering. Then, returning to RB Salzburg to take over the first team, he achieved a league and cup double in his first season and made history by taking the Austrian club into the knockout rounds of the UEFA Champions League. Another league title in 2023 prompted Al Ahli to recruit the technician who, in a learning curve spanning barely eight years, had sampled coaching at various levels.

The rest, as they say, is history. The run to the club's first AFC title was a triumphal march of 12 victories and one draw with 34 goals scored and 10 conceded. "I'm so proud of the players," Jaissle said after the Final. "Proud of what they did, how they performed and how they handled the journey in this



competition.” At the final tournament in Jeddah, the AFC Technical Observers had words of praise for a team which “had balance and was good at keeping its shape as a unit. It was a good blend of qualities and personalities. There was flair in the wide areas and, with Firmino pulling the strings, they had great depth in attack”.

Playing the Final on home soil was a double-edged sword. On one side, the support could be a boost. On the other side, it could generate intense pressure. “The opponents caused us difficulties,” Jaissle admitted afterwards. “They were well organised and in such a match there’s a lot of pressure. You need to deal with it. It’s never easy. I was proud of how the players handled it. They showed great personality. In the second half we focused on defending with the aim of keeping a clean sheet. And we managed to do it.”

The Final naturally generated the biggest headlines. But, for many, the finest achievement was the victory over Al Hilal in the Semi-final. The Technical Observers noted that Al Ahli’s strategy disarmed the opponent’s midfield. “These games are usually decided by details,” Jaissle commented. “There are strengths and weaknesses in every team. We tried to identify the best ways to exploit them – and they worked perfectly. We knew it was going to be a hard fight and I was happy with the way we set about it. Everybody performed in a brilliant way and I felt we totally deserved the win.”

“Al Ahli won the match tactically and emotionally,” the Technical Observers remarked. “It was very clever coaching.”





# *TECHNICAL TOPICS*



# *QUALITY, COMPACTNESS AND COMPOSURE*

In the eyes of the Technical Observers, those three virtues could be attached to the two teams who reached the first final of the AFC Champions League Elite™. The new format challenged coaches to deal with league and cup scenarios in a blend of home games, away fixtures, home-and-away knockout ties and matches disputed at a centralised venue. The champions, Al Ahli Saudi FC, successfully negotiated the twists and turns of this pathway, winning all but one of their 13 encounters. Runners-up Kawasaki Frontale, after losing two of their first three games in the League Stage, were beaten only once more on their road to the Final in Jeddah. Consistency across the diverse scenarios created by the new format could be added to the list of ingredients for success.

## **Functional units**

The Technical Observers in Jeddah drew on their extensive experience to reflect that “in the early days of the AFC Champions League™, many matches were marked by teams retreating into deep defensive blocks, relying on quick counters or foreign strikers to decide the outcome. However, since around 2019, higher-intensity pressing football has steadily moved towards the centre-stage, with Al Hilal SFC as one of the stand-out forces”. Their appreciation was endorsed by the top eight in Jeddah, where Al Hilal were not the only stand-out force. Silver-medallists Kawasaki Frontale were described as “a tenacious co-operative unit moving as a block up and down the pitch and from side to side. They emphasised that the key to collective high pressing is to have support in numbers from a compact high block. They were experts at ‘making the pitch smaller’”.

The intention to press high was a common denominator among the top teams. Even though an adverse 7-0 scoreline might suggest otherwise, even Gwangju FC bravely launched into their high-pressing game against Al Hilal – only to run into an opponent with enough technical ability and positional awareness to play out of tight situations.



The observers noted that, after 15 minutes or so, hesitation and lack of confidence began to creep into the Korea Republic side's pressing, allowing Al Hilal to dictate the flow of the game and build through the thirds with a degree of comfort. Two of Al Hilal's seven goals resulted directly from high regains via pressing. The season's overall statistics reveal that 13 goals were derived from winning the ball in advanced areas – with two prime examples: firstly, Kawasaki Frontale's fourth in the Round of 16 win against Shanghai Shenhua, when Yusuke Segawa immediately delivered the ball for Marcinho to seal victory; and the high regain followed by a pass by Roberto Firmino that allowed Riyad Mahrez to put Al Ahli 1-0 ahead after barely four minutes of the Quarter-final against Buriram United.

The efficiency of high pressing can be gauged by averages of Passes Permitted per Defensive Action (PPDA; i.e. the number of passes played by the opposition before possession is regained). In the PPDA ranking, Kawasaki Frontale emerge in first place with an average of 8.3 followed by Al Hilal with 9.2. Al Ahli's average was lowered to 11.4 by a more conservative approach after the half-time interval and Al Nassr SC's deeper block was illustrated by a figure of 14.7.

#### Living with pressure

The legendary tennis player and serial title-winner Billie Jean King always insisted "pressure is a privilege". And, while the aggressive high press has been moving towards centre-stage, teams have inevitably been working on finding the antidote. The two finalists

illustrated the value of compactness in possession and out of possession, allied with enough proficiency in their combination play to deal with aggressive pressure by opponents. Al Ahli started the final with trademark high pressing; Kawasaki Frontale, responding with composed, unfazed combinations in tight areas, managed to play out of their defensive third – to the extent that, in the second half, the champions focused on defending their two-goal advantage and expended less energy on collective high pressing.

Al Hilal, on the other hand, had struggled to deal with close individual marking on their key midfielders during the Semi-final against Al Ahli (Franck Kessie on Sergej Milinkovic-Savic; Ziyad Al Johani on Marcos Leonardo; and Roberto Firmino picking up Ruben Neves). The result was a loss of compactness, with Al Hilal resorting to the long ball towards striker Aleksandar Mitrovic while the two wingers became disengaged. The observers recalled frequent images of a lone Al Hilal midfield scurrying to cover extensive spaces between disconnected lines.



## The counter-offensive

In previous seasons, changes of format (among them a pandemic-induced switch to single matches at neutral venues) had contributed to fluctuations in the number of successes from counterattacking – from a pre-pandemic level of 19% of open-play goals in 2019 to 9% in 2021, followed by seasons of stability at 15%. The inaugural AFC Champions League Elite™, however, suggested strongly that the ability to counterattack at speed is now an essential item in the top teams' tool kits. One in five of the season's open-play goals could be directly attributable to fast breaks. The exact figures are 56 goals – 21% of the total.



At the same time, the success rate from direct attacking confirmed that, in general, possession is no longer an obsession. Whereas three Quarter-finals were won by the team with a greater share of the ball, the last three matches reversed the trend. Al Ahli had 46% of possession against Al Hilal and 48% in the Final. Kawasaki Frontale, after 33.5% against Al Sadd, had 26% in the Semi-final v Al Nassr. In other words, the only game where they dominated possession was the one they lost. "The strength of Al Ahli lies in their ability to vary the rhythm of the game", technical observer Nasser Larguet commented, "alternating between patient possession and lightning-fast accelerations. The team shows tactical intelligence and self-control."

Going back to the topic of counterattacking, collective counters after regains in midfield had been the most prolific variation on the theme in the 2023/24 season. During the 2024/25 competition, pride of place veered away to classic breaks from deep positions. If pictures speak louder than words, a compilation of video clips could be useful components in coach education courses – starting with the home game against Ulsan HD FC in which three of Yokohama Marinos' goals came from fast breaks while the visitors were backpedalling. Or the third goal in the Japanese team's 4-0 win against Central Coast Mariners in Australia, when a throw by the goalkeeper triggered the back-to-front counterattack.

The sequence could continue with two moves by Kawasaki Frontale. Firstly, a classic break when the silver-medallists beat the high press by Shanghai Port, countered at speed on the left and cut the ball back for Sai van Wermeskeren to put them 3-0 up before half-time. Secondly, the break from a deep block which allowed Soma Kanda to seal a 3-0 away win against Buriram United. Among the 21 goals derived from classic counterattacking, the prime examples were provided by teams from the East.

The counter-argument from the West could be found in the chapter dedicated to collective counterattacks after regains in midfield. Salem Al Dawsari completed his hat-trick and sealed Al Hilal's 5-4 win in Al Ain by rounding off a fast break with a top-class shot into the top corner of the net. (It has to be said that he had earlier latched on to a through pass to score from a classic counter timed at 45+3 in the same game.) Al Wasl's winner away to Al Gharafa came after a regain launched a move on the left and a low cross for Isaac Success to score in added-time. And there were a couple of goals that could be described as a cross between a classic and a solo counterattack: the long ball from a right-back position by Cristo Gonzalez that set off Akram Afif on a solo run that earned Al Sadd's opening goal in the 2-1 away win against Al Nassr; or the solo run from his own half and the long-range

finish that allowed Matias Vargas to complete his hat-trick in Shanghai Port's 3-1 victory over Ulsan Hyundai. The season delivered a clear reminder that, while the emphasis is so often on a patient build-up through the thirds, the top teams also seize opportunities for the fast break before opponents can engage defensive shapes and mechanisms.

## Countering and counteracting

Just as the trend towards high pressing has prompted research into antidotes, the success rate from counterattacking inevitably raises questions about the measures that can be taken to counteract it. The observers pointed out that both finalists excelled at pre-empting fast breaks by putting immediate pressure on the ball-carrier. Other top teams opted for an efficient 'resting defence' based on keeping a sufficient number of players behind the ball to avoid over-committing to attack. There was, it has to be said, use of the tactical foul to produce a break in play and opportunity to re-group, while some teams deployed front players to disturb attempts at rapid distribution by goalkeepers or, at least, position themselves in a manner that directed the opposition's build-up play into certain (predictable) channels. Another major factor was the avoidance of square passing in midfield areas – a high-risk element which often provides a platform for interceptions and immediate collective counters.



## Make no mistake!

Mistakes happened but many of them were provoked. That was the heading on one page of the Observers' notebooks. They pointed out that one of the salient features to emerge from the final tournament was the high cost of mistakes at the top level of the game. Asked to expand on their opinion, they pointed to the third and decisive goal by Kawasaki Frontale against Al Sadd, when the Japanese team committed players, during extra-time, to seemingly futile pressure on an opponent near the corner flag on their right wing. But the Al Sadd player gave the ball away with a sloppy pass, resulting in a low cross into a penalty area where the attackers were in a majority. "Several players had moved up into goalscoring positions," the observers noted, "and the mistake was ruthlessly exploited." A similarly poor pass, incidentally, had previously cost Al Sadd the opening goal in their 1-1 away draw against Al Wasl. The observers also cited the goalkeeping error which gave Shanghai Port their second goal in the 3-1 win against Ulsan HD and Al Nassr's crucial opening goal in the Quarter-final against Yokohama Marinos, when a defender mistimed his clearance, slicing it against a post and presenting Jhon Duran with an unmissable opportunity. "Our mistakes when losing possession were exploited by the individual quality of our opponents," rued skipper Ken Matsubara afterwards.

Ironically, Kawasaki Frontale, having played their way effectively out of Al Ahli's high press during the opening exchanges of the final, were severely punished for the first loss of possession in their defensive third, with the regain in the right-back area allowing Roberto Firmino to set up Galeno for his long-range shot into the top corner. The final tournament, the observers remarked, "showed that the top teams made constant efforts to provoke mistakes and made full use of even the smallest errors".

## Within striking distance

Galeno's exquisite right-footed shot from the left highlighted the trend towards the use of scheming

individuals capable of making the difference via flair on the flanks – the final offering a prime example with Kawasaki Frontale's Marcinho and Al Ahli's Riyad Mahrez. Galeno's inside run from the left to tee up the ball on his stronger right foot was the last of the season's 50 goals that heralded a renaissance of the long-range shot. As the goalscoring analysis section of this review points out, the total represented 18% of open-play goals – the highest percentage registered in just over a decade of AFC technical reports. Al Hilal exploited long-range shooting more than any other team with seven successes, while Al Ahli, Gwangju and Yokohama Marinos accounted for four apiece.



The observers, however, stressed that the value of shooting from distance is not to be measured solely by the number of times the ball hits the net but can also be a damaging weapon for teams challenged to break down deep defensive blocks – in terms of luring defenders out of the back line and opening up spaces for combination play through the central area of the attacking third. Although long-range shooting can produce goals glamorous enough to feature in Best Goals rankings, it can also pay less glamorous but equally handsome dividends by generating scenes of chaos in the box, such as rebounds, deflections, corner kicks or goalkeepers caught unsuspected – not to mention the bonus of animating the crowd and

changing the atmosphere in the stadium. The take-away message from the season was that whereas analysts might indicate that most goals are scored from a central area inside the penalty area, the fact that shots from outside the box produced almost as many goals as the through pass suggests that training-ground work on long-distance shooting is not a waste of time.

## Ringmasters and magicians

"The final tournament featured a number of star players who, individually, were capable of making the difference but who were also playing for the team," the Technical Observers commented. "There were different types of players: Roberto Firmino and Riyad Mahrez of Al Ahli; Sadio Mane and Cristiano Ronaldo of Al Nassr; Salem Al Dawsari of Al Hilal; Akram Afif of Al Sadd; Marcinho and Tatsuya Ito of Kawasaki Frontale – to name but a few. The ability to run with the ball, to beat an opponent in 1v1 situations and to have the touch, know-how and inventiveness to produce clever combinations in the attacking third of the pitch were hallmarks of these creative wizards."

And then there were influential tactical leaders who played a part in unifying their individual strengths. In other words, there were star performers and ringmasters who organised the circus: Franck Kessie of Al Ahli; Rubén Neves and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic of Al Hilal; Marcelo Brozovic of Al Nassr; or Yuki Yamamoto of Kawasaki Frontale. The fact that all but the two Japanese players are from other Confederations raised the question of how to develop the magicians and ringmasters of the future – a topic which features in the Talking Points section of this review.

And then there were players ready to provide the surprise element. Such as the Al Ahli right-back Ali Majrashi, who caught the eye during the Final by suddenly appearing on the left of the Kawasaki Frontale penalty area. Or the champions' swashbuckling centre-back Roger Ibanez who, in the Semi-final against Al Hilal, made an impact by delivering the long pass to

the left which triggered the opening goal and then made the powerful upfield run into the attacking third, truncated by the tackle from Kalidou Koulibaly which entailed a red card. Ibanez demonstrated that the surprise element is not exclusive property of full-backs and wing-backs.

### The emotions also play

It could be an imaginary case study at a coach education course. You are the head coach. You and your team are making a first appearance in the final of an AFC competition. The match is being played in the opposing team's stadium where all but a handful of a 58,000 crowd are passionate in their support for the home team. How do you prepare your players to deal with this scenario? For Shigetoshi Hasebe, it was reality rather than imagination. On the other bench in Jeddah, Matthias Jaissle was also making his debut. How best to make sure that the players were not infected by the euphoria in the stands?

The Observers were impressed by the way the two coaches responded to the grand occasion by displaying authority and composure, calmly offering guidance to their players without histrionics – and inviting debate about the extent to which the coach's behaviour affects the attitudes of his players. Hasebe had good reason to feel proud of his team after the narrow Semi-final victory over Al Nassr who had come back to 2-3 in the 87th minute. "Kawasaki showed great emotional power," the observers commented, "staying focused during a series of dangerous moments and right through to the final whistle. This was exemplified by the final move of the game when Cristiano Ronaldo broke free only for the goalkeeper and substitute defender to throw themselves into the path of the shot. This was nothing to do with technique or tactics. This was about willpower and emotions." The Final between teams from East and West provoked reflections on the different cultures within the AFC territories, ranging from over-excitement and losses of concentration to extreme levels of emotional containment. The impact on the outcomes of top-



level matches raises questions about whether the emotional aspects of playing and coaching deserve to have greater presence in preparations among clubs and national teams and carry greater weight in Coach Education programmes.

In Jeddah, the debating point was whether emotional components had been decisive at a tournament

where, as Nasser Larguet put it: "Al Ahli, Al Hilal, Kawasaki Frontale and Al Nassr represented the elite of Asian club football, each with their distinctive strengths and tactical approaches and with playing philosophies that created interesting clashes of style. And the two favourites were not in the final of a tournament which once again demonstrated the beauty and variety of football."



# GOALSCORING ANALYSIS

# GOALSCORING: A 360° VISION

At first sight, a figure of 360 goals looks alarming. It is 108 lower than the total in the previous season. But it serves as a warning that the change of format slashed the number of fixtures from 149 to 118, thereby making numerical comparisons meaningless. The only reliable indicators are averages and percentages. So, 3.05 goals per game sits in a comfortable position midway between the 3.14 in 2023/24 and the 2.95 in 2022. During the newly-introduced League Stage, there were seven drawn games in the East and 14 in the West. Eleven away wins in the East, 16 in the West. In the East, 156 goals hit the net (including the 26 in games involving Shandong Taishan) while almost half of the 136 goals in the West – 63 to be precise – were scored by the three teams from Saudi Arabia who topped the final table.

In the Knockout Stage, the average was deflated by a total of 37 goals in the home-and-away ties in the Round of 16 but then re-inflated by 20 in the single-match Quarter-finals and nine in the two Semi-finals. The season's top scorers were Al Hilal (38), champions Al Ahli Saudi (34), Yokohama Marinos (29), Kawasaki Frontale (27) and Al Nassr (26). Those five teams delivered 43% of the goals: none of the others contributed more than 20.

Goalscoring efficiency was pretty much in line with the previous season. A tally of 3,023 goal attempts (at 25.6 per game) bettered the 2023/24 figure by a few decimal points while the 1,070 that were on target, replicated the accuracy ratio of 35%. A success rate of one goal per 8.4 attempts compared slightly unfavourably with the 8.1 in 2023/24. Likewise, the efficiency rate in terms of beating the goalkeeper.



Of the on-target finishes, one in 2.97 hit the net, compared with 2.87 in the previous season.

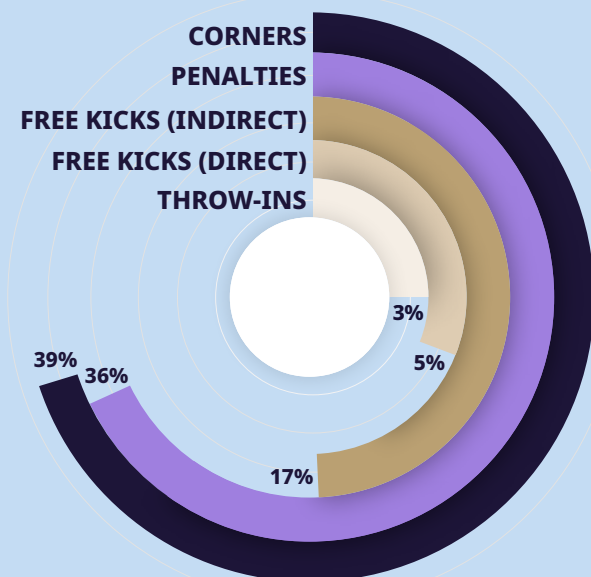
The goalscoring chart breaks down the season's 360 goals into 14 set-play and open-play categories.

## Set Plays

Dead-ball scenarios generated 25% of the competition's goals – signifying a recovery from the eye-catching low of 21% in the previous season. But it was still significantly lower than the 31% registered in national team football at the most recent AFC Asian Cup™ in Qatar. The pattern within the set-play categories, however, differed substantially from the parameters of the previous season when, for example, penalty kicks had accounted for 46% of



## How the goals were scored (Set plays)



the dead-ball goals. During the 2024/25 campaign, the percentage dropped to 36%, re-aligning with the 35% in 2022.

This allowed corner kicks to take over as the most productive set-play category. They supplied 39% of the total with a success ratio of 1:32 that represented an improvement on the 1:37 in the previous season. There was widespread use of the classic corner-header formula (17 successes), such as the only goal of the game when Al Wasl travelled to Tashkent on the opening day. A corner on the right allowed Soufiane Bouftini to win the match with a conclusive header. The right-footed delivery bucked the general trend towards inswinging corners. Al Ahli scored four of their goals from corners, among them the right-footed delivery from the left by Gabri Veiga which crept directly into the net at the near post to put his side 1-0 ahead in the away game against Al Rayyan.

One of the features of the 2023/24 season had been the barely credible statistic of two successes from indirect free kicks in 149 matches. This category enjoyed a revival in 2024/25 when 15 goals represented – despite the reduction in the number of games – the best return since 2018. Vissel Kobe exploited this speciality more than any other team, using inswinging deliveries to create four goals, such as the left-footed supply from the right that allowed Yuya Osako to round off a 4-0 victory over Shanghai Port with a one-touch finish. A spectacular example was also provided by Akram Afif who clinched Al Sadd's 3-1 Round of 16 win against Al Wasl from long range after a free kick had been played back to him. One of the curious footnotes in this chapter is that the total included two incidents where the goalkeeper handled back-passes. Both were touched off and

blasted into the net, with Han Chan-hee opening the scoring for Pohang Steelers against Vissel Kobe and Riyad Mahrez putting Al Ahli 2-0 ahead in the away leg of their Round of 16 tie against Al Rayyan.

By contrast, the number of goals from direct free kicks – a topic frequently addressed in AFC technical reports – were again conspicuous by their rarity. Of the four successes in 118 games, two were excellent left-footed strikes: Johor Darul Ta'zim's third goal against Shanghai Shenhua scored by Juan Muniz; and the shot by Jun Amano into the top corner of the Central Coast Mariners' net that clinched Yokohama Marinos' 4-0 away victory. Teams from the West reaped a dividend of zero from direct free kicks – raising once again questions about training-ground work on this speciality.



Al Ain paid a price for lapses of concentration at opposition throw-ins. The defending champions allowed a throw by Adam Bareiro to reach Roger Guedes, who clinched a 2-1 away win for Al Rayyan. And another long throw from the right by Ameer Sabah set up the opening goal in Al Shorta's 2-0 home win against the title-holders. The other success, by the way, was the Vahid Amiri throw that set up the Persepolis goal in the 1-1 home draw with Al Gharafa.

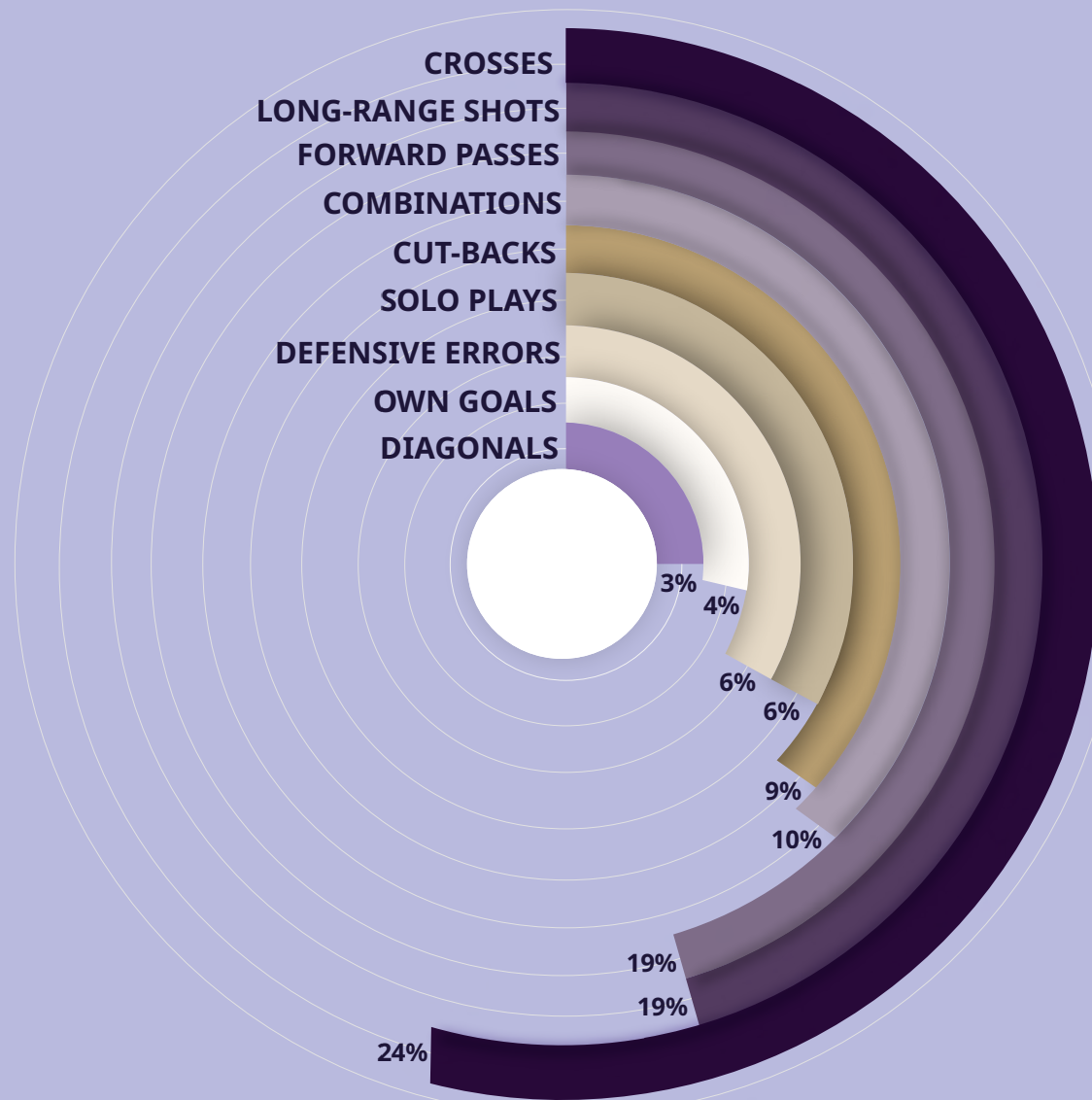
The bottom line is that the last two examples were culled from a list of 31 matches (26% of the fixture list) where the opening goal was derived from a set play.

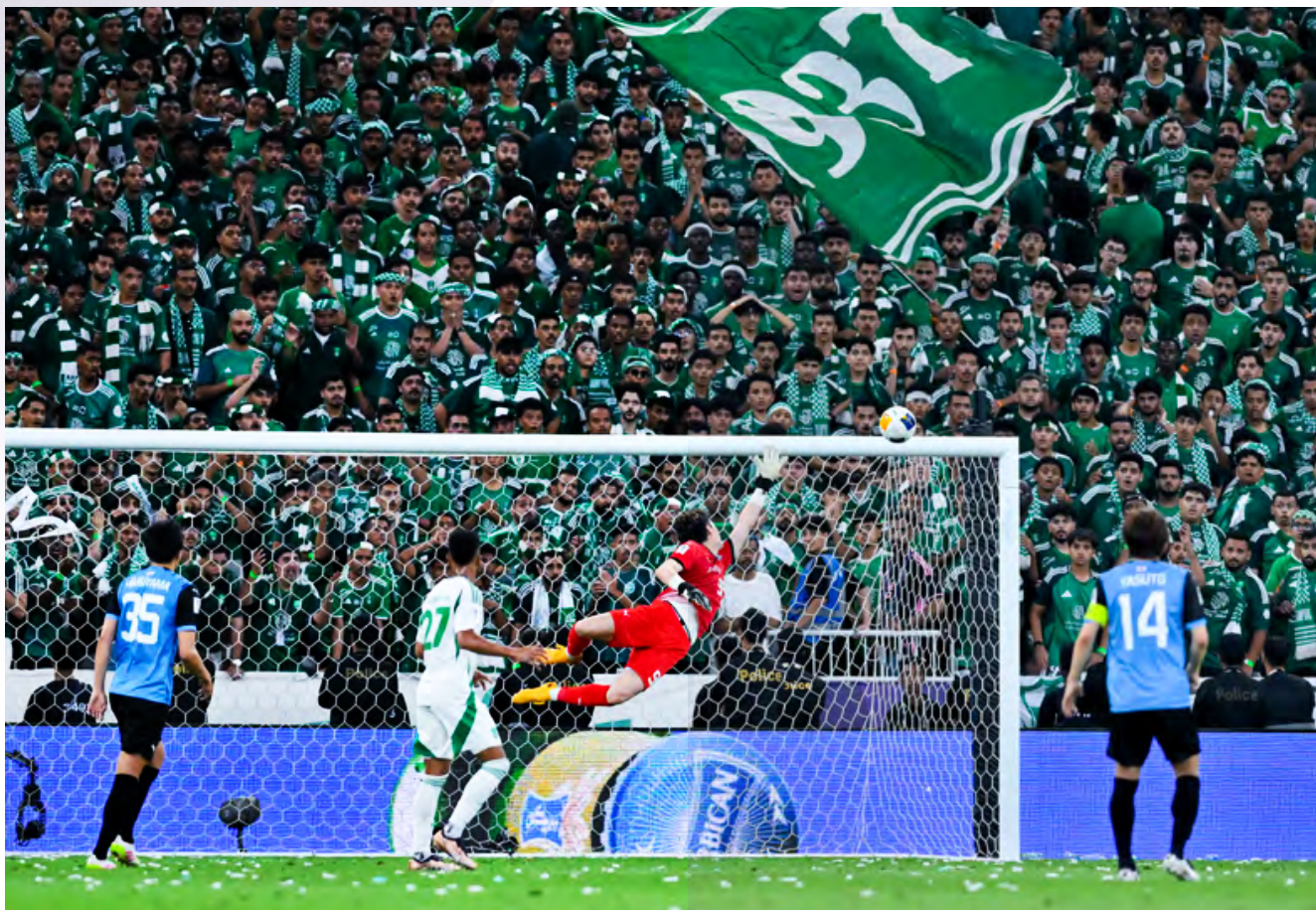
### Open Play

The number of goals scored in open play was, to note an item of trivia, exactly 100 lower than in 2023/24. But the misleading number conceals a degree of consistency blended with nuances. In line with a long-standing tradition, the wide areas provided the most productive pathway to the net. Crosses accounted for 24% of the open-play total while wing play in general (including cut-backs and diagonals) generated 36%. These figures can be compared to 26% and 38% respectively during the previous season.

The two finalists illustrated different approaches to wing play. No fewer than 13 of Kawasaki Frontale's 27 goals originated in the wide areas (eight crosses, four cut-backs and one diagonal). By contrast, nine of Al Ahli's 34 successes stemmed from the flanks. Four of them were diagonals. Crosses provided three goals and cut-backs two. The brilliant cross by Roberto Firmino that allowed Franck Kessie to head the champions 2-0 up in the Final was delivered from just inside the penalty box rather than out near the touchline. And so was the cut-back by Galeno that allowed Firmino to sweep in the opening goal in the Semi-final against Al Hilal. Vissel Kobe's haul of six goals from crosses included the brace which

### How the goals were scored (Open play)





gave them a 2-0 win against Gwangju in the home leg of their Round of 16 tie. And, of course, Al Nassr capitalised on the leaping ability of Cristiano Ronaldo, as exemplified by his hanging-in-the-air header that earned the third goal in the 4-0 win against Al Wasl.

The diversity of Al Ahli's attacking play was reflected by nine goals derived from through passes and three from combination moves in central areas. Ditto Al Nassr, who created seven goals via forward passes and four from combination play – one of them the neat move that permitted Cristiano Ronaldo to seal the 2-1 win against Al Rayyan with a first-time left-footed finish. With Al Nassr on the receiving end, Yokohama Marinos' consolation goal in the Quarter-final rewarded a fluent four-man combination.

After years of relative drought in terms of goals from combination play, it was the origin of 10% of the open-play goals in 2024/25 – up from 8% in the previous season. Yokohama Marinos (with six goals), Al Hilal (five), Al Nassr (four) along with Al Ahli and Kawasaki Frontale (three each) jointly accounted for 21 of the 28 successes. In other words, Japan and Saudi Arabia led the field. On the other hand, the remaining 19 teams shared seven goals.

While the dividend from forward passing was falling from 25% of open-play goals in the previous season to 19% in 2024/25, long-range shooting was moving in the opposite direction, climbing from 11% to 18% of open-play goals. The fact that this is the highest percentage recorded in the 11-season existence of AFC Technical Reports on the premier club competition means that the topic is further mentioned in the Technical Topics section of this review.

# SET PLAY



RANKING	PLAYER'S NO.	PLAYER'S NAME	MATCH	TIME	TYPE
1	20	Jun Amano	Central Coast Mariners FC vs <b>Yokohama F. Marinos</b> (Matchday 6 of 8)	70'	Direct Free Kick
2	20	Juan Muniz	<b>Johor Darul Ta'zim F.C.</b> vs Shanghai Shenhua F.C. (Matchday 2 of 8)	79'	Direct Free Kick
3	22	Sergej Milinkovic-Savic	<b>Al Hilal SFC</b> vs Gwangju FC (Quarter-Final)	6'	Corner
4	3	Farshad Faraji	<b>Persepolis F.C.</b> vs Al-Gharafa SC (Matchday 4 of 8)	53'	Throw-in
5	3	Roger Ibanez	Al Wasl F.C. vs <b>Al-Ahli Saudi FC</b> (Matchday 2 of 8)	38'	Corner
6	10	Roger Guedes	Al Ain FC vs <b>Al-Rayyan SC</b> (Matchday 7 of 8)	75'	Throw-in
7	99	Ivan Toney	Al Ain FC vs <b>Al-Ahli Saudi FC</b> (Matchday 5 of 8)	70'	Indirect Free Kick
8	7	Jasir Asani	<b>Gwangju FC</b> vs Shenhua F.C. (Matchday 5 of 8)	58'	Short Corner
9	10	Yuya Osako	<b>Vissel Kobe</b> vs Shanghai Port F.C. (Matchday 7 of 8)	81'	Indirect Free Kick
10	33	Kang Min-woo	Shanghai Shenhua F.C. vs <b>Ulsan HD FC</b> (Matchday 6 of 8)	66'	Corner

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VIDEOS



# OPEN PLAY

RANKING	PLAYER'S NO.	PLAYER'S NAME	MATCH	TIME	TYPE
1	13	Galeno	<b>Al-Ahli Saudi FC</b> vs Kawasaki Frontale (Final)	35'	Long-Range Shot
2	29	Salem Al Dawsari	<b>Al Hilal SFC</b> vs Persepolis F.C. (Matchday 7 of 8)	45+1'	Long-Range Shot
3	84	Akram Afif	<b>Al Sadd SC</b> vs Al-Ahli Saudi FC (Matchday 7 of 8)	1'	Long-Range Shot
4	29	Salem Al Dawsari	Al Ain FC vs <b>Al Hilal SFC</b> (Matchday 3 of 8)	75'	Long-Range Shot
5	88	Hamad Al Yami	<b>Al Hilal SFC</b> vs Pakhtakor FC (Round of 16 - Leg 2 of 2)	30'	Cross
6	10	Roberto Firmino	<b>Al-Ahli Saudi FC</b> vs Al Sadd SC (Matchday 7 of 8)	10'	Cross
7	7	Jasir Asani	<b>Gwangju FC</b> vs Vissel Kobe (Round of 16 - Leg 2 of 2)	118'	Long-Range Shot
8	7	Cristiano Ronaldo	<b>Al-Nassr FC</b> vs Al-Rayyan SC (Matchday 2 of 8)	76'	Through Pass
9	10	Matias Vargas	Ulsan HD FC vs <b>Shanghai Port F.C.</b> (Matchday 5 of 8)	83'	Solo
10	7	Cristiano Ronaldo	<b>Al-Nassr FC</b> vs Al Wasl F.C. (Matchday 7 of 8)	78'	Cross

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# TALKING POINTS

## Finding the magic?

It would be a good question to throw on the table at a coach education course: Apart from appearing in the Knockout Stage of the AFC Champions League Elite™, what do the following players have in common? Akram Afif, Salem Al Dawsari, Cristiano Ronaldo, Sadio Mane, Marcinho, Malcom, Roberto Firmino, Matheus, Galeno, Anderson Lopes and Riyad Mahrez? The answer is that they can all create moments of magic on a football pitch with ingenious ball skills, great goals or inventive assists. The fact that they hail from Asia, Africa, Europe and South America illustrates that creativity has no frontiers. The talking point among coaches is simply to ask how this sort of talent can be replicated and developed.

A lot of the answers would probably underline the importance of encouraging kids to express themselves as they play their way through the development phases. How relevant is futsal in cultivating individual trickery in tight spaces? How pivotal is it for coaches to give them space to indulge in solo skills instead of insisting exclusively on collective aspects of a passing game? How crucial is it to allow youth players freedom to find imaginative solutions rather than adhering to set playing patterns imposed by coaches? How important is it to applaud gifted performers and to accept the mistakes and the risk elements as they attempt to outwit opponents? Football is a passionate, creative art. What would it be without artists?

## The importance of importing?

Of the eight coaches in Jeddah, two were working in their native countries. Five of the other six hailed from non-AFC territories – Brazil, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Why did the coaches of Gwangju and Kawasaki Frontale form such a small minority? The first answer that comes to mind is that the people responsible for appointing coaches appear to favour technicians from South America or Europe. Why?

One of the most probable responses at the debating table would be that, if clubs are increasingly recruiting



high-profile foreign players, a high-profile foreign coach is a prime requirement in terms of reputation, top-level experience, respect and credibility. And, it has to be acknowledged, a considerable percentage of AFC coaches do not have extensive top-level experience, especially on the international stage. But are we getting into a vicious circle in which lack of experience is a barrier to gaining experience? With the AFC Coaching Convention firmly established and the quality of coaching and coach education improving, what can be done to allow more native technicians to break into the top jobs?

And then there are the players. What is the impact of lifting restrictions on the numbers of foreign players? One side of the debating table might venture the opinion that 'local' players – especially those in development age-groups – will surely benefit from training day after day

alongside the imported talent. The other side might ask how many of them are in the starting line-up when it comes to matchday? And how many of them occupy the key roles - including the goalkeeper? One of the teamsheets in Jeddah revealed the presence of nine international players on the bench...

At the same time, the decision to stage the AFC U17 Asian Cup™ on a yearly basis indicates serious investment in youth development. But how many of those players will be given opportunities to perform on the big stage?

## Good at multi-tasking?

While the ball was rolling in Jeddah during the final phase of the competition, a glance at the status of the contestants in their national competitions revealed that the three teams from Saudi Arabia were chasing Al Ittihad Club in the Pro League; Buriram United and



Al Sadd SC held advantages of one and two points respectively over Bangkok United and Al Duhail SC in Thailand and Qatar; Gwangju FC occupied fifth place in the Korea Republic with four wins in 11 games; Kawasaki Frontale were eighth, seven points off the pace, in a J1 League where Yokohama Marinos were rooted to the foot of the table with one win in a dozen matches. Meanwhile the season was revealing once again that sustained success in the AFC's premier club competition can be elusive. In 2023/24, defending champions Urawa Red Diamonds were eliminated in the Group Stage. And, when the curtain rose on the AFC Champions League Elite™, who would have predicted that Al Ain FC, within months of lifting the trophy, would end the League Stage propping up the West rankings without a win in eight games? The talking point is why it can prove to be so difficult to combine national and international success.

Voices from some areas of the AFC might murmur that the September- May fixture list doesn't always align neatly with the peak-performance cadences of domestic competition – which issues a challenge to coaches and their physical-preparation staff. Others might mention long-haul travel requirements and consequent rest and recovery issues in equipping the players for the following domestic fixture. A voice from Australia, for example, might point out that the trips from Sydney to China PR and Japan in the League Stage involved flying times of 10 hours or more in each direction. The question from the other side of the debating table might be whether a maximum of five away trips prior to the Finals in Saudi Arabia can really be regarded as too heavy a burden. If the top clubs' objective is to win trophies at home and on the high-profile international stage, the talking point is related to the measures coaches can put in place when designing their planning and strategies for the season. And, when that is done, what is the most appropriate way to combine squad rotation with consistent performance levels in all competitions?

# KEY PLAYERS



# GOALKEEPERS



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



**37** | **Yassine Bounou**  
(Al Hilal SFC)

# DEFENDERS



**13** | **Sota Miura**  
(Kawasaki Frontale)



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



**3** | **Kalidou Koulibaly**  
(Al Hilal SFC)



**2** | **Kota Takai**  
(Kawasaki Frontale)



**2** | **Sultan Al Ghannam**  
(Al Nassr FC)

# MIDFIELDERS



**8** | Ruben Neves  
(Al Hilal SFC)



**11** | Marcelo Brozovic  
(Al Nassr FC)



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



**10** | Roberto Firmino  
(Al Ahli Saudi FC)



**22** | Sergej Milinkovic-Savic  
(Al Hilal SFC)

# WINGERS



**23** | **Marcinho**  
(Kawasaki Frontale)



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



**29** | **Salem Al Dawsari**  
(Al Hilal SFC)



**7** | **Jasir Asani**  
(Gwangju FC)



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

# STRIKERS



**7** | Cristiano Ronaldo  
(Al Nassr FC)



**10** | Anderson Lopes  
(Yokohama F. Marinos)



**9** | Aleksandar Mitrovic  
(Al Hilal SFC)



**10** | Sadio Mane  
(Al Nassr FC)



**84** | Akram Afif  
(Al Sadd SC)

# TEAM PROFILES





## AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)

Two-time Asian runners-up and one of the most successful clubs in Saudi Arabia, Al Ahli Saudi FC, have won three Saudi Pro League titles and six Crown Prince Cups. They are also the first Saudi Arabian club to win the league and the King's Cup in the same season, doing so twice in 1978 and 2016. The three-time winners of the Gulf Club Champions League made their last appearance in the AFC Champions League™ in 2021 when their campaign ended in the Group Stage.

Back for the 13th time, the Jeddah-based side finished an unbeaten second in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage. They eliminated Qatar's Al Rayyan SC 5-1 on aggregate in the Round of 16 to book their place in the Quarter-finals, where they defeated Buriram United 3-0. Al Ahli overcame compatriots Al Hilal SFC 3-1 in the Semi-finals and finally clinched their first Continental title with a 2-0 win over Japan's Kawasaki Frontale.



### KEY FEATURES

- Built from the back with the goalkeeper and central defenders
- The two full-backs took positions higher up the field with No. 79 organising the play in midfield
- Two midfielders, No. 10 and 30, played behind the striker (No. 99), while the two attacking midfielders No. 7 and 13 took up wide positions
- Good use of flanks and crosses - more on the left (through No. 77) than on the right
- Alternating positions between possession, reversal of play and depth in the squad
- High, compact defensive block allowing the team to recover the ball quickly

### KEY PLAYERS

10	Roberto Firmino	Captain involved in both phases with good finishing
79	Franck Kessie	Midfield schemer with simple but effective play
3	Roger Ibanez	Athletic presence in defence and dynamic at attacking set pieces



### HEAD COACH: MATTHIAS JAISSLE (GER)

A former TSG Hoffenheim and Germany U23 national team player, Matthias Jaissle began his managerial career as assistant coach of Danish Superliga side Brøndby IF in 2017 before stints in Austria with FC Red Bull Salzburg's U18 academy team and FC Liefering. In 2021, he stepped into the position of head coach for RB Salzburg and not only won the domestic double, but also led the club to the UEFA

Champions League knockout stage for the first time in their history.

In 2023, the former centre-back took over the helm of Al Ahli, who had won promotion back to the Saudi Pro League. He led his side to third place in the domestic league in the 2023/24 season, earning them qualification for the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25.



## KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)

Kawasaki Frontale made it to the Quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League™ in 2007, 2009 and 2017, but saw their performance falter in the next few editions as they failed to go past the Round of 16. The four-time J1 League winners, who hold the record for the most AFC Champions League™ qualifications by a Japanese club with 11 appearances, finished second in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage with 15 points.

Frontale showcased their strength in the Round of 16 by overcoming Shanghai Shenhua FC of China PR 4-1 on aggregate to book their place in the Quarter-finals for the fourth time where they defeated Qatar's Al Sadd SC 3-2 before registering another 3-2 win against Al Nassr Club in the Semi-final. Their hopes for a first title, however, came to an end when they lost 2-0 in the Final to Al Ahli Saudi FC.



### HEAD COACH: SHIGETOSHI HASABE (JPN)

Shigetoshi Hasebe took over Kawasaki Frontale's head coach duties from respected tactician Toru Oniki in December 2024 and had a debut to remember when he guided his team to a 4-0 win over FC Pohang Steelers to march into the knockout stage of the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25.

The 54-year-old, who was named the 2023 J.League's Manager of the Year, spent a season with Frontale as a player in 1997 after spells with Verdy Kawasaki, Vissel Kobe and JEF United Ichihara. He coached Mito HollyHock for a year before taking the reins of Avispa Fukuoka in 2020, earning them promotion to the J1 League in his first season and winning the J.League Cup, the club's first major honour, in 2023.

### KEY FEATURES

- Looked to build from the back and break out from the wings (Al Sadd's 1-5-3-2 leaves them the sides)
- Vertical defensive transitions, midfielders (No. 77 and 19) were always available
- No. 9 and 23 provided solutions with their speed and attacking power in one-on-one situations
- Defensive shape: 1-4-4-2
- No. 14 and 9 were key in deploying the high press
- Immediate pressing when they lost possession
- Good defensive organisation
- Compact and aggressive block
- Pressed high when they lost possession or when the opponent was building up from the back
- Despite the heat, humidity and extra time, the team remained focused and united



### KEY PLAYERS

77	Yuki Yamamoto	Midfield schemer, controls the game
23	Marcinho	A winger who penetrates the flank with pace
2	Kota Takai	Defence leader, good vertical passes and strong in 1v1 situations



## AL HILAL SFC (KSA)

Al Hilal SFC have established themselves as Asia's most decorated club with successful AFC Champions League™ title runs in 2019 and 2021 alongside their Asian Club Championship trophies from 1991 and 2000. On the home front, Al Hilal, who finished first in the 2023/24 Saudi Pro League, have won a record 19 Saudi Pro League titles. They have reached an unmatched five AFC Champions League™ Finals and hold the joint record with Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor for the most continental appearances with 19 showings.

Finalists in the AFC Champions League™ 2022 and semi-finalists in the last edition, the Riyadh-based side topped the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 West Region League Stage unbeaten, defeated Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor 4-1 in the Round of 16, and breezed past Gwangju FC 7-0 in the Quarter-finals. Appearing in the Semi-finals for a record-extending ninth time, Al Hilal were knocked out by eventual champions Al Ahli Saudi FC 3-1.



### HEAD COACH: JORGE JESUS (POR)

Prior to joining Al Hilal, Jorge Jesus guided Fenerbahce to the 2022-23 Turkish Cup and to the runners-up spot in the Turkish Super League. He also guided Portugal's Benfica to three Primeira Liga titles and two UEFA Europa League runners-up positions and led Flamengo to the Brazilian Serie A title and the Copa Libertadores in 2019.

Jesus had previously managed Al Hilal in 2018-19, leading them to a Saudi Super Cup win over Al Ittihad in his first game in charge. He marked his return to the club in 2023 by helping them win the Saudi Super Cup titles in 2023 and 2024, while also guiding them to clinching the 2023/24 Saudi Pro League and King Cup crowns.



### KEY FEATURES

- Patient in the build-up from the back via goalkeeper (No. 37), centre-backs (No. 3 and 87), central midfielder (No. 8)
- Excellent passing – providing good options for the players in possession: No. 8 and 22
- Ability to change direction and position from No. 8, 22, 29, 11 and 77
- Good wing play by No. 77, 11 and 29
- Accurate, well-timed final balls; good finishing ability
- Disciplined, well-organised defence; excellent positional play
- Deployed a high block with man-to-man marking when the opponents play out from the back
- Midfield block when losing possession during play
- Utilised a high defensive line; goalkeeper is good at covering the spaces behind

### KEY PLAYERS

22	Sergej Milinkovic-Savic	Contributes in both phases and gets into a dangerous area
8	Ruben Neves	A playmaker with outstanding skills and creative play
29	Salem Al Dawsari	Winger-striker with good finishing skills and pace



## AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)

Semi-finalists at the AFC Champions League™ in 2020 and 2021, Al Nassr have consistently been a powerhouse in West Asia, having won nine Saudi Pro League titles as well as the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and the Asian Super Cup. Following Cristiano Ronaldo's arrival in December 2022, the club were runners-up in back-to-back editions of the Saudi Pro League and made it to the Quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League™ 2023/24.

Making their eighth Continental showing, the Riyadh-based side finished third in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage and beat Esteghlal FC 3-0 in the Round of 16. Al Nassr defeated Japan's Yokohama F. Marinos 4-1 in the last eight to set up a meeting with yet another Japanese club, Kawasaki Frontale, but came out second best with a 3-2 defeat.



### HEAD COACH: STEFANO PIOLI (ITA)

The Parma-born Stefano Pioli played for several Serie A clubs, including Parma, Juventus, Verona and Fiorentina as well as the Italian U21 national team before hanging his boots up in 1999. He began coaching the same year at Bologna's youth team before managing sides like Parma, Inter Milan and Lazio.

The former defender took over as AC Milan head coach in October 2019 and oversaw the club's Serie A title-winning campaign in 2022. Following his departure in May 2024, he took the reins of Al Nassr in September of the same year and was named Saudi Pro League Manager of the Month in January.

### KEY FEATURES

- Progressive build-up play from the goalkeeper with good interchanging of positions
- No. 2 took up high positions with No. 3, 4 and 83 forming the core back-three structure
- No. 11 controlled the flow of the game with outstanding anticipation
- Deployed long diagonal balls from the onset with wide build-up play
- Fast counterattacks with collective movement
- Assured combination play in tight spaces around the box
- Intensive high pressing and counter-pressing
- Quick transitions from the attack to defence
- Disciplined team spirit with composure



### KEY PLAYERS

11	Marcelo Brozovic	Skipper who controls the team's attack and defence
10	Sadio Mane	Striker with speed and skill who also contributes to defence.
7	Cristiano Ronaldo	Brings stability to the team; poses a threat with his imposing presence



## AL SADD SC (QAT)

Two-time champions of Asia, Al Sadd are the most successful sports club in Qatar, holding a national record of 64 official football championships and being the only Qatari team to win the AFC Champions League™. Their Continental win in 2011 also saw them qualify for the FIFA Club World Cup, where they finished third.

With numerous records to their name, including 18 Qatar Stars League titles, 19 Emir of Qatar Cups and eight Qatar Cups, Al Sadd made their seventh appearance in the continental contest and beat UAE's Al Wasl FC 4-2 on aggregate in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25's Round of 16. They returned to the Quarter-finals for the first time since 2019 and the sixth time in their history and lost 3-2 to Japan's Kawasaki Frontale.



### HEAD COACH: FELIX SANCHEZ (ESP)

Felix Sanchez started his career as a youth coach at FC Barcelona from 1996 to 2006, after which he moved to work at Qatar's Aspire Academy. He coached various Qatari national teams, including the U19 team, which won the AFC U-19 Championship in 2014.

Sanchez handled the Qatar senior national team from July 2017 and led them to the AFC Asian Cup™ title in 2019 for the first time. The now 49-year-old left in 2022 to become head coach of the Ecuador national team but returned to Qatar in 2024 as head coach of Al Sadd in what was his first senior club experience.

### KEY FEATURES

- Progressive build-up from goalkeeper with interchanging positions
- Comfortable in possession by rotating midfielders even under pressure
- Skipper 4 an Influential holding midfielder
- Effective use of overlapping full-backs both at same time
- Game-opening diagonals from a short-pass-based game
- Assured combination play in tight spaces around box
- Intensive high or midfield pressing according to situations
- Goalkeeper covering the open space behind high defensive line

- Quick transition from attack to defence; counter-pressing
- Ability to stay focused after falling behind; discipline, team spirit, composure

### KEY PLAYERS

4	Mohamed Camara	Leader of defence with precise passing ability
6	Paulo Otávio	Playmaker with outstanding skills and creative plays
84	Akram Afif	Wide attacking dynamo creating many big chances





## BURIRAM UNITED (THA)

Buriram United, who won a record 11th Thai League 1 crown in the 2024/25 season, are also six-time Thai FA Cup winners and seven-time League Cup champions, winning the domestic treble five times since 2011. The Thai side, who reached the AFC Champions League™ 2013 Quarter-finals and the Round of 16 in 2018, made their ninth appearance in the Continental contest in 2024/25 since their Group Stage finish a year prior.

A sixth-place finish in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage saw them advance to the Round of 16, where they knocked out Johor Darul Ta'zim 1-0 on aggregate. Back in the knockout stage for the first time since 2013, Buriram lost 3-0 to Al Ahli Saudi FC, with all three of the Saudi Arabia side's goals coming in the first half.



### HEAD COACH: OSMAR LOSS (BRA)

Brazilian Osmar Loss began his coaching career with Internacional's youth setup in 1994 and was appointed manager of their B-side in 2009. After stints with Fluminense, Corinthians, Guarani and other clubs in his homeland, Loss joined the Islamic Republic of Iran's Persepolis FC as assistant coach in 2022 and was promoted to head coach two years later,

taking them to the 2023/24 Iran Pro League title.

The Brazilian took over the helm at Buriram United in June 2024 and led them to their 11th Thai League 1 title.

### KEY FEATURES

- Difficulties in developing play through the final third with frequent ball losses
- Emphasis was on counterattacking from a deep defensive block
- Conservative back line of five with cautious full-backs
- Good substitutions who provided greater control in midfield
- Defended in numbers in a low block without aggressive duels
- Were able to recover possession by exploiting the opponents' errors or lack of movement



### KEY PLAYERS

23	Goran Causic	Positive sub with good technique and quality recovery, with effective transitions from defence-to-attack
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## GWANGJU FC (KOR)

Founded in 2010, Gwangju FC finished third in K League 1 in 2023 to secure a place in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25. The club finished ninth in the 2024 K League 1 season and also made the Korea Cup Semi-finals.

The AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 newcomers qualified for the knockout stage as the only Korea Republic club. They lost 2-0 in the first leg of the Round of 16 to Japan's Vissel Kobe but bounced back with a 3-0 victory to reach the Quarter-finals. Their run was cut short in the last eight, however, when they went down 7-0 to Al Hilal SFC.



### KEY FEATURES

- Patient in the build-up play from the back through to the midfield
- Attempted constructive build-up play even when under pressure and also in counter-attacks
- Good passing game, creating several chances but ineffective finishing in the final third
- Creative combination play; ability to change direction/pace
- Unafraid to apply aggressive high pressure right from the beginning of the game
- This lasted for 30 minutes v Al Hilal; but were beaten by the opponents' high-quality build-up play and positional rotations

### KEY PLAYERS

KEY PLAYERS		
7	Jasir Asani	Winger with excellent breakthrough and cut-in abilities
55	Park Tae-jun	Contributes in both phases with good mobility and technique
27	Kim Jin-ho	A full-back with well-timed contributions in attack



### HEAD COACH: LEE JUNG-HYO (KOR)

A former Korea Republic defender who spent his entire professional career at Busan IPark, Lee Jung-hyo retired in 2009 and joined Ajou University as coach in 2011 before joining the backroom staff with Seongnam Dragons in 2018 and Jeju United in 2020, whom he helped lead to the K League 2 title the same year.

The now 49-year-old took charge of Gwangju FC in December 2021, returning after a prior stint five years ago, and led his team to an early K League 2 title and promotion to K League 1. His achievement was recognised with the 2022 K League Manager of the Year Award.



## YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)

Two-time champions of the now-defunct Asian Cup Winners' Cup, Yokohama F. Marinos have competed in the AFC Champions League™ six times. Their best showing came in the 2023/24 edition when the five-time J1 League winners finished runners-up behind United Arab Emirates' Al Ain FC.

In the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25, the Japanese side topped the League Stage standings with 18 points and secured their place in the Quarter-finals following a 5-1 aggregate win against China PR's Shanghai Port FC. The 2023 J1 League runners-up, however, exited the competition after losing 4-1 in the last eight to Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr Club.



### KEY FEATURES

- Progressive build-up play from goalkeeper with positional rotations
- Comfortable in possession even under pressure with interchanging midfielders
- Influential holding midfielder as a skipper
- Effective use of overlapping full-backs both at same time
- Game-opening diagonals from short-pass-based game
- Assured combination play in tight spaces around the box
- Intensive high and midfield pressing according to situations
- Goalkeeper covering wide space behind defenders
- Quick transition from attack to defence; counter-pressing
- Ability to stay focused after falling behind; disciplined team spirit with composure

### KEY PLAYERS

KEY PLAYERS		
28	Riku Yamane	Midfield schemer controls the game with insightful plays
27	Ken Matsubara	Captain contributes to both phases; inspirational mobility
10	Anderson Lopes	Leading striker who scored nine goals



### HEAD COACH: PATRICK KISNORBO (AUS)

Following Steve Holland's departure in April 2025, assistant coach Patrick Kisnorbo took over from the Englishman, with his first AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 fixture in charge being the Quarter-final clash against Al Nassr Club.

A former Australian international, Kisnorbo was capped 18 times and

has played for clubs across continents, including Scottish side Heart of Midlothian, England's Leeds United and Ipswich Town and Australia's Melbourne City, where he also briefly served as head coach in 2024.



## JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM (MAS)

Johor Darul Ta'zim (JDT) have won 11 consecutive Malaysia Super League titles, the latest secured in 2024/25. In 2015, JDT became the first Malaysian club to win the AFC Cup™ and remain the only Malaysian side to participate in the AFC Champions League™, reaching the Round of 16 for the first time in 2022. However, in the 2023/24 edition, the Johor-based side failed to progress to the knockout stage.

JDT finished the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage in third place on 14 points with four wins, two draws and one loss. They drew 0-0 with Thailand's Buriram United in the first leg of the Round of 16, but a 1-0 defeat in the return fixture ended their hopes of making a maiden appearance in the last eight.



### HEAD COACH: HECTOR BIDOGLIO (ARG)

Born in Argentina, Hector Bidoglio made 23 appearances for the Venezuela national team between 1999 and 2000 and played for various Venezuelan clubs as well as Al Arabi SC of Qatar and Thanh Hoa FC in Vietnam. He served in Argentina with Newell's Old Boys as assistant coach and youth coordinator before taking up their head coach role in 2018.

The 57-year-old, who also had coaching stints in Peru, Ecuador, and Spain, was appointed head coach of JDT in July 2022, leading them to the Malaysia Super League, FA Cup and Malaysia Cup treble the same year. He was named the club's technical director the following year and re-appointed head coach in 2024.



## VISSEL KOBE (JPN)

Founded in 1966 and promoted to the J1 League in 1997, Vissel Kobe claimed their league title in 2023 and went on to defend the crown the following year. The club made their first appearance in the AFC Champions League™ in 2020 as winners of the Emperor's Cup, and made their way into the Semi-finals before losing to Korea Republic's Ulsan Hyundai — their best performance on the Continental stage to date.

In the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25, the Japanese side finished fifth in the League Stage with four wins and a draw against two losses. In the Round of 16, they secured a 2-0 win over Gwangju FC in the first leg, but despite the strong start, fell to a 3-0 defeat in the return leg to bow out of the competition.



### HEAD COACH: TAKAYUKI YOSHIDA (JPN)

As a player, Takayuki Yoshida was part of Yokohama Flugels' victorious 1994/95 Asian Cup Winners' Cup squad and later achieved another high point when he scored the winner in their capture of the 1998 Emperor's Cup. He ended his playing career at Vissel Kobe in 2013 with 27 goals in 140 appearances to his name.

The former midfielder began his coaching career at Vissel as assistant coach in 2015 and took charge as head coach two years later before departing for J2 League club V-Varen Nagasaki in 2020. Yoshida returned to Vissel in 2022, leading them to consecutive J1 League titles in 2023 and 2024 as well as the 2024 Emperor's Cup.



## SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)

Formed in 1951, Shanghai Shenhua have won the Chinese Jia-A League (the predecessor of the Chinese Super League) thrice, the Chinese FA Cup six times and the Chinese FA Super Cup five times. They made their AFC Champions League™ debut in 2002 but managed to go past the Group Stage for the first time in 2006 when they reached the Quarter-finals. They made their last appearance in the competition in 2020 where they suffered a Group Stage exit.

Runners-up in the Chinese Super League in 2024, Shanghai Shenhua closed seventh in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage with three wins and a draw against four losses. Their Round of 16 match-up against Japan's Kawasaki Frontale saw them win the first leg 1-0, but their hopes of reaching the Quarter-finals for a second time were dashed when they lost 4-0 in the second.



### HEAD COACH: LEONID SLUTSKY (RUS)

A former goalkeeper with Russian Second Division side Zvezda Gorodishche, Leonid Slutsky became head coach of FC Moscow in 2005 and Krylia Sovetov in 2008. He left for CSKA Moscow in 2009, taking them to the UEFA Champions League knockout stage for the first time as well as to three domestic league titles before departing in 2016.

Slutsky, who briefly took charge of the Russian national team as well, joined English Championship club Hull City before moving on to Eredivisie side Vitesse Arnhem in 2018 but left for Russian Premier League club FC Rubin Kazan a year later, guiding them to a fourth-place finish in the league. The now 53-year-old joined Shanghai Shenhua in January 2024 and led them to Chinese FA Super Cup titles in 2024 and 2025.



## SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)

Shanghai Port FC made their debut in China PR's third tier league in 2006 before climbing to the Chinese Super League in 2013. They clinched their first title in 2018 and added two more in 2023 and 2024, the same year in which they won their maiden Chinese FA Cup. The 18-year-old club debuted in the AFC Champions League™ in 2016, with their best performance coming in 2017 when they reached the Semi-finals.

Shanghai Port secured eighth place in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage to make the Round of 16, where they met Japan's Yokohama F. Marinos. The club exited the competition after they lost 1-0 in the first leg and 4-1 in the second.



### HEAD COACH: KEVIN MUSCAT (AUS)

A former Soccerroo with 46 caps and 10 goals between 1994 and 2006, Kevin Muscat played for Wolverhampton Wanderers and Crystal Palace as well as Scottish Premiership team Rangers. He began his coaching career with Melbourne Victory as assistant coach in 2012 before being promoted the following year, guiding his side to an A-League premiership-championship double in 2015.

The 51-year-old took over as head coach of Yokohama F. Marinos in July 2021 and led the Japanese side to the 2022 J1 League title and the runners-up spot the following year. Muscat joined Shanghai Port in December 2023 and gave them their Chinese Super League and Chinese FA Cup titles a year later.



## ***FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)***

One of Korea Republic's most successful sides, Pohang are three-time Asian winners, the last in 2009, five-time winners of the K League 1 and six-time Korean FA Cup champions. They were AFC Champions League™ finalists in 2021, missed out on the 2022 edition and made the Round of 16 in 2023/24, where they were knocked out 3-1 on aggregate by two-time champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

Appearing in the Continent's premier men's club competition for the tenth time, Pohang were eliminated at the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 in the League Stage when they finished in ninth place with six points. They won two games and lost five to make their first exit at this stage since 2016.



### **HEAD COACH: PARK TAE-HA (KOR)**

Former Korea Republic international Park Tae-ha, spent his entire playing career with Pohang Steelers and boasts of scoring in the club's 1997 Asian Club Championship triumph.

The former winger enjoyed managerial stints with clubs such as K League

1 side FC Seoul and China PR's Yanbian Fude , and also served as assistant coach of Korea Republic's national team from 2007 to 2011. Having coached the reserve side of Pohang Steelers from 2005 to 2007, Park took over from compatriot Kim Gi-dong when he parted ways with the club in December 2023.



## ***ULSAN HD FC (KOR)***

Founded in 1983, two-time AFC Champions League™ winners (2012, 2020) Ulsan Hyundai FC have won the K League 1 five times, including three consecutive titles starting from 2022. They reached the Semi-finals in their AFC Champions League™ debut in 2006 and returned to the latter stages in 2021 and again in the 2023/24 edition, where they were eliminated on penalties by Yokohama F. Marinos.

Making their 12th Continental appearance, and their eighth in a row, the 2024 K League 1 champions were eliminated at the League Stage after finishing 10th, with only one win to their name.



### **HEAD COACH: KIM PAN-GON (KOR)**

A former Ulsan Hyundai and Jeonbuk Hyundai player, Kim Pan-gon started as assistant coach with Busan I'Park from 2005 to 2008 before moving to Hong Kong First Division League club South China Athletic Association as head coach. He also managed the Hong Kong, China U23 side team as well as the senior team twice (2009-2010 and 2012-2017).

The now 55-year-old from South Gyeongsang Province managed the Malaysian national team from 2022 to 2024, where he led them to earn their first AFC Asian Cup™ point since 1980 at the 2023 edition. Kim took over Ulsan HD in July 2024 and led them to their third straight K League 1 title as well as the runners-up spot in the Korea Cup.



## CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)

Founded in 2004, the Central Coast Mariners won the 2024 A-League Men Championship, adding the title to their past wins in 2013 and 2023. They have also won the A-League Premiership three times, the last in 2023/24, and claimed the 2023/24 AFC Cup™ for the first time. The Gosford-based side has appeared in the AFC Champions League™ five times and reached the Round of 16 twice.

The Mariners ended the League Stage of the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 at the bottom of the 12-team standings with a solitary point after losing seven of their eight matches.



### HEAD COACH: MARK JACKSON (ENG)

Mark Jackson started his playing career at Leeds United in 1995, earned four caps for the England U23 national team in 1997 and ended his playing days at Farsley FC in 2015. The now-47-year-old Englishman then turned his attention to coaching, rejoining his hometown club Leeds as their U15-16 coach before being promoted to the U18, U23 and finally joining the backroom staff under head coach Jesse Marsch.

Jackson was appointed head coach of League One club Milton Keynes Dons in 2020 where he remained for three years before taking over as head coach of Central Coast Mariners in September 2023. His first season at the helm saw him win the 2023/24 AFC Cup™, the 2023/24 A-League premiership and the 2024 A-League Men championship.

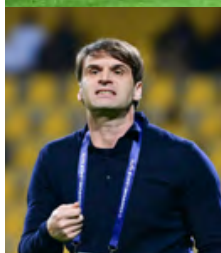
WEST



## AL WASL FC (UAE)

Since its establishment in 1960, Al Wasl has become among the most successful teams in the UAE, winning eight UAE Pro League titles, with its most recent in 2023/24. They have also won three UAE President's Cups and the Gulf Club Champions Cup in 2010. Al Wasl made three AFC Champions League™ appearances prior to the 2024/25 season but did not progress past the Group Stage.

Al Wasl finished fifth in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage with 11 points to make it to the Round of 16 for the first time in the club's history. But their joy was short-lived as they lost 4-2 on aggregate to Qatar's Al Saad SC and exited the competition.



### HEAD COACH: MILOS MILOJEVIC (SRB)

A former defender, Milos Milojevic started his managerial career as assistant coach in 2013 with his former club Vikingur Reykjavik in Iceland before being promoted to head coach in 2015. He later took up appointments with other clubs in Iceland, Sweden and Red Star Belgrade in Serbia, where he was assistant coach in 2019.

The 42-year-old left in 2021 for Sweden's Hammarby IF and Malmo FF before returning to Red Star as head coach, leading them to the 2022/23 Serbian SuperLiga and Serbian Cup titles. Milojevic joined Al Wasl in 2023 and led them to the 2023/24 UAE Pro League and President's Cup titles.



## ***ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)***

Esteghlal FC is the Islamic Republic of Iran's oldest professional club, founded in 1945, and one of its most successful. They are nine-time winners of the Iran Pro League and seven-time Hazfi Cup titleholders, finishing second in the domestic league in 2023/24. The club made the Semi-finals of the AFC Champions League™ for the first time in 2013 and the knockout stage in 2018. The Tehran-based club made their 13th appearance at the continental stage in 2024/25 and their first since 2021.

Their qualification to the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 Round of 16 was only sealed on the final League Stage matchday, thanks to a 2-0 defeat of Qatar's Al Rayyan SC. In trying to reach the Quarter-finals for the third time in their history, Esteghlal lost 3-0 on aggregate to Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr.



### **HEAD COACH: MIODRAG BOZOVIC (SRB)**

As a player, Miodrag Bozovic played for Red Star Belgrade, Indonesia's Pelita Jaya, and the Netherlands' Waalwijk, among others, before retiring in 1999. He started his coaching career with Serbian club FK Beograd in 2002 and has amassed coaching experience across Europe and Asia.

Bozovic joined Azerbaijan Premier League club Neftchi Baku in 2023 before departing to IR Iran a year later as head coach of Esteghlal Khuzestan and then Esteghlal FC in 2025.



## ***AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)***

Established in 1967, eight-time Qatar Stars League and six-time Emir of Qatar Cup winners Al Rayyan SC have only made the AFC Champions League™ Round of 16 once, in 2022. Having won their domestic league last in 2015/16, they finished as runners-up in 2023/24 to qualify for the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 and made their 12th appearance in the tournament.

The 2024/25 edition marked their second appearance in the Round of 16 after they placed seventh with eight points in the League Stage. Al Rayyan's dreams of advancing further were dashed, however, when they lost to Al Ahli Saudi FC 5-1 on aggregate.



### **HEAD COACH: ARTUR JORGE (POR)**

Artur Jorge played as a central defender for the Portugal U21 national team and his hometown club, SC Braga, where he made 240 appearances and scored 10 goals. He also spent most of his coaching career with Braga, starting in 2010 and finishing in 2024 with spells in between at FC Tirsense and Limianos, also in Portugal.

He joined Brazil Serie A club Botafogo in 2024 and led his team to the Serie A title and the Copa Libertadores the same year, as well as winning Serie A Coach of the Year. The now 53-year-old joined Al Rayyan in 2025, replacing Younes Ali midway through the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage.



## PAKHTAKOR FC (UZB)

Pakhtakor's best showing in the AFC Champions League™ was in 2003 and 2004 when they reached the Semi-finals. The Uzbek champions also made the last eight in the 2009 edition and repeated the feat in 2020. The record 16-time Super League winners have participated in 19 AFC Champions League™ editions but have struggled in recent years, with their fifth straight appearance in 2023/24 ending at the Group Stage.

The Tashkent-based club qualified for the Round of 16 at the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25, the first time since the 2020 edition, but failed to follow through when they went down 4-1 on aggregate to Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal SFC.



### HEAD COACH: PEDRO MOREIRA (POR)

Pedro Moreira was a youth coach from 1998 to 2012 with clubs in Portugal before joining FC Pacos de Ferreira as assistant coach under Paulo Fonseca. He remained Fonseca's assistant across clubs such as FC Porto, Braga, Shakhtar Donetsk and AS Roma for the next nine years, where he enjoyed considerable success.

He was named head coach of Liga Portugal 2 side Torreense in 2022 but he left the position a year later for Primeira Liga side Casa Pia. Moreira signed up with Pakhtakor in December 2024, replacing Maksim Shatskikh midway through their AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage campaign.



## PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)

One of Asia's most popular clubs, Islamic Republic of Iran's Persepolis FC, were AFC Champions League™ runners-up in 2018 and 2020. The club has won a record 16 domestic league titles as well as seven Hazfi Cups, five Super Cups and the 1990-91 Asian Cup Winners' Cup. They won the 2023/24 Iran Pro League, their seventh consecutive title, to qualify for the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25.

Persepolis, who failed to make it past the Group Stage at the last edition, finished ninth in the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage with seven points. Their one win and four draws against three defeats saw them miss out on the Round of 16 to Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor on goal difference.



### HEAD COACH: ISMAIL KARTAL (TUR)

As a player, Ismail Kartal played 11 seasons in the Turkish Süper Lig, winning two league titles with Fenerbahçe and making six appearances for the Türkiye national team. He started his coaching career in 2001 with Karabükspor and spent 24 years with stints in various clubs in his homeland.

The former defender's coaching highlights include leading Fenerbahçe to the 2014 Turkish Super Cup. He returned to the club in 2022, guiding them to league runners-up behind Galatasaray in 2023/24. Kartal joined Persepolis in January 2025, replacing Spain's Juan Garrido halfway through the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage.



## AL GHARAFAS SC (QAT)

Established in 1979, Al Gharafa are seven-time winners of both the Qatari Stars League and the Emir of Qatar Cup. They finished third in the 2023/24 domestic league and made the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage after defeating UAE's Shabab Al Ahli 1-0 in the West Region qualifying playoffs.

The 2010 quarter-finalists, making their 10th AFC Champions League™ appearance and first since 2022, finished the 2024/25 League Stage in 10th place with seven points, concluding their campaign with two wins and a draw against five defeats.



### HEAD COACH: PEDRO MARTINS (POR)

A defensive midfielder, Pedro Martins played in the Primeira Liga and the Liga Portugal 2 as well as on the international stage, making one appearance each in his country's U18, U21, and senior national teams. He began his coaching years as head coach with third-tier Uniao de Lamas in 2006 and had stints with numerous clubs in his homeland until 2018, when he joined Greece's Olympiacos FC.

The 54-year-old won three consecutive Super League Greece titles from 2019 to 2022 with Olympiacos, and a double in 2019-20 when they won the Greek Cup. He signed as head coach of Al Gharafa in November 2022.



## AL SHORTA (IRQ)

Al Shorta are one of the most successful teams in Iraq, winning the Iraq Stars League seven times and their first Iraq FA Cup, completing the domestic double in 2023/24. The 93-year-old club won their third consecutive league title in 2023/24 to make their fifth appearance on the Continental stage and the first since 2021.

The Baghdad-based side, who have never made it past the knockout stage, fared poorly at the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage, finishing 11th with six points, with only a win over Al Ain FC and three draws against four defeats to show for their efforts.



### HEAD COACH: AHMED SALAH ALWAN (IRQ)

A former Iraq international with 27 caps and five goals, Ahmed Salah started as assistant coach at Erbil SC in 2013 and after a year at Naft Al Wasat, joined Al Shorta in 2017, taking on a dual role as assistant coach and caretaker. He departed in 2020 to assume head coach responsibilities at Zakho SC and Al Kahrabaa and also spent a year as assistant coach to the Iraq national team

in 2002 before returning to Al Shorta in 2023.

The former striker took Al Shorta to the 2023 league title before again departing, this time for Al Talaba but returned once again to Al Shorta in August 2024.



## ***AL AIN FC (UAE)***

With a record 14 UAE Pro League titles under their belt and a place in Asian football history as the inaugural AFC Champions League™ winners in 2003, Al Ain FC are UAE's most decorated club. The only club from the UAE to win the Continental crown, the 2005 and 2016 finalists claimed the title again in 2023 after failing to make it past the qualifying playoff in the 2022 edition. They placed third in their domestic league in 2023/24.

Seeking back-to-back honours in their 17th Continental appearance, Al Ain's defence of their crown fizzled out when they finished the League Stage at the bottom of the standings, with only two points from eight matches.



### **HEAD COACH: VLADIMIR IVIC (SRB)**

A former Serbia and Montenegro international, Vladimir Ivic, also played for German club Borussia Mönchengladbach and Greek sides AEK Athens and PAOK FC. He took charge of PAOK's youth side in 2013 before assuming head coach duties three years later. The Serb joined Maccabi Tel Aviv for two spells (2018-20 and 2022-23) with a stint at EFL Championship side Watford in between.

After a year with FC Krasnodar in the Russian Premier League, Ivic joined Al Ain in February 2025, taking over from Portugal's Leonardo Jardim during the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 League Stage.

# RESULTS



# LEAGUE STAGE

## EAST

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
17 Sep,24	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)	Void	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)
17 Sep,24	GWANGJU FC (KOR)	7-3 (2-1)	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)
17 Sep,24	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	0-0 (0-0)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
17 Sep,24	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	4-1 (0-0)	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)
18 Sep,24	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	0-1 (0-0)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)
18 Sep,24	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	2-2 (0-1)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
01 Oct,24	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)	1-2 (0-1)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
01 Oct,24	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)	0-1 (0-1)	GWANGJU FC (KOR)
01 Oct,24	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)	3-0 (0-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
01 Oct,24	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	3-0 (2-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
02 Oct,24	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	Void	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)
02 Oct,24	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)	4-0 (2-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
22 Oct,24	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	3-2 (2-0)	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)
22 Oct,24	GWANGJU FC (KOR)	3-1 (2-1)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
22 Oct,24	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	1-0 (0-0)	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)
22 Oct,24	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)	Void	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)
23 Oct,24	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	0-2 (0-0)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
23 Oct,24	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	2-0 (1-0)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)

**EAST**

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
05 Nov,24	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)	2-2 (0-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
05 Nov,24	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)	3-1 (3-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
05 Nov,24	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	2-0 (1-0)	GWANGJU FC (KOR)
05 Nov,24	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	3-0 (1-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
06 Nov,24	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)	Void	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)
06 Nov,24	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)	5-0 (3-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
26 Nov,24	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	3-2 (1-0)	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)
26 Nov,24	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	1-3 (0-2)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
26 Nov,24	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	0-3 (0-0)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)
26 Nov,24	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)	Void	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
27 Nov,24	GWANGJU FC (KOR)	1-0 (0-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
27 Nov,24	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)	2-0 (1-0)	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)
03 Dec,24	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)	0-4 (0-3)	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)
03 Dec,24	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)	3-1 (2-1)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
03 Dec,24	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	0-0 (0-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
03 Dec,24	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	1-1 (0-1)	GWANGJU FC (KOR)
04 Dec,24	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)	Void	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)
04 Dec,24	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	1-2 (1-0)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
11 Feb,25	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)	1-2 (0-0)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)

**EAST**

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
11 Feb,25	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	4-0 (1-0)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
11 Feb,25	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)	0-4 (0-1)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)
11 Feb,25	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)	Void	GWANGJU FC (KOR)
12 Feb,25	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)	1-0 (1-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
12 Feb,25	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	2-1 (1-1)	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)
18 Feb,25	GWANGJU FC (KOR)	2-2 (0-2)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
18 Feb,25	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)	2-0 (1-0)	CENTRAL COAST MARINERS (AUS)
18 Feb,25	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	4-2 (2-0)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)
18 Feb,25	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	5-2 (1-1)	FC POHANG STEELERS (KOR)
19 Feb,25	ULSAN HD FC (KOR)	Void	SHANDONG TAISHAN FC (CHN)
19 Feb,25	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	0-2 (0-0)	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)



## LEAGUE STAGE

### WEST

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
16 Sep,24	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	1-1 (1-1)	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)
16 Sep,24	AL AIN FC (UAE)	1-1 (0-1)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
16 Sep,24	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	1-0 (1-0)	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)
16 Sep,24	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)	3-0 (1-0)	AL GHARAF A SC (QAT)
17 Sep,24	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)	0-1 (0-0)	AL WASL FC (UAE)
17 Sep,24	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)	1-3 (0-3)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
30 Sep,24	AL SADD SC (QAT)	2-0 (1-0)	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)
30 Sep,24	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)	1-1 (1-0)	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)
30 Sep,24	AL WASL FC (UAE)	0-2 (0-2)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
30 Sep,24	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)	2-1 (1-0)	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)
01 Oct,24	AL GHARAF A SC (QAT)	4-2 (1-0)	AL AIN FC (UAE)
01 Oct,24	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	5-0 (2-0)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
21 Oct,24	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	0-0 (0-0)	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)
21 Oct,24	AL SADD SC (QAT)	1-0 (1-0)	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)
21 Oct,24	AL AIN FC (UAE)	4-5 (1-3)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
21 Oct,24	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)	1-2 (0-2)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
22 Oct,24	AL GHARAF A SC (QAT)	1-2 (1-0)	AL WASL FC (UAE)
22 Oct,24	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)	0-1 (0-0)	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)

**WEST**

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
04 Nov,24	AL WASL FC (UAE)	1-1 (1-0)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
04 Nov,24	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	5-1 (2-1)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
04 Nov,24	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)	1-1 (0-0)	AL GHARAFSA SC (QAT)
04 Nov,24	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	3-0 (2-0)	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)
05 Nov,24	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)	0-1 (0-0)	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)
05 Nov,24	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)	5-1 (3-0)	AL AIN FC (UAE)
25 Nov,24	AL AIN FC (UAE)	1-2 (0-0)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
25 Nov,24	AL GHARAFSA SC (QAT)	1-3 (0-0)	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)
25 Nov,24	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)	0-0 (0-0)	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)
25 Nov,24	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)	1-1 (0-1)	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)
26 Nov,24	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	1-3 (0-1)	AL WASL FC (UAE)
26 Nov,24	AL SADD SC (QAT)	1-1 (0-1)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
02 Dec,24	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)	2-1 (0-1)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
02 Dec,24	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	2-2 (1-1)	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)
02 Dec,24	AL WASL FC (UAE)	1-1 (0-0)	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)
02 Dec,24	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)	1-2 (0-0)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
03 Dec,24	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)	1-1 (1-0)	AL AIN FC (UAE)
03 Dec,24	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	3-0 (1-0)	AL GHARAFSA SC (QAT)
03 Feb,25	AL AIN FC (UAE)	1-2 (1-0)	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)
03 Feb,25	AL SADD SC (QAT)	1-3 (1-2)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)

**WEST**

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
03 Feb,25	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)	1-1 (1-0)	AL SHORTA (IRQ)
03 Feb,25	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)	4-0 (2-0)	AL WASL FC (UAE)
04 Feb,25	AL GHARAF A SC (QAT)	1-0 (1-0)	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)
04 Feb,25	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	4-1 (4-0)	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)
17 Feb,25	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)	2-1 (1-1)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
17 Feb,25	AL SHORTA (IRQ)	2-0 (0-0)	AL AIN FC (UAE)
17 Feb,25	PERSEPOLIS FC (IRN)	0-0 (0-0)	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)
17 Feb,25	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	4-2 (3-1)	AL GHARAF A SC (QAT)
18 Feb,25	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)	0-2 (0-0)	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)
18 Feb,25	AL WASL FC (UAE)	0-2 (0-1)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)



# ROUND OF 16

## 1ST LEG

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
03 Mar,25	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)	0-0 (0-0)	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)
03 Mar,25	AL WASL FC (UAE)	1-1 (1-0)	AL SADD SC (QAT)
04 Mar,25	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)	0-1 (0-1)	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)
04 Mar,25	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)	1-0 (1-0)	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)
04 Mar,25	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)	1-3 (0-2)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
04 Mar,25	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)	0-0 (0-0)	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)
05 Mar,25	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)	2-0 (2-0)	GWANGJU FC (KOR)
05 Mar,25	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)	1-0 (0-0)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)

## 2ND LEG

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
10 Mar,25	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)	3-0 (2-0)	ESTEGHLAL FC (IRN)
10 Mar,25	AL SADD SC (QAT)	3-1 (3-1)	AL WASL FC (UAE)
11 Mar,25	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)	4-1 (3-1)	SHANGHAI PORT FC (CHN)
11 Mar,25	JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM FC (MAS)	0-1 (0-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
11 Mar,25	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	4-0 (2-0)	PAKHTAKOR (UZB)
11 Mar,25	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	2-0 (0-0)	AL RAYYAN SC (QAT)
12 Mar,25	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)	4-0 (1-0)	SHANGHAI SHENHUA FC (CHN)
12 Mar,25	GWANGJU FC (KOR)	3-0 a.e.t. (2-0,1-0)	VISSEL KOBE (JPN)





## QUARTER-FINALS

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
25 Apr,25	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	7-0 (3-0)	GWANGJU FC (KOR)
26 Apr,25	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	3-0 (3-0)	BURIRAM UNITED (THA)
26 Apr,25	YOKOHAMA F. MARINOS (JPN)	1-4 (0-3)	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)
27 Apr,25	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)	3-2 a.e.t. (2-2,2-1)	AL SADD SC (QAT)

## SEMI-FINALS

DATE	TEAM A	SCORE	TEAM B
29 Apr,25	AL HILAL SFC (KSA)	1-3 (1-2)	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)
30 Apr,25	AL NASSR CLUB (KSA)	2-3 (1-2)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)



## FINAL

Date	Team A	Score	Team B
03 May,25	AL AHLI SAUDI FC (KSA)	2-0 (2-0)	KAWASAKI FRONTALE (JPN)



# REFEREES



# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE™ 2024/25

## Refereeing Technical Report

### 1. Summary

A total of 83 referees, 61 assistant referees, and 29 Video Match Officials (VMOs) were appointed to officiate the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25.

REFEREES	MA
Adam Peter Kersey	AUS
Daniel John Elder	AUS
Alireza Faghani	AUS
Jonathan Adam Barreiro	AUS
Shaun Robert Evans	AUS
Ammar Ebrahim Hasan Mahfoodh	BHR
Fu Ming	CHN
Jin Jingyuan	CHN
Ma Ning	CHN
Wang Di	CHN
Zhang Lei	CHN
Tam Ping Wun	HKG
Thoriq Munir Alkatiri	IDN
Yudi Nurcahya	IDN
Bijan Heidari	IRN
Kazemi Syedvahid	IRN
Mood Bonyadifard	IRN
Morteza Mansourian	IRN
Ahmed Kadhim Gatea Rsetam	IRQ
Mohanad Qasim Eesee Sarray	IRQ
Yousif Saeed Hasan	IRQ
Zaid Thamer Mohammed	IRQ

Adham Mohammad Tumah Makhadmeh	JOR
Ahmed Faisal Mohammad Alali	JOR
Mohammad Hasan Mahmoud Arafah	JOR
Yusuke Araki	JPN
Hiroki Kasahara	JPN
Jumpei Iida	JPN
Hiroyuki Kimura	JPN
Ryo Tanimoto	JPN
Chae Sang-hyeop	KOR
Choi Hyun-jai	KOR
Kim Dae-yong	KOR
Kim Hee-gon	KOR
Kim Jong-hyeok	KOR
Kim Woo-sung	KOR
Ko Hyung-jin	KOR
Shukri Hussain A Alhunfush	KSA
Faisal Sulaiman A Albalawi	KSA
Khalid Saleh H Alturais	KSA
Majed Mohammed H Alshamrani	KSA
Mohammed Khled S Al Hoish	KSA
Abdullah M M H M H Jamali	KUW
Ahmad Kh Y Y A Alali	KUW
Ammar I S A M Ashkanani	KUW
Saud M M T A Alsamhan	KUW
Ali Alachkar	LBN
Hussein Abo Yehia	LBN
Muhammad Nazmi Bin Nasaruddin	MAS



Razlan Joffri Bin Ali	MAS
Suhaizi Bin Shukri	MAS
Tuan Mohd Yaasin Bin Tuan Mohd Hanafiah	MAS
Benjamin James Abraham	NZL
Ahmed Abu Bakar Said Al Kaf	OMA
Mahmood Salim Said Al Majarafi	OMA
Omar Mubarak Mazaroua Al Yaqoubi	OMA
Qasim Matar Ali Al-Hatmi	OMA
Yahya Ahmed Ibrahim Al Balushi	OMA
Abdulhadi Alasmar M A Al-Ruaile	QAT
Abdulrahman Ibrahim Y J Al-Jassim	QAT
Mohammed Ahmed K D Al-Shammari	QAT
Salman Ahmad Falahi	QAT
Ahmad A'Qashah Bin Ahmad Al'Badowe	SGP
Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari Bin Jahari	SGP
Hanna Hattab	SYR

Pechsri Mongkolchai	THA
Sivakorn Pu-Udom	THA
Songkran Bunmeekiart	THA
Wiwat Jumpaoon	THA
Sadullo Gulmurodi	TJK
Nasrullo Kabirov	TJK
Sayyodjon Zainiddinov	TJK
Resul Mammedov	TKM
Adel Ali Ahmed Khamis Alnaqbi	UAE
Ahmed Eisa Mohamed Darwish	UAE
Omar Mohamed Ahmed Hassan Alali	UAE
Sultan Mohamed Saleh Yousif Alhammadi	UAE
Yahya Ali Mohammad Hassan Almulla	UAE
Aziz Asimov	UZB
Rustam Lutfullin	UZB
Asker Nadjafaliev	UZB
Akhrol Riskullaev	UZB
Ilgiz Tantashev	UZB

ASSISTANT REFEREES	MA
Anton Shchetinin	AUS
Ashley Warwick Beecham	AUS
George Lakrindis	AUS
Owen Goldrick	AUS
Ma Ji	CHN
Zhang Cheng	CHN
Zhou Fei	CHN
Farhad Moravjeji	IRN
Alireza Ildorom	IRN
Saeid Ghasemi	IRN
Ahmed Sabah Qasim Al-Baghdadi	IRQ

Watheq Mdallal Obaid Al-Swaiedi	IRQ
Ahmad Moannes Nadi Alroalle	JOR
Mohammad Mustafa Hassan Alkalaf	JOR
Jun Mihara	JPN
Yosuke Takebe	JPN
Takeshi Asada	JPN
Kota Watanabe	JPN
Yusuke Hamamoto	JPN
Bang Gi-yeol	KOR
Jang Jong-pil	KOR
Kwak Seung-soon	KOR
Park Kyun-yong	KOR
Park Sang-jun	KOR
Yoon Jae-yeol	KOR
Mohammed Maki A Alabakry	KSA
Hesham Mohammed A Alrefaei	KSA
Khalaf Zaid M Alshammari	KSA
Abdulrahim Habeeb T Alshammari	KSA
Omar Ali A Aljamal	KSA
Saad Saud S Alsubaie	KSA
Yasir Abdullah S Alsultan	KSA
Abdulhadi M O A B Alanezi	KUW
Ahmad S H M Abbas	KUW
Ali T H A Jraq	KUW
Saoud A J H J Alshemali	KUW
Mohamad Mu Azi Bin Zainal Abidin	MAS
Mohamad Zairul Bin Khalil Tan	MAS
Hamed Talib Saif Al Ghafri	OMA
Abu Bakar Salim Mahad Al-Amri	OMA
Nasser Salim Abdullah Ambusaidi	OMA
Rashid Hamed Ali Al Ghaithi	OMA



Majid Hudaires M A Alshammari	QAT
Ramzan Saeed M A Al-Naemi	QAT
Saoud Ahmed S A Almaqaleh	QAT
Taleb Salem H A Al-Marri	QAT
Abdul Hannan Bin Abdul Hasim	SGP
Andy Tan Mint Land	SGP
Rawut Nakarit	THA
Tanate Chuchuen	THA
Vafo Karaev	TJK
Hasan Karimov	TJK
Farkhod Kuralov	TJK
Ahmed Saeed Ahmed Alasal Alrashdi	UAE
Jasem Abdulla Yousef Abdulla Al-Ali	UAE
Mohamed Ahmed Yousef Abdulla Alhammadi	UAE
Sabet Obaid Suroor Sabet Al-Ali	UAE
Timur Gaynullin	UZB
Sanjar Shayusupov	UZB
Andrey Tsapenko	UZB
Alisher Usmanov	UZB

VIDEO MATCH OFFICIALS	MA
Alexander George King	AUS
Katherine Margaret Jacewicz	AUS
Du Jianxin	CHN
Shen Yin hao	CHN
Koki Nagamine	JPN
Lee Seul-gi	KOR
Abdullah Dhafer A Alshehri	KSA
Sultan Sanat L Alharbi	KSA
Ibrahim Abdullah M Aldakhil	KSA
Mamdouh Mufareh A Al Shadan	KSA
Abdullah H A M GH H Alkandari	KUW
Abdullah M E A H Arab	KUW
Hashem S H H M Albrahim	KUW
Shiekh Ahmad Alaeddin	LBN
Abdulla Ali A A Al-Marri	QAT
Faisal Eid D A Alshammari	QAT
Khamis Mohammed S A Al-Marri	QAT
Meshari Ali A R Alshamari	QAT
Mohamed Ahmed E E Mohamed	QAT
Yousuf Aref M A Al-Shamari	QAT
Zahy Snaid S A Alshammari	QAT
Torphong Somsing	THA
Abdullo Davlatov	TJK
Easa Khalifa Ahmed Khalaf Alhajeri	UAE
Mohammed Obaid Khadim Mohammed	UAE
Saqr Hamdan Saif Alalkeem Alzaabi	UAE
Rakhimbek Karimov	UZB
Abdurashid Khudoyberganov	UZB
Firdavs Norsafarov	UZB



## 2. Video Assistant Referee (VAR)

The VAR system was implemented in a total of 118 matches, beginning from the League Stage. According to the stringent criteria and specifications overseen by FIFA, all Match Officials selected to officiate as Video Match Officials obtained licenses to use the technology. During the post-match online debriefings, the best AFC Referee Technical Instructors addressed areas for further development, based on the analysis of particular match situations.

### 2.1 VAR Implementation Statistics

VAR REVIEWS	TOTAL	DECISIONS CHANGED	DECISIONS CONFIRMED
<b>TOTAL REVIEWS</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>4</b>
On Field Reviews	48	44	4
Only VAR Reviews	15	15	0
Penalty area incidents reviewed	26	25	1
Goals reviewed	21	20	1
Encroachment by GK in PK reviewed	0	0	0
Potential red card incidents reviewed	16	14	2
Mistaken identity situations reviewed	0	0	0
Average reviews per match	0.53		
1 Review every # matches	1.87		

There was a match average of 0.53 reviews per match, equivalent to 1 review every 1.87 matches.



### 3. Technical Summary

#### 3.1 General Performance

Across 121 matches — including three qualifying play-off games — referee assessors and instructors evaluated the match officials' overall performance as "good."

Throughout the season, a new evaluation scheme was fully implemented for the first time, enabling continuous performance development. The referee assessors and instructors too played a crucial role in monitoring and evaluating the performance of match officials throughout the season. Their close observation and detailed match reports provided valuable feedback to the officials, helping them improve their performance over time.

The referees also benefited from post-match online briefings, which were conducted seven times throughout the season by the AFC's top Referee Technical Educators (RTEs).

#### 3.2 General Management

A total of 457 disciplinary sanctions were issued at the AFC Champions League Elite™ 2024/25 from the Preliminary Stage, of which 432 were cautions (yellow cards). Six (6) sending offs took place after a second caution and 19 direct red cards were shown. There was an average of 3.57 yellow cards and 0.21 red cards per match.



# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE™ FINALS JEDDAH 2025

## Refereeing Technical Report

### 1. Summary

Since the competition's revamp, the first-ever Finals was held in Jeddah between April 25 and May 3, 2025, whereby a total of 33 match officials, comprising 15 referees and assistant referees each, as well as three video match officials were appointed.

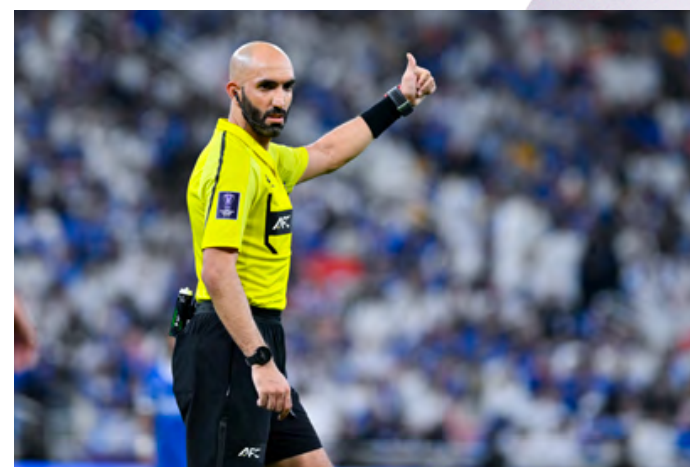
REFEREES	MA
Alireza Faghani	AUS
Ma Ning	CHN
Adham Mohammad Tumah Makhadmeh	JOR
Yusuke Araki	JPN
Kim Jong-hyeok	KOR
Khalid Saleh H Alturais	KSA
Mohammed Khled S Al Hoish	KSA
Ahmad Kh Y Y A Alali	KUW
Muhammad Nazmi Bin Nasaruddin	MAS
Ahmed Abu Bakar Said Al Kaf	OMA
Abdulrahman Ibrahim Y J Al-Jassim	QAT
Salman Ahmad Falahi	QAT
Adel Ali Ahmed Khamis Alnaqbi	UAE
Omar Mohamed Ahmed Hassan Alali	UAE
Ilgiz Tantashev	UZB

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Zhou Fei	CHN
Mohammad Mustafa Hassan Alkalaf	JOR
Jun Mihara	JPN
Park Kyun-yong	KOR
Mohammed Maki A Alabakry	KSA
Khalaf Zaid M Alshammari	KSA
Abdulhadi M O A B Alanezi	KUW
Mohamad Zairul Bin Khalil Tan	MAS
Al-Amri Abu Bakar Salim Mahad	OMA
Ramzan Saeed M A Al-Naemi	QAT
Taleb Salem H A Al-Marri	QAT
Ahmed Saeed Ahmed Alasal Alrashdi	UAE
Mohamed Ahmed Yousef Abdulla Alhammadi	UAE
Andrey Tsapenko	UZB

VIDEO MATCH OFFICIALS	MA
Fu Ming	CHN
Khamis Mohammed S A Al-Marri	QAT
Muhammad Taqi Aljaafari Bin Jahari	SGP

Technical Instructors/Assessors	MA
Ali Ahmed I Altraifi	KSA
Subkhiddin Bin Mohd Salleh	MAS
Valentin Kovalenko	UZB

FITNESS INSTRUCTORS	MA
Choi Young-in	KOR
Ganesan S/O Maniam	SGP



## 1.2 Support Team

**Referees' Liaison Officers (LOs):** A team of LOs supported the coordination of all logistic requirements.

**Players Team:** Local teams took part in the referees practical training session.

**Medical Team:** A medical doctor was stationed at the AFC HQ hotel throughout the competition, while a team of physiotherapists and masseurs ensured the referees' physical conditioning. Additionally, an ambulance and paramedics were stationed at the training venue daily to provide emergency and first aid treatment as needed.

## 2. Preparatory Course

The referees and assistant referees participated in a two-day preparatory course from April 23 to 24, 2025, consisting of both theoretical and practical training sessions with Instant Feedback set up.

### 2.1 Practical Sessions

Two teams and a coach assisted to simulate match incidents based on the instructors' training plan. Fitness training was conducted alongside Instant Feedback sessions to ensure Match Officials were suitably prepared for their upcoming appointments.

### 2.2 Theoretical Sessions

The theoretical sessions were designed to further enhance the technical knowledge of the match officials and optimise the level of consistency in their application of the Laws of the Game. Numerous match incident videos were reviewed and discussed in order to facilitate the match officials' participation, analysis and consensus; relevant information on fitness and administration was also shared.

## 3. During Competition

### 3.1 Practical Sessions

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

### 3.2 Match Assessment

All match footages were analysed live by a video referee assessor at the Remote Monitoring Room located in the referees' hotel. The video referee assessor tracked the match situations, compiling all relevant details: time and nature of incidents, decisions and sanctions, officials involved and other inputs for discussion.

Referee assessors were also assigned to observe the match officials' performance live at the match venue. The referee assessors closely monitored the team's officiating capabilities and decisions throughout the match, and provided first-hand feedback.

### 3.3 Match Debriefing Sessions

The match debriefings conducted for the appointed match officials served as a vital learning tool, whereby significant incidents from the previous matches were analysed to prepare the officials for upcoming challenges.

By addressing specific match incidents and providing guidance on officiating standards, the instructors highlighted areas for improvement and provided advice to ensure consistency and uniformity in foul recognition and Laws of the Game interpretation.

## 3.4 Match Preparation Sessions

Technical Study Group presented insights related to team tactics, individual players' styles and behaviours, which proved to be beneficial for the match officials' preparation and understanding of football dynamics. An emphasis was also put on the pivotal role that the match officials play as a football developer.

## 4. Video Assistant Referee (VAR) System

The VAR system was implemented for all seven matches.

### 4.1 Technical Setup

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

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

## 4.2 VAR Implementation Statistics

VAR REVIEWS		TOTAL	DECISIONS CHANGED	DECISIONS CONFIRMED
	<b>TOTAL REVIEWS</b>	4	4	0
On Field Reviews		3	3	0
Only VAR Reviews		1	1	0
Penalty area incidents reviewed		3	3	0
Goals reviewed		1	1	0
Encroachment by GK in PK reviewed		0	0	0
Potential red card incidents reviewed		0	0	0
Mistaken identity situations reviewed		0	0	0
Average reviews per match		0.57		
1 Review every # matches		1.75		

There was a match average of 0.57 reviews per match, equivalent to 1 review every 1.75 matches.

## 5. Technical Summary

### 5.1 General Performance

The referee assessors and instructors' team, through their match reports and close monitoring, rated the match officials' performance as 'good'. The daily training, match debriefings, and other relevant activities that were organised to raise the refereeing standards contributed significantly to decision-making as the tournament progressed.

### 5.2 General Management

A total of 26 disciplinary sanctions were issued at the AFC Champions League Elite™ Finals Jeddah 2025, of which 24 were cautions (yellow cards). Two sending-offs took place after a second caution. There was a match average of 3.43 yellow cards and 0.29 red cards.



## SOCIAL

*Impressions: 1.45 billion*



*Engagements: 62.5 million*



*Video views: 469.12 million*



## WEBSITE

*Users: 792,969*



*Page views: 2,875,696*





# *AFC COMMITTEES*

## COMPETITIONS COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
DR. TRAN QUOC TUAN	CHAIRPERSON	VFF
MR. DASTANBEK KONOKBAEV	DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON	KFU
MR. JAMES JOHNSON	Member	Football Australia
MR. KAZI MD. SALAHUDDIN	Member	BFF
MR. YANG XU	Member	CFA
MR. IWAN BOEDIANTO	Member	PSSI
MR. TSUNEYASU MIYAMOTO	Member	JFA
MR. CHUN HANJIN	Member	KFA
MR. OSAMA HUSAIN SULTAN	Member	KFA
MR. SEMAAN DOUAIHY	Member	LFA
MR. TUN TUN AUNG	Member	MFF
DR. AHMED KHELLIL ABBASSI	Member	QFA
MR. IBRAHIM S. ALKASSIM	Member	SAFF
MR. DAVLATMAND ISLOMOV	Member	TFF
MR. PAIRIT TANPAIRIEE	Member	FA Thailand
MR. MOHAMMED ABDULLA HAZZAM ALDHAHERI	Member	UAE FA

## TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
MR. KOHZO TASHIMA	CHAIRPERSON	JFA
MR. ADNAN DARJAL MOTAR	DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON	IFA
MR. MOHAMMAD YOSUF KARGAR	Member	AFF

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

## REFEREES COMMITTEE

NAME	POSITION	MEMBER ASSOCIATION
MR. HANY TALEB B S AL-RAEESI	CHAIRPERSON	QFA
MR. RAVSHAN IRMATOV	DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON	UFA
MR. CUI ENLEI	Member	CFA
MS. SACHIKO YAMAGISHI	Member	JFA
MR. MUN JIN HEE	Member	KFA
MR. NURDIN BUKUEV	Member	KFU
MR. ALI ALTRAIFI	Member	SAFF
MR. SALEM ALI ALSHAMSI	Member	UAE FA

A large stadium at night, viewed from a high angle, with a purple overlay. The text "PREVIOUS WINNERS" is written in a large, white, italicized font across the center. The stadium is filled with spectators, and the pitch is visible in the foreground. The lighting is dramatic, with bright spotlights illuminating the field and the stands. The overall atmosphere is one of excitement and anticipation.

# *PREVIOUS WINNERS*

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2023/24

## Al Ain FC (UAE)

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

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

11/05/24	<b>Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN)</b> Asahi Uenaka 72' Kota Watanabe 84'	2-1 (0-1)	<b>Al Ain FC (UAE)</b> Mohammed Al Baloushi 12'
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International Stadium Yokohama (Yokohama)

#### SECOND LEG

11/05/24	<b>Al Ain FC (UAE)</b> Soufiane Rahimi 8', 67' Alejandro Romero 33' Kodjo Laba 90'+1, 90'+5	5-1 (2-1)	<b>Yokohama F. Marinos (JPN)</b> Yan Matheus 40'
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Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium (Al Ain)

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2022

## Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)

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

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

29/04/23	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b> Salem Al Dawsari 13'	1 – 1 (1-0)	<b>Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)</b> Shinzo Koroki 53'
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King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)

#### SECOND LEG

06/05/23	<b>Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)</b> André Carrillo (OG) 48'	1-0 (0-0)	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b>
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Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2021

### Al Hilal SFC (KSA)

FINAL			
23/11/21	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b> Nasser Al Dawsari 1' Moussa Marega 63'	2-1 (1-0)	<b>FC Pohang Steelers (KOR)</b> Mohammed Al Baloushi 12'

King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2020

### Ulsan Hyundai FC (KOR)

FINAL			
19/12/20	<b>Persepolis FC (IRN)</b> Mehdi Abdighara 45'	1-2 (1-1)	<b>Ulsan Hyundai FC (KOR)</b> Gleidionor Figueiredo Pinto Junior 45+4', 55' PK

Al Janoub Stadium (Doha)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2019

### Al Hilal SFC (KSA)

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

FINAL			
FIRST LEG			
9/11/19	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b> Andre Carrillo 60'	1-0 (0-0)	<b>Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)</b>

King Saud University Stadium (Riyadh)

SECOND LEG			
11/05/24	<b>Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)</b>	0-2 (0-0)	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b> Salem Al Dawsari 74' Bafétimbi Gomis 90+3'

Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2018

## Kashima Antlers (JPN)

Kashima Antlers won 2-0 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

3/11/18	<b>Kashima Antlers (JPN)</b> Léo Silva 58' Serginho 70'	2-0 (0-0)	<b>Persepolis (IRN)</b>
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Kashima Soccer Stadium, Kashima

#### SECOND LEG

10/11/18	<b>Persepolis (IRN)</b>	0-0 (0-0)	<b>Kashima Antlers (JPN)</b>
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Azadi Stadium, Tehran

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2017

## Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)

Urawa Red Diamonds won 2-1 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

18/11/17	<b>Al Hilal (KSA)</b> Omar Khribin 37'	1-1 (1-1)	<b>Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)</b> Rafael Silva 7'
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King Fahd International Stadium, Riyadh

#### SECOND LEG

25/11/17	<b>Urawa Red Diamonds (JPN)</b> Rafael Silva 7'	1-0 (0-0)	<b>Al Hilal (KSA)</b>
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Saitama Stadium 2002, Saitama

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2016

## Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors won 3-2 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

19/11/16	<b>Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)</b> Leonardo 70', 77'	2-1 (0-0)	<b>Al Ain (UAE)</b> Danilo Asprilla 63'
----------	----------------------------------------------------------	-----------	--------------------------------------------

Jeonju World Cup Stadium, Jeonju

#### SECOND LEG

26/11/16	<b>Al Ain (UAE)</b> Lee Myung-joo 34'	1-1 (1-1)	<b>Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)</b> Han Kyo-won 30'
----------	------------------------------------------	-----------	--------------------------------------------------------

Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2015

## Guangzhou FC (CHN)

Guangzhou FC won 1-0 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

07/11/15	<b>Al Ahli FC (UAE)</b>	0-0 (0-0)	<b>Guangzhou FC (CHN)</b>
----------	-------------------------	-----------	---------------------------

Rashid Stadium (Dubai)

#### SECOND LEG

21/11/15	<b>Guangzhou FC (CHN)</b> Elkeson 64'	1-0 (0-0)	<b>Al Ahli FC (UAE)</b>
----------	------------------------------------------	-----------	-------------------------

Tianhe Stadium (Guangzhou)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2014

### Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)

Western Sydney Wanderers won 1-0 on aggregate

#### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

25/10/14	<b>Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)</b> Tomi Juric 64'	1-0 (0-0)	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b>
----------	---------------------------------------------------------	-----------	---------------------------

Parramatta Stadium (Sydney)

#### SECOND LEG

01/11/14	<b>Al Hilal SFC (KSA)</b>	0-0 (0-0)	<b>Western Sydney Wanderers (AUS)</b>
----------	---------------------------	-----------	---------------------------------------

King Fahd International Stadium (Riyadh)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2013

### Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)

Aggregate score 3-3. Guangzhou Evergrande won on away goals

#### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

26/10/13	<b>FC Seoul (KOR)</b> Sergio Escudero 11' Dejan Damjanovic 83'	2-2 (1-1)	<b>Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)</b> Elkeson 30' Gao Lin 58'
----------	----------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------	-----------------------------------------------------------------

Seoul World Cup Stadium (Seoul)

#### SECOND LEG

09/11/13	<b>Guangzhou Evergrande (CHN)</b> Elkeson 30'	1-1 (0-0)	<b>FC Seoul (KOR)</b> Dejan Damjanovic 83'
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Tianhe Stadium (Guangzhou)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2012

### Ulsan Hyundai (KOR)

FINAL			
10/11/12	<b>Ulsan Hyundai (KOR)</b> Kwak Tae-hwi 13' Rafinha 68' Kim Seung-yong 75'	3-0 (1-0)	<b>Al Ahli (KSA)</b>

Ulsan Munsu Football Stadium (Ulsan)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2011

### Al Sadd (QAT)

FINAL			
04/11/11	<b>Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)</b> Eninho 19' Lee Sung-hyun 90+2'	2-2 (1-1) After extra-time. Al Sadd win 4-2 on penalties	<b>Al Sadd (QAT)</b> Sim Woo-yeon 30' og, Abdul Kader Keita 61'

Jeonju World Cup Stadium (Jeonju)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2010

### Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)

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

National Stadium (Tokyo)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2009

### Pohang Steelers (KOR)

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

National Stadium (Tokyo)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2008

### Gamba Osaka (JPN)

Gamba Osaka won 5-0 on aggregate

#### FINAL

##### FIRST LEG

05/11/08	<b>Gamba Osaka (JPN)</b> Lucas 37' Yasuhito Endo 43' Michihiro Yasuda 68'	3-0 (2-0)	<b>Adelaide United (AUS)</b>
----------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------	------------------------------

Expo '70 Stadium (Osaka)

##### SECOND LEG

12/11/08	<b>Adelaide United (AUS)</b>	0-2 (0-2)	<b>Gamba Osaka (JPN)</b> Lucas 4', 14'
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Hindmarsh Stadium (Adelaide)

## AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2007

### Urawa Reds (JPN)

Urawa Reds won 3-1 on aggregate

#### FINAL

##### FIRST LEG

07/11/07	<b>Sepahan (IRN)</b> Mahmoud Karimi 47'	1-1 (0-1)	<b>Urawa Reds (JPN)</b> Robson Ponte 45'
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Foolad Shahr Stadium (Fuladshahr)

##### SECOND LEG

14/11/07	<b>Urawa Reds (JPN)</b> Yuichiro Nagai 22' Yuki Abe 71'	2-0 (1-0)	<b>Sepahan (IRN)</b>
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Saitama Stadium 2002 (Saitama)

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2006

## Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors won 3-2 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

01/11/06	<b>Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)</b> Yeom Ki-hun 59' Botti 90+1'	2-0 (0-0)	<b>Al Karama (SYR)</b>
----------	-----------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------	------------------------

Jeonju World Cup Stadium (Jeonju)

#### SECOND LEG

08/11/06	<b>Al Karama (SYR)</b> Iyad Mando 54' Mohanad Ibrahim 60'	2-1 (0-0)	<b>Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR)</b> Ze Carlo 88'
----------	-----------------------------------------------------------------	-----------	-----------------------------------------------------

Khaled Ibn Al Waleed Stadium (Homs)

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2005

## Al Ittihad (KSA)

Al Ittihad won 5-3 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

26/10/05	<b>Al Ain (UAE)</b> Ali Msarri 50'	1-1 (0-0)	<b>Al Ittihad (KSA)</b> Mohamed Kallon 85' PK
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Tahnoun Bin Mohammed stadium (Al Ain City)

#### SECOND LEG

05/11/05	<b>Al Ittihad (KSA)</b> Mohamed Kallon 2' Mohammed Noor 33' Joseph-Desire Job 57' Ahmed Dokhi 69'	4-2 (2-0)	<b>Al Ain (UAE)</b> Shehab Ahmed 55' PK Luis Tejada 90'
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Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium (Jeddah)

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2004

## Al Ittihad (KSA)

Al Ittihad won 6-3 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

24/11/04	<b>Al Ittihad (KSA)</b> Redha Tukar 28'	1-3 (1-1)	<b>Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)</b> Denis Laktionov 27' Kim Do-hoon 81' Jang Hak-young 90'
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Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium (Jeddah)

#### SECOND LEG

01/12/04	<b>Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma (KOR)</b>	0-5 (0-1)	<b>Al Ittihad (KSA)</b> Redha Tukar 27' Hamzah Idris 45', Mohammed Noor 55', 78' Manaf Abushgeer 90'
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Tancheon Sports Complex (Seongnam)

# AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ 2003

## Al Ain (UAE)

Al Ain won 2-1 on aggregate

### FINAL

#### FIRST LEG

03/10/03	<b>Al Ain (UAE)</b> Salam Jawhar 40' Mohammed Omar 75'	2-0 (1-0)	<b>BEC Tero Sasana (THA)</b>
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Tahnoun Bin Mohammed stadium (Al Ain City)

#### SECOND LEG

11/10/03	<b>BEC Tero Sasana (THA)</b> Therdsak Chaiman 60' PK	1-0 (0-0)	<b>Al Ain (UAE)</b>
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Rajamangala National Stadium (Bangkok)

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