



COACHES CIRCLE

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



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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH 
ANGE POSTECOGLOU

PRICELESS

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Thereafter, public health issues overshadowed all else, and soon anxiety over job security, the economy and social isolation became a widespread and distressing by-product of the crisis.

Meanwhile, sporting events were cancelled or postponed, and football, the world's favourite game, found itself in 'suspended animation'. As the old saying goes, 'You never know what you have until you lose it.'

The cessation of play reminded us all of the game's importance. As Carlo Ancelotti once said: "Football is the most important of the less important things in the world." It is not life or death, but, for a vast number of people, the game is a way of life, a focal point, a means of expression, an interest and a social/cultural phenomenon - in a word, it is priceless.

The value of football to young people can't be overstated. It is a sporting democracy which offers educational values, health benefits, social interaction and playing opportunities. It is a wonderful vehicle for personal and sporting development. Young people love to play football, to experience through the game a joyous way of living, with fluid movement, playfulness, co-operation, competition, challenge, commitment, celebrations, commiserations, energy and fun. Above all, it encourages social integration and inclusion, offering children the



The AFC Champions League 2020 recommenced in September, with Qatar hosting the West region Group Stage under strict health and safety regulations.



In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh Football Federation distributed meals to underprivileged people, while ensuring that safety measures were respected.



Many of AFC's Member Associations swung into action in the face of the pandemic; the All India Football Federation assisted in building COVID-19 testing centres.

chance to build relationships while nurturing their love of the ball and their fascination with the game itself.

World champion coach Vicente del Bosque of Spain, a technical guru and a caring man, supported the community aspect when he said: "Football has an important role to play in society. Players should have a sense of social responsibility."

Another legend of the technical area was Jock Stein. The former Glasgow Celtic manager, sadly no longer with us, was the first British coach to win the European Cup (now known as the UEFA Champions League), and was renowned as a champion of the supporters.

A famous quote of his – "Football without fans is nothing" – is preserved for posterity on his statue outside Celtic Park.

At a time of empty stadiums, of cardboard-cut-out figures in the stands and recorded crowd noises during televised

matches, Jock's words resonate. It is impossible to compensate for the missing fans, for the atmosphere which they generate and for the emotion they bring to the professional game. It seems a lifetime ago that 60,000 fans packed the Saltama Stadium in Japan for the second-leg match of the AFC Champions League final between Urawa Red Diamonds and Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia, generating a mood of intensity, passion and excitement. But this is not a one-way track. Football also gives something to the fans. For many it is a passion, a lifestyle and an interest that engages and absorbs them. It is an antidote to the stresses and strains of daily life, a remedy for boredom.

The words of P.J. O'Rourke are relevant in this context: "Soccer matches should be something special, something people eagerly look forward to, something that brightens their life."

To a vast number of people, football really matters.

For the privileged few, the game is also a profession. Players, coaches, referees, doctors, physiotherapists, administrators, journalists, agents, sport scientists and others are the lucky ones whose passion is also their business. Some find fame and fortune; others make a living; while many contribute for a short time before they return to normal life. Meanwhile, TV and sports companies make money from football, but they also contribute substantially to its development, promotion and progress. Without investment, the grassroots suffer, the tutoring of talent is limited, infrastructure does not improve and the education of coaches and referees is restricted. Football at the top-level has become big business, an enormously valuable product with a remarkable following. For its complex array of



Persepolis FC (IRN) faced Al Nassr (KSA) in the Semi-final at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha, Qatar, in October.

stakeholders and interested parties, it has become more than a game.

Football, with all its social, cultural and historical complexities, has a global appeal. As the writer Germaine Greer pronounced: "Soccer is an art central to our culture."

The COVID-19 pandemic has made people reflect on life's core values and activities, and although it fades into insignificance in comparison to the public's health and wellbeing, the game's relevance, in my view, has been reinforced. For a vast number of people, life without football would be a poorer place. And, as the game slowly recovers from lockdown and travel restrictions, competitions begin to restart, albeit in staccato fashion and sometimes in new formats.

Having reflected during these troubled times, an incalculable number of players, coaches and fans from all levels of the game would agree that football is not just valuable - it's priceless.

“Football has an important role to play in society. Players should have a sense of social responsibility.”

Vicente del Bosque
Former Spain Team Manager

HIGH RISK, HIGH REWARDS

Born in Athens, but moved to Australia as a five-year-old.

Unwaveringly faithful to the footballing credo of his father Dimitris, alias 'Jim'.

A defender with 193 appearances for South Melbourne and four caps for Australia.

Captain and then coach – at the age of 31 – of South Melbourne, where he won two titles as player and two as coach.

Then, at the turn of the century, a first move from club to national-team football and a long spell in charge of Australia's age-limit teams. Then back to club football at Brisbane Roar before bouncing back into international football in 2013, when he replaced Holger Osieck at the helm of the senior national team. After leading Australia to victory at the AFC Asian Cup in 2015, he added the AFC Coach of the Year award to a collection of honours that currently stands at six titles as a player and sixteen as a coach.

Then, in 2018, another switch into club football and a move to Japan as manager of Yokohama F Marinos – and, one year later, the club's first J-League triumph in 15 years. He is, of course ...



**ANGE POSTECOGLU
(YOKOHAMA MARINOS)**

1 WHAT WOULD YOU SAY WERE THE MAIN INGREDIENTS OF YOUR SUCCESS WITH AUSTRALIA AT THE AFC ASIAN CUP 2015 AND YOKOHAMA MARINOS IN THE J-LEAGUE?

"Well, they are different challenges, even apart from the normal differences between club and national team football. With the AFC Asian Cup, the biggest challenge for me was that we'd gone through a sort of regeneration of the national team around 12 months prior to the Asian Cup. What we called our Golden Generation had retired pretty much at the same time and needed to be replaced. So, I decided that if we wanted to have any chance of success, the key was to get as much international football as possible for the new guys. That was a real challenge in terms of finding talent and finding players that we thought could adapt into national team football. So, we spent 12 months on just building a team with the 2015 Asian Cup in mind. It included going to the World Cup in Brazil in 2014 and going into the proverbial Group of Death with Chile, Holland and Spain. Taking a young team there was to all intents and purposes fairly risky, but, in the end, it was good for us because, having gone through that experience, going to the AFC Asian Cup became much less of a pressure situation.

"That was a rebuilding exercise in terms of the squad, whereas going to Yokohama was more about changing the manner in which we played. It was more about changing the focus and establishing how we were going to play our football. Setting up a style of play and sort of the first step in changing the players' mindset and convincing them that this was how we wanted to play the game.



Ange Postecoglou led the Yokohama F Marinos to J League victory in 2019, breaking a 15-year drought for the side.

"So, one was more of a challenge from a playing-squad perspective; the other one was challenging in terms of implanting a philosophy and style of football. Both needed some time. Both took 12 months, but both were ultimately successful.

"Japanese football, observing it from afar and then actually coaching in it, was incredibly technical with physically very fit and mobile players. But they tended to play in a fairly conservative way in possession and out of possession, even though I felt they had the quality not to do so. It was really a question of being more aggressive in everything we did.

"In possession, it was about moving the ball forward more

quickly. Being aggressive in the way we defended. So, we set about monitoring our football and trying to press more aggressively and higher up the park, press when we lost the ball. Trying to raise the tempo of everything just a little bit. The possession style was obviously very important, starting with some good building from the back. It has to be said that the rule change halfway through the season was a godsend to me. We were trying to build from deep anyway, but it just gave us a bit more breathing room. You know, teams were just waiting for us – and we had to wait until the ball cleared the penalty area to get moving. Suddenly, we could keep our centre-backs inside the penalty box and get going straight away. It certainly helped our game in the second half of the season."

2 HAVING EXPERIENCED BOTH, WHAT IS THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MANAGING A NATIONAL TEAM AND A CLUB SIDE?

“There’s the obvious thing that, at a club, you’re into day-to-day coaching. You miss that with a national team, because that is the way you build your relationships with the players and staff. You work with them and get their feedback, which doesn’t happen in national team football unless you are in training camps – and there’s a lot of time between camps. At a club, you are very much focused on the next game and the next result, which is much more immediate than with a national team.

One big difference is that in international football, everything you do is magnified. Every decision you make, and every outcome of those decisions, are magnified by X percentage. A loss in international football has much more impact than a loss in club football. The next game for the club can be three days away; the next game with the national team can be three months away. A loss for the national team can mean you’re immediately out of a tournament. Injuries can be critical, whereas in club football they tend to have less impact. In international football, a single injury can mean a player has to miss a whole tournament. So, everything is heightened and being a national team manager teaches you how to handle those pressurised situations. When I came back into club football and had an injury to deal with, I wasn’t as fazed. I knew that he could be back, say, in three weeks. If you’re preparing for an Asian Cup, it’s a case of ‘that’s him gone’.

“It’s about perspectives, but I guess you could say that club management is more fulfilling in that you have that daily contact with the players, whereas national team football gives you those unbelievable highs and lows.”

3 WERE THERE ANY CULTURAL DIFFERENCES YOU HAD TO OVERCOME TO SUCCEED IN JAPAN?

“That’s why I came here – to face the challenge of moving into a different culture in Japan. And there is a strong footballing culture in the country. Obviously, the greatest immediate challenge for me was the language barrier. Communication is such an important part of coaching and, suddenly, that’s sort of taken away from you because you need to do everything through a translator and a third party. But I was aware of that when I came here, so I just embraced that reality and set about focusing on the coaching and trusting my ability to get a message across.

“Even taking into account the language issue, I would still go back to saying the main challenge was addressing the conservative tendency in a football that I felt was, in general terms, very risk-averse. I thought that if I could break that down and convince my players that making a mistake was not the end of the world, it would give them belief that they were technically equipped to play a high-tempo possession-based game. It was about breaking that mindset – that worrying about making a mistake. It’s a very big part of Japanese culture not to want to do something that might cost the team a goal, cost the team a game. So, it was important to give them protection – to make



After leading his national men’s side to victory at the AFC Asian Cup in 2015, the Australian coach added the AFC Coach of the Year award to his large collection of honours.

it clear to them that ‘I will take responsibility’. Giving them that sort of belief allowed them to play well and start getting results.”

4 HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE OF MANAGEMENT?

“Evolving. Always evolving. The game changes. The world changes. People are changing and the way we interact is changing. As a manager, I have always had a very clear idea about how I want the game to be played and I have made that clear to the players I’ve worked with, the coaching staff, the directors. But the way I’ve delivered that message has evolved over time. At the beginning it was just ‘this is the way we’re going to do it’ with no questions asked. Then you get to the stage where people do start to ask you questions. You need

to have the answers. I still try to keep a certain distance from the players, the staff and so on but I do make efforts to engage them in what we're doing, why we're doing it this way ... persuading them to buy into it. I try to make it clear that life is something more than winning. It's also about the way we play our football, the way we approach everything we do in our professional lives. Encouraging them to believe that this is bigger than just winning a game of football.

"I guess that's the main evolution in my style, engaging the people I work with, not just being direct or blunt but also painting a whole picture, telling them a story and hoping that they are prepared to buy into it. I'm sure that if I'm still involved in coaching in ten years' time, I will have evolved further. The way I interpret the game has never shifted. But I'm now releasing more responsibilities to other people and encouraging them to do things on their own and drive things for themselves, instead of me having my hands all over everything – even if my hands are all over everything!"

5 WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO SURVIVAL AS A TOP COACH?

"Having got to this stage of my coaching career, I think the key is not to slip into 'survival mode'. The world has changed, and we'll never again see the likes of Arsène Wenger and Sir Alex Ferguson doing such long stints at a single club. These days, even success doesn't earn you that sort of continuity – and maybe, on the other hand, as a coach you might want to try something new when you have been successful. The important thing is to forget about survival as a factor in what you do.



Socceroos head coach Ange Postecoglou speaks to players during a training session in Sydney ahead of the FIFA World Cup Brazil 2014.

"If you're only trying to survive, the people around you will sense that. The players will sense that. Everyone will sense it. And if you're focusing on your own survival, inevitably you'll start to take decisions that you don't really believe in. I've never really thought about survival in any of the jobs I've had. And I really believe that it impacts more heavily on the people around you than it does on yourself. That's something you sometimes don't realise. You're asking people to believe in something and go on a bit of a journey, so if they sense that you're basically only concerned about your own survival in the job, you'll quickly lose them.

"Every manager will go through a challenging period when results are not there. Nobody is immune to that, especially in today's world. One thing I've always said to other coaches is: 'don't think about the length of your contract; don't think about how long the chairman says you've got'. Just coach for the moment. You know you won't be there for ever, so don't let that become an inhibiting factor."

6 WHAT IS YOUR ASSESSMENT OF TOP-LEVEL FOOTBALL IN ASIA TODAY?

"There is a barrier to break. We can talk about the number of foreign managers who come to this part of the world and say they can't believe the levels of technique, the number of talented players. But it's not just about persuading those players to play a bit quicker or at a higher tempo. That's become commonplace among managers who've come here. It's not a question of the players being unable to adapt to that. It's just pure belief – and we're going back to that risk-averse mentality. If you come to a nation like Japan or Korea Republic or Iran and say: 'we want to go to a World Cup and win it or get to a semi-final' or, in a club side: 'we want to go to the Club World Championship and beat one of the top teams', there's almost fear in pronouncing those words. You just have to make it clear that when you're on this road there are going to be mistakes, there are going to be trip-ups along the way. You mustn't let that deter you from the ultimate goal.

"I really think that an Asian country can win a World Cup in the next 20 years. It's very, very conceivable, the way world football is going. But it's about belief in being able to do that. You've only got to look at last season's AFC Champions League Final as a great example. It was a pro-active, really aggressive team that won it. Also, a club from a region that isn't renowned for that type of play. People will have taken note of that and I think we can expect to see more countries and more clubs follow suit. I know Japan have said they can win a World Cup by 2050 but I've seen the talent in the country and I honestly believe it can be achieved before that and that the country can become a real force."

7 HOW CAN AN ASIAN CLUB BECOME A TRULY GLOBAL BRAND?

"I think that can happen. You know as well as I do that we are in a region that is football-mad. You go to any part of Asia and you see people who are obsessed with football. Okay, sometimes they're obsessed with football on the other side of the world. That's where clubs over here need to be a bit more savvy about the way they market themselves. I really like what Japan has done with their exemptions for players from Thailand or Vietnam. We've got a very strong following in Thailand. We played a game in August and the amount



Interaction and idea-sharing with other coaches is critical to driving the game forward in the region, something Ange Postecoglou believes is more difficult to manage in such a large geographic region.

of interest from Thailand, because we brought a player in from there and he's not classed as a foreigner ... they have been very clever about the way they market that, creating a brand. We need to make the most of that – marketing the talented players. Look at Son in Tottenham. He's a 'global brand' in himself and a great asset for Tottenham, where he has built a great career."

8 DURING OUR ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM, YOU ASKED ARSÈNE WENGER, IN HIS CAPACITY AS CHIEF OF GLOBAL FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT AT FIFA, ABOUT THE LAWS OF THE GAME. ARE THERE ASPECTS THAT DISTURB YOU?

"I put a question to Arsène about the offside rule, as I know he's now in the forefront on this sort of thing. You see the way the game is going, and you watch that Champions League Final in Europe and see how aggressive Bayern Munich are in playing that high line. Part of their strategy is based on knowing that, if the striker's nose is offside, he is ruled offside. Technology is very clear about that – you don't need to rely on the linesman anymore. But if the law changes ... I mean, what Arsène hinted about it no longer being offside unless there's a clear line between the attacker and the defender, well, the game changes. Would it shift defenders back a bit? I think we need to accept technology and all its consequences. But I don't feel that people have necessarily thought about all the consequences of bringing it in. And some of the other Laws of the Game as well – not just the offside rule. We can all argue about what is handball and what isn't handball. I've always tried to coach without worrying about all those things to do with refereeing decisions.

But, with technology, I can't help but feel that, inevitably, it's going to affect coaching styles – the way you set up your team."

9 WHAT MORE DO YOU THINK THE AFC CAN DO TO SUPPORT HEAD COACHES DURING TOP-LEVEL CONTINENTAL COMPETITIONS?

"I think the biggest issue is that it's such a big region that you run into scenarios of isolation for coaches. It would be good to get together more. In Europe, you can have more contact because managers can quite easily arrange to meet for lunch. Here, you could be talking about an 8-hour or 10-hour flight to meet up with a colleague. There are so many bright Asian and foreign coaches that you'd love to sit down and share some ideas with each other. And, this year, the circumstances have made everybody feel even more isolated than usual. So that would be my major point – to help us coaches to stay engaged and really work together as a region. I'm sure it would help a lot to raise the game and drive it forward."

10 HOW DO YOU SEE THE GAME DEVELOPING – PARTICULARLY IN ASIA?

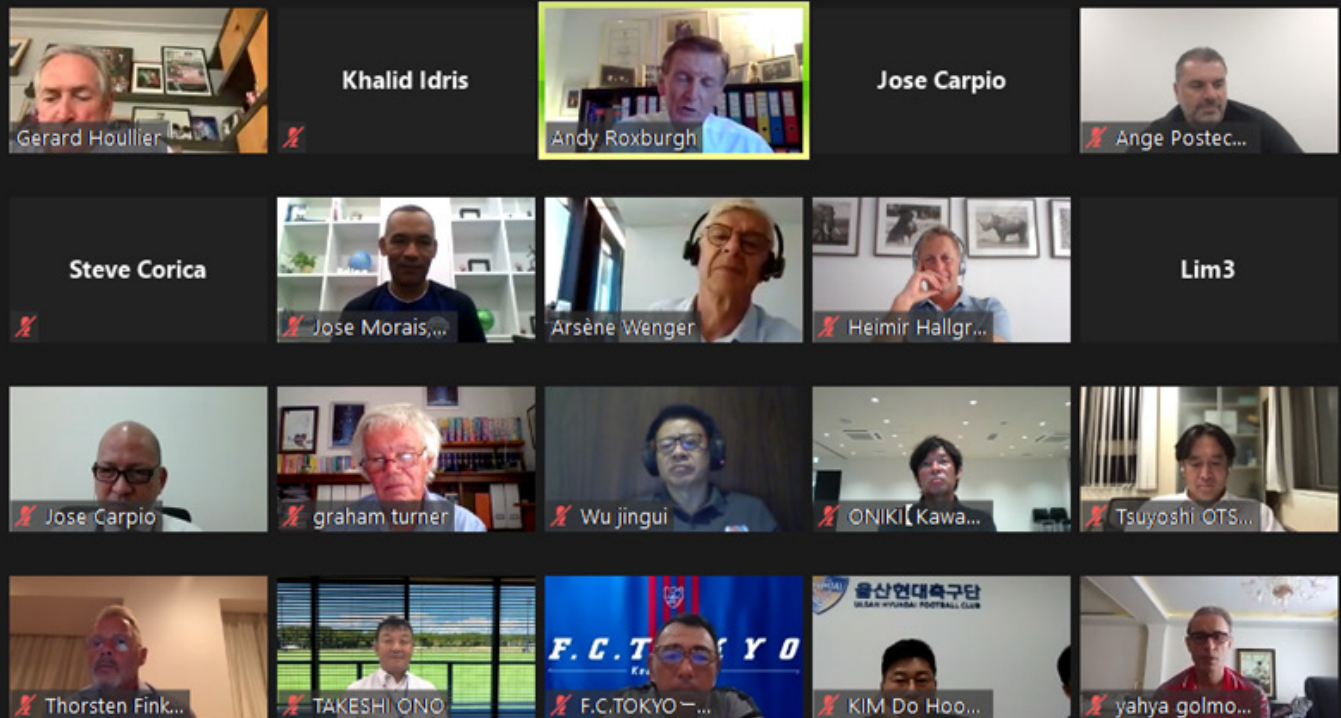
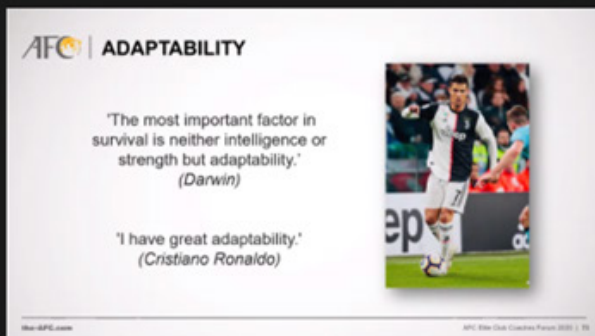
"I think it is exciting. We've got the FIFA World Cup in Qatar on the horizon. It is in our region and I am hoping it will give us incentives. If we, as a region, really set our minds on becoming a force in world football, rather than just another participant, I think that in the next 10 or 15 years, we could make an enormous step forward."

5TH AFC ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM

LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

The AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum, which has been an annual fixture since 2016, refused to be beaten by the viral onslaught of 2020. The pandemic evidently ruled out the usual practice of assembling a star line-up of coaches in Shanghai, so the event responded to the unexpected scenario by switching to a contain-and-counter strategy.

The AFC counterattacked with an online version which, as Technical Director Andy Roxburgh acknowledged, "was not ideal because there is greater interaction when you have a group around a table. But it was much better than a cancellation, and turned out to be very interesting. And, hopefully, we can look forward to business as usual in Shanghai in 2021".



A TRENDSETTING VICTORY?

But looking back was the first item on the agenda – back to the 2019 AFC Champions League Final and the high-tempo, high-pressing approach that had won it for Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia, breaking that long sequence of victories for teams from the Eastern zone of AFC geography. But it was the manner of victory, rather than the victory itself, which made an impact in coaching terms. As Andy Roxburgh reminded the online gathering at the Forum, “their style was, the minute they lost the ball, to work hard to get it back. It was a mentality of attack with or without the ball. When they had it, they were immediately ready to go in the depth and when they didn’t have it, they were ready to press and engage in their counter-pressing to make sure they couldn’t be counterattacked. They implemented it really well and it surprised a lot of people”.

The question posed to the Forum participants was whether they felt Al Hilal’s high-pressing game would set a trend that other AFC Champions League contenders might follow.

“I worked in Saudi Arabia and now I’ve been in China for three years,” Shanghai SIPG head coach Vítor Pereira commented. “I saw Al Hilal in the Final and I was impressed by the way they pressed. I thought it was a step up in the level of football in that Zone.

“When I was there, it was really difficult to see a team press like that. But when we look at the Champions League Final in Europe, we saw how Bayern Munich try to press the ball all the time. Most of the big teams do this nowadays – high pressing and very fast transitions. In Asia, I think we are now seeing teams ready to press high, to have an aggressive reaction to losing the ball and then to use it positively.



60,000 fans packed the Saltama Stadium to watch the historic victory of Al Hilal over Urawa Red Diamonds in the AFC Champions League 2019 Final.

“In my three years in China, I have seen teams raising the level of their game. And we see teams from Japan and Korea Republic with a lot of quality.”

“I also worked in Saudi Arabia, and it was a surprise to see Al Hilal pressing high up the pitch,” Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors’ head coach José Morais agreed.

“I think that we are seeing a rise in standards, like in the rest of the world. I think it’s also a question of mentality. At European teams, it is perhaps regarded as normal. But in Asia, you have to work hard to apply this concept, and in some countries, this is easier than in others because of the difference in football culture. You have to persuade the important players to buy into this concept, to build belief in the concept and in their ability to implement it.

“Another factor is that some countries allow more foreign players – and that can mean more players who are accustomed to this style of play. Korea Republic is making progress and we have very good coaches who are curious about learning new things. In fact, we are optimistic of getting a team from Korea Republic into the Final in the near future.”

The Forum participants conceded that climate is a conditioning factor – and Sydney City’s Stephen Corica explained how the pandemic has highlighted this aspect in Australia.

“We’ve had two sets of climatic conditions this year. In summer weather, the high pace goes out of the window and the pace is a lot slower. Thanks to COVID-19, our season has moved into winter and you see the difference. Teams are trying to press higher and the game is more intense. So, in Australia, there’s a lot of talk about moving to winter. The players are enjoying it and I think it’s much better for our game and the league. You can do more high pressing and you can keep it up for much longer. As a coach, if you want to go down that road, you’ve got a much better chance of being able to apply that style of play.”

“Here in Japan,” added Ange Postecoglou, J-League champion with Yokohama Marinos, “we’re going through a spell of great humidity, which makes it a tough proposition. But there are teams setting out to be aggressive in the tempo of their game – with and without the ball. Some teams will undoubtedly be prepared to take this style on and make it successful. At the same time, while we’re identifying this as a trend, there will already be coaches trying to work out how to beat the high press – and that’s the beauty of the game.”

Moving westwards across the AFC map, Heimir Helgrímsson, currently at Al Arabi in Qatar, commented: “I was impressed by Al Hilal’s game and this is one way of developing the football here because in the two years I’ve been working here, I’ve seen that the tempo in the West is generally quite low. I’m sure that raising the tempo is the way to make the West more competitive. At the same time, I also have to give credit to Urawa Red Diamonds because I thought the Japanese team played away from the high pressure really well.”

In other words, the take-home message delivered by the Forum was that, even if teams, for climatic or other reasons, choose not to implement an Al Hilal-style high pressing game, they need, if they are to compete at top level, to be equipped to deal with it.



Al Hilal’s high-pressing style was displayed by André Carrillo, who sealed the side’s 1–0 first-leg home win over Urawa Red Diamonds.

COMPARING NOTES

Inevitably, the European version of the Champions League is regarded as the benchmark-setter, and, as it happened, one of the special guests at the Forum was Gérard Houllier, who, as Global Sporting Director of Red Bull Soccer and special adviser to Olympique Lyonnais, had a finger in two of Europe’s top four pies.

“Once the ball is lost, Leipzig also press extremely high to regain possession as quickly as possible,” he said of the German semi-finalists. “And when they win the ball high, they try to finish the move in two or three passes. If the high press is not on, they retreat quickly below the halfway line and press hard from there. Lyon adopted a different strategy because they were up against very strong opposition. They opted to play deeper than usual and to look for the counterattack. They also had three good centre-backs. They had had defensive problems before reaching the final eight and that’s why they adopted that system.

“That tournament demonstrated how defenders need to play a clear role in the build-up. You don’t have defenders without ball skills anymore. They have to stay calm and rely on their skills under pressure from opponents who try to make them play long balls.”

Looking back at Europe’s eight-team final tournament in Lisbon, the most salient features were high back lines, counter-pressing strategies, the continued emphasis on building from the back, the ability to play in tight areas, the role of the full-backs as wingers and, contrasting with the general tendency in the AFC Champions League, the extensive use of combination play in the final third to produce one quarter of the competition’s open-play goals.

The tournament in Lisbon also underscored the value of goalkeepers’ one-on-one skills in scenarios where higher defensive lines offer greater opportunities for attackers to break clear to take on the keeper – with Manuel Neuer once again proving decisive in the open spaces behind FC Bayern München’s high back line and contributing to the build-up with accurate passing. The champions’ set-up was outstanding in terms of compactness, with the full-backs playing an important role by interacting with wingers who packed enough pace to get in behind defenders.

One of the opinions expressed at the Forum was that, “the traditional cross is not dangerous anymore because centre-backs are very competent and defensive covering is better with midfielders ready to drop deep to help”. The wide players were certainly creating the dangers, but, looking at Di María and Mbappé at Paris Saint-Germain; Sterling and Sané at Manchester City; or Mané and Salah at Liverpool, their game was not predominantly about delivering crosses.

Year after year, participants at the Forum have saluted improving levels in the AFC Champions League – and noted that Europe’s equivalent leads the field.

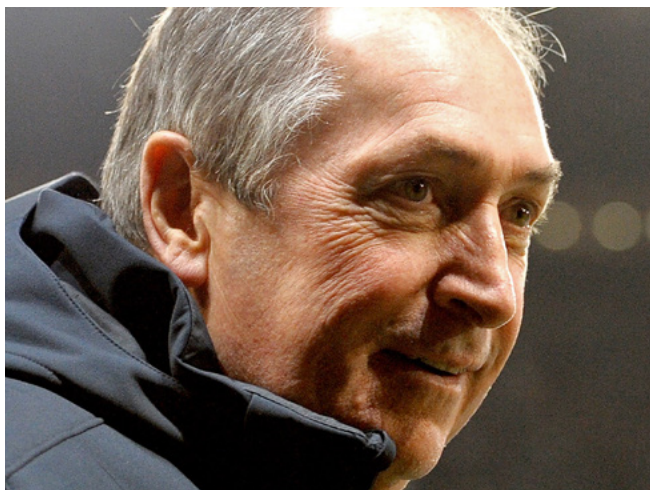
“It leads us back to the issue we addressed before,” commented Ange Postecoglou. “But now a lot of clubs are wondering how they can play at a higher tempo; stay compact; and play positive possession football. And if you go through this progression process, mistakes will happen. So, you’ve got to be careful that these mistakes don’t become a deterrent and lead you back into playing safe. If you persevere, you can bridge that gap and achieve success.”

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

MANAGEMENT MATTERS

This year's online event featured a forum within the Forum as Gérard Houllier was joined by Arsène Wenger to lead a session on management matters.

FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development started the ball rolling by reflecting on how management scenarios have changed in recent times.



Guest speaker Gérard Houllier, Global Sporting Director of Red Bull Soccer and special adviser to Olympique Lyonnais, discussed the role of stability in creating a successful team.

"When I started, I was alone on the training pitch with my team," Arsène Wenger recalled. "When I finished at Arsenal, I was on the pitch with the team and a staff of around 20 people. So, management has changed a lot. Apart from managing the team, you had to manage the team around the team. At the start, your credibility came from the quality of your training sessions and the quality of your management in terms of winning football games. I would say that we have gone from a vertical situation where you would give orders to players who apply what you say, to a more horizontal scenario. You have moved from a commanding position to a persuasive position. The manager today is about convincing people that what he says is right and what he wants is right. We have moved from giving orders mode into communication mode."

"The amount of information players now receive is much better – which means they are better prepared, better educated. We have gone from a very collective mindset in management to a more individualised style of management. Today, there is personalisation – a more personal rapport with the individual player indicating how he can improve. You must give more individual responsibility to the player and, as well, you have to be more open-minded."

"When I started you had to fight for information. Today, the responsibility of the manager is to filter and select from the huge amount of information he gets and to pinpoint the four or five important points that might help to sort out problems. That is a basic change – the manager needs the skill to select the really important data."

Asked whether screaming at players or throwing boots at them would be productive in the modern game, Arsène Wenger responded with a categorical 'no'.

"Because they are more sensitive and have been educated in a different way. When I started, young players, if they played well, could step up into the professional game. Today, players come to you with five or six years of training and education already behind them. Apart from being better prepared, they are also more demanding and want to be treated differently. The modern 'big player' is a company within the company. He comes with his own people: his own dietician, his own physiotherapist, his own fitness coach – and these people sometimes question what you are telling the player. You have to be able to swim against this stream which flows around the player, and it is important to identify what's going on around him."

"That's why you need advisers inside the club to help players to settle in, to get to know the influences around



FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development Arsène Wenger reflected on the new 'horizontal' style of management, replacing giving orders with communication.

the player and give you important information. That is something that has become absolutely vital. You have as well to master the environment of the individual player because basically he comes into the company to fulfil a job – and if he loses interest, he will move to a different company.”

The Q&A segment of the session immediately led into the coaching impact of VAR – and, in particular, the interpretation of the offside rule whereby a nose or a knee-cap can rule out a goal.

“This approach makes strikers feel that things have gone against them,” Arsène Wenger commented. “Before, if a nose was in front, it was still a goal. Today, the result of greater precision is that goals are being cancelled out that would not have been disallowed before. But, before you change, you must think things through. If you were to implement, for example, the idea that if any part of your body is onside, the goal will stand, one of the effects from a coaching perspective is that you might force defensive lines to drop deeper and make it more difficult to squeeze the game.”

WHAT PRICE STABILITY?

One of the major concerns in the coaching profession is how to reconcile teambuilding with a scenario in which clubs chop and change on a short-term basis.

“I said at the Champions League Final in Europe that we were seeing two ways of understanding football management. One way is to inject a lot of money. The other way is to bet on players who identify with the club and its culture, who know about football at top level and can give a certain continuity. I’ve known Bayern for a long time and I give credit to the people

like Beckenbauer, Hoeness, Rummenigge and now Oliver Kahn – all people who have played at the club and who know what is required at top level football if you want to win titles. They don’t win every year, but they have a continuity. Inside the club they have created a culture of winning that is carried on through generations. That is quite interesting to observe in the modern period.”

Gérard Houllier reflected: “Stability is not necessarily just about the coach but also about the staff who surround the team and link the dressing-room with the board of directors.”

This struck a chord with Arsène Wenger. “There seems to be a huge deficit within big clubs in terms of knowledge of what is needed at the top level in the game. The way forward is to create a position within the clubs to help the coach – people with experience who can stabilise things with the board and help the coach to stabilise and to communicate between the coach and the board. It’s about reducing the pressure. Not a Technical Director who takes decisions, but a psychological helper and stabiliser inside the club. There is huge turmoil inside many clubs, and we forget that the coach can need help sometimes. I was lucky to be so long in the same job. But that does not mean that you don’t sometimes feel lonely. And you so often have no help inside the club.”

“I had a case where, in a big game, a player was sent off for the first time in his career,” Gérard Houllier recalled, “so he had no ‘criminal record’. It turned out that he was having to deal with a distressing situation in his private life – and the coach needs somebody to know about that sort of thing and to help psychologically. The human



An atmosphere of trust, inter-personal skills and a light-hearted philosophy are critical to success in Gérard Houllier’s view.

aspect is important. And the coach needs to listen and to build trust. You need a certain psychological expertise.”

THE PRESSURE GAUGE

How do you deal with the pressures of being a top-level coach? That was one of the questions thrown at the special guests at the Forum.

Arsène Wenger was the first to field it. “By answering two simple questions that help you to be resilient. At the times when things are not going well, when there’s huge pressure around you and when everybody questions what you think, it’s important to isolate yourself and to ask yourself ‘why am I here?’ and ‘why am I doing this?’; and ‘what is important to me?’ Centring again the essence of your job is absolutely vital and helps you to be resilient. It is very simple, but I personally think it is very efficient. Focus on what matters to you in your life and what is central to your beliefs.”

"I agree with Arsène about the isolation," Gérard Houllier nodded, "because when things don't go right you maybe need not to listen, not to read, to avoid TV and so on. I would say you sometimes need one person you can trust and talk to. I remember a couple of times when I went to Liverpool, I phoned Arsène because he is my friend and I knew I could trust him. I would say 'I want to do this or that' and he would make some reflections that gave me ideas about how to deal with the situation. You need one – or maximum two – persons that you know you can talk to."

"The second thing is to ask yourself simply 'what is good for the team?' and 'what is good for the results that you want to achieve?' Sometimes when you are under pressure you forget some of the core things about what is technically or tactically good in terms of decisions to take or adjustments to make."

TOP PRIORITY

Asked about his priorities as an elite-level coach, Gérard Houllier replied: "the priority is winning in style. In a way that corresponds to your vision of football. So, you need the power to convince people outside and inside. Also, to bring pleasure. You need to have an element of fun. Within an atmosphere of trust, you also need a bit of light-hearted philosophy."

Arsène Wenger mused: "first of all, it is important to define a top elite-level coach. For me it is somebody who has a clear idea of what he wants. Secondly, it's someone who can formulate clearly what he wants. Thirdly, it's someone who can obtain from other people what he wants. Fourthly, it's somebody who can get, on the pitch, exactly what he wants. Those are the four aspects that are absolutely vital for a top elite coach. Somebody who can transform his ideas into achievements on the pitch."

"We are not only intellectuals – we need to provide concrete results. So, the priority is, above all, to have a clear mind. And to be able to translate ideas into achievements. Also, as coaches, we are tempted to overrate the quality of our communication. We speak to a player and think 'Okay, he understands'. But then you get feedback on what he actually took from the conversation and sometimes realise that it is not at all what you wanted to communicate."

CAUSES FOR CONCERN

The final challenge for the two guest speakers was to pinpoint the aspects that most concern them about today's top-level football. Gérard Houllier's response was a combination of aspects that had been mentioned earlier in the Forum.

"Arsène talked about the two ways to achieve success and I remember saying 'fortunately, money doesn't

buy success'. But I think that in the future money will play a bigger part. We also talked about stability in coaching, but we also need greater stability in the playing staff. Whether the money is provoking greater movement, I don't know. All I know is that teams that have greater stability of players who've been at the club for at least two or three years seem to have a better chance of attaining success. So, my worry is that money will provoke more movement of players, more changes of club."

"What concerns me is the increase of individualism in a collective sport," Arsène Wenger commented.

"It seems that, over the years, the sense of belonging to something bigger than you has been decreasing and I think it's a very important part of the psychology of football. Before, a club was a great place to achieve your ambitions. Today, the club is at the service of the player who wants to achieve his personal aims. If the club does not conform to the targets of the player, he simply wants to move. So, the rise of individualism is a very important concern to me. Another, at club level, is the lack of turnover in the hierarchy of the game. The uncertainty within competitions is not there anymore. And uncertainty is a very important part of our game."

The remark provided a neat conclusion to an event which had kept its head above water amid a tidal wave of uncertainties about competitions, fixture lists and the health of everybody involved. Games were being played in empty stadiums. The pandemic opened the door to five substitutions. But, as the online AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum demonstrated, one of the prime requirements in the coaching profession is the ability to adapt to unforeseen situations ...



Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger greets West Ham United's French defender Patrice Evra during the English Premier League football match between their sides in London on April 22, 2018.

COACHING CONVENTION

WORK IN PROGRESS

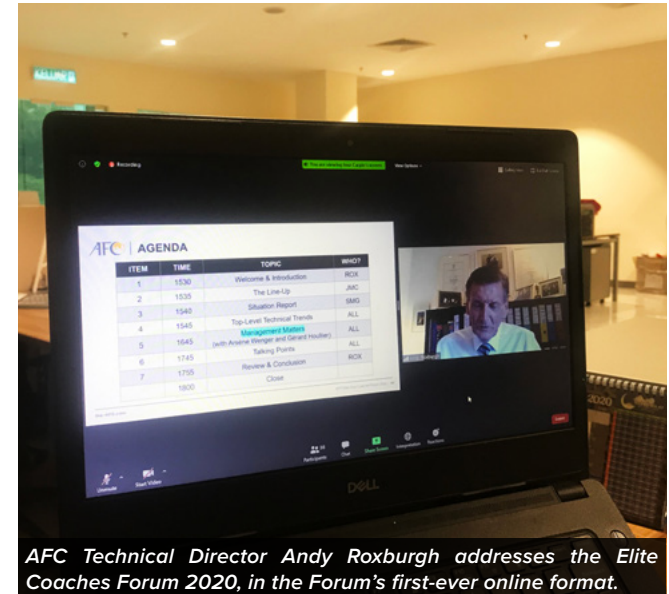


AFC President HE Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa with HE Du Zhaocai, Saoud A. Aziz M A Al-Mohannadi and Kohzo Tashima at the AFC Coaching Convention Pro Level Endorsement Certificate Ceremony in June 2019 in Paris, France.

The three-word title may be as mundane as they come. But, in the convulsed context of 2020, it is strangely heartening. As Andy Roxburgh comments in his editorial, football is a priceless component in the world's social fabrics. When the ball stops rolling, a motivating force in millions of lives is brought to a standstill. And while the elite game may have the resources to reboot, there are challenges to be met at grassroots and development levels. That is why it is heartening to record that, while the pandemic has undoubtedly dabbled at the brakes, it has failed to halt the forward momentum of the AFC's trinity of projects, which are crucial to the development of the game in Asia: the AFC Coaching Convention; the AFC Elite Youth Scheme; and the AFC Grassroots Charter.

The situation has been the cue for blowing dust off a few clichés like necessity being the mother of invention. Online solutions have been designed to allow evaluation procedures to go ahead. And there are special obstacles to be surmounted on the Coaching Convention front, where a number of Coach Education courses have needed to be postponed and where, even when they go ahead, the monitoring of practical work is a crucial element. But there is no such thing as mission impossible – as demonstrated in Saudi Arabia by the transmission of the live feed from an 'A level' coach education course training session to AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur.

Since Coaches Circle Issue 4 was published earlier this year, five more Member Associations have been endorsed at 'B licence' level, the latest arrival being the Maldives. At the peak of the pyramid, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Indonesia and Jordan are awaiting evaluation for Pro level endorsement – the latter



AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh addresses the Elite Coaches Forum 2020, in the Forum's first-ever online format.

duo bidding to step up from 'A level' to join the five MAs currently on the top rung. Saudi Arabia is one of a sextet on track for 'A level' endorsement, while a further eight are in line for 'B level' status. The pandemic has reduced the speed of the process, with seven member associations' coach education courses postponed in order to avoid any possible health risks.

All this adds up to a positive balance of 27 MAs already on board within two and a half years of the Convention launch, with a further 18 engaged in the endorsement procedures. It means that only six AFC Member Associations have yet to apply for membership – a statistic which illustrates the level of commitment to coach education.

AFC COACHING CONVENTION CATEGORIES

PRO - Level



FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA LIMITED



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QFA QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

A - Level



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

B - Level



NATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL TIMOR-LESTE

GRASSROOTS

REGENERATING THE ROOTS

Worryingly, grassroots football has been deeply affected by the pandemic, with millions of children deprived of the sport that gives them human and social values as well as the sheer fun of playing the game. This has been reflected by the need to hit the 'pause' button on the development of the AFC Grassroots Charter and report that the status quo recorded in the previous issue has not been altered. But it is a healthy status quo. Only 14 MAs have yet to apply for membership.

The other positive slant is provided by a full pending tray, with Qatar to be evaluated for Gold status and Singapore bidding to join them by stepping up from Silver level. Bhutan, Hong Kong, Iraq and Malaysia are in line for ratification at Silver level, with Bahrain, Nepal and Oman aiming to join the 19 associations already confirmed at Bronze-level membership.



More than 40 children from Thailand and Vietnam participated in the the launch of the Toyota Grassroots Project 2020, which followed on from the highly-successful AFC U23 Championship Thailand 2020.

AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER CATEGORIES



GOLD



FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA LIMITED



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

SILVER



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

BRONZE



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



FEDERACAO FUTEBOL TIMOR-LESTE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

ELITE YOUTH

A FORESEEABLE FUTURE

Since the last issue, there has also been significant forward movement in the AFC Elite Youth Scheme, with three more MAs endorsed as full members of the scheme. As a reminder, ratification takes the form of a three-star structure based on 11 criteria. AFC endorsement for full membership requires at least one

academy at club or national level, though provisional ratification may be granted if the remaining ten criteria are met – as is the case with Mongolia, the first to be endorsed with provisional status.

Two MAs have been welcomed on board at 2-star level. India's endorsement has been based on the youth development work at two academies: the JSW Bengaluru network supported by 20 centres in three states; and the Reliance Foundation Young Champs academy in Kopar Khairane, near Mumbai. The other newcomer in this category is Tajikistan, thanks to the TFF Academy, some 20km from the capital Dushanbe.

The endorsement at 1-star level corresponds to Singapore – or, to be precise, the LCS Academy set up under the aegis



Vietnam, which is to be evaluated for 3-star membership, has multiple training pitches at its PVF Football Academy.



India's youth team training at the SW Bengaluru FC Academy, one of two academies for which India has received 2-star endorsement.

of Lion City Sailors FC. With the pathway to membership currently being smoothed out by online assessment procedures, the three 1-star members could soon be joined by four other associations (Bahrain, Hong Kong, Lebanon and the Maldives), whose applications are currently in the evaluation process, along with IR Iran (candidates to join at 2-star level), Vietnam (at 3-star level), plus Iraq and Kuwait who have applied for provisional membership.

It adds up to a heartening total of 19 MAs who, in a very short space of time, have sought recognition for elite youth development projects in line with AFC criteria.

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME CATEGORIES

ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR



KOREA FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION

2 - STAR



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL
FEDERATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
OF MALAYSIA



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL
FEDERATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION

1 - STAR



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL
UNION



MYANMAR FOOTBALL
FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
OF SINGAPORE

PROVISIONAL



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL
FEDERATION

MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS TO BE EVALUATED

3 - STAR



VIETNAM FOOTBALL
FEDERATION

2 - STAR



FOOTBALL
FEDERATION ISLAMIC
REPUBLIC OF IRAN

1 - STAR



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL
FEDERATION



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION LTD.



LEBANESE FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
OF MALDIVES

PROVISIONAL



IRAQI FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL
ASSOCIATION

FINAL WORD

The growing reputation and prestige of the AFC's competitions have been reflected by a revamping and rebranding of the AFC age group championships to become AFC Asian Cups from 2021.

At the same time, the AFC Futsal Championship, AFC Women's Futsal Championship, AFC U-20 Futsal Championship and AFC Beach Soccer Championships will also become AFC Asian Cups after the AFC Executive Committee ratified a recent decision by the AFC Marketing Committee.

Dato' Windsor John, the AFC General Secretary, said: "We believe the change reflects the new stature of the competitions and by further strengthening the brand and commercial value of our competitions, there will be significant benefits for the AFC and its Member Associations.

"It is not only the name that will change as the AFC, in line with our Vision and Mission, will continue to enhance and invest in all our competitions to provide the best platform for Asia's talents at all levels in the coming years."

The first competition to carry the new name will be the qualifying rounds for the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup 2022 and the AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup 2022.

Japan, DPR Korea and Korea Republic will be direct qualifiers to the AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup final competition in 2022 after they finished as the top three teams in the AFC U-19 Women's Championships in Thailand in 2019.

Japan, DPR Korea and China PR received automatic qualification for the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup 2022

in line with their finishing position in the AFC U-16 Women's Championship also held in Thailand in 2019.

The hosts for both qualifying round 1 competitions have also been decided, with Australia, Mongolia, Myanmar and Tajikistan hosting groups in both the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup and the AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup.

For the AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup qualifiers, the other hosts will be Bangladesh, Jordan, Kyrgyz Republic and Vietnam, while China PR, Chinese Taipei, Laos and Singapore will make up the remaining hosts in the AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup qualifying round 1.

The latest rebranding and revamping exercise applies only to AFC competitions that are scheduled to take place from 2021, and will not impact the age-group tournaments that were postponed from 2020.

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