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CONTENTS

6 HISTORY



10 IN FOCUS: 2010 FINAL



16 PERSEPOLIS FC



ULSAN HYUNDAI FC



24 IN FOCUS: 2015 FINAL



32



38 VENUE

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the content in this publication, for up-to-date information on the 2020 AFC Champions League and the participating clubs, please visit www.the-afc.com.



AFC MESSAGE



Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

AFC President

Dear friends,

I am delighted to be able to welcome you to this most important of AFC Champions League finals being held in Doha, Qatar and congratulations to the two teams not only for qualifying tonight but also for their continuous and unwavering support.

This has been the most challenging of seasons with not only football but the entire world facing the most unprecedented and uncertain times. Here in Asia, we have not been immune, but we have displayed the spirit and determination for which we are renowned.

But we have also demonstrated that we can rise to the challenge when the time is right by delivering a competition of the stature of the AFC Champions League, which has seen 52 teams from 23 Member Associations compete for Asia's ultimate club prize.

The AFC could not have achieved this without the solidarity and unity of its Member Associations and without the outstanding support of the Qatar Football Association and the Qatari Authorities and we extend our heartfelt thanks to them all.

Tonight's final once more showcases the magnificent Al Janoub Stadium, one of eight which will host the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, and the AFC has been grateful to be able to stage both the centralised AFC Champions League West and East Regions in two other venues which will also stage the FIFA World Cup.

During the centralised matches this year, Doha has provided a taste of the excellence that the football world can expect to experience during the 2022 tournament – both on and off the pitch as well as demonstrating the warmth of Arabic hospitality.

The medical support provided by the Qatari authorities in safeguarding the health and welfare of all the participants during this difficult time of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that Qatar's non-football care is also exceptional.

Tonight, the AFC will honour the true heroes of the last year, the health professionals and frontline workers who have provided such tireless care and support for communities across our Continent. We are proud to label this AFC Champions League as #FootballforHeroes.

So, all that is left is to congratulate once more both teams for reaching this final and wish them the very best of luck.

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President

ROLL OF HONOUR

2019	Al Hilal	3-0 agg Urawa Red Diamonds
2018	Kashima Antlers	2-0 agg Persepolis
2017	Urawa Red Diamonds	2-1 agg Al Hilal
2016	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	3-2 agg Al Ain
2015	Guangzhou Evergrande	1-0 agg Al Ahli
2014	Western Sydney Wanderers	1-0 agg Al Hilal
2013	Guangzhou Evergrande	3-3 agg FC Seoul
2012	Ulsan Hyundai	3-0 Al Ahli
2011	Al Sadd	2-2* Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
2010	Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma	3-1 Zobahan
2009	Pohang Steelers	2-1 Al Ittihad
2008	Gamba Osaka	5-0 agg Adelaide United
2007	Urawa Red Diamonds	3-1 agg Sepahan
2006	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	3-2 agg Al Karamah
2005	Al Ittihad	5-3 agg Al Ain
2004	Al Ittihad	6-3 agg Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma
2002-03	Al Ain	2-1 agg BEC Tero Sasana
2001-02	Suwon Bluewings	0-0* Anyang Cheetahs
2000-01	Suwon Bluewings	1-0 Jubilo Iwata
1999-00	Al Hilal	3-2 Jubilo Iwata
1998-99	Jubilo Iwata	2-1 Esteghlal
1997-98	Pohang Steelers	0-0* Dalian Wanda
1996-97	Pohang Steelers	2-1 Ilhwa Chunma
1995	Ilhwa Chunma	1-0 Al Nassr
1994-95	Thai Farmers Bank	1-0 Al Arabi
1993-94	Thai Farmers Bank	2-1 Oman Club
1992-93	Pas	1-0 Al Shabab
1991	Al Hilal	1-1* Esteghlal
1990-91	Esteghlal	2-1 Liaoning
1989-90	Liaoning	3-2 agg Nissan
1988-89	Al Saad	3-3 agg Al Rasheed
1987	Yomiuri	w-o Al Hilal
1986	Furukawa	g-s Al Hilal
1985-86	Daewoo Royals	3-1 Al Ahli
1972-84	No competition	
1971	Maccabi Tel Aviv	w-o Al Shorta
1970	Taj	2-1 Hapoel Tel Aviv
1969	Maccabi Tel Aviv	1-0 Yangzee
1967	Hapoel Tel Aviv	2-1 Selangor

* won on penalties
agg – aggregate (away goals win if level)
g-s – group stage
w-o - walkover



2019


2018



2017


2016


2012


2013


2014



2015

THE 2020 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL GOES BACK TO THE FUTURE AS, AFTER A DIFFICULT COVID-19 INTERRUPTED YEAR, THE CONTINENTAL COMPETITION CLIMAX RETURNS TO A ONE-LEG FORMAT FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 2012 AS PERSEPOLIS AND ULSAN HYUNDAI FACE OFF FOR ASIA'S BIGGEST CLUB PRIZE.

After a year like no other in living memory in which the AFC Champions League began with a bang back in February before being halted for more than six months and then resuming in the centralised location of Qatar, football fans across Asia can look forward to a grand finale between the Islamic Republic of Iran's Persepolis and 2012 winners Ulsan Hyundai on December 19.

As the world faces its ongoing battle against COVID-19, football has offered some much-needed relief to many and fans of the Tehran and Ulsan sides will hope a tough year can end on a high with their team lifting the AFC Champions League trophy aloft on the Al Janoub Stadium podium.

While the competition's showpiece event has taken place over two legs since 2013, the adapted format, brought about to ensure the tournament could resume safely, will see a return to days gone by when between 2009 and 2012 the final took place over one leg.

For Persepolis, it also offers the chance to make up for heartbreak in 2018 when they lost to Kashima Antlers in the final as the Azadi Stadium side aim to become the first champions from Iran, while Ulsan are looking to add to the title they won eight years ago and become the fifth two-time AFC Champions League winners

The 18th edition of the AFC Champions League has continued to raise the bar as some of the globe's most renowned played have graced Asia's primary club competition once more, none more acclaimed than Vissel Kobe's Barcelona legend Andres Iniesta.

It all began back in 2002-03 when the AFC Champions League was formed following the merger of the Asian Club Championship, the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and the Asian Super Cup.

The oldest of those tournaments, the Asian Club Championship, was first held in 1967 and played for by the league winners of each country, with Israel's Hapoel Tel Aviv the inaugural champions. The Asian Cup Winners' Cup kicked off in 1990 and involved the champions of each nation's main cup competition. The winners of each, meanwhile, faced off for the Asian Super Cup.

But a new millennium brought about a new way of thinking and, after Suwon Samsung Bluewings won the final two Asian Club Championships in 2000-01 and 2001-02, an exciting new era of Asian football















began.

Persepolis were among the 16 teams from 11 countries vying to become the first-ever champions but exited in the first round as the United Arab Emirates' Al Ain ultimately tasted glory after defeating Thailand's BEC Tero Sasana 2-1 on aggregate in the final.

The Emirati giants exited at the quarter-finals a year later as Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad and Korea Republic's Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma went all the way to the showpiece event before producing one of the most memorable finals to date. Incredibly, Seongnam let a 3-1 first-leg lead from Jeddah slip on home soil to suffer an agonising 6-3 aggregate loss as the Saudis won in dramatic fashion.

A battle of the first two winners saw Al Ittihad overcome Al Ain to retain the trophy a year later before the title headed to East Asia for the first time in 2006 as Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors defeated Syria's Al Karamah to be crowned Korea's first Continental champions since Suwon.

Sepahan became Iran's maiden AFC Champions League final representatives in 2007 but went down 3-1 on aggregate to Urawa Red Diamonds as the trophy went to Japan for the first time and to its fourth different country in six years. And there it would stay as Gamba Osaka ran out convincing 5-0 winners over two legs against Adelaide United in 2008 in what was Australia's first appearance in the main event.

Four years of one-legged finals followed as Pohang Steelers denied Al Ittihad a third title following a 2-1 win in Tokyo in 2009 before Seongnam ensured the trophy remained in Korea a year later by defeating Iran's Zobahan 3-1.

Al Sadd brought the trophy back to West Asia in 2011, beating Jeonbuk on penalties in Jeonju but East Asia would win the next seven editions starting with Ulsan's 3-0 win over Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli in 2012 as they became the fourth side from Korea to be crowned champions.

The following year marked the return of the two-legged final and Guangzhou Evergrande, under FIFA World Cup-winning coach Marcello Lippi, became China PR's first winners after seeing off FC Seoul on away goals. Western Sydney Wanderers then stunned Al Hilal in the 2014 edition in one of the most remarkable underdog stories in the competition's history, winning 1-0 as Australia tasted glory for the first time.

Guangzhou made it two titles in three years by edging the UAE's Al Ahli in 2015 and Jeonbuk joined the Guangdong club on two after dealing Al Ain a 3-2 defeat to mark the 10-year anniversary of their first success in style. Urawa did likewise a year later as they handed Al Hilal a second final defeat in four years, running out 2-1 winners over the two legs.

Then, after a string of dramatic second-leg games at a packed Azadi Stadium in 2018, Persepolis made it all the way to their first final only to lose 2-0 on aggregate to Japan's Kashima Antlers, with the scoreless draw in the second leg in front of a record 100,000 spectators ultimately ensuring it was the J1 League side who came out on top.

Al Hilal finally got their hands on the prize they craved most in 2019 and with it their revenge on Urawa as the Riyadh giants followed up a 1-0 victory on home soil by winning 2-0 at Saitama Stadium to deservedly be crowned kings of the Continent.

Six former champions lined up for the 2020 group stage but Al Hilal's defence of their title ended in bitter disappointment as a COVID-19 outbreak within their squad meant they had to withdraw shortly after resuming their campaign in Doha.

Al Ain exited at the group stage while Al Sadd, much fancied on home soil, fell in the Round of 16 to Persepolis.

Both Guangzhou and Jeonbuk – with four AFC Champions League titles between them – were eliminated in the group stage to mean Ulsan were the only past winner from East Asia to appear in the knockout rounds.

Having missed out on the title two years ago, Persepolis followed their last 16 win over Al Sadd by defeating Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor in the quarter-finals and edging Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr on penalties to return to the showpiece event.

Ulsan, meanwhile, were too good for both Australia's Melbourne Victory and China PR's Beijing FC in the Round of 16 and quarter-finals before coming from behind to defeat Japan's Vissel Kobe after extra time in the semi-finals.

As West Asia now prepares to face East Asia in the first one-legged final since Ulsan won the title in 2012, the stage is set for a thrilling finale to the Continent's most prestigious club competition.

IN FOCUS - 2010 FINAL

THE REDEMPTION

HAVING MISSED OUT ON ASIAN GLORY WITH ADELAIDE UNITED IN 2008, SASA OGNENOVSKI HAD TO WAIT JUST TWO YEARS FOR HIS RETURN TO THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL. CAPTAINING A SEONGNAM ILHWA CHUNMA SIDE THAT BORE THEIR OWN SCARS FROM DEFEAT AT THE FINAL HURDLE, THE 2010 MVP REFLECTS ON THEIR PATH TO ABSOLUTION.









Ten years have passed since Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma were crowned kings of the Continent, but for Sasa Ognenovski, the team's captain who lifted the AFC Champions League trophy in Tokyo, time has not dulled the memories or emotions of the campaign and a climax that was the last time Korean and Iranian teams faced off in the final.

The pleasure of recalling those glory days is sharpened all the more due to his experience two years earlier. As part of the Adelaide United side, Ognenovski reached Asian club football's grandest stage only to fall at the final hurdle in a comprehensive defeat to Japan's Gamba Osaka.

The imposing centre-back was at the 2010 edition, though, this time with Korea Republic's Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma, who themselves had suffered a devastating defeat in their previous appearance in the competition climax, at the memorable 2004 showpiece.

And this time, for the big Australian and the K League side, redemption was achieved.

"When I joined Seongnam, it was clear that the club had a totally different outlook on how they approached the season," recalls the now 41-year-old Ognenovski from his home in Melbourne.

"There was no prioritising a particular tournament or game. Every competition we were involved in, we wanted to win: we'd play our first 11 against second division teams in the cup matches! There was no taking our foot off the pedal, it was a case of going flat out all year.

"It was an awesome feeling, knowing that it was a serious club who wanted to win every competition."

Not only were Seongnam a serious club, but they had a serious coach in Shin Tae-yong, who knew what it felt like to taste the highs and lows of the Asian game.

As a 25-year-old midfielder, Shin was a part of the Seongnam team to lift the 1995 Asian Club Championship, and nearly a decade later was on the bench as the side saw a 3-1 first-leg lead overturned at home by Al Ittihad in the final.

"He reminded us of that constantly and reiterated that opportunities like that don't come every year and you need to make the most of it," adds Ognenvoski.

"He kept feeding us that information and made sure we didn't rest on our laurels. And so we went out to win every game. Even in pre-season we were demolishing teams."

That winning mentality and confidence seeped into the side and by the time the 2010 AFC Champions League came around, Ognenovski admits that there was a completely different feeling about the team than he had experienced with Adelaide.

"We felt we were the best team in Asia and we went out on the park with that mentality, no matter who we played against," he says. "We had this air of confidence approaching our group, that was different to Adelaide where we always felt that underdog status.

"With Seongnam we were feared and didn't fear anyone."

Ognenovski and his teammates certainly backed up their words on the pitch, too.

Winning their opening four matches in Group E, scoring eight times and conceding just once, and ultimately qualifying for the knockout stage in first place, five points ahead of the second-placed team, Beijing FC.

Among the most poignant matches in the first round for the Australian international, though, was the return to his home city on Matchday Two as Melbourne Victory hosted Seongnam.

"I'm from Melbourne originally but it was a team that snubbed me during the A-League, so I had to move into State League twice," recalls Ognenovski of a match where he netted

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the opener for the side in a 2-0 away win.

"To come home with my family there watching the game and to score, and also have my young defensive protege Yun Young-sun score, it meant it was a very touching game and a bit of a 'you missed out' to Melbourne Victory.

A less cherished memory was a sending off at Beijing on Matchday Four, but with a place in the Round of 16 already assured, Ognenovski was able to serve out his one-match suspension and return in time for the Round of 16 and a rematch with his nemesis from 2008, Gamba Osaka.

Having seen his Adelaide side thumped 5-0 on aggregate by Gamba two years earlier, which included a 3-0 defeat in the first leg that effectively killed the tie, it was redemption at its fullest for Ognenovski when this time it was Gamba on the receiving end of a thrashing as a brace from Mauricio Molina and a Song Ho-young strike eliminated the 2008 winners.



"That was for me the most satisfying game," admits Ognenovski. "The tables were turned. Gamba weren't the bullies this time, we were.

"Gamba weren't the best team in Asia, we were the best team in Asia. That was really satisfying, it was pretty comprehensive too. It was a special one, personal revenge."

Even more familiar opponents were next up in the quarter-finals, however, as Seongnam faced the team that had defeated them in the 2009 Korean FA Cup final, Suwon Samsung Bluewings.

"It was an interesting game because it was a derby and in those kind of situations all the tactics get thrown out of the window," recalls Ognenovski of a game that Seongnam had a 4-1 lead from the first leg, but ultimately edged through after losing the return meeting 2-0 at Suwon World Cup Stadium.

"That was the tie that I felt that we just scraped through, that we maybe rode our luck a bit in the second leg. I recall our 'keeper making a couple of stunning saves at their place.

"We talked amongst each other and we felt that we could have done better in those games and not ended up in that situation."

Although the message in the dressing room would have been to avoid getting into a similar scenario, the semi-final against Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab was, if anything, even more nail-biting as the sides shared a rollercoaster seven-goal thriller in Riyadh in the first leg.

"That was a crazy game," admits Ognenovski. "A strange atmosphere in the stadium and a strange game in general, basically a shootout. It was played at such a frenetic pace it could have been 5-5, 6-6! Not the way we wanted to play by any means!

"But after that game I remember saying to the media that we know what we need to do now to make the final. That was for me the clear message to my team and the coach reiterated my words."

And so it proved, as Seongnam put on a far more organised and compact defensive performance, shutting down Al Shabab's



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Brazilian playmaker Camacho and securing a 1-0 win that sealed an away goals victory and a return to the AFC Champions League final.

And so to Tokyo and the 2010 showpiece. Despite the scares in the previous two ties of the knockout stage, Ognenovski insisted that Seongnam's belief was if anything enhanced rather than shaken by the narrow victories over Suwon and Al Shabab.

"We walked into that game, and into that stadium, absolutely supremely confident that we would win," he says, despite the suspension of striker Dzenan Radoncic and the absence of several first-teamers.

"I think that winning mentality in itself sort of drove us over the line regardless of the lack of some of our starting personnel."

With his family in attendance having made the trip over from Australia, Ognenovski, who led the side out onto the pitch at Tokyo National Stadium, kicked off a dream day by scoring the opener on 29 minutes in a goal-mouth scramble following a corner.

"I remember the ball bobbling around and I was luckily in that space," he recalls. "Scoring that goal when I did was a bit part of us stamping our authority on the game and alleviating any nerves that any of us had.

"Once we went 1-0 ahead we were always going to be very, very hard to beat after that."

Cho Byung-kuk, Ognenovski's defensive partner, made it 2-0 on 53 minutes, and, although Mohammad Reza Khalatbari reduced the deficit some 15 minutes later, Kim Cheol-ho scored the vital third with seven minutes remaining to ensure the nightmares of Seongnam's collapse in the 2004 final, and Ognenovski's own experience in 2008, could finally be put to bed.

"Those demons were exorcised, like they had been for me against Gamba in the Round of 16, the monkey was off our back," admits Ognenovski.



"We could get to that stage again and claim the title. To go in there and win the way we did, we proved we were good enough and that what happened in 2004 was an anomaly."

Not only was Ognenovski, as captain, the one to lift the trophy but he also earned man of the match and his performances throughout the tournament saw him named the competition's MVP – a hat-trick of honours for the Melburnian on a memorable night.

"It's a night that I look back at now and just recognise that it was a fantastic moment for me," he says.

"I walked away with three trophies that day: the winners' trophy, the man of the match award and the tournament MVP!"

And there were more plaudits to come. At the prestigious AFC Annual Awards later that year, Ognenovski was named the AFC Player of the Year. To this day, he remains the only Australian to be honoured with the Continent's top player accolade.

"It was a really special moment in my life, in my career, a bit of a reward for the hard work and the path that my football career took."

PERSEPOLIS FC

IR Iran

Qualified as: Iranian Pro League – Winners
Founded: 1963
Stadium: Azadi Stadium, Tehran (100,000)
Iranian Pro League (13): 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, 2008, 2002, 2000, 1999, 1997, 1996, 1976, 1974, 1972
Hazfi Cup (6): 2019, 2011, 2010, 1999, 1992, 1988
Asian Cup Winners' Cup (1): 1991

AFC Champions League: Runners-up 2018; Semi-Finals 2017; Round of 16 2015, 2012, 2009; Group Stage 2019, 2011, 2002-03





One of the most storied and popular clubs in Asian football, Tehran giants Persepolis are back in the AFC Champions League final for the second time in three years after producing a string of excellent results in Qatar to book their return to the main event.

Having lost out to Japan's Kashima Antlers in 2018, the Azadi Stadium side continue their long quest to win the Continent's most prestigious club competition, something which eluded them in the Asian Club Championship era and has done likewise since the launch of the AFC Champions League.

Given the sheer size of Persepolis it may come as somewhat of a surprise that they have fallen just short in the competition, particularly when considering the domestic honours they have amassed in their proud history.

Some of the finest players the Islamic Republic of Iran has ever produced, meanwhile, have turned out for the club with no fewer than four AFC Player of the Year winners having donned the famous Persepolis red: Khodadad Azizi (1996), Ali Daei (1999), Mehdi Mahdavikia (2003) and Ali Karimi (2004).



Other renowned names to have represented the Iranian powerhouse include Ali Parvin during the 1970s and 1980s, Karim Bagheri in the 1990s and 2000s and, most recently, national team goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand who played a huge role in helping the side reach the 2018 final.

Persepolis boast a record 13 Iranian Pro League titles, including the last four in a row, as well as six Hazfi Cups. They also tasted Continental glory back in 1991 when they defeated Bahrain's Al Muharraq to be crowned the inaugural Asian Cup Winners' Cup champions before finishing as runners-up two years later.

A decade on from that second Asian Cup Winners' Cup final, Persepolis were among 16 teams to feature in the first AFC Champions League when they were eliminated in the 2002-03 group stage despite winning two of their three games. Current coach Yahya Golmohammadi, meanwhile, has the claim to fame of having netted their maiden goal in the competition.

The Tehran side did not return until 2009 when they reached the last 16, a feat they also managed in 2012 and 2015, but it has been since 2017 that they have truly developed into a force in the competition.

Under Croatian tactician Branko Ivankovic, Persepolis began to dominate Iranian football for the first time since the late 1990s/early 2000s, claiming their first Iranian Pro League title in almost a decade in 2017.

And their presence was soon felt greater on the Continent, too, with a run to the 2017 AFC Champions League semi-finals following knockout round wins over



Lekhwiya and Al Ahli Saudi raising expectations among their loyal support. While defeat to Al Hilal ended the dream in the last four, the foundations had been laid for an assault on the title a year later.

Persepolis topped their group in 2018 before a drama-filled knockout round that included a string of incredible moments at Azadi Stadium.

Trailing the United Arab Emirates' Al Jazira by a goal in the second leg of the Round of 16, captain Seyed Jalal Hosseini popped up with a last-minute winner to send 80,000 fans at the Azadi into raptures as Persepolis progressed on away goals.

The quarter final efforts perhaps bettered those of the previous round when, up against an Al Duhail side that had won a record-equaling nine AFC Champions League games in a row by defeating Persepolis in the



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	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
Persepolis	6	3	1	2	8	5	3	10
Al Taawoun	6	3	0	3	4	8	-4	9
Al Duhail	6	3	0	3	7	8	-1	9
Sharjah	6	2	1	3	13	11	2	7

Group Stage

11/02/20
Al Duhail 2-0 Persepolis
Mario Mandzukic 5, Edmilson Junior 13

18/02/20
Sharjah 2-2 Persepolis
Mohammed Khalfan 25, Ryan Mendes 45+1; Ali Alipour 9, 27

15/09/20
Persepolis 1-0 Al Taawoun
Shojae Khalilzadeh 83

18/09/20
Al Taawoun 0-1 Persepolis
Bashar Resan 48 pen

21/09/20
Persepolis 0-1 Al Duhail
Almoez Ali 60 pen

24/09/20
Persepolis 4-0 Sharjah
Shojae Khalilzadeh 2, Isa Al Kasir 41, Vahid Amiri 44, Mehdi Abdi Qara 90+1

Round of 16

27/09/20
Persepolis 1-0 Al Sadd
Isa Al Kasir 88

Quarter-Final

30/09/20
Persepolis 2-0 Pakhtakor
Isa Al Kasir 49, 66

Semi-Final

03/10/20
Al Nassr 1-1 Persepolis
Abderrazak Hamdallah 36 pen; Mehdi Abdi Qara 42
Perespolis won 5-3 on penalties

first leg, the Iranians fought back from a two-goal aggregate deficit to score three second-half goals and advance.

While Persepolis were never behind in the semi-final against Al Sadd, they were within a goal of exiting when Beiranvand produced one of the competition's most iconic moments.

As tension gripped the 100,000 inside Azadi Stadium with the clock ticking down, FIFA World Cup winner Xavi Hernandez advanced into the box to meet Jung Woo-young's delivery only to see his header miraculously tipped over the bar by the custodian. A collective sigh of relief breathed among the Persepolis support and a place in the final was sealed.

But Ivankovic's men were unable to complete the dream, a 2-0 first-leg defeat against Kashima in Japan was one hurdle they were unable to overcome as a goalless draw in the Iranian capital saw the J1 League club crowned champions.

Persepolis stuttered in 2019, falling at the group stage in Ivankovic's last campaign at the helm, but returned in emphatic fashion this time round.

Things began slowly, though, as they picked up just a point from their opening two games back in February prior to the COVID-19 enforced postponement.

Upon the tournament's resumption in Qatar, perhaps few outside of Iran would have tipped Persepolis for success. Ali Alipour's brace against the UAE's Sharjah before the hiatus proved his last goals in the competition for the side as he left for Portugal while other notable departures included Beiranvand and Mahdi Torabi.

However, now under club legend Golmohammadi who brought in a host of new players, there was renewed belief after Persepolis resumed in Doha with back-to-back 1-0 wins over Saudi side Al Taawoun to move to the Group C summit.

A narrow 1-0 loss to Al Duhail meant qualification went down to the wire but a resounding 4-0 win over Sharjah ultimately saw Persepolis progress with minimal fuss as table-toppers,

Isa Al Kasir proved the hero in the Round of 16 as his 88th-minute winner dealt Al Sadd more heartache at the hands of Persepolis before the striker was at the double in the quarter-finals as Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor were next to fall.

A much-fancied Al Nassr of Saudi Arabia awaited in the last four but, after going a goal down to Abderrazak Hamdallah's penalty, the Tehran giants fought back almost instantly as Mehdi Abdi Qara levelled before Golmohammadi's team held their nerve from the spot to advance on penalties.

The win capped a remarkable performance in the Qatari capital which saw Persepolis concede just two goals in seven games, none of which were from open play, to give themselves the chance to make up for missing out in 2018.

While popular centre-back Shojae Khalilzadeh has since departed, a number of players from two years ago remain, with midfielders Bashar Resan, Ahmad Noorollahi and Kamal Kamyabinia all likely to be key.

At the back, Siamak Nemati has been excellent as a converted right-back and Hamed Lak has impressed in goal as Beiranvand's replacement, while there may even be a return to the starting line-up for the veteran Hosseini to fill the void left by Khalilzadeh.

Newcomers Hossein Kanaani and Saeid Aghaei have also performed well while Persepolis will hope Abdi Qara can repeat his semi-final heroics.

No Iranian side has won the AFC Champions League, with Sepahan (2007) and Zobahan (2010) also finishing as runners-up. With the final at Al Janoub Stadium to decide the destiny of the 2020 trophy, Persepolis have another opportunity to put the country on the roll of honour and ensure one of Asia's biggest clubs are crowned kings of the Continent for the first time.

IN FOCUS:

BASHAR RESAN

“Our target coming into the tournament was to reach the final and we delivered after great performances in all our matches in Doha. We knew that we would get there after defeating Al Sadd in the Round of 16 because they, along with Al Hilal, were the only teams that could stop us.”

Self-belief is not something Persepolis have lacked in recent years as the Tehran club have continued to defy the odds, and perhaps no one embodies that spirit better than midfielder Bashar Resan, who arrived in the Iranian capital in mid-2017 and has gone on to develop into a firm fans’ favourite at Azadi Stadium.

While star players have come and gone with regularity since the Iraq international’s arrival he has remained a constant, moving from bit-part role in his earlier days to one of the first names on the team sheet.



And he is a major reason why Persepolis, despite seeing an exodus of players prior to the 2020 AFC Champions League’s resumption in Qatar in September, are appearing in the showpiece event for the second time in three years.

Now 23, Baghdad-born Resan joined the red half of Tehran from Iraqi powerhouse Air Force Club in the summer of 2017. He had tasted Continental glory a year earlier, his goal in the semi-final of the AFC Cup against Lebanon’s Al Ahed securing a place in the final, a game the midfielder missed through suspension.

His former club would go on to win the competition in 2017 and 2018 but Resan was ready for the step up and looking to challenge for titles at a higher level.

“Iranian football is faster and more aggressive than Iraqi football,” he noted shortly after signing for a Persepolis side who were enjoying a return to the fore of Iranian football under Croatian Branko Ivankovic.

“As the season goes on my aim is to adapt more to life in Tehran and help the club win trophies. Persepolis are a huge club, not only in the Islamic Republic of Iran but also in Asia so titles have to be the goal.”

Joining ahead of the 2017 AFC Champions League quarter-finals, Resan was deployed from the bench in each of his new side’s games up until defeat to Al Hilal in the semi-finals before experiencing a breakout year in 2018.

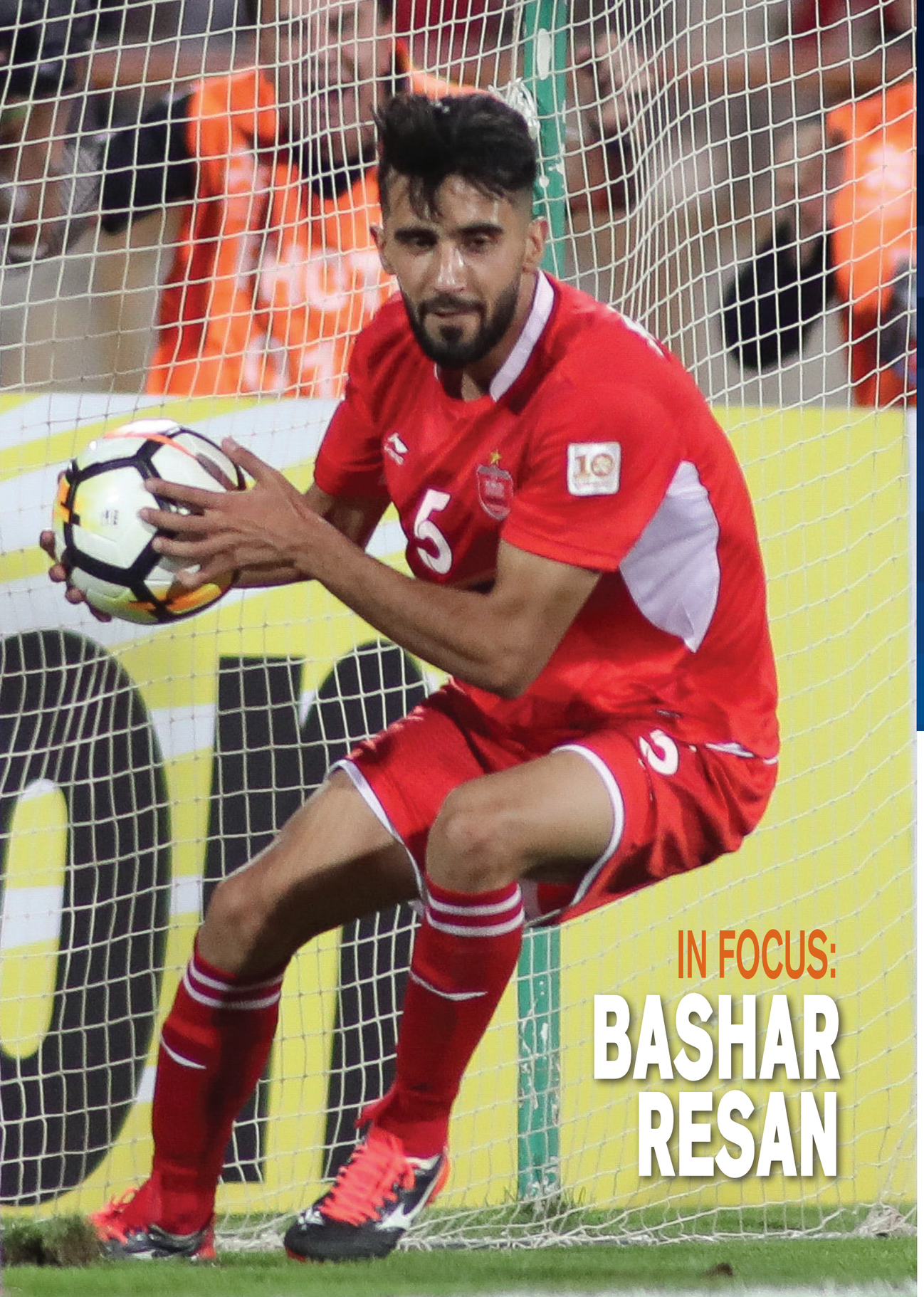
The first six months of the year continued much in the same vein with Resan getting regular game time both domestically and on the Continent – normally as a second-half substitute – as Persepolis topped their group then edged past Al Jazira into the quarter-finals.

However, the summer of 2018 saw key players Vahid Amiri and Farshad Ahmadzadeh depart – the former after an impressive FIFA World Cup – and Resan seized the opportunity to make a place in the midfield his own.

His maiden start in the AFC Champions League was a 1-0 defeat to Al Duhail in the first leg of the quarter-finals before Persepolis stunned the Qataris in the return meeting at Azadi Stadium by fighting back from a 2-0 aggregate deficit to win 3-2, with Resan’s presence in the penalty area forcing Sultan Al Brake to divert into his own goal and bring the scores level at 2-2.

While 2018 was proving hugely successful on the pitch, his first Iranian Pro League title having been wrapped up earlier in the year, it was also one of personal tragedy for Resan. The midfielder was withdrawn midway through the second half of Iraq’s friendly against Argentina in Riyadh to be told his mother had passed away, and he was soon on a flight back to Baghdad.

However, having played in the first leg of the semi-final against Al Sadd in Doha – a 1-0 win prior to the



IN FOCUS: BASHAR RESAN











international break – he returned to the line-up for the return meeting at Azadi Stadium.

Packed to its 100,000 capacity, the home fans left their midfielder with little doubt as to how much he meant to them, a banner displaying their collective condolences welcoming Resan to the pitch for a tie which Persepolis edged 2-1 on aggregate.

"I dedicate this win to my late mother, my family and all the fans who supported us in Iraq and Iran," remarked a visibly emotional Resan after displaying a fine combative performance.

"Also, this win is for the fans here who stood with us despite the tough times we are going through. Congratulations to these fans, and those outside the stadium."

A final against Japan's Kashima Antlers was the last hurdle to Persepolis winning the AFC Champions League for the first time but, despite putting in a fighting display over the two legs, the Tehran side's 2-0 first-leg loss in Ibaraki proved too difficult to overcome as the teams played out a goalless draw in Tehran.

It had, however, been a year full of footballing success for Resan and, although there was a disappointing Continental campaign in 2019, he helped Iraq reach the knockout rounds of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 and wrapped up a league-cup double with his club.

Now under Yahya Golmohammadi, Persepolis picked up just a point from their opening two 2020 AFC Champions League games before enjoying a fine run in Qatar, with Resan's penalty on Matchday Four securing back-to-back 1-0 wins over Al Taawoun as the side moved to the top of Group C.

Those victories laid the foundations for knockout round qualification that was ultimately secured with a convincing 4-0 win over Sharjah, by which time Resan was already eyeing a return to the showpiece event.

"When we came to Doha our target was to get six points from the first two games and that made the group wide open again," he admitted.

"We finished on top of the group but our ambition is to make it to the final match of the tournament."

By now Persepolis had momentum and a late goal against Al Sadd saw them into the quarter-finals, where Pakhtakor were next to fall as Persepolis sailed into a third semi-final in four years.

A goal down in the last-four match-up with Al Nassr, Resan again was key, floating a perfectly weighted cross into the area for Mehdi Abdi Qara to head home before the game was ultimately decided by penalties as the Terhan side returned to the final after netting all five of their spot kicks.

"Our defence was great as the two goals we conceded in Doha were from penalties; Al Nassr are a good team but we played against them with 10 men [in extra-time] and they weren't able to score," reflected Resan.

"The coach told us at half-time that we would be able to win the match. We had great fighting spirit as we were not only representing Persepolis fans but all of Iran. We showed great effort and the solidarity of the players helped us achieve our target."

For Resan, who has started 18 of his side's 21 AFC Champions League games since the 2018 quarter-finals, a return to the final offers the chance to make up for the disappointment of two years ago. There is little doubt he – and his teammates – will be backing themselves to overcome the odds once more.

ULSAN HYUNDAI FC

Korea Republic

Qualified as: K League 1 Runners-up
Founded: 1983
Stadium: Ulsan Munsu Football Stadium, Ulsan (43,554)
K League 1 (2): 2005, 1996
Korean FA Cup (1): 2017

AFC Champions League (1): 2012; Semi-Finals 2006; Round of 16 2019, 2018; Group Stage 2017, 2014, 2009





Ulsan Hyundai are one of four clubs from Korea Republic to have won the AFC Champions League since its inception and among a group of five to have been crowned kings of Asia since the turn of the millennium.

Having defeated Al Ahli Saudi in the 2012 final to complete a then record-breaking nine successive victories in the competition, the K League 1 side return to the showpiece event on the back of an eight-game winning run as they look to become the AFC Champions League's fifth two-time winners.

The side also boasts two K League titles, with a number of renowned players having shone in Ulsan blue, including former Korea Republic internationals Lee Chun-soo and Kim Byung-il as well as Yoo Sang-chul, who was part of both league championship-winning teams.



In recent years Ulsan have created a team capable of challenging for top honours once more but have suffered their fair share of heartache.

The Horangi lost the 2019 K League 1 title on the final day of the season after a surprise defeat to Pohang Steelers saw Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors leapfrog them at the last. This year, Ulsan led for much of the campaign but let a nine-point lead slip and again lost out on the last day of the season to their Jeonju rivals before also losing the FA Cup final against Jeonbuk.

However, failure to land their first K League title since 2005 appears only to have further motivated them ahead of the 2020 AFC Champions League's resumption as their form in Qatar has been nothing short of exceptional, winning eight from eight to reach the final.

You have to go back 14 years for Ulsan's first appearance in the competition when, in 2006, they reached the semi-finals before defeat to eventual winners Jeonbuk. Three years later they would suffer group stage elimination.

It was on their third appearance, in 2012, that Ulsan wrote their names into the history books by producing one of the most memorable runs the tournament has ever seen.

Having won one and drawn two of their opening three games, Ulsan went on a surge by defeating Brisbane Roar, Beijing FC and FC Tokyo to top their group before Kashiwa Reysol were next to fall in the knockout rounds.

Saudi giants Al Hilal offered little resistance in the quarter-finals as Brazilian Rafinha netted three goals over two legs in a resounding 5-0 aggregate win to set up a semi-final date with Uzbekistan's Bunyodkor.

Ulsan fell behind in Tashkent but responded in perfect fashion as Rafinha, Kim Shin-wook and Lee Keun-ho – who returned



to the club in 2018 – all scored in a 3-1 win. Kim and Lee did likewise in the return meeting as a 5-1 aggregate win secured a place in the final.

With the one-legged showpiece event taking place in front of more than 42,000 spectators at a packed Ulsan Munsu Football Stadium the stage was for Kim Ho-gon's team to write their names into Asian football's history books.

Captain Kwak Tae-hwi calmed any nerves by heading home inside 15 minutes before Rafinha nodded in his seventh of the campaign midway through the second half. Kim Seung-yong ensured the home support could relax in the final 15 minutes after rifling in his side's third goal to cap a memorable campaign in fine fashion as Ulsan were crowned Asia's best.

In truth, the side have not come close to matching the class of







	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
Ulsan Hyundai	6	5	1	0	14	5	9	16
FC Tokyo	6	3	1	2	6	5	1	10
Shanghai Shenhua	6	2	1	3	9	13	-4	7
Perth Glory	6	0	1	5	5	11	-6	1

Group Stage

11/02/20
Ulsan Hyundai 1-1 FC Tokyo 1
Adailton 82 OG; Diego Oliveira 64

21/11/20
Ulsan Hyundai 3-1 Shanghai Shenhua
Yoon Bit-garam 19, 41, Kim Kee-hee 63; Zhu Jianrong 89

24/11/20
Perth Glory 1-2 Ulsan Hyundai
Daniel Stynes 71; Kim In-sung 89, Junior Negrao 90+3

27/11/20
Ulsan Hyundai 2-0 Perth Glory
Kim In-sung 87, Junior Negrao 89

30/11/20
FC Tokyo 1-2 Ulsan Hyundai
Kensuke Nagai 1; Yoon Bit-garam 44, 85

03/12/20
Shanghai Shenhua 1-4 Ulsan Hyundai
Bi Jinhao 60; Park Jeong-in 3, Lee Sang-heon 24, Bjorn Johnsen 75 pen, 90

Round of 16

27/09/20
Ulsan Hyundai 3-0 Melbourne Victory
Bjorn Johnsen 65, 86, Won Du-jae 77

Quarter-Final

27/09/20
Ulsan Hyundai 2-0 Beijing FC
Junior Negrao 21 pen, 42

Semi-Final

27/09/20
Ulsan Hyundai 2-1 Vissel Kobe
Bjorn Johnson 81, Junior Negrao 119 pen; Hotaru Yamaguchi

2012 until this year, with group stage eliminations in 2014 and 2017 followed by back-to-back Round of 16 exits in the ensuing two years.

However, after an opening-day draw with FC Tokyo, Kim Do-hoon's men have been in imperious form since the tournament's resumption in Qatar.

Yoon Bit-garam netted a double as Ulsan got off to the perfect start in Doha, seeing off Shanghai Shenhua 3-1 before they came from a goal down against Perth Glory to win 2-1 after late strikes from substitutes Kim In-sung and Junior Negrao.

Another win over Perth, with the same two players scoring late again to seal a 2-0 victory, put Ulsan in a strong position to advance and they then rubber stamped a place in the last 16 after another Yoon double helped them come from a goal down against Tokyo to win 2-1.

A perfect five wins from five was sealed in their final Group F game when a much-changed line-up eased to a 4-1 victory over Shanghai with Bjorn Johnsen twice on the scoresheet.

The Ulsan momentum showed no sign of slowing in the Round of 16 as another Johnsen brace and a goal from Won Du-jae on his return to the side saw off the challenge of Melbourne Victory.

Up against fellow unbeaten team Beijing FC in the quarter-finals, Negrao scored from the spot and then from distance to seal a 2-0 win and a place in the semi-finals, where they would have their first almighty scare.

The Korean side fell behind against Vissel Kobe after Hotaru Yamaguchi struck early in the second half before Vissel thought they had a second only to see it ruled out by VAR.

Johnsen equalised in the final 10 minutes but saw it chalked off for offside before VAR again corrected the decision in Ulsan's favour. And the drama was not complete because, with a penalty shootout fast approaching, Negrao was upended in the box and the Brazilian duly slotted home the ensuing penalty to seal a 2-1 win at the death.

Ulsan's winning run now stands at eight, just one short of their 2012 streak, while they also go into the final on a tournament-leading 21 goals.

Unsurprisingly the prolific Negrao is continuing to find the back of the net with regularity but the 2020 K League 1 top scorer is joined on five goals by Johnsen while Yoon has scored four from midfield.

Lee Chung-yong has added quality and experience in midfield and, at the other end of the age spectrum, Won is among the bright hopes having helped Korea Republic win the AFC U23 Championship earlier in the year, picking up the MVP award, too.

Lee Keun-ho's performances in 2012 saw him named the AFC Player of the Year and the veteran is the one player who remains from the title-winning campaign, while captain Sin Jin-ho is a calming influence in the centre of the park and forward Kim In-sung is both a creative and goalscoring threat.

At the back, goalkeeper Jo Su-huk has impressed in deputising for regular first choice Jo Hyeon-woo and the defence ahead of him, which includes Dutchman Dave Bulthuis, Kim Kee-hee, Jeong Dong-ho and Park Joo-ho has conceded fewer than a goal a game.

Ulsan's appearance in the final marks the first time a Korean side has been present since Jeonbuk were crowned champions in 2016. The East Asian nation has seen its teams lift the trophy five times, the Horangi's aim is to add a sixth and make up for recent disappointments by winning Asia's most prestigious club prize.

IN FOCUS:

JUNIOR NEGRAO

After spending more than a decade regularly moving between clubs, there is little doubt Junior Negrao has found a home away from home in southeastern Korea Republic, with the Ulsan Hyundai striker having delivered the goods during a goal-laden three-year spell that has turned him into a firm fan favourite and one of the most feared frontmen in the country.

His five-goal run in this year's AFC Champions League has followed on from an outstanding domestic campaign in which he netted an incredible 26 times in 27 league games to, by some distance, top the scoring charts.

However, Negrao's K League season ended in bitter disappointment as Ulsan – despite leading Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors by nine points at one stage – lost out on the league title on the final day for the second year in a row.



A chance to make amends was then spurned in the FA Cup final. Negrao netted in both legs against Jeonbuk but, after putting Ulsan a goal up in the return meeting, was on the losing end once more as the Jeonju club stormed back to claim a 2-1 win on the night and 3-2 on aggregate.

It was a cruel way to end such a fine season, both on an individual level for Negrao and for a team that had done so much so well before falling just short.

However, Ulsan have regrouped in Qatar with several players – among them the man known as the 'smiling assassin' – helping create a positive attitude in the camp.

Now, on the back of eight successive wins since landing in Doha, Ulsan have become one of the most talked about teams on the Continent while their number nine sits just two goals short of the tournament's seven-goal leading scorer Abderrazak Hamdallah of Al Nassr.

"We have shown a different side to us," admitted 33-year-old Negrao.

"We learned from our mistakes in the league and tried not to repeat them. We moved on and forgot what happened in Korea, and started again with a different and stronger mentality, that is why we keep winning."

In many ways, forgetting the past to forge a stronger future has been the story of Negrao's career. After stints in Portugal, Belgium, Switzerland and no fewer than 11 clubs in his native Brazil, the centre forward made his first foray into Asian football with Thai side Muangthong United in 2016.

But it was during a prolific loan spell with another team in the Southeast Asian country, Pattaya United, that he drew the attention of onlookers from Korea Republic.

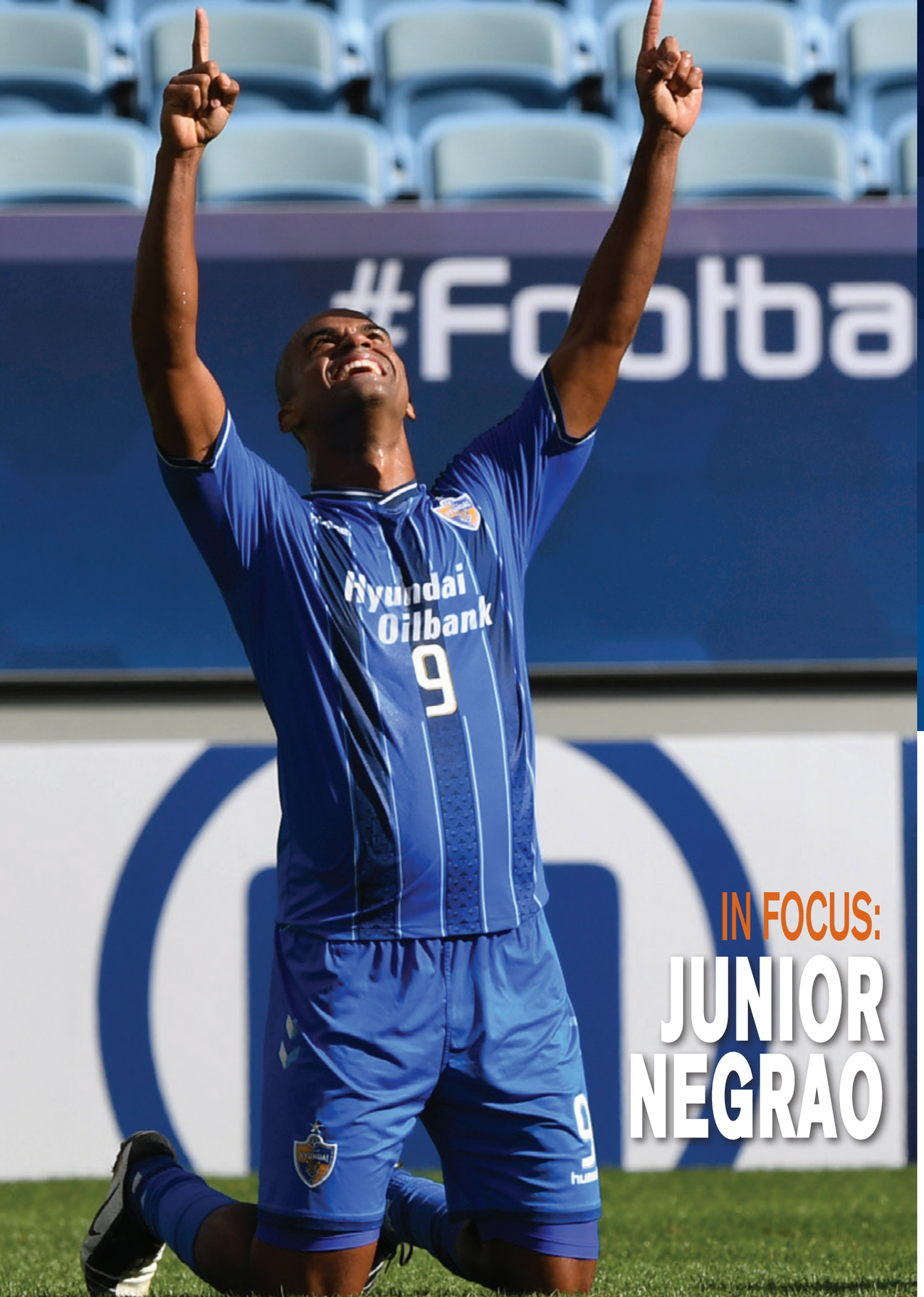
A move to newly promoted Daegu FC followed and the Salvador native had few problems adapting to life in his new environs, with 12 goals in his first season proving too good a return to keep K League 1 giants Ulsan at bay as they stepped in to acquire the in-form striker.

"I think the main reason for successful performances in Asia is about how I feel welcome there. I feel at home in Korea," reflected Negrao.

"Everybody in Korea helped me a lot with food, with everything. It's totally different from my home country, but this kind of reception made a difference, to feel adapted, and to just play well and try to perform at my best."

His happiness off the pitch was mirrored on it during his first season at Ulsan Munsu Football Stadium as he netted 22 times to help his side finish third in the standings.

This was the year in which fans of Asian football first laid eyes on Negrao in the AFC Champions League group stage, where a double against Melbourne Victory – his first goals in



IN FOCUS: JUNIOR NEGRAO











the competition – helped his side advance to the knockout rounds for the first time since 2012, before elimination at the hands of domestic rivals Suwon Samsung Bluewings.

While Negrao had produced the goods in his first season with Ulsan, it was one that would end in disappointment as he missed out on the first major trophy of his career following a 5-1 aggregate defeat against former side Daegu in the FA Cup final.

But this was an improving Ulsan side and one that was now ready to challenge Korea Republic's perennial champions, Jeonbuk.

The Horangi took the fight to the Jeonju team until the final day of the season before a shock 4-1 loss to East Coast Derby rivals Pohang Steelers saw Jeonbuk leapfrog them at the last to be crowned champions – a bitterly disappointing end to an excellent season in which the Brazilian had added a further 19 league goals.

On the Continent, meanwhile, Negrao had netted twice to help Ulsan reach the knockout rounds once more, although the good work of a 2-1 first-leg win over Urawa Red Diamonds was undone in the return meeting in Korea Republic as the hosts slumped to a 3-0 loss and elimination.

Ulsan were arguably the best team in their homeland in 2020, topping the league for the majority of the season, while Negrao was undeniably the best striker. But they again failed to hold their nerve, defeat to Jeonbuk on the penultimate day of the season leaving the destiny of the title in their rivals' hands, a gift they duly accepted.

Defeat in the FA Cup final only compounded their misery, although Negrao remained upbeat ahead of the AFC Champions League's resumption in Qatar.

"Because our ending in our national league was not as good as we expected, we just need to bring our confidence back, play our game and play the way we are strongest," he reflected upon arriving in West Asia for a hectic schedule of Continental action.

"I like it more when I have a game every three or four days. You can build up the confidence."

Negrao did not take long to showcase his attributes in the Qatari capital, coming off the bench to volley home a winner against Perth Glory on Matchday Three before creating one and scoring another as Ulsan overcame the Australians once more three days later.

Ulsan made it to the knockout rounds for the third year in a row and, after seeing off Melbourne in the last 16, Negrao starred in the quarter-finals against Beijing FC, scoring from the spot and rocketing home a second from distance to seal a 2-0 win.

Onwards to the semi-finals and an Ulsan side that appears steelier than before fought back from a goal down against Japan's Vissel Kobe to win 2-1, Negrao dramatically fouled two minutes from the end of extra time before he netted from the spot to avoid a nerve-racking penalty shootout.

Ulsan are now within touching distance of becoming the fifth two-time AFC Champions League winners, although within touching distance is where the nearly men of Korean football have fallen short so often in recent times.

As a do-or-die clash against the Islamic Republic of Iran's Persepolis looms in the grand finale, Ulsan will hope to keep nerves at bay and pray that history doesn't return to haunt them. With the stakes so high, perhaps it's best to go into the match with the mindset of their brilliant Brazilian.

"All the time, I just try to have fun," added Negrao. "That's the kind of mindset I try to portray onto other players. Just have fun. Don't try to be a robot, just relax and things will come naturally."

IN FOCUS - 2015 FINAL

THE JOURNEY



THE 2015 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL MARKED THE RETURN OF AN EMIRATI TEAM TO THE GRANDEST STAGE IN THE ASIAN GAME FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A DECADE, A REMARKABLE RUN THAT FEATURED SOME STUNNING MOMENTS AND MATCHES ALONG THE WAY BEFORE HEARTBREAK AT THE FINAL HURDLE.

Football clubs from the United Arab Emirates have a proud history in the AFC Champions League, and no moment was prouder than the very first edition of the revamped tournament when Al Ain were crowned inaugural champions, defeating BEC Tero Sasana of Thailand, on 11 October, 2003.

Although the Garden City side were defeated by Al Ittihad of Saudi Arabia when they returned to the Continental climax in 2005, the facts remained that of the opening three AFC Champions League finals, the UAE had been represented in two of them.

That it took a further 10 years before a third Emirati side returned to the showpiece event is testament to the efforts and achievement of the Red Knights of Dubai, known now as Shabab Al Ahli Dubai, but then simply as Al Ahli.

This was a team that entered the tournament on the back of domestic dominance. UAE Pro League champions for the sixth time, finishing 16 points ahead of runners-up Al Wahda, they also won the UAE League Cup and were only denied a domestic treble after losing 1-0 to Al Ain in the President's Cup final.

In a much-celebrated coup for the club the signing of Brazilian attacking midfielder Everton Ribeiro, who had been linked with Manchester United and AC Milan, had been announced. There was also significant local talent in the ranks with Ahmed Khalil, part of the exciting UAE attack at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, and midfielder Ismail Al Hammadi who also impressed in Australia.

At the helm was Romanian Cosmin Olaroiu, who had already picked up league titles in his homeland, Saudi Arabia with Al Hilal and Al Ain before leading Al Ahli to their double in 2014.

For all that pedigree, though, Al Ahli had yet to make their mark on the AFC Champions League after underwhelming performances in their previous five appearances. They were eliminated in the qualifying round in 2002-03 and failed to get past the group stage in 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2014.

And to say their 2015 Continental campaign began with signs of going any other way would be a far stretch indeed as Olaroiu's men went winless in their first three ties.

A 3-3 draw with Saudi namesakes Al Ahli and a defeat away to IR Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz was followed by an uninspiring goalless draw at home to Uzbek side Nasaf Qarshi.

"We had total control of the game, tried different things. But the problems we had were that we did not score," a disconsolate Olaroiu said after the stalemate.

"We always wanted a striker, and the president [Abdullah Al Naboodah] was willing to pay the price for bringing in a striker.

"We had four names, but none of them came. It was nobody's fault. They kept saying 'tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow' but nobody came."

A return meeting with Nasaf saw Everton Ribeiro's late goal give Al Ahli their first victory and, importantly, hope.

The Brazilian then opened the scoring in Jeddah against Al Ahli only for their hosts to pull off a late comeback and win 2-1 to mean Olaroiu's men no longer had their destiny in their hands going into their final Group D game.

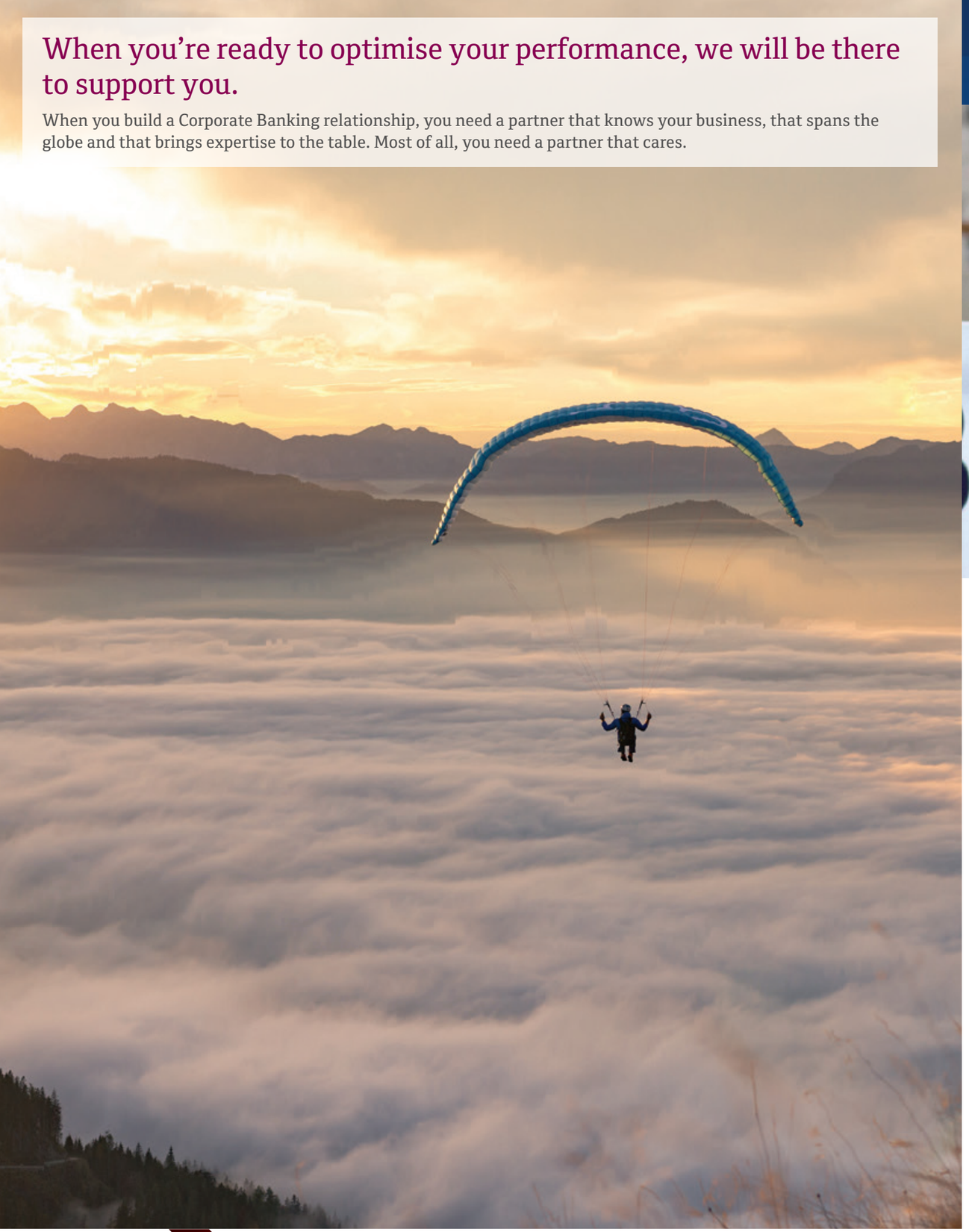
A win for Nasaf against the Saudi Al Ahli would eliminate the Red Knights, who themselves had to defeat Tractorsazi to stand any chance. And with 75 minutes gone the scenario seemed unlikely. Down 2-1, the Dubai side were facing elimination.

But, when they needed him most, up stepped a striker that Olaroiu had been crying out for as Khalil's two deftly taken headers, the second just two minutes from the end, secured a 3-2 victory.

And with Nasaf held to a goalless draw by Al Ahli Saudi, the Emiratis were through to the knockout stage for the first time

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by the narrowest of margins: a superior head-to-head record.

"Thank God we qualified," said a relieved Olaroiu afterwards. "This was a good game to watch on TV, in the stadium but not on the bench.

"We accomplished the most important target this season and I'd like to congratulate my players, and everyone connected to the club."

An arguably even more stunning turnaround was to come in the Round of 16. After a goalless stalemate with Al Ain in the first leg, Al Ahli pulled off a five-minute three-goal salvo, prompted by a Khalil brace, to turn an early 1-0 deficit into a 3-1 lead.

Al Ain managed to restore parity late on but the away goals damage was done as Al Ahli secured a place in the quarter-finals.

And during the Emirati off-season, Olaroiu finally brought in the extra piece of the puzzle that he long awaited: a new striker to compliment Khalil.

Brazilian Rodrigo Lima joined from Portugal giants Benfica and countryman Everton Ribeiro was quickly convinced he would play an important role:

"I am sure he will bring goals to the team," he said. "We have a good chemistry together on the pitch, me as the playmaker and he as the centre forward.

"We have played together very well during pre-season and we will try to bring good results. Lima is a good guy and a team guy, he is with the team always."

Evidence of that came immediately. Lima was on target in his first Asian outing, scoring the only goal in a 1-0 away win against quarter-final opponents Naft Tehran.

He repeated the trick in the return meeting, too, as his 26th-minute opener, coupled with a Khalil 'Panenka' penalty, ensured a 2-1 win in Dubai and a 3-1 aggregate victory.

And their reward? A semi-final meeting with Saudi giants Al Hilal, still smarting from the shock defeat in the 2014 final against Western Sydney Wanderers.

Played out in front of over 53,000 in Riyadh the first leg was a closely contested affair with a pair of Brazilians scoring for each team. Lima again found the net just before the hour mark, with Ailton grabbing an 82nd-minute leveller after compatriot Carlos Eduardo had earlier seen his spot kick strike a post.

That was no indication, though, of the drama that was to follow in the second leg.

Lima drew first blood at a packed Rashid Stadium with his fourth goal in four AFC Champions League games before Everton Ribeiro made it 3-1 on aggregate with a delicate chip over Abdullah Al Sudairy just before half-time.

Al Hilal came roaring back after the interval. A deft finish on the turn from Ailton reduced the deficit before Carlos Eduardo unleashed a stunning shot from outside the area to put the visitors in front.

Having surrendered a two-goal cushion, things looked grim for Al Ahli but one final chance remained in the last minute of stoppage time.

Everton Ribeiro whipped a free-kick into a packed penalty area, Al Sudairy rose and punched but the ball went only as far

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as Kwon Kyung-won.

The Korean's volley ricocheted into the net to send the home fans into delirium in the stands and his manager on a fist-pumping sprint down the touch line.

"My players are the heroes for what they have done, nobody gave them a chance," said a proud Olaroiu.

"I think from what happened over the two games we deserved to qualify [for the final]. They don't give up and they deserve to have the best performance in the club's history in the AFC Champions League.

"Now we are going to try our best to make the dream real."

The final obstacle in their path: 2013 winners Guangzhou Evergrande of China PR.

Despite the firepower of Guangzhou's Brazil-born trio of Ricardo Goulart, Paulinho and Elkeson, the first leg of the final in Dubai was a tightly contested goalless stalemate.

"Our performance was good but luck was not with us in scoring, but what is important is that we did not concede any goals," admitted Al Ahli defender Salmeen Khamis.

"It was the first time for us to play in the final, in the beginning it was the fear and awe of the opponent but in the second half we were able to control the game.

"We wait for the second match where we will give the best performance in China and come up with a positive result."

Unfortunately for Al Ahli and for Khamis, most especially, it would prove to be an occasion to forget.

After a goalless half in a teeming Tianhe Stadium, Elkeson netted the tie's only goal in sumptuous fashion and it was Khamis who was the victim of a moment of exquisite skill.

A wonderful flick saw him nutmeg the Al Ahli defender with his back to goal, pivoting at pace to poke into the bottom right corner.

Al Ahli were rattled and Khamis lost his cool and his control on 67 minutes, dismissed by referee Ravshan Irmatov after a clumsy challenge on Guangzhou winger Zheng Long.

Lima almost changed things when he went through on goal with 12 minutes remaining, but centre-back Kim Young-gwon denied the striker with an outstanding block.

No more chances were forthcoming and Irmatov soon brought an end to both the second leg and Al Ahli's incredible 2015 campaign.

A journey of twists and turns, high and lows, burned bright but ultimately burned out with the trophy in their opponent's hands.

"Even with 10 men we tried to play, we tried to score," reflected Olaroiu. "We fought until the end, until the last second, and this makes me very, very proud of my players.

"They have done a fantastic job. Even if they did not win the trophy, they make a very good image for UAE football.

"Nobody believed we could get to this stage. With hard work and with a lot of sacrifices we made it to this stage. They deserved to be here, it's not the end of the journey."

Olaroiu was right. Al Ahli went on to lift the 2015-16 UAE Pro League title and the League Cup the following year before the Romanian departed, bringing the curtain down on a hugely successful period for club and coach alike.



Al Janoub Stadium, Al Wakrah



One of a number of state-of-the-art new venues to be built ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Al Janoub Stadium was inaugurated on May 16, 2019 when Doha rivals Al Sadd SC and Al Duhail SC faced off in the Emir Cup of Qatar final. Featuring a roof inspired by the sails of the Gulf region's traditional dhow boats and an exterior referencing Al Wakrah's history of seafaring, the curvilinear venue has a cooling system that can take the temperature as low as 18 degrees Celsius in the spectator area and 20 degrees Celsius on the pitch. With a capacity of 40,000, the stadium also has a retractable roof while swimming pools, running tracks, restaurants and a shopping mall can be found on the complex. With the 2020 AFC Champions League being moved to the centralised location of Qatar, Al Janoub Stadium hosted a number of group stage, last 16 and quarter-final games. With it's futuristic appearance and impressive facilities, it offers the perfect setting for the tournament's finale.







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