



AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2016

TECHNICAL REPORT & STATISTICS



ONE ASIA  ONE GOAL

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2016

<p>GROUP A</p>	 <p>LOKOMOTIV TASHKENT (UZB)</p>	 <p>AL NASR (UAE)</p>	 <p>AL ITTIHAD (KSA)</p>	 <p>FOOLAD MOBARAKEH SEPAHAN (IRN)</p>
<p>GROUP B</p>	 <p>ZOBAHAN (IRN)</p>	 <p>LEKHWIYA (QAT)</p>	 <p>AL NASSR (KSA)</p>	 <p>BUNYODKOR (UZB)</p>
<p>GROUP C</p>	 <p>TRACTORSAZI TABRIZ (IRN)</p>	 <p>AL HILAL (KSA)</p>	 <p>PAKHTAKOR (UZB)</p>	 <p>AL JAZIRA CLUB (UAE)</p>
<p>GROUP D</p>	 <p>EL JAISH (QAT)</p>	 <p>AL AIN (UAE)</p>	 <p>AL AHLI (KSA)</p>	 <p>NASAF (UZB)</p>
<p>GROUP E</p>	 <p>JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS (KOR)</p>	 <p>FC TOKYO (JPN)</p>	 <p>JIANGSU FC (CHN)</p>	 <p>BECAMEX BINH DUONG (VIE)</p>
<p>GROUP F</p>	 <p>FC SEOUL (KOR)</p>	 <p>SHANDONG LUNENG (CHN)</p>	 <p>SANFRECCIE HIROSHIMA (JPN)</p>	 <p>BURIRAM UNITED (THA)</p>
<p>GROUP G</p>	 <p>SHANGHAI SIPG (CHN)</p>	 <p>SUWON SAMSUNG BLUEWINGS (KOR)</p>	 <p>MELBOURNE VICTORY (AUS)</p>	 <p>GAMBA OSAKA (JPN)</p>
<p>GROUP H</p>	 <p>SYDNEY FC (AUS)</p>	 <p>URAWA RED DIAMONDS (JPN)</p>	 <p>GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE (CHN)</p>	 <p>POHANG STEELERS (KOR)</p>



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AFC Champions League 2016

Dear friends

The 2016 season once again captured the imagination of passionate fans from across the continent, with four clubs making their debut in the knockout stage. I wish to extend my thanks to the 45 teams from 17 Member Associations who took part in the 139 matches scoring a remarkable 357 goals.

In recent years the AFC Champions League has gone from strength to strength. The huge appeal and success of the AFC Champions League is reflected not only in the outstanding crowds in the stadiums but also by the large television audiences. In addition, through the AFC's digital media

channels more and more spectators are engaging with the competition. This not only elevates the importance of the AFC Champions League but also delivers the AFC vision of football becoming the number one sport across Asia.

Under the banner of One Asia, One Goal, we are committed to improving the quality of our competitions. Success can only be achieved through the unity of our Member Associations and partners.

I would like to acknowledge the contributions made by our Member Associations, their clubs, our broadcast partners and sponsors

for ensuring the AFC Champions League's position as one of the best club competitions in the world.

I am certain that the analysis and comments will provide valuable insights for coaches involved in this season's AFC Champions League and for those with future aspirations. It is all a part of the AFC's objectives to raise the standards of competitions throughout the continent.

Finally, I invite you to enjoy this report and reflect on some of the technical trends and innovations displayed during the AFC Champions League 2016.

One Asia, One Goal

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President





COMPETITION OVERVIEW

Competition Overview

PLAY-OFF STAGE



Twenty-one teams qualified for the 2016 AFC Champions League play-off, going head-to-head over a maximum of three rounds for eight berths in the Group Stage of the competition alongside the 24 automatically qualified clubs from across Asia.

Mohun Bagan of India eliminated Singapore's Tampines Rovers in the first preliminary round to set up a meeting with Shandong Luneng, where they were handed a 6-0 defeat by the Chinese Super League side.

Shandong were joined in the next phase by Hanoi T&T, 1-0 winners over Hong Kong's Kitchee, Thailand's Chonburi, who saw off Yangon United from Myanmar with a 3-2 win in extra-time, and Muangthong United, who advanced via a penalty shoot-out win over 2015 AFC Cup winners Johor Darul Ta'zim.

Shandong continued through to the group stages with a 2-1 win over A-League side Adelaide United but there was to be no further joy for Hanoi T&T, Chonburi or Muangthong United.

Hanoi T&T slipped to a 3-0 loss at the hands of former champions Pohang Steelers from Korea Republic while Chonburi suffered a 9-0 thrashing against FC Tokyo of the J.League. Muangthong United, meanwhile, were eliminated when they suffered a 3-0 defeat at the hands of tournament debutants Shanghai SIPG.

In the west only one round of play-off was required, with two-time champions Al Ittihad from Saudi Arabia seeing off Jordan's Al Wehdat in a one-off meeting to book their place in the next phase while Qatar's El Jaish defeated Iran's Naft Tehran to also advance.

Bunyodkor from Uzbekistan handed Al Shabab from the United Arab Emirates a 2-0 defeat to progress and they were joined in the group phase by Al Jazira of the UAE, who eliminated Qatar's Al Sadd in a penalty shootout.





GROUP STAGE - WEST



Group A

Lokomotiv Tashkent advanced to the knockout rounds of the AFC Champions League for the first time in the club's history by topping Group A ahead of Al Nasr from the United Arab Emirates.

Andrey Miklyaev's team made a slow start to proceedings due to the competition's start coming ahead of the commencement of the Uzbekistan league, notching up draws with Al Ittihad from Saudi Arabia and Al Nasr before hitting their stride in the third round of matches with a 2-0 win over Sepahan in Iran.

A second win against the Iranians, this time a 1-0 success in Tashkent, consolidated their position at the summit and further draws against Al Nasr and Al Ittihad sealed their passage to the next round.

They were joined in the last 16 by Al Nasr, who also progressed beyond the Group Stage of the AFC Champions League for the first time in the club's history. Despite making a losing start against Sepahan, back-to-back wins over Al Ittihad and Sepahan on Matchdays Two and Three set the club from Dubai on their way to the next phase.

Group B

Iran's Zob Ahan moved through the group stages with an unbeaten record to book their place in the Round of 16 for the first time since 2011.

After kicking proceedings off with a 1-0 win over Qatar's Lekhwiya, the Iranians were held to a draw by the Qataris in the return before picking up a point against Bunyodkor in Tashkent.

Three wins in the second half of the group phase followed, including two against Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr, ensuring Zob Ahan booked their place in the knockout phase with 14 points from their six matches.

Lekhwiya joined Zob Ahan in the next round despite a slow start that saw Sabri Lamouchi's team collect just two points from their opening three games. A 4-0 win over Al Nassr on Matchday Four was the turning point and a 2-0 win over Bunyodkor took the Qatar Stars league side a step closer to the last 16.

A 0-0 draw with Bunyodkor in the final round of group matches was enough to ensure Lekhwiya finished level on points with Al Nassr and qualified for the next phase by virtue of a better head-to-head record.





Group C

Tractorsazi Tabriz kicked off their campaign in Group C with back-to-back wins over Al Jazira of the United Arab Emirates, with the victories setting the tone for the Iranian club as they comfortably negotiated their way into the Round of 16.

A 4-0 thrashing of the side from Abu Dhabi in the opening round of matches was followed two weeks later by a 1-0 win over the same opposition on Matchday Two in Iran, giving Tractorsazi the perfect platform upon which to build.

Defeat at the hands of Pakhtakor in Tashkent on Matchday Three did little to derail Tractorsazi's challenge and successive wins against the Uzbek side and Al Hilal from Saudi

Arabia were enough to secure a place in the next round with one group match remaining.

Two-time Asian champions Al Hilal joined Tractorsazi in the last 16 with a second place finish in the group. After opening with a draw against Pakhtakor, a 4-1 victory over the same opponent put Al Hilal in a strong position in the group and their place was sealed with a 2-1 win over Tractorsazi in the final round of group matches in Riyadh.

Group D

Back-to-back wins over former champions Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates gave El Jaish a remarkable start to their 2016 AFC Champions League campaign, and the club from Doha had their place in the knockout phase of the competition by the time they had drawn 0-0 with Uzbekistan's Nasaf on Matchday Four.

Al Ain, meanwhile, were forced to fight for their place in the next phase of the competition after such a poor start, and a 1-0 win over Al Ahli from Saudi Arabia thanks to a solitary goal from Omar Abdulrahman kick started the club's recovery.

Victory over the same opponents in Jeddah followed on Matchday Four only for Al Ain's attempt to secure second place in the group to take a slight blow with a 0-0 draw against Nasaf with one round of matches remaining.

However, Zlatko Dalic's team managed to pick up a 2-0 win over the Uzbek side in the final group game thanks to goals from Danilo Asprilla and Ismail Ahmed to take second spot, finishing a point ahead of Al Ahli.



GROUP STAGE - EAST



Group E

Former champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors prevailed in a tight group to advance to the Round of 16 for the fourth time in a row after seeing off the challenge of China's Jiangsu FC in the final round of matches.

Jeonbuk kicked off their campaign with a 2-1 over J.League side FC Tokyo, but a 3-2 reversal against Jiangsu signalled how tight the fight for the two places in the knockout phase of the competition would be.

Becamex Binh Duong made sure it would be a four-way battle for the most part after picking up a draw with Jiangsu and three points against Jeonbuk on Matchday Four, but the Vietnamese side eventually fell away as the club from Korea Republic took command, winning their final two games to book their place.

FC Tokyo joined them at the expense of Jiangsu, sealing their spot in the Round of 16 with a 2-1 win over Binh Duong on the final day of the group phase as Jiangsu were held by Jeonbuk in a battle that went right down to the wire.

Group F

FC Seoul kicked off their 2016 AFC Champions League campaign with a comprehensive 6-0 win over Thailand's Buriram United, with the victory setting the tone as Choi Yong-soo's side cruised to top spot in Group F and a place in the Round of 16 for the fourth season in a row.

The club from the Korea Republic capital secured back-to-back 4-1 wins over Sanfrecce Hiroshima and Shandong Luneng to put themselves in a strong position at the halfway stage and a 0-0 draw with

Shandong on Matchday Four guaranteed their place in the knockout rounds of the competition.

That left Shandong Luneng and Sanfrecce Hiroshima fighting for second place, with the Chinese Super League side holding the upper hand going into the latter stages of the group as a result of their opening day 2-1 win over the J.League club.

Shandong's hopes of taking the runners-up berth were sealed after a solitary goal from Diego Tardelli gave his side all three points against Sanfrecce Hiroshima on Matchday Five, meaning their draw with Buriram in the final round of matches was academic.

Group G

Shanghai SIPG bounced back from an opening day 2-1 loss at the hands of





Melbourne Victory to make a major impact on the AFC Champions League in their first-ever appearance in the competition.

Sven-Göran Eriksson's side notched up four wins in a row – against Suwon Samsung Bluewings, Gamba Osaka (twice) and Melbourne – with the goals of Elkeson and Wu Lei helping the club seal their place in the Round of 16 at the end of play in Matchday Five as the Chinese Super League side signalled their intentions.

With Gamba Osaka struggling, that left Suwon Samsung Bluewings and Melbourne Victory to fight it out for the second spot in the knockout rounds, and the two clubs went toe-to-toe, drawing both of their head-to-head meetings.

In the end, Melbourne claimed the ticket for the next phase of the competition thanks to

their 2-1 win over Gamba Osaka on the final day of the group stage, finishing ahead of the club from Korea Republic by virtue of having scored an away goal in their meeting in Suwon on Matchday Four.

Group H

Defending champions Guangzhou Evergrande made headlines for all the wrong reasons in the 2016 AFC Champions League as Luiz Felipe Scolari's side failed to advance beyond the group stages of the competition for the first time since making their debut in 2012.

The five-time Chinese Super League champions made a spluttering start to the campaign, drawing with Pohang Steelers before a loss against Sydney FC and another draw with Urawa Red Diamonds left the two-time winners with a mountain to climb in the second half of the schedule.

Defeat at the hands of Urawa Red Diamonds on Matchday Four was another blow for Guangzhou, who missed out despite wins in their final two matches against Pohang Steelers and Sydney FC.

That left Sydney FC to claim top spot in the group, sealing their place with a 0-0 draw against Urawa Reds Diamonds in the penultimate round of matches while the J.League side pipped Guangzhou to second place by virtue of their 1-1 draw with Pohang Steelers on Matchday Six.



ROUND OF 16 - WEST



Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal progressed to the knockout phase of the competition for the eighth season in a row and the 2014 finalists were slated to take Lokomotiv Tashkent, who entered unknown territory for the club as the Uzbeks were making their first-ever appearance in the Round of 16.

A 0-0 draw in the first leg in Riyadh handed a slim advantage to Lokomotiv, and Andrey Miklyaev's side took full advantage on home soil as goals from Islom Tukhtakhodjaev and Sherzod Fayziev put the home side in an unassailable position. Not even a late penalty from veteran winger Mohammed Al Shalboub could deny Lokomotiv, who ended Al Hilal's hopes of a first Asian title since 2000.

Al Nasr of the United Arab Emirates ensured there was another new face in the last eight of the competition as they eliminated Tractorsazi Tabriz amid a flurry of goals across both legs of their Round of 16 meeting.

The club from Dubai notched up a comprehensive 4-1 win on home soil, only for the Iranians to go on an all-out attack in the second leg. But Tractorsazi came up just short, their 3-1 win seeing Al Nasr advance with a 5-4 aggregate victory, with Salem Saleh's goal in the second leg decisive for the UAE side.

Inaugural winners Al Ain ensured there would be two teams from the United Arab Emirates going into the draw for the quarter-finals when they roused themselves to eliminate

another Iranian side as Zlatko Dalic's team overcame Zob Ahan.

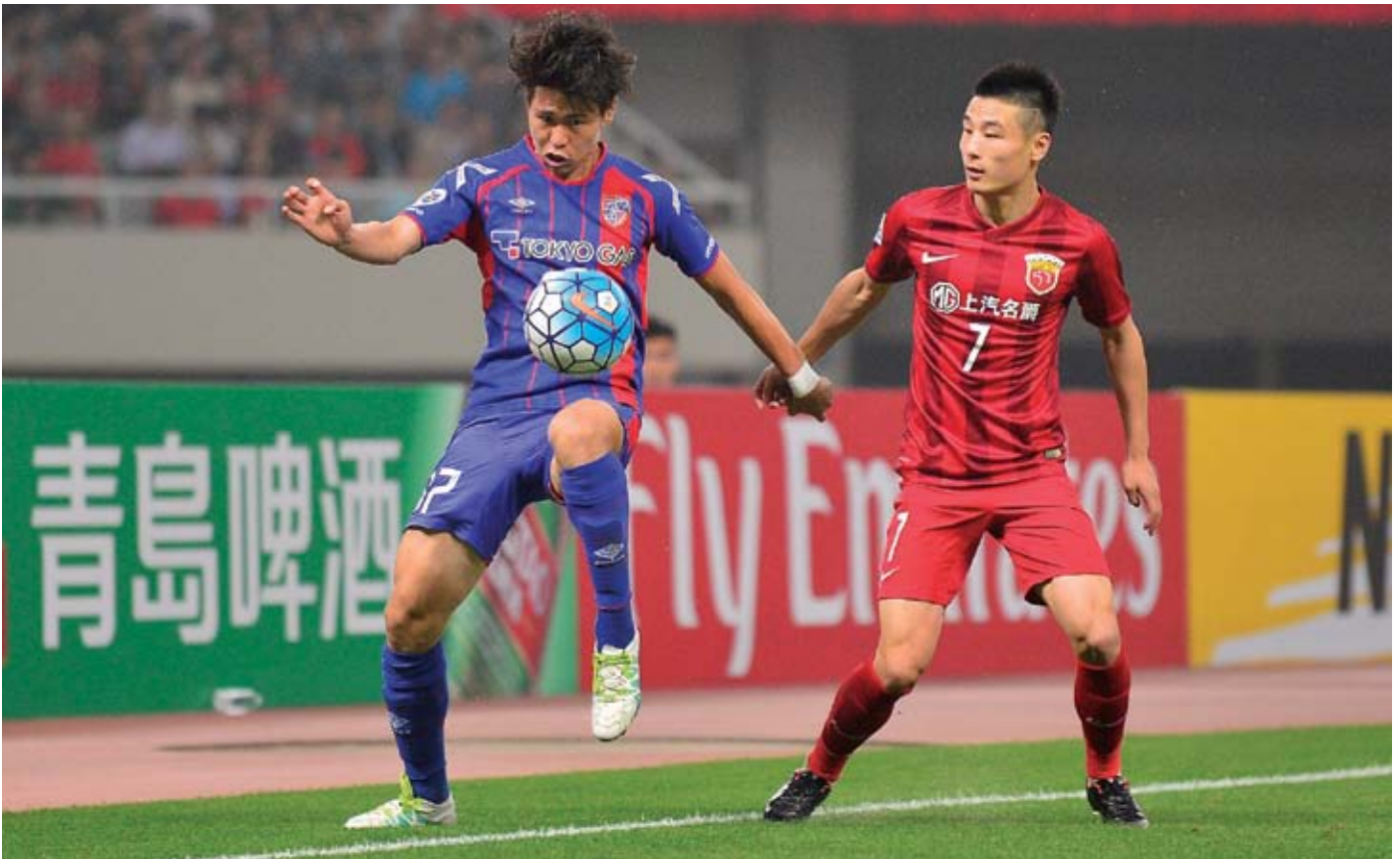
A 1-1 draw in Al Ain was followed by an impressive second leg performance by Al Ain, with goals from Lee Myung-joo and Danilo Asprilla sealing a 2-0 win on the night and on aggregate for the 2003 champions.

In the all-Qatar Stars League clash between El Jaish and Lekhwiya, the goals flowed in both legs, with El Jaish establishing a significant cushion in the first leg as Sabri Lamouchi's team notched up a 4-0 win away from home, with Brazilian forward Romarinho claiming a brace.

Lekhwiya responded with a 4-2 win in the second leg, leaving El Jaish to advance with a 6-4 aggregate win.



ROUND OF 16 - EAST



Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors progressed to the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League thanks to the goal scoring exploits of Brazilian forward Leonardo who, after a relatively quiet group phase, sparked to life with three goals across both legs of the Round of 16 meeting with Melbourne Victory.

Besart Berisha gave Melbourne an early lead in the first leg before Leonardo equalised and the Brazilian netted twice more in the second leg in Jeonju to ensure Berisha's second of the tie was academic as Choi Kang-hee's side went through.

FC Tokyo were looking to advance to the quarter-finals for the first time in the club's history, and the J.League side had the perfect

start with a 2-1 win in their first leg meeting with Shanghai SIPG.

But the away goal scored by Wu Lei was to prove crucial as Wu netted again a minute into injury time at the end of the second leg to take Shanghai SIPG into the draw for the last eight.

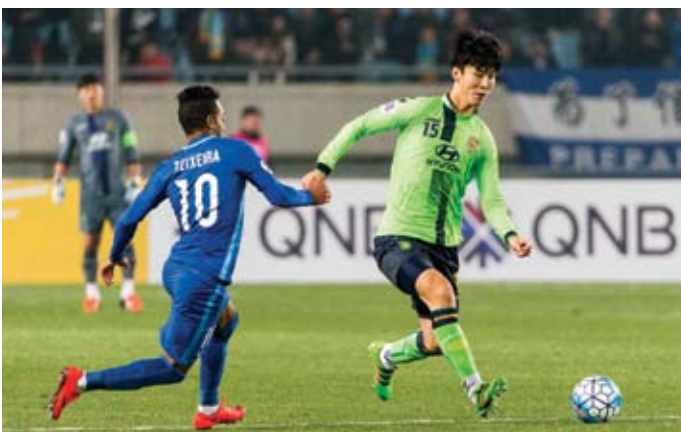
There was to be more heartache for Japanese clubs as 2007 winners Urawa Red Diamonds slipped up against FC Seoul in the most dramatic fashion. Leading 1-0 from the first leg, a goal from Dejan Damjanovic took the game into extra-time, where a 3-2 win on the night left the game level at 3-3 on aggregate.

FC Seoul eventually advanced to the quarter-finals at the end of a prolonged penalty shoot-

out, which went into sudden death with both teams having scored four of their first five spot kicks, and a miss by Yoshiaki Komai in the eighth round gave the club from Korea Republic a 7-6 win.

There was drama, too, in the meeting between China's Shandong Luneng and Sydney FC, with the first leg 1-1 draw setting the tie up perfectly for an exciting return meeting.

The Australians looked set for their first-ever appearance in the quarter-finals after Rhyan Grant's goal early in the second half gave Sydney a 2-1 lead on the night and 3-2 on aggregate, but Hao Junmin's goal in the final minute took Shandong through on the away goals rule.



QUARTER-FINALS



Al Ain v Lokomotiv Tashkent

Al Ain took their place in the semi-finals of the AFC Champions League for the second time in three seasons, claiming their berth in the last four despite a sluggish performance over both legs against Uzbekistan's Lokomotiv Tashkent.

The club from the United Arab Emirates were rusty due to the fixture coming right at the start of their new domestic season and Zlatko Dalic's side were facing a Lokomotiv

side packed with experience, despite the club appearing in the quarter-finals of the first time.

The teams played out a nervous 0-0 draw in the first leg at the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium in Al Ain, where Colombian winger Danilo Asprilla went closest to giving his side the advantage deep into a game played in punishing heat.



El Jaish v Al Nasr

Brazilian striker Wanderley – a new signing for Dubai's Al Nasr in the summer – was to become the focal point of the story surrounding the quarter-final between his club and El Jaish of Qatar.

The former Flamengo forward scored twice in the first leg between the two teams in Doha as Al Nasr notched up an impressive 3-0 win over their hosts, with his goals coming either side of a strike by Burkina Faso winger Jonathan Pitroipa as Al Nasr stood on the verge of booking a place in the semi-finals for the first time in their history.

In the days after the game, however, it emerged that the 28-year-old was ineligible to play for Al Nasr and the result was overturned, with the Asian Football Confederation's disciplinary committee awarding El Jaish a 3-0 win.

A goal by ex-Corinthians forward Romarinho nine minutes into the second leg sealed the outcome of the quarter-final as El Jaish secured a 4-0 aggregate win to advance to the last four of the competition for the first time in the club's history.





Shanghai SIPG v Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors

Shanghai SIPG progressed to the quarter-finals in their debut season in the AFC Champions League, but faced the sternest of tests against two-time finalists Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in the last eight.

After a scoreless draw in the opening leg in Shanghai for Sven-Göran Eriksson's team, SIPG were put to the sword in Korea Republic by a ruthless Jeonbuk, who advanced to the semi-finals once again with a comprehensive 5-0 destruction of the Chinese Super League side.

With the game still deadlocked after the first 45 minutes in Jeonju, all five goals came in the second half with Brazilian forward Leonardo opening the scoring seven minutes after the interval. An own goal by Shi Ke six minutes later gave Shanghai an almost insurmountable task.

A second from Leonardo – this time from the penalty spot – put the outcome of the tie beyond doubt before a late brace from veteran forward Lee Dong-gook put the icing on the cake as Jeonbuk marched into the semi-finals.



FC Seoul v Shandong Luneng

Under new coach Hwang Sun-hong, who replaced Choi Yong-soo after his departure for China's Jiangsu Suning, FC Seoul underlined their continued class with a 3-1 first leg win over Shandong Luneng that set the former finalists up for a return to the semi-finals.

Dejan Damjanovic, a player with experience of the Chinese Super League having spent time with Beijing Guoan and Jiangsu Sainty, gave FC Seoul the lead just 19 minutes into the game before Park Chu-young doubled his side's lead. Walter Montillo pulled one back before the break for Shandong, but Adriano claimed Seoul's third to put Hwang's team in control.

Shandong, however, gave the former finalists a scare when, after a goalless first half, Montillo's goal 14 minutes into the second half of the second leg gave Felix Magath's side a lifeline. The game was now finely poised, with another Shandong goal enough to take the Chinese side into the last four on the away goals rule.

However, with eight minutes remaining, Yun Ju-tae scored to ensure FC Seoul advanced to a semi-final meeting with Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, keeping their hopes of another appearance in the final alive.



SEMI-FINALS

**Al Ain v El Jaish**

After missing out on an appearance in the final in 2014, Al Ain were determined not to allow the chance of AFC Champions League glory to pass them by again and Zlatko Dalic's side flew out of the blocks in the first leg of their semi-final meeting with Qatar's El Jaish.

Goals from Douglas and Omar Abdulrahman put Al Ain 2-0 up inside the first 22 minutes of the first leg and although Uzbekistan's Sardor Rashidov pulled one back from the penalty spot seven minutes into the second half, Caio's late third gave Al Ain a seemingly unassailable 3-1 advantage at the end of the opening 90 minutes.

The 2003 champions cemented their place in the final thanks to more inspired play by Omar Abdulrahman, who extended his side's lead further with a goal in the 57th minute of the second leg, and a late rally inspired by two goals from the impressive Romarinho was never going to be enough for El Jaish.

Mohammed Abdulrahman applied the finishing touch for Al Ain three minutes into injury time, and a 2-2 draw in the second leg saw Al Ain progress to the final with a 5-3 aggregate win.





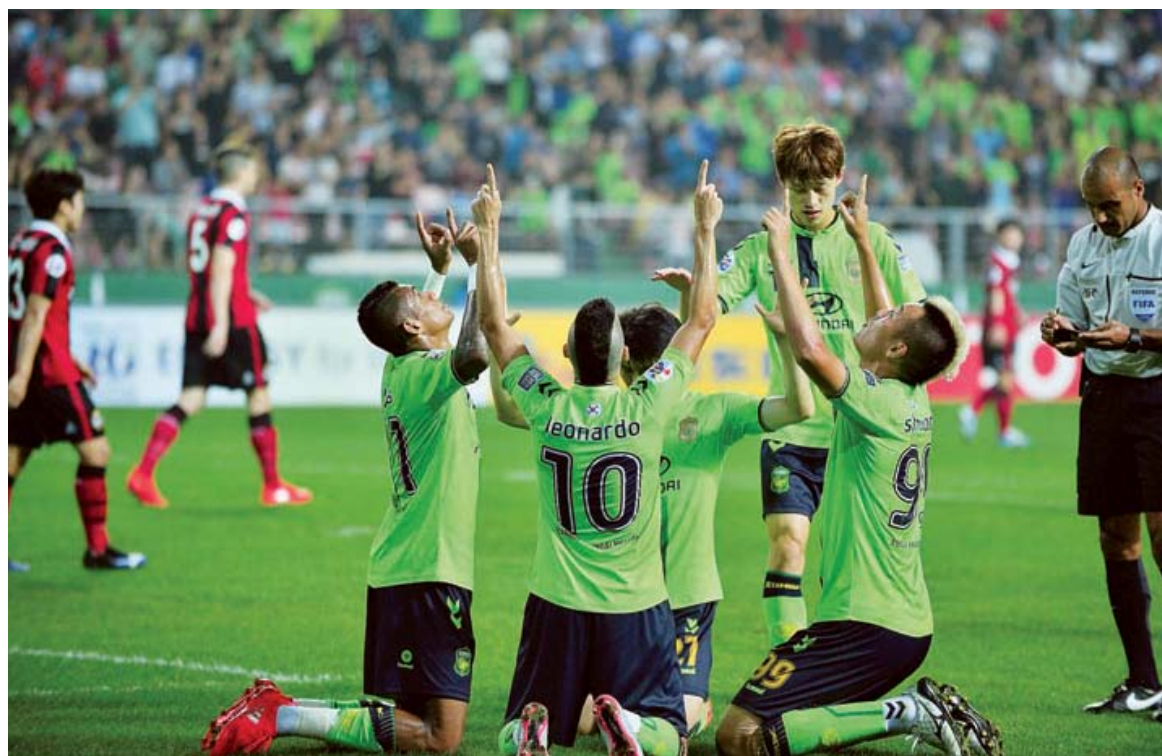
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors v FC Seoul

Leonardo continued his blistering knockout phase form in the first half of the first leg of Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors' semi-final meeting with two-time runners up FC Seoul, with the Brazilian giving his side the perfect start in their quest for a place in the final.

Two goals inside the first 40 minutes – the first from the penalty spot – coming either side of a 26th minute goal from compatriot Ricardo Lopes saw Jeonbuk take a 3-0 lead into the halftime break in the first leg, with the game ending in a 4-1 win for the 2006 champions.

FC Seoul needed an early goal to haul themselves back into the tie and Adriano duly obliged seven minutes before the halftime break in the second leg to leave Hwang Sun-hong's team needing to score two unanswered goals in the final 45 minutes to progress.

However, Lopes' goal just before the hour mark steadied Jeonbuk's nerves and although Ko Kwang-min scored deep into injury time for FC Seoul, Choi Kang-hee's side notched up a 5-3 aggregate win that took them into the final for the first time since losing on penalties to Qatar's Al Sadd in 2011.



FINAL



Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (KOR) v Al Ain (UAE)

"I am convinced we didn't deserve to lose," maintained Al Ain head coach Zlatko Dalić. "We are in a good position and the way we worked really hard to come back into the game made me very proud. But the second match will be hard," said his Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors counterpart Choi Kang-hee. The opening gambits at the Jeonju World Cup Stadium had set the scene for a riveting endgame in the Emirates.

Theories about the importance of keeping powder dry during the first act of a two-leg final were borne out by a first half in which goalkeepers were given few reasons to get their gloves dirty. "Our build-up play was not so good," admitted Choi Kang-hee who, on the other hand, set out to muzzle the visitors' creative bite by detailing Choi Chul-soon, more frequently seen in the right-back role, to man-mark Al Ain's Omar Abdulrahman from a screening position in front of the back four.

The Al Ain No 10 nevertheless unlocked the game early in a second half when the visitors permitted themselves more adventurous disruption of Jeonbuk's attempts to build from the back. He fed a pass to Danilo Asprilla on

the edge of the box and, taking one touch to tee the ball up, the Colombian hit the net with a left-footed half-volley. The value of the away goal prompted Choi Kang-hee to switch to 4-4-2, immediately sending on Lee Dong-gook as the second striker. He was rewarded with a comeback. Leonardo, receiving with his back to goal, turned, cut inside and found the net with a long-range shot – and did so again from the penalty spot after Kim Shin-wook was impeded while trying to connect with a Lee Dong-gook cross from the left.

When a spectacular pre-match ceremony heralded the start of the second act at the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium a week later, the swords were, as the saying goes, still in the air. The home fans, aware that a 1-0 victory would suffice, raised a box-to-box banner bearing the legend One Dream. Behind the goal defended by Ismail Ahmed, another announced Only Win. At the other end, the visiting supporters were grouped around a Mad Green Boys flag. They fell silent when, within two minutes of Ryuji Sato signalling the start of play, Brazilian Ricardo Lopes, working the right flank in the visitors' 4-1-4-1 formation was stretched off.

On came Han Kyo-won, wearing a No 7 shirt that had maybe not been mentioned during the home team's who-marks-whom preparations for set plays.

As expected, Al Ain took the game enthusiastically to their opponents with a 4-2-3-1 in which Omar Abdulrahman, shadowed again by Choi Chul-soon, tried to orchestrate attacking play and link with the three South Americans who formed the cutting edge of the team while, behind them, controlling midfielders Ahmed Barman and Lee Myung-joo associated with the back four in a high defensive unit. Jeonbuk initially set out to stem the purple tide with a high defensive barrier, but were pushed inexorably back, relying on fast counters with as many as five players flooding forward as soon as possession was regained.

One of them, after a half-hour of home-team pressure, yielded a corner on the Jeonbuk right. Lee Jae-sung's driven left-footed delivery caught the home team ball-watching or man-watching. But, amid the flurry of individual duelling, substitute Han Kyo-won remained

unwatched. His unopposed side-foot close-range finish gave Jeonbuk the critical away goal which, Choi Kang-hee had predicted, would be “perfect for managing the game”.

His forecast, however, was not immediately borne out. Within four minutes, a corner was worked back to Caio, whose chipped cross was volleyed against the turf and into the Jeonbuk net by Lee Myung-joo. Stimulated by the equaliser, Al Ain, with Danilo Asprilla teaming-up with Douglas to form a pacy, potent attacking spearhead with outstanding first-touch technique, began to fabricate neat high-tempo combinations in the final third. Disorder in the visiting defence prompted Kim Hyun-gil to concede a penalty as he attempted to deal with yet another surging run by Asprilla. But, after the Japanese referee had invested enough time in clearing the ‘D’ to allow the weight of pressure to fall heavily on the shoulders of the patiently-waiting Douglas, the Brazilian dispatched his spot-kick over the crossbar. The pivotal moment applied the brakes to Al Ain’s momentum and tilted the psychological pendulum of the intensely-fought contest in the visitors’ direction.

Tension also crackled in the technical areas. Moments of chaos and confrontation culminated in dismissals for Jeonbuk assistant coach Park Choong-kyun and the home team’s head coach, Zlatko Dalić. When calm had been restored by the half-time interval, it was No 2 Borimir Perković who directed Al Ain’s operations during the second half.

The whirlwinds of activity that had marked the first half continued unabated after the interval. But there were reasons to believe that Choi Kang-hee had used the break to remind his players about game-management principles. There were fewer attempts to build from the back as Jeonbuk increasingly relied on long diagonals to the flanks, followed by disciplined advances in pursuit of the second ball. The final was fragmented by 32 free kicks, 51 throw-ins and 22 goal kicks. With Omar Abdulrahman dropping deep and wide in search of freedom from his persistent shadow, Al Ain’s attacking was often tantamount to threading through the eye of a needle. A lot of the drama was played out on two different stages. On one, Al Ain’s attacking quartet was battling against Jeonbuk’s defensive quintet; on the other, Al Ain’s defensive block of six was attending to the front five in the visitors’ 4-1-4-1 formation. The home team’s hectic pursuit of a goal that would force extra-time resorted increasingly to

communication between the two departments via long back-to-front passing which the visitors intercepted with a degree of comfort, often showcasing their strength in aerial play.

As the clock ticked down, Jeonbuk played increasingly on the back foot, concentrating on keeping defensive play compact and drawing deep on their reserves of game management and fighting spirit. Left centre-back Cho Sung-hwan’s rallying calls to his fellow defenders were shrill enough to be heard above the noise of the crowd. Tackling was committed with elements of recklessness creeping far enough into the game to persuade the referee to brandish his yellow card. As fatigue began to bite, Choi Chul-soon began to focus on holding his anchor position in front of the back four, allowing Omar Abdulrahman greater space in which to exercise his exceptional playmaking skills.

Choi Kang-hee, having sent on the towering striker Kim Shin-wook to provide a reference point for long passing from the back, made his third change in the closing minutes, sending on the white-haired Brazilian, Edu, to use his strength in one-on-one battles. Perković, with twenty minutes remaining, had sent on attack-minded Mohamed Alraqi to replace

left-back Mohammed Fayez but the left-footer, roaming into midfield, joined his team-mates in frustrating failure to open pathways through the Korean defensive barrier. When shooting opportunities cropped up, Kwoon Sun-tae, impressive between the visiting posts, was equal to all of them – notably a close-range drive by Douglas’ replacement, Ibrahim Diaky, which he somehow pushed away.

When the final whistle sounded, the voices of the Mad Green Boys were the only ones to be heard in a silenced stadium. The home players went to ground, felled by the enormous disappointment of having been unable to grab the victory they had worked so hard to achieve and their supporters had craved. Before the home team trooped disconsolately onto the podium to receive their silver medals, Omar Abdulrahman had stepped up to receive the Fair Play Award for his team and the Most Valuable Player Award for his individual contribution to the competition. But they did little to ease the pain of a 3-2 aggregate defeat. As Jeonbuk captain Kwoun Sun-tae took off his goalkeeping gloves to receive the AFC Champions League trophy from AFC president Shaik Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, the fireworks at the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium signalled the start of a Green Party.





GREEN BOYS



jongeun

15

yunho

3

JEONBUK

35

HY



WINNING COACH

A man with a plan

"We had prepared for every outcome. I just focused on giving the players a positive mindset to deal with any problems. We had planned for lots of situations." As his players tossed him into the evening air at the Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium in Al Ain, Choi Kang-hee could reflect on long and short-term plans which had been brought to satisfying fruition.

No sooner had the celebrations ended in Al Ain, the former Korea Republic head coach was quick to emphasise the longer-term aspect of his work. "Since coming back to Jeonbuk from the national team in 2014," he said, "we have been building this team with a view to winning the AFC Champions League." The comment is a fair reflection of the 57-year-old's focus, pragmatism and dedication to the task in hand. His reference to the national team offers another example of Choi Kang-hee's serious approach to his profession. It was with a semblance of reluctance that he agreed to take the Korea Republic helm in December 2011 with the aim of salvaging a troubled 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign. He accepted with the firm proviso of being allowed to head for the exit as soon as the campaign was over – which he did. Hong Myungbo took the team to Brazil, leaving Choi Kang-hee to return to Jeonbuk, where he had initially taken charge in 2005 and had lifted the AFC Champions League trophy a decade before he got his hands on it again in Al Ain.

Jeonbuk's victory in 2016 offered an invitation to reflect on the relevance of continuity in the technical area. One of three native coaches among the top eight teams, Choi Kang-hee, despite his interlude with the national team, had been able to implement a steady programme of team-building, using midfielders Lee Jae-sung and Kim

Bo-kyung as the cornerstones of his structure. He had no hesitation in rating "team spirit and good players" as the key factors in Jeonbuk's success and, despite his playing career as a defender, he implemented an ambitious playing philosophy summarised by a traditional Korean adage which can be translated as "shut up and attack".

Choi Kang-hee's personal approach to the job is built on foundations of thorough preparation and attention to detail, coupled with a shrewd eye and laudable levels of emotional intelligence – the latter virtue illustrated by his balanced demeanour during the fracas in Al Ain which resulted in his assistant, Park Choon-kyun being sent to the stands along with the opposing coach. Although he permitted himself a couple of smiles after the final whistle, his manner, sometimes described as taciturn, reflects total concentration on the task in hand. Preparing for every eventuality is a personal quality he tries to transmit to his players – and his ability to produce a rapid tactical response was highlighted when Jeonbuk fell 0-1 behind in the home leg of the final. Within seconds, he had withdrawn midfielder Kim Bo-kyung and sent on Lee Dong-gook as second striker, to sow the seeds for the comeback that earned a 2-1 win. Before the return match, he had commented "if we score an away goal, it will be perfect for managing the game". And his prediction was ably implemented by his players after the opening goal by substitute Han Kyo-won.

The reward was a second AFC Champions League title and, five days later, another smile appeared on Choi Kang-hee's face as Jeonbuk's man with a plan received the AFC Coach of the Year Award.









TECHNICAL TOPICS

TECHNICAL TOPICS



AFC technical observers once again focused on the teams who reached the latter stages of the competition and, from a coaching perspective, it was interesting to note that, with Choi Kang-hee's success, six of the last eleven winning coaches have been 'home-grown': four from Korea Republic; one apiece from Australia and Japan. The non-Asian winners during that period were from Brazil (two), Uruguay, Italy and Germany. While the input from diverse footballing cultures undoubtedly enriches Asia's leading club competition, some crystal-ball gazing might be required to assess to what extent the coach education developments throughout the continent will succeed in promoting home-grown coaching talent and encouraging recruitment among leading clubs.

Korea Republic Leads Way

The final outcome of the 2016 AFC Champions League extended the run of Eastern victories in the competition to five successive seasons, while the presence of Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors meant that teams had raised the Korea Republic flag at four of the last eight finals. Choi Kang-hee, not only the Champions League winner in 2016 but

also the AFC Coach of the Year, commented "I cannot pass judgement on the other teams from my country but, in our case, I would say that the key factors were team spirit and good players. I think that teams from Korea – and from China – are powerful. Japanese teams are technically very good. But maybe they struggle to match us for power. As for the teams in the West of Asia, we don't know them particularly well because we don't play them at all often. The last time a club from the West won the title was in 2011 – and in a penalty shoot-out against us. Since then, teams from the East have dominated – but not by a huge margin. We have been very impressed by Al Ain and it was very difficult to beat them in the final. So I would hesitate to talk about a clear superiority. What is clear is that the AFC Champions League has increased in importance. The standards are higher now and it has become more competitive. China and Japan, in particular, are spending money and raising their competitive level. And that is helping the general standard to become much higher – and the marketing and the branding of the competition have also helped."

Sven-Göran Eriksson, who led Shanghai SIPG through the campaign, concurred

"The Asian Champions League is impressive and it is on the way up. I'm not sure that it matches the UEFA Champions League for quality and intensity yet – you can see this in aspects like the use of high pressing – but I'm sure that the competition in Asia will continue to grow."

Questioned about the prominence of Korea Republic representatives in the competition, AFC technical director Andy Roxburgh reflected "I think one of the key factors is that they have developed a strong, aggressive mentality. Maybe their climate also encourages them to play high-power football with great fighting spirit. They play to their strengths. Their league is also very competitive and the tendency not to overdo imports means that they can try to maintain a strong national identity."

What's in a Number?

Champion coach Choi Kang-hee pointed out that Jeonbuk had alternated two systems during the run to the title: "we played 4-1-4-1 when we wanted to attack the opposition and 4-3-3 when we wanted to adopt a more cautious approach". He also pointed out that his ploy of asking his habitual right-

back Choi Chul-soon to man-mark Omar Abdulrahman in both legs of the final was “a special effort to limit the threat of Omar and to make Al Ain less effective”. Man-to-man marking was very much the order of the day during the early years of the German Bundesliga but has become such a rarity in the modern game that players have often not been educated in the art of coping with it.

Apart from fuelling discussions during coach education courses, Choi Kang-hee’s comments illustrate how the top teams in the AFC Champions League were equipped to vary their structures – to the extent that it was often difficult to select a ‘typical’ formation to illustrate them on the team pages of this report. This is why each drawing refers to the team structure at a specific match and does not necessarily illustrate the way the team shaped-up for every game.

Nor does it necessarily illustrate defensive shapes in a competition where, in general, the top teams displayed great discipline in dropping rapidly into compact, mostly deep-lying defensive blocks. Teams occasionally set out to hold a high defensive line, but the general trend can arguably be gauged by the fact that the knockout rounds produced an average of 2.2 offside decisions per match. During the three hours of football in the final, the assistant referees flagged offside on only one occasion.

This can be linked to the *modus operandi* of goalkeepers who, by and large, were not required to patrol large areas behind their back four and therefore offered few lines of comparison with the Manuel Neuer style of keeping. Needing to win, Al Ain pushed their back line up in the return match against Jeonbuk, allowing Khalid Eisa space to make upfield sorties and to participate in the construction of moves from the back. At the other end of the pitch, Kwoun Sun-tae was more conservative in his positional play and, as he had done during other matches in the knockout rounds, his contribution was built on the basis of excellent reflex saves.

Against the backdrop of tactical flexibility, it was nonetheless apparent that 4-2-3-1 remained the preferred set-up with, as in the previous season, five of the quarter-finalists adopting this format as a default setting. The other continuing trend was towards the double midfield screen, with five of the top eight protecting their back four in this way. Lokomotiv provided an exception to this rule by deploying Timur Kapadze in a sweeping role as the single screen in front of the back four. FC Seoul were especially chameleonic, with observers at individual matches describing their structure as 4-4-2, 4-2-3-1 or, when making the domestic trip to face neighbours Jeonbuk, a 3-5-2 with transitions to 5-3-2 defending. As Andy Roxburgh remarked, “In an overview of the top teams, listing formations by numbers is

less relevant than looking at their playing styles and their approach to the key matches in the knockout rounds.”

Home Rule?

Europe’s equivalent club competition has, in recent years, fuelled debate on styles and approaches by crowning title-winners of contrasting characteristics. There has been a rotation between possession-based champions, such as FC Barcelona, and teams like FC Internazionale or Chelsea FC who have favoured more direct attacking, along with two-time silver medallists Atlético Madrid. In this respect, the Asian competition is notably less polarised. Whereas Barça, FC Bayern Munchen or PSG can be expected to dominate possession at home and away, the trend in the 2016 AFC Champions League was for teams to adopt a more conservative approach when playing away from home – a tendency linked to the variations in playing structures. From the quarter-finals onwards, the visiting team had the lion’s share of the ball on only one occasion – during the match when El Jaish were defeated 0-3, only for the result to be reversed. Lokomotiv secured an even share of possession when they visited Al Ain but, in the other dozen fixtures, it was the home team who dominated. Choi Kang-hee’s comment about variations to his formation according to whether attack or caution was the priority could be endorsed by statistical evidence: Jeonbuk dominated



possession in all their home games (as much as 60-40 v Shanghai SIPG) but were happy to surrender the major share of the ball to their opponents when they were on the road.

Of the 14 matches played by the top eight teams, only two produced a victory for the team enjoying less possession: Al Ain's 1-0 away win against Lokomotiv and the identical scoreline when El Jaish visited Al Nasr.

This represents a marked contrast with the UEFA Champions League where, in the 96 games which produced a winner, 53 were won by the team which had dominated possession and 43 by the side that had a lesser share of the ball. In other words, the European competition offered lesser guarantees of success for the ball-dominating side than in Asia. It was Luis Figo, during his spell on the staff of FC Internazionale, who described Jose Mourinho's side as being "comfortable without the ball" – a description which was borne out on the following evening

when Inter defeated FC Bayern München in the Madrid final of the UEFA Champions League despite a 32% share of possession. The question is to what extent the players in the top teams need to be educated in feeling comfortable enough without the ball to, nonetheless, produce a result.

Counter Measures

In the Asian competition, almost one in six of the open-play goals was the result of quick counterattacking, with 34 goals clearly fitting into this category. One of the season's outstanding examples was the fast collective counter which resulted in a diagonal delivery into the box, where Romarinho converted the only goal of the game for El Jaish in their visit to Al Nasr. However, the fact that 16% of open-play goals stemmed from counters represents a sharp downturn in relation to the previous season, when 22% of open-play goals were counterpunches. Strangely, there were none after the Round of 16. In Europe, success rates have declined in recent seasons as coaches have recognised the importance of 'countering the counter' and

the 2016 campaign suggested that the top teams in Asia are becoming increasingly conscious of the risks of over-exposing and the need to develop techniques designed to disturb the opponents' counterattacking potential. As an example, the AFC technical observer's report on a match involving FC Seoul recorded the Korea Republic team "pressuring immediately after losing the ball with four players narrowing spaces fast to leave the opponents without opportunities to launch a fast counterattack".

A Pressing Question

Sven-Göran Eriksson's opinion that teams in the AFC Champions League struggled to match their European counterparts in terms of collective high pressing served to spark debate at the Elite Club Coaches Forum staged in Shanghai. In general, heads were nodded in agreement, although the coaches did detect attempts by some to implement pressing techniques, notably the hard-running contestants from Japan and Korea Republic. But when it comes to implementing sustained high pressing in





many of the climatic conditions prevalent in AFC countries, there are difficulties in fully embracing this type of approach.

During the knockout rounds of the AFC Champions League, observers often noted enthusiastic expenditure of calories in squeezing the space and pressing the ball. Few teams, on the other hand, implemented structured collective pressing based on, for example, showing opponents inside and using a covering player to win possession.

Quantity and Quality

With the top teams aware that the route to success against compact defensive blocks is often to go round them, efficient wing play was often the factor which made the difference. The AFC technical observers applauded the quality of crossing by Lokomotiv – and by the champions Jeonbuk, especially when the tall Kim Shin-wook was making his physique and aerial ability count in the target-striker role. On other occasions, quality did not match quantity. “The team built play very well on the flanks,” a technical observer reported after watching one of the quarter-final games, “and they created opportunities for

a steady stream of crosses. But defenders won all of them.” With full-backs supporting wide midfielders/wingers in supplying crosses, the comment underlines the need for all of them to be technically equipped to deliver quality crosses.

With a disappointing return (6% of open-play goals) from solo play – that is, incisive running or dribbling with the ball – effective delivery from the flanks and penetrating passes were the major sources of goalscoring opportunities in the 2016 AFC Champions League.

Extending the theme of deliveries from wide areas, headers accounted for 46 goals during the AFC Champions League season: 15% of all the goals scored. This compares with 18% in Europe’s equivalent competition.

Corner kicks are arguably the most dangerous deliveries from wide areas and the season, once again, displayed enormous variety in the mechanisms of defending against them (players on posts etc). The general trend was towards a mix of zonal and man-to-man marking – the danger of the latter being an excessive focus on

grappling rather than defending against the delivery. The return leg of the final provided a graphic illustration, with individual skirmishing allowing Jeonbuk’s substitute to score the goal that won the title – and underline the importance of coaching set-play procedures.

The Winning Mentality

One of the clichés of the modern game is regularly delivered into microphones at press conferences all over planet football. The talking point to emerge from observations on the AFC Champions League is how best to define the cliché. The word ‘mentality’ suggests a definition nearer to the head than to the feet. Sometimes, however, mindsets appeared to be geared towards a teeth-gritted, muscular approach to the challenge of winning games. There can be no questions about the intensity of play. But is sustained high tempo preferable to controlling the tempo of the game with variations of pace? In developing the AFC Champions League stars of the future, is a ‘winning mentality’ about hyperactivity? Or is it more to do with psychology, emotional intelligence and the ability to read the game?

KEY FEATURES

AL AIN

- 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1 with two screening midfielders
- Attacking philosophy based on skilful combination play
- Skills and creativity of Abdulrahman key components
- Caio, Asprilla working the wide areas with pace and dribbling skills
- High defensive line with keeper ready to cover behind
- Overlapping full-backs helping to supply steady stream of crosses
- Positional interchanging in final third; team spirit and athletic condition



AL NASR

- Variations on 4-2-3-1; one midfielder occasionally up to form 4-4-2
- Emphasis on passing game, building from back line
- Good use of wide areas; centre-backs supplying diagonal passes
- Quick transitions to deep, well-organised 4-5-1 zonal defending
- Screening midfielders Jalal, Tariq influential in developing attacking moves
- Full-backs alternating in overlapping support for 3-4-3 attacking
- Good off-ball movement; occasional use of high pressing



EL JAISH

- 4-2-3-1 with 4-3-3 attacking, 4-5-1 defending
- Defence-to-attack transitions faster than in other direction
- Mix of combination play with direct supply to front + second ball
- Zonal back four with keeper and centre-backs controlling aerial play
- Keita the attacking catalyst; control, vision, penetrating passes
- Counterattacks based on rapid supply to wings; support from full-backs
- Emphasis on delivering crosses even though success rate was low



FC SEOUL

- 4-4-2 with occasional use of 3-5-2 + transitions to 5-3-2 defending
- Attacking play based on low, short-passing combinations
- Under pressure, used direct supply to striker, pushing up quickly
- Good movement by forwards Adriano, Dejan; skills and pace in final third
- Narrow back four led by Tae-hwi; Barba the key in building through midfield
- Hard-working midfield; fierce pressure on ball-carrier on loss of possession
- Fast counters based on quick supply to Dejan and rapid support



JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS

- 4-3-3 or 4-1-4-1 with quick attack-to-defence transitions
- Set out to hold high defensive line with intense pressure in midfield
- Chul Soon a key performer in screening role in front of defence
- Bo Kyung, Jae Sung the box-to-box links between defence and attack
- Leonardo, Ricardo Lopes the skilful companions to central striker
- Emphasis on short-passing combinations in middle-to-front play
- Strong collective virtues, tactical discipline, mental strength



LOKOMOTIV

- Variations on 4-3-3 with Kapadze as single screening midfielder
- Mix of direct attacking with patient, assured combination moves
- 4-5-1 defending with quick transition to deep, compact block
- Good width with overlapping full-backs, notably Mustafev on left
- Dangerous set plays; high-quality deliveries by Djeparov
- Pressing in wide areas; ability to control the tempo of game
- Athletic, disciplined unit with personality and strong work ethic



SHANDONG LUNENG

- 4-4-2 with Montillo as shadow striker behind target-man Pellè
- Frequent use of direct supply to striker and collective second-ball support
- Compact defending with intense pressure by five-man midfield
- Fast counters along flanks with wide midfielders, full-backs bursting forward
- Skilful Montillo, Junmin exploiting central spaces created by Pellè's runs
- Strong centre-backs dominant in air, quick to launch counters
- Disciplined, hard-working team with blend of solo and collective skills



SHANGHAI SIPG

- 4-2-3-1 with fast transitions to deep 4-5-1 defending
- Intense pressure on ball-carrier in midfield; tight marking, double-cover
- Midfield ball-winning the cue for immediate delivery to striker
- Dribbling skills of Lei, Hulk or Elkeson the main attacking weapons
- Well-organised back four with good aerial ability
- Adventurous full-backs combining well with wide midfielders
- Hard-working team with high levels of technique in mid-to-front positions







GOALSCORING ANALYSIS

Goalscoring Analysis

The Net Result

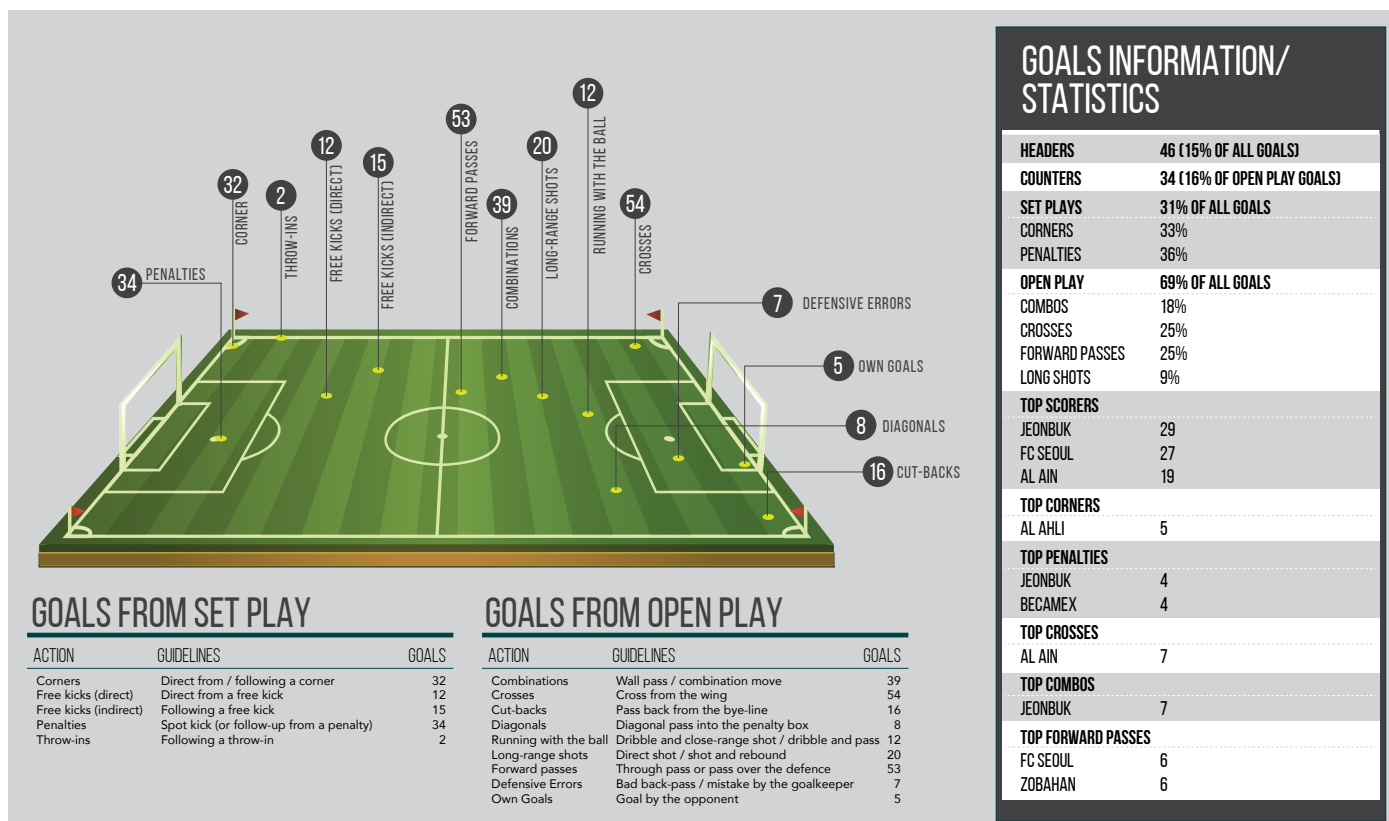
In the AFC Champions League, the boys from Brazil worked their way into the best goalscoring positions. In 2015, Guangzhou Evergrande's Brazilian star Ricardo Goulart had topped the charts with eight goals while Shandong Luneng's Yang Xu and Al Ahli's Ahmed Khalil had shared the silver medal with six goals apiece. In 2016, FC Seoul's Adriano amply surpassed his compatriot's tally by scoring 13 times – 10 of them during the group stage. Jeonbuk's Leonardo also reached double figures, while the El Jaish attacker Romarinho completed the Brazilian monopoly of the podium with seven goals. Of the 15 players who scored more than three goals during the season, seven hailed from Brazil, with Al Ain's Colombian forward Danilo Asprilla completing a South American majority and extended the tendency that had emerged in 2015, when the top 14 scorers had included six Brazilians and two Africans. In 2016, 11 of the top 15 scorers were plying their trade outside their native countries. This trend is by no means exclusive to Asia's premier club competition. But, as mentioned elsewhere in this report, the tendency to rely on Brazilian strike forces provokes reflection on the possible implications for home-grown goalscorers in terms of making a mark in first teams and, in consequence, for the future of national team football within the Confederation.

A total of 171 players shared the 309 goals scored during the AFC Champions League campaign, with 103 of them writing their names on scoresheets only once. A total of 36 players scored two while 32 hit three or more. The total, incidentally, does not include the three 'administrative' goals adjudicated to El Jaish in their quarter-final match against Al Nasr. The knockout rounds were more prolific than the group stage where the 96 fixtures yielded 228 goals at an average of 2.38 per game. The parameters in individual groups varied widely between the 37 goals scored in Group E to the 18 in Group H. The 16 matches in the first knockout round produced 47 goals at 2.94 and the remaining 13 fixtures produced 34 at 2.62, bringing the overall average for the season to 2.47 goals per match. By comparison, the 2015/16 UEFA Champions League had produced a higher average of 2.78 per game, but had reversed the pattern established in the AFC equivalent. In Europe, the knockout rounds had produced significantly fewer goals than the group stage.

The tallies for individual clubs were evidently influenced by the number of games played. But the highest-scoring sides hailed from the Korea Republic. The champions, Jeonbuk, adhering to Choi Kang-hee's "shut up and

attack" philosophy, headed the table with 29 goals, followed by FC Seoul, who provided the highest individual scorer – Adriano – and found the net 27 times. The nearest pursuer (at some distance) was silver-medallist Al Ain, with the team from the Emirates scoring 19 goals – the figure which had sufficed for Guangzhou Evergrande to take the title in 2015. The totals by the Korea Republic duo, incidentally, were way ahead of 2015, when semi-finalists Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia were the highest scorers with a total of 21, followed by two Japanese contestants with 20 apiece. The overall goalscoring tally in the AFC Champions League represented a 7.5% decrease in relation to the previous season. With the number of goals stemming from dead-ball situations increasing in 2016, the thought-provoking statistic is that the number of goals scored in open play fell by a significant 12.3% in relation to the previous season.

There is inevitably a degree of personal interpretation, but the goalscoring chart details the technical and tactical actions which led to the 309 goals scored in the 2016 AFC Champions League.



Open Play

Attacking moves in open play accounted for a few decimal points short of 70% of the competition's total, compared with 73% in the previous season and 77% in the UEFA Champions League.

In percentage terms, crossing and finishing was, once again, the most fertile source of goals, supplying a quarter of the open-play goals (compared with 26% in the previous season). But only marginally. And, in numerical terms, the number was down from 63 to 54 – a downfall of 14%. In general, exploitation of the wide areas was less successful – the combined total for crosses and cut-backs falling from 83 in 2015 to 70 in 2016. Beaten finalists Al Ain were among the standard-bearers for successful wing play, however, with seven of their 19 goals stemming from crosses. Despite the overall decline, the season did produce some outstanding examples of supply from the wings, with the move finished by FC Tokyo's Kota Mizunuma against Shanghai SIPG earning a place among the season's best goals, along with the cut-back that set up Al Ain's Lee Myung-joo during the match against Zobahan FC in Iran.

However, passes through the middle accounted for an almost identical number of goals and, percentage-wise, registered an increase from 20% to 25% – statistics which invite debate about the viability of a more direct attacking (or counterattacking) style. Six of FC Seoul's 27 goals could be attributed to through passes with IR Iran's Zobahan FC, despite playing fewer matches, equalling their total. Al Ain, although excelling at wing play, were also adept at finding routes through the middle – the goal scored by Danilo Asprilla against Nasaf providing a prime example. The success rate in the AFC Champions League nevertheless is in marked contrast to its European counterpart, where only 35 goals (30% less than in Asia) could be traced to the forward pass during the 2015/16 season, hinting at the efficiency of defensive blocks comprising a back four ably protected by centrally-positioned screening midfielders. Continuing on the theme of defensive efficiency, a noteworthy feature of the AFC Champions League was that the number of own goals and costly defensive errors fell from 25 in 2015 to 12 in 2016.

If the sources of goals were regarded as a league table, one of the eye-catching features was

that combination play climbed from fourth place to third in 2016. The number of goals (39 as opposed to 24) represents an increase of 63% from season to season. The figures, nonetheless, still lag considerably behind the levels registered in Europe where the likes of FC Barcelona, FC Bayern München and Paris Saint-Germain FC have helped the number of combination-play successes to consolidate at something over 60 goals per season. In the ACL, combination moves accounted for 18% of the open-play goals, with the champions, Jeonbuk, leading the pack thanks to seven goals resulting from this *modus operandi* in the final third. A shining example was the goal scored by Leonardo during the game against Shanghai SIPG.

Successes from long-range shooting registered a sharp downturn from 36 in 2015 to 20 in 2016 – a massive 44% drop to a level of one in eleven of the open-play goals. This is in line with Europe's equivalent competition, where the 2015/16 season was marked by a 31% reduction in successes from long distance. UEFA's technical report remarked "the statistic is an invitation to reflect on standards of goalkeeping and/or the trend towards twin screening midfielders, which arguably increases the difficulties in finding space for clear shots at goal from central areas in the vicinity of the box". The same issues could be broached during analysis of the ACL season. There was, however, no decline in the crowd-pleasing nature of the long-range successes, with spectacular efforts by players from FC Seoul, Shandong Luneng FC and Al Nasr sharing acclaim among the season's best goals.

The rising success rate in combination play needed to be set against a drop of almost 30% in the number of goals attributable to solo runs with the ball. Only 5.6% of the open-play goals had their origin in individual dribbling skills, with the effort by Shandong Luneng's Zhao Mingjian against Buriram United proving to be an oasis in the desert.

Set Plays

With defensive blocks seemingly more difficult to penetrate in open play, dead-ball situations acquired greater relevance as a source of goals and underlined the potential dividends to be

harvested from work on the training pitch. The success rate from set plays rose from 27% in 2015 to 31% of all goals scored in the AFC Champions League – a much higher level than the 23% registered in the competition's European counterpart. But there were shades of meaning to be drawn. Much of the statistical increase is down to a 36% rise in the number of penalties converted. In fact spot-kicks – excluding shoot-outs evidently – accounted for 36% of all the set-play goals, with Jeonbuk and Becamex the leading beneficiaries with four penalty successes apiece.



It meant that penalties took over from corner-kicks as the most fruitful source of dead-ball successes. As in 2015, 32 of the season's goals stemmed from corners, five of them converted by Al Ahli. The most spectacular examples nevertheless bore Japanese branding: FC Tokyo's goal against Jiangsu FC and Gamba Osaka against Melbourne Victory. The figures were more or less in line with the 2015/16 UEFA Champions League, where the 125 matches had produced 30 goals from corners at a success rate of 1 in 42.

In the AFC Champions League, free kicks generated 27 goals, compared with 30 in the previous season. The balance, however, shifted slightly. Direct strikes were increasingly good at beating keepers, while the number of productive indirect free kicks fell by almost 30%. Although Jeonbuk's Leonardo produced two stunning direct free kicks against Melbourne Victory, teams from the West held sway in this particular category, led by the left boot of Al Ain's specialist Omar Abdulrahman. His spectacular successes, however, represented a cue for debate. With many of the dead-ball specialists hailing from other continents, how important is it at youth development levels to coach Asian players in this specialised discipline?





TALKING POINTS

Talking Points

One leg or two?

At the recent Club Coaches Forum, Sven-Göran Eriksson, who led Shanghai SIPG through their AFC Champions League campaign, sowed the seeds of debate with the comment “it’s not a real final unless it’s played as a single match”. For the Swedish coach, steeped in European traditions, cultural issues may have influenced his viewpoint. But is he right?

On one side of the debating table, there is compelling evidence to support the decision to re-adopt the two-leg format in 2013. The geographical dimensions of the AFC can evidently raise logistical (and financial) hurdles in terms of mass movements of supporters and the two-leg format guarantees that each set of supporters can get a good sight of their team during the final.

On the other hand, all the pageantry, the decisive on-the-pitch action and the presentation of the trophy are heavily concentrated into the second leg of the final. And those who are fighting in the Eriksson corner would argue that a single-match final is much more of an occasion. It becomes an event which is richer in drama and, arguably, is easier to market and gives greater opportunities to create a strong brand identity. The formula of alternating the return match between East and West represents implicit recognition that the second leg is of greater significance.

Another debating point is whether a single match creates a better scenario for a thrilling spectacle. Does the two-leg format encourage a cautious, conservative approach to the first game? Previous finals had suggested an affirmative response to the question and to what extent was the first leg of the 2016 final an exception to the rule? Media reports emphasised that the game in Jeonju had only burst into life after Danilo Asprilla’s precious away goal for Al Ain – which prompted Jeonbuk coach Choi Kang-hee to make (successful) strategic changes in search of a response. Talking of which, should the away-goal rule be dropped in the final? Would home teams throw more caution to the winds if goals by the visitors carried less weight?

The two-leg format is, without doubt, tactically distinct from a single game. “Our strategy,” said Choi before the return match in Al Ain, “will change a bit because it’s different when you play away instead of at home.” His Al Ain counterpart, Zlatko Dalić, added “The 2-1 result means we have to score. Jeonbuk don’t need to score...”

Between the options of a two-match final and a single game at a neutral venue, is there a compromise solution? In the United States, for example, the Major League Soccer has implemented a new system whereby the MLS

Cup final is played as a single match at the home ground of the team that accumulated a greater number of points during the league season. Could the AFC devise a similar system with the final being staged by the team that had the better record over the entire Champions League campaign? In other words, home advantage for the final would be a reward for consistently good performances during the whole season.

Talking of rewards, was it right that Al Ain walked away from the 2016 campaign with so little? The team from the Emirates had, after all, battled right the way through their half of the draw to emerge as the No. 1 team from the West. They then lost the final by a single goal and, in previous finals, the margin between winning and losing had been even slimmer – the away goals rule in 2013, for instance. Should there be a trophy for both finalists? A reward for the stars of the East and the stars of the West?

Is the current approach to the final the best possible solution? Or are there motives for regular reviews?



Important imports?

Caio, Douglas, Asprilla, Leonardo, Ricardo Lopes...the team-sheets for the final between Jeonbuk and Al Ain provided a fair reflection of the tendencies among the top teams in the AFC Champions League. So does the 2016 competition's scoring chart. Of the 15 players who scored more than three goals, four were playing in their native country. Eight were South American and seven (including the top three) were Brazilian. Similar evidence can be found in the AFC Champions League 'Star Squad': imports form a majority.

The debating point is nothing to do with questioning the quality of imported players. The big foreign signings come with undisputable positives in their baggage. They bring different qualities; they enhance the competition as a product; and they can act as role models in terms of influencing young players. Discussion, however, is attached to the roles they play. A look at the Star Squad neatly makes the point. Of the 16 players selected for the middle-to-front positions, 11 are imports – and all but two of them are South American.

Their added-value is two-fold. At the AFC Club Coaches Forum, there was no shortage of applause for the good imported players who, they feel, have helped to improve performance levels. It is also beneficial, in development terms, to play against them. The debating point is whether there is a risk of building two-department teams in which native players provide the defensive qualities and the midfield industry while creativity and solo skills are supplied by imported players in the middle-to-front positions.

Are local talents in danger of finding their pathways into first-team football blocked by the players imported to fill those attacking positions? And, if paths really are being blocked, what is the potential impact on national team football in Asia?

