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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH

LEONARDO JARDIM

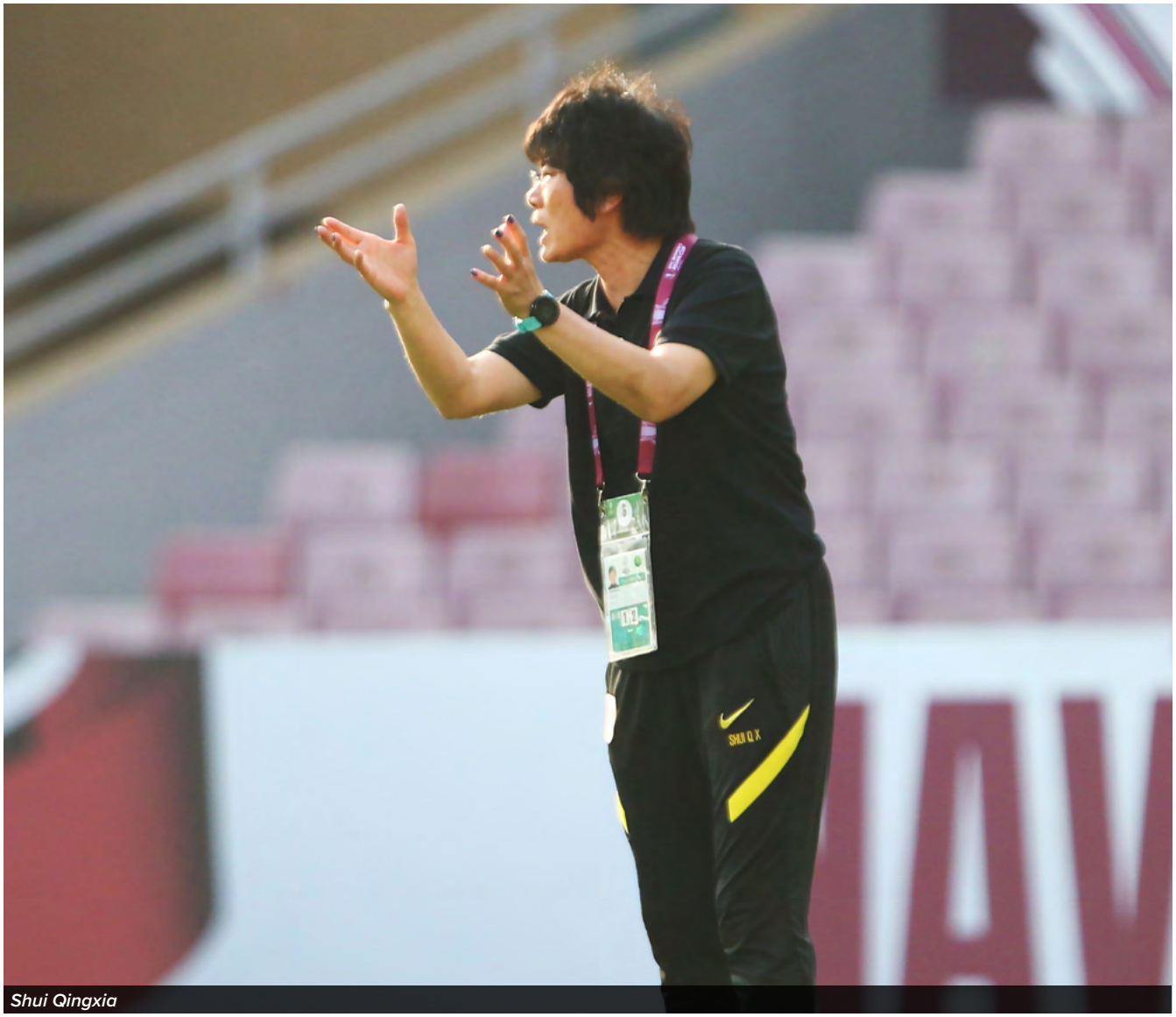
EDITORIAL

THE POWER OF HUMILITY

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

They have something in common, apart from the fact that they have both qualified for a FIFA World Cup, been finalists in an AFC Asian Cup™ and supported AFC technical events and publications: Shui Qingxia (the Chinese coach who won the AFC Women's Asian Cup India 2022™ and qualified for the FIFA Women's World Cup Australia and New Zealand 2023™) and Hajime Moriyasu (the men's national coach of Japan who was an AFC Asian Cup™ finalist in 2019 and qualified for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™) are elite coaches who both display an admirable degree of humility. They are good examples of coaches who are modest, unpretentious, and open. They endorse the old maxim: if you have to tell people you are, you aren't. If you have to tell people you are good at something, maybe you're not. But there is a view which is held by some in professional football that humility can be an indicator of softness and character weakness. Sadly, super-confidence, conceit and a feeling of superiority are often on display, especially at the highest level of the game.

Son Heung-min of Korea Republic and Tottenham Hotspur has shown with his performances for club and country that humility and confidence are not mutually exclusive. The clean-cut, respectful, modest footballer is a genuine superstar and a role model for the next generation of talented Asian players. People who show



Shui Qingxia

EDITORIAL

humility are always seeking to improve; they avoid self-promotion; and they are usually valuable, hardworking members of a team. Two World Cup winners, Andrés Iniesta of Vissel Kobe (ex-FC Barcelona and Spain) and N'Golo Kanté of Chelsea and France, illustrate the point: both are world champions, each showing that humility is a virtue, not a flaw. The selfie generation encourages vanity and selfishness, but in a team sport such as football, it is a 'we mentality' that delivers competitive success.



Hajime Moriyasu

Cristiano Ronaldo, five times a Ballon d'Or winner, once described Carlo Ancelotti, the current manager of Real Madrid and one of the world's greatest coaches, as 'very humble'. Cristiano then added: "which is not so normal in the football business." It may not be the norm, but there are some high-profile beacons of respectful, patient, and unassuming leadership in football. Former World champion Vicente del Bosque was the epitome of these qualities, and he summed up his philosophy when he said: "I think every coach has his own personality and his own way of going about the job. If I had to describe myself – and that's not an easy task – I would say that my own style was based on human values, being positive and on sharing." But maybe this perspective only comes with maturity. Marcello Lippi, another World Cup-winning coach, someone who can be proud but not loud, fired a word of warning to coach educators everywhere when he declared: "There is one thing I've realised in my years in football: it's that managers, particularly young ones, are extremely arrogant. They are convinced that they have nothing to learn." No doubt there is a balance to be found between confidence and competence on the one hand, and self-awareness and humility on the other.

Youth coaches need to help their talented youngsters keep their feet on the ground; coach educators have a duty to develop technicians who can embrace their strengths yet remain open, curious and aware of their limitations. In the field of technical development, arrogance is the enemy. Far from being a weakness, humility is an attribute to be prized. It is a prerequisite for strong relationships, continuous learning and healthy confidence. If you want to see the power of humility in action, look no further than China PR's Shui Qingxia and Japan's Hajime Moriyasu.

THE BIG INTERVIEW

A TWENTY-YEAR TRIP FROM MADEIRA TO DUBAI



LEONARDO JARDIM

One of the nice things about the coaching profession is that its door is open to everybody. From former superstars with illustrious playing careers to those who never played the game at top level. This is the story of a man whose passion for football ushered him into coach education courses at the age of 21 and, since then, has allowed him to fill an impressive trophy cabinet well before celebrating his 50th birthday. Born in Barcelona (no, not that one – his birth certificate was stamped in Venezuela) to Portuguese parents from the island of Madeira, his career was launched by assistant coach jobs at local teams. After five years' experience as head coach of Camacha, he broadened his horizons on mainland Portugal and in Greece before making a huge impact in the international media by leading AS Monaco to a long-awaited league title way ahead of French giants such as Paris Saint-Germain and Olympique Marseille, winning 30 and losing only three of 38 matches and scoring 107 goals in the process – 15 of them supplied by an 18-year-old Kylian Mbappé. And then to Saudi Arabia to take the helm at Al Hilal SFC and steer the club to victory in the 2021 edition of the AFC Champions League™. After moving to Dubai to manage Shabab Al Ahli, he is currently warming to the challenge of taking on his former club in the upcoming round of the 2022 AFC Champions League™ season. He is, of course, Asia's current champion club coach.

GOING RIGHT BACK TO YOUR EARLY CAREER IN PORTUGAL, WHO WERE YOUR MAIN INFLUENCES AS A COACH?

I started working as a coach when I was very young. I began my coach education when I was 21 and when I started working as an academy coach, my reference point was Carlos Queiroz, who had been a very successful coach during that period and had won the FIFA U20 World Cup for Portugal in 1989 and 1991. But later I focused on creating my own identity, following up my ideas, my philosophy of training and team management. I was obviously very aware of other coaches' methods but I was keen to create my own DNA in football.

IN MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF COACHING, HAVE YOU CHANGED THE STYLE OF PLAY THAT YOU FAVOUR?

It's clear that over such a long period there has been an evolution. It's normal to change. Firstly because of the different, demanding challenges that I needed to face as my career developed. I tried out my ideas with clubs in the third league, the second league and the top league in Portugal. Then, in Greece and in France. I coached different players with better quality in different competitions. So it was normal that, step by step, I introduced small changes to my ideas about training, about how to defend and, above all, the methodology of training. It has become close to my heart to make sure it is as near as possible to the realities of a match. I prefer attacking football and I like the game to be as beautiful as possible, while keeping the right level of balance. And, of course, your opponents can influence your approach. When I moved to AFC countries, I discovered that I needed to adjust some of my thinking because the culture was not the same as in Europe. But I still focus on directing training with specificity regarding the goals we want to achieve.



WHAT WAS THE FORMULA FOR THAT SPECTACULAR CHAMPIONSHIP-WINNING SUCCESS AT AS MONACO?

I had six wonderful years in Monaco and the formula was based on working within a long-term project. In 2014, we started a strategy to detect and develop new, young players. So we started with a very young team and worked very hard with a group of players who had the opportunity to evolve over two seasons. In the third season, we managed to win the championship ahead of a very powerful PSG and other clubs like Lyon and Marseille who were favourites to win it. The key was definitely that three-year development project when we gradually built a team capable of winning titles.

APART FROM MBAPPÉ, THAT TEAM HAD PLAYERS LIKE THOMAS LEMAR AND BERNARDO SILVA... YOU HAVE DEVELOPED A LOT OF TOP PLAYERS. WHAT IS THE SECRET OF ELITE PLAYER DEVELOPMENT?

It's true that we developed some of the best players in the world and, nowadays, most of them are performing in the best teams and the best championships. To develop young players you need, firstly, to spot the talent. And then work on that talent, developing qualities in different areas of the game, respecting high-performance principles. You have to work hard to achieve those objectives. But, if you have a group of players you think can reach the highest level, the key factor is their mentality. A lot of young players fail to reach the highest level because they don't have the right mentality. And this is difficult for a coach to control or rectify. The secret is achieving a good relationship between talent and mentality.

HAVING WON THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE™ AND REACHED THE TOP FOUR IN THE UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE, HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THE TWO COMPETITIONS?

Yes, in Europe we reached the quarter-finals twice and then the semi-finals in 2017. And then winning the AFC Champions League™ was a great achievement. But there is a big difference. First of all, everybody talks about the teams and coaches in the European competition – much, much more than people talk about the Champions Leagues in Africa or Asia. That includes the media, of course. And then there are big differences between the



teams' qualities. In Europe, I think the number of top-quality teams is higher, whereas in Asia the number is more limited. But I think the AFC Champions League™ is a good competition. Last year, for example, we played against opponents from (the Islamic Republic of Iran) and Saudi Arabia, who were very good teams. And in the final, the (Pohang) Steelers from Korea (Republic) were also very well-organised opponents. I won titles in France, in Greece and I really wanted to win a Champions League, so it was wonderful to win that final.

WITH AL HILAL, YOU WON THAT TITLE WITH A HIGH-PRESSING APPROACH. HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO IMPLEMENT THAT?

Our strategy was to use high pressing to take the initiative away from our opponents. It worked well because, for example, the two Iranian teams that we played didn't really expect us to do it. It helped us to gain the upper hand and score more than one goal per match to demonstrate a level of superiority. It was basically down to hard work on the training pitch – and the key thing was to make sure that everybody believed in this approach to the game. In my pressing system, the trigger is my striker and the midfielder on the opposite side. This is the signal for us to press as a block. Because it's not just about the striker, wingers or midfielders. It is a collective operation. In the international competition, we tried to press a lot. In the national league, it was slightly different because to press collectively you need a high level of motivation and this is sometimes difficult to achieve consistently. In the Emirates with Al Shabab, it is the same process. We set out to play a pressing game but we need to go step by step. It takes time.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT TAKING ON YOUR FORMER CLUB, AL HILAL, WITH YOUR NEW CLUB, SHABAB AL AHLI, IN THE ROUND OF 16?

It will be an interesting challenge, especially because I still have good friends in Riyadh and at the club. Al Hilal will obviously be the favourites because they won the competition last year and they have some of the best players in Asia. For Shabab Al Ahli it's a question of being

ambitious, well-organised and focused on qualifying for the next round. We need to play at 100% of our capabilities, with great heart and a very positive attitude.

HAVING WORKED IN SIX DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, WHAT IS THE KEY WHEN A COACH MOVES TO A NEW ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE?

You need the ability to adapt – which is a very important skill. Every country is different. The culture is different, the football is different. Even in Europe, you can see that football in Italy, England or Spain has its own characteristics. In Asia, adaptation is even more important, as there are additional challenges. One is the weather. Because when it is so hot, it can obviously affect your work. Or there are religious issues which need to be respected. We need to organise matches and training sessions that respect the times for prayer. As coaches, every time we move to a new country, we arrive with our footballing DNA and try to implement our ideas. But we need to adapt to, and respect, the culture, the traditions, the religions and the rules of each individual country. So the challenge is to communicate your ideas in the right way and create a good environment for the players to implement them.

WHAT WOULD YOU PICK OUT AS YOUR BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT SO FAR? AND WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT?

All my achievements have been important to me. My first title – winning the Cup in Madeira with Camacha – when we were playing our football in the second division. That was very important for me. And then winning the second division title with Beira Mar and getting promotion to the top league. And then the titles in Greece and France. Maybe that league win with Monaco was the most memorable. Having said that, every title has been important in my life. A title has its importance because it is a reward for working hard and winning games. And the first is always special. Like the first Champions League in Asia with Al Hilal. They have all been special achievements because, as coaches, that's how we write our history.

> "The most important thing is to work hard and to believe in your own methodology and your leadership abilities. It's also important to assemble a staff with good, positive attitudes that can help you to stay strong and be successful. The key is to be loyal to your own ideas of working while respecting the club's identity, the structure, the players and the culture."
>
> **LEONARDO JARDIM**

As for disappointments, maybe the experience at Monaco when, after five years or so, my contract was terminated. Three months later, they called me back to start a new project. My relationship with the owner had been very good but, with a new president, life wasn't quite as easy and my contract was terminated again – not because of my work but because of problems outside football. That was a disappointment.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE COACHING COLLEAGUES ABOUT BEING SUCCESSFUL IN TODAY'S TOP-LEVEL FOOTBALL?

The most important thing is to work hard and to believe in your own methodology and your leadership abilities. It's also important to assemble a staff with good, positive attitudes that can help you to stay strong and be successful. The key is to be loyal to your own ideas of working while respecting the club's identity, the structure, the players and the culture. Also, never forget that behind every success there is a lot of sacrifice and hard work. If I have one wish for my colleagues, it would be that everyone could have the good fortune to work at clubs with ambitions.

AFC U23 FOLLOW UP

TASHKENT AND BEYOND



"It made me happy to see the coaches' awareness and understanding of what is going on in world football. It was encouraging to see that Asian football seems to be on the right track." The words were spoken by Islam Akhmedov, one of the AFC's technical observers, during an online follow-up workshop for national team coaches and technical directors at the final tournament of the AFC U23 Asian Cup™ played in Uzbekistan earlier this year. As AFC's technical director Andy Roxburgh pointed out, "The U23 category is essentially a development tournament for footballers who aspire to cross the threshold to senior teams. So the prospects of a nation's footballers are highly dependent on the coaches who develop them."

As it happened, the winning coach in Uzbekistan was a specialist in the development of young players. Saad Al-Shehri had led Saudi Arabia into the final of the previous tournament in Thailand in 2020 and, in 2022, went a step further by winning gold rather than silver, beating the host nation 2-0 in the Tashkent final. Interviewed during the online session by László Szalai, the AFC head of player development who had captained the team of technical observers in Uzbekistan, he underlined the importance of mental preparation for a high-intensity international tournament. "We had five or six of the squad from Thailand with us in Uzbekistan," he said, "and this helped the group to perform. We didn't make too many technical changes, as we did quite well in Thailand and fell only just short of winning the title. But, to be champion of Asia, you have to take care of all the different elements of player performance and help each individual to produce a good contribution to the team. We gave importance to mental preparation, rather than just focusing on physical aspects of the game. We went into the tournament with a clear goal of winning it. It helped the players to be able to work with a clear objective and to clear their minds of everything other than becoming champions of Asia."

Asked how today's age-limit football compared with his experience as a player at the FIFA U20 World Championship in 1999, Al-Shehri responded, "Football is always developing and evolving. I think the game has become more challenging and the modern-day player needs to be more complete. The spaces to play have been getting smaller and smaller. So we now need to work really hard at developing the individual skills of

the player so that he can deal with all the situations he is going to encounter in modern top-level football." He was also keen for young Asian players to broaden their footballing horizons. "We need our players to play a maximum amount of time at demanding levels in high-intensity competitions," he said. "We need to have more opportunities against top teams from other continents, like Brazil. That is important to develop our football and compete with the best in the world."

Al-Shehri was also adamant that coaches need to be equipped to deal with the demands of the modern game. "When we develop our youth players," he insisted, "the important thing is that we must continue to learn and to keep up with everything that is new. For the coach, the key is to keep educating ourselves, observing more clearly and analysing everything related to the game."

TECHNICAL TOPICS

The online session went on to review some of the topics addressed in the technical report which has now been published on the AFC website. László Szalai, commenting on attacking play at an event that yielded 81 goals at an average of 2.53 per game, said, "The tournament showcased many aspects of the evolution of attacking play. Full-backs, once again, caught the eye with their contributions. Many of them – notably Australia and Uzbekistan – were prepared to push both of them forward, with wingers often moving infield to create space for overlapping runs." He cited the relationship between Saudi Arabia's left-back Moteb Al Harbi and wide midfielder Turki Al Ammar as a prime example, with the former appearing in the box to score two goals – one a right-footed finish in the centre of the Tajikistan penalty area; the other a left-footed shot from the left of the box.

He also highlighted the changing profile of the central attacker. "Strikers were generally well-controlled by centre-backs and were not prolific goalscorers. They were more about movement, drifting wide to create space or dropping deep to receive and to open play to the wings. In other words, they were more about opening up channels and creating chances for midfielders."

A DIFFERENT DEAD-BALL GAME

The online audience also heard that scoring patterns in Uzbekistan had raised eyebrows. Only 22% stemmed from set plays – compared with 32% at the senior AFC Asian Cup™ in 2019. Discounting nine penalties, the nine set-play goals spelt one success per 323 minutes of play.

Japan posted the only success of the tournament from a direct free-kick. The other three semi-finalists (Australia, Saudi Arabia and the hosts) scored no set-play goals. None of the top eight teams scored from an indirect free-kick. The success rate from corners was 1:47. Why?

"The statistics add up to an interesting story," reflected Nair Sivaji, one of the technical observers in Uzbekistan. "I have to say that the delivery of set plays into key areas was not brilliant. Nor was second-phase attacking following dead-ball situations. On the other hand, teams were generally more adept defensively when it came to set plays. It gave us food for thought and raised questions about whether enough attention is being paid to this aspect of the game at development levels."



THE PRESSURE GAUGE

The technical report noted a trend towards a high-pressing game at the AFC U23 Asian Cup, although temperatures and COVID-19 were conditioning factors at the tournament in Uzbekistan. Islam Akhmedov commented that the top four teams were equipped to play a high-pressing game but that, in general, efficiency varied greatly. "Saudi Arabia operated their pressing game at a high level," he added during the online session. "They were well-organised and well-coached. But other teams pushed forward to press the ball, leaving spaces between lines, and were less effective. There was also diversity in ability to deal with high pressing. Qatar, for example, found it very difficult when put under pressure by Uzbekistan – the game they lost 6-0. But if coaches continue to work on this aspect of the game, we will be better in competing on the world stage."

His fellow technical observer Takeshi Ono added, "I know pressing is a big issue in modern football and, in Japan, we are working on preparing our young players' ability to receive the ball when under the sort of pressure that Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan applied at this tournament. But what I would say is that transition play in general had developed in comparison with the previous tournament – and this was a very positive aspect. We saw teams like Malaysia and Turkmenistan well-organised in deep-block defending and counterattacking. Vietnam and Jordan were also good. And, in terms of attack-to-defence transitions, the top four performed at a very high level – especially Saudi Arabia, who were remarkable."

Statistics reveal that one-quarter of the tournament's open-play goals could be attributed to counterattacking – a significant increase on the 10% registered at the previous U23 event in 2020. Ten of the 16 were collective counters, mostly after ball-winning in midfield; three stemmed from high regains; two were solo efforts; and there was only one success from a classic back-to-front counterattack, ironically an own goal by an Iraq defender against Uzbekistan.



KEEPING UP WITH THE TIMES

AFC's Jose Carpio – a goalkeeper in his playing days – kept a close eye on the glove-wearers in Uzbekistan and noted significant development in a rapidly-changing profile. "You could see that they were equipped to work as part of the team," he reported, "alert to requirements of sweeping behind a high defensive line and being active in playing out from the back. We also saw team-mates being unafraid to use the keeper as an outlet if they were being pressed. Playing the ball back to the keeper was also used as a method of switching play to a different area of the field. It means that modern goalkeeping requires skills in short, medium and long passing with both feet. And good decision-making in terms of when he can play short or when it is better to make a safety-first clearance. In other words, an understanding of the game. And it was satisfying to see this during the tournament." Certainly, the U23 competition reflected coaching work being done on the aspects of the goalkeeping role that, a couple of weeks later, was a topic addressed in detail at the AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum and covered elsewhere in this publication.



TIME TO CHANGE?

Another topic which resurfaced as a major concern at the Elite Club Coaches Forum has become a perennial talking point at AFC events. And the U23 tournament in Uzbekistan added fuel to the flames with some startling statistics related to Real Playing Time. During the match between Jordan and Iraq, the ball was in play for 33 minutes and 24 seconds.

As the participants at the online workshop heard, the problem was that it was not a one-off occasion. Tajikistan v UAE registered an actual playing time of 41m33s; Saudi Arabia v UAE 45m14s. The technical report also points out that if the timings of the Uzbekistan v Iraq quarter-final that went to extra-time are converted to 90-minute values, the calculator screen would read 40m48s. In one-third of the group games in Uzbekistan, the real playing time was less than 50 minutes.

The technical report puts the statistics into international perspective by comparing them with the 2021 final tournament of the European Championship where, in a 51-match competition, only one game registered an actual playing time below 50 minutes and, in 21 matches, the ball was in play for more than 60 minutes. To quote the report on the U23 tournament in Uzbekistan, “the alarming statistics from the AFC tournament strongly suggest a negative impact on player development in terms of the capacity to deliver performances of a sustained high intensity”.

During the online follow-up session, various causes – in addition to deliberate time-wasting – were mentioned, including the feigning of injuries, over-lengthy VAR reviews and prolonged protests against referees’ decisions, sometimes conducted with the ball in a player’s hand to prevent play from resuming.

When the subject was broached at the Elite Club Coaches Forum a couple of weeks later, Yokohama Marinos’ coach Kevin Muscat commented, “The main thing is that Asian teams will go into international competitions at a severe disadvantage. OK, a lot of the top Asian players might be playing in Europe. But for the younger players coming through the junior teams, playing 10 or 12 minutes less – or even more in some games – cannot be good for development.”

UAE’s Mahdi Ali added, “I have been analysing actual playing time in the league in UAE and the figures are 42-47 minutes of real playing time. Very low. Occasionally, when the top teams played each other, we saw figures of around 57 minutes. I think the key people in this are the coaches and the referees. They are the main factors. I have also noticed that when we start the season in hot weather – late August, early September – the playing time is high. Nothing to do with intensity. It’s because the teams play the ball around at the back and, in the heat, nobody goes in to press. If we want to improve Asian football, we need to take action regarding playing time.”

ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM

WINDS OF CHANGE



Believe it or not, completing a hat-trick is not always a cue for jubilation. For the third successive year, the AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum had to be an online event which doesn't have the same buzz as face-to-face get-togethers among coaches from the four corners of the Confederation. The good news, however, is that the event has stayed alive and kicking and that plans to return to Shanghai for the annual fixture in 2023 are firmly in place. The even better news is that, in the face of pandemic-driven headwinds, AFC competitions have survived and that significant forward-looking changes are taking place. During a season when the AFC Champions League™ is based on single-match confrontations, it was impossible for the 18 front-line coaches who attended the Forum to assess the impact of the farewell to the away-goals rule. Nor could they reasonably speculate about the effects of the significant switch of the competition's schedule, which means that the next edition of the AFC Champions League™ will kick-off in September 2023 and end with a two-legged final in May 2024.

On the other hand, they could offer opinions about the changes to player registration rules, whereby all foreign players can appear on the squad list while individual team sheets can feature six Asian and five non-Asian players. "We always discuss the balance between development and the quality of the game," commented Japan's deputy technical director Takeshi Ono, one of the special guests at the Forum. "The number of non-Asian players can help to raise the standard. But too many foreign players can mean a lack of opportunities for young local players. We will see if having half of the players on the pitch from Asia can offer enough opportunities." Kevin Muscat, currently in Japan with Yokohama Marinos, added, "In the J-League you don't always see the full quota of five foreign players. They might be on the team sheet but

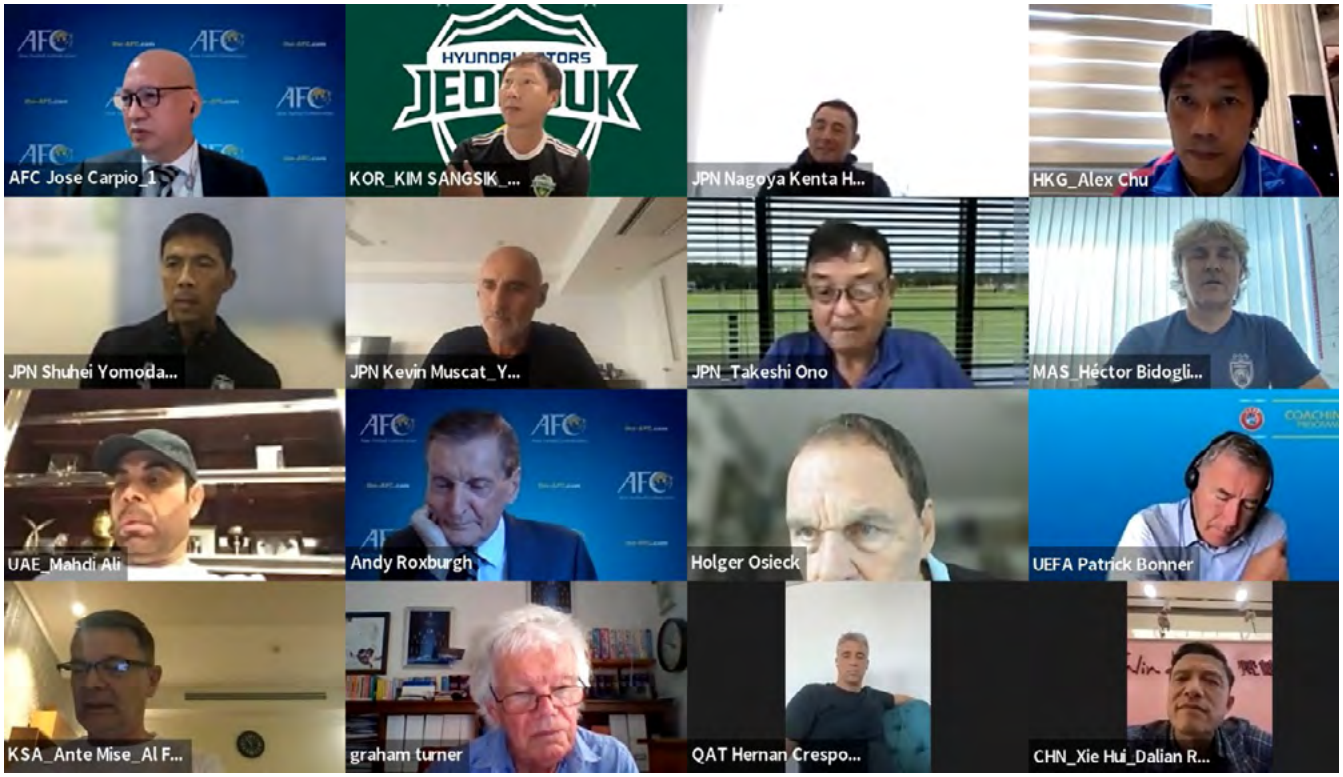
they're not necessarily in the starting XI. But I think the new rule will give coaches the sort of flexibility that we want."

PRESSING FOR AN ANSWER?

When coaches get together, albeit online, conversation inevitably drifts towards changes on the field of play. And, focusing on Al Hilal's second AFC Champions League™ victory in three years, the move towards a high-intensity, high-pressing game was one of the salient tendencies – as the champion coach, Leonardo Jardim, explained earlier in this publication. "I have just watched the knockout rounds of the current AFC Champions League™ played as one-off games in the bubble in Japan," Takeshi Ono commented at the Forum, "and I saw a lot of very positive play. Since Al Hilal won the competition in 2019 with a high-pressing game, this has become a trend in Asia – with the aim of scoring goals, not just defending high up the pitch. This season, I felt that the intensity of the pressing became higher, stronger and more effective. And this meant that the ability to beat the high press became a key issue. By and large, the teams who survived were the ones best equipped to deal with the opponent's pressing. We have to admit that there are still gaps between us and Europe. But my observation is that Asian football is progressing."

RISK AND REWARD

A quote from Roberto Martínez was a further cue for reflections on the UEFA Champions League, regarded as the benchmark-setter in Planet Football's club competitions. "The level of risk and reward in the UEFA Champions League," the Belgium head coach remarked, "is a lot higher than in any other competition you see around the world." And the 2022 final served food for thought. As AFC technical director Andy Roxburgh



pointed out, Real Madrid and Liverpool adopted identical team shapes but radically different approaches to the game: "Jürgen Klopp's team played their very aggressive game." he recalled, "based on high-intensity running, pressing and counter-pressing. In other words, high-risk football. Real Madrid, although they had played a high-pressing game in previous rounds – against PSG, for example – were happy to play patiently. Carlo Ancelotti opted to focus on his team's abilities on the ball rather than pressing off the ball. They defended and countered, constantly playing diagonals into the spaces behind the Liverpool full-backs. The Liverpool goalkeeper made no saves in the match; Thibaut Courtois made nine and was made Player of the Match. Madrid had three shots; Liverpool 23. They adopted totally different approaches and illustrated that the team playing the counterattacking game sometimes comes out on top."

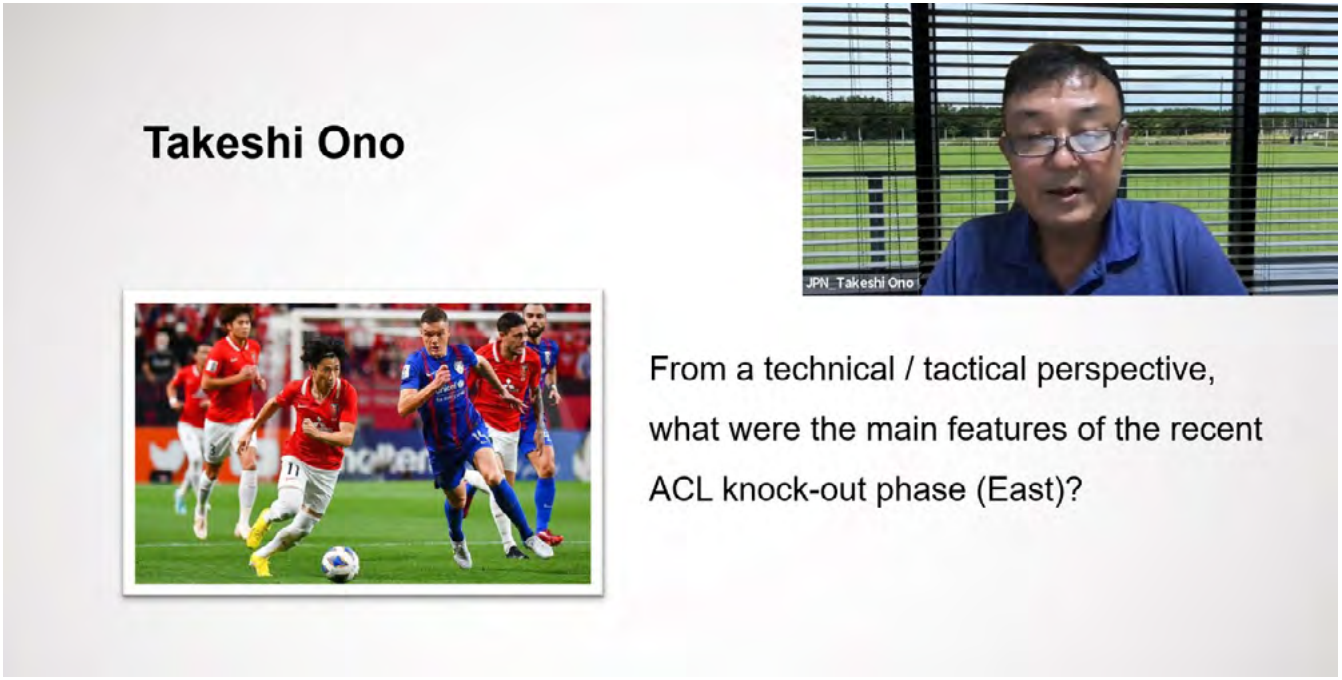
HIGHS AND LOWS

The coaches took a look at the two schools of thought. On the one hand, the high compact block, with a high back line laying foundations for high collective pressing

and playing high-risk attacking football. On the other hand, the teams who prefer a low defensive block and low pressing in areas where there is space for direct counterattacking. Kevin Muscat commented, "I prefer to talk about 'strong pressing' rather than 'high pressing' because the word 'high' is associated with high risk. If you sit low, I don't think there's necessarily a lower risk. It's basically about space because, if you sit low, there is obviously less space behind you. But if you're strong in your pressing and things are done well, I don't associate it with levels of risk. In the J-League in Japan, I would say that in the past it was generally risk-aversive. But now there's a lot more variation between teams with respect to the high-pressing topic we're discussing."

FOLLOWERS OF FASHION?

The importance of teams' ability to play out of the high press provided another debating point. FIFA advisor Holger Osieck, a familiar name in AFC circles (and winner of the AFC Champions League™ with Urawa Red Diamonds in 2007) was among the special guests at the Forum. "One of the most visible trends," he commented, "is that most teams set out to build their attacks from the back, often with short passing within the penalty area. The technical development of players has definitely risen. But there are still mistakes that allow the pressing team to win the ball high and have opportunities to counterattack. It's a good idea to try to be constructive in playing from the back. But there are moments when you shouldn't be inhibited about using the option of the long ball. The top teams often have the ability to read these situations and mix up the game, whereas a lot of other teams with less ability will try to copy the trend, to the extent that they try to play out of the high press even when it isn't really the best option. I'm impressed by the top teams who can play through pressure in midfield and hit really good opening passes to the wings – sometimes using the back-pass to the GK so that he can re-direct play to an area where there is more space. What I'm saying is that teams who are not sufficiently technically equipped should be careful and make sure that following a trend doesn't backfire on them. It all boils down to the individual qualities of the players and the coach's ability to adapt his approach to the real qualities of his players rather than follow a fashion. You must assess the potential of the players and devise game plans that they can implement."

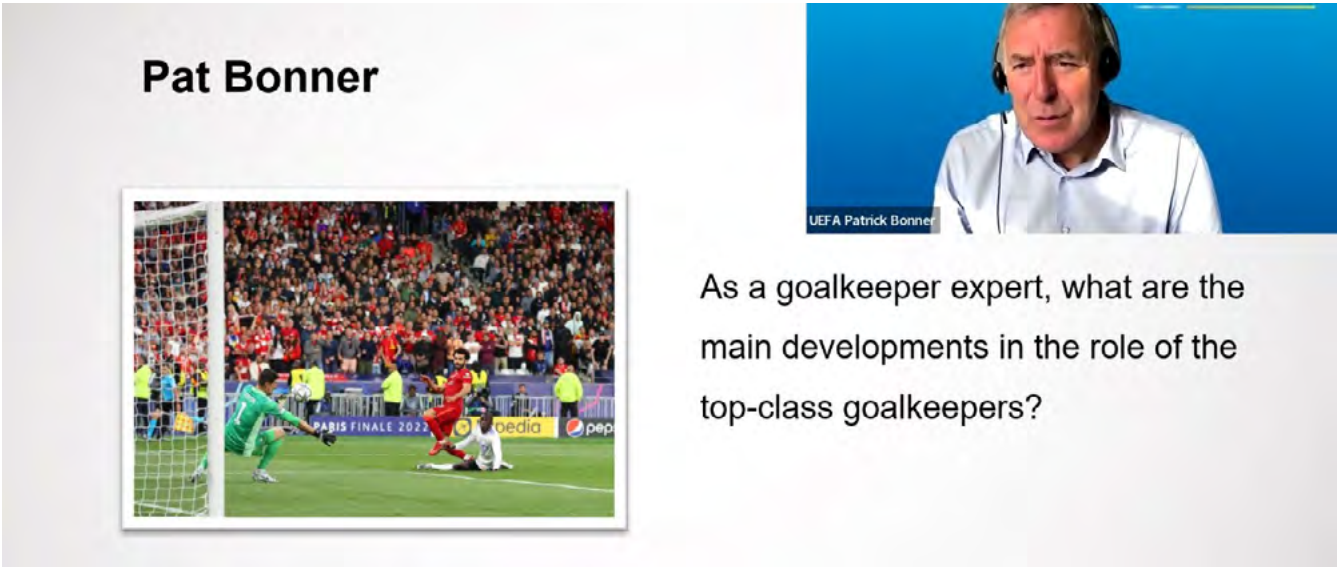


DON'T FORGET THE GLOVES...

In high-pressing strategies, the goalkeeper has become a major target – and that was why another special guest stepped on to the Forum's virtual podium. Former Celtic and Republic of Ireland goalkeeper Packie Bonner, deeply involved in the education of goalkeeper coaches in Europe, was invited to review the main developments among today's top-class keepers. "The one consistent factor that we all agree on," he said for openers, "is that the goalkeeper, no matter how much his job description changes, still has to make the big saves. We must never forget that. Courtois was Player of the Match in that final because he made big saves at big moments. That's what keeps the coach in a job! But the big change that will have been noted by all goalkeeper coaches is that the activity of a keeper right now is as much as 85% with the feet."

“The big change is that he is now part of the team – not apart from the team – and needs to be an important support player at the back,” he stressed. “There have been big, big improvements but there’s still a lot of development to go and, in the future, he will need to be almost exactly the same on the left foot or the right because so many teams are looking at how to press the goalkeeper. We still see mistakes, sometimes because the keeper is predominantly one-footed. I saw an example last week of a keeper getting caught on the ball, outside the box because he was predictably right-footed. The player who came to press him was clever, changed his angle of approach. The goalkeeper insisted on getting the ball on to his right foot when using the left foot would have resolved the issue.”

Bonner reflected on the ways the profile of the goalkeeper has changed. “In the past, he reflected, “they were physically strong – powerful enough to come for crosses and be dominant in the box. Now they tend to be quicker and more mobile. Speed is an extremely important part of their development. You don’t see so many big, muscular goalkeepers now. They have to be good with their feet and their range of passing is another huge area to work on. We can talk about risk-and-reward elements of goalkeeping but the huge development is being part of the team. No longer is he on the sidelines in training. Now he’s much more integrated. Relationships with defenders and midfielders form a major part of tactical preparation for his role within the team and positioning is important – instead of moving towards the ball, he might need to come away from it to make himself available. He’s no longer so worried about protecting his goal – he’s going into positions which, in the past, would have been no-go areas in the eyes of many coaches. Now, the range of passing is crucial. Instead of just kicking the ball away, can he play through or beyond the high press and find a team-mate? Among today’s top guys the range and accuracy of passing is really high. How do you develop that? In isolation? Or within the team concept? The coach needs to get the balance right.”



WHO TAKES THE GOAL-KICK?

Bonner also reviewed the impact of the change to the goal-kick rule, citing Gianluigi Donnarumma, the goalkeeper of European champions Italy as an interesting example of a slight tactical innovation. “He was not the person taking the goal kick,” he pointed out. “He was moving away and it was the centre-half taking the kick. It seemed odd. But by taking up a different position, the distance between the goalkeeper and the opponent’s high press was bigger. And the angle was different. He had the chance to look up and see where the press was coming from, allowing him a couple of extra seconds. The movement of the players – the centre-halves, midfielders and so on created a nicely organised situation. It was not accidental. It had obviously been worked out on the training ground by the goalkeeper coach and the head coach.”

THE SUPPORTING ROLE

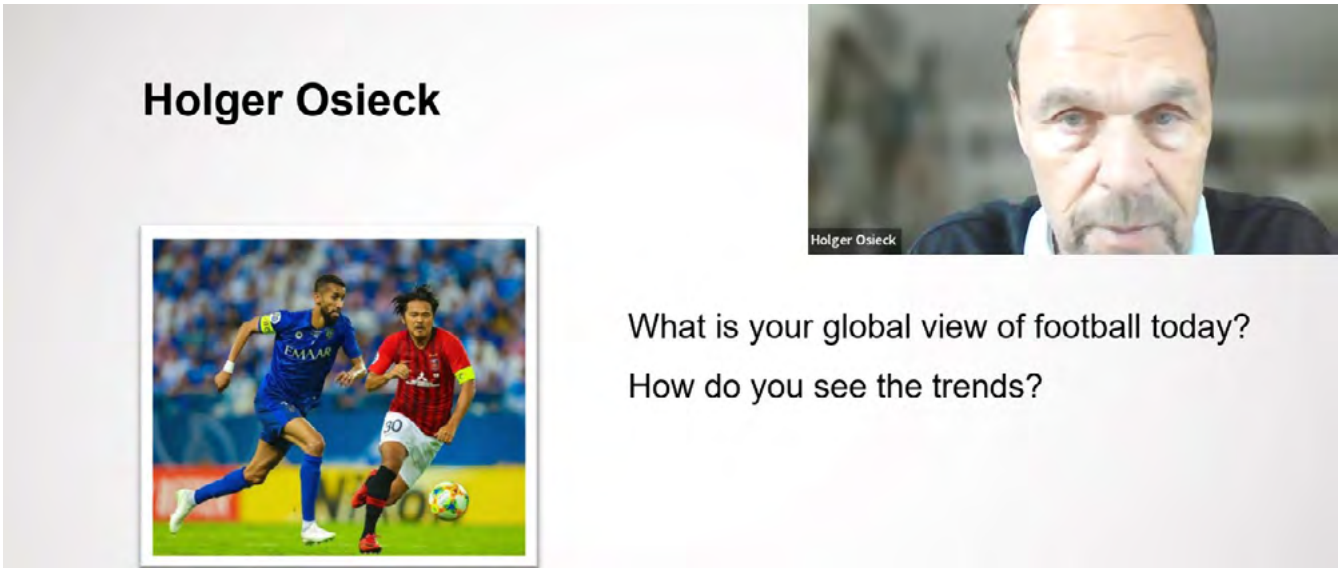
“The goalkeeper today has an important role to play in the possession game and the building of attacking play,” Bonner commented when reviewing the evolution of the job description. “He’s involved as a support player, positioning himself in the best areas even when the ball is high up the pitch and he’s communicating all the time – not just sitting back in his goal. The involvement is based on positional sense, reading the game and moving into areas where he can be of use to the team. I would ask head coaches how much attention they pay

to the goalkeeper's work on the training pitch. I would always insist that work must be game-related. If not, when he comes into a game and is pressed, everything will be totally different from what he has been doing on the training ground. The role of the goalkeeper is evolving and it's very important for underage players to experience this."

FOLLOW YOUR LEADER

The leadership qualities required by today's top coaches formed another item on the Forum agenda. "Leadership is one of the most important elements of being a coach," was the response from Holger Osieck. "To perform at the top level requires, of course, competence and a number of other skills. And, when you have been coaching for quite some time, you are backed by experience. At the same time, a key factor is the personality of the individual. Every coach has a different approach, his own philosophy. It's not correct to copy other people. You have to find your own way. And in terms of guidance, you need to be convincing. You have to get your message across in a way that the players believe in you, believe it's the right approach and are able to implement your ideas."

UAE's Mahdi Ali added, "There are many factors related to success but to have a good team working with you is one of the most important. And trust between players, staff, managers, owners, fans. I have worked in many projects – with the government before I moved into football – and, whatever you do, you need to do it with passion, honesty and good relationships. The most important things are the relationships with the players. You have to accept that relationships have highs and lows so you have to manage that too."



Ante Mise (Al Faisaly) and Ramón Díaz (Al Hilal) both underlined the importance of adaptability in terms of embracing new cultures when they moved to Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Hernán Crespo who, after spells in Italy, Argentina and Brazil, recently moved to Qatar to take the helm at Al Duhail. "What I found when I came here was the importance of understanding the culture," he commented, "and assessing what part my team could play in the football family. I tried to give the team an identity in terms of how we wanted to play – to be offensive, to build from the back and I had to convince the players that was the right thing to do. We have to respect opponents but we also want to be the owners of our destiny. I tried to mix in my own experience – I got my licence at Coverciano in Italy – to give some added value. It's about changing a mentality, which is a good challenge for me."

Packie Bonner, whose media work allows him to keep a close eye on his former club, Celtic, expressed admiration for Ange Postecoglou's adaptation to Scotland after his successes in his native Australia and Japan – not least his courage in moving to Glasgow without taking backroom staff with him. Bonner highlights "the clarity and consistency of his messages to the players and to the media. At the same time, he's very much the boss, always in control. It also seems that he has the trust of everybody and looks as though he is very committed to the job. He also appears to have emotional consistency – he doesn't go up and down as the weeks go by. He has shown a lot of respect to people, and, above all, he goes about the job with humility."

As Andy Roxburgh says in his editorial, humility is an attribute to be prized among the leadership qualities of today's top coaches.

AFC TECHNICAL PROJECTS

With the easing of pandemic restrictions in the second half of 2022 in the Asian continent, on-site assessment visits are getting back on track for the three main technical projects of the AFC.

Three Member Associations were successful in their bids to upgrade their current endorsement levels under the AFC Coaching Convention, with the All India Football Federation and the Football Association of Singapore being approved at the Pro Level and the Tajikistan Football Federation at the A Level. Meanwhile, the Lao Football Federation and the Football Association of Thailand became the latest additions to the list of MAs endorsed at the B and A Level, respectively. Coach education development continues with 12 MAs aiming to upgrade from their current levels and three MAs seeking endorsement under the Convention.

On the youth front, the Hong Kong Football Association Ltd. welcomed the Hong Kong FC Academy as their third one-star academy after Kitchee Academy and Lee Man FC Academy were afforded the same status in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Under the AFC Grassroots Charter, Football Australia successfully renewed its Gold Level endorsement while the endorsements of the Football Association of Singapore and the Football Association of Thailand were upgraded to Gold and Silver levels, respectively.

The Chinese Football Association is currently undergoing assessment to upgrade its current endorsement to a higher level of recognition, from Silver to Gold. Evaluations are in the pipeline for the applications of the United Arab Emirates Football Association at the Silver Level and Football Federation Islamic Republic of Iran and Oman Football Association at the Bronze Level.







AFC PROJECTS

AFC COACHING CONVENTION

CATEGORIES

PRO - Level

- FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
- CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE
- UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

A - Level

- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.
- 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
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND
- 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
- LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES
- MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

CATEGORIES

ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR

- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

2 - STAR

- ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

1 - STAR

- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.
- 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

AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER

CATEGORIES

AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER

GOLD

- FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA
- JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE
- QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

SILVER

- BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.
- JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA
- PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND
- UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

BRONZE

- AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
- CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA
- IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION
- LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES
- MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION
- ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF SRI LANKA
- SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
- FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE
- FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN
- VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

THE WINNING COACH

FROM BANGKOK TO TASHKENT

Saudi Arabia's first title at this level could be interpreted as a victory for continuity. There are not many coaches who appear at an AFC U23 tournament and reappear at the next one two years later. Even fewer reach the final at both. In Bangkok in 2020, Saad Al Shehri had maintained "you need to have a good defence rather than a good attack". And his team had endorsed that principle by conceding only two goals in their six matches – while scoring only five. A solitary extra-time goal earned Korea Republic the title.

In Uzbekistan, Al Shehri's team achieved a winning balance, scoring 13 goals and, in the 540 minutes of play, conceding none. "I think we were the best team," he said after the 2-0 win against the hosts in the Final, "with the right strategies in the games we played." After a relatively comfortable Semi-final victory over Australia, he commented: "I'm very happy with the victory and the way we played against a good team. We thought that our high-pressing strategy would give them problems – and it did."

Despite the impeccable record, he didn't pretend that winning the title had been a walk in the park. After the



Quarter-final against Vietnam, he admitted "we just scratched the surface of our performance levels against a side with good organisation and a counterattacking strategy. We played much better in the second half, increasing our possession and creating better chances." There was a similar tale to tell in the Final where, after an indifferent first period, he used his half-time team talk to remind his players of Uzbekistan's weak points. "They played with determination and concentration to get the result. On the first day we had a meeting and I told them to keep one goal in mind – to win the title. And I told them to aim for individual awards as well." That objective was also achieved.

Al Shehri, a former midfielder who played at the FIFA World Youth Championship in Nigeria in 1999, had made his national team coaching debut as assistant with the U20 side back in 2012 at the age of 32, stepping up to head coach status with the U19 team in 2015 – and winning a silver medal at the AFC U19 Championship in Bahrain in the following year. His tenure of the U23 bench dates back to March 2018 and an Asian Games campaign in the same year. The silver medal in Bangkok earned Saudi Arabia a first appearance at the Olympic Games since 1996. But, in the meantime, he had been forging a reputation as a youth development specialist with age-limit teams at Al Qadsia, Al Nassr, Al Nahda and Al Ettifaq.

His experience told him that mental preparation was a vital component in a Final played before a large crowd against the host nation. Firas Al Brikan, MVP at the Final and a member of the squad that had lost in Bangkok, said "the head coach helped us a lot throughout the tournament. We understood what we needed from each other, and we were determined to win the title for him."

Al Shehri, as an accomplished age-limit coach, was reluctant to compare with the past. "This generation is different from the last," he said in Tashkent. "We started preparing six months before the tournament started and we travelled to Uzbekistan with pressure on us to make people happy. But it was good for us because it made the players aware that they needed to concentrate, to run and to fight for results. But this was just the start. The important thing is the future – and our preparations for Paris 2024." Victory in Tashkent was a just recompense for a coach dedicated to the development of young talent.

COACHES CORNER

KEY DATES

Jan 2023

Jan 6-19
25th Arabian Gulf Cup Iraq 2023

Feb 2023

Feb 1
33rd AFC Congress 2023

Feb 16
AFC U17 Asian Cup 2023

Feb 19 and 20
AFC Champions League Round of 16 (West)

Feb 23
AFC Champions League Quarter Finals (West)

Feb 26
AFC Champions League Semi Finals (West)

Mar 2023

Mar 1 – 18
AFC U20 Asian Cup Uzbekistan 2023

Mar 4-10
AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup 2024 Qualifiers (Round 1)

Mar 7
AFC National Coaches Online Session

Mar 8
AFC Women's Football Day 2023

Mar 16 – 26
AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup Thailand 2023

Apr 2023

Apr 3 – 11
Women's Olympic Football Tournament 2024 Asian Qualifiers Round 1

Apr 10
3rd AFC Coach Education Panel Meeting

Apr 11-13
AFC Coach Education Conference

Apr 18
3rd AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting

Apr 20
3rd AFC Youth Panel Meeting

Apr 22 – 30
AFC U17 Women's Asian Cup 2024 Qualifiers Round 1

Apr 27
AFC Elite Youth Online Session

Apr 29
AFC Champions League Final (Leg 1)

May 2023

May 3-20
AFC U17 Asian Cup 2023

May 6
AFC Champions League Final (Leg 2)

May 9
AFC Grassroots Online Sesion

May 11
AFC Women's Football Online Session

May 15
AFC Grassroots Football Day 2023

May 20 – Jun 11
FIFA U-20 World Cup Indonesia 2023

May 23 – 28
AFC Futsal Train the Trainers Instructors Course

June 2023

Jun 3 – 11
AFC U20 Women's Asian Cup 2024 Qualifiers (Round 2)

AFC TECHNICAL REPORTS



CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP 2022 INDIA™ TECHNICAL REPORT



CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD THE AFC U23 ASIAN CUP™ UZBEKISTAN 2022 TECHNICAL REPORT

ALL AFC TECHNICAL REPORTS CAN BE VIEWED AT:
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