AFC QUARTERLY

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ISSUE 11

Shaikh Salman

The AFC President looks to the future

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Final Preview

ISSUE 11

July 2015

MAHDI ALI

Engineering success: Meet the man driving the UAE towards Russia 2018

PLUS

BHUTAN

The Himalayan nation eyes further progress following historic qualification

MASASHI NAKAYAMA

Japanese legend and AFC Asian Cup winner looks back on a stellar career that helped give birth to an icon of Asian football

GLOBAL FC

Filipinos seek to build on their maiden AFC Cup campaign following a rise from obscurity to domestic dominance

SAFUWAN BAHARUDIN

Singapore international on a whirlwind six months that brought success and disappointment, and his big hopes for the future

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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

AFC President

Dear friends,

Global football has seen some turbulent times recently. However, the beautiful game goes on, and since the latest edition of AFC Quarterly we have witnessed some exciting matches, in both national team and club competitions.

Once again Asia's two premier club competitions, the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup, have shone. The continent is now looking forward to the quarter-finals kicking off in August, with Asia's best clubs battling it out to be crowned champions. The AFC Champions League produced some surprises, as usual, with Naft Tehran, a newcomer in the competition, qualifying to the quarter-finals. Debutants FC Istiklol from Dushanbe, Tajikistan, also made history by getting through to the knockout stage of the AFC Cup.

On the national team competition side, the draw for the FIFA World Cup 2018 and AFC Asian Cup 2019 Preliminary Joint Qualification Round Two was held in mid-April in Kuala Lumpur. The matches started in mid-June, with the finals in Russia and the UAE as the competing teams' targets. There was plenty of excitement already in the round two opening matches, with close-fought thrillers such as Saudi Arabia edging Palestine 3-2 with a stoppage-time strike, and surprises such as Guam racing to the top of their group with two wins in two.

In addition to the AFC national team and club competitions, Asian teams have been in action at FIFA tournaments in Canada and New Zealand. Performances at the FIFA U-20 World Cup might have been a disappointment for some of our teams but Uzbekistan made sure that at least one Asian team made it to the last eight.

The FIFA Women's World Cup is in full swing with great displays from the Asian teams. Australia, China, Japan and Korea Republic all made it through to the knockout phase and Thailand performed admirably on their first appearance on the big stage.

Finally, off the field, the AFC held its 26th Ordinary Congress in Bahrain at the end of April. Key Asian representatives were elected by the AFC Congress to chart the course for football to flourish on the continent and internationally. I look forward to working with the new Executive Committee, and with all the Member Associations, to help Asian football reach its potential both here and on the world stage.

Together we will do it.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President

Back In Business

Former winners Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors returned to the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League for the first time since reaching the 2011 final after edging out China's Beijing Guoan 2-1 on aggregate in the last 16 at the end of May.

Spot On

Goalkeeper Nikola Stosic was the hero as debutants FC Istiklol secured Tajikistan's first-ever appearance in the quarter-finals of the AFC Cup after beating inaugural finalists Al Wahda of Syria in the last 16 on penalties in front of a packed Republican Central Stadium in Dushanbe at the end of May.

Gallery

Four More Years

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa was re-elected as AFC President for a further four-year term until 2019 in Manama at the end of April having stood unopposed ahead of the 26th AFC Ordinary Congress.

Former Winners Guangzhou To Face Familiar Foes

THE DRAW FOR THE QUARTER-FINALS OF THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TOOK PLACE IN JUNE IN KUALA LUMPUR, WITH THE REMAINING EIGHT SIDES LEARNING THEIR OPPONENTS FOR THE TIES SET TO TAKE PLACE IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER.

Former winners Guangzhou Evergrande from China will take on Japan's Kashiwa Reysol in the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League following June's draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Guangzhou became the first Chinese side to be crowned continental champions in 23 years after edging out Korean counterparts FC Seoul in the 2013 final having beaten Kashiwa 8-1 on aggregate in the semi-finals.

And with FIFA World Cup winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari now in charge having succeeded Fabio Cannavaro, Guangzhou will face a repeat encounter with the J.League side when they travel to Japan on August 25 before hosting the return fixture three weeks later.

Guangzhou or Kashiwa will face either 2006 winners Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors from Korea Republic or Japan's Gamba Osaka, continental champions in 2008 in the semi-finals.

In the West, 2014 finalists Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia will face Qatari champions Lekhwiya.

And debutants Naft Tehran from Iran will take on Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates.

The first legs of the quarter-finals will be played on August 25 and 26, with the return fixtures on September 15 and 16.

The semi-finals will also be played on a home-and-away basis, firstly on September 29 and 30, with the second legs then to be played on October 20 and 21.

The final will also take place over two legs, with the semi-final winner from the East hosting the second leg on November 21 having travelled to the West for the first leg two weeks earlier.

Quarter-Final Draw

25/08/15 & 15/09/15
Al Hilal v Lekhwiya

25/08/15 & 15/09/15
Kashiwa Reysol vs Guangzhou Evergrande

26/08/15 & 16/09/15
Naft Tehran vs Al Ahli

26/08/15 & 16/09/15
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors vs Gamba Osaka

Defending Champions To Take On Inaugural Winners

THE NEXT PHASE OF THE AFC CUP WILL TAKE PLACE IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER WITH THE EIGHT QUALIFIERS ALL EYEING A PLACE IN OCTOBER'S FINAL FOLLOWING JUNE'S DRAW IN KUALA LUMPUR.

Defending champions Qadsia SC will take on inaugural AFC Cup winners Al Jaish of Syria in the quarter-finals of the 2015 tournament following June's draw in Kuala Lumpur as the Gulf side look to extend Kuwait's record of having a representative in each of the last six finals.

Qadsia SC edged out Arbil of Iraq on penalties in last year's final to ensure the AFC Cup remained in Kuwaiti hands for a third year in a row having lost the 2013 final to domestic rivals Kuwait SC.

And standing in their way of advancing to the semi-finals once again will be the competition's inaugural champions Al Jaish, who lifted the title in 2004, and are making their first appearance in the knockout stage since lifting the trophy 11 years ago.

The winners will face either Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim or 2009 semi-finalists South China of Hong Kong.

Three-time champions Kuwait SC, who lost in last year's quarter-finals, will take on Hong Kong champions Kitchee with either Tajikistan's FC Istiklol or Malaysia's Pahang FA awaiting in the semi-finals.

The first legs of the quarter-finals will be played on August 25 and 26, with the return fixtures taking place on September 15 and 16.

The semi-finals will also be played on a home-and-away basis with the first legs on September 29 and 30 and the return fixtures on October 20 and 21, with the final to be played as a one-off game on October 31.

The final will be hosted by either Kuwait SC, Kitchee, Istiklol or Pahang following a separate draw.

Quarter-Final Draw

25/08/15 & 15/09/15
Qadsia SC v Al Jaish

25/08/15 & 15/09/15
Johor Darul Ta'zim v South China

26/08/15 & 16/09/15
Kuwait SC v Kitchee

26/08/15 & 16/09/15
FC Istiklol v Pahang FA

Shaikh Salman Re-Elected As AFC President

HE SHEIKH AHMAD FAHAD AL AHMAD AL SABAH, KOHZO TASHIMA AND HRH PRINCE ABDULLAH AL-HAJ IBNI SULTAN HJ AHMAD SHAH WERE ALSO ELECTED TO THE FIFA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE IN BAHRAIN IN APRIL.

The 26th AFC Ordinary Congress re-elected by acclamation Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa as the President of the AFC for a further four-year term until 2019 at the end of April.

Incumbent Shaikh Salman had stood unopposed for the positon in Bahrain having been appointed as the 10th AFC President at the 2013 AFC Congress.

"I am humbled and honoured to stand unopposed for the position of AFC President and FIFA Vice-President," said Shaikh Salman.

"I take this as a sign of your satisfaction with the work that I have done so far and your trust in me to lead this unique Confederation.

"In Asia, we all recognise that we need to close the gap on the rest of the world. The next four years, and beyond, will be about improving all our levels of competition, whilst simultaneously targeting all aspects of football development, for example in the area of coach education. Looking back, we have achieved a huge amount, together, in the last two years – in competitions, in development, in governance, in many areas. But we cannot be complacent, we need to consolidate and do more.

"I look forward to working with the new Executive Committee, and with all the Member Associations, to help Asian football reach its potential both here and on the world stage. Together, we will do it."

HE Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al Ahmad Al Sabah from Kuwait, Japan's Kohzo Tashima and HRH Prince Abdullah Al-Haj Ibni Sultan Hj Ahmad Shah were also elected to the FIFA Executive Commitee along with Shaikh Salman.

The 21 remaining places on the AFC Executive Committee were also confirmed.

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AFC Grassroots Football Day Celebrated Across Asia

AFC MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS MARKED THE THIRD AFC GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL DAY ON MAY 15 WITH A TOTAL OF 31 COUNTRIES HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPORTANCE OF GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT WITH VARIOUS EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES.

The third AFC Grassroots Football Day took place in May with the initiative continuing to grow with the number of participants doubling this year since the initiative was introduced in 2013.

With AFC Grassroots Football Day taking place on May 15, a total of 31 Member Associations took part in the project which encourages participation by all children regardless of their level.

Member Associations are sent equipment to support their activities to assist with the development of grassroots football, which forms the basis for success at all levels.

"I am very pleased to see that the AFC Grassroots Day initiative, which was introduced in 2013, has witnessed growing support from the Member Associations. Now in its third year, the number of associations taking part has more than doubled, with over 30 countries celebrating the day through different educational football activities and thus officially declaring their commitment to grassroots development," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

"Asia is the world's fastest growing football market with huge potential. By supporting grassroots football together we can make that potential a reality."

In Japan, various festivals took place, including on several small islands in Goto in the Nagasaki prefecture. There, 140 children under the age of 10 experienced small-sided games and skill stations.

A total of 165 girls aged between nine and 12 took part in a festival at the Pyongyang International Football School as DPR Korea also marked AFC Grassroots Football Day (pictured above).

In the Maldives, around 300 children and coaches participated in workshops and games, while a one-day seminar for coaches was also held.

Myanmar celebrated AFC Grassroots Football Day with 400 students from 10 townships taking part along with 60 coaches.

The Bhutan Football Federation celebrated AFC Grassroots Football Day as around 100 students aged six to 12 participated in the celebration in Thimphu, with 17 districts also observing the occasion across the country.

More than 250 pupils aged six to 12 participated in events in Brunei and were coached in eight football disciplines covering basic training, ball control, passing, kicking and mini games under the tutelage of 22 FIFA grassroots coaches.

FATHER FIGURE

MAHDI ALI IS THE MAN WITH THE DISTINCTIVE RED CAP WHO HAS BEEN BEHIND THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' RECENT UPTURN IN FORTUNES. ALTHOUGH A THIRD PLACE FINISH AT THE 2015 AFC ASIAN CUP IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP IN THE PLAN MADE BY THE FATHER OF THE GOLDEN GENERATION.

By: John McAuley **Photos:** World Sport Group

Mahdi Ali sits in an Abu Dhabi hotel, sipping on Moroccan tea and scribbling feverishly across a small piece of paper on the table in front of him.

The interview has stretched well into its second hour, unusually long for the self-confessed shy guy of Emirati football, but he is still keen to chart his remarkable journey from gifted player, to respected engineer, to coach and to surrogate father of arguably the most talented generation of players in Asia today.

Yet the United Arab Emirates national team coach - an obsessive note-taker - is not openly plotting his side's safe passage through qualification for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup, instead, he is sketching the intricate mechanics of the ticketing for the US$7.8 billion Dubai Metro, a system he designed.

He describes the emirate's vast parking payment projects, in great detail too, because he devised them, just as he was integral in the implementation of Dubai's road toll, its air-conditioned bus shelters and the Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) that governs it all.

And all the while, he was earning his stripes as a football coach, perfecting the techniques and training methods to guide what would soon become known as the UAE's golden generation.

"To be honest, if I say I planned for this, I would not be telling the truth," Ali says, easing back into his seat.

> "TO BE HONEST, IF I SAY I PLANNED FOR THIS, I WOULD NOT BE TELLING THE TRUTH."

"I went through many things in my life, some bad moments, some good, but they all gave me experience. I learned so many things in my job, in my education, in my life in football.

"How it happened to me, I don't know. But if I could make a plan for my career I don't think I could do it better than it has turned out."

That much is hard to argue. A footballer of some repute, Ali played the entirety of his 23 year career with Dubai's Al Ahli from young boy to team talisman.

His most memorable contribution was a man-of-the-match performance in the 1988 President's Cup final against Al Shabab when, with his side trailing 1-0, Ali scored twice and created another as Al Ahli won 3-2.

Even when Ali swapped football for academia in 1994, the lure to return was impossible to resist, and within two years, he was back having been asked to help the club regain top-flight status following a painful relegation.

Ali, having accomplished the mission at the first attempt, continued until his body told him to retire in 1998 with his knee, a perennial problem, unable to take any more.

However, as one door closed, another opened and Ali joined Al Ahli's coaching set-up, first becoming assistant manager of the U-10s.

"I knew that being a player did not require the same thinking as a coach," Ali says. "I'd played for many years, but as a coach there are so many things you have to know about.

"For me, I had my job, so football was like a hobby, like my passion. I was involved for such a long time, so it was not easy for me to just suddenly stop playing or not being on the pitch. I needed to keep that."

So Ali kept on, at the same time juggling his job at the Dubai Municipality with a burgeoning coaching career. He enrolled in a myriad of courses, spent a year in London in 2000 and collected a certified licence from the English Football Association. Returning to Al Ahli with fresh ideas and enthusiasm, he remained an assistant coach until 2004.

Then, as commitments on the Dubai Metro project increased, Ali was approached to undertake another expansive enterprise as he was asked to become a member of the national team set-up, originally as assistant to the U-16s, and from there helped mentor a collection of players who remain with him until now.

Initially, it was not without its difficulties as Ali had to balance twin responsibilities in football and work, but somehow he found time for both as a match against Kuwait in 2007 illustrates the sacrifice.

With the UAE facing a crucial match in qualification for the 2008 AFC U-19 Championship, Ali spent two days hopping between the Emirates and its Gulf neighbour, even changing in his car from local dress to national team uniform.

It was ceaseless: work until 2:30pm, flight at 4pm, training and then team hotel. Back to airport, arrive Dubai 4am, work at 7:30am, and repeat. On Matchday, he only just made it in time for the warm-up.

"This explains my life during all this time," says Ali. "My whole life was like this. So I was always planning in advance, to be prepared for everything."

Preparation time was limited for the AFC U-19 Championship, but 10 days before the UAE set off for the tournament, Ali was promoted to head coach. The team, though, returned from Saudi Arabia with the trophy.

"My first success was for the people who supported me and had trust in me," Ali says. "I didn't want them to feel the biggest responsibility, because if we went there and

Left & Above
AFC Asian Cup 2015

> "I KNEW THAT BEING A PLAYER DID NOT REQUIRE THE SAME THINKING AS A COACH."

didn't get a good result, they would be blamed for giving a job to someone who'd never been a head coach. It was a big risk for them, but I always like challenges, so I took it.

"Thankfully, we won it: the first official title for UAE football. And since then I've received a lot of support from everybody, starting with Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who hosted us at his palace after the tournament and asked me to be fully dedicated to football.

"He then spoke directly to my manager at the RTA and gave instruction for me to concentrate solely on the national team. It was a huge honour. He's the person behind all I have achieved."

It would prove a wise decision. During Ali's tenure, the group – spearheaded by Ahmed Khalil and later Omar Abdulrahman – quickly established themselves as west Asia's premier prodigies.

Quarter-finalists at the 2009 FIFA U-20 World Cup; 2010 U-23 Gulf Cup champions; 2011 Asian Games silver medalists and then, via a dramatic night in Uzbekistan in March 2012, qualification for the London Olympic Games.

"It was so good," he says. "There were different emotions at different moments, but at the end of that road I had realised a big dream."

And, to be fair, he had many more.

"When I was young I had so many big dreams I wanted to achieve in football," Ali says. "I wanted to play in the World Cup, to win the Gulf Cup, win the Asian Cup, to play in the Olympics. And as I grew up these dreams were carried with me, becoming bigger and bigger, like somebody was growing with me.

"However, I was not successful with the national team and therefore could not let go those dreams. So I thought that, in being a coach, maybe I could achieve everything I couldn't as a player."

It explains Ali's dedication; a trait that, like the dreams, has endured and enlarged. Fastened tight to his quest for improvement, Ali has spent time in Qatar watching the likes of Bayern Munich and Paris Saint-Germain train – all of his own volition. In 2012, he went for 12 days to Barcelona, intent on discovering what made the Catalan club one of the most successful sides in the world.

Left & Above 2012
Olympic Games qualifiers

Arriving each day at the famed La Masia training base at 7:30am, Ali did not leave until 9pm having witnessed sessions involving every age group, from U-10s to Pep Guardiola's senior team.

"My first impression was how they prepared each training session, how each one was organised," he says. "I was very happy because it was almost exactly like what I am doing now. I was so pleased I was on the right track."

Not that he would ever allow himself to veer off course. Ali is an avid reader, from books penned by top coaches in sport – American basketball coach John Wooden is a favourite – to those that maximise the mind. Currently, he is midway through Chess and Football, a study that examines the similarities between the board game and the beautiful game.

For Ali, everything provides potential to develop. Constantly, ideas are formulated and jotted down, whether on his smartphone or the notepad that resides beside his bed in case something comes to him in the middle of the night.

He digitises and documents his findings in an electronic library at home; his server contains countless matches and data, so he can access them whenever the mood strikes. Which can be often, since Mahdi is as meticulous as they come.

"Football is a details game and these small details make a big difference," he says. "As a coach, you shouldn't leave anything to chance. You have to think about unexpected things that can happen, and if you're prepared well and work very hard, I'm certain you will achieve your goal one day."

An obvious objective sits three years from now. Russia 2018 appears a perceivable next step for the UAE, although Ali is wary that a FIFA World Cup cannot be taken for granted.

In 1990 – the UAE's only FIFA World Cup appearance – Ali injured his knee one week before the squad departed for Italy and instead of mixing it in midfield with Lothar Matthaus and Carlos Valderrama, he watched from afar.

"I DON'T LIKE TO SPEAK ABOUT MYSELF, I ALWAYS LET PEOPLE MAKE THEIR OWN JUDGMENT."

"Of course, this was very disappointing for me, but I always think destiny is written for you," Ali says. "Whatever happens, happens. This is life."

Many agree this is the country's best opportunity to qualify again. After impressing at the Olympics, Ali became only the fourth Emirati to manage the senior team and he has since continued to break barriers.

Five months after the London Olympic Games, a side comprising the majority of his squad clinched the Gulf Cup for only the second time in the country's history.

Then, at January's AFC Asian Cup, they finished third – the UAE's best finish on foreign soil.

"I don't like to speak about myself, I always let people make their own judgment," he says. "But after all the success with the national team, people are trying to think differently. We can see many local coaches start taking club teams and national teams, not only in UAE but in the Gulf. Other countries are using the UAE as an example. That really makes me happy.

"But a coach should not be related to nationality. We should select a coach because of his experience, his intelligence, which personality he has, how passionate and hungry he is for his work. You have to bring coaches who still want to achieve something. They have to be always motivated, not just come for the experience and leave."

He plans to stick around for a while, and in February, Ali signed an extension to this contract through to 2018, and the hope is that he can lead the current crop to the promised land.

He certainly has the resources: Abdulrahman is the side's poster boy - one of the most recognisable footballers in Asia - but Khalil, Ali Mabkhout, Amer Abdulrahman and Khamis Esmail have attracted attention from European clubs, as well.

Ali advocates the need to move abroad, yet he continually reminds his players that, whatever they have achieved thus far, it can always be bettered. After all, it is something he has abided by his entire life.

"With this generation, the UAE deserves to play at the World Cup again," he says. "We have a lot of potential and if we keep going in the same spirit, with the same application and are given the time to prepare the team for this big challenge, I feel we can achieve something great.

"The harder you work, the more chance you will achieve your goals. If you're asking me how I keep going with the same motivation, it's easy: set an objective that is ongoing. For example, I always think I have to be better than yesterday. So this keeps me working harder and harder. This is the greatest achievement. I try to keep my players' thinking in line with mine."

The bond between master and mentor is as obvious as it is strong. Ask any current player about Ali and the answer remains consistent: they owe everything to him; he has their complete trust. He is often referred to as 'father Mahdi'.

"When they say father, I feel very old," he jokes. "But I'm really happy. When they're playing, and one of them scores a nice goal or performs well, I feel so proud. Being a coach, there are so many things you wanted to do as a player and couldn't because of your limitations.

"For example, I was not so good at heading, so now when I teach a player to score with his head, I feel that I'm scoring that goal. And also, when I see all the players who've been with me growing together, learning from each other and watching them improve, it is very rewarding. Honestly, each one of my players, I like something in him. This is the way we've grown up together."

That familiarity is undoubtedly what pushes the UAE to continue their climb, but Ali insists it also takes careful management. Invariably, he understands the need to reinvent his methods and motivations – fail to succeed in that, and his players lose their drive. It explains the steadfast resolve to enhance his repertoire.

And when you talk about familiarity and Ali, the distinctive red cap which adorns his head is one thing that comes to mind.

"I said I would tell people only when I retire. First of all it's one of the colours of our flag, and also we wear red so it matches our uniform," he says

"And second, red is my team colour and also Al Ahli club. Always red is a very strong colour. A dominant colour. And I'm happy with this colour, I feel optimistic with this colour, with this hat."

Since 2008, the UAE have contested 10 various age-group tournaments under Ali and his red cap, some involving a laborious qualification process. Subsequently, he estimates that in that time he has holidayed twice with his family. No wonder, then, that he craves the few weeks when he can set sail with close friends on a fishing boat. But, soon enough, the itch returns.

"Football has given me a lot of things, but for me personally, the best achievement is seeing people happy," he says. "When I see people coming back to the stadium, being proud of our national team, this is the greatest success. I cannot explain it, but it really is an amazing feeling.

"I don't know, when I'm involved in football I forget everything. Sometimes when I feel tired or have a headache, once I go on to the pitch I don't feel anything. I don't know how it happens. I just feel very relaxed, very comfortable."

It sounds almost like his second home. Ali sits back in his seat, sips his tea and smiles wide.

"I think maybe the first home."

THE LAST EIGHT

EIGHT SIDES REMAIN IN CONTENTION TO BE NAMED 2015 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE WINNERS, BUT WHO WILL COME OUT ON TOP AS THE TOURNAMENT ENTERS THE QUARTER-FINAL STAGE?

With four former continental champions, a 2013 semi-finalist, a back-to-back domestic league winner, a comeback specialist and a debutant enjoying an extraordinary maiden campaign all in the mix to be crowned kings of Asian football, the 2015 AFC Champions League quarter-finals are eagerly anticipated.

Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia remain in the hunt for a third Asian title that will help heal the heartbreak of last November's final defeat by Australia's Western Sydney Wanderers.

The previous year's winners, Guangzhou Evergrande, are making their fourth consecutive quarter-finals, while Korea Republic's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors and Japanese treble winners Gamba Osaka also know what it takes to lift the continental title.

Japan's Kashiwa Reysol, meanwhile, have returned to the form that saw them reach the 2013 semi-final.

Qatar's Lekhwiya continued to stamp their authority on their domestic league having successfully defended the championship and have seen that dominance extended to the continent.

For Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates, though, the quarter-final stage is unchartered territory but consecutive come-from-behind wins show they will be a tough test for any opponent.

Iranian club Naft Tehran round out the eight, and the play-off winners have continued to surprise more experienced sides on their debut in the AFC Champions League this season.

Al Hilal VS Lekhwiya

First Leg – 25/08/15 • 20:50

Second Leg – 15/09/15 • 19:00

Al Hilal's mission to go one step further than their runners-up finish in 2014 will be bolstered when the AFC Champions League resumes in August by the return from suspension of reigning AFC Player of the Year Nassir Al Shamrani.

The Saudi Arabia international striker was missing for the majority of the group stage, but the former Al Shabab striker will be on hand to bring his devastating finishing to Al Hilal's aid again in August as they look to overcome the loss of key midfielder Thiago Neves.

The Brazilian left the club at the end of the just-concluded Saudi season that saw Al Hilal advance to the quarter-finals in impressive fashion after topping Group C under new coach Giorgos Donis ahead of former champions Al Sadd from Qatar before coming from a goal behind in the first leg to defeat Persepolis in the last 16.

Al Hilal's squad remains one of the strongest in the Asian club game, with veteran midfielders Saud Kariri and Mohammed Al Shalhoub brining guile and experience to the team while Korea Republic international Kwak Tae-hwi marshals the defence having won the title in 2012 with Ulsan Hyundai.

Top
Nawaf Al Abid

Above
Kwak Tae-hwi

King Fahd International Stadium, Riyadh (71,000)

Lekhwiya advanced to the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League for the second time in three seasons with victory over local rivals Al Sadd in the Round of 16 as the side rounded out an impressive 2014/15 season.

The Doha-based club claimed their second consecutive Qatar Stars League title – also ahead of Al Sadd – while also emerging from the group stage of the AFC Champions League relatively unscathed.

And Lekhwiya advanced to the Round of 16 as winners of Group A, finishing ahead of Persepolis having suffered just one defeat in their opening game of the competition against the Iranians.

From there, though, they picked up 13 points from their next five matches before seeing off Al Sadd in the Round of 16, with Lekhwiya prevailing 4-3 on aggregate following a thrilling second leg.

The squad is packed with quality as Qatar international striker Sebastian Soria provides the thrust in attack, while Korea Republic's Nam Tae-hee supplies much of the guile in midfield alongside Slovakian Vladimir Weiss and Tunisian Youssef Msakni.

Top
Karim Boudaif

Above
Luiz Junior

Abdulla Bin Khalifa Stadium, Doha (10,000)

COACH
Giorgos Donis

Greek coach Giorgos Donis took over midway through the just-completed Saudi Arabian league season, replacing Laurentiu Reghecampf who had steered Al Hilal to the final of the AFC Champions League in 2014. Donis played in Greece and England before working in Cyprus with APOEL, taking them into the group stage of the UEFA Champions League last season.

COACH
Djamel Belmadi

Former Marseille, Southampton and Manchester City midfielder Djamel Belmadi returned to the club as a replacement for Danish coach Michael Laudrup in June. Having led Lekhwiya to back-to-back domestic championships in 2011 and 2012, Belmadi was appointed as the coach of Qatar and led them to the Gulf Cup title in 2014 and was at the helm for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

Naft Tehran VS Al Ahli

First Leg – 26/08/15 • 19:00

Second Leg – 16/09/15 • 20:25

Naft Tehran have reached the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League in their first-ever appearance in the continental club championship as the upwardly mobile side from the Iranian capital continue to make an impression.

Under former Iran international midfielder Alireza Mansourian, Naft advanced to the Round of 16 as runners-up from Group B after finishing behind Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates but ahead of Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor.

And Naft progressed to the last eight of the competition on the away goals rule despite losing the second leg of their meeting with Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli 2-1, leaving the teams to share a 2-2 draw on aggregate.

Iman Mobali, once seen as one of the brightest prospects in Iranian football, has become central to the way the team operates under Mansourian, with the former Esteghlal and Foolad midfielder dictating much of the team's play.

Iran striker Gholamreza Rezaei leads the attacking line, meanwhile, for a team that finished third for the second season in a row in the Iranian league while also finishing as runners-up in the Hazfi Cup.

Top
Gholamreza Rezaei

Above
Iman Mobali

Azadi Stadium, Tehran (100,000)

Al Ahli saw off former champions and domestic rivals Al Ain in the Round of 16 to book their place in the last eight of the AFC Champions League, the first time the Dubai-based club have advanced so deep into the continental club championship.

Under Romanian coach Cosmin Olaroiu, Al Ahli have developed into a highly effective outfit, even though they slipped into the knockout phase of the competition by the narrowest of margins.

Al Ahli, winners of the league title in the United Arab Emirates in 2014, claimed second place in Group D ahead of Uzbekistan's Nasaf by virtue of a better head-to-head record.

And Al Ahli booked their place in the quarter-finals courtesy of the away goals rule at the end of a thrilling second leg that saw the match end in a 3-3 draw.

UAE internationals Habib Al Fardan and Walid Abbas are key to the team's defence, while the club signaled their intent at the start of the year by signing Everton Ribiero.

The Brazil international has been a key element in the team's success alongside United Arab Emirates forward Ahmad Khalil.

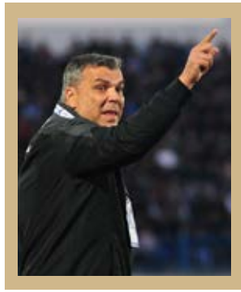
Top
Majed Hassan

Above
Ismail Al Hammadi

Rashed Stadium, Dubai (9,390)

COACH
Alireza Mansourian

Alireza Mansourian has emerged as one of the new breed of coaches in Iran, graduating from a playing career that saw him represent his nation at the 1998 FIFA World Cup. The former midfielder played in Greece and Germany as well as in his native Iran before turning to coaching.



COACH
Cosmin Olaroiu

Romanian coach Cosmin Olaroiu has operated extensively across the Middle East having worked with Al Hilal in Saudi Arabia and Al Sadd in Qatar before joining Al Ain in 2011. He took over at Al Ahli in 2013 and recently signed a new three-year contract with the club. He also took temporary charge of Saudi Arabia at the AFC Asian Cup in Australia.

Kashiwa Reysol

VS

Guangzhou Evergrande

First Leg – 25/08/15 • 19:00

Second Leg – 15/09/15 • 20:00

Former J.League champions Kashiwa Reysol qualified for the 2015 AFC Champions League by finishing fourth in the 2014 J.League, a placing achieved thanks to a strong end to the campaign.

Under new coach Tatsuma Yohshida, the club made a solid start to their 2015 AFC Champions League campaign, seeing off Thailand's Chonburi FC in the play-offs before building on that performance in the early phase of the group stage.

A draw with Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors and a convincing win over Vietnamese champions Becamex Binh Duong put Reysol well on their way to booking a berth in the knockout stage, and by the end of the group stage, the 2011 J.League champions finished as winners of Group E.

In his first job as a coach, Yoshida carried on the work done by Brazilian Nelsinho Baptista, who took Reysol to the semi-finals in 2013, with new signing Cristiano providing power and pace for a team that already featured the prolific Leandro.

Japan international striker Masato Kudo is part of a strong domestic contingent that also features Daisuke Suzuki, Hidekazu Otani and goalkeeper Takanori Sugeno.

Top
Cristiano

Above
Naoki Wako

Hitachi Stadium, Kashiwa (15,349)

Former champions Guangzhou Evergrande have struggled to hit the heights achieved since winning the title under Marcello Lippi in 2013, but the Chinese Super League champions will still be taking their place in the quarter-finals for the fourth season in a row.

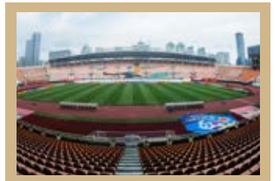
While Guangzhou failed to adequately replace the guile and creativity of Dario Conca – the star of that 2013 title-winning team – for last year's campaign, Ricardo Goulart has proven to be a stellar signing with the Brazilian one of the AFC Champions League's stand-out players in 2015.

Fabio Cannavaro, who took over from Lippi ahead of the start of the current Chinese Super League season, steered the team through the group stage and Round of 16 despite a growing list of injury issues, but the Italian was replaced by the club's management after progress was secured in favour of another FIFA World Cup winner, Luiz Felipe Scolari.

How quickly the team adapts to the methods of Scolari – a renowned taskmaster – will determine if Guangzhou can harbour serious hopes of reclaiming the title.

Top
Zheng Zhi

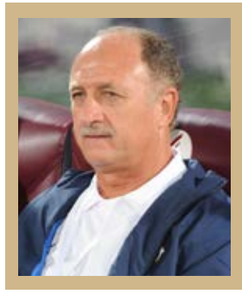
Above
Huang Bowen



Tianhe Sports Center Stadium, Guangzhou (60,000)

COACH
Tatsuma Yoshida

Tatsuma Yoshida replaced Nelsinho Baptista, who took Kashiwa to the semi-finals of the AFC Champions League in 2013, when the highly effective Brazilian left to join Vissel Kobe at the end of last season. The 41-year-old former midfielder has built on Nelsinho's success, with Reysol particularly impressive in the group stage of the AFC Champions League this season.



COACH
Luiz Felipe Scolari

FIFA World Cup winner Luiz Felipe Scolari took over as coach after Fabio Cannavaro had secured the club's place in the quarter-finals, and the former Brazil and Portugal coach returns to the AFC Champions League having previously led Bunyodkor in the competition.

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors

VS

Gamba Osaka

First Leg – 26/08/15 • 19:00

Second Leg – 16/09/15 • 19:00

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors' impressive run of appearances in the AFC Champions League continued with the club qualifying for the tournament for a sixth straight season, with Choi Kang-hee's side once again advancing to the knockout stage.

The two-time finalists – the club won the title in 2006 and were runners-up to Al Sadd in 2011 – went into the current edition of the continental championship as K-League Classic champions as they claimed their third title in six years.

A 4-1 win over China's Shandong Luneng in the final round of group matches ensured Jeonbuk joined Kashiwa Reysol in qualifying from Group E before the Koreans saw off Beijing Guoan 2-1 on aggregate in the last 16.

Brazilian trio Eninho, Edu and Leonardo have been key to Jeonbuk's performances so far this year, while veteran striker Lee Dong-gook continues to hit the back of the net despite now being 36 years old.

Korea Republic international Han Kyo-won has continued to impress after a strong first season with the club in 2014 after joining from Incheon United, while Australia's Alex Wilkinson remains central to the team's performance in defence.

Top
Choi Bo-kyung

Above
Lee Jae-sung

Jeonju World Cup Stadium, Jeonju (43,389)

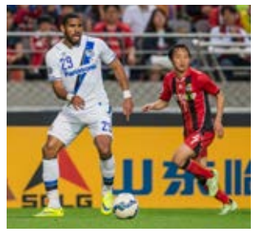
Gamba Osaka made a slow start to their 2014 domestic campaign before going on to win the Japanese treble in impressive style last season, and their 2015 season followed a similar pattern as they struggled in the opening rounds of the AFC Champions League.

The 2008 winners picked up just a solitary point in their opening three games, losing their openers against Guangzhou R&F and Seongnam FC before being held to a 1-1 draw by Buriram United.

But three straight wins – including a 5-0 thrashing of Guangzhou – saw Kenta Hasegawa's side hit their stride and book their place in the Round of 16 as Group F winners, with Takashi Usami taking on the inspirational mantle from team-mate Yasuhito Endo.

Gamba then showed they meant business by handing 2013 finalists FC Seoul a 6-3 thrashing over two legs in the Round of 16, underlining their status as a serious challenger for the title.

Endo remains central to the team's hopes in midfield but, with the team improving as the domestic season rolls on, Hasegawa and his players will be tough to beat in the next phase of the competition.



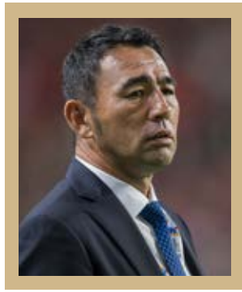
Top
Shu Kurata

Above
Patric

Expo '70 Commemorative Stadium, Osaka (21,000)

COACH
Choi Kang-hee

Choi Kang-hee knows what it takes to be successful at the continental level, having guided Jeonbuk to the AFC Champions League title in 2006 and to another final in 2011 before steering the Korea Republic national team through qualifying for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Choi returned to the club last year and claimed a third K-League title with Jeonbuk.



COACH
Kenta Hasegawa

Kenta Hasegawa steered Gamba Osaka to an historic domestic treble in 2014 as the club finally emerged from the shadow of Akira Nishino, who won the AFC Champions League with the club in 2008. Hasegawa, previously coach of Shimizu S-Pulse, was named the J.League's Manager of the Year last season following Gamba's remarkable achievement.

AFC CUP HUNT HEATS UP

DEFENDING CHAMPIONS QADSIA SC WILL LOOK TO WIN BACK-TO-BACK AFC CUP TITLES AND EXTEND KUWAIT'S RECORD OF A REPRESENTATIVE IN EACH OF THE LAST SIX FINALS. WILL KUWAITI DOMINANCE OF THE TOURNAMENT ENDURE OR WILL A NEW CHAMPION ARISE? AFC QUARTERLY LOOKS AT THE EIGHT SIDES WHO WILL COMPRISE THE QUARTER-FINALS.

Since 2009, there has been one constant in the AFC Cup final: the presence of a team from Kuwait. Three times Kuwait SC have lifted the continental title in 2009, 2012 and 2013, after an all-Kuwait final victory over domestic rivals Qadsia SC. The runners-up did not to have to wait long to overcome their championship disappointment, though, as Qadsia SC secured a penalty shootout success over Arbil of Iraq to claim last year's title.

Qadsia SC are on course to defend the AFC Cup this year, while Kuwait SC are also in the mix along with debutants FC Istiklol from Tajikistan, who are enjoying a historic maiden campaign, and inaugural champions Al Jaish of Syria who lifted the title in 2004.

From the East, last year's semi-finalists Kitchee of Hong Kong come into the last eight of the AFC Cup as domestic treble winners, while local rivals South China have cruised into the quarter-finals with a 100% record.

Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim also showed their attacking prowess en route to the last eight with countrymen Pahang FA likewise looking to make a mark in their first appearance in the quarter-finals of the AFC Cup.

With a place in October's final the ultimate goal, the first legs will take place at the end of August and the second legs in mid-September.

Qadsia SC VS Al Jaish

First Leg – 25/08/15

Defending champions Qadsia SC are seeking a third consecutive appearance in the AFC Cup final as they look to lift the title for a second time and ensure it remains in Kuwaiti hands for a fourth year in a row.

Having lost the 2013 final to countrymen and three-time champions Kuwait SC, Qadsia SC defeated Iraq's Arbil 4-2 on penalties in last year's final.

Qadsia SC also reached the 2010 final in their debut campaign, but lost on penalties to Syria's Al Ittihad.

This year, Qadsia SC were beaten into second place in Group C by newcomers FC Istiklol as the Tajikistan champions took four points from their two meetings with the Kuwaiti side, who also lost to already-eliminated Arbil.

Fahad Al Ansari's goal, though, did see Qadsia SC edge past Jordan's Al Wehdat in the Round of 16 to seal a place in the last eight.

While the holders are missing former frontman Omar Al Soma, now at Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli, Kuwait playmaker Bader Al Mutawa has remained a leader in the forward line and has chipped in with three goals.

Second Leg – 15/09/15

Inaugural champions Al Jaish returned to the quarter-finals for the first time since winning the title in 2004 as the Syrian club were indebted to Mohamed Sharifa's stoppage time penalty to take them past Jordan's Al Jazeera in the last 16.

An away goals victory over local rivals Al Wahda saw Al Jaish lift the title 11 years ago, but since then the 12-time Syrian champions have crashed out in the group stage on three occasions in 2010, 2011 and 2014.

This year, though, Al Jaish are bolstered by the meanest defence in the competition having conceded just once in the group stage as they topped Group D unbeaten, four points clear of second-placed Kuwait SC, before beating Al Jazeera 1-0 in the Round of 16.

Goals at the other end of the field have also been hard to come by, though, and Al Jaish's total of seven scored is the lowest amongst the quarter-finalists. The Syrian club are heavily reliant on striker Bassel Moustafa who netted three times in the group stage – half of Al Jaish's total in the first phase of the tournament.

Kuwait SC VS Kitchee

First Leg – 26/08/15

Three-time champions Kuwait SC are bidding to extend their dominance of the AFC Cup with a fourth title having previously triumphed in 2009, 2012 and 2013.

The 12-time Kuwaiti champions ensured a return to the quarter-finals for the sixth time in seven appearances in the continental competition after recording a 2-0 victory over Iraq's Al Shorta in the Round of 16.

Having gone into last year's tournament as defending champions and heavy favourites, the Kuwaiti club were eliminated in the last eight by Indonesian side Persipura Jayapura after losing the second leg 6-1 in Jayapura after Kuwait SC had won 3-2 in the first meeting in Kuwait City.

Kuwait SC began the 2015 edition in good form, though, with back-to-back wins over Lebanon's Nejmeh and Riffa of Bahrain before sharing a goalless draw with Syria's Al Jaish.

Defeats to Al Jaish and Riffa in the return meetings did see the Kuwaiti outfit ultimately finish in second in the group behind the Syrians, although goals from Abdullah Al Buraiki and Rogerinho saw them past Al Shorta in the last 16.

Second Leg – 16/09/15

Hong Kong's Kitchee sealed a third consecutive appearance in the quarter-finals of the AFC Cup having finished in second place behind Johor Darul Ta'zim in Group F before edging out Indonesian champions Persib Bandung in the last 16.

After suffering a group stage exit in their debut in the 2008 edition, Kitchee made the Round of 16 on their return to the AFC Cup in 2012 and have been involved in the knockout stage reckoning ever since, making the semi-finals – their best ever showing – in last year's tournament.

This year, Kitchee sealed their place in the Round of 16 with a game to spare after a 2-1 victory in Singapore against Balestier Khalsa.

However, a 2-0 away defeat at Johor in the previous game, coupled with a 2-2 draw with Kingfisher East Bengal in the final round of group fixtures, meant that Kitchee had to settle for the runners-up spot in the group.

But last year's top-scorer Juan Belencoso and Hong Kong midfielder Lam Ka Wai were on target in Bandung as Kitchee posted a 2-0 win in Indonesia to advance to the last eight.

Johor Darul Ta'zim VS South China

First Leg – 25/08/15

Making their knockout stage debut in only their second AFC Cup campaign, Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim made a statement of intent in the Round of 16 with a thumping 5-0 victory over Myanmar's Ayeyawady United at Stadium Tan Sri Dato' Haji Yunos.

Johor had exited in the group stage in their maiden appearance at the continental competition in the 2009 edition, but have flourished in this year's tournament after topping Group F ahead of 2014 semi-finalists Kitchee of Hong Kong before cruising past Group H runners-up Ayeyawady in the last 16.

Former South China coach Mario Gomez took charge of the 2014 Malaysian champions in time for their final group game against Singapore's Balestier Khalsa after replacing Croatian coach Bojan Hodak in April.

And the Argentinian will look for goals from two of his compatriots in the form of Johor strikers Luciano Figueroa and Jorge Pereyra Diaz, while Malaysian international Safiq Rahim, who has chipped in with four goals en route to the last eight, is also a threat from midfield.

Second Leg – 15/09/15

Hong Kong's South China will look to secure a second appearance in the semi-finals of the AFC Cup under new coach Casemiro Mior after reaching the final four for the first time in 2009 following the departure of Mario Gomez to Johor Darul Ta'zim.

Brazilian coach Mior is in his third term at the club and the three-time Hong Kong Coach of the Year will seek to extend the side's 100% record in the 2015 edition of the tournament.

South China made light work of the group stage after chalking up six straight victories to win Group G to finish 10 points ahead of second place Pahang FA from Malaysia thanks to six goals from veteran Australian striker Daniel McBreen.

In total, South China scored 19 and conceded just three having exited in the group stage last year after winning just twice.

And McBreen was again amongst the goals as his brace led South China to a 2-0 home win over Indian champions JSW Bengaluru in the Round of 16 at the end of May.

FC Istiklol VS Pahang FA

First Leg – 26/08/15

Domestic champions FC Istiklol secured Tajikistan representation in the quarter-finals of the AFC Cup for the first time in what has been a remarkable debut campaign.

Istiklol did lose their maiden continental outing 3-1 at home to 2014 finalists Arbil from Iraq, but recovered to win 2-1 away in Turkmenistan against Ahal FC before recording an impressive 2-2 away draw in Kuwait against defending champions Qadsia SC.

Even better was to come on Matchday Three, as goals from Nuriddin Davronov and Manuchehr Dzhalilov saw Istiklol upset the holders 2-0 in the return meeting in Dushanbe.

And a goalless draw with Arbil and a 5-2 victory over Ahal, coupled with Qadsia's loss to Arbil, confirmed Istiklol's impressive final standing as Group C winners.

Having eliminated one former runner-up in the group stage, the Tajik double winners then knocked out Al Wahda of Syria in the last 16 via a penalty shootout.

While the goals have been shared around, Dzhaililov remains the focal point in attack with four goals to his name in the competition.

Second Leg – 16/09/15

Malaysia's Pahang FA are set to make their first quarter-final appearance in the AFC Cup after group stage exits in their previous two continental campaigns in 2005 and 2007.

This year, successful progression from Group G in second place ahead of Filipino champions Global FC and Myanmar's Yadanarbon took Zainal Abidin Hassan's side into the Round of 16 for the first time.

And Pahang joined compatriots Johor Darul Ta'zim in the last eight after winning their tie with Persipura Jayapura 3-0 due to a forfeit from their Indonesian opponents.

Marshalled by Pakistan captain and former Fulham centre-back Zesh Rehman, Pahang also boast significant firepower up front in the shape of powerful striker Dickson Nwakaeme.

The 29-year-old Nigerian has scored six times in the competition so far, including a hat-trick in the rollercoaster 7-4 victory over Yadanarbon.

There are also attacking options from midfield with young Malaysians Gopinathan Ramachandra and Devandran Saarvindran on target in the group stage for the Kuantan-based club.

FULL SUPPORT

BAHRAIN'S SHAIKH SALMAN BIN EBRAHIM AL KHALIFA WAS RE-ELECTED UNOPPOSED AS PRESIDENT OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION DURING THE 26TH AFC CONGRESS. HAVING INITIALLY BEEN ELECTED FOR TWO YEARS IN 2013, THE NEW FIFA VICE-PRESIDENT TALKS TO AFC QUARTERLY ABOUT HIS PLANS.

Congratulations on your unopposed re-election, how does it make you feel to have the Confederation put their faith in you in that way?

On a purely personal level, I am humbled and honoured to have been elected unopposed for the position of AFC President and FIFA Vice-President. I take it as a sign of satisfaction with the work that I have done so far. And as a sign of trust in me to lead this unique Confederation.

Do you feel you have the full support of the Confederation?

I feel that my re-election was a clear sign of the Member Associations' trust in my work during the first two years. The AFC consists of 47 members in a very diverse continent, and of course everyone doesn't always agree. But, like a football team with many different players, together we are strong. So yes, I do feel we are moving together in the same direction, developing football for Asia, and that I have full support in that process from all regions.

What have you been able to achieve over the last two years as you said when you were elected that you would have to be realistic with what you could achieve?

Firstly, I took over a Confederation in the midst of turbulence, and to stabalise it, I can tell you that it was not easy. But when I was elected two years ago I made it my mission to bring about unity amongst our Member Associations, and to try to bring AFC and its members closer to each other. I believe that during these two years together we have achieved unity, a unity not yet seen in Asian football. As a Confederation we are now closer than ever. I have also worked on another key principle, solidarity. It is one of football's key values, and key to our success. Solidarity is about giving the small a chance alongside the big, that the poor can compete with the rich. A league is only as strong as its weakest club, and a team is only as strong as its weakest player. That is also true for a Confederation. With this in mind, I have initiated regular meetings of Member Associations, and regular circular letters updating member associations of AFC's activities. So, we move forward together through dialogue, not conflict. As a Confederation, we have achieved a lot in a short space of time, yet there is much more to do.

You will now have a full four-year term, what do you hope to achieve in that time?

We will continue developing football in Asia through the initiatives we have launched during the past two years, such as the AFC Kick Off programme, building mini-pitches, providing funding for national youth teams to play in AFC competitions, and providing specialists to help with development in our Member Associations via the AFC Expert Pool. In addition to focusing on development on the one side, on the other we need to have a serious look at how we can close the technical gap between the world's leading football nations and Asia, on the field. Development both on and off the field is of course an important part of it. My vision for the AFC and Asian football is two-fold: an Asia where football is the most popular sport, both to play and to watch; and a world where our top teams and players regularly compete successfully at the top.

What is the most pressing issue?

Closing the gap on the field is the most pressing issue for me. We need to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil was not a success for Asia. We have recently appointed a new AFC Technical Director, Andy Roxburgh. His wealth of experience, working together with the Member Associations, will play an important part in raising our game onto the next level.

The AFC Challenge Cup and the AFC President's Cup have been removed from the calendar, what challenges does this present to help the Member Associations that would have participated in those events to improve?

It is true that those competitions have finished and the clubs from the AFC President's Cup will now participate in the AFC Cup from the play-off qualifiers stage. There are also plans for a new national team competition. The AFC Competitions Committee has approved a competition for the national teams that were eliminated after the preliminary joint qualification Round One of the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup. This new competition will be organised after the preliminary joint qualifying Round Two finishes. It will be a centralised competition combined with educational programmes in areas such as match organisation, coaching and refereeing.

But the success of a smaller nation like Bhutan shows what Asia can achieve?

That is right, I am of course really happy to see Bhutan proceed to Round Two of the preliminary joint qualification for the AFC Asian Cup and FIFA World Cup. It shows that our development programmes, working in tandem with FIFA's initiatives, are bearing fruit. But we of course have plenty of other success stories at different levels of the game. For example, women's football in Asia is world class and in refereeing and futsal we have also made huge progress. And we also need to recognise the incredible difficulties some of our Member Associations face in a diverse continent such as Asia. Some countries are struggling with serious conflict and internal turmoil, or are subject to sanctions. Merely running football in these areas is a great challenge, and we need to give these Member Associations credit for their hard work. The climate and geography also create their own challenges. We have huge potential in Asia, but unlocking that requires tailor-made solutions to the very different obstacles our members face.

Are you excited by the joint AFC Asian Cup and FIFA World Cup qualifiers?

Of course! I am looking forward to seeing how the new joint format works in practice. It allows for a fair distribution of the number of matches the teams play. It is also more inclusive, giving all teams a chance to compete against each other. The possibility of the highest and lowest ranked teams facing each other in qualifiers supports lower ranked national teams' development. The preliminary joint qualification Round One produced some thrilling matches and surprise results so the second round promises to be exciting as well. Timor-Leste is improving rapidly and had an impressive run against Mongolia, winning both matches. But it was Bhutan who produced perhaps the biggest upset. Bhutan beat Sri Lanka home and away, and it is this sort of individual success stories that inspire the whole continent to reach new milestones.

You have been an advocate of Asia being awarded more places at the FIFA World Cup, what will it take to achieve that and did the results in Brazil affect that?

As I have said before, the FIFA World Cup in Brazil did not go to plan for the Asian participants – and this is absolutely no criticism of the four Asian teams who qualified, since they did so on merit. We had some good performances here and there,

but unfortunately the results did not reflect that. However, top level competitions, and especially so the FIFA World Cup, provide an invaluable incentive for development. The number of places should not merely reflect previous success, cementing the status quo.

You were head of the FIFA taskforce for the International Match Calendar 2018–24, do you hope we can start looking forward to the 2022 FIFA World Cup?

Based on the taskforce's recommendation, the FIFA Executive Committee decided in March that the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar will be played in November and December 2022. The final will take place on 18 December 2022 – Qatar's National Day, which should be a great occasion. Of course I am very much looking forward to it, as Qatar 2022 will be the first time the West Asian region hosts a FIFA World Cup, only the second FIFA World Cup to be held in Asia. The Gulf is a true football region, with some of the world's most passionate football lovers, and Qatar is no exception. I am happy that the region will have a chance to show this passion to the world. The AFC and the whole Asian football community all look forward to hosting the FIFA World Cup, and welcoming the world.

The venue for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup has been decided; can the United Arab Emirates match the success of Australia?

The AFC Asian Cup 2015 in Australia clearly set a benchmark and yes, that bar was set very high in January. But the United Arab Emirates has all the necessary elements in place for matching Australia's success. And actually, we should not forget that there is even more at stake in the 2019 edition of the AFC Asian Cup: the number of teams has been extended from 16 to 24, which gives more Member Associations the opportunity to participate in Asia's flagship national team competition and grow football in their country. It will also help to grow the competition itself further by involving more nations, more fans and more commercial partners across Asia. With these developments we can definitely expect an exciting tournament.

Success at the top level is important, but what is being done to aid the development of youth and women's football?

The AFC has two specific annual initiatives for both: the AFC Women's Football Day was inaugurated this year and it took place on the international women's day on March 8; and the AFC Grassroots Football Day was organised for the third time this year on May 15. Most of our Member Associations were actively involved in both, and it is a pleasure to see how boys and girls, despite their level or social background, enjoy playing football all across Asia. Also, it is important to add that the AFC's Financial Assistance Programme specifically earmarks funds for women's football which many Associations avail of to develop the women's game in their countries. Also our development programmes emphasise the importance of grassroots, as children, today's grassroots players, are tomorrow's national team stars. Asia will not be able to fulfil its potential and fill the gap unless we have a 360 degree view on football development with a strong emphasis on youth and women's football.

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

JAPAN'S MASASHI NAKAYAMA HAS ONE OF THE MOST GLITTERING RESUMES IN THE HISTORY OF ASIAN FOOTBALL HAVING WON THE AFC ASIAN CUP, THE ASIAN CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP AND APPEARED AT THE FIFA WORLD CUP, BUT FOR ALL HIS SUCCESS, ONE FAILURE IN PARTICULAR STICKS IN HIS MIND.

By: Michael Church **Photos:** World Sport Group/Getty Images/Hiroshima Football Association

More than a decade after he last pulled on the national team's famous blue shirt, Masashi Nakayama's name still resonates loudly within Japanese football. After a career spent as one of Japanese football's pioneers, his every utterance as an analyst with TV Asahi carries weight and significance.

Adored by fans for his never-say-die attitude, his professional and thorough approach always belied the fact his nickname 'Gon' was due to his resemblance to a comedy character on Japanese late-night television.

But for a man who achieved almost everything possible in the Asian game, who scored 247 goals in 539 games across a club career that lasted an astonishing 23 seasons, it is a rare failure that sticks uppermost in his mind.

Nakayama is perhaps most famous for scoring Japan's first-ever goal at the FIFA World Cup, when he netted in the 2-1 loss against Jamaica at France in 1998, but it

was an incident earlier in the tournament he recalls when reminiscing about the Samurai Blues' debut appearance at the game's greatest event.

"I think having scored the first goal is not as important to me; it was the failure when I was one-on-one with the Croatian goalkeeper," says Nakayama as he casts his mind back almost 17 years to a warm June afternoon in Nantes. "That's what I remember more.

"In everything I have achieved, the failures were there to prepare me more to go to the next level. I remember it that way. Because I missed it, it made me work harder to get to the next level."

The memory that lingers longest for Nakayama was formed 34 minutes into Japan's meeting with Croatia at the Stade de la Beaujoire.

The single-level stadium is packed, with the shrill high-pitched chanting of the Japanese drowned out by the throaty roar from the boisterous Croatians when Hidetoshi Nakata steals the ball in the midfield.

The young midfielder bursts into the Croatian half, catching the opposition defenders on their heels; Nakayama peels towards the penalty area as Nakata shapes to ping the ball into the striker's path. In one movement, he cushions the ball expertly on his thigh before going for goal.

But in his urgency, Nakayama fails to find the middle of the ball; the shot's still going goalward but, under pressure from Zvonimir Soldo, the less-than-full-blooded effort is pushed to safety by Drazen Ladic, the goalkeeper palming the ball clear with his left hand.

The Croatians avert the danger and one of Japan's few attacks comes to nothing, while Nakayama sinks to his knees, his head on the turf as he punches the ground in frustration.

In the end, Croatia run out 1-0 winners thanks to a goal from Real Madrid's Davor Suker 13 minutes from time.

Suker and company would go on to reach the semi-finals; Japan, having already lost their opening game to Argentina, would be going home no matter the result of their final game against Jamaica.

That was the game that yielded Nakayama's historic goal, but even that is bittersweet. Trailing 2-0 in Lyon in a game the Japanese were expected to win, Nakayama netted to halve the deficit. There was little celebration, but rather a head-down run back to resume the game as quickly as possible.

"I'm thankful I scored that goal because before every World Cup it comes up that I was the first player to score for Japan, but looking at the game, we were 2-0 down and I scored to make it 2-1," he says.

"At that time I was just thinking we have to score one more, I wasn't thinking that my job was done. We needed to score again. I'm thankful I scored, but it wasn't the best result."

For all the challenges, however, Nakayama's career was a major success by any measure.

His list of records is remarkable and includes the fastest ever hat-trick in international football, secured in the 9-0 win during qualifying for the 2000 AFC Asian Cup against Brunei in Macau in February 2000.

All three goals were scored within three minutes and three seconds of the start of the game, an astonishing feat that arguably surpassed the four consecutive hat-tricks – also a world record – he scored in the J.League less than two years earlier.

His trophy-winning run started in late 1992 when he was part of the Japan squad that won the AFC Asian Cup title on home soil, defeating Saudi Arabia in the final in Hiroshima.

Nakayama was 25 years old at the time and the insanity of the J.League era was still several months away.

Unfancied – both at home and abroad – Japan defied the odds to win the title, building up a groundswell of support as they progressed through the tournament.

"It was also leading up to the qualifying rounds for USA '94, so it was a very good preparation for us," says Nakayama. "The tournament was in Japan, too, but there was really no interest in the country initially.

"But the more we kept winning, the more the country got behind us and it was a really good atmosphere. It was great to get to that level at that moment. It was a great tournament to establish ourselves in Asia, to see where we were at Asian level as well.

"The year before we played in the Dynasty Cup with China and Korea Republic and we won that in a penalty shootout against Korea. We weren't thinking about whether we were professional or not, it was about us coming together and having the willingness to put in the hard work to get to that level.

"We knew we could be a strong team in Asia and I think it was a good time because all of the players who came together had that mentality. We were striving to get to a level that was respectable within Asia."

By March the next year, the J.League was launched amid much hype and fanfare. Stadiums across the country were sold out and football – which was nothing more than a niche, minority sport until that point – was suddenly vying with baseball for media attention.

Top Left Against Croatia at the 1998 FIFA World Cup

Above In Action during an exhibition game in 2014

Middle Against Argentina at the 1998 FIFA World Cup

Bottom 1998 Asian Club Championship

The victory at the AFC Asian Cup just four months earlier played a contributory role in boosting the profile of players who, until that point, had been barely recognisable.

"A lot of national team players were playing for the J.League teams, so there was already that recognition because the players were Asian champions," says Nakayama.

"On top of that, once the league became professional we had all these big name players coming over from overseas playing as well and that also put a focus on the J.League.

"We were trying to make the league last, not just be a one-year wonder or that kind of thing. There was a lot of pride there and the players gave their all and it was a combination of that that allowed the league to do well and be very popular."

The move was a success, with football vying for column inches in newspapers and airtime on television with baseball; Japan's youth was embracing a game that gave them a greater international profile than the more established yet conservative baseball scene.

As a result, Japan's footballers were afforded the full rock star treatment – with all the distractions that come with such status – but Nakayama worked to ensure he kept his feet on the ground and scoring goals.

"It was madness, with the games selling out and being very popular," says Nakayama. "There was, initially, a rivalry with baseball which is still the number one sport, but we came very close and the gap was narrowed a fair bit and it was something the players were striving to do because a lot of people thought it was impossible.

"But there was also the madness from the fans; we were treated as if we were superstars. Some people got carried away with it, but I didn't want that madness, I just want to improve as a player so I tried to stay grounded. I didn't want any of that and let it ruin my life."

The hype increased further towards the end of 1993 when Japan – now the Asian champions and with a full J.League season under their belts – setting their sights on a place at their first-ever FIFA World Cup in the United States.

Qualifying took place in Qatar, with Japan needing to win their final game against Iraq to book their berth.

But disaster hit in the dying minutes when Jaafar Omran struck in injury time, scoring the goal that gave Iraq a share of the points and

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At the heart of the image

ensuring Korea qualified ahead of Japan.

Nakayama started the game for Japan – scoring his country's second goal before being substituted 10 minutes from time – on a day that came to be known as the 'Tragedy of Doha' and the experience, among others, pushed the striker towards making even greater efforts to succeed.

"In Doha, I was a member of the national team, but I wasn't a regular and that was the one thing that pushed me," he says. "What do I have to do to get to that level, to be a regular starting member of the team?

"Then I had an injury and that set me back, but that made me realise what I had to do to get back into shape, to get back to where I was and become a starting member of the team. It was an unlucky event to have that injury, but it was also lucky because it made me reassess the work that I had to put in to be a starting member of the national team."

What followed was one of the most successful careers in Japanese football, with three J.League titles and an Asian Club Championship win in Tehran against Esteghlal in 1999, the first by a Japanese club since the arrival of professional football in the country.

There were personal accolades too: Nakayama was the J.League's top scorer twice, in 1998 – when he was also named the

Above 1992 AFC Asian Cup

Below 1998 Asian Club Championship

league's Most Valuable Player – and in 2000.

After 20 seasons with Jubilo Iwata – and their pre-J.League incarnation Yamaha Motors – Nakayama, at the age of 42, moved to Consadole Sapporo, where he finished his career three years later in 2012 when a knee injury prevented him from continuing aged 45.

"I was able to have such a long career because I didn't want to let the team down, it's not just about me," he says.

"Everyone is working together and I want to be there for my team-mates and ensure they're happy with me so we can get to where we can. That pushed me, supporting the team and being part of the team."

Injury, ultimately, ended Nakayama's long and illustrious career, but there is no sense of regret from a player who achieved more than many as he watches the current generation of Japanese players move to Europe in increasing numbers to try their luck.

"If I was 25, I'd be aiming to do what the other guys are doing and try to go and play overseas, but I think I was in the right place at the right time," he says. "I was there and went through everything I went through and we did what was right at the time.

"I was part of the history of Japanese football. That's how it was meant to be. If I hadn't had my injuries, I'd probably still be playing at this age and aiming to do my best. Never give up, just keep trying.

"When we were playing, we laid down the groundwork for what's happening today. We made sure the league was popular and made sure that the position in Asia was recognised and established and then the whole situation became easier for players to move overseas and play.

"The guys from my generation would like to take a little bit of credit for where things are today, having laid out that groundwork for the players today."

A NATION ON THE RISE

BHUTAN'S 3-1 VICTORY OVER SRI LANKA IN MARCH EARNED THE HIMALAYAN NATION A PLACE IN THE SECOND ROUND OF JOINT QUALIFIERS FOR THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP AND 2019 AFC ASIAN CUP AND A CHANCE TO CONTINUE THEIR DEVELOPMENT AFTER FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS HAD PREVIOUSLY RESTRICTED THE CHANCE FOR PROGRESS.

By: Andrew Mullen **Photos:** World Sport Group/Bhutan Football Federation/Getty Images

Left & Bottom Right Against Sri Lanka

Below New coach Norio Tsukitate

Below The Other Final

Above Bhutan Football Federation President Ugen Tsechup

Bhutan's first-ever victory at international level was the feature of a documentary titled "The Other Final" as the second lowest ranked team in the FIFA rankings beat Monserrat, the team sitting one place below them, on the same day as the 2002 FIFA World Cup final between Brazil and Germany at the International Stadium in Yokohama.

But while back-to-back wins over Sri Lanka some 13 years after that 4-0 victory, which were for the record Bhutan's fourth and fifth at international level from 47 games since joining FIFA in 2000, did not receive the same focus, the international press coverage was significant across numerous football and sport outlets.

And the rise up the FIFA rankings which followed, and more importantly progress to the joint qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2018 and AFC Asian Cup 2019, suggests that Bhutan might not have to wait another 13 years to reach double figures in terms of international victories.

1983

Bhutan Football Federation founded

"The honest truth is that we were not hopeful; we just told our boys to give up their all and try their best and make up proud. Even if they did lose, we told them to limit the number of goals that we conceded," says Bhutan Football Federation President Ugen Tsechup.

"There was no sense or even thought that we would beat Sri Lanka, especially because the first game was away. We thought we would have a chance in the home game if we limited the number of goals in Sri Lanka.

"It was a pleasant surprise and in the moments when we scored that sense of elation definitely took over. We were proud of the boys and happy."

Bhutan's participation in the first round of qualifiers, which would determine the six sides who would progress to complete the

2000

Bhutan Football Federation becomes affiliated with FIFA

40-team second round, had initially been a doubt even at the start of the year due to the financial constraints which had stopped any previous thoughts of making an earlier debut in the FIFA World Cup qualifiers.

They had participated in the AFC Asian Cup qualifiers previously, although a 20-0 defeat by Kuwait ahead of the 2000 tournament is a result which many from the country would like to forget.

But after receiving a subsidy from world governing body FIFA to participate in the two-legged tie with Sri Lanka, Chokey Nima's

side headed for Colombo's Sugathadasa Stadium in March following a month long training camp in Thailand for the start of the road to Russia 2018 and the United Arab Emirates in 2019 for what would be their first international fixture since 2013.

"One of the reasons why we haven't taken part is that we have always had fund constraints, and that money in Bhutan could be used for so many other things rather than trying to qualify from the first round," adds Ugen Tsechup.

"We have not been taking part in the World Cup qualifiers because of the fund constraints, but this time we were able to because of the help and assistance from FIFA as they gave funds specifically for teams that haven't been able to take part before."

And it proved money well spent as Tshering Dorji rifled home from inside the penalty area with eight minutes remaining to hand

20-0

Bhutan lost a 2000 AFC Asian Cup qualifier to Kuwait

Bhutan a first international victory since beating Afghanistan 3-1 at the 2008 SAFF Championship.

More though was to come as Chencho Gyeltshen, Bhutan's best-known player having joined Thailand's Buriram United, chased down a long ball over the top less than five minutes into the second leg at Changlimithang Stadium before flicking it over the advancing Sri Lanka goalkeeper from a tight angle.

And despite Sri Lanka equalising through Subash Madushan from a corner 11 minutes before half-time, Bhutan were not to be denied and Chencho Gyeltshen netted a superb second with just over a minute remaining having earlier had a goal disallowed to seal a 3-1 aggregate victory.

"On reflection, maybe it would have been good to have spent that money earlier and to see if we could have qualified because what is has done for Bhutan football is tremendous," says Ugen Tsechup.

"Players who didn't want to play for the national team or didn't have time have been inspired to play following the reaction of the fans and the amount of enthusiasm it has created in the youth of Bhutan.

"The team was selected in January this year and didn't have time to practice together and to achieve what they did achieve speaks for the resolve they have. We hope the more they play together the more they will improve and start to understand each other's game more."

Bhutan's reward, having risen to 163rd in the FIFA rankings following the back-to-back

wins, was a place in Group C of the second round of joint qualifiers alongside 2015 AFC Asian Cup quarter-finalists China, Qatar, the Maldives and Hong Kong.

"If we can qualify for the next round of qualifiers it would be a massive achievement, but just to qualify for the second round is already a big achievement," says Bhutan captain Karma Shedrup Tshering.

"On paper, every team looks better than us – we're always going to be underdogs – but on the pitch it's a completely different story, you never know what's going to happen."

Bhutan, though, are not getting too carried away having moved above Hong Kong as well as Malaysia, and just behind Singapore and Indonesia, in the FIFA rankings following the wins over Sri Lanka.

"I think the FIFA ranking system that they have in place is for teams that regularly play against each other and not limiting themselves to one or two games. For teams like Bhutan, we may play one friendly in four or five years and if we lose that we may be ranked last, but if we win that one game, the average will be in our favour and we will go up," says Ugen Tsechup.

"At the time, we were ranked as the lowest team, I don't think it was the correct evaluation.

"We would be in the bottom 10-15, but not the last ranked team in the world."

But wherever Bhutan find themselves ranked by the time the second round is completed, which for Bhutan will be at the National Stadium in Male against the Maldives on 29 March 2016, the focus for the Bhutan Football Federation will remain on developing their footballing infrastructure.

The six-team National League is currently the top league in Bhutan, with a second-tier league consisting of teams just from the capital Thimphu.

3-1

Bhutan beat Sri Lanka on aggregate to reach the second round of qualifiers

Ugyen Academy appeared in the group stage qualifiers for the 2014 AFC President's Cup having claimed the 2013 domestic title; with 2014 winners Druk United set to feature in the play-off qualifiers for the 2016 AFC Cup.

"The Bhutan Football Federation are trying to encourage clubs to come up. We have a local league which is just in Thimphu and we have a six team national league where we try and limit the teams from Thimphu otherwise most of the teams would be from the capital," says Ugen Tsechup.

"We have constraints and the biggest constraint is the non-professional status of the players as most of them are students or business people. The club owners are also not professional and don't have the professional structures and just do it for the love of the game. They will try and work out a payment for the players during the season."

For the majority of the squad, the trip to Sri Lanka was the first time they had left the country, although this was not the case for Karma Shedrup Tshering who is a pilot with the country's national airline.

"To be honest, just to qualify for the second round of the World Cup qualifiers is a very big step for Bhutan football and football here is really improving as a result of the victory," says Karma Shedrup Tshering.

"We don't have a professional league, just an amateur league, but since that result against Sri Lanka, we can already notice a lot of crowd support in our local games. The players have got a little bit of fame within the country which is nice."

But despite the fame and fanfare created by that first win over Monserrat and the more recently celebrated wins over Sri Lanka, the future is certainly the emphasis for Bhutan.

"The focus has always been on grassroots and youth development. The win over Sri Lanka is a sweet surprise victory as we didn't send them out to play a lot of friendly matches and we didn't give them exposure to play with players from outside of our country because it was expensive, so the training they did was in the country and within the league system and through that we were able to build a national team," says Ugen Tsechup.

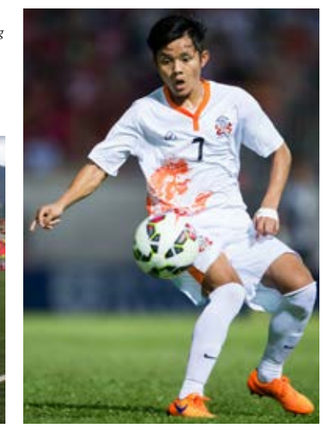
"But the focus since I was elected president in 2008 has always been on developing a strong foundation with grassroots and youth programmes so that we can have a sustained quality team."

Left Chencho Gyeltshen

Above Captain Karma Shedrup Tshering

Below Changlimithang Stadium

Right Tshering Dorji



Q&A

Bhutan Football Federation President Ugen Tsechup

What is the biggest challenge faced by the Bhutan Football Federation?

It is difficult to get the team together for long durations and it is hard to arrange consistent practice sessions at regular intervals because each player in the national squad has their responsibility at the place they work. Some of the players work in government offices, some are soldiers, some are students, some are corporate employees and one is a semi-pro.

What plans do you have to raise the level of the local league?

Everything is related to finance. Until we can offer more prize money and until we can get corporate sponsorships, it is always going to be difficult to develop the grassroots and youth programmes. Until we can give more prize money the club owners will not be inspired to invest in new talent and coaches. I don't think that will happen until we can become strong financially and this has to be considered within the whole economic development of Bhutan.

What is the future for football in Bhutan?

I ask the young boys and girls in Bhutan, what is the difference between the professional people and you? They have two arms, you have two arms, they have two legs and you have two legs, there is nothing different physically, but is it the level of dedication and the possibility of a future in football. We need to reach that level where football can be a source of income, and livelihood, for our boys and girls. Once we do that, I am quite certain we do have the talent and the capability to do well in the region.

THE MAN DOWN UNDER

AFTER MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION DURING HIS SHORT STINT WITH AUSTRALIA'S MELBOURNE CITY, SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL SAFUWAN BAHARUDIN IS LOOKING FORWARD TO MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY FOOTBALL OUTSIDE THE LION CITY.

By: Colin Pereira **Photos:** World Sport Group/Getty Images/Football Association of Singapore

The six months from November 2014 to May 2015 were a pretty eventful period in the life of Singapore international Safuwan Baharudin.

It was bookended by the low of Singapore's group stage exit in the defence of their AFF Suzuki Cup title and the high of victory in the Malaysian FA Cup final with Singapore's Lions XII.

But it was the period in between when the 23-year-old made the biggest impression of all as he became the first player from the tiny city state to play for a club in Australia's A-League.

Safuwan joined Melbourne City in late January 2015, and while his loan spell was not extended after he suffered a back injury in April, his time in Australia could be considered a success as he started six matches for the A-League side and did not look out of place playing for a club with a number of high-profile players including Australia international striker Josh Kennedy, Slovenia international midfielder Robert Koren and former Republic of Ireland international winger Damien Duff.

Indeed the versatile Safuwan, who can

Safuwan Baharudin

Nationality:
Singapore

DOB:
22/09/1991

Position:
Defender

Current club:
Lions XII
(Singapore)

Previous clubs:
Young Lions
(Singapore)
Melbourne City
(Australia)

be deployed as a defender, midfielder and emergency striker, proved to be a hit with the Melbourne City fans especially after he scored and was named Man of the Match in his third game for the club, a 3-1 win over Adelaide United on February 27.

"I was very happy to be the first Singaporean to play in the A-League but to score in just my third game there was a great feeling," says Safuwan.

"What made that moment extra special was that my parents were there that week to watch me and they were able to catch that moment live. Nothing could beat that feeling."

Such is the power of social media that the joy of that moment resonated far beyond Melbourne, with even the then reigning English Premier League champions getting in on the act.

"I wasn't checking much on what was happening on social media, but I was having some group chats on my mobile phone and people kept sending me screenshots of the goal being tweeted out by Singaporeans and other people – even Manchester City congratulated me for the goal on Twitter," says the two-time Southeast Asian Games bronze medallist.

"It was nice. I didn't really think that Singaporeans would be following Melbourne City on Twitter or Instagram, but it turned out that there were a lot of people on the Melbourne City account who were from Singapore who were paying attention to what I was doing."

That memorable moment came less than three months after the disappointment of the AFF Suzuki Cup when defending champions Singapore bowed out in the opening round after losing to late penalties against both Thailand and Malaysia at the newly-opened National Stadium.

Safuwan took a short holiday in London before the start of pre-season training with Lions XII but he returned from his vacation to some surprising news.

"I had a caretaker coach in Singapore who told me that he was planning something for me after the Suzuki Cup and when I came back after my holiday, I got notice about a potential trial with Melbourne City in Abu Dhabi," he explains.

"I went there early in January for a 10-day trial. I was only listed to play for one game there against Al Jazira but then the trial was extended to 12 days and I also got to play another game against (Ukrainian side) Dnipro.

"They seemed to be quite impressed but they told me to go back to Singapore and to wait for an answer. So I went home and then they called me up and told me they wanted me in Melbourne."

It took a while for the news to sink in but while Safuwan had some reservations, he realised that it was too good an opportunity to turn down.

"I had mixed feelings and I had to discuss the idea with my wife because while I wanted to try to make it as a player outside of Singapore, I had to be confident that I could actually make it at that level," he says.

"I definitely had a point to prove. I did some research into the club and I read that players like Harry Kewell and David Villa had played for them and that they had some well-known players in their squad.

"The first person that I shook hands with when I arrived at the club was Damien Duff and that made me realise that this was the real thing.

"I had watched him, Robert Koren and Josh Kennedy in action before but when you're playing with them, you have to change your mindset and be mentally strong because it was an opportunity to learn from good players."

Mind made up, Safuwan arrived in Australia at the end of January to join up with John van't Schip's Melbourne City.

"Safuwan has made a very stable impression," said the Dutchman shortly after the Singaporean's arrival in Australia.

"He reads the game in a good way. His technical ability is more than average (and) he understands things quite quickly."

And Van't Schip was convinced enough to include Safuwan in the squad for the local derby against Melbourne Victory on February 7.

"I wasn't supposed to be in the starting line-up but my defensive mate Erik Paartalu was injured one day before the game so I had a rough idea that I would play if he didn't pass his fitness test the next morning," recalls Safuwan, who usually played at centre-back but found himself thrust into central midfield in the Melbourne derby.

"It was tough because I had to slot in at the very last minute, but I told myself that this might be the only time I got to play so even if it was out of position I had to take it.

"It was tough. I thought that the Singapore versus Malaysia rivalry was intense, but at club level in Melbourne, Victory versus City was a huge game.

"I was quite nervous, but at the same time, I was up for the challenge and I think that I did quite well although we lost 3-0. Otherwise I might not have played again in the first 11 for quite some time!"

Given the cosmopolitan nature of Melbourne, Safuwan had little problem settling down in his new environment.

"Knowing that the big guns were there, I wanted to learn from them and so I took notice of their daily routines and how they worked to improve as players – not just during the games and training, but the extra things that they did away from the pitch," he says.

"I saw some of the things that they did before and after training and I have been trying to do some of them since I came back like pre-activation before training by using foam rollers to ease off the muscles."

Unfortunately for Safuwan, his stint in Melbourne came to an end when a back problem suffered in an A-League game against Wellington Phoenix saw him return to Singapore for treatment on the injury ahead of schedule.

"It was disappointing that I could not see out the last few weeks of the season with City because I knew that I had given my fair share and had deserved my place there," he laments.

"Due to circumstances, the loan spell had to be cut short but I really treasure those three months and I would love to go back because Melbourne is a great place to live and to play football.

"A lot of people want me to be back there, but I have a contract now with Lions XII so we'll have to see how things go."

While he underwent treatment on his back problem, Safuwan was able to play for Lions XII and his return had a silver lining as the Singapore club beat Kelantan 3-1 at the end of May to lift the Malaysian FA Cup.

"My time at Melbourne City strengthened my belief that I can play at a higher level," says Safuwan, who also won the Malaysian Super League title with Lions XII in 2013.

"My dream would be to play for a European club, but now that I've had a taste of playing at a high level in Australia, I'm hoping to get another stint at a club in one of the bigger Asian leagues – maybe Japan – and to continue to improve as a player.

"It's difficult to say where I might be five to 10 years from now, but I would like to eventually make my mark at a club outside of Singapore and to play for many more years before I retire."

Top Left & Bottom Left
2014 AFF Suzuki Cup

Left
2012 AFF Suzuki Cup

Above
Playing for Melbourne City

THE FUTURE IS IN SAFE HANDS

FORMER SCOTLAND MANAGER ANDY ROXBURGH WAS APPOINTED AS THE AFC TECHNICAL DIRECTOR HAVING PREVIOUSLY HELD SIMILAR ROLES WITH THE SCOTTISH FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION AND UEFA AND HAS HIS SIGHTS SET ON ACHIEVING SIMILAR SUCCESS IN A CONTINENT THE FORMER STRIKER FIRST VISITED 30 YEARS AGO.

By: Andrew Mullen

In footballing terms, Andy Roxburgh has seen and done it all. The former team-mate of legendary Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson led Scotland at the 1990 FIFA World Cup before being appointed as the first Technical Director of the Scottish Football Association and European governing body UEFA.

And following a stint with Major League Soccer side New York Red Bulls where he worked with 2015 AFC Asian Cup winner Tim Cahill, having first visited Asia in the mid-80s during his time working within the Scottish national team youth set-up, the 71-year-old was appointed as the new Technical Director of the AFC at the end of March on an initial two-year contract.

"My relationship with Asian football in quite extensive," says former striker Roxburgh, who has already worked in China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Singapore while he previously visited Japan every two years for the last decade and a half.

"And while somebody from the outside might find it a surprise that someone like myself appearing here, it isn't really because of that long-standing connection."

Having retired as a player in 1975 after playing more than 200 matches with five Scottish teams, including with Ferguson at Falkirk, Roxburgh was appointed the Scottish Football Association's first Technical Director in the same year before managing Scotland at the 1990 FIFA World Cup and 1992 UEFA European Championship during seven years with the national team between 1986-1993.

Roxburgh was then named UEFA's first Technical Director in 1994, a position he held until 2012 before joining Major League Soccer side New York for two years.

"We already had colleagues in the past that were doing this job before me and I am now bringing my experience to add something else," says Roxburgh.

"There have been no targets set, but the Technical Director's role is more about education and is not a results-orientated exercise."

During his time with Europe's governing body, Roxburgh is credited with setting up the framework for the UEFA Convention on the Mutual Recognition of Coaching Qualifications and initiating the UEFA Grassroots Charter.

"What we have to do is introduce programmes and projects and create events that first encourage exchange. This is something we did in my previous life in Europe. One of our first ones will be the national coaches conference that we will run in August in Kuala Lumpur. That will be to reflect on what happened at the Asian Cup, so an exchange will go on, but for me it will be to examine the idea of creating a coaching convention in Asia," says Roxburgh.

"There was always concern at a continental level that if you trained coaches that you make them all the same and develop the same style of football throughout the continent, but that didn't happen in Europe because we devised guidelines and education standards that you had to match. It wasn't what you had to teach, but how you taught it."

Roxburgh has also worked closely with FIFA as a member of its Technical Committee, as well as a FIFA instructor, and as a member of the Technical Study Group at six FIFA World Cups.

"I am following colleagues who have built the foundation and I will continue that evolutionary process to add a bit more to the foundations which means if you build the right foundations you can build the house, although that will be for someone else to do," says Roxburgh.

"We need to have top players, top coaches and we need to have big results, but the job of the Technical Director and his colleagues is how you do it. Where a national or club coach has a job to win the next game, the job of the Technical Director is to win the next 10 years.

"We will support those on the frontline today, but as of equal importance to the Technical Director is the future."

Having initially taken a watching brief at the start of his new role, Roxburgh will soon get down to the day-to-day task of shaping football's future in the continent having already worked in around 60 countries during his career.

"If you don't have progressive coach education you are always going to be limited. Coach and player education are key.

"We can sit back and wait and see if top players turn up, but you might wait forever, so the thing is to design your way forward and to design youth programmes while grassroots is also essential," says Roxburgh.

"You must have an organised grassroots programme, then you must have an appropriate elite youth programme and then you have the icing on the cake which is the top level professionals.

"These are not necessarily newsworthy things, but they are crucial for the long-term health of football and crucial for the long-term health of the continent."

And while Roxburgh's brief covers the entire spectrum, one area in particular will receive special attention from the recipient of an Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1993 while Scotland coach.

"Grassroots to me is anything that is not elite, so the elite academies and the professional game is not grassroots, but everything else is," he says.

"You need to promote it, but you need to organise it.

"It is not glamorous, but it is crucial as if you do not have mass participation, then you are always going to struggle to get decent players."

GOING GLOBAL

FOUNDED IN 2000 BY A GROUP OF FRIENDS FROM TACLOBAN, GLOBAL FC HAVE RISEN TO BECOME ONE OF THE LEADING SIDES IN THE PHILIPPINES AND PIONEERS IN FOOTBALL'S FAST-GROWING DEVELOPMENT IN THE ARCHIPELAGO.

By: Daniel Pordes **Photos:** World Sport Group/Global FC/Anton Sheker

Fifteen years ago, on a patch of grass behind Quezon City Hall in Metro Manila, a then 29-year-old Dan Palami, with fellow displaced friends and colleagues from Tacloban City, kicked off the humble beginnings of what has become one of the powerhouses of Philippines football, Global FC.

Palami, now President and Chief Executive of Global, has helped lead the club to a number of national and continental milestones as this year the team, 2014 domestic champions, became the first Filipino side to participate in the AFC Cup.

And although Global narrowly missed out on a place in the knockout stage, the club performed creditably after securing a first-ever AFC Cup win over Yadanarbon of Myanmar and a pair of goalless draws with five-time Malaysian champions Pahang FA to finish third in Group G, a remarkable achievement considering their modest origins.

Palami's weekly social kickabouts moved from Quezon City Hall to the University of the Philippines Sunken Garden football field and until mid-2003, the aspiring lawyer was content to play for fun.

But after leaving University of the Philippines College of Law in his senior year to set-up a railway company, Palami suffered a blow that forced him to reappraise his views on football and the club.

"I had a personal and financial crisis in my life that hit me in the middle of 2003 and lasted for a year. The only thing that kept me sane were the weekly football games on Saturday," says Palami.

"The social aspect of football helped me get over that crisis and I said to myself if I could help football in the Philippines in any way I would do it."

The Tacloban collective began to participate in minor tournaments around Manila under the name Laos FC before Palami made the decision to improve the level of the team with talented players from amongst his employees joining the ranks from 2007.

Among them were accountant Jerry Barbaso from Dipolog city in Mindanao Province who had joined the railway company after completing a degree in management accounting.

"I came to Manila for a job, not to play football actually, but my boss Mr. Palami encouraged me to play the game – just for fun," recalls current Global full-back Barbaso, who joined Laos in 2009.

"I worked for eight hours in the day and then had training afterwards, and then a game on the weekend.

"There was no additional money for playing at the beginning. There was no grass, not enough balls, no proper uniforms – nothing! If after the game we were bought dinner, we were very happy."

Shortly after Barbaso joined, Laos were renamed Global and took part in the inaugural United Football League (UFL) Cup, the precursor to the UFL League, with Palami's side qualifying for the second tier league competition that began in 2010.

Global's debut in the second division of the Metro Manila-based UFL League was an unprecedented success for Palami and the club and they cruised to the title and promotion on the back of an undefeated streak, before claiming the UFL Cup and runner-up place in the UFL first division the following year.

Palami himself had now retired from playing duties to focus on running his business as well as a managerial role with the Philippines national team.

The Azkals had enjoyed a surge in credibility to match the rise of league football in the country after a stunning semi-final finish at the 2010 AFF Suzuki Cup that saw the side begin to rise up the FIFA Rankings.

As a result of the growing success of the Philippines as a footballing nation, an influx of foreign-based players began to look to the national team and a locally-based club.

"One of the early mottos of Global was 'country before club', so the players who are with us always have to go the national team if called upon.

Global FC President and Chief Executive Dan Palami

Far Top Left & Above
2015 AFC Cup

Top Left
2012 United Football League

Bottom Left
2013 AFC President's Cup

"Global was a natural choice when the foreign-based players started coming over from 2011 onwards because it is the club that had the least conflict when it comes to national duties," said Palami.

"One of the early mottos of Global was 'country before club', so the players who are with us always have to go the national team if called upon, even on non-international dates we will release them, because the country comes first.

"As the Azkals' popularity grew, we received hundreds of calls from parents and relatives who had a nephew or son playing for this or that club. Filipinos are culturally very proud when they see a relative representing the country.

"Of course, out of the hundreds of calls we might get more lemons than actual players, but that was part of the growing pains."

One such overseas player, forward Misagh Bahadorn, who was born to an Iranian father and Filipino mother, grew up in Iran but joined Global in 2011 after graduating from Manila's Centro Escolar University with a degree in dentistry.

Bahadoran had represented the Philippines in Futsal during his years as a student, as well as turning out for Pasargad FC and Kaya FC.

"I was about to leave and go back home to Iran after graduating, but then I heard about Global. They were one of the first clubs to pay players a salary and when I started to train with them I could see they were way better than other clubs in the Philippines," says current Global captain and Philippines international Bahadoran.

"Global FC were new then, but we became very successful very quickly. Lots of good players began to come to the Philippines to play and as captain of one of the best sides the national team managers paid more attention.

"So I was, and still am, very proud and happy to be chosen for the national team thanks to Global. I didn't think this would be possible in Iran, but here, in the other half of my two countries, with the Philippines and Global it is."

Bolstered by the likes of Bahadoran, newly-promoted Global went on to lift the top flight championship in the 2012 season to become the first club from the Philippines to participate in an AFC continental competition after qualifying for the 2013 AFC President's Cup.

An appearance in the AFC President's Cup brought with it requirements in infrastructure that was taken up by Global's Chief Operating Officer, Palami's younger brother, Cian, a former player with Laos.

While the AFC President's Cup campaign ended disappointingly in the group stage, the experience and developments behind the scenes at the club began to bear fruit and Global won their second UFL title in 2014 and with it entry into the 2015 AFC Cup.

"We built up an infrastructure that quickly overtook the other teams – a big reason why we won the title last year. Clubs in the Philippines tended to have a head coach and that was it; so he'd be doing everything and that's just not possible. With a professional team you have to put together the backroom staff," says current head coach Leigh Manson, who joined Global in January 2014

"The club is really moving forward and we would like to be in the AFC competitions each year. Things are moving very, very fast and it's very, very exciting."

Global FC coach Leigh Manson

"As a club, we've taken enormous steps: in the office to meet the AFC competition requirements, and on the pitch with vastly improved training and personnel. We've just signed Norio Suzuki who was playing in the J.League last year for Vegalta Sendai.

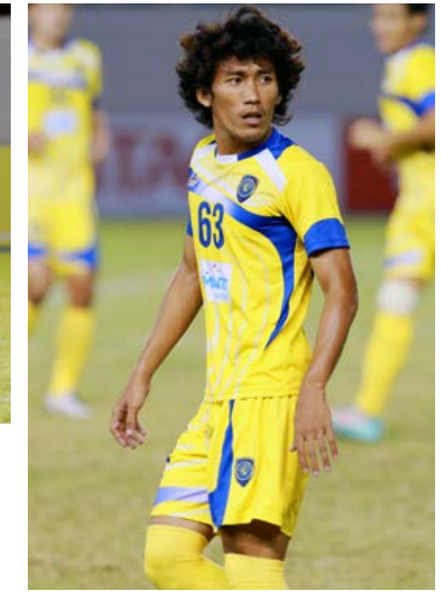
"So the club is really moving forward and we would like to be in the AFC competitions each year and my job is to build, not just the first team, but also the technical side of the club from the grassroots up. Things are moving very, very fast and it's very, very exciting."

So, from setting up Global-run youth academies in Manila and Tacloban for the next generation of Philippines stars, to stepping out at the new 25,000-seater Philippine Sports Stadium in their recent AFC Cup campaign, the club has come a long way since Palami's epiphany.

"We've learnt so much and we hope this experience will help us when we finally reach the top levels in Asia," says Palami.

"We want to stabilise our local presence, be more involved in the continental scene, and then be the club that will bring an Asian title to the Philippines.

"I think, with the experience we're getting now, all these birth pains will be worth it when we finally lift that trophy."



Far left
2015 AFC Cup

Above
Misagh Bahadoran (left)

Top Right
Jerry Barbaso

Left
President & Chief Executive Dan Palami (right)

Right
Coach Leigh Manson

Bottom
Philippine Sports Stadium

Heavyweights Endure Mixed Fortunes As Minnows Lead

Guam, Hong Kong, DPR Korea and Thailand set the pace after the first two Matchdays in the second round of joint qualifiers for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup with the quartet picking up maximum points, while Japan, Iran and Uzbekistan endured slow starts to their campaigns.

AFC Asian Cup 2015 champions Australia and runners-up Korea Republic also picked up victories in their openers, as did 2019 hosts the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and China.

Guam made history when the continental minnows defeated two-time AFC Challenge Cup finalists Turkmenistan 1-0 thanks to a first half own goal from Serdar Annaorazov in their Group D opener to claim their first ever FIFA World Cup qualifying victory.

And the Pacific Ocean Islanders followed up with a 2-1 win over India as Brandon McDonald and Travis Nicklaw were on target for the home side to top the standings despite Sunil Chhetri's late consolation for the visitors.

Chhetri had also been on target for India against Oman, but with Qasim Said and Amad Al Hosni also scoring in the first half, Oman claimed a 2-1 win.

Iran, meanwhile, were held to a 1-1 draw away at Turkmenistan as Sardar Azmoun's early strike was cancelled out by Ruslan Mingazov in first half stoppage time.

Hong Kong, meanwhile, opened their campaign in Group C with a 7-0 win over Bhutan at Mongkok Stadium before securing a 2-0 win over the Maldives.

Qatar had earlier edged out the Maldives 1-0 in Male before China beat Bhutan 6-0 in Thimphu.

Elsewhere, having suffered heartbreak in the final of the 2014 AFC Challenge Cup to miss out on a place at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, the Philippines have begun their latest continental qualifying campaign in impressive fashion with back-to-back Group H wins over Bahrain and Yemen.

But DPR Korea are the early leaders in Group H due to a superior goal scoring record after edging out Yemen 1-0 before recording a convincing 4-2 win over Uzbekistan.

In Group F, leaders Thailand picked up the first victory of the second round with a 1-0 win over Vietnam at the end of May before securing a 2-0 win over Chinese Taipei.

Iraq were the only one of the 39 sides taking part in the joint qualifiers not to begin their campaign, with the 2015 AFC Asian Cup semi-finalists set to face Chinese Taipei in early September.

The impressive exploits of Guam aside, one of the most eye-catching results of the early phase of the second round was Singapore's goalless draw with Japan at Saitama Stadium.

The Samurai Blue were unable to get past goalkeeper Izwan Mahbud to leave Singapore in pole position in Group E having earlier recorded a 4-0 win over Cambodia.

Syria, who have played a game less, beat Afghanistan 6-0 and are just a point off the pace after the reigning SAFF champions recovered to edge out Cambodia by a single goal.

Japan will look to kick-start their campaign when they meet bottom-placed side Cambodia in September.

Australia, meanwhile, successfully negotiated a tricky away tie in Kyrgyzstan with goals from Mile Jedinak and Tommy Oar securing a 2-1 win in Bishkek.

And the Asian champions are joined at the top of the Group B table by Jordan, who recorded a 3-1 away win over Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan who had earlier beaten Bangladesh.

In Group A, Saudi Arabia began their campaign with a 3-2 win over Palestine, while Omar Abdulrahman scored the only goal as the UAE edged out Timor Leste.

Palestine, though, were able to recover and beat Malaysia, who earlier drew 1-1 with Timor Leste, 6-0 in Kuala Lumpur to leave the trio level at the top of the table.

And finally, Korea Republic top Group G ahead of Lebanon and Kuwait after strikes from Lee Jae-sung and Son Heung-min secured a 2-0 win in Myanmar.

Yousef Naser scored the only goal as Kuwait edged out Lebanon, who bounced back to defeat Laos 2-0.

Following the conclusion of the qualifying campaign in March 2016, the group winners and the four best runners-up will advance directly to the 2019 AFC Asian Cup as well as the final round of qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

The next best 24 teams will compete in a separate competition for the remaining slots at the 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

Second Round

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Palestine	2	1	0	1	8	3	5	3
Saudi Arabia	1	1	0	0	3	2	1	3
UAE	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
Timor Leste	2	0	1	1	1	2	-1	1
Malaysia	2	0	1	1	1	7	-6	1

11/06/15
Malaysia 1 *(Safee Sali 34)* Timor Leste 1 *(Ramon Saro 90+3)*
Saudi Arabia 3 *(Yahya Al Shehri 6, Mohammed Al Sahlawi 47, 90+3)* Palestine 2 *(Pablo Bravo 51, Matias Hadwa 90+2)*
16/06/15
Timor Leste 0 United Arab Emirates 1 *(Omar Abdulrahman 80)*
Malaysia 0 Palestine 6 *(Musab Battat 9, Sameh Maraaba 22, 75, Tamer Seyam 41, 89, Khader Abuhammad 63)*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	1	1	0	0	3	1	2	3
Kyrgyzstan	2	1	0	1	4	3	1	3
Australia	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	3
Tajikistan	2	0	1	1	2	4	-2	1
Bangladesh	2	0	1	1	2	4	-2	1

11/06/15
Bangladesh 1 *(Valerii Kichin 32 OG)* Kyrgyzstan 3 *(Anton Zemlianuhin 9, 41, Edgar Bernhardt 29)*
Tajikistan 1 *(Manuchehr Dzhalilov 67)* Jordan 3 *(Hassan Abdel Fattah 29, 64, 88)*
16/06/15
Bangladesh 1 *(Jahid Ameli 50)* Tajikistan 1 *(Fathullo Fathuloev 87)*
Kyrgyzstan 1 *(Almazbek Mirzaliev 90+2)*
Australia 2 *(Mile Jedinak 2, Tommy Oar 68)*

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Hong Kong	2	2	0	0	9	0	9	6
China	1	1	0	0	6	0	6	3
Qatar	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
Maldives	2	0	0	2	0	3	-3	0
Bhutan	2	0	0	2	0	13	-13	0

11/06/15
Hong Kong 7 *(Jaimes McKee 19, 57, Christian Annan 23, Lo Kwan Yee 30, Ju Yingzhi 42, Lam Ka Wai 49, Godfred Karikari 68)* Bhutan 0
Maldives 0 Qatar 1 *(Ahmed El Sayed 90+8)*
16/06/15
Bhutan 0 China 6 *(Yang Xu 45+2, 61, 76, Wu Lei 55, Yu Dabao 67, 83)*
Hong Kong 2 *(Xu Deshuai 63, Lam Ka Wai 67)*
Maldives 0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Guam	2	2	0	0	3	1	2	6
Oman	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	3
Iran	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Turkmenistan	2	0	1	1	1	2	-1	1
India	2	0	0	2	2	4	-2	0

11/06/15
Guam 1 *(Serdar Annaorazov 12 OG)* Turkmenistan 0
India 1 *(Sunil Chhetri 26)* Oman 2 *(Qasim Said 1, Amad Al Hosni 40)*
16/06/15
Guam 2 *(Brandon McDonald 37, Travis Nicklaw 62)*
India 1 *(Sunil Chhetri 90+3)*
Turkmenistan 1 *(Ruslan Mingazov 45+1)* Iran 1 *(Sardar Azmoun 4)*

Second Round

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Singapore	2	1	1	0	4	0	4	4
Syria	1	1	0	0	6	0	6	3
Afghanistan	2	1	0	1	1	6	-5	3
Japan	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Cambodia	2	0	0	2	0	5	-5	0

11/06/15
Cambodia 0 Singapore 4 *(Khairul Amri 9, Safuwan Baharudin 21, 35, Fazrul Nawaz 55)*
Afghanistan 0 Syria 6 *(Reja Rafe 19, 35, Mouaiad Al Ajjan 40, Abdulrazak Al Husein 70, Sanharib Malki 75, Omar Kharbin 90+3)*
16/06/15
Cambodia 0 Afghanistan 1 *(Mustafa Zazai 86)*
Japan 0 Singapore 0

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Thailand	2	2	0	0	3	0	3	6
Iraq	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vietnam	1	0	0	1	0	1	-1	0
Chinese Taipei	1	0	0	1	0	2	-2	0

24/05/15
Thailand 1 *(Pokklaw Anan 81)* Vietnam 0
16/06/15
Chinese Taipei 0 Thailand 2 *(Teerasil Dangda 21, 40)*

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	1	1	0	0	2	0	2	3
Lebanon	2	1	0	1	2	1	1	3
Kuwait	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
Myanmar	2	0	1	1	2	4	-2	1
Laos	2	0	1	1	2	4	-2	1

11/06/15
Lebanon 0 Kuwait 1 *(Yousef Naser 86)*
Laos 2 *(Khampheng Sayavutthi 81, 83)* Myanmar 2 *(Zaw Min Tun 41, Kyaw Zayar Win 86)*
16/06/15
Myanmar 0 Korea Republic 2 *(Lee Jae-sung 35, Son Heung-min 68)*
Laos 0 Lebanon 2 *(Mohamad Ghaddar 4, Fayez Chamsine 75)*

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
DPR Korea	2	2	0	0	5	2	3	6
Philippines	2	2	0	0	4	1	3	6
Bahrain	1	0	0	1	1	2	-1	0
Uzbekistan	1	0	0	1	2	4	-2	0
Yemen	2	0	0	2	0	3	-3	0

11/06/15
Yemen 0 DPR Korea 1 *(So Hyon-uk 71)*
Philippines 2 *(Misagh Bahadoran 50, Javier Patino 59)* Bahrain 1 *(Abdulwahab Al Malood 90+3)*
16/06/15
DPR Korea 4 *(Pak Kwang-ryong 4, Jang Kuk-chol 16, Ro Hak-su 34, Ri Hyok-chol 36)* Uzbekistan 2 *(Anzur Ismailov 54, Sardor Rashidov 79)*
Yemen 0 Philippines 2 *(Misagh Bahadoran 52, Iain Ramsay 74)*

Former Winners Remain In The Hunt

Former winners Guangzhou Evergrande, Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, Gamba Osaka and Al Hilal along with Qatar's Lekhwiya, Emirati club Al Ahli, Kashiwa Reysol of Japan and Iranian debutants Naft Tehran all secured qualification for the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League in May.

Chinese champions Guangzhou, who lifted the continental title in 2013, recorded a 3-2 aggregate victory over Korea Republic's Seongnam FC despite losing the first leg 2-1, while Jeonbuk, Al Hilal and Gamba also posted victories to win their respective ties and advance to the last eight.

Former semi-finalists Kashiwa and 2013 quarter-finalists Lekhwiya, as well as Al Ahli and newcomers Naft, completed the quarter-final line-up.

A brace from Brazilian forward Ricardo Goulart in a 2-0 second leg victory at Tianhe Sports Centre Stadium secured Guangzhou's fourth consecutive appearance in the quarter-final stage despite their defeat in Seongnam a week earlier.

Winners of the 2006 edition, Jeonbuk earned a return to the quarter-finals for the first time since 2011 after beating Beijing Guoan 1-0 in the second leg to seal a 2-1 win on aggregate.

Brazilian substitute Edu's strike with 18 minutes remaining at Workers' Stadium proved enough for the K-League Classic champions after their 1-1 draw in the first leg at Jeonju World Cup Stadium.

"Beijing's tactics were decent but we have achieved our target of qualifying for the AFC Champions League quarter-finals. No matter who our next opponent is we will try to go as far as we can," said Jeonbuk coach Choi Kang-hee.

Iran's Naft, meanwhile, achieved a historic first appearance in the last eight after Leandro Padovani's goal at King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah was enough to see the Iranians through on away goals despite losing 2-1 against Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli.

Leading 1-0 from the first leg, Padovani's all-important opener left Al Ahli needing a minimum of three goals to progress, and despite Omar Al Soma's double, it was not enough for the home side.

"I want to congratulate my players for the great achievement as we defeated a strong team who didn't lose any matches in the group stage and their first defeat in the competition was against us in the first leg," said Naft coach Alireza Mansourian.

"We came to Saudi Arabia with great ambition as we wanted to qualify for the next round. We planned to score an early goal which would affect our opponents and we successfully scored an important goal."

Elsewhere, having won the first leg 2-1 thanks to goals from Sebastian Soria and Youssef Msakni, Qatari champions Lekhwiya ensured a 4-3 aggregate win over domestic rivals Al Sadd after a 2-2 draw in the return meeting.

Lekhwiya substitute Ismail Mohamad came off the bench to score the crucial goal seven minutes from time to secure their progress after Msakni's opener had been cancelled out by Al Sadd's Muriqui and Ali Asadalla.

And despite an own goal handing Al Hilal a 1-0 defeat to Iran's Persepolis in the first leg of their tie in Tehran, the 2014 finalists cruised into the last eight after a comprehensive 3-0 win over the Iranian league side in the second meeting a week later thanks to goals from Yousef Al Salem, Mohammed Shalhoub and Abdulaziz Al Dawsari that saw the Saudi Arabian side advance 3-1 on aggregate.

Japanese treble winners Gamba, meanwhile, secured a return to the quarter-finals for the first since winning the continental title in 2008 after their 3-2 second leg win over 2013 finalists FC Seoul of Korea clinched a convincing 6-3 victory on aggregate having won the first meeting 3-1 the week before in Kashiwa.

Brazilian Patric opened the scoring for Group F winners Gamba after just 16 minutes at Expo '70 Stadium as Kenta Hasegawa's side quickly added to their first leg victory in Korea before Shu Kurata added a second on the stroke of half-time after Mauricio Molina had missed a penalty for the visitors.

And despite Yun Ju-tae scoring twice for FC Seoul in the second half either side of a header from Gamba's Brazilian substitute Lins, the K-League side failed to secure a fourth AFC Champions League quarter-final appearance in five years.

Finally, 2013 semi-finalists Kashiwa claimed their place in the last eight thanks to Yusuke Kobayashi's crucial second half strike which secured an away goals success over Korea's Suwon Samsung following a 4-4 draw on aggregate despite losing the second leg 2-1 at home.

Group Stage

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lekhwiya	6	4	1	1	9	5	4	13
Persepolis	6	4	0	2	7	7	0	12
Al Nassr	6	2	2	2	7	6	1	8
Bunyodkor	6	0	1	5	2	7	-5	1

24/02/15
Persepolis 3 *(Mohsen Bengar 60, Hadi Norozi 66, Mohammad Noori 83)* Lekhwiya 0
Al Nassr 1 *(Fabian Estoyanoff 51)* Bunyodkor 1 *(Zabikhillo Urinboev 14)*
03/03/15
Bunyodkor 0 Persepolis 1 *(Mohammad Noori 21)*
Lekhwiya 1 *(Vladimir Weiss 51)* Al Nassr 1 *(Mohamed Musa 47 OG)*
17/03/15
Bunyodkor 0 Lekhwiya 1 *(Nam Tae-hee 28)*
Al Nassr 3 *(Adrian Mierzejewski 32, Fabian Estoyanoff 86, Hassan Al Raheb 90+5)* Persepolis 0
08/04/15
Lekhwiya 1 *(Vladimir Weiss 43)* Bunyodkor 0
Persepolis 1 *(Mehdi Taremi 62)* Al Nassr 0
22/04/15
Bunyodkor 0 Al Nassr 1 *(Adrian Mierzejewski 33)*
Lekhwiya 3 *(Youssef Msakni 69, Nam Tae-hee 83, Ali Afif 90+3)* Persepolis 0
06/05/15
Al Nassr 1 *(Hassan Al Raheb 36)* Lekhwiya 3 *(Youssef Msakni 28, Nam Tae-hee 32, Sebastian Soria 58)*
Persepolis 2 *(Mohammad Noori 49, Obid Jurabaev 73OG)* Bunyodkor 1 *(Sardor Rashidov 61)*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Ain	6	3	3	0	7	2	5	12
Naft Tehran	6	2	2	2	8	8	0	8
Pakhtakor	6	1	3	2	6	8	-2	6
Al Shabab	6	1	2	3	5	8	-3	5

24/02/15
Pakhtakor 2 *(Kakhi Makharadze 48, Igor Sergeev 85)* Naft Tehran 1 *(Ali Ghorbani 59)*
Al Ain 0 Al Shabab 0
03/03/15
Naft Tehran 1 *(Siamak Kooroshi 50)* Al Ain 1*(Asamoah Gyan 58)*
Al Shabab 2 *(Abdulrahman Al Khaibary 35, Naif Hazazi 84)* Pakhtakor 2 *(Igor Sergeev 62, Kakhi Makharadze 71)*
18/03/15
Pakhtakor 0 Al Ain 1 *(Miroslav Stoch 61)*
Naft Tehran 2 *(Arslan Motahhari 86, Leandro Padovani 90)* Al Shabab 1 *(Naid Hazazi 43)*
07/04/15
Al Ain 1 *(Jires Kembo Ekoko 20)* Pakhtakor 1 *(Igor Sergeev 45+2)*
Al Shabab 0 Naft Tehran 3 *(Vahid Amiri 57, Arsalan Motahhari 83, Reza Aliyari 90+1)*
22/04/15
Naft Tehran 1 *(Gholamreza Rezaei 25)* Pakhtakor 1 *(Vladimir Kozak 36)*
Al Shabab 0 Al Ain 1 *(Asamoah Gyan 58)*
06/05/15
Al Ain 3 *(Omar Abdulrahman 63, Asamoah Gyan 74, Jires Kembo Ekoko 87)* Naft Tehran 0
Pakhtakor 0 Al Shabab 2 *(Mousa Al Shammari 6, Abdullah Al Astaa 65)*

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Hilal	6	4	1	1	9	4	5	13
Al Sadd	6	3	1	2	9	9	0	10
Foolad	6	1	3	2	2	4	-2	6
Lokomotiv	6	1	1	4	10	13	-3	4

25/02/15
Foolad Khouzestan 0 Al Sadd 0
Al Hilal 3 *(Saud Kariri 11, Yousef Al Salem 14, Thiago Neves 71)* Lokomotiv 1 *(Sardor Mirzayev 39)*
04/03/15
Lokomotiv 1 *(Oleg Zoteev 6)* Foolad Khouzestan 1 *(Mehrdad Jamaati 32)*
Al Sadd 1 *(Khalfan Ibrahim 29)* Al Hilal 0
17/03/15
Foolad Khouzestan 0 Al Hilal 0
Al Sadd 6 *(Khalfan Ibrahim 27, 50, Hasan Al Haydos 34, Nadir Belhadj 40, Abdelkarim Hassan 63, Grafite 66)*
Lokomotiv 2 *(Damir Kojasevic 56, Jasur Khasanov 77)*
08/04/15
Lokomotiv 5 *(Marat Bikmaev 7, 14, Sanjar Shaakhmedov 55, Damir Kojasevic 79, Ruslan Korian 90+1)* Al Sadd 0
Al Hilal 2 *(Nassir Al Shamrani 46, Yasir Al Shahrani 61)* Foolad Khouzestan 0
21/04/15
Lokomotiv 1 *(Temurkhuja Abdukholikov 90+4)* Al Hilal 2 *(Nawaf Al Abid 56, Abdulla Al Dossary 72)*
Al Sadd 1 *(Muriqui 42)* Foolad Khouzestan 0
05/05/15
Al Hilal 2 *(Yousef Al Salem 20, Mohammed Kasola 69 OG)*
Al Sadd1 *(Hasan Al Haydos 32)*
Foolad Khouzestan 1 *(Bahman Jahantigh 89)*
Lokomotiv 0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Ahli (KSA)	6	3	3	0	11	7	4	12
Al Ahli (UAE)	6	2	2	2	8	8	0	8
Nasaf	6	2	2	2	5	5	0	8
Tractorsazi	6	1	1	4	7	11	-4	4

25/02/15
Nasaf 2 *(Ilkhom Shomurodov 46, Khamza Karimov 52)*
Tractorsazi Tabriz 1 *(Edinho 32)*
Al Ahli (UAE) 3 *(Ismail Al Hammadi 19, 79, Ahmed Khalil 43)* Al Ahli (KSA) 3 *(Osvaldo 1, Hussain Al Moqawhi 41, Taiseer Al Jassam 57)*
04/03/15
Tractorsazi Tabriz 1 *(Farshad Ahmadzadeh 40)* Al Ahli (UAE) 0
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 *(Omar Al Soma 22, Saleh Al Amari 78)*
Nasaf 1 *(Artur Gevorkyan 65)*
18/03/15
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 *(Taiseer Al Jassam 71, 79)* Tractorsazi Tabriz 0
Al Ahli (UAE) 0 Nasaf 0
07/04/15
Tractorsazi Tabriz 2 *(Edinho 60, Shahin Saghebi 77)* Al Ahli (KSA) 2 *(Omar Al Soma 74, 90)*
Nasaf 0 Al Ahli (UAE) 1 *(Everton Ribeiro 81)*
21/04/15
Tractorsazi Tabriz 1 *(Mehdi Kiani 52)* Nasaf 2 *(Artur Gevorkyan 59, 71)*
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 *(Muhannad Asiri 78, Bruno Cesar 90+4)*
Al Ahli (UAE) 1 *(Everton Ribeiro 16)*
05/05/15
Al Ahli (UAE) 3 *(Everton Ribeiro 58, Ahmed Khalil 77, 88)* Tractorsazi Tabriz 2 *(Mehrdad Bayrami 21, Saman Narimanjahan 67)*
Nasaf 0 Al Ahli (KSA) 0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Kashiwa	6	3	2	1	14	9	5	11
Jeonbuk	6	3	2	1	14	6	8	11
Shandong	6	2	1	3	13	17	-4	7
Binh Duong	6	1	1	4	6	15	-9	4

24/02/15
Binh Duong 2 *(Ganiyu Oseni 48, Wang Qiang 56 OG)*
Shandong 3 *(Wang Yongpo 47, Yang Xu 61, 81)*
Jeonbuk 0 Kashiwa 0
03/03/15
Shandong 1 *(Yang Xu 61)* Jeonbuk 4 *(Edu 21, Han Kyo-won 71, Lee Jae-sung 76, Leonardo 90+3)*
Kashiwa 5 *(Masato Kudo 42, 67, David Vrankoic 44 OG, Kim Chang-soo 56, Hidekazu Otani 75)* Binh Duong 1 *(Ganiyu Oseni 82)*
17/03/15
Kashiwa 2 *(Kosuke Taketomi 23, Naoki Wako 90+2)*
Shandong 1 *(Walter Montillo 51)*
Jeonbuk 3 *(Eninho 16, Lee Dong-gook 41, 88)* Binh Duong 0
08/04/15
Shandong 4 *(Wang Yongpo 4, Junior Urso 34, Walter Montillo 37, Yang Xu 49)* Kashiwa 4 *(Leandro 23, Masato Kudo 29, Cristiano 32, 76)*
Binh Duong 1 *(Abass Cheikh Dieng 90+3)* Jeonbuk 1 *(Eninho 31)*
22/04/15
Kashiwa 3 *(Eduardo 9, Kosuke Taketomi 20, 39)*
Jeonbuk 2 *(Lee Dong-gook 67, 81)*
Shandong 3 *(Yang Xu 27, 70, Junior Urso 61)* Binh Duong 1 *(Nguyen Tron Hoang 19)*
06/05/15
Binh Duong 1 *(Le Cong Vinh 56)* Kashiwa 0
Jeonbuk 4 *(Lee Jae-sung 25, Kim Hyung-il 51, Eninho 80, Edu 88)* Shandong 1 *(Wang Tong 45+1)*

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Gamba Osaka	6	3	1	2	10	7	3	10
Seongnam FC	6	3	1	2	7	5	2	10
Buriram United	6	3	1	2	12	7	5	10
Guangzhou R&F	6	1	1	4	3	13	-10	4

24/02/15
Buriram United 2 *(Deeprom Prakit 16, Gilberto Macena 18)* Seongnam FC 1 *(Narubadin Weerawatnodom 87 OG)*
Gamba Osaka 0 Guangzhou R&F 2 *(Hamedallah Abderrazzaq 10, Wang Song 80)*
03/03/15
Seongnam FC 2 *(Ricardo Bueno 8, Hwang Ui-jo 67)*
Gamba Osaka 0
Guangzhou R&F 1 *(Lu Lin 27)* Buriram United 2 *(Ko Seul-ki 44, Gilberto Macena 90)*
17/03/15
Guangzhou R&F 0 Seongnam FC 1 *(Hwang Ui-jo 27)*
18/03/15
Gamba Osaka 1 *(Hiroyuki Abe 39)* Buriram United 1 *(Theerathon Bunmathan 62)*
07/04/15
Seongnam FC 0 Guangzhou R&F 0
Buriram United 1 *(Theerathon Bunmathan 9)* Gamba Osaka 2 *(Lins 41, Kotaro Omori 87)*
22/04/15
Seongnam FC 2 *(Kim Do-heon 27, Nam Joon-jae 38)*
Buriram United 1 *(Diogo 77)*
Guangzhou R&F 0 Gamba Osaka 5 *(Patric 14, 45, Hiroyuki Abe 44, 68, Takashi Usami 70)*
06/05/15
Buriram United 5 *(Diogo 12, 38, 56, Andres Tunez 36, Gilberto Macena 59)* Guangzhou R&F 0
Gamba Osaka 2 *(Takashi Usami 64, Lins 82)* Seongnam FC *(Hwang Ui-jo 15)*

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Beijing	6	3	2	1	6	3	3	11
Suwon	6	3	2	1	11	8	3	11
Brisbane	6	2	1	3	7	9	-2	7
Urawa	6	1	1	4	5	9	-4	4

25/02/15
Brisbane 0 Beijing 1 *(Shao Jiayi 90+3)*
Suwon 2 *(Oh Beom-seok 56, Leo 87)* Urawa 1 *(Ryota Moriwaki 45+1)*
04/03/15
Urawa 0 Brisbane 1 *(Brandon Borrello 3)*
Beijing 1 *(Dejan Damjanovic 65)* Suwon 0
17/03/15
Beijing 2 *(Pablo Batalla 78, Yu Dabao 84)* Urawa 0
18/03/15
Brisbane 3 *(Brandon Borrello 13, Devante Clut 22, 80)*
Suwon 3 *(Seo Jung-jin 39, 50, Jong Tae-se 71)*
08/04/15
Urawa 1 *(Tomoaki Makino 74)* Bejing 1 *(Yu Dabao 33)*
Suwon 3 *(Kwon Chang-hoon 51, Seo Jung-jin 59, Yeom Ki-hun 65)* Brisbane 1 *(Luke DeVere 76)*
21/04/15
Urawa 1 *(Zlatan Ljubijankic 69)* Suwon 2 *(Ko Cha-won 74, Kaio 89)*
Beijing 0 Brisbane 1 *(Andrija Kaluderovic 39)*
05/05/15
Suwon 1 *(Leo 27)* Beijing 1 *(Dejan Damjanovic 25)*
Brisbane 1 *(Andrija Kaluderovic 70)* Urawa 2 *(Shinzoh Koroki 24, Yuki Muto 57)*

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Guangzhou	6	3	1	2	9	9	0	10
FC Seoul	6	2	3	1	5	4	1	9
Western Sydney	6	2	2	2	9	7	2	8
Kashima	6	2	0	4	10	13	-3	6

25/02/15
Kashima 1 *(Shoma Doi 68)* Western Sydney 3 *(Gen Shoji 54 OG, Yojiro Takahagi 86, Mark Bridge 90+3)*
Guangzhou 1 *(Ricardo Goulart 31)* FC Seoul 0
04/03/15
Western Sydney 2 *(Iacopo La Rocca 57, Romeo Castelen 90+5)* Guangzhou 3 *(Ricardo Goulart 19, 58, 64)*
FC Seoul 1 *(Kim Jin-kyu 66)* Kashima 0
18/03/15
FC Seoul 0 Western Sydney 0
Guangzhou 4 *(Ricardo Goulart 10, 62, Elkeson 57, Zhao Xuri 90+2)* Kashima 3 *(Hiroyuki Takasaki 36, Shoma Doi 51, Gaku Shibasaki 90+3)*
07/04/15
Western Sydney 1 *(Kerem Bulut)* FC Seoul 1 *(Go Yo-han 72)*
Kashima 2 *(Yasushi Endo 19, Hiroyuki Takasaki 90+3)*
Guangzhou 1 *(Elkeson 75)*
21/04/15
Western Sydney 1 *(Nikita Rukavytsya 24)* Kashima 2 *(Shoma Doi 66, Mu Kanazaki 90+1)*
FC Seoul 0 Guangzhou 0
05/05/15
Guangzhou 0 Western Sydney 2 *(Mark Bridge 33, Tomi Juric 90+3)*
Kashima 2 *(Shuhei Akasaki 8, Gaku Shibasaki 79)* FC Seoul 3 *(Lee Woong-hee 36, Osmar Barba 51, Mauricio Molina 90+1)*

Round of 16

Al Sadd v Lekhwiya
19/05/15
Al Sadd 1 *(Hasan Al Haydos 37)*
Lekhwiya 2 *(Sebastian Soria 13, Youssef Msakni 36)*
26/05/15 Lekhwiya 2 *(Youssef Msakni 13, Ismail Mohamad 83)* Al Sadd 2 *(Muriqui 36, Ali Asadalla 63)*
Lekhwiya win 4-3 on aggregate

Al Ahli (UAE) v Al Ain
20/05/15
Persepolis 1 *(Digao 90+2 OG)* Al Hilal 0
27/05/15
Al Ain 3 *(Asamoah Gyan 5, 78, Rashed Eisa 90+2)* Al Ahli (UAE) 3 *(Salmin Khamis 51, Ahmed Khalil 53, 56)*
Al Ahli (UAE) win on away goals following a 3-3 draw on aggregate

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors v Beijing Guoan
19/05/15
Jeonbuk 1 *(Kim Kee-hee 13)* Beijing Guoan 1 *(Pablo Batalla 85)*
26/05/15
Beijing Guoan 0 Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 1 *(Edu 73)*
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors win 2-1 on aggregate

Seongnam FC v Guangzhou Evergrande
20/05/15
Seongnam FC 2 *(Jorginho 23, Kim Do-heon 90+5)*
Guangzhou 1 *(Huang Bowen 42)*
26/05/15
Guangzhou 2 *(Ricardo Goulart 27, 57)* Seongnam FC 0
Guangzhou Evergrande win 3-1 on aggregate

Persepolis v Al Hilal
19/05/15
Persepolis 1 *(Digao 90+2 OG)* Al Hilal 0
26/05/15
Al Hilal 3 *(Yousef Al Salem 29, Mohammed Al Shalhoub 57, Abdulaziz Al Dawsari 90+1)* Persepolis 0
Al Hilal win 3-1 on aggregate

Naft Tehran v Al Ahli (KSA)
20/05/15
Naft Tehran 1 *(Gholamreza Rezaei 34)* Al Ahli (KSA) 0
27/05/15
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 *(Omar Al Soma 36, 42)* Naft Tehran 1 *(Leandro Padovani 31)*
Naft Tehran win on away goals following a 3-3 draw on aggregate

Suwon Samsung v Kashiwa Reysol
19/05/15
Suwon 2 *(Yeom Ki-hun 1, Jong Tae-se 59)* Kashiwa 3 *(Akimi Barada 12, Leandro 29, 56)*
26/05/15 Kashiwa 1 *(Yusuke Kobayashi 65)* Suwon 2 *(Jong Tae-se 26, Ku Ja-ryong 54)*
Kashiwa win on away goals following a 4-4 draw on aggregate

FC Seoul v Gamba Osaka
20/05/13
FC Seoul 1 *(Yun Ju-tae 90+2)* Gamba Osaka 3 *(Takashi Usami 63, 86, Koki Yonekura 74)*
27/05/13 Gamba Osaka 3 *(Patric 16, Shu Kurata 45, Lins 86)* FC Seoul 2 *(Yun Ju-tae 58, 90+2)*
Gamba Osaka win 6-3 on aggregate

Champion Trio March On In AFC Cup

Defending champions Qadsia SC as well as former AFC Cup winners Al Jaish and Kuwait SC joined Tajikistan's FC Istiklol, Malaysian clubs Johor Darul Ta'zim and Pahang FA and Hong Kong pair Kitchee and South China in securing qualification for the quarter-finals of the AFC Cup in May.

Kuwait's Qadsia SC had struggled in the group stage, although they eventually progressed as the second-place side from Group C, but a 76th minute goal from Fahed Al Ebrahim proved enough against Jordan's Al Wehdat in the Round of 16 for the holders to ensure passage to the last eight.

There were also away wins for countrymen Kuwait SC as well as Kitchee, while inaugural champions Al Jaish of Syria, Johor, South China and debutants Istiklol advanced with home wins in the last 16.

"I want to thank the players for the great effort that they have put in the match as they showed a solid performance against one of the best teams in Jordan," said Qadsia SC coach Rashed Al Bedaih following the Round of 16 win.

"It was a difficult match because it was an away match for us, but we proved that we can win anywhere. We showed our good performance and the players played with big fighting spirits along with high concentration. Al Wehdat put a lot of pressure on us, but we handled this pressure and secured the win."

In Irbid, Adham Sharefa scored from the penalty spot a minute from time to secure Group D winners Al Jaish a place in the quarter-finals with a 1-0 win over Jordan's Al Jazeera.

Al Jaish, winners of the inaugural AFC Cup in 2004, also had goalkeeper Ahmad Madanieh to thank for keeping them in the game with a penalty save seven minutes from the end of a tight clash that saw them return to the last eight for the first time since their title-winning campaign.

Group D runners-up Kuwait SC also left it late in their last 16 clash with Iraqi champions Al Shorta as the three-time AFC Cup winners made the breakthrough 10 minutes from time through a penalty kick from Abdullah Al Buraiki before former AFC Foreign Player of the Year Rogerinho added a second deep in stoppage time.

Newcomers Istiklol, meanwhile, continued their historic maiden AFC Cup campaign as they became the first side from Tajikistan to reach the quarter-finals after a dramatic 4-2 penalty shootout victory over Syria's Al Wahda following a 1-1 draw after extra-time.

Raslan Al Kurdi's header had given the Syrian champions the lead only for the unfortunate defender to level the scores 12 minutes before the break following a misplaced clearance.

And after 120 minutes were unable to separate the two sides, Group C winners Istiklol netted all four penalties while goalkeeper Nikola Stosic first saved from Osama Omari before watching as Al Wahda's Mahmoud Khadouj missed the vital spot-kick to hand the home side the milestone victory.

"I am happy with tonight`s result as we have given a holiday to Tajik football fans. It was our dream before the game," said Istiklol coach Mubin Ergashev following the win at Dushanbe's Republican Central Stadium.

"It was difficult. We couldn`t begin very well, maybe we had a little pressure. But I must say my thanks to my players. We are the first team from our country to qualify to the quarter-finals of the AFC Cup and the most important thing is the victory."

Elsewhere, Argentinean forward Jorge Pereyra Diaz stole the show with two goals and two assists as Group F winners Johor Darul Ta'zim eased to a 5-0 win over Myanmar's Ayeyawady United in their last 16 clash at Stadium Tan Sri Dato' Haji Yunos.

A double from countryman Luciano Figueroa and a strike from captain Safiq Rahim completed the win over the Group H runners-up as the Malaysians advanced to their first-ever AFC Cup quarter-final appearance.

Also in the East, 2014 semi-finalists Kitchee overcame a tricky away tie at Persib Bandung thanks to first half goals from 2014 AFC Cup Top Scorer Juan Belencoso and midfielder Lam Ka Wai in a 2-0 victory in Indonesia.

South China advanced to the last eight for the first time since 2009 by the same scoreline as their domestic rivals as a brace from Australian veteran Daniel McBreen saw them beat India's JSW Bengaluru 2-0 at Mongkok Stadium.

And Malaysia's Pahang joined compatriots Johor in the quarter-finals after being awarded a 3-0 win over Indonesia's Persipura Jayapura.

Group Stage

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Wehdat	6	4	1	1	16	3	13	13
Al Wahda	6	3	2	1	8	4	4	11
Al Nahda	6	2	1	3	7	11	-4	7
Salam Zgharta	6	1	0	5	5	18	-13	3

24/02/15
Al Wehdat 5 *(Mahmoud Shelbaieh 7, 82, Saleh Ibrahim 24, Mahmoud Zatara 90+2, 90+3)* Salam Zgharta 1 *(Lucas Galan 34)*
Al Wahda 1 *(Mohammad Jafar 15)* Al Nahda 2 *(Ely Cheikh Samba 41, Salim Juma 68)*
10/03/15
Salam Zgharta 0 Al Wahda 2 *(Abdulkader Deka 45, Mohammad Hamdkou 90)*
Al Nahda 0 Al Wehdat 3 *(Monther Abu Amara 20, Mahmoud Zatara 76, Tall Malick 90+2)*
17/03/15
Salam Zgharta 2 *(Abou Bakr Al Mel 38, 62)* Al Nahda 1 *(Said Al Razaiqi 45+2)*
Al Wehdat 0 Al Wahda 1 *(Osama Omari 6)*
14/04/15
Al Nahda 4 *(Ely Cheikh Samba 14, 19, Mansoor Al Naaimi 28, Mohammed Al Shamsi 90+1)* Salam Zgharta 1 *(Lucas Galan 48)*
15/05/15
Al Wahda 1 *(Osama Omari 88)* Al Wehdat 1 *(Monther Abu Amara 27)*
28/04/15
Salam Zgharta 0 Al Wehdat 3 *(Monther Abu Amara 25, Amer Deeb 38, Tall Malick 65)*
Al Nahda 0 Al Wahda 0
12/05/15
Al Wehdat 4 *(Amer Deeb 35, Ahmad Elias 38,Mohammad Al Basha 75, Mahmoud Zatara 89)* Al Nahda 0
Al Wahda 3 *(Mohammad Jafar 43, 57, Osama Omari 90)* Salam Zgharta *(Yehya El Jasem 90+3)*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Shorta	6	2	3	1	14	7	7	9
Al Jazeera	6	2	3	1	6	7	-1	9
Wad Alness	6	1	3	2	6	11	-5	6
Al Hidd	6	0	5	1	6	7	-1	5

24/02/15
Wad Alness 1 *(Abuhammad Sameeh 90+4)* Al Jazeera 1 *(Raèd Fraeh 31)*
Al Shorta 2 *(Waleed Salim 2, Amjed Kalaf 13)* Al Hidd 2 *(Rico 28, Jasim Ayyash 45+1)*
10/03/15
Al Jazeera 1 *(Franco De Souza 12)* Al Shorta 1 *(Mahdi Kareem 7)*
Al Hidd 1 *(Sayed Adnan 4)* Wad Alness 1 *(Hazem Abuhammad 90+4)*
17/03/15
Al Shorta 6 *(Alaa Abdul Zahra 20, 35, Amjed Kalaf 34, Marwan Hussein 45+1, 90+1, Dhurgham Ismail 63)* Wad Alness 2 *(Fadi Zidan 40, 86)*
Al Hidd 1 *(Rico 54)* Al Jazeera 1 *(Amer Abuhudieab 68)*
14/04/15
Wad Alness 1 *(Abuhammad Sameeh 83)* Al Shorta 0
Al Jazeera 1 *(Fadi Al Natour 75)* Al Hidd 0
28/04/15
Al Jazeera 2 *(Raèd Fraeh 26, Mohammad Tamous 50)* Wad Alness 0
Al Hidd 1 *(Ifedayo Omosuyi 77)* Al Shorta 1 *(Makadji Boukar 82)*
12/05/15
Al Shorta 4 *(Marwan Hussein 19, 53, Caion 50, Waleed Salim 76)* Al Jazeera 0
Wad Alness 1 *(Said Al Shakhi 29)* Al Hidd 1 *(Ahmed Al Khattal 81)*

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
FC Istiklol	6	3	2	1	12	8	4	11
Qadsia SC	6	3	1	2	7	6	1	10
Arbil	6	2	1	3	8	8	0	7
Ahal FC	6	2	0	4	8	13	-5	6

25/02/15
FC Istiklol 1 *(Mustafa Nadhim 60 OG)* Arbil 3 *(Ahmed Mohammed 35, Nabeel Sabah 65, Luay Salah 75)*
Qadsia SC 2 *(Saleh Al Sheikh 58, Faisal Abdullah 63)* Ahal FC 0
11/03/15
Ahal FC 1 *(Suleyman Orazov 28)* FC Istiklol 2 *(Fathullo Fathuloev 4, Khurshed Makhmudov 66)*
Arbil 0 Qadsia SC 1 *(Danijel Subotic 77)*
18/03/15
Ahal 2 *(Gurban Annayev 29, 90+1)* FC Arbil 1 (*Luay Salah 30)*
Qadsia SC 2 *(Bader Al Mutawa 3, 54)* FC Istiklol 2 *(Manuchehr Dzhalilov 36, Dilshod Vasiev 45+1)*
15/04/15
FC Istiklol 2 *(Nuriddin Davronov 53, Manuchehr Dzhalilov 63)* Qadsia SC 0
Arbil 2 *(Younus Mahmood 41, 65)* Ahal 3 *(Zafar Babajanov 47, Mamedaly Karadanov 73, 75)*
29/04/15
Ahal 0 Qadsia SC 1 *(Bader Al Mutawa 20)*
Arbil 0 FC Istiklol 0
13/05/15
Qadsia SC 1 *(Hamad Aman 49)* Arbil *(Luay Salah 45+1, Mohammed Al Jumaili 52)*
FC Istiklol 5 *(Manuchehr Dzhalilov 9, 90+1, Khurshed Makhmudov 28, Manuel Bleda 31, Rahmet Shermetov 53 OG)* Ahal 2 *(Mamedaly Karadanov 32, Altymurad Annadurdiyev 90+3)*

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Jaish	6	4	2	0	6	1	5	14
Kuwait SC	6	3	1	2	9	6	3	10
Riffa	6	2	2	2	7	7	0	8
Nejmeh	6	0	1	5	4	12	-8	1

25/02/15
Kuwait SC 4 *(Ahmad Al Saqer 16, Husain Hakim 52, Chadi Hammami 83, Ahmad Dhahi 89)* Nejmeh 1 *(Sy Cheikh 40)*
Riffa 0 Al Jaish 1 *(Bassel Moustafa 66)*
04/03/15
Al Jaish 1 *(Abdulatef Salkeni 88)* Nejmeh 0
Kuwait SC 2 *(Sami Al Sanea 51, Abdullah Al Buraiki 73)* Riffa 1 *(Abdallah Deeb 27)*
17/03/15
Al Jaish 0 Kuwait SC 0
18/03/15
Riffa 2 *(Jhon Obregon 5, Sayed Dhiya 35)* Nejmeh 1 *(Khaled Takaji 45+2)*
15/04/15
Nehmeh 1 *(Abbas Atwi 22)* Riffa 1 *(Abdallah Deeb 32)*
Kuwait SC 0 Al Jaish 1 *(Khaled Kogale 6)*
29/04/15
Nejmeh 1 *(Sy Cheikh 22)* Kuwait SC 2 *(Rogerinho 2, 46)*
Al Jaish 1 *(Bassel Moustafa 36)* Riffa 1 *(Sayed Ali 73)*
13/05/15
Riffa 2 *(Sayed Ahmed 15, Mohammad Al Azmi 74 OG)* Kuwait SC 1 *(Abdullah Al Buraiki 20)*
Nejmeh 0 Al Jaish 2 *(Bassel Moustafa 35, Abdulatef Salkeni 84)*

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Persipura	6	5	1	0	17	4	13	16
JSW Bengaluru	6	4	0	2	8	8	0	12
Maziya Sports	6	2	1	3	7	6	1	7
Warriors FC	6	0	0	6	1	15	-14	0

24/02/15
JSW Bengaluru 2 *(Sunil Chhetri 67, Shankar Sampingiraj 90+3)* Maziya Sports & Recreation 1 *(Mohamed Umair 89)*
Warriors FC 1 *(Andy Ahmad 69)* Persipura Jayapura 3 *(Lancine Kone 30, Boaz Solossa 34, Nelson Alom 58)*
11/03/15
Persipura Jayapura 3 *(Ian Kabes 4, Robertino Pugliara 23, 50)* JSW Bengaluru 1 *(Vineeth Chekiyot 90)*
Maziya Sports & Recreation 2 *(Asadhulla Abdulla 47, Pablo Rodriguez 88)* Warriors FC 0
17/03/15
Maziya Sports & Recreation 1 *(Asadhulla Abdulla 78)*
Persipura Jayapura 2 *(Boaz Solossa 35, Lancine Kone 77)*
JSW Bengaluru 1 *(Joshua Walker 36)* Warriors FC 0
14/04/15
Persipura Jayapura 0 Maziya Sports & Recreation 0
Warriors FC 0 JSW Bengaluru 1 *(Robin Singh 76)*
28/04/15
Persipura Jayapura 6 *(Bio Paulin 19, Ian Kabe 41, 58, Boaz Solossa 53, 56, Gerald Pangkali 88)* Warriors FC 0
Maziya Sports & Recreation 1 *(Pablo Rodriguez 60)* JSW Bengaluru 2 *(Sunil Chhetri 70, 78)*
12/05/15
JSW Bengaluru 1 *(Udanta Singh 24)* Persipura Jayapura 3 *(Robertino Pugliara 29, Imanuel Wanggai 72, Boaz Solossa 77)*
Warriors FC 0 Maziya Sports & Recreation 2 *(Mohamed Umair 49, Pablo Rodriguez 90+3)*

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Johor Darul Ta'zim	6	5	0	1	11	3	8	15
Kitchee	6	3	2	1	10	6	4	11
East Bengal	6	1	2	3	8	10	-2	5
Balestier Khalsa	6	1	0	5	3	13	-10	3

24/02/15
Kitchee 3 *(Xu Deshuai 21, Ngan Lok Fung 67, Jordi Tarres 90)* Balestier Khalsa FC 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim 4 *(Nazrin Nawi 9, Safiq Rahim 38, Suppiah Chanturu 47, Safee Sali 53)* Kingfisher East Bengal 1 *(Ranti Martins 35)*
10/03/15
Kingfisher East Bengal 1 *(Ranti Martins 74) Kitchee 1 (Juan Belencoso 30)*
Balestier Khalsa FC 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim 1 *(Asraruddin Omar 90+3)*
17/03/15
Balestier Khalsa 2 *(Xu Weihua 6, Miroslav Kristic 19)*
Kingfisher East Bengal 1 *(Dudu Omagbemi 82)*
Kitchee 2 *(Juan Belencoso 27, Jordi Tarres 35)* Johor Darul Ta'zim 0
14/04/15
Kingfisher East Bengal 3 *(Baldeep Singh 22, Nurullah Hussein 71 OG, Ranti Martins 75)* Balestier Khalsa 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim 2 *(Luciano Figueroa 17, Safiq Rahim 44)* Kitchee 0
28/04/15
Kingfisher East Bengal 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim 1 *(Raju Gaikwad 6 OG)*
Balestier Khalsa 1 *(Muhammad Fadhil 33)* Kitchee 2 *(Juan Belencoso 14, 61)*
12/05/15
Kitchee 2 *(Lam Ka Wai 15, Xu Deshuai 59)* Kingfisher East Bengal 2 *(Ranti Martins 80, Cavin Lobo 89)*
Johor Darul Ta'zim 3 *(Safee Sali 76, Safiq Rahim 85, Luciano Figueroa 90)* Balestier Khalsa 0

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
South China	6	6	0	0	19	3	16	18
Pahang FA	6	2	2	2	11	10	1	8
Global FC	6	1	2	3	5	12	-7	5
Yadanarbon	6	1	0	5	10	20	-10	3

25/0/15
Yadanarbon 2 *(Damion Stewart 35 OG, Djawa Maximin 55)* Pahang FA 3 *(Dickson Nwakaeme 6, 12, Gopinathan Ramachandra 89)*
Global FC 1 *(Michael Jonsson 87)* South China 6 *(Daniel McBreen 2, 27, Lo Kong Wai 39, Chan Wai Ho 50, Mahama Awal 66, 75)*
11/03/15
South China 3 *(Lo Kong Wai 13, Mahama Awal 19, Daniel McBreen 38)* Yadanarbon 1 *(Zaw Lin Tun 88)*
Pahang FA 0 Global FC 0
18/03/15
Yadanarbon 2 *(Djedje Djawa 52, Win Htay Kyaw 90+4)* Global FC 0
Pahang FA 0 South China 1 *(Chan Siu Ki 13)*
15/04/15
South China 3 *(Chan Siu Kwan 10, Lo Kong Wai 53, Jack Sealy 56)* Pahang FA 1 *(Dickson Nwakaeme 62)*
Global FC 4 *(Mark Hartmann 16, 40, Misagh Bahadoran 60, Renato Gonzalez 83)* Yadanarbon 1 *(Yan Paing 19)*
29/04/15
South China 3 *(Cheng Lai Hin 40, Bojan Malisic 55, Daniel McBreen 90+2)* Global FC 0
Pahang FA 7 *(Dickson Nwakaeme 7, 32, 59, Matias Conti 18, Devandran Saarvindran 48, 87, Hafiz Kamal 85)*
Yadanarbon 4 *(Djedje Djawa 45+1, Hlaing Bo Bo 58, 68, Win Naing Soe 90+1)*
13/05/15
Yadanarbon 0 South China 3 *(Daniel McBreen 27, 60, Lam Hok Hei 40)*
Global FC 0 Pahang FA 0

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Persib Bandung	6	3	3	0	10	5	5	12
Ayeyawady Utd	6	2	4	0	13	9	4	10
New Radiant SC	6	1	2	3	4	10	-6	5
Lao FC	6	0	3	3	7	10	-3	3

25/02/15
Persib Bandung 4 *(Achmad Jufriyanto 15, Makan Konate 42, Atep Rizal 45+1, Yandi Sofyan 90+2)* New Radiant SC 1 *(Ashad Ali 60)*
Lao FC 2 *(Sitthideth Khanthavong 63, Phatthana Syvilay 65)* Ayeyawady United 2 *(Riste Naumov 21, 57)*
11/03/15
Ayeyawady United 1 *(Edison Fonseca 58)* Persib Bandung 1 *(Atep Rizal 45)*
New Radiant SC 2 *(Patrick Okoro 69, Ashad Ali 88)* Lao FC 1 *(Maitee Hatsady 38)*
18/03/15
Persib Bandung 1 *(Atep Rizal 20)* Lao FC 0
New Radiant SC 0 Ayeyawady United 3 *(Edison Fonseca 34, Riste Naumov 86, 90+3)*
15/04/15
Ayeyawady United 0 New Radiant SC 0
Lao FC 0 Persib Bandung 0
29/04/15
Ayeyawady United 4 *(Edison Fonseca 9, 86, Riste Naumov 69, 80)* Lao FC 3 *(Phatthana Syvilay 28, Maitee Hatsady 42, Kazuo Homma 74)*
New Radiant SC 0 Persib Bandung 1 *(Muhammad Ridwan 14)*
13/05/15
Lao FC New Radiant SC
Persib Bandung 3 *(Supardi Nasir 29, Muhammad Ridwan 52, Makan Konate 90)* Ayeyawady United 3 *(Riste Naumov 44, 76; Nay Lin Aung 90+3)*

Round of 16

Persipura Jayapura v Pahang FA
26/05/15
Persipura Jayapura 0 Pahang FA 3
Pahang FA awarded 3-0 win due to decision by the AFC Executive Commitee

Al Wehdat v Qadsia SC
26/05/15
Al Wehdat 0 Qadsia SC 1 *(Fahed Al Ebrahim 76)*

FC Istiklol v Al Wahda
26/05/15
FC Istiklol 1 *(Raslan Al Kurdi 34 OG)* Al Wahda 1 *(Raslan Al Kurdi 21)*
FC Istiklol win 4-2 on penalties

South China v JSW Bengaluru
26/05/15
South China 2 *(Daniel McBreen 28, 58)* JSW Bengaluru 0

Al Jaish v Al Jazeera
27/05/15
Al Jaish 1 *(Adham Sharefa 90)* Al Jazeera 0

Persib Bandung v Kitchee
27/05/15
Persib Bandung 0 Kitchee 2 *(Juan Belencoso 32, Lam Ka Wai 44)*

Al Shorta v Kuwait SC
27/05/15
Al Shorta 0 Kuwait SC 2 *(Abdullah Al Buraiki 80, Rogerinho 90+4)*

Johor Darul Ta'zim v Ayeyawady United
27/05/15
Johor Darul Ta'zim 5 *(Safiq Rahim 1, Jorge Pereyra Diaz 61, 74, Luciano Figueroa 46, 90+1)* Ayeyawady United 0

Oman Crowned Beach Soccer Champions

Oman won their first-ever Asian beach soccer title after edging out Japan 3-2 on penalties following a 1-1 draw after extra-time in March's final of the AFC Beach Soccer Championship in Qatar.

Goalkeeper Haitham Showan saved the decisive spot-kick in the shootout to hand Oman victory after Japan captain Ozu Moreira had cancelled out counterpart Hani Al Dhabat's second minute opener.

With no further changes to the scores in overtime, successful penalties from Al Dhabat and Mandhar Hilal were matched by Moreira and Shinji Makino.

But after Abdullah Masoud scored for Oman,Takasuke Goto then failed to beat Harib to give the Sultanate a historic victory.

In doing so, Talib Al Thanawi's undefeated side clinched one of the three tickets on offer for the 2015 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup, where they will make their second appearance in the tournament after the 2011 edition in Italy.

Joining Oman in Portugal as Asia's representatives will be beaten finalists Japan and Iran, who lost in extra-time to the Samurai Blue in the semi-finals but finished third after sweeping aside Lebanon 8-3 in the third place play-off.

Runners-up in the 2011 edition held on home soil in Muscat, Oman began their campaign in Doha with a narrow 3-2 win over Bahrain before easing to wins over both Laos and Qatar to seal Group A in convincing fashion.

Quarter-final opponent China were also comfortably dispatched as Khalid Al Oraimi's hat-trick led Oman to a 7-2 victory.

In the semi-finals, though, Lebanon proved a much tougher adversary and Al Thanawi's team needed Yahya Al Araimi's 39th minute winner to seal a thrilling 5-4 victory over extra-time.

Japan, too, came into the final with a 100% record after cruising through Group B with wins over Kuwait, Vietnam and China.

Marcelo Mendes' side then beat Bahrain in the quarter-finals before squeezing past Iran 5-4 in the semi-finals.

And despite losing in the final to Oman, Japan will make their continent-leading eighth consecutive appearance at the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in June.

Iran, who have previously featured at five FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup tournaments, also began their qualification campaign for the 2015 edition in confident fashion with back-to-back victories over Lebanon and Thailand to top the three-team Group D.

But after beating the United Arab Emirates in the quarter-finals, Iran found Japan one step too far as Marco Octavio's side lost 5-4 in what was their only defeat of the competition.

Iran, though, bounced back in the third place play-off and Mohammad Amadzadeh scored four goals as Octavio's side recorded a 8-3 win over Lebanon.

Uzbekistan, who had topped Group C with a perfect record, lost 6-1 to Lebanon in the quarter-finals before also suffering a narrow 3-2 defeat at the hands of Bahrain in the seventh place play-off.

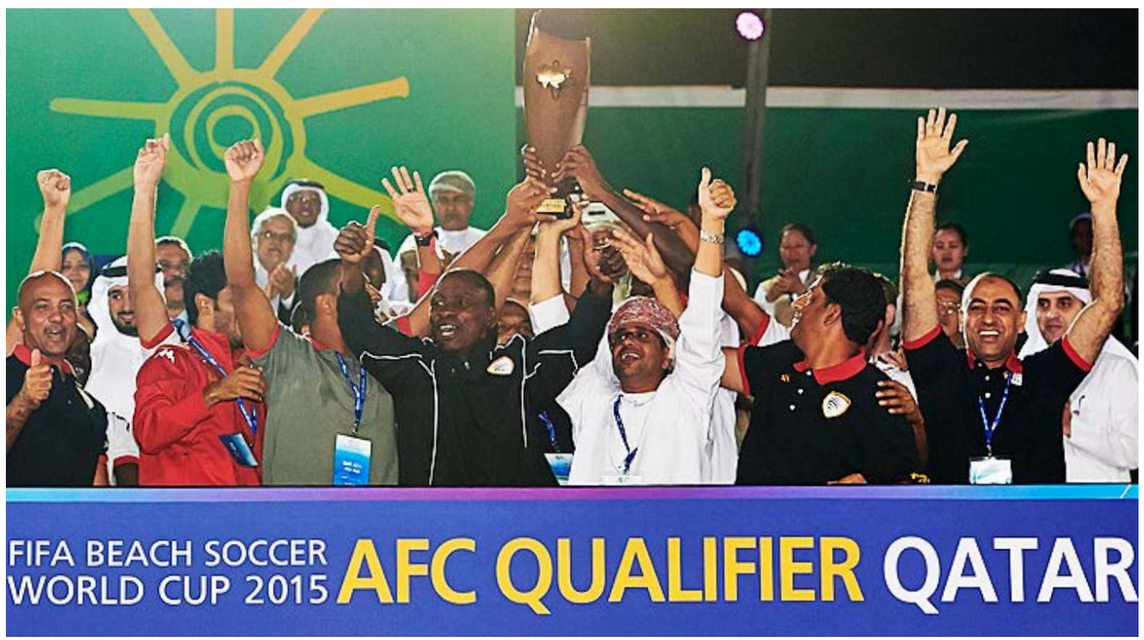
The UAE proved too good for China in the play-off for fifth place as Haitham Mohamed's hat-trick secured a 5-1 victory.

Japanese duo Goto and Moreira and Vietnam's Bui Tran Tuan Anh topped the scoring charts with eight goals.

Tuan Anh's total was particularly impressive after needing just two games to net five times against China before recording a hat-trick against Kuwait.

Joining Iran's Amadzadeh a further goal back were the UAE's Ali Hasan, Haitham Fattal of Lebanon and Oman's Ghaith Sebeit and Al Araimi.

Japan captain Moreira was named the tournament's MVP after combining with Goto to net over half of Japan's total tally for the tournament, while Iran's Seyed Peyman Hosseini was named the best goalkeeper.



Group A

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Oman	3	3	0	0	0	19	5	14	9
Bahrain	3	2	0	0	1	16	6	10	6
Laos	3	1	0	0	2	11	21	-10	3
Qatar	3	0	0	0	3	6	20	-14	0

23/03/15
Oman 3 *(Hani Al Dhabat 11, Jalal Khamis 18, Yahya Al Araimi 36)* Bahrain 2 *(Ayoob Naseeb 21, Abdulla Abdullatif 31)*
Qatar 5 *(Hamad Al Sharqi 5, 20, Jafal Rashid 17, Mohamed Hashim 19, Nanthaly Savatdy 21 OG)*
Laos 6 *(Chiew Nonmany 3, 16, 31, Souksakhone Bountathip 7, 29, Tona Bounmalay 29)*
24/03/15
Laos 3 *(Chiew Nonmany 16, Nanthaly Savatdy 29, 30)*
Oman 8 *(Yahya Al Araimi 2, 15, Abdullah Masoud 18, Hani Al Dhabat 20, Tona Bounmalay 23OG, Ghaith Sebiet 23, 35, Mandhar Hilal 33)*
Bahrain 6 *(Abdulla Abdullatif 6, 29, Rashed Jamal 17, 25, 30, Jasim Rashed 24)* Qatar 1 *(Jafal Rashid 30)*
25/03/15
Bahrain 8 *(Rashed Jamal 5, 17, Thani Salem 9, Ayoob Naseeb 27, 29, 31, Ebrahim Hasan 34, Abdulla Abdullatif 34)* Laos 2 *(Tona Bounmalay 9, Vatsana Sisoulath 34)*
Qatar 0 Oman 8 *(Yahya Al Araimi 8, Ghaith Sebiet 12, 15, 34, 34, Abdullah Masoud 16, Hani Al Dhabat 26, Yaqoob Rabia 29)*

Group B

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	0	13	5	8	9
China	3	1	0	1	1	12	15	-3	4
Kuwait	3	1	0	0	2	12	13	-1	3
Vietnam	3	0	0	0	3	13	17	-4	0

23/03/15
China 8 *(Liu Yisi 1, 24, Chen Xiaowei 7, Wen Chao 25, 32)* Vietnam 7 *(Bui Tran Tuan Anh 3, 4, 11, 23, 26)*
China win 3-2 on penalties
Japan 5 *(Ozu Moreira 11, 12, 21, Taksuke Goto 5, 13)*
Kuwait 3 *(Ali Al Saif 8, 12; Abdullatif Al Hamad 12)*
24/03/15
Kuwait 3 *(Mohammad Bu Abbas 2, Ali Al Saif 18, Mohammed Hajeyah 31)* China 4 *(Wan Chao 2, Liu Yisi 24, Cai Weiming 25, 33)*
Vietnam 2 *(Le Ngoc Phuoc 27, Tran Vinh Phong 20)*
Japan 3 *(Taksuke Goto 2, Ozu Moreira 4, Takuya Akaguma 11)*
25/03/15
Vietnam 4 *(Tran Vinh Phong 9, Bui Tran Tuan Anh 16, 17, 35)* Kuwait 6 *(Ali Al Saif 8, 19, 26, Abdullatif Al Hamad 10, 23, Mohammad Bu Abbas 14)*
Japan 5 *(Takuya Akaguma 2, Takasuke Goto 15, 34, 36, Ozu Moreira 33)* China 0

Group C

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Uzbekistan	2	2	0	0	0	12	6	6	6
UAE	2	1	0	0	1	12	11	1	3
Iraq	2	0	0	0	2	6	13	-7	0

23/03/15
United Arab Emirates 7 *(Hasan Ali 2, 4, 12, Adel Ali 5, Ali Karim 13, 17, 29)* Iraq 5 *(Ali Joudah 3, Abdullah Suhail 19, 21, Hussein Jabar 27, 32)*
24/03/15
Uzbekistan 6 *(Haitham Mohamed 20 OG, Jafar Irismetov 21, 33, 33, Tokhir Abdurazzakov 24, Sarvar Kholmurodov 31)* United Arab Emirates 5 *(Ali Mohammad 10, 31, Mohamed Al Zaabi 24, Ali Karim 25, Haitham Mohamed 30)*
25/03/15
Uzbekistan 6 *(Feruz Fakhriddinov 2, Jamoliddin Sharipov 4, 15, Sarvar Kholmurodov 11, 16, Jafar Irismetov 22)* Iraq 1 *(Hussein Jabar 33)*

Group D

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iran	2	2	0	0	0	11	3	8	6
Lebanon	2	0	1	0	1	5	5	0	2
Thailand	2	0	0	0	2	3	11	-8	0

23/03/15
Iran 3 *(Mohammadali Sadeghi 13, Farid Boulokbashi 29, Mohammad Ahmadzadeh 35)* Lebanon 2 *(Ahmed Grada 8, Mohamad Halawi 35)*
24/03/15
Thailand 2 *(Komkrit Nanan 1, 18)* Lebanon 3 *(Haitham Fattal 1, 2 Mohamad Halawi 37)* AET
25/03/15
Iran 8 *(Seyed Pejman Hosseini 3, Farid Boulokbashi 4, 17, Mohammadali Sadeghi 8, Hassan Abdollahi 8, Mohammad Moradi 19, 33, Ali Naderi 34)* Thailand 1 *(Vitoon Tapinna 23)*

Quarter-Finals

26/03/15
Uzbekistan 1 *(Ganisher Kholmurodov 20)* Lebanon 6 *(Mohamad Merhi 8, 13, Haitham Fattal 24, 27, 33, Mohamed Choker 26)*
Iran 6 *(Mehran Morshedizadeh 7, Seyed Pejman Hosseini 15, Amir Akbari 27, Mohammad Ahmedzadeh 28, Ali Naderi 30, Farid Boulokbashi 34)* United Arab Emirates 1 *(Ali Karim 4)*
Oman 7 *(Hani Al Dhabat 3, Khalid Al Oraimi 12, 29, 31, Yahya Al Araimi 15, Jalal Khamis 20, Ghaith Sebiet 24)* China 2 *(Cai Weiming 3, Wan Chao 27)*
Japan 5 *(Takaaki Oba 13, Ozu Moreira 23, Hirofumi Oda 29, Shinji Makino 30, Salman Khaled 35 OG)*
Bahrain 2 *(Rashed Jamal 2, Ayoob Naseeb 33)*

Play-off Semi-Finals

27/03/15
Uzbekistan 3 *(Jamoliddin Sharipov 15, 17, Sarvar Kholmurodov 18)* China 4 *(Wan Chao 12, Cai Weiming 18, Hao Minhui 22, Wen Tingyuan 28)*
United Arab Emirates 2 *(Hasan Ali 16, Ali Karim 35)*
Bahrain 1 *(Salman Khaled 17)*

Semi-Finals

27/03/15
Lebanon 4 *(Haitham Fattal 17, Ahmed Grada 27, 34, Mohamad Merhi 34)* Oman 5 *(Yahya Al Araimi 16, 39, Khalid Khamis 18, Mandhar Hilal 32, Mohamad Merhi 34 OG) AET*
Iran 4 *(Hassan Abdollahi 8, 20, Mohammad Ahmadzadeh 12, Mostafa Kiani 35)* Japan 5 *(Hirofumi Oda 15, Shusei Yamauchi 16, Takasuke Goto 17, 20, Ozu Moreira 32)*

Seventh Place Play-off

28/03/15
Uzbekistan 2 *(Jafar Irismetov 6, 11)* Bahrain 3 *(Mohamed Ashoor 8, Salman Khaled 30, Salem Thani 38)*
DPR Korea win 4-1 on penalties

Fifth Place Play-off

28/03/15
China 1 *(Fu Xiaojun 29)* United Arab Emirates 5 *(Ali Karim 4, Haitham Mohamed 6, 12, 25, Mohamed Al Zaabi 16)*

Third Place Play-off

28/03/15
Lebanon 3 *(Mohamed Choker 17, Haitham Fattal 20, Mohamad Merhi 26)* Iran 8 *(Mohammad Moradi 9, Mohammadali Mokhtari 12, Ali Naderi 13, 29, Mohammad Amadzadeh 15, 21, 28, 33)*

Final

28/03/15
Oman 1 *(Hani Al Dhabat 2)* Japan 1 *(Ozu Moreira 23)*
AET Oman win 3-2 on penalties

The Asahi Shimbun AJW

The Asahi Shimbun AJW (Asia & Japan Watch)

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Line-Up Set For 2016 AFC U-23 Championship

Hosts Qatar will be joined by group winners Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Australia, DPR Korea, Korea Republic, Japan and China as well as best second placed finishers Thailand, Iran, Vietnam, Yemen and Uzbekistan at the 2016 AFC U-23 Championship following the completion of the qualifiers.

Defending champions Iraq made the ideal start to the campaign to advance to the tournament, which also acts as a qualifier for the 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil, by defeating Lebanon 4-1 in Muscat.

And having edged out Saudi Arabia 1-0 in the final of the inaugural tournament in 2014, Iraq then beat the Maldives 7-1 before needing a pair of late goals to edge out Bahrain.

Iraq completed their unbeaten record in Group A with a 2-2 draw against hosts Oman, who came back from two goals down to qualify as one of the best second-place finishers.

Jordan sealed progress as winners of Group B in May after topping the standings also with an unbeaten record.

In Group C, 2014 runners-up Saudi Arabia beat hosts Iran 2-1 on the final Matchday to top the table by a point although both sides secured progress to the finals in Qatar.

In the UAE, the hosts posted a 100% record to ease into the finals following three straight victories over Sri Lanka, Tajikistan and Yemen to win Group D.

But Yemen secured qualification as another of the best-placed runners-up.

Syria and Australia also posted 100% records to top Group E and Group F having won all three games.

Uzbekistan did progress from Group E after beating India and Bangladesh, although Group F runners-up Myanmar missed out.

In Group G, a superior goal difference saw DPR Korea edge out Thailand, although the hosts also advanced to the finals as one of the best second-placed sides.

Korea Republic and Japan, meanwhile, posted perfect records in Groups H and I to ensure their progress.

And after beating Malaysia and Macau either side of their defeat by Japan, Vietnam eventually also progressed as one of the best second-placed finishers.

Finally in Group J, China posted convincing wins over Laos, Singapore and Mongolia to top the table with another 100% record and earn their place at the finals in Qatar next year.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iraq	4	3	1	0	15	4	11	10
Oman	4	2	2	0	12	3	9	8
Bahrain	4	1	2	1	4	3	1	5
Lebanon	4	1	1	2	3	9	-6	4
Maldives	4	0	0	4	2	17	-15	0

23/03/15
Bahrain 1 Oman 1
Maldives 1 Lebanon 2
25/03/15
Lebanon 1 Iraq 4
Maldives 0 Bahrain 3
27/03/15
Iraq 7 Maldives 1
Oman 4 Lebanon 0
29/03/15
Oman 5 Maldives 0
Bahrain 0 Iraq 2
31/03/15
Lebanon 0 Bahrain 0
Iraq 2 Oman 2

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	3	2	1	0	12	3	9	7
Kuwait	3	1	2	0	5	3	2	5
Pakistan	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Kyrgyzstan	3	0	1	2	1	7	-6	1

16/05/15
Jordan 5 Pakistan 0
Kuwait 0 Kyrgyzstan 0
18/05/15
Pakistan 0 Kuwait 2
Kyrgyzstan 0 Jordan 4
20/05/15
Jordan 3 Kuwait 3
Kyrgyzstan 1 Pakistan 3

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Saudi Arabia	4	3	1	0	9	1	8	10
Iran	4	3	0	1	15	2	13	9
Palestine	4	2	0	2	6	4	2	6
Afghanistan	4	1	1	2	2	8	-6	4
Nepal	4	0	0	4	0	17	-17	0

23/03/15
Nepal 0 Iran 5
Afghanistan 0 Palestine 2
25/03/15
Palestine 0 Saudi Arabia 1
Afghanistan 2 Nepal 0
27/03/15
Saudi Arabia 0 Afghanistan 0
Iran 3 Palestine 0
29/03/15
Iran 6 Afghanistan 0
Nepal 0 Saudi Arabia 6
31/03/15
Palestine 4 Nepal 0
Saudi Arabia 2 Iran 1

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE	3	3	0	0	8	0	8	9
Yemen	3	2	0	1	7	2	5	6
Tajikistan	3	1	0	2	6	6	0	3
Sri Lanka	3	0	0	3	1	14	-13	0

27/03/15
United Arab Emirates 4 Sri Lanka 0
Yemen 2 Tajikistan 1
29/03/15
Sri Lanka 0 Yemen 5
Tajikistan 0 United Arab Emirates 3
31/03/15
United Arab Emirates 1 Yemen 0
Tajikistan 5 Sri Lanka 1

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Syria	3	3	0	0	10	1	9	9
Uzbekistan	3	2	0	1	7	2	5	6
India	3	0	1	2	0	6	-6	1
Bangladesh	3	0	1	2	0	8	-8	1

27/03/15
Syria 4 Bangladesh 0
Uzbekistan 2 India 0
29/03/15
Bangaldesh 0 Uzbekistan 4
India 0 Syria 4
31/03/15
Syria 2 Uzbekistan 1
India 0 Bangladesh 0

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Australia	3	3	0	0	15	1	14	9
Myanmar	3	2	0	1	6	6	0	6
Chinese Taipei	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Hong Kong	3	0	0	3	2	11	-9	0

27/03/15
Australia 6 Hong Kong 0
Myanmar 3 Chinese Taipei 0
29/03/15
Hong Kong 1 Myanmar 2
Chinese Taipei 0 Australia 4
31/03/15
Australia 5 Myanmar 1
Chinese Taipei 3 Hong Kong 1

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
DPR Korea	3	2	1	0	8	1	7	7
Thailand	3	2	1	0	7	2	5	7
Cambodia	3	1	0	2	5	7	-2	3
Philippines	3	0	0	3	2	12	-10	0

27/03/15
DPR Korea 4 Philippines 0
Thailand 2 Cambodia 1
29/03/15
Philippines 1 Thailand 5
Cambodia 1 DPR Korea 4
31/03/15
DPR Korea 0 Thailand 0
Cambodia 3 Philippines 1

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	3	0	0	12	0	12	9
Indonesia	3	2	0	1	7	4	3	6
Timor Leste	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Brunei Darussalam	3	0	0	3	0	10	-10	0

27/03/15
Korea Republic 5 Brunei Darussalam 0
Indonesia 5 Timor Leste 0
29/03/15
Brunei Darussalam 0 Indonesia 2
Timor Leste 0 Korea Republic 3
31/03/15
Korea Republic 4 Indonesia 0
Timor Leste 3 Brunei Darussalam 0

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	10	0	10	9
Vietnam	3	2	0	1	9	3	6	6
Malaysia	3	1	0	2	3	3	0	3
Macau	3	0	0	3	0	16	-16	0

27/03/15
Japan 7 Macau 0
Malaysia 1 Vietnam 2
29/03/15
Macau 0 Malaysia 2
Vietnam 0 Japan 2
31/03/15
Japan 1 Malaysia 0
Vietnam 7 Macau 0

Group J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
China	3	3	0	0	13	0	13	9
Laos	3	1	1	1	7	3	4	4
Singapore	3	0	2	1	2	7	-5	2
Mongolia	3	0	1	2	2	14	-12	1

27/03/15
China 5 Mongolia 0
Laos 0 Singapore 0
29/03/15
Mongolia 0 Laos 7
Singapore 0 China 5
31/03/15
China 3 Laos 0
Singapore 2 Mongolia 2

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EAST ZONE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	3	0	0	13	1	12	9
Japan	3	2	0	1	21	3	18	6
Chinese Taipei	3	1	0	2	6	11	-5	3
Guam	3	0	0	3	0	25	-25	0

19/05/15
Japan 0 Korea Republic 2
Chinese Taipei 4 Guam 0
20/05/15
Korea Republic 4 Chinese Taipei 1
Guam 0 Japan 14
21/05/15
Japan 7 Chinese Taipei 1
Guam 0 Korea Republic 7

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
DPR Korea	3	3	0	0	32	1	31	9
China	3	2	0	1	23	5	18	6
Hong Kong	3	1	0	2	3	18	-15	3
Northern Mariana	3	0	0	3	1	35	-34	0

19/05/15
China 15 Northern Mariana Islands 0
DPR Korea 10 Hong Kong 0
20/05/15
Northern Mariana Islands 0 DPR Korea 17
Hong Kong 0 China 7
21/05/15
China1 DPR Korea 5
Hong Kong 3 Northern Mariana Islands 1

Semi-Finals

23/05/15
Korea Republic 1 China 4
DPR Korea 3 Japan 0

Third Place Play-off

24/05/15
Korea Republic 1 Japan 4

Final

24/05/15
China 0 DPR Korea 2

EAST ZONE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	4	3	1	0	28	2	26	10
UAE	4	3	1	0	21	2	19	10
Palestine	4	2	0	2	7	15	-8	6
Bahrain	4	1	0	3	4	7	-3	3
Iraq	4	0	0	4	2	36	-34	0

20/04/15
Jordan 20 Iraq 0
United Arab Emirates 7 Palestine 0
21/04/15
Palestine 2 Bahrain 1
United Arab Emirates 1 Jordan 1
22/04/15
Bahrain 1 United Arab Emirates 3
Iraq 2 Palestine 4
24/0/4/15
Iraq 0 United Arab Emirates 10
Jordan 2 Bahrain 0
25/04/15
Palestine 1 Jordan 5
Bahrain 2 Iraq 0

DPR Korea And Jordan Claim Crowns

DPR Korea and Jordan posted undefeated records to claim titles at the AFC-14 Girls' Regional Championships in the West and East Zones in April and May.

In the East, DPR Korea topped a group that contained China, Hong Kong and Northern Mariana Islands before downing Japan in the semi-final and then coming out on top in a return meeting with China in the final to lift the title with a 100% record in Sri Lanka.

A month earlier, Jordan topped a group that contained the United Arab Emirates, Palestine, hosts Bahrain and Iraq to lift the West Zone title.

In Colombo, DPR Korea began their campaign in confident fashion with a 10-0 win over Hong Kong before beating Northern Mariana Islands 17-0.

DPR Korea then crucially beat China 5-1 to impressively top Group B with a 100% record.

Korea Republic, meanwhile, topped Group A after beating Japan 2-0 in their opening game before also recording wins against Chinese Taipei and Guam.

In the semi-finals, DPR Korea dispatched Group A runners-up Japan 3-0, while China recorded 2-0 win over Korea Republic.

And in the final, Choe Kum-ok opened the scoring for DPR Korea nine minutes after half-time before a penalty from Pang Un-sim sealed the win with 20 minutes remaining.

DPR Korea's Kim Ryu-song was named the MVP, while team-mate Kim Yun-ok claimed the top goalscorer honour.

Japan finished third after avenging their group stage loss to Korea Republic by claiming a 4-1 win in the third place play-off.

In Manama, Jordan picked up their third consecutive girls regional title by the narrowest of margins after topping the group by virtue of a superior goal difference over the UAE.

A 20-0 win over Iraq in their opener provided the perfect start for Jordan, who then shared a 1-1 draw with the UAE.

A narrow 2-0 win over hosts Bahrain followed before a 5-1 victory against Palestine provided enough of a boost to their goal difference as Jordan ensured the UAE would finish runners-up with Palestine third, Bahrain fourth and Iraq fifth.

And after netting 12 goals, Jordan's Leen Yasin Mohammad Al Btoush claimed the top goalscorer award as well as the MVP accolade.

AFC & UAFA Sign Cooperation Agreement

The AFC and the Union of Arab Football Associations signed a Memorandum of Understanding to strengthen cooperation and dialogue between the two organisations in specific areas of common interest following the conclusion of April's AFC Congress in Bahrain.

The main focus of the cooperation agreement between the AFC and the Union of Arab Football Associations (UAFA) is education through the exchange of knowledge, experience and resources.

"This Memorandum of Understanding, the first between the AFC and the UAFA, is great news for football in the region," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

"The pooling of resources and expertise between the two organisations will benefit football at all levels in West Asia."

Through the Memorandum of Understanding, the AFC and the UAFA commit to promoting and establishing friendly relations of cooperation, both between themselves and among their Member Associations, serving the interest of football in their respective territories and complying with the Statutes of the AFC, CAF, UAFA and FIFA.

"UAFA is delighted to partner with the AFC to ensure we benefit from the latest information on developments at the international level," said UAFA President Prince Turki Khalid Bin Faisal Al Saud.

"The agreement also means we have regular exchanges between the two organisations on several topics and we can inform the AFC on issues specific to our region."

Key areas of MoU between AFC and UAFA

- Football is beneficial for the physical and mental health of both children and adults.
- Football helps foster and promote fundamental educational and cultural values, such as fair play, team spirit and cooperation, self-control and respect for others.
- Football contributes to social integration, cohesion and participation among Member Associations.
- Football encourages peace and assists in developing tolerance and understanding.
- Football possesses positive educational qualities that are important for the development of sport and society in general.
- Football can significantly contribute to local development and the economy as a whole.

New Date Set For Medical Conference

The 5th AFC Medical Conference will now be held in New Delhi from 30 November until 2 December 2015 after being postponed in April following an outbreak of swine flu in India.

The conference is held every four years since its inception in 1999 in Japan.

The event provides cutting edge, evidence-based scientific information in the field of sports and medicine presented by experts based on research.

The pre-conference programme from November 28-29 will include courses relating to team physicians, sports physiotherapy, anti-doping and orthopedics.

Partnership To Enhance Safety & Security

The AFC and the International Centre for Sport Security signed a wide-ranging partnership agreement to strengthen safety and security in Asian football organisations after the AFC Congress in Bahrain at the end of April.

The agreement between AFC and the International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS) will strengthen existing safety and security regulations, develop training programmes and help assess safety and security within the AFC Member Associations.

"Safety and security is a top priority for the AFC, a basic requirement for any football match to take place. The AFC does everything within its powers to protect players, officials, coaches and spectators across Asia," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

"The ICSS is at the forefront of safeguarding sport and this agreement is a significant step forward in enhancing safety and security practices within the AFC and our Member Associations."

The ICSS is an independent and non-profit organisation that addresses critical issues in sport including corruption and transparency as well as major event safety and venue security.

"This partnership with the AFC represents a significant milestone for the ICSS and builds on our growing portfolio with various sports organisations and other major events rights-holders around the world," said ICSS President Mohammed Hanzab.

"As one of the fastest growing and most diverse football regions in the world, Asia is an important platform for the ICSS to showcase our expertise, as well as providing us with a unique opportunity to work on some of the world's largest major sport events and venues."

Key areas of MoU between AFC and ICSS

- The development of AFC safety and security regulations within the framework of FIFA international guidelines.
- Developing and delivering training programmes to educate security officers within AFC Member Associations, including 'Train the Trainer' programmes.
- Developing key requirements for the security design of sport infrastructure, security operations for clubs, international matches and tournaments taking place in AFC Member Associations.
- Supporting the growth of a professional network of security personnel to ensure the appointment of qualified staff for clubs, international matches and tournaments.
- Reviewing current safety and security documentation and reporting tools for clubs, international matches and tournaments taking place within the AFC.
- Providing safety and security assessments in collaboration with or on behalf of the AFC.

Batch 2014 Coaches Complete Penultimate Module

The AFC Coach Asia programme, which prepares participants for the highest coaching qualification in the continent, completed its fourth module at the end of May in Kuala Lumpur.

The 26 members of the pioneering Batch 2014 group finished the 12-day module of the two-year programme having completed Module Three in Korea Republic, Module Two in China and Module One in Malaysia.

Theoretical and practical sessions were conducted by instructors Richard Bate from the United Kingdom, Vaithilingam Subramaniam from Singapore, Lim Kim Chon from Malaysia and Narayanan Nair Sivaji from Singapore.

Development of movement in team play, goalkeeping, leadership in professional football, sport psychology, student coaching sessions, goalscoring, working with a diamond system of play and attacking deep defensive structures were all covered.

The new coaching development programme, which qualifies participants for the AFC Professional Coaching Diploma known as the 'Pro Diploma', started in April 2014.

Japan Hosts Assistant Referees Course

The Japan Football Association started its biennial International Refereeing Course in May as assistant referees from 12 Member Associations across Asia visited Osaka.

Previously held for referee instructors, the focus of the course was to improve and upgrade the skills of assistant referees while also providing opportunities for the exchange of information and ideas from the participants from Australia, Bangladesh, Bahrain, Cambodia, Guam, Hong Kong, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Northern Mariana Islands, Chinese Taipei, Myanmar and the Philippines.

The five-day course was conducted by a team of the Japan Football Association's leading referee instructors led by FIFA/AFC referee instructor Noboru Ishiyama.

"This year's target is assistant referees who make crucial and important decisions of their own and also assist and support the referees in making correct decisions during the match," said Director of the AFC Referees Department Yoshimi Ogawa.

"However, most training programmes focus on the referees although the difficult and important roles of assistant referees are acknowledged. Therefore it's really a good idea to focus on the assistants this time.

"AFC did not have assistant referee courses until the 2011 season. And AFC Assistant Referees have improved a lot since we launched courses for them in 2012. We look forward to seeing them become AFC Assistant Referees in the near future."

Futsal Benchmark Visit Concludes

The AFC/UEFA Futsal Benchmark Study programme concluded with a visit to UEFA headquarters in Switzerland in April.

The two-day visit, part of an exchange programme between AFC and UEFA, was aimed at further developing and improving futsal in Asia following earlier study visits to Russia and Spain.

The visit, under the AFC Futsal Development Programme, began at UEFA Headquarters with a reception by UEFA's Head of National Team Competitions Lance Kelly, while UEFA Futsal Competitions Manager Laurent Morel also welcomed the visitors.

The AFC delegation, led by AFC Director of Futsal and Beach Soccer Development Ali Targholizade, made a presentation on the current status of Asian futsal, highlighting all AFC futsal competitions, components of the AFC Futsal Development Programme and the progress of the game in Asia.

UEFA also presented on their structure, coach education programmes, futsal competitions, events, marketing and development components.

Bahrain & India Confirmed As Hosts

Bahrain has been confirmed as the host for the 2016 AFC U-19 Championship, while India will be the venue for the same year's AFC U-16 Championship.

A total of 43 Member Associations including hosts Bahrain and 2014 champions Qatar will compete in the qualifiers for the 16-team 2016 AFC U-19 Championship.

The 10 group winners and the five best second-placed teams will qualify for the finals, while hosts Bahrain receive automatic qualification.

Should Bahrain finish top of their qualifying group or in one of the five second best-placed teams, the next second placed team will qualify for the finals following the completion of the qualifiers between 28 September and 6 October.

The 2016 AFC U-16 Championship will also be made up of 16 teams, with 45 nations entering the qualifiers.

The 11 group winners and the four best second-placed teams will qualify for the finals following September's qualifiers, with hosts India receiving automatic qualification.

Should India finish top of their qualifying group or amongst the four best second-placed teams, the next second best placed nation will qualify for the finals.

AFC U-19 Championship 2016 Qualifiers	
Group A	Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan
Group B	Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Syria
Group C	UAE, Palestine, India, Afghanistan
Group D	Qatar, Oman, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan
Group E	Iran, Kuwait, Jordan, Nepal
Group F	Iraq, Bahrain, Maldives, Tajikistan
Group G	Myanmar, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Brunei, Timor-Leste
Group H	Thailand, Korea Republic, Singapore, Chinese Taipei, Northern Mariana Islands
Group I	DPR Korea, China, Malaysia, Macau
Group J	Japan, Australia, Philippines, Laos

AFC U-16 Championship 2016 Qualifiers	
Group A	Uzbekistan, Yemen, Palestine, Maldives
Group B	Nepal, Oman, Kyrgyzstan, Jordan
Group C	Qatar, Tajikistan, Iraq, Turkmenistan
Group D	Saudi Arabia, UAE, Pakistan, Bangladesh
Group E	Iran, Bahrain, India, Lebanon
Group F	Syria, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka
Group G	Malaysia, Laos, Philippines, Northern Mariana Islands, Timor-Leste
Group H	DPR Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Cambodia
Group I	Korea Republic, China, Chinese Taipei, Macau
Group J	Australia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Guam
Group K	Japan, Hong Kong, Brunei, Mongolia

Familiar Draw For Defending Champions

Defending champions Nagoya Oceans of Japan will face familiar foes Lokomotiv Tashkent of Uzbekistan in the group stage of the 2015 AFC Futsal Club Championship following June's draw in the Iranian city of Isfahan.

Nagoya, winners of the 2011 and 2014 editions, met Lokomotiv in the group stage last year in Chengdu and will have a return clash with the Tashkent side in the 2015 tournament in Group B along with Kyrgyzstan's champions MFC Emgek.

Last year's runners-up Chonburi Bluewave of Thailand will face Qatar's Al Rayyan SC and Iraqi side NAFT Al Wasat Club in Group C.

The host country's representative, Tasisat Daryaei of Iran, are in Group A alongside Kuwait's Qadsia SC and Al Khaleej SC of the United Arab Emirates.

Group D, meanwhile, comprises China's Shenzhen Nanling Tielang, who finished fourth last year; Lebanese club Bank of Beirut and Vietnam's Thai Son Nam.

Tasisat Daryaei as hosts, as well as Nagoya, automatically qualified for the finals, with the top three clubs from Japan, Thailand and China seeded as per the final rankings at the 2014 AFC Futsal Club Championship.

The 2015 AFC Futsal Club Championship will take place from 31 July to 7 August.

AFC Futsal Club Championship	
Group A	Tasisat Daryaei (Iran), Qadsia SC (Kuwait), Al Khaleej SC (UAE)
Group B	Nagoya Oceans (Japan), MFC Emgek (Kyrgyzstan), Lokomotiv (Uzbekistan)
Group C	Chonburi Bluewave (Thailand), Al Rayyan SC (Qatar), NAFT Al Wasat Club (Iraq)
Group D	Shenzen Nanling Tielang (China), Bank of Beirut (Lebanon), Thai Son Nam (Vietnam)

HONG KONG STADIUM

Hong Kong

The 40,000 capacity Hong Kong Stadium was opened in March 1994 following redevelopment of the old Government Stadium.

Located in the So Kon Po area of Hong Kong Island, near to Causeway Bay, the venue is primarily used for football, although rugby union and cricket have been played at the stadium which is also a concert venue.

Hong Kong Stadium is the home ground for domestic side South China as well as the representative team.

A crowd of just under 38,000 turned out for South China's 2009 AFC Cup semi-final with Kuwait SC, before later that year, Hong Kong Stadium played host to the East Asian Games football final as Hong Kong edged out Japan on penalties to win the gold medal.

Hong Kong Stadium also hosted the final of the Asian Club Championship in 1998 as Korea Republic's Pohang Steelers defeated China's Dalian Wanda on penalties.

The venue, known for its hosting of the Sevens World Series, also hosted the first Bledisloe Cup rugby union match to be played outside of either Australia or New Zealand in 2008, while the British and Irish Lions played the Barbarians in 2013.

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Mahdi Ali