



COACHES CIRCLE

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



ISSUE 7
NOV 2021

THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH **MAHDI ALI** ►

ART OR SCIENCE?

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

Let me state my position from the outset: I believe that football is more of an art than a science. But this is a stance which is becoming more and more difficult to defend as the language of the coaching profession, particularly within the professional game, has changed due to technological advances, the extensive use of data and the search for even the smallest of advantages. A game of passion has become obsessed with the need for facts, for statistics to support every decision and for coaches to find answers in Big Data, analytics, tracking systems, drones, algorithms or even Artificial Intelligence. Oman's national coach Branko Ivankovic, a very progressive technician, recently voiced his concern: "Too much analysis leads to paralysis."

Various sophisticated tools have, of course, enhanced the capacity of the team-behind-the-team to work on strength and conditioning, on recovery and regeneration and all aspects of sports medicine. However, the old coach's adage that 'your eye is your judge' has become blurred in a digital age of computer analysis, software apps and data overload. Indeed, with some derogatory undertones, many technicians today are referred to as 'computer coaches'. The value of these technological advances is not in question. But a reliance on science, in my view, has the potential to diminish the human aspect of a game which, at its best, is wonderfully unpredictable, elevated by moments of



Match analysts at the AFC U23 Championship Thailand 2020

brilliant spontaneity and subject to unbridled extremes of emotion.

Leonardo da Vinci was not a football coach, but he knew a thing or two about art and science. He once said: "There are three classes of people: There are those who see, those who see when they are shown, and those who do not see." From a coach education perspective, this translates into 'some are naturally gifted with an eye for the game, some need to be taught how to read the game, while some will never develop the ability to see beyond a superficial, albeit enjoyable, view of football'. Like other hard skills, performance

analysis is something that can be taught and is a key aspect of a coach's competence. The topic therefore needs to be prioritised on coaching courses and should be introduced from day one. And yes, if they have any aspirations to be the next Pep Guardiola, the student coaches will need their laptops!

A coach's personal traits, or soft skills as they are often called, are more difficult to dissect and to replicate. Emotional intelligence, the power of persuasion, communication skills, creativity and mental strength can be identified and encouraged, but not drilled like multiplication tables. Building teams, selling a

philosophy of play and having a feeling for the game's subtleties can be developed, but only if there is a capacity to learn and a degree of innate talent. It has been said that Jürgen Klopp, the manager of Liverpool FC, has a special gift for empathy and this has been an important ingredient in his success story as an elite club coach. We are talking about the art of management here and not mathematical certainties.

It's time to look at the bigger picture and recognise the progress that has been made in top-level football. Jens Bangsbo, a Danish expert of physiology in football, once stated: "Football is not a science, but

science can help to make a difference." Few coaches would argue with this and the value of football analysts in match preparation and player performance, along with the use of data as a scouting tool, cannot be underestimated.

It is claimed that in the future, data will help to answer important questions about formations, tactics and individual player movements. But I still think that human interpretations will outmanoeuvre algorithms. I reiterate my view that football is more of an art than a science. But the gap is closing fast and, we have the data to prove it!



Coaches require computer skills



VAR made its full debut at the AFC U23 Championship Thailand 2020



Branko Ivankovic



Too much analysis leads to paralysis.

Branko Ivankovic
Oman's national coach



PASSION, PLANNING AND CONSTANT SELF- EDUCATION

MAHDI ALI

Not every coach has a degree in electronic engineering. And if you asked coaches to list the teams they have been part of, he would be unique in including the 'one that designed the Dubai Metro and public transport payment systems'. But a career with the city authority failed to quench his enduring passion for the game of football. He was a one-club player at Al Ahli, where he made 190 appearances. His international career, however, was punctuated by injuries, one of which cruelly ruled him out of the UAE's campaign at the 1990 FIFA World Cup. Turning to coaching, he returned from the AFC U19 Championship in Saudi Arabia with a gold medal in his pocket; took the squad to the FIFA U20 World Cup a year later; came back from the 2010 Asian Games in China PR with a bronze medal; led the U23s to the 2012 Olympics in London; and, with the UAE's senior team, won the Gulf Cup in Bahrain in 2013 before earning a bronze at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015. Turning to club management, he is currently extending his list of honours at Shabab Al Ahli, clinching a hat-trick of Super Cup, Arabian Gulf Cup and President's Cup in the 2020/21 season. It is always a pleasure to talk to...



1 ONE OF THE OTHER SURPRISES ON YOUR CV IS THAT YOU EARNED YOUR FIRST COACHING QUALIFICATION IN ENGLAND...

Yes, I spent a year in London for family reasons and I saw it as a good opportunity to join one of the courses organised by the FA. It was a very good first experience for me and it wasn't easy. To be admitted I had to submit a CV which they checked out with my club. I was the only Arab in a group of 19 and one of four who graduated, completing the whole course from the initial written exam to the final practical tests. The course was



very well organised and very demanding. In the written exams, for example, you had to give the right answer without any spelling mistakes. I remember an incident when I had my final practical exam on the pitch. When we arrived, one of the guys submitted his papers and he was told, even before he had started, that he had failed. He was unshaven and not well-dressed and, when he asked why, he was told he had to set a good example for the young players. He wasn't allowed to do the test and had to come back another day.

2 LOOKING BACK OVER YOUR CAREER AS A MIDFIELDER, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A PLAYER AND TO WHAT EXTENT HAS YOUR PLAYING EXPERIENCE INFLUENCED YOU AS A COACH?

When I started in the senior team at my club I was only 17 and I was playing three matches a week: two with the first team and one with the Under-17s. The coach was Nandor Hidegkuti from Hungary and when I arrived, he told me I needed to play as many games as possible to build experience and stamina in competitive matches. I started as a striker then played No. 10, left wing, right wing and ended my career in midfield as a No. 6. I was lucky to work with many top coaches – and I learned from all of them. In the national team, I had Mario Zagalo and Carlos Alberto Parreira, for example. Football was everything to me and when I finished my education and started work it was still my favourite hobby. On the way to school, waiting for the bus, we played football. In the playground, we played football. When I got home, before going to the club, we played football. And, of course, at the club I played football. I was also lucky to

play alongside a lot of national team players – legends in the history of the UAE. It was a great challenge because it was hard to earn a place in the team.

I was lucky to play first-team football for 15 years. But I was not so lucky with injuries. I needed several knee operations and I wasn't able to win many titles with my club. I was also unlucky with the youth and senior national teams. Four years with the senior team and I didn't have the chance to play a single official match – partly through injuries and partly because competition for places was very strong. I had so many dreams. And when I stopped playing, I couldn't let them go – the dreams of playing a FIFA World Cup, AFC Asian Cup, Olympics, Gulf Cup... So I told myself that the way forward was to try to achieve these things as a coach. That was why I didn't want to be an administrator or a committee member at the club. I told them I wanted to be the coach. All my experiences as a player affected me and I think they helped me as a coach.

3 YOU WERE VERY SUCCESSFUL AS A NATIONAL YOUTH COACH, WINNING THE AFC U19 TITLE IN 2008. WHAT DID YOU EMPHASISE IN YOUR ROLE AS A COACH OF TALENTED YOUNG PLAYERS?

In our region we have a lot of players who lack advice and guidance. So, when we started in 2004, we focused on the psychological or, you might say, sentimental side. The objective was to develop players and create a strong senior national team. We had talented, skilful players but we lacked endurance. We had pace and skill but the shortcomings on the physical side

“If you are not ready physically, there are a lot of things you will not be able to do.”

became noticeable at the international level. We could compete with European U10, U12 teams and so on. But we couldn't from the U18 level. They were too strong physically – and tactically. So we set out to build a team for the future, focusing on tactical issues and how to play as a block. We wanted every player to know his role and to have clear objectives to try to achieve as individuals.

I devised plans for them as a team, setting out the strategies, the vision, emphasising the key factors and the need for discipline within a code of conduct on and off the pitch. We set out to bring everyone together – not just the players but also the entire staff, making sure the players and us were speaking the same language. We did a lot of organising and this helped us improve as a team. We achieved all our objectives. We played a FIFA World Cup in 2009; we went to the AFC Asian Cup, which had not been a planned objective but which we achieved because we were very well prepared; and we planned to qualify for the Olympics, which we did. In 2015, our aim was to be one of the top four teams in Asia and we achieved third place.

4 SUBSEQUENTLY, YOU TOOK THE UAE TO THE 2012 OLYMPICS IN LONDON. WAS THAT AN IMPORTANT LEARNING EXPERIENCE FOR YOU AS A COACH AND DO YOU THINK THAT MEN'S FOOTBALL HAS A PLACE AT THE OLYMPICS?

I think we played our best football at the Olympics. We were up against very strong teams: Uruguay, Team GB and Senegal. Although we lost games, it was clear that we were at the same level as our opponents. We were let down by small details. But the good thing was that the tournament convinced everyone in the UAE that I could take charge of the senior national team. It was a good time for change. We had an old squad and it was time to make room for a new generation. In August 2012, after the Olympics, I took 15 of my squad into the senior team, which was a big risk. I was on fire but you also need luck – and luck comes from hard work. So, I agree absolutely that the Olympics for men is a valuable development competition.

5 WHAT ARE YOUR RECOLLECTIONS OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP IN 2015 WHERE YOUR UAE TEAM FINISHED THIRD?

I think it was one of the best competitions I've ever taken part in. It was very well organised and there was a good atmosphere. We were a bit unlucky because we played the Semi-final against the hosts (Australia). Against any other team, I think we could have made the final. And it was about small details again. We conceded the two goals from set pieces and at the international level, if you make mistakes there, you'll concede a goal. We

played strong teams. Apart from Australia, there were Qatar, Bahrain, IR Iran, Japan and Iraq. I gained a lot of experience and learned a lot from that competition.

6 AS AN ENGINEER BY TRADE, YOU KNOW A LOT ABOUT BUILDING THINGS, INCLUDING FOOTBALL TEAMS. FOR YOU, WHAT ARE THE MAIN COMPONENTS IN BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL SQUAD AT CLUB OR NATIONAL LEVEL?

The first step is to always prepare a plan and organise it very well. Especially in our region, where there has not always been proper planning and sometimes even very little advance warning of match dates. Even in the AFC Champions League, where we sometimes have to improvise the fixture list. You need to prepare Plan B and Plan C as well as Plan A. The other very important thing is building a good spirit and environment in the team, keeping everybody focused and knowing what to do on and off the pitch. And to make them care about each other.

There are so many technical details to take care of, but the basis is playing together as a team with every player knowing his role in attack and defence. And preparing them physically to play tough games. If you are not ready physically, there are a lot of things you will not be able to do. I like discipline within the team but at the same time, if you have talented players you need to give them a degree of freedom. In defence, there is no room for creativity but when you have creative players you need to allow them to express themselves in attack. It's no good making them do what you want all the time

when they have their own personalities and their own ideas. You need to give them space to show their ability. To build a strong team you need to prepare the four phases of the match very well. If you want to attack well, you have to defend well. If you want to defend well, you have to attack well. The starting point of defence is in attack and the starting point of attack is in defensive work. You have to prepare all this and communicate your ideas, your philosophy. You also have to know your opponent very well and study the small details that might win you the game.

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

There's a big difference between playing league football and leading a national team. Time is short in the national team so you have to focus on the really important things. The other big difference is the playing levels in domestic leagues and international football, where the tempo and real playing time are higher. In our league the average is around 43 minutes whereas at international level it's around 60 minutes. To make that step up in a short time is not easy. The level of the opponent is also higher – and so are travelling times and the factor of jet-lag. I remember the match when we qualified for the Olympics. It was March and the temperature here was between 28° and 32°. We arrived in Tashkent and it was -1°. It's not easy for the body to adapt to a difference of 30°. In the league, preparation is much easier. You have the players with you all the time. And you can prepare them much more thoroughly.



8 WITH SO MANY FOREIGN COACHES IN WEST ASIA, HOW DIFFICULT IS IT FOR TALENTED LOCAL TECHNICIANS TO BE SUCCESSFUL?

It is very difficult to work with top clubs or national teams. There isn't enough trust or belief in local coaches. It will take some time for coaches to acquire enough successes to build this trust. It's like trying to write on a stone - difficult to engrave your name. Local coaches are under tremendous pressure – winning or losing an individual match can make opinions swing 180°. You have to be patient and learn not to listen to everybody. In our league at the moment, there are only two local coaches out of 14. But personally, I don't like to split local and foreign coaches. For me, a coach is a coach. If you have had a good coach education and the ability to lead a team, the nationality is not important.

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

The best thing about this job is that you make a lot of people happy when you win. That's a great feeling. I don't know how to express the feeling but when you see all the players, all the staff, all the fans, it's a great feeling in this beautiful sport. Like when we won the Gulf Cup in 2013 in Bahrain. Even though we were playing in Manama, there were three times as many people waiting outside than there were in the stadium. The happiness and joy in the country were really amazing.

The worst thing about the job is that it's very bad for your health! You are always under pressure, so you have to learn how to deal with it and you have to teach yourself to adapt. Otherwise, you will run into difficulties on a personal level.

10 WHAT IS YOUR PHILOSOPHY OF THE GAME?

Winning matches is very important! What controls a game is the ball. If you control the ball, you can control the game. So the key factor is to control the ball. I believe in possession play. That doesn't mean controlling the ball at all times without creating a chance. My ideal is to see a beautiful game and to have fun playing it. In possession, the aim is to create as many opportunities as possible. It doesn't matter how many passes you play. What matters is how you shift play from your own half into the opponents' half and the number of chances you create.

And when you lose possession, you need to know what to do to win the ball back as quickly as possible, ideally in the opponents' half. You need to push the opposition into specific areas, provoke mistakes – and then exploit them. You aim to win the ball in the area where you lost it so that the opponent doesn't have the chance to counterattack or build from the back. If you cannot press you have to know when to drop into position and look for the right moment to attack the ball. Also, if you press high, you need to be aware that the opponent may try the long ball. You have to be equipped to deal with that. It's also important for players to know where to look for the free man and create numerical superiority in attack when the opposition is defending in a deep block.

11 HOW DO YOU VIEW THE AFC'S COMPETITIONS AT CLUB AND NATIONAL LEVEL?

Both are important. You play your local league with ambitions to get into the AFC Champions League – a



competition that is important for all clubs and for Asian football in general, because there are so many areas for improvement that we have to work on. The AFC is doing a good job, but at the local level we have to do more to raise our game so that we can compete at the international level. With regard to organisation, marketing, the fans and preparing players for national team football, it is a very good competition and all the clubs fight to get into it.

12 HOW IMPORTANT IS NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR TODAY'S FRONTLINE COACHES?

Whether we like it or not, we have to regard technology as an advantage, including VAR and goal-line technology. They are aspects that can help you do your job better. The key is to use technology properly. You have to remember that in football small details can make big differences. So, technology is a good thing. But there are things that technology cannot see. During training, for example, we control all our players – GPS, heart rate and so on in addition to in-depth match analysis on technical aspects, passing, actual playing time, etc. It's up to you to use all this data to do your job better, but without forgetting your feelings, your eyes and your experience as a coach. I remember one instance when, during training, my assistant told me that one player's heart rate was very high. He thought the player was tired. I said I didn't think so because the loading was not very high. I spoke to the player afterwards about his performance and he told me he had problems at home. Technology can be important but it doesn't always give you the full picture. You have to trust your own eyes.

13 WHAT ASPECT OF TODAY'S FOOTBALL DISTURBS YOU MOST?

When I see that there are so many things we can improve, yet we are not doing them. Especially at the local level. In 2009, I was already expressing concern about real playing time. But a coach cannot do anything about that alone. We need help from referees and other coaches. You can't play 40 minutes in the league and then expect to compete for 60 minutes at an international level. We also need to focus on the intensity of the game and ways to help players cope with pressure. We have to find ways to improve performances against opponents who are all well-organised. When you see things are not moving forward in the way that you would like, it makes you sad.

14 FINALLY, IF YOU HAD TO GIVE ONE PIECE OF ADVICE TO A YOUNG COACH, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Not to rely too much on your coach education. It gives you good fundamentals of how to go about the business of being a coach. But you, as a coach, have to learn a lot and, I would recommend, read a lot. And you need to go and see other teams. When I started, I read a lot about basketball, athletics, tennis, ways to create champions, psychology, the human mind, personality...when you are coaching, you are alone. So you need to absorb from other sources, do research on the internet, tap into the experiences of other people. You must never stop your self-education.

In many walks of life, the pandemic has reduced objectives to keeping heads above troubled waters – and that includes huge areas of planet football. A year ago, AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh commented in the fifth issue of The Coaches Circle that, “Hopefully, we can look forward to business as usual in Shanghai in 2021.” He was, of course, referring to the AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum which has been an annual fixture since 2016 when leading coaches in Asian club football first gathered around debating tables in Shanghai. After the pandemic ushered the event towards an online version in 2020, the fact that this Plan B solution needed to be adopted for a second successive year emphasised that the coaching profession, like so many others, is negotiating an age of uncertainty in which forward planning has become problematic.

GOODBYE TO THE AWAY GOAL?

This ‘treading water’ scenario was highlighted by some of the topics that were thrown on to the online debating table at the Forum. For example, UEFA’s decision to abolish the away-goal rule in all European competitions: in favour or against? What impact will this make on coaches’ approach to home-and-away ties? Do you harmonise with coaches who adopt a more conservative strategy for the home leg on the basis that 0-0 is not a bad result for teams confident of scoring in a return leg where a score-draw would suffice to secure progress to the next round? Would you be happy to wave goodbye to a system where, for example, a 1-4 scoreline in the first leg probably reduces the return match to a formality? Will the death of the away-goal rule issue an invitation for visiting teams to replicate the ultra-cautious attitudes which provoked its birth?

ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM

A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS



The participants at the Forum found it – understandably – difficult to find answers. After all, the pandemic wiped everything bar the AFC Champions League off the fixture lists for 2020 and, at the time of writing, the ball

had started rolling again in qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup, the AFC Asian Cups (U23 and Women) and the pilot club competition for women. But, with the AFC Champions League in 2021 and 2022 adhering to the

single-match format in the Knockout rounds, the away-goal rule lies dormant in Asia. The only rational response in this age of uncertainty was therefore to monitor the impact in European competitions before launching the issue at AFC debating tables.

TIME IS SHORT?

The spectre of ultra-cautious visiting teams, not overly concerned about keeping the ball moving, interlinks with another topic mooted at the Forum and, when anti-pandemic measures allow offices to be fully operational, often mentioned in the corridors of the AFC: real playing time. OK, as Al-Rayyan head coach Laurent Blanc remarked while the Forum was discussing sustained high-pressing, climatic conditions are a mitigating factor. But at the recent European Championship finals – despite high temperatures at venues like Baku, Bucharest, Rome and Seville – real playing time often amply exceeded the 60-minute mark. The 47'05 registered when Denmark entertained Russia was so much of an anomaly that it raised questions about a statistical blip – especially when, at the same time on the same day in the same group, Belgium and Finland kept the ball in play for 69'15. As Mahdi Ali comments during the interview earlier in this publication, real playing time in some domestic leagues is even lower and the suspicion is that, in AFC competitions, the overall figure is nearer Denmark v Russia than Belgium v Finland.

If that impression is correct, the issue is not solely about offering entertainment value to spectators and TV audiences. The question for coaches – and this is the facet raised by Mahdi Ali as a major issue – is whether, when AFC teams perform on international stages, this has a negative impact against opponents who regularly sustain high-intensity play for longer periods. What can

be done to achieve competitive levels of real playing time? One idea mooted at the Forum was to employ a timekeeper to ensure that the ball is in play for a minimum of 60 minutes – and inform the referee at Denmark v Russia, for example, that an additional 12'55 had to be played. Fuel for debate...

TRENDING NOW?

A review of the previous season's AFC Champions League is a perennial fixture on agendas for the Elite Club Coaches Forum. In 2020, discussion focused on the high-tempo, high-pressing style which had won the title for Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia and broken a sequence

of seven successive titles for teams from the East. At the time, AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh had reflected that, "The intensity of Al Hilal's game was exceptional. A positive feature, especially bearing in mind all the comments about lack of intensity among teams from the West. Time will tell whether it sets a trend." But, with the hands of the clock held back by COVID-19, trends have been difficult to pursue – especially bearing in mind that Al Hilal's defence of the title was truncated by the pandemic.

As Andy Roxburgh commented at the Forum, Kim Do-hoon's Ulsan Hyundai produced neat combination attacking en-route to the 2020 title and was equipped to execute high collective pressing – but not to the same degree of intensity that Al Hilal had displayed a year earlier. Japan's Deputy Technical Director Takeshi Ono remarked that some of the teams in the East – Japan among them – excel at combination play but, he added, the challenge for all AFC Member Associations is to implement this virtue in high-intensity games. And, once again, the pandemic factor intervenes: how much do neutral venues and/or empty or near-empty stadiums subtract from the intensity of the AFC Champions League matches?

Statistics reveal that in the AFC Champions League 2020, only 9% of open-play goals stemmed from combination moves – barely half of the percentage registered in Europe's equivalent competition. This interlinked with a comment by Yokohama Marinos coach Kevin Muscat.

"Asian teams seem to be more willing to step away from traditional styles," he said, "and are often, nowadays, more expansive than conservative. But I have no doubt



Laurent Blanc



Kevin Muscat

that exposure on a regular basis to high-level football in Europe allows players to gain experience and become better far more quickly.”

The debating point is how much of the creative combination play displayed among AFC clubs is generated by imported players with that sort of work experience on their CV. Fabio Capello, one of the special guests at the Forum, recalled: “When I was in China PR, I did detect a difference between local and imported talent. And I would say the greatest difference was losses of concentration in high-intensity matches, which led to costly mistakes.”

Europe, further along the road towards a ‘new normality’ in these troubled times, certainly affords more opportunities to detect trends. As Andy Roxburgh pointed out, European club and national



team competitions highlighted two distinct schools of thought: teams who base their strategy on high-intensity attacking with and without the ball; and others who adopt more of a contain-and-counter approach. The former is a game based on a high back line with a keeper sweeping behind; an extremely compact formation; high-pressing aimed at regaining possession within seconds; full-backs operating as wingers; switches of play via accurate long diagonals; in-possession play based on building from the back; positional attacking with great mobility; and rapid transitions. Which all adds up to intense, fast, vertical football.

The contain-and-counter philosophy is built on the foundation of a deep defensive block protected by one or two screening midfielders; attack-to-defence transitions based on getting numbers behind the ball; aggressive collective pressing from midfield; and lightning-fast vertical counters with players flooding upfield. At coach education courses, the two philosophies might easily be illustrated by clips from the 2021 UEFA Champions League between Manchester City and Chelsea.

TIMES ARE CHANGING

Is the traditional ‘unchanged team’ a thing of the past? The question was inspired by comments at the Forum by Beijing Guoan coach Slaven Bilić. He admitted to feeling disappointed when coaches seem reluctant to exploit the talent at their disposal or their squad’s attacking potential. “Sometimes,” he added, “they don’t field their best players. Is this about fear of losing?” It’s a frequent – sometimes weekly – dilemma for coaches influenced by heavy workloads, travelling, the ability to make five substitutions and squad sizes that encourage rotations for man-management reasons. The question dovetails with a topic raised by Andy Roxburgh in his

editorial and highlighted by Roy Hodgson when asked, as special guest at the Forum, to reflect on the major changes in football management over the last couple of decades: sports science.

“This is something that has just grown and grown, alongside video analysis,” he said. “The level of help that you get from a sports scientist in analysing the work you do on a daily basis, looking at the performance levels of a player during a game. And then the video analysis that helps us to put things together and examine exactly what’s happening on the field of play and how the players are implementing what you are trying to do in coaching. It also gives the coach a great tool in terms of showing them, with data, how they are doing in interpreting what you tell them.

“Having said that, the things the sports scientists or medical staff ask or tell you to do can irritate you. They might want to apply the brakes at a moment when you don’t want to. You don’t want to give a player an extra day’s rest that they say he needs because you want to get him back on the training field and do some more coaching. It’s always a bit of a tug-of-war and they’re so often right. If you go against them when they tell you a player might pull a muscle and needs to rest, nine times out of ten they’re right and you end up with egg on your face. But I have to say that the sports scientists I have worked with at Crystal Palace and, before that, at West Brom and England, were good. They joined in with the coaching staff and were part of discussions. They might say ‘Look, that was a hard session today, based on the data of how hard they worked. We don’t know what you’re planning to do in the next session but our advice would be to take it a bit easier. If you do another session similar in volume and input, you’re

risking a negative effect on your chances in the next game.' That's something we never had in the past, when it was all based on simply how you felt. You relied on eyesight and experience, whereas now you've got factual information to back you up and help you."

ADVICE FOR FRONT-LINE COACHES

Based on his vast experience with 20 clubs and national teams, Roy Hodgson was asked what advice he would pass on to his colleagues in the coaching profession. "I think one important piece of advice would be to concentrate on the things you can change and influence," he replied. "And not to dwell on things that might happen around you that you might not like very much. Also, you need a fair amount of pragmatism. Some of us go into football, maybe, dreaming. We go into our first job with a clear philosophy about the way we want to play; how our team's going to look; this is what's going to happen; the victories I'm going to enjoy; and this is what it's going to be like and I'm going to become a successful coach. But along the way you're going to come across so many obstacles – and one of those obstacles might be a very simple one. I listened to Slaven talking quite eloquently earlier on about encouraging the players to play good football and support the beautiful game. But you must always remember that, as a manager, you're going to be judged on results. If you're playing good football and losing, the press and social media will at first say positive things about you 'playing nice football'. But only for so long. Sooner or later, you're going to be sliding towards the bottom of the league table and, unfortunately, your job is going to be on the line.

"Another important point is about surrounding yourself with people you trust. People who can help you; people you might like as persons; and people you feel you can

turn to for advice. It's tempting to feel that you're the only person who can see what's happening on the field or on the training pitch. But that's not the reality of the job."

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SELF-BELIEF

One of the other key questions was about approaching a job where the average tenure for a coach is now well below two seasons. "One of the biggest dangers for a new manager is avoiding cynicism," was Hodgson's reply. "If you worry about statistics and go into a job thinking that you're not going to last in it, I don't think that's going to help you do the job in the right way. You've got to believe in yourself and believe you're going to receive the support and backing to get on with it in the way you want. Realistically, it may not work out that way because we know the score. We know what contracts are worth. We know about levels of patience. But you've got to attack the job on the basis of seeing out a contract, doing things properly. I don't see how any other attitude can work."

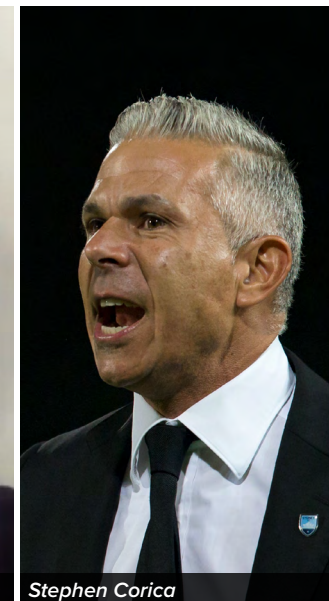
LEADERSHIP AND EMOTIONS

When Sydney FC head coach Stephen Corica asked to what extent coaches need to change their philosophy when moving from country to country, Fabio Capello's response was, "You have to adapt to a different style, sometimes even within the same country. I found that in Italy. Roma was completely different from Juventus or Milan. The organisation, the fans, the media – everything was different. Then you go to Spain, England, Russia, China PR...you always have to understand exactly where you are working. But the leadership is always the same."

This prompted Slaven Bilić to reflect, "For me, the most important thing about leadership is how you handle your emotions when you have a team talk or 1v1 talks



Fabio Capello



Stephen Corica

with your players, especially before a game. When I started as a coach in my early 30s, I remembered that as a player, what I didn't like was when the manager seemed insecure in his decisions. It's important to handle those sorts of emotions even when you might not be sure about a decision or don't have that much belief in your team. They always need to feel that you believe in them, whether you do or not. The key is to transmit positive emotions and show leadership to the team." Fabio Capello agreed: "You have to understand the importance of managing emotions because the players look to you. So your emotional response is really important for the confidence of the players."

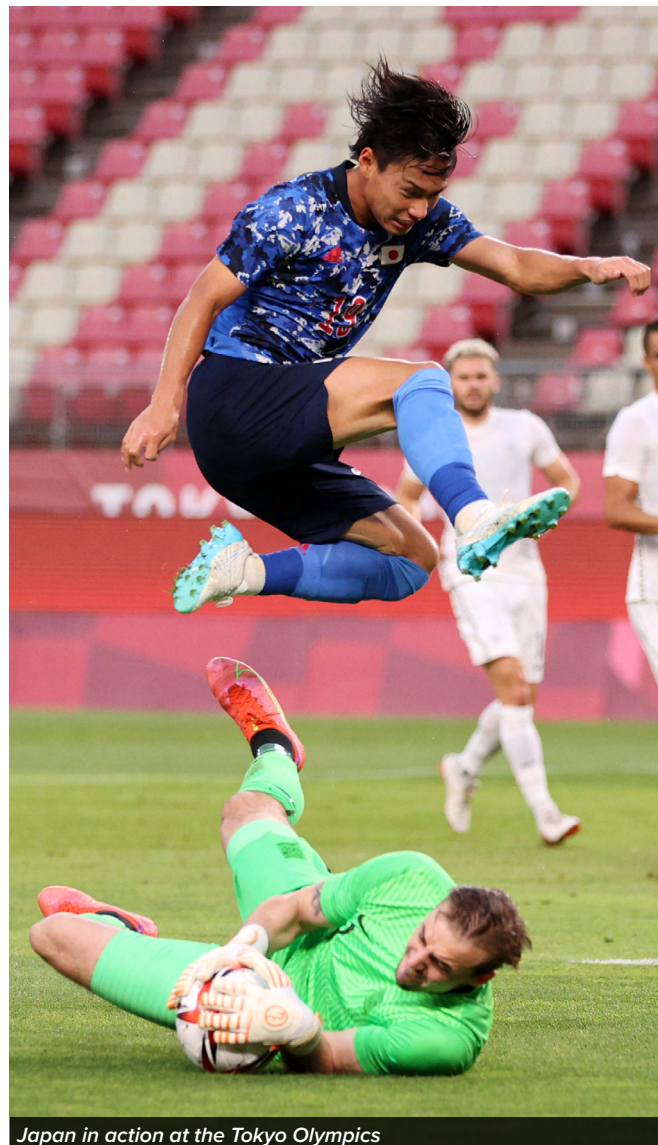
That parting shot interlocks nicely with the AFC Emotions Project – but that is another ongoing story...

GLOBAL EVENTS (OLYMPICS/ FUTSAL WC)

HALF-EMPTY OR HALF-FULL?

In terms of development, events that allow teams from AFC Member Associations to measure themselves on the world stage against opposition from other Confederations are absolutely priceless. Since our last issue, the AFC men's and women's national teams have done so at the Olympic Games in Japan while, a few weeks later, five teams took to the court at the FIFA Futsal World Cup staged in Lithuania. All three competitions provided positives and negatives – and lessons to be exploited in the future.

At the men's football Olympic tournament, those who see the glass half-full will congratulate Japan and Korea Republic for topping their Groups, winning five of their six games and conceding one goal apiece. Those who regard it as half-empty might, on the other hand, mention that Australia and Saudi Arabia made early exits, the latter losing all three Group games while the former's solitary victory created ripples – Graham Arnold's team posting a 2-0 win over Argentina. However, as the tournament moved into the Knockout rounds, the AFC representatives did not win another game. Kim Hak-bum's Korea Republic, after scoring 10 in the Group phase, maintained attacking momentum in the Quarter-



Japan in action at the Tokyo Olympics



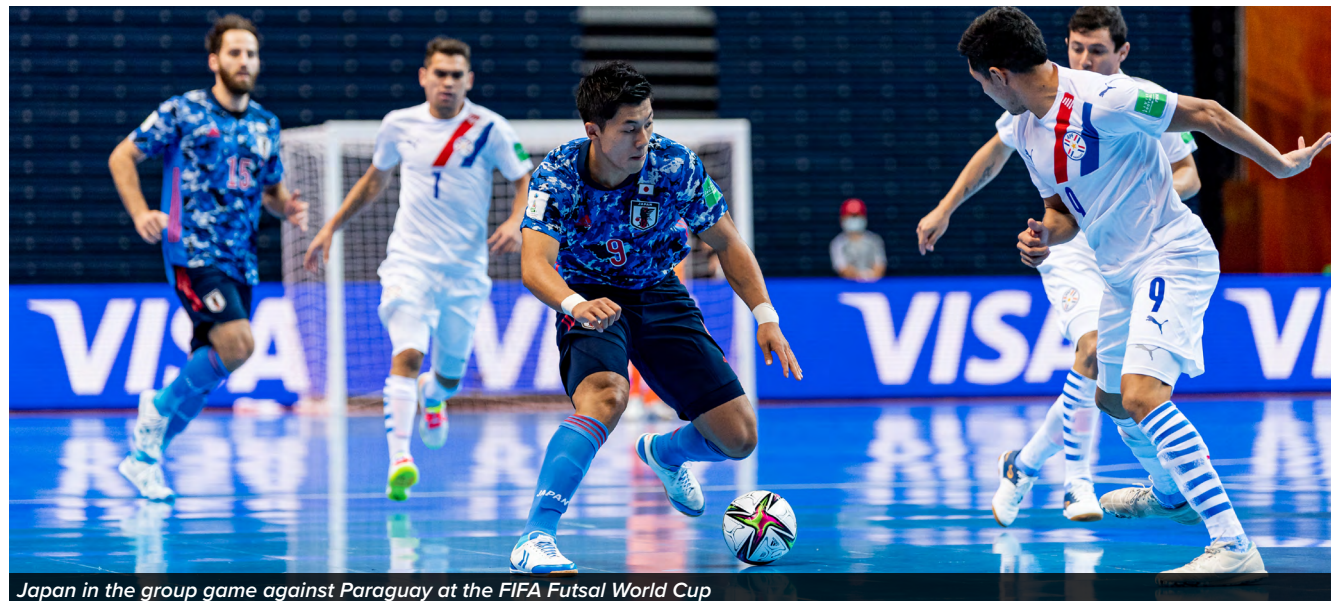
Australia's Caitlin Foord in the semi-final against Sweden

final against Mexico but struggled defensively against technically-gifted opponents – as demonstrated by a 6-3 final score.

The hosts, by contrast, ticked defensive boxes but lacked efficiency in the attacking third. Despite long periods of domination and neat approach play, Hajime Moriyasu's team failed to ruffle the New Zealand net until a penalty shoot-out and then, in a Semi-final against a similarly goal-shy Spain, were beaten by a solitary goal in the dying moments of extra-time and lost the third-place match 3-1 against the prolific Mexicans.

The women's tournament produced a similar tale of falling just short of the podium. China PR, it has to be said, missed it by a distance, conceding 17 times to end as group tailenders while the other two AFC participants edged through via third place in the other Groups. Japan posted a creditable draw with eventual gold-medallists Canada while Australia did likewise against world champions USA. However, Asako Takakura's team was then beaten 3-1 by a potent Sweden team that also proved too strong in the Semi-final against Australia, who had won a thrilling Quarter-final against Great Britain 4-3 after extra-time. But Tony Gustavsson's side, on the receiving end of the same scoreline against the USA, fell tantalisingly short of the bronze medal after an exhilarating campaign. Interestingly, from a coaching perspective, Canada took the gold medal despite winning only two of their six games, basing their strategy on two wide strikers acting as the first line of defence by shepherding opponents into a densely-populated central area.

And so, on to Lithuania, where the half-full contingent could congratulate the five AFC representatives



Japan in the group game against Paraguay at the FIFA Futsal World Cup

for making history by reaching the Knockout Stage phase albeit via third place finishes in the cases of Japan, Vietnam and Thailand. That trio fell at the next hurdle: Bruno García's Japan performing creditably in a 4-2 defeat by five-time champions and pre-tournament favourites Brazil; Vietnam also making a positive impression despite losing 3-2 to Russia; and Thailand suffering a comprehensive 7-0 loss against Kazakhstan. The other two AFC teams had the misfortune to meet in the Round of 16. Bakhodir Akhmedov's Uzbekistan claimed second place despite losing two of their Group games to earn a tie against Mohammad Nazemosharieh's IR Iran who, again, were an impressive presence on the world stage. The two Asian sides produced arguably the most entertaining match of the tournament, with the

Iranians emerging 9-8 winners in a game where six goals were scored in the final 10 minutes. However, surrendering a 2-0 half-time lead to lose 3-2 to Kazakhstan meant that the AFC participation did not extend beyond the Quarter-finals of a tournament where Portugal, the champions of Europe, defeated Argentina in a closely-fought final.

Statistics pass a harsh sentence on the AFC teams. The two Olympic tournaments yielded a balance of W9 D4 L16 while the net result of the futsal competition was W7 D2 L12. But individual performances, notably by Japan and Australia fuel belief that with a half-full mentality, Asian teams can continue to strengthen their impact on the world stage and find the extra competitive edge that will elevate them on to the podium.

COACHING CONVENTION

KEEPING THE BALL ROLLING

If put together as a compendium, our regular updates on the three major AFC projects reflect remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Anti-COVID-19 measures have restricted access to – or even closed – the AFC’s headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. And, around our Member Associations, everyone has tales to tell. In such circumstances, the easy option is to fold one’s arms and do nothing. But fortunately, football people are not like that. And much credit is due to those at both the AFC and the MAs, who have managed to keep the ball rolling during a period when coach education courses have had to be postponed or cancelled; when grassroots activities have been seriously curtailed; and when youth development events and competitions have suffered severe disruptions.

Statistics are not a very effusive way of expressing gratitude for their efforts. But in these times of limited personal contact, they are better than nothing. The remarkable fact is that, just over three years since the AFC Coaching Convention was launched, membership is four short of a full house, with Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Pakistan and Yemen the only MAs yet to apply.



The Kyrgyz Football Union AFC 'A' Diploma Course practical session

Since our last issue, Vietnam’s application to join the Convention at ‘A’ level has been endorsed, lifting the number on that rung of the ladder to 13. The pandemic, meanwhile, has undoubtedly applied the brakes to evaluation procedures because, at the time of writing, a total of 17 applications are either ongoing or in the pending tray. Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have applied to upgrade from ‘A’ to ‘Pro’ level while Singapore is bidding to make the longer leap from ‘B’ to ‘Pro’.

Similarly, Brunei Darussalam, Iraq, Kyrgyz Republic and

Tajikistan are in line to move from ‘B’ to ‘A’, while Nepal, Syria and Thailand have applied to jump on board at ‘A’. Laos, Mongolia, Oman, Sri Lanka and Turkmenistan, on the other hand, are being evaluated for ‘B’-level membership.

This means that 43 MAs are aligning their Coach Education programmes with the AFC’s requirements and are buying into this far-reaching project aimed at upgrading standards and earning due recognition on the international stage for AFC-endorsed diplomas.

AFC COACHING CONVENTION CATEGORIES

PRO - Level



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

A - Level



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

B - Level



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL TIMOR-LESTE

GRASSROOTS

THE GROWTH RATE

The grassroots sector of the game has generally suffered greater disruption than any other during the prolonged pandemic. The growth rate has slowed – but not stopped. Assisted by online assessment techniques, the AFC Grassroots Charter has maintained a degree of momentum since the advances recorded in our last issue and posted a couple of ‘firsts’ on its growth chart.

With memberships dating back to the Charter’s inception in 2018, the three-yearly renewal process has now begun, with Macau’s re-endorsement at Bronze level going into the records as the first of its kind. At the same time, Hong Kong’s successful application for promotion from Bronze to Silver – with online assessments coming into play – is the Charter’s first upgrade of this kind.

As with the other projects, there are various evaluation procedures currently underway – among them applications by Qatar and Singapore to join Australia, Japan and Korea Republic on Gold. Bhutan, Guam, Malaysia and UAE have their sights on Silver and, if their applications are endorsed, they will take the total at that level into double figures. Syria’s endorsement means that 26 MAs are now on board at Bronze, with an application from Oman currently in the pipeline. Only eight MAs have yet to apply for membership.



Afghanistan Football Federation



Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran



Chinese Football Association



Lebanese Football Association

AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER CATEGORIES



GOLD



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA
KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

SILVER



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.



Jordan Football Association



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

BRONZE



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



FEDERACAO FUTEBOL TIMOR-LESTE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

ELITE YOUTH

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS

On the Elite Youth front, salient features since our last issue are the application from Bangladesh to join the scheme at 1-star level, along with heartening requests for academies in Hong Kong, Japan and Malaysia for the AFC's endorsement. The Hong Kong Football Association Ltd. has proposed academies corresponding to two clubs: Lee Man FC based in Tseung Kwan O and the Hong Kong FC set-up in Happy Valley.

In Japan, whose Elite Youth Development programme already enjoys the AFC's endorsement at the 2-star level, the JFA Girls' Academy is pivotal in their application for a 3-star endorsement. The Malaysia FA, which had its NFDLP Mokhtar Dahari Academy endorsed with 2-star status in 2020, has now requested the addition of an academy in Kulai set up by Johor Darul Ta'zim FC (JDT), the club which lifted the AFC Cup back in 2015.

The fact that every issue of The Coaches Circle seems to record applications for academies to receive the AFC's endorsement is a healthy symptom of the growing realisation among MAs that high-quality, elite youth development facilities and coaching are vital for the future growth of the sport in Asia.



India youth players



Football Association of Singapore



The Hong Kong Football Association Ltd.



Bhutan youth players

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

CATEGORIES

ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR



KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

2 - STAR



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

1 - STAR



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



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THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND

PROVISIONAL



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

KEY DATES

Jan 2022		20 Jan - 06 Feb 22		27 Jan 22				
			AFC Women's Asian Cup India 2022™	AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to Qatar™ (MD7)				
Feb 2022	01 Feb 22							
		AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to Qatar™ (MD8)						
March 2022	01 Mar 22	08 Mar 22		10 Mar 22	24 Mar 22		29 Mar 22	
		14th AFC Coach Education Panel Meeting (Online)	AFC Women's Football Day 13th AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting (Online)	13th AFC Youth Panel Meeting (Online)	AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to Qatar™ (MD9)		AFC Asian Qualifiers - Road to Qatar™ (MD10)	
April 2022	01 - 15 Apr 22	15 Apr - 01 May 22						
		AFC Futsal Asian Cup Kuwait 2022™ Qualifiers	AFC Champions League 2022™ (East) - Group Stage (MD1-MD6)					
May 2022				10 May 22	15 May 22		18 - 24 May 22	
				AFC Champions League 2022™ (West) - Group Stage (MD1-MD6)	AFC Grassroots Day		AFC Cup 2022™ (West & South) - Group Stage	
June 2022	01 - 19 Jun 22	08 - 14 Jun 22		24 - 30 Jun 22				
		AFC U23 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2022™	AFC Asian Cup China 2023™ Qualifiers Final Round	AFC Cup 2022™ (Asean, Central & East) - Group Stage				

TRIBUTE TO SUBRAMANIAM

SUBRA – A GENTLE MAN AND A GENTLEMAN

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

He was a gentle man and a gentleman – soft-spoken and courteous. Mr. S Subramaniam, the former Technical Director of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) who passed away recently, was in many ways a mirror image of Dr. Joe Venglos, the legendary European coach who ‘Subra’ brought to Malaysia in the mid-1980s. Like Joe, Subra was respectful, curious, dedicated, loyal and immensely passionate about the game. He was also a coach education trailblazer in his homeland of Malaysia and across the Asian Continent.

Throughout the 1990s, and with the driving force of the AFC's visionary General Secretary Peter Velappan behind him, Subra established a comprehensive programme of coach education and coaching licences. Through conferences, seminars and courses, Asia's coach educators were supported and given guidelines for the delivery of diplomas at C, B, A and Professional levels. With Subra as a motivating force, Grassroots



8th Asian Coaching School 1996 Kuala Lumpur

Football was also identified as a key area for further development.

I had the pleasure of working with Subra on many occasions, notably with FIFA's Technical Study Group at the 1998 FIFA World Cup in France and on a FIFA Instructors course in Saudi Arabia. He also collaborated with me on a number of technical events in Europe and in other AFC Member Associations.

As Technical Director of the AFC and the Kuala Lumpur FA, Subra left an impressive legacy, and his outstanding efforts were recognised when he was presented with the AFC's Gold Service Award in 2011.

Subra was a pioneer in the technical field, and on behalf of the Asian coaching fraternity, I salute him as a teacher, as a coach, as an innovator and as a developer. But, above all, I pay tribute to a respected colleague and to a wonderful man.



Subra' (right) shakes hands with Dr. Joe Venglos



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Graham Turner

PRODUCTION

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DESIGN

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TECHNICAL ADMINISTRATION

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