

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 13

PLUS

INDIA

New focus on youth development and grassroots for South Asian nation

AHMED KHALIL

AFC Player of the Year Award for Al Ahli and UAE forward



Johor Darul Ta'zim

Malaysia's AFC Cup winners aiming high

ISSUE 13

January 2016



JI SO-YUN

Korea Republic midfielder reflects on her whirlwind year in London and Olympic Games aspirations ahead of Brazil 2016 qualifiers



ZHENG ZHI

Guangzhou Evergrande's evergreen China national team captain looks back on a year of dominance for the AFC Champions League winners



ANGE POSTECOGLOU

The coach at the centre of Australia's 2015 AFC Asian Cup success sets his sights on making an impact at the FIFA World Cup

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Asian Football Confederation
AFC House, Jalan 1/155B, Bukit Jalil
5700 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

Tel: +603 8994 3388
Fax: +603 8994 2689

www.the-afc.com

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Editor:

Andrew Mullen

Deputy Editor:

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Designer:

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Photos:

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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

The turn of each year brings about renewed enthusiasm, hope, and opportunities, and 2016 promises to be yet another momentous and captivating year for football in Asia.

The year's action starts shortly after we usher in the New Year with the continent's top 16 U-23 national teams gathering in Qatar to compete in the AFC U23 Championship. Hot on its heels, the AFC Futsal Championship kicks off in Uzbekistan in February, while Asia's future stars will be looking to make their mark at the AFC U-16 and AFC U-19 Championships, which take place later in the year in India and Bahrain respectively. Our vibrant and diverse competitions and activities will continue to showcase the AFC's capability at creating opportunities for Asian football to make progressive strides in world football.

Looking back on 2015, it was a stellar year for the Asian game. The AFC Asian Cup in Australia last January set the tone with record-breaking crowds and new peaks of TV viewership across the continent, while there were also match attendance records set in the AFC Champions League. From hosting the first-ever AFC Women's Futsal Championship to the impressive showing by our women's teams at the FIFA Women's World Cup, we can all be proud of our achievements as a confederation.

The recently concluded FIFA Club World Cup is another fine example of the progress made by Asian clubs and I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to Guangzhou Evergrande, who reached the semi-final, and to Sanfrecce Hiroshima, who finished third after an inspiring campaign. Off the pitch, in areas such as infrastructure, grassroots, governance, development, and social responsibility, we have strived to elevate all aspects of the beautiful game and the successes of 2015 is a tribute to tireless hard work, dedication, and spirit of unity from all our Member Associations.

The global football landscape continues to transform, but our aspirations and commitment towards the development of Asian football have not changed. We are resolute in maintaining and enhancing the integrity and professionalism of our sport and we will continue to enhance the breadth and depth of our endeavours over the course of the year. Most importantly, our Member Associations and esteemed partners will continue to play a critical role on this journey. We thank you for your commitment to Asian football, for believing in our vision, and for the generosity of your spirit. In the coming year, we will launch our new vision and mission, with the aim to raise Asian Football towards even greater heights. As we prepare for yet another thrilling year, I look forward to your support in our unwavering efforts to strengthen the future of football in Asia.

I wish you and your families a joyous and successful year ahead.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President

Gallery



..... Standing Out

Tianhe Sports Centre Stadium in all its impressive glory for the second leg of the AFC Champions League final between Guangzhou Evergrande and Al Ahli as the Chinese side claimed a second continental title in three years thanks to Elkeson's second leg strike that saw off the side from the United Arab Emirates.

Gallery

AFC ANNUAL AWARDS

New Delhi 2015



Top of The Class

Asia's finest were honoured at the AFC Annual Awards at the end of November, with United Arab Emirates forward Ahmed Khalil named AFC Player of the Year after helping Al Ahli to the final of the AFC Champions League as the continent's leading lights were recognised in New Delhi.

Gallery



Malaysian Pride

Fans of Johor Darul Ta'zim contributed to the carnival atmosphere inside Dushanbe's Republican Central Stadium for the 2015 AFC Cup final against Tajikistan's FC Istiklol, and they were rewarded as the Malaysian side claimed the title following a hard-fought 1-0 win.



UAE’s Khalil Crowned AFC Player Of The Year

AL AHLI AND UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FORWARD AHMED KHALIL WAS NAMED AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AHEAD OF COMPATRIOT OMAR ABDULRAHMAN AND CHINA’S ZHENG ZHI AT NOVEMBER’S AFC ANNUAL AWARDS IN NEW DELHI.

Ahmed Khalil of the United Arab Emirates was named AFC Player of the Year in November after helping Al Ahli reach the AFC Champions League final and his nation claim third place at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup Australia. Khalil edged out Al Ain midfielder and compatriot Omar Abdulrahman and 2013 AFC Player of the Year Zheng Zhi who led Chinese side Guangzhou Evergrande to the 2015 AFC Champions League title. Joint second-highest scorer at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup and in the AFC Champions League, Khalil was named 2008 AFC Youth Player of the Year and now shares the double accolade with Iran’s Mehdi Mahdavi and Japan’s Shinji Ono.

“Winning the AFC Player of the Year award gives me a special feeling that I can’t describe. I did not expect to win, but it’s a great honour and I’m extremely happy. I wish every UAE player can aim to win this award in the future,” said Khalil, who is the first Emirati to be named AFC Player of the Year. “This award is not just for me, but all the people of the UAE. This is for the national team, my club team, all my team-mates and all the technical staff. I thank them and we continue to do our best going forward.” Khalil finished joint second on the top scorers chart for the AFC Champions League alongside Shandong Luneng’s Yang Xu with both behind Brazilian Ricardo Goulart and the Guangzhou forward was named AFC Foreign Player of the Year having netted eight goals in the continental competition. Korea Republic international Son Heung-

min, meanwhile, edged out compatriot Ki Sung-yueng and Australia midfielder Massimo Luongo to be named the AFC International Player of the Year following his exploits with Germany’s Bayer Leverkusen and England’s Tottenham Hotspur. Elsewhere, 19-year-old midfielder Dostonbek Khamdamov was named AFC Men’s Youth Player of the Year after helping Uzbekistan to the knockout stages of the FIFA U-20 World Cup. Rikako Kobayashi, who was MVP and second highest scorer as Japan won a record-breaking fourth AFC U-19 Women’s Championship in Nanjing in August, was named the AFC Women’s Youth Player of the Year. Later, Japan’s Aya Miyama was named AFC Women’s Player of the Year for a third time.



Delight For AFC Asian Cup Winners Australia

Australia were recognised for their historic 2015 AFC Asian Cup success on home soil after being named Men’s AFC National Team of the Year at November’s AFC Annual Awards, while Ange Postecoglu received the Men’s AFC Coach of the Year accolade. The Socceroos beat Korea Republic 2-1 after extra-time in last January’s final thanks to goals from tournament MVP Massimo Luongo and James Troisi at Stadium Australia in Sydney. Former Brisbane Roar coach Postecoglu was able to mastermind that success following a creditable performance in the 2014 FIFA World Cup. “I’m truly honoured and humbled, it’s been a great year for Australian football,” said Postecoglu.

“An award like this is a reminder of how special an achievement it was to win the AFC Asian Cup. “For us, it was great to host the tournament and it was a boost for the game in Australia to win it.” Asako Takakura took away the Women’s AFC Coach of the Year accolade for a fourth successive year having led Japan to success at the 2015 AFC U-19 Women’s Championship after a penalty shootout victory over DPR Korea in the final of the Nanjing-hosted tournament. Japan also earned the AFC Women’s National Team of the Year, with Norio Sasaki’s 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup runners-up edging out Takakura’s AFC U-19 Women’s Championship-winning side and AFC U-16 Women’s Championship winners DPR Korea.

- AFC Diamond of Asia Abdullah Khalid Al Dabal
- AFC Dream Asia Award Japan
- AFC Fair Play Association of the Year Japan
- AFC Futsal Team of the Year Tasisat Daryaei
- AFC Futsal Player of the Year Vahid Shamsaee
- AFC Inspiring Member Association Of The Year Japan
- AFC Developing Member Association Of The Year Hong Kong
- AFC Aspiring Member Association Of The Year Bangladesh
- AFC President’s Recognition Award For Grassroots Football Japan/Vietnam/Brunei Darussalam



Guangzhou Evergrande Face New Foes

Defending champions Guangzhou Evergrande from China face a journey into the unknown in the group stage of the AFC Champions League following December's draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Luiz Felipe Scolari's side claimed a second AFC Champions League in three years after edging out Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates 1-0 on aggregate in the final at the end of last year to add to their maiden continental crown in 2013.

But while last year's campaign began with fixtures against familiar opponents in FC Seoul and Western Sydney Wanderers, when the 2016 group stage begins at the end of February, Australia's Sydney FC, one of Pohang Steelers, Hanoi T&T or Kitchee, and Urawa Red Diamonds from Japan will present a new challenge for Guangzhou in Group H.

"We need to do some good preparation and homework on these opponents. We play in the AFC Champions League regularly and in this tournament you will always meet new friends as well as old friends," said Guangzhou President Liu Yongzhou.

"Winning the title and winning it for a second year in a row are two totally different things, we need to do a lot more work and perform even better than in 2015 should we wish to be a champion again."

Compatriots Jiangsu Sainty, who beat Shanghai Shenhua in the 2015 FA Cup Final, will face 2006 winners Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors from Korea Republic as well as Vietnamese champions Becamex Binh Duong and a play-off qualifier in Group E.

Elsewhere in the East, Japanese champions Sanfrecce Hiroshima will meet Korean FA Cup winners FC Seoul and Thai champions Buriram United in Group F, as well as a team from the play-offs.

And in Group G, A-League Grand Final winners Melbourne Victory take on two-time Asian champions

Suwon Samsung Bluewings, Japan's Gamba Osaka as well as the final play-off qualifier.

In the West, 2010 finalists Zobahan from Iran return to the AFC Champions League after a five year absence and will take on Saudi champions Al Nassr as well as Qatar's Lekhwiya and one of four play-off qualifiers from the West in Group B.

"With due respect for the rival teams in the group we are determined to have the best results ever for the club and repeat our glories and victories of the past," said Zobahan team manager Ali Shojaei.

"However, there's no team that should be underestimated in the group, if you think a team is not a strong one they could surprise you with how good

they are. And, of course, Lekhwiya and Al Nassr are well-known and powerful teams."

Zobahan's countrymen, Tractorsazi Tabriz, will face last year's semi-finalists Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan champions Pakhtakor and a play-off qualifier in Group C.

Elsewhere, Emirati champions Al Ain will be joined in Group D by Nasaf from Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli as well as a

team advancing from the play-offs.

Finally, Group A will see Iranian champions Foolad Sepahan line-up against Al Nasr from the UAE, Lokomotiv of Uzbekistan and a play-off qualifier.

The eight outstanding places in the group stage will be decided by the play-offs, which see a total of 21 teams seek to advance to the AFC Champions League.

The play-offs begin with a meeting between India's Mohun Bagan and Singapore's Tampines Rovers on January 27, with the eight sides eventually determined on February 9 ahead of the first round of group stage fixtures two weeks later.

Three-time champions Pohang from Korea as well as two-time winners Al Ittihad from Saudi Arabia and 2011 winners Al Sadd from Qatar are amongst those looking to return to the competition via the play-offs.



Tough Test For 2015 Runners-up FC Istiklol

Last year's runners-up FC Istiklol will face a stern test of their AFC Cup credentials following December's group stage draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Istiklol enjoyed a hugely impressive first outing in the AFC Cup in 2015 as they advanced to the final before losing out to Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim.

But the 2016 edition could prove even tougher with Iraq champions Nafit Al Wasat, two-time AFC Cup winners Al Faisaly and one of four teams who advance from the AFC Cup play-offs waiting in Group B.

"We have a tough group and it will be hard for us," said Istiklol Team Manager Shahzod Sulaymonov. "The team from Iraq is a really

strong team and their ranking is high so I think playing against them will be the toughest game in the group."

Defending champions Johor have been drawn in Group H with JSW Bengaluru of India, Lao FC and Myanmar's Ayeyawady United, although should Johor make it through the AFC Champions League play-offs, they will be replaced by Pahang FA.

Group D, meanwhile, features a pair of former champions with 2008 winners Al Muharraq from Bahrain drawn against inaugural winners Al Jaish with Oman's Fanja and a play-off qualifier.

Hong Kong's Kitchee have advanced to the AFC Cup knockout stage in their last four appearances, and should they fail to make it through the AFC Champions League

play-offs, they will join Bhalestier Khalsa of Singapore, Maldivian club New Radiant SC and Kaya FC of the Philippines in Group F.

Fellow Hong Kong side South China face the Maldives' Maziya S&C along with I-League champions Mohun Bagan and either Yangon United or Yadanarbon.

Elsewhere, Tampines Rovers or Warriors FC will face Selangor FA, Filipino club Ceres La Salle and Bangladeshi champions Lt. Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club in Group E.

In the West, Omani champions Al Oruba take on Air Force Club of Iraq, Palestine's Al Dharia and a play-off qualifier in Group C.

Finally, Group A contains either Al Wehdat or Al Jazeera of Jordan, Lebanon's Al Ahed, Altyn Asyr of Turkmenistan and a play-off qualifier.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Foolad Sepahan	Al Nassr	Pakhtakor	Al Ain	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	Sanfrecce Hiroshima	Melbourne Victory	Guangzhou Evergrande
Al Nasr	Zobahan	Al Hilal	Nasaf	Jiangsu Sainty	FC Seoul	Gamba Osaka	Sydney FC
Lokomotiv	Lekhwiya	Tractorsazi Tabriz	Al Ahli	Becamex Binh Duong	Buriram United	Suwon Samsung Bluewings	Urawa Red Diamonds
Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Al Wehdat or Al Jazeera	Nafit Al Wasat	Al Orouba	Al Muharraq	Tampines Rovers or Warriors FC	Kitchee	Mohun Bagan	Johor Darul Ta'zim or Pahang FA
Al Ahed FC	Al Faisaly	Air Force Club	Fanja	Selangor FA	Balestier Khalsa	South China	JSW Bengaluru
Altyn Asyr	FC Istiklol	Al Dharia	Al Jaish	Ceres La Salle	New Radiant SC	Yangon United or Yadanarbon	Lao FC
Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Play-Off Qualifier	Lt. Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club	Kaya FC	Maziya S&C	Ayeyawady United

THE SKY'S THE LIMIT

HAVING LIVED UP TO HIS POTENTIAL AT BOTH THE AFC ASIAN CUP AND IN THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE IN 2015, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FORWARD AHMED KHALIL CAPPED A STANDOUT SEASON FOR BOTH CLUB AND COUNTRY BY BECOMING THE FIRST EMIRATI TO BE NAMED AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: Lagardère Sports





The interview with 2015 AFC Player of the Year Ahmed Khalil finishes on a surprising revelation. The shy and introverted demeanour that has appeared so at odds with the 24-year-old striker's all-action playing style

evaporates in a flash of white teeth as a grin lights up the face that has been shadowed by the brim of his bright red baseball cap.

"I'm a footballer now, but I had hoped I could be a pilot, I always wanted to be one," admits the United Arab Emirates and Al Ahli man who has so terrorised defences in 2015 that he has been awarded Asian football's highest individual accolade.

"But sometimes you have to sacrifice the things you love to excel in things you do best. I wanted to have more hobbies, but I give all my time for football."

The aviation industry's loss is undoubtedly the beautiful game's gain, and the rewards for Khalil's sacrifice and dedication have never been more apparent than in the 2015 season where his achievements as one of the focal points in attack for both national team and club side saw the 2008 AFC Youth Player of the Year edge out countryman Omar Abdulrahman and China's Zheng Zhi to claim the coveted trophy in New Delhi in November.

Khalil's performances in the AFC's flagship

tournaments that year, joint runner-up in the scoring tables at both the 2015 AFC Asian Cup and AFC Champions League, helped write new records.

The UAE's third place finish was their best

"FOR ALL MY TEAM-MATES AND ALL TECHNICAL STAFF, I THANK THEM FOR HELPING ME TO RECEIVE THIS AWARD AND PROMISE WE WILL DO THE BEST IN THE FUTURE."

at an AFC Asian Cup outside of home soil, while Al Ahli reached a first-ever Asian club championship final.

And although compatriots such as Adnan Al Talyani and Ismail Matar, as well as contemporary Ismail Ahmed, had all been previously among the contenders to be named Asia's best, Khalil received the honour of becoming his nation's first to accept the AFC Player of the Year, albeit with a humility typical of the man.

"For all my team-mates and all technical staff, I thank them for helping me to receive this award and promise we will do the best in the future," he said, after a congratulatory embrace from fellow nominee and countryman Abdulrahman.

"I would like also to congratulate the

people of the UAE for this achievement, the national team and the club. This award is not for Ahmed, but for all the Emirates.

"Nowadays, when you play, you make targets and goals, but this trophy I never expected to win, so it's a great honour and I'm extremely happy. This was a very good year for me, it was the best ever.

"I wish every UAE player can win this in the future."

A one-club man, Khalil has been with Al Ahli, the team of all five of his older footballing brothers, since joining their youth team as a precocious eight-year-old daydreaming about flying airplanes, and has enjoyed several periods of domestic success in his career to date, noticeably in the 2009 and 2014 domestic title-winning seasons.

As an individual, 2008 was a year that particularly resonates strongly with Khalil as he was named AFC Youth Player of the Year having been both MVP and Top Scorer at the AFC U-19 Championship as the UAE lifted the title for the first time.

"Getting the 2008 AFC Youth Player of the Year award was a huge honour, but moreover it made me hungry to win another award," says Khalil.

"Since I was in the youth teams and until I reached the national team, whenever I played in a competition, I hoped always to

finish as the top scorer or the MVP because I believe after you accomplish a dream you should accomplish another one.

"The 2015 season, though, was a lot different to 2008, as then I was a youth player and recognised more for what I did with the national team than the club. A lot has changed since then in terms of playing and training."

In addition to his determination for continual self-improvement, the role of two coaches, Romanian Cosmin Olariu at Al Ahli and Mahdi Ali at national team level have proved to be crucial in Khalil's banner year.

Olariu arrived in Dubai in the summer of 2013 and had an immediate effect on Al Ahli, as under the Romanian's guidance, they surged to the 2014 league title and a place in the 2014 AFC Champions League.

Though they were not able to progress further than the group stage, Khalil and his team-mates missed out on the last 16 by just a point.

And Khalil, who had been struggling under Olariu's predecessor Quique Flores, had begun to flourish and become an integral part of the side, doubling his playing time in the UAE domestic league and solidifying his place in Ali's UAE squad for the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.

"Over the previous three years I hadn't been playing in the club as a regular, so I thank coach Cosmin, he was a turning point for me,"

Left AFC Champions League 2015

Above AFC Champions League Final 2015

WE HOPE WE CAN WIN THE NEXT ASIAN CUP WHEN IT IS HELD IN 2019 IN THE UAE."

says Khalil.

"The most important thing for me with him is that he gave me belief and he was the main reason behind the efforts that I have put in and the return of my form.

"Similarly, in the national team, I thank coach Mahdi who strongly affected me and put a lot of trust in me, at times a blind trust."

At the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia, Khalil responded to that faith by becoming a highly successful part of the UAE's attacking trident alongside Abdulrahman and eventual tournament top scorer Ali Mabkhout.

The trio combined on numerous occasions to great effect as they brushed past Qatar, with Khalil scoring twice in a man-of-the-match performance, and Bahrain to finish behind Iran in second-place in their group.

The UAE then solidified their place as one of the crowd favourites as they defeated holders Japan in the quarter-finals on their way to an eventual third-place finish after another brace of Khalil goals ensured a 3-2 win over Iraq.

"In Australia we worked really hard, and we really hoped to go beyond the stage that we achieved, but in the end this is football," says Khalil.

"Sometimes, you work hard and the other team works harder, and it's about the team to get the title. We tried our best in Australia but we were not lucky.

"Winning the AFC Asian Cup is a dream for every player, we are still young and have a young team. We hope we can win the next Asian Cup when it is held in 2019 in the UAE."

Khalil's form continued on the continent with his club side after scoring three goals in the group stage of the 2015 AFC Champions League, none more vital than his late brace against Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz in a last-gasp 3-2 win as the Al Ahli captain secured his side their first-ever place in the knockout stage on the final Match Day.

The striker's heroics continued in the Round of 16 as his quick-fire double formed part of a seven minute three goal spree in Al Ahli's 3-3 away goals win over domestic rivals Al Ain.

The 3-1 win on aggregate in the quarter-final against Iranian debutants Naft Tehran was less frenetic, but did see Khalil get on the scoresheet again in the second leg in Dubai, netting one of his favourite goals of



the year, a chipped 'Panenka' penalty.

"It's one of the goals that sticks in my mind from this year," admits Khalil.

"Mainly because it was a very tense moment and everyone said I should not take the penalty that way. But I did anyway; thankfully I scored it."

Khalil, though, was unable to find the net in either the semi-final victory against Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal or in the final defeat against Guangzhou Evergrande with exhaustion forcing him off in the second half of the second leg of the final.

"I was suffering from fatigue in the final, I had played three matches in nine days and had been travelling all over Asia, this is difficult and will create tiredness in any player," says Khalil, who in the run up to the second leg in Guangzhou had played 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup joint qualifiers in Abu Dhabi and Kuala Lumpur. "Having said that, Guangzhou deserved to win the title.

"We were playing in the final for the first time and maybe that affected us as we lacked the experience.

"We were hoping to reach the quarter-finals, but we achieved more and reached the final. Once we got there we tried our best to win it, but sometimes you don't get what you want in football, but we will carry this match and the experience we gained from it with us

Left & Above
AFC Asian Cup 2015

for the future."

In 2016, with no AFC Champions League commitments, Khalil's continental focus is very much on the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup joint qualifiers where the UAE currently lie in second in Group A, three points behind leaders Saudi Arabia.

Having made just the single appearance at the FIFA World Cup in 1990, should the UAE defeat Palestine on March 24, the match against the Saudi Arabia five days later in Abu Dhabi could be a make-or-break tie that sees the victor into the final round.

"We are performing very very well so far in the qualifiers, only the earlier away loss to Saudi Arabia was a bit of a blow," says Khalil, who is the second highest scorer in qualifying on 10 goals behind Saudi Arabia forward Mohammad Al Sahlawi.

"We have to be very cautious in the final two games against first Palestine and then the re-match against Saudi Arabia and hope to get the result we need.

"The year 2015 was a tough year, but a good one and there's still more to come from us. In life you need to have targets and dreams. I'm still young and I can give more and succeed further still to get more trophies and titles, the sky's the limit."



AHMED KHALIL

Nationality:

United Arab Emirates

DOB:

08/06/1991

Position:

Forward

Current club:

Al Ahli (United Arab Emirates)



THE JOURNEY BEGINS NOW

A TOTAL OF 45 TEAMS FROM 17 MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS LEARNED THEIR DESTINY FOR THE 35TH EDITION OF ASIA'S PREMIER CLUB TOURNAMENT IN DECEMBER; WITH THE DRAW FOR THE GROUP STAGE AND PLAY-OFFS OF THE 2016 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE SETTING UP SEVERAL MOUTHWATERING TIES.

Guangzhou Evergrande demonstrated the growing might of the Chinese Super League in a historic night at Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium at the end of last year by claiming their second AFC Champions League title in three years, but with December's group stage draw in Kuala Lumpur swiftly following to already throw up some eye-catching ties, the battle for Asia's premier club tournament title is set to be even fiercer in 2016.

Before the group stage even kicks off, there are a series of fascinating fixtures ahead with 21 clubs from Amman to Adelaide taking part in the play-offs.

Included in their number are a

host of big name teams including former champions in Korea Republic's Pohang Steelers, Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad and Al Sadd of Qatar all aiming for one of eight places on offer to join the 24 sides already qualified for the AFC Champions League group stage.

The group stage will begin at the end of February and culminate in early May ahead of the home-and-away Round of 16 ties later that month.

The quarter-finals will kick off in mid-September, with the semi-finals taking place in October.

And the latest winner of the AFC Champions League will be crowned at the end of November, with the final featuring a representative from each side of the continent.

But to get to the pinnacle of Asian club football, there is still a long journey ahead for 45 teams with their eyes on the continent's biggest prize.



	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	HISTORY	DID YOU KNOW?
FOOLAD SEPAHAN Iran GROUP A 	Sepahan secured their 11th appearance in the AFC Champions League after winning the 2015 Persian Gulf Pro League title. 	Sepahan are Iran's most successful club since domestic football was professionalised in 2001, with a league-leading five Iran Pro League titles.	Sepahan were the first non Tehran-based team to win the Iran Pro League, topping the table in the 2002/03 season under manager Farhad Kazemi.
AL NASR United Arab Emirates GROUP A 	Dubai-based club Al Nasr ensured a return to the AFC Champions League after defeating Al Ahli on penalties in the UAE President's Cup final.	In their only previous AFC Champions League appearance in 2012, Al Nasr finished third in Group C behind Iran's Sepahan and Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia.	Al Nasr are one of the oldest club sides in the United Arab Emirates having been founded in 1945.
LOKOMOTIV Uzbekistan GROUP A 	Lokomotiv finished runners-up in the Uzbek League, just a point behind winners Pakhtakor. 	Lokomotiv made their first appearance in the AFC Champions League group stage last year after they were eliminated in the play-offs in 2013 and 2014.	In April 2015, Lokomotiv signed a partnership with English League One side Fleetwood Town.
AL NASSR Saudi Arabia GROUP B 	Back for a second consecutive continental campaign after they successfully defended their Saudi Professional League title, Al Nassr will be making their third appearance in the AFC Champions League.	Runners-up at the 1995 Asian Club Championship, Al Nassr's best year on the continent came in 1998 when they lifted both the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and Asian Super Cup.	Al Nassr were the first Asian participants at the FIFA World Club Cup, representing the continent at the inaugural event in 2000. 
ZOBAHAN Iran GROUP B 	Zobahan defeated capital city side Naft Tehran 3-1 to win their third Hazfi Cup and also qualify for a fourth AFC Champions League appearance. 	After a group stage exit in their maiden AFC Champions League appearance in 2004, Zobahan reached the final in the 2010 edition, losing to Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma 3-1, as well as the quarter-finals in 2011.	Zobahan and Isfahan city-rivals Sepahan are sponsored by rival Steel companies.
LEKHWIYA Qatar GROUP B 	Lekhwiya won a fourth Qatar Stars League title in five years to ensure a fifth appearance in the AFC Champions League.	In the 2013 tournament, Lekhwiya defeated Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in the Round of 16 to reach the quarter-finals before losing to eventual winners Guangzhou Evergrande of China.	Lekhwiya won their Qatar Stars League title in their very first season after promotion from the second Division. 
PAKHTAKOR Uzbekistan GROUP C 	Pakhtakor won their league-leading 11th Uzbek League championship by just a point from of Lokomotiv in the 2015 season.	Pakhtakor twice reached the semi-finals in 2003 and 2004, but lost to Thailand's BEC Tero Sasana and Seongnam Ilhwa Chunma of Korea Republic. 	A perennial competitor in the AFC Champions League, Pakhtakor competed in every edition of the tournament from 2002 to 2013 before missing out for the first time in 2014.
AL HILAL Saudi Arabia GROUP C 	Two-time continental champions Al Hilal beat Al Nassr in the final of the King's Cup. 	One of Asia's most successful club sides, Al Hilal won the Asian Club Championship in 1991 and 2000 as well as the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and Asian Super Cup.	Al Hilal has won 56 official championships since being founded in 1957.

DID YOU KNOW?	HISTORY	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	
The club was established in 1970 by the Iran Tractor Manufacturing Company in Tabriz, hence their name and tractor on the club badge.	Formed back in 1970, Tractorsazi have only been back in the top division since 2009, but have already added the Hazfi Cup to their three runner-up finishes in the Persian Gulf Pro League. 	Tractorsazi claimed a fourth AFC Champions League appearance with a third runners-up spot in four years in the Persian Gulf Pro League.	TRACTORSAZI TABRIZ Iran GROUP C 
Al Jahili Fort, represented on the club badge, is one of the largest castles in Al Ain and seen as an important symbol of the city.	Al Ain won the inaugural AFC Champions League title in 2003. 	Al Ain confirmed their dominance of Emirates football and secured a 11th AFC Champions League campaign with their domestic record 12th Arabian Gulf League title.	AL AIN United Arab Emirates GROUP D 
Nasaf won the 2011 AFC Cup after edging out Kuwait SC 2-1 in the final in Qarshi. 	At the 2002 Asian Club Championship Nasaf reached the semi-final where they were defeated by eventual winners Suwon Samsung Bluewings.	A third-place finish in the Uzbek League meant Nasaf returned to the AFC Champions League for their third appearance since the tournament's re-format.	NASAF Uzbekistan GROUP D 
Al Ahli's Syrian striker Omar Al Soma was the Saudi Professional League's top scorer in the 2015 season with 22 goals. 	Set-up in 1937, Al Ahli have reached the AFC Champions League on six previous occasions with runners-up finishes at the 2012 edition and 1985/86 Asian Club Championship.	Al Ahli finished runners up in the Saudi Professional League, four points behind Al Nassr, despite going undefeated in all 26 games with 17 wins and nine draws.	AL AHLI Saudi Arabia GROUP D 
Jeonbuk striker Lee Dong-gook is the leading scorer in the AFC Champions League with 27 goals, one ahead of Al Hilal forward Nassir Al Shamrani.	Jeonbuk became the first East Asian side to win the revamped AFC Champions League in 2006 after beating Syria's Al Karamah 3-2 on aggregate before losing the 2011 final on penalties to Qatar's Al Sadd.	Jeonbuk ensured a return to the AFC Champions League for a seventh consecutive season after successfully defending their K-League Classic title. 	JEONBUK HYUNDAI MOTORS Korea Republic GROUP E 
Jiangsu, then known as Jiangsu Maint, were a member of the inaugural season of professional association football in China, the 1994 Jia-A League season.	In their only previous AFC Champions League appearance, Jiangsu missed out on a place in the Round of 16 on goal difference to Thailand's Buriram United. 	After their maiden outing in 2013, Jiangsu Sainty earned a second AFC Champions League group stage appearance after beating Shanghai Shenhua in the FA Cup final.	JIANGSU SAINTY China GROUP E 
In 1976, Becamex Binh Duong was first established as Song Be FC, named after the Vietnamese for the Be River. 	In last year's AFC Champions League, Becamex Binh Duong claimed their first-ever win in the competition after defeating eventual quarter-finalists Kashiwa Reysol 1-0 at home.	Vietnamese champions Becamex Binh Duong are back in the AFC Champions League after winning the V.League for a second successive year to secure their third appearance in the competition.	BECAMEX BINH DUONG Vietnam GROUP E 
Sanfrecce have now won three of the last four J.League titles having finished only eighth in 2014. 	Sanfrecce reached the last 16 of the AFC Champions League for the first time in three attempts in 2014 before losing to eventual champions Western Sydney Wanderers.	Sanfrecce qualified for a fourth AFC Champions League appearance after beating Gamba Osaka 4-3 on aggregate in the J.League Championship final.	SANFRECCE HIROSHIMA Japan GROUP F 

	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	HISTORY	DID YOU KNOW?
FC SEOUL Korea Republic GROUP F 	FC Seoul finished fourth in the K-League Classic last season, but ensured a return to the AFC Champions League as FA Cup winners. 	FC Seoul reached the 2013 AFC Champions League final only to lose on away goals to China's Guangzhou Evergrande before also reaching the semi-finals in the 2014 edition.	FC Seoul relocated to Seoul World Cup Stadium in 2004 from the satellite city of Anyang.
BURIRAM UNITED Thailand GROUP F 	Buriram secured a sixth group stage appearance after winning both the Thai Premier League title and FA Cup in 2015.	Formerly known as Provincial Electricity Authority, Buriram are one of the most successful Thai teams in recent history and reached the AFC Champions League quarter-finals in 2013.	Buriram's stadium is nicknamed "Thunder Castle" and attracts the highest attendances in the Thai Premier League. 
MELBOURNE VICTORY Australia GROUP G 	Melbourne Victory finished first in the 2015 regular season before defeating Sydney FC in the Grand Final for their third Premiership and Grand Final double.	Having made three previous appearances in the AFC Champions League, Melbourne are yet to reach the knockout stage having been eliminated each time in the group stage.	Melbourne won the Premiership and Grand Final double in 2007 and 2009. 
GAMBA OSAKA Japan GROUP G 	Gamba Osaka secured an eighth appearance in the group stage of the AFC Champions League after beating Urawa Red Diamonds 2-1 in the final of the Emperor's Cup having finished runners-up in the J.League.	Gamba, who won the AFC Champions League title in 2008, returned to the semi-finals last year before losing to eventual champions Guangzhou Evergrande.	Gamba beat Australia's Adelaide United 5-0 on aggregate in the 2008 AFC Champions League final. 
SUWON SAMSUNG BLUEWINGS Korea Republic GROUP G 	Suwon claimed a second consecutive runner-up finish in the K-League Classic and an AFC Champions League place as they were once again edged to the title by Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.	Suwon won back-to-back continental titles in 2001 and 2002, the latter of which was the last edition of the Asian Club Championship before the competition's revamp into the AFC Champions League.	Cha Bum-kun was the manager of the club between 2004-2010. 
GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE China GROUP H 	Defending champions Guangzhou return to the competition after winning the Chinese Super League for a fifth consecutive season. 	The southern Chinese club claimed a second AFC Champions League title in three years in November by defeating Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates 1-0 on aggregate.	Both former coach Marcello Lippi and incumbent Luiz Felipe Scolari are the only coaches to have won both the AFC Champions League and FIFA World Cup.
SYDNEY FC Australia GROUP H 	Sydney FC finished as runners-up to Melbourne Victory in the 2015 A-League season before losing to Kevin Muscat's side in the 2015 Grand Final.	Sydney FC has participated in the group stage of the AFC Champions League twice in 2007 and 2011. 	Several high profile players have represented the club previously including Dwight Yorke, Juninho Paulista, John Aloisi, Brett Emerton, Marc Janko and Alessandro Del Piero.
URAWA RED DIAMONDS Japan GROUP H 	Urawa Red Diamonds finished third in the J.League before losing the Emperor's Cup final to Gamba Osaka.	Urawa beat Iran's Sepahan 3-1 on aggregate to win the 2007 AFC Champions League. 	A crowd of 59,034 attended the second leg of the 2007 AFC Champions League final at Urawa's Saitama Stadium.



Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Foolad Sepahan	Al Nassr	Pakhtakor	Al Ain
Al Nasr	Zobahan	Al Hilal	Nasaf
Lokomotiv	Lekhwiya	Tractorsazi Tabriz	Al Ahli
Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier
Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors	Sanfrecce Hiroshima	Melbourne Victory	Guangzhou Evergrande
Jiangsu Sainty	FC Seoul	Gamba Osaka	Sydney FC
Becamex Binh Duong	Buriram United	Suwon Samsung Bluewings	Urawa Red Diamonds
Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier	Play-off Qualifier

GUIDING LIGHT

CHINA'S SUN WEN IS READY TO GIVE BACK TO THE GAME WHICH GAVE THE FIVE-TIME AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP WINNER AND JOINT RECIPIENT OF THE FIFA WOMEN'S PLAYER OF THE CENTURY ACCOLADE SO MUCH DURING A GLITTERING CAREER.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images

When it comes to career credentials, few can rival Sun Wen after the China legend was named the joint FIFA Women's Player of the Century, won five AFC Women's Asian Cups and an Olympic Games silver medal, as well as claiming the Golden Ball and the Golden Shoe at the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup.

But asked to recollect her personal highlight, there is no mention of awards.

"I always remember the 1999 final," says 42-year-old Sun, after China played out a goalless draw with the USA in Pasadena's Rose Bowl in the final of the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup before suffering an agonising 5-4 penalty shootout defeat.

"It wasn't about the result; it was the feeling of playing in front of 90,000 spectators. We'll never forget it because as a women's soccer player, you are very happy to see that your ability can be appreciated by the fans. The attendances in China's league were in the hundreds, so sometimes you had doubts. This was like a dream."

And recognition is important to a player who made 152 appearances, scoring a remarkable 106 goals, for the Steel Roses.

Yet from a young age found it difficult to convince her mother that football was the right career trajectory.

"My father was interested in football so I would watch games with him. He supported my choice to play, but my mother didn't," added Sun.

"She tried to convince me that it was too competitive and that I should study instead,





but I didn't listen."

After taking up the sport at the age of eight, Sun, who went on to star in four FIFA Women's World Cups, became more serious as she entered her teens, attending camps and participating in competitions in her hometown of Shanghai.

And her decision to defy her mother's advice already seemed justified by the time she was 18, when she was part of a China side that hosted the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991, just a few months after helping the national team claim their third successive AFC Women's Asian Cup on route to an unprecedented seven in a row.

"I was the youngest player in the team and was so nervous, and I hadn't told my parents I would be playing, so they were shocked," she explains.

And the teenage forward got on the scoresheet in her side's second Group A outing, a 2-2 draw with Denmark, as the Steel Roses topped the table ahead of Norway, the Danes and New Zealand, before ultimately losing 1-0 to Sweden in the quarter-finals.

"My mother changed a little after that and began to support me, but I still promised her I'd go to university after my career," says Sun, who graduated with a major in advertising after her retirement.

The prolific goalscorer went on to appear in four FIFA Women's World Cups during a time when China dominated the women's game in Asia, yet fell just short on the global stage on several occasions. The runner-up spot in 1999 was preceded by a fourth-placed finish at the 1995 FIFA Women's World Cup in Sweden and the silver medal at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta after Sun scored in a 2-1 defeat by the USA.

But it was the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney that ranks as the biggest disappointment in her glittering career as China, off the back of yet another continental triumph in 1999, exited in the group stage.

Paired in a tough-looking Group F, China defeated Nigeria 3-1 in their opening fixture, before playing out a 1-1 draw with the USA.

But a 2-1 loss to Norway in their final group match saw Norway move ahead of China en route to claiming a first Olympic crown.

"We had such a strong team, but didn't make it out of the group stage," says Sun, who scored in each of her side's games.

"We actually played well – drawing with the United States and dominating against Norway, but they played very intelligently and their substitute scored a beautiful goal to end our dream."

A year after the 2000 disappointment, the

Steel Roses forward decided to try her hand at something new, departing Shanghai SVA, who she had represented since 1989, for Women's United Soccer Association side Atlanta Beat.

"There were many difficulties because we had to arrange everything by ourselves. In China, things are taken care of for you, but in America, you had to find a place to rent, get a driving licence and cook for yourself," explains Sun.

"But I wanted to see the support, experience a different culture and meet new people. It was fantastic as it opened my mind.

"I truly enjoyed the atmosphere; there was an average of 15,000 fans. The style of play was also very different in America as they were more physical and there was a lot of body contact, so I took time to get used to it. But football language is easy to understand."

The first year did not go exactly as planned for Sun, who spent much of her time on the sidelines after undergoing knee surgery shortly after her move.

But she returned to show her new fans exactly what she was capable of, scoring one and assisting another as her side saw off the Philadelphia Charge 3-2 in the semi-finals of the Founders Cup.

After ultimately losing a penalty shootout

against the San Jose CyberRays in the final, following a 3-3 draw in which Sun scored her side's third goal, the forward stayed for one more year before returning to the more familiar surroundings of Shanghai.

By now, the balance of power was shifting in Asia, with DPR Korea bringing an end to China's continental dominance in 2001 before retaining their title in 2003.

And although the Steel Roses won the AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2006, Sun's tournament finale, they have yet to claim the title since.

"It was my first international tournament so it was special, but after a while it felt quite easy – no one paid attention to it as everyone knew we would win," she admits.

"Then, after 2000, things began to change. First, DPR Korea got stronger, and then other teams such as Japan started to catch up. Nowadays, the East Asian teams are all at a high level and have different strengths."

And despite China no longer ruling the roost in Asian football, the scorer of five goals in Olympic competition is positive about the shift in the balance of power, preferring to focus on the overall development of the women's game on the continent.

"You can see the technical part of the game has improved, the overall tempo is faster and the transition from defence to attack is much

Top Left AFC Women's Asian Cup 1997

Left & Bottom Left AFC Women's Asian Cup 1999

Above FIFA Women's World Cup 1999

Top Right AFC Women's Asian Cup 1999

Bottom Right AFC U-19 Women's Championship 2015

quicker," says Sun.

"The gap between the teams is closer so the games are more watchable, which is very important for women's football because just having one team at the top is not enough."

Yet the gulf in quality between the East Asian teams – along with Australia – and the rest of the continent remains a cause of concern for Sun, who was working on the technical support team at the AFC Women's U-19 Championship in Nanjing in August.

"To close the gap, the priority must be to improve the standard of coaching.

"Some of the players on the weaker teams are talented and have good skills and athleticism, but you see a big difference between them in warming up and in the actual match," she notes. "This is why coaches need a better understanding of the game."

"We need a long term programme with

investment and support. This is being talked about a lot, but it takes time."

And Sun, who is also the vice director of the Shanghai Football Association, is passionate about helping build the future of the women's game in Asia.

"We always use Europe as the benchmark.

They have many top sides, but in Asia it's always the same teams," she says. "This means AFC youth tournaments are very important for development, although there are still not enough games in a year."

As for the development in her homeland, Sun cites that a recent change in policy, which saw the Ministry of Education take control of the school football system from the Chinese Football Association, may lead to long-term positive change.

"The traditional culture of parents being more interested in their children studying than taking part in sports is hard to change," she explains. "But now the situation has changed as college systems can be set up like in America. This way, if you have the ability to play football, maybe you can go to university. This could change parents' attitudes."

And quizzed on whether she sees her future assisting the development of a sport that has given her so much over years, the answer is a firm, "Naturally."



MAKING AN IMPACT

ANGE POSTECOGLOU HAS REVITALIZED AUSTRALIA'S FORTUNES SINCE TAKING OVER AS COACH, LEADING THE SOCCEROOS TO 2015 AFC ASIAN CUP GLORY AT HOME BEFORE BEING NAMED AFC COACH OF THE YEAR. THAT SUCCESS, THOUGH, IS JUST THE BEGINNING FOR THE AMBITIOUS MAN FROM MELBOURNE.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images





Few national team coaches could have hoped for a year like Australia coach Ange Postecoglou enjoyed in 2015 after welcoming the new year with a maiden AFC Asian Cup title before bookending it with the AFC Coach of the Year accolade at the prestigious AFC Annual Awards ceremony at the end of November.

Indeed, since taking over the reins in October 2013, the former Brisbane Roar and Melbourne Victory coach has seen the Socceroos rediscover their bounce in a major way after successive 6-0 defeats by Brazil and France hastened the end for predecessor Holger Osieck.

A creditable 2014 FIFA World Cup campaign blooded a new generation and restored previously punctured Australian pride, but now, with eyes very much on the future and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, Postecoglou and the Socceroos are looking to not only meet the best, but beat them, too.

"From our perspective, we've qualified for the last three World Cups, and qualifying isn't enough anymore," says Postecoglou of the task ahead.

"We want to be ambitious and make an impact at the World Cup and that

means beating one of the 'so-called' better credentialed or bigger nations. We don't fear anyone; we've proved that at previous World Cups. It's now about getting consistency in our game, so that we feel confident before any match and progress deep into tournaments.

"At some point the European and South American World Cup dominance needs to be broken and I think Asia is a continent that's capable of doing it. And from our perspective, we want to be at the forefront of that: to push ourselves or one of the other Asian nations to win a World Cup one day."

Australia famously reached the Round of 16 in the 2006 edition, but since then have fallen at the group stage. Topping the efforts of the golden generation of a decade ago would mean at least reaching the quarter-finals, a feat only previously achieved twice by Asian nations: DPR Korea in 1966 and Korea Republic, who reached the semi-finals when they co-hosted the tournament with the Japanese in 2002.

On home soil, at least, Australia are a match for anyone as they showed at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup. Although a second-place finish in Group A meant they missed out on a potential Sydney semi-final on Australia Day, the defeats of China, the United Arab Emirates and a revenge win over Korea Republic in

the final in front of a packed crowd at Stadium Australia was a rich reward for the hosts and their coach.

"We had prepared the team really well after the 2014 World Cup. We didn't play any games at home, we left the team on the road and had some pretty tough games. We went to Japan, the Middle East, played Belgium away, while we weren't winning games, we were really preparing the players to have a strong tournament," says Postecoglou.

"By the time we got into camp at the beginning of January, I knew the players I had were ready to make an impact and I think we grew as the tournament went along. Massimo Luongo was one of the guys in the lead up to the AFC Asian Cup that we gave a lot of exposure to in tough games away from home, and it was really his first experience to play in front of the home crowd and we all know in football that can have quite an impact.

"Guys like Mass, Trent Sainsbury and Mat Ryan ended up having outstanding tournaments. The work we did with them in the six months prior meant they were ready for it. Korea gave us a hell of a game in the final, but in the end we were the best team for that tournament.

"We knew going into that we wouldn't have a chance to host an Asian Cup again for a

while, so for us to win it, knowing how difficult it would be – and it did end up being very challenging – it was immensely satisfying. As much as it showcased our country and what we can do with a major tournament, as well it gave the sport-loving public in Australia the chance to embrace top-level football."

Building on their continental success, now, is the target with the successful introduction of a new generation of players a hallmark of Postecoglou's Australia side so far with Queens Park Rangers midfielder Massimo Luongo and Valencia goalkeeper Mat Ryan just 22-years-old at the time of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup campaign, while PEC Zwolle centre-back Trent Sainsbury celebrated his 23rd birthday four days before the tournament opener.

And, with the 2016 AFC U23 Championship taking place in January in Doha, the Greek-born Melbourne-born is looking to the next crop of talented youngsters to come through the ranks.

"I'll be paying a great deal of focus on the AFC U23 Championship as we're still in the growth phase. We're hoping out of the Olympic team we'll be getting two or three senior internationals for the next cycle," said Postecoglou, who spent seven years as coach of the Australia U-17 and U-20 sides.

"Coach Aurelio Vidmar has been working hard preparing them for the tournament; it'll

Top Left & Bottom Left
AFC Asian Cup 2015

Left AFC Coach
of the Year 2015

Above FIFA
World Cup 2014

be a tough competition with only three spots for the Olympics available. I will certainly be there to watch every game, and make sure that if we have players ready for that step up, I'll see it first-hand.

"We've already introduced some into the international arena guys, likes Josh Brillante, Chris Ikonomides and Adam Taggart. For me, if the performances are strong, we've shown that in the past we're not afraid to throw the young guys in, and we'll do so after the Olympics campaign as well."

Once the tournament in Doha is complete, attention will turn once more to the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup joint-qualifiers with Australia currently sitting top of Group B, two points clear of Jordan, with home games against Tajikistan and the current second placed side in March.

Successfully negotiate those ties, and Australia will enter the third and decisive round on the road to Russia 2018, where four teams from 12 will qualify as Asia's guaranteed representatives for the FIFA

World Cup.

"The qualifiers have been good; we are still in a rebuilding mode post the Asian Cup, and giving exposure to some younger players who are in their first qualifying campaign," says Postecoglou.

"We had a bit of a bump in the road with a defeat away to Jordan, but again that was a great experience for the players, and we've bounced back really strongly from there.

"We always knew that we'd have our final two games at home, and always felt comfortable that we'd be in a strong position which we are.

"We want to see progress. Our performances were pretty good in Brazil, but the reality is we didn't win a game there and that's certainly not the way we want to go into the next tournament. The first part of that process will be qualifying for the World Cup, and we've already seen how challenging that can be with the next phase set to be even more so.

"I'm confident that if we can get through that process, then we'll have hardened up.

"This group of players are still very young and developing, mostly in that 23, 24 year-old bracket, so by the time we get to the next World Cup, hopefully they'll be at a good age to make an impact."



REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

IN LESS THAN
TWO YEARS,
KOREA REPUBLIC'S
JI SO-YUN HAS
ESTABLISHED HERSELF
AS ONE OF THE STARS OF
THE WOMEN'S GAME IN
EUROPE AFTER HELPING
CHELSEA LADIES TO
THE ENGLISH TITLE AND
WOMEN'S FA CUP.

By: Michael Church Photos: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images





At the far end of Chelsea's sprawling, state-of-the-art training complex about 45 minutes by train from the heart of London, sits a fairly non-descript white wooden building. Around it, a lush carpet of pristine football pitches reverberates to the sounds of the soon-to-be-crowned English Women's Super League champions finishing off another session under the bright autumn sun. Over the following two weeks, Chelsea Ladies will claim their first-ever English league title, and at the heart of the team that sealed a hugely successful season stood diminutive Korea Republic midfielder Ji So-yun. Less than two years after trading Japan's INAC Leonessa Kobe for London, the 24-year-old has become one of the most highly rated female players in the world, helping her nation to the knockout phase of the FIFA Women's World Cup for the first time as well as scoring the goals that won the Women's Super League and the Women's FA Cup. For Ji, it has been a remarkable ascent, but it has not been without its issues. "I'm perfectly settled here, I love life here in

England," she says in an upstairs room looking out over the English countryside. "But the only thing that I don't like is the British weather. I can't get used to it, I'm not a British woman just yet because I can't get used to it." For all her meteorological misgivings, though, the Seoul-born midfielder has settled into life in her new home quickly. Based close to the training facilities in the peaceful surrounds of Cobham – where she shares a house with two of her team-mates – Ji has adapted well. "Living in Japan and England are the same in many ways, both in terms of the lifestyle and the football," she says. "But there are also big differences. Lifestyle wise, it's a totally different culture, different language and different weather. "Football wise, Japan is more about focusing on the basic skills and focusing on passing. There's the tiki-taka style and we watched Barcelona a lot. Everything's based on passing and playing beautiful football and the focus is on the ball. "In England, it's much more physical, it's about the speed of the women's league. It's more powerful and it's totally different and I found it hard to get used to everything. I'm still getting used to everything. I don't think I've totally got to grips with it. I'm still learning."

Those issues – whether perceived or real – have not stopped Ji from becoming one of the finest female players in the English league. She was named the Women's Player of the Year at the end of her first season and she followed that up by continuing to impress in 2015. However, Ji, despite all her success, is unable to put her finger on what it is she has done right. "I don't know," she says when asked why everything has gone so well. "My first year here was a very successful season and it was better than I expected because I thought it would take longer to get used to everything. "My style is totally different and maybe that's been a culture shock for the English players. I'm definitely working on the physical side as well, but I don't think just focusing on that would be 100% positive for me because of my playing style. "I want to focus on faster decision-making and anticipating things. If I do build up my physical side it will slow me down, and speed is a strong point for me, so I don't want to get any slower – it's just about finding the balance." Ji's journey into English football began in 2013 when, playing for Japan's INAC Leonessa Kobe in the final of the Mobcast

Cup – an intercontinental club competition held in Japan – the Korean was instrumental in a 4-2 win over Chelsea. Immediately after the game she was approached by Chelsea coach Emma Haines. "She came over and gave me a little note saying she wanted to work with me in England," says Ji – and before long the wheels were in motion to take her to the other side of the world. The move has proven to be an unprecedented success, and Ji now has set her sights on not only achieving more with Chelsea, but also with her native Korea. After helping the national team reach the knockout phase of the FIFA Women's World Cup for the first time in Canada last year where the Koreans were knocked out by France in the Round of 16, Ji is now targeting a place at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. However, she is under no illusions over the difficulty of the task facing her and her compatriots, with the Japan team that reached successive FIFA Women's World Cup finals the favourites to take one of only two berths available in Brazil in the summer. "I really don't know, but growing up the children are more hardworking and committed than they are in other places," she says of the reasons why east Asia's women's teams

have consistently managed to be among the world's best. "That's why Japan won the World Cup. They're very skillful and clever. They are better than some of the men's teams at the minute. "Japan are here," says Ji, raising her right hand to head level, before positioning her left at shoulder height. "And Korea was here and now we're going up. I don't think there's long to go before we close the gap. "At the minute, the women's scene in Japan has 13,000 or 14,000 players playing and in Korea there's only about 1,700. There's still a big gap but there's not long to go." Only two nations will represent Asia at the Olympics – unlike the four who qualified for Canada 2015 – and Ji knows the competition for that pair of berths will be tough when the qualifying competition takes place in Japan in February and March. "I really want to go, but there's only two tickets for the Olympics and the Asian teams are very strong," she says. "I'll try hard

because I really want to play at the Olympics. "It's a very difficult task because the Asian teams are strong and when I play for the national team I have to play that much harder. Every game is like a final. The Women's Asian Cup was so much harder than the World Cup, that's how difficult the task is that we face. But we really want to go." Despite her commitments to Chelsea Ladies – who Ji is hoping will extend her contract beyond the end of 2015 – Ji is confident, fitness permitting, that she will be available to spearhead Korea's challenge. "At the moment, I don't have anything blocking me," she says. "National team qualifiers always come first, and when I do renew my contract with Chelsea Ladies, that will be an important factor. I don't want anything blocking that because the national team is important to me. "There is going to be a lot more interest if we qualify for the Olympics. But for me it's just important to get there because it would be a real honour to be there and a very special feeling. That's why I want to go, it would be one of the pinnacles of my career. "By going to the Olympics, there's a lot more interest and that would give the younger players better role models for the future. And if it's that special I really need to go."

Far Top Left FIFA Women's World Cup 2015
Bottom Left & Left AFC Women's Asian Cup 2014

Above Women's FA Cup Final 2015



THE GAME CHANGER

INDIA'S FORTUNES ARE SET FOR AN UPTURN THANKS TO A GENERATION OF PLAYERS NURTURED BY A RENEWED FOCUS ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT READY FOR THIS YEAR'S AFC U-16 CHAMPIONSHIP AND 2017 FIFA U-17 WORLD CUP.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: All India Football Federation





Below President
Praful Patel



Left Against Iran
in September 2015

Below General Secretary
Kushal Das



Above Technical
Director Scott O'Donnell

For over two decades, in the period stretching between 1948 and 1970, India were among Asia's heavyweights on the sporting field. But not merely, as the case is now, in the popular sports of cricket and field hockey where India continue to reap regular rewards, but in football.

Under the guidance of legendary coach Abdul Rahim and after him Englishman Harry Wright, Asian Football Confederation founder member India were a force to be reckoned with, claiming gold medals at the 1951 and 1962 Asian Games, becoming the first Asian side to reach the Olympic Games semi-finals in 1956, and finishing runner-up at the 1964 AFC Asian Cup.

Back then, India would regularly defeat the likes of current leading sides Japan and Korea Republic, with their last notable scalp coming in the bronze medal play-off at the 1970 Asian Games in Thailand where a Manjit Singh goal was enough to defeat the Samurai Blue.

That success proved to be the start of the

1937

All India Football Federation Founded

decline, however, with the Blue Tigers going for long stretches without approaching the same level of sustained success of the days of Rahim and Wright, making just two further

appearances in the AFC Asian Cup in 1984 and 2011, and dropping to an all-time low of 173 in the FIFA Rankings as recently as March 2015.

But there are signs the sleeping giant of 1.2 billion people is starting to stir with a new generation of footballers that could be the forerunners of the rise of a new player in the Asian game, and with India the hosts of both the upcoming 2016 AFC U-16 Championship and the 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup, they have the perfect proving ground to show how far they have come.

"The two upcoming tournaments will be landmark events for India and will redefine

1956

India reach Olympic Games semi-finals

Indian football from now on and for many more decades to come," says All India Football Federation (AIFF) President Praful Patel, who has been at the helm of India's football governing body since 2012.

"We want to involve the youth of the country and the two events can be a game changer.

"The popularity of the sport is bound to increase as we already have had support from all quarters.

"And on the field, we intend to create the generation which can compete with the best



in the world."

The new found optimism that now exists within Indian football is centred around the current U-16 crop that, in particular, showed much promise during the AFC U-16 Championship qualifiers in September, where they took their place in the continental finals in Goa on merit after beating Bahrain 5-0 and Lebanon 6-0 to finish in second place in Group E behind Iran.

A performance that has generated real hope in the future of Indian football from those within the governing body, the foundations for this new belief began in 2011 with a new focus on the next generation that was led by the newly-appointed general secretary Kushal Das.

"The glory days of the 1950s and 60s were great, but there's been a lull since and we've stagnated. When I joined, we had our professional league, the I-League, but what we

173

India's FIFA Ranking in March 2015

were missing was youth development and a grass roots programme," says Das, who worked at the International Cricket Council in Dubai before returning to India and his role at the AIFF in late 2010.

"We brought in Rob Baan, a Technical Director

from Holland, who helped us devise a development plan – covering grassroots and youth players – which has been circulated to all the state associations and affiliates to understand the vision we have.

"And with FIFA's performance team we created a four-year strategic plan with 13 key objectives that included enhancing the I-League, improving coach education, and helping to professionalise the set-up of Indian football across the country.

"We're ensuring through the club licensing that the clubs are focusing on youth development and the AIFF now runs four academies ourselves as well as putting

on grassroots programmes across the country."

A key figure in the setting up of the academies under the new direction of Das and Patel has been Australian Scott O'Donnell, who was appointed by FIFA in November 2011 to carry out the role. A former manager of Singapore's Geylang United and the Cambodia national team, the 48-year-old Sydney-native has been in India ever since, and now holds the position of Technical Director following the retirement of Baan.

O'Donnell, whose own playing career took in stints in Australia, Malaysia and



Singapore, was first tasked with identifying players and staff for the academies and currently oversees the four centres based in the traditional footballing-hotbed of Goa, with a fifth set to be opened in the north-eastern city of Imphal, another football stronghold, later this year.

“When I first came here, it was clear what we needed in terms of grassroots and youth development hadn’t been done previously. Now, slowly but surely, we’re getting there, and the last few years have been very satisfying,” says O’Donell, who has also seen the academies help develop Indian coaches, physiotherapists and team managers.

“There are a lot of people who have benefited from being with us full-time for the last two and a half years now, eating, breathing and living football which they didn’t have before.

“But due to the vast size of India, identifying players is easier said than done.

“The size of the country is an issue, but there’s also a problem with a lack of youngsters playing the game.

“In terms of tournaments, there are a lot of states in India where kids don’t play any competitive football, which is a big concern.

“We had a situation where we had previous AFC qualifiers that were the players’ first competitive games, and that’s just not good enough.”

To counteract this, the AIFF have recently set-up the country’s first season-long U-15

competition to complement the pre-existing U-18 I-League, with 40 teams signing up to take part. A zonal-based undertaking, the first fixtures of the round-robin format began in October, with the final stage set to take part in a centralized venue.

Although the AIFF are currently running

1.2 Billion

India’s Population

the U-15 I-League, O’Donell sees the role of the new competition as the forebear of professional standard state-run youth leagues as part of the governing body’s long-term vision for country-wide football development.

“There has been heaps of interest in the league with so many academies across the country wanting to get involved. Not just for the players, but the coaches, administrators, referees - it will be a learning curve for all of us - it’s a huge thing,” adds O’Donell.

“The only way is up for us and it will all begin with the AFC U-16 Championship and then on from there to the FIFA U-17 World Cup.

“But it will mean nothing if we let the momentum drop or we go backwards after the tournaments.

“This can’t be the end, it has to be the start. We need to develop a bigger base of players and a bigger base of qualified coaches so we can get good coaching at a younger age

so that our grassroots programme isn’t neglected again and we thereby have a bigger base of players for our future national team selection.”

India have never played at a FIFA World Cup at any level before, but in December 2013, FIFA announced that India’s absence from the world football stage would be at an end.

And should the U-17 tournament prove a success, the AIFF already plan to bid to host a future FIFA U-20 World Cup with their eyes on an even bigger prize after that.

“We would like to qualify for the FIFA World Cup as quickly as possible, that’s the main goal. But of course that will take some time,” says Das.

“But the day India plays in the World Cup will just change the whole equation as far as football is concerned in India, and the AFC U-16 Championship and FIFA U-17 World Cup are very important milestones on that path.

“In the short-term, we would be looking for a competitive performance in the two upcoming tournaments, which entails at least reaching the knockout stages in both.

“In the next five to six years we should be reaching up to our old standards, and by that I mean a realistic goal of getting back into the top 10-15 teams in Asia.

“And then for the India men’s team to qualify for the FIFA World Cup, that’s the main target.”



Left Against Bahrain in September 2015

Above The official handover of 2017 FIFA U-17 World Cup

Bottom U-17 coach Nicolai Adam



Q&A



President of All India Football Federation
Praful Patel

What measures have the AIFF put in place to increase the development of Indian football?

At the AIFF we have always maintained that grassroots is the only way forward, and for the sustainable future of our football we need youngsters to train in the best environment. This is the ideal motivation for all the youngsters, the drive to push them for the ultimate. We have in place our developmental roadmap ‘Lakshya’ which had been drafted by our former Technical Director and are working as per the AIFF strategic plan which has been endorsed by FIFA. We have embarked on a structured youth development programme where we have been running our own academies and grooming the stars for the future. In fact, the team who will represent India in the 2017 U-17 World Cup has been training in one of the AIFF academies since February 2013.

What are the biggest challenges facing Indian football going forward and what strategies will the AIFF implement to overcome these obstacles?

There was a time when we strived to have better infrastructure. We want to follow the same standards all over and are working hard with all our state associations and offer them as much help as we can from our stakeholders. We are thankful to the government of India, FIFA and the AFC for their continued support.

How far can Indian football go over the next decade?

For long we were referred to as the ‘sleeping giant.’ I can add that the ‘sleeping giant’ has woken up and taken its first steps.

THE WINNING HABIT

ZHENG ZHI CAPTAINED GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE TO CONTINENTAL GLORY FOR A SECOND TIME IN THREE YEARS AFTER WINNING THE 2015 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE IN NOVEMBER HAVING BEGAN THE YEAR BY HELPING CHINA SECURE A QUARTER-FINAL PLACE AT THE 2015 AFC ASIAN CUP IN AUSTRALIA.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: Lagardère Sports

At the end of November, when referee Ravshan Irmatov blew the whistle to mark the end of the 2015 AFC Champions League final, Guangzhou Evergrande captain Zheng Zhi felt a sense of delightful déjà vu.

A crucial goal again from Brazilian striker Elkeson at Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium had helped Zheng's side to the pinnacle of Asian club football for a second time in three years and once more it was the evergreen skipper,

an icon of both the club and his nation, who raised the AFC Champions League trophy into the night's sky on a balmy evening in southern China.

And at the helm was another FIFA World Cup-winning coach, this time Brazilian Luiz Felipe Scolari who had joined in the summer, as opposed to Italian tactician Marcello Lippi who had masterminded the run to the 2013 AFC Champions League title, but had stepped down at the start of the year.

"After Scolari came in our team gradually stabilised as he helped us strengthen our





mentality. Football can be a balancing act, and I think he did quite well in both our attack and defence, we conceded few goals, and were able to come out on top in some tough games in the Chinese Super League and ACL,” says 35-year-old China midfielder Zheng, who was heavily involved in both domestic and continental championship-winning campaigns.

“Many CSL clubs had invested more than previously and bought many super players, which made the whole league competitive. There were two to three teams who took turns to lead the league table, and we only won the title in the last round.

“I had thought previously it would be unimaginable that one team could win the league title five times consecutively. And personally, I am honoured to have been able to lift the AFC Champions League trophy for a second time; it is an honour for any player.”

The similarities between the 2015 and 2013 seasons end there, though. In 2013, Guangzhou enjoyed a irresistible run to the continental and domestic double.

That year, Zheng and his team-mates plundered 22 goals with just six conceded in the knockout stages of the AFC Champions League while clinching their third successive domestic championship by a mammoth

18-point margin.

The 2015 season was far less straightforward for the former Charlton Athletic and Celtic midfielder and his club.

For many, including Guangzhou team-mates Zhang Linpeng, Zeng Cheng, Gao Lin, Mei Fang and Liao Lisheng, it all began with the 2015 AFC Asian Cup 2015 in Australia in January and a creditable quarter-final finish that confounded pessimistic predictions following China’s unconvincing qualifying campaign.

“We were in a very strong group with three great teams, but that we could ensure our qualification from the group with a game to spare was, I think, quite encouraging for our young team,” said Zheng, an ever-present throughout the tournament.

“It is quite a pity for us that in quarter-final we lost to Australia, but I think the Asian Cup helped the national players at Guangzhou find our confidence back. It helped us to prepare us for the upcoming AFC Champions League campaign.”

Still smarting from the pain of their AFC Champions League defence coming to a premature end at the hands of eventual winners Western Sydney Wanderers in the quarter-finals in 2014, Guangzhou won their first three group stage games of the 2015

edition under new coach Fabio Cannavaro.

However, results were misleading. Guangzhou’s free-scoring ways on the continent were still present as they netted eight times in their first three games, but they also conceded seven.

Marauding full-back Zhang had suffered a knee injury in early February before a punishing trip to Parramatta for a game against Western Sydney at the start of March, where new signing Alan suffered a cruciate ligament rupture in training ahead of the tie, which effectively ruled the Brazilian striker out for the rest of the year. And then first-choice goalkeeper Zeng suffered an injury in the rollercoaster 3-2 win against the defending champions.

Guangzhou lost two of the final three group games and topped the standings by just a point ahead of FC Seoul.

“The group stage matches are a gruelling process, and although we won our first three matches, our team’s fitness condition had reached a period of difficulties with the start of our domestic league season,” says Zheng.

“And also due to some injuries, we encountered some ups and downs after the first three games of the group stage so we were quite fortunate to qualify from the group as the winner.”

Far Top Left AFC Asian Cup 2015

Far Bottom Left & Top Left AFC Champions League 2015

Bottom Left AFC Champions League 2013

Above AFC Champions League Final 2015

To compound matters, on the home front Sven-Goran Eriksson’s Shanghai SIPG had emerged as a genuine rival for the league title. With Ghana’s Asamoah Gyan, the 2014 AFC Champions League Top Scorer and 2014 AFC Foreign Player of the Year, in their ranks after moving from Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates, the side formerly known as Shanghai East Asia were leading the way in the Super League.

Guangzhou then lost Korea Republic defender Kim Young-gwon and 2014 Chinese Super League top scorer Elkeson to injury ahead of the crucial AFC Champions League Round of 16 against Seongnam FC in May.

After losing the first leg in Korea 2-1, though, Cannavaro’s side were able to overturn the deficit at home as two goals from Brazilian Ricardo Goulart secured a 3-2 aggregate win.

“I think these two matches against Seongnam were the most difficult ones for us in the ACL because our team suffered a lot of injuries, and after a defeat in the first leg, we had to win at home,” says Zheng.

“Therefore, this match is of great importance for us in the ACL, and the victory against Seongnam is of great significance to us

eventually lifting the title.”

It was also of great significance at the team’s helm with it being the last game of Cannavaro with the Italian replaced by 2002 FIFA World Cup-winning coach Scolari.

“Cannavaro is a young coach and, because we are of similar age, there were many interactions between us. I think he is an optimistic and kind person,” adds Zheng.

“Coaching Guangzhou was his first time working as a head coach and under his instruction, especially during difficult circumstances like that, what he achieved was very good.”

However, the Brazilian’s greater emphasis on defensive solidity, the summer signings of compatriots Robinho and Paulinho, and the return of key players from injuries helped Guangzhou embark on a 28-game unbeaten run in all competitions.

And in the final three fixtures they would hold off both the challenge of Shanghai and Emirati side Al Ahli, in the AFC Champions League final, to claim another historic domestic and continental double.

Zheng, though, missed out on a second

AFC Player of the Year award after finishing runner-up to Al Ain’s Ahmed Khalil.

“I understand that there will be one day that I cannot play anymore, but I am sure that there will be more youngsters who can become professional players who strive to play for our national team,” says Zheng.

“Becoming two-times ACL champions was very meaningful to Guangzhou city and Chinese football because Chinese fans really want the China national team to improve ourselves and I really believe winning the ACL has given an encouragement to the fans and everyone involved in the game here.

“That said, at Guangzhou Evergrande we are doing our part proactively and have a football academy with 3,000 students, and in the near future they will graduate as professional players and join Guangzhou, or other clubs in the CSL, and other national youth teams.

“I hope I can manage my own condition, though, and continue to play until I’m old. I have many ‘next goals’, and I will support and encourage myself until the end of my career.

“I have such a passion for football and desire for victory that every time when I step on the field, I am hoping to win for my team, I love the feeling of victory and raising a trophy. That will never change.”



HISTORY MAKERS

MALAYSIA'S JOHOR DARUL TA'ZIM BROKE NEW GROUND BY BECOMING THE FIRST EAST ASIAN SIDE TO LIFT THE AFC CUP IN OCTOBER. AND, AFTER EXTRAORDINARY PROGRESS IN THE LAST THREE YEARS, A PLACE IN THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE IS THE NEXT TARGET.

By: Gary Koh Photos: Lagardère Sports





When Johor Darul Ta'zim captain Safiq Rahim lifted the AFC Cup after his side defeated Tajikistan champions FC Istiklol in the final in Dushanbe in October, the Malaysian side made history as the first club outside of the Middle East and Central Asia to win the trophy since its inception in 2004.

Leandro Velazquez's match-winning goal capped a phoenix-like renaissance for the southern Malaysian state side as they rose to emerge from the doldrums of two decades of mediocrity to one of the most-talked about Asian clubs in the space of just three years.

Their continental success was the icing on the cake for the Southern Tigers, as they are affectionately nicknamed, in the deluge of silverware they have garnered since their patron Tunku Ismail Ibni Sultan Ibrahim – the Crown Prince of the Johor state – kick-started a football revolution that would make headlines domestically and abroad.

Prior to Tunku Ismail's takeover in late 2012,

football in the state was in a rut.

Their past glories as a major domestic force in the mid-1980s to the 1990s, culminating in the Malaysia League and Cup double in 1991, were a distant memory.

The last major silverware won by the club came before the turn of the century, when they claimed the Malaysia FA Cup in 1998.

Starved of success during those intervening years, the locals were pining for the era when the likes of Nasir Yusof and Ervin Boban captured the imagination of the crowds at the Tan Sri Dato Haji Hassan Yunus Stadium.

Disillusioned by the declining standard of the game in the state, crowds dwindled to a few hundred every home game as the 30,000-seater stadium disintegrated into a pale shadow of the venue that hosted the FIFA World Cup qualifying play-off between Japan and Iran in 1997.

That long period in the Malaysian football wilderness would soon end when Tunku Ismail became the new president of the Johor Football Association in the second half of 2012.

And the 31-year-old wasted no time

setting the wheels in motion soon after taking office.

He revamped the entire Johor football structure and brought Johor's various professional football clubs under the Johor umbrella.

"At that point in my life, I was looking to step up and bring tangible changes for the people of my land, so I went to watch one of the Malaysia Super League games involving Johor at the Pasir Gudang Stadium," Tunku Ismail says.

"There was barely anyone there, and I thought to myself: 'What's going on?' Because the Johor I remember watching with my family in the 90s had a lot more support.

"That night I told myself that I was going to change the face of Johor football."

Tunku Ismail's direct involvement in changing the state of the game in Johor saw several corporate sponsors become involved as he also established a marketing division to promote the new brand name of the state.

The investment that rolled in saw Johor emerge as a major force in the local transfer market.

Strengthening the playing squad was a

priority as he sought to make the club one of the most feared sides in Malaysia again.

While they spared no expense attracting the most talented local players available, they went further than their rivals' usual promise of domestic supremacy with a vision to be the best club in Malaysia, and beyond.

Rival club stalwarts Safiq Rahim and Amri Yahyah were convinced to depart Selangor to sign for their present employers in 2013.

High-profile foreign signings also raised the quality of the squad, with Johor attracting Spanish 2008 UEFA European Championship winner Dani Guiza in 2013 and ex-Argentina international duo Pablo Aimar and Luciano

"JDT is the place to be for any player to expand his career as a professional footballer."

Midfielder Safiq Rahim

Far Top Left Tunku Ismail Ibni Sultan Ibrahim

Left & Above AFC Cup 2015

Figueroa the following season.

"With JDT's professional administration and complete facilities, we as players only need to focus on giving our best on the pitch in every match," says Malaysia international midfielder Safiq.

"JDT is the place to be for any player to expand his career as a professional footballer."

Having come close to winning silverware in 2013, Johor finally reaped the fruits of their labour when they won the Malaysia Super League the next year under Croatian head coach Bojan Hodak, their first domestic league title since 1991.

Among the marquee trio, Figueroa played the biggest role in the Southern Tigers' success that season with 11 league goals as he combined a predatory instinct in the final third with his tireless work rate.

Their domestic league success saw the doors to Asia open up as the Malaysian champions fulfilled Tunku Ismail's promise of bringing the club into continental club

competition. They also made history as the first club from the country to feature in the AFC Champions League, albeit in the qualifying play-offs.

As the new Johor, their Asian debut in 2015 saw them edge past Indian champions Bengaluru FC 2-1 after extra-time in the first play-off round before they were humbled in the next round by three clear goals from Bangkok Glass away in the Thai capital.

It saw Johor join the AFC Cup group stage where they were pooled in Group F alongside 2014 semi-finalists Kitchee of Hong Kong, Singaporean debutantes Balestier Khalsa and Indian side Kingfisher East Bengal. They dominated the group, winning five out of six matches to seal top spot and earn home advantage in their one-leg Round of 16 clash against Myanmar side Ayeyawady United.

But while things were going well in Asia, they were enduring a rocky Malaysia Super League title defence as a series of inconsistent results saw Johor fall several points off the pace.

With their domestic league aspirations at stake, Johor parted company with Hodak in April and replaced him with Argentinean



Mario Gomez from Hong Kong side South China.

The new coaching appointment was an inspired one as the 58-year-old former Valencia and Inter Milan assistant coach turned the Southern Tigers' season around and was rewarded with a stunning run that saw them retain the domestic league championship on the final day of the season in August and clinch the AFC Cup in October.

His impact was immediate as the team responded positively to his methods and delivered an attractive brand of attacking football.

Ayeyawady were ruthlessly brushed aside by five clear goals in their Round of 16 contest to set up a showdown with South China in the quarter-finals.

Another of Gomez's masterstrokes was to recall Figueroa into the side after the 34-year-old striker was initially sidelined through a combination of injury and poor form.

The powerful forward's 10 goals in 12 domestic league matches in the second half of the season was crucial in Johor retaining the title, while he contributed five in their

"Every day we worked hard to be a little better than we were the previous day."

**Coach
Mario Gomez**

successful AFC Cup run.

It was Gomez's inside knowledge of his former club South China that saw Johor get the better of their Hong Kong opponents in the quarter-finals before the suspension of Kuwaiti sides saw them advance into the final despite losing the first leg of their semi-final 3-1 to Qadsia SC.

And the final triumph against FC Istiklol in Tajikistan was where the Argentine's tactical prowess shone through as Johor overcame a partisan capacity crowd to become the first Southeast Asian side to lift the AFC Cup.

"Every day we worked hard to be a little better than we were the previous day," says

Gomez.

"We want to continue the same way as we have done before.

"In the professional game, we need to have all 11 players perform, not nine or 10.

"Thus it is important that when we work in training, everyone helps and understands what his role is."

What Johor have achieved as a club since Tunku Ismail took charge and spearheaded the revolution during those three years can be an example to all clubs on the continent.

Champions in Malaysia and AFC Cup winners, Johor were also nominated for the AFC Club of the Year at the AFC Annual Awards in November.

And with their football history continuously writing new historical chapters for posterity, the sky is the limit as far as the Southern Tigers are concerned as Johor continue their pursuit of one day measuring up to the continent's leading clubs in the AFC Champions League.



Above
AFC Cup Final 2015

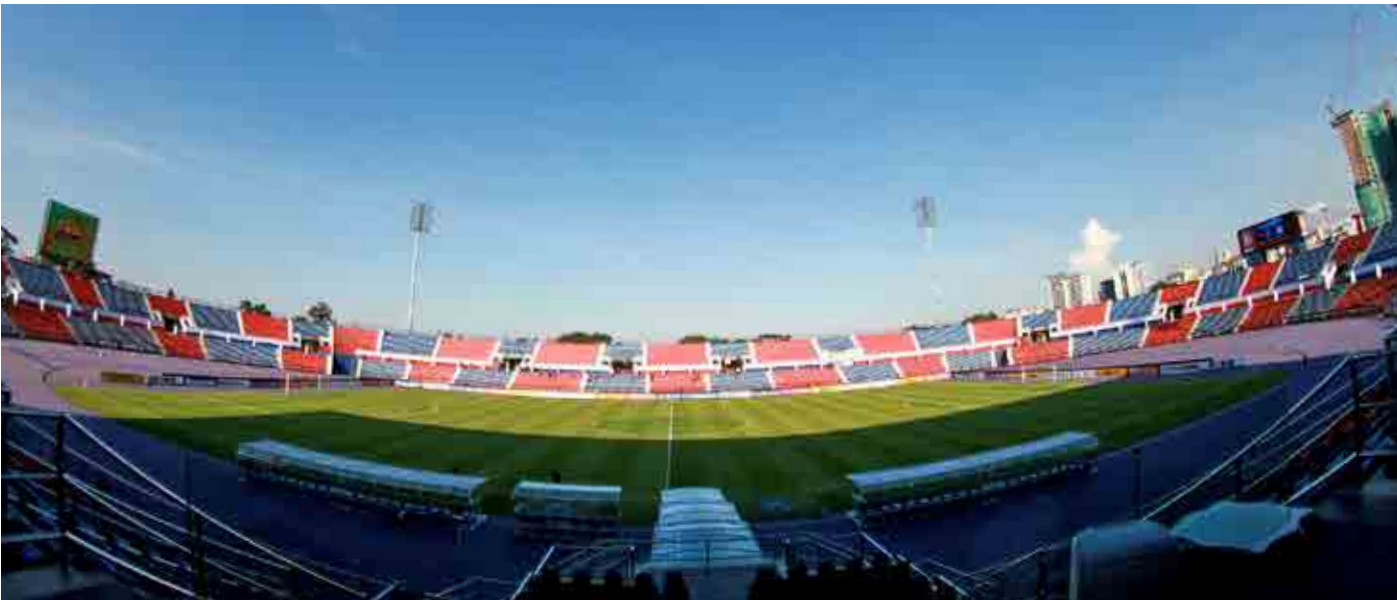


Far Left & Left
AFC Cup 2015

Top Right
Safiq Rahim

Right
Mario Gomez

Below Tan Sri Dato Haji
Hassan Yunus Stadium



Flawless Qatar Remain On Course

With their 100% record still intact, Qatar became the first side to book their tickets to the third round of 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying and a place at the 2019 AFC Asian Cup after recording wins over China, the Maldives and Bhutan in October and November's joint-qualifiers. Having earlier edged Hong Kong 3-2 at Mongkok Stadium in September, Qatar were back in action at home the following month for a double-header where a Karim Boudiaf goal was enough to secure a priceless 1-0 win over China before a more comfortable 4-0 defeat of Maldives followed five days later. And with China being held to a goalless

stalemate by a resolute Hong Kong despite an earlier 12-0 defeat of Bhutan, Qatar moved four points clear at the top of the Group C table with neither of the East Asian sides now able to catch Jose Carreno's team. But the other seven groups remain in the balance, with the winners along with the four best runners-up directly advancing to the 2019 AFC Asian Cup as well as the final round of qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup when the campaign concludes in March. The next best 24 teams will compete in a separate competition for the remaining slots at the 2019 AFC Asian Cup. Korea Republic, who appeared at the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, are the only other side remaining who boast a perfect record in qualifying and they cemented their stranglehold on Group G with wins over Kuwait, Myanmar

and Laos. Thailand, too, remain unbeaten with back-to-back victories over neighbours Vietnam and Chinese Taipei. Undefeated Iraq are also in the running in Group F, although they fell behind the Thais following a 1-1 draw in Vietnam, a result that was partly mitigated by a 2-0 win over Chinese Taipei. Group A remains a battle of the Gulf powerhouses with undefeated Saudi Arabia and the UAE occupying the top two places. With forward Mohammad Al Sahlawi netting a stunning seven goals in three games, Saudi Arabia enjoyed important wins over the UAE and Timor Leste, although their goalless draw with Palestine does mean the final standings could be decided on the last Matchday in March when Saudi Arabia face

the UAE in Dubai. The United Arab Emirates, having claimed third place in Australia ahead of hosting the 2019 tournament, recorded a 10-0 win over Malaysia thanks to four goals from Ahmed Khalil and a hat-trick from 2015 AFC Asian Cup top scorer Ali Mabkhout. Iran are also yet to be beaten and overcame their disappointment of a 1-1 draw in Muscat against Oman to chalk up two comfortable wins over Turkmenistan and Guam to extend their lead in Group D after Oman lost 2-1 to Turkmenistan. Along with Korea Republic, Iran and Australia, Japan represented Asia at the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the Samurai Blue have recorded five straight wins following their goalless draw against Singapore that opened their qualifying campaign.

Vahid Halilhodzic's side netted eight times without reply in their three games on the road as Japan brushed aside Syria, Singapore and Cambodia to remain at the top of Group E and they are yet to concede in the qualifiers.



Unlike the other 2014 Brazil representatives, AFC Asian Cup champions Australia suffered a surprise defeat in qualifying as goals from Hassan Abdel Fattah and Hamza Al Dardour condemned the Socceroos to a 2-0 defeat in Jordan. However, Australia bounced back on home soil with emphatic wins over Kyrgyzstan and Bangladesh to re-take top spot in Group B after Jordan suffered a 1-0 defeat in Kyrgyzstan to drop down to second place. Finally in Group H, DPR Korea lead the way with a one point cushion over Uzbekistan after wins against Yemen and Bahrain. Uzbekistan, though, have a game in hand over the East Asians and levelled their head-to-head record with DPR Korea after recording a 3-1 victory over their opponents in Tashkent.

Second Round																	
Group A									Group B								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Saudi Arabia	6	5	1	0	25	3	22	16	Australia	6	5	0	1	17	3	14	15
UAE	6	4	1	1	22	3	19	13	Jordan	6	4	1	1	12	2	10	13
Palestine	6	2	3	1	15	4	11	9	Kyrgyzstan	7	3	2	2	9	8	1	11
Malaysia	7	1	1	5	3	28	-25	4	Tajikistan	6	1	2	3	9	12	-3	5
Timor Leste	7	0	2	5	2	29	-27	2	Bangladesh	7	0	1	6	2	24	-22	1
11/06/15									11/06/15								
Malaysia 1 (<i>Safee Sali</i> 34) Timor Leste 1 (<i>Ramon Saro</i> 90+3)									Bangladesh 1 (<i>Valerii Kichin</i> 32 OG) Kyrgyzstan 3 (<i>Anton Zemlianukhin</i> 9, 41, <i>Edgar Bernhardt</i> 29)								
Saudi Arabia 3 (<i>Yahya Al Shehri</i> 6, <i>Mohammed Al Sahlawi</i> 47, 90+3) Palestine 2 (<i>Pablo Bravo</i> 51, <i>Matias Hadwa</i> 90+2)									Tajikistan 1 (<i>Manuchehr Dzhalilov</i> 67) Jordan 3 (<i>Hassan Abdel Fattah</i> 29, 64, 88)								
16/06/15									16/06/15								
Timor Leste 0 United Arab Emirates 1 (<i>Omar Abdulrahman</i> 80)									Bangladesh 1 (<i>Jahid Ameli</i> 50) Tajikistan 1 (<i>Fathullo Fathuloev</i> 87)								
Malaysia 0 Palestine 6 (<i>Musab Battat</i> 9, <i>Sameh Maraaba</i> 22, 75, <i>Tamer Seyam</i> 41, 89, <i>Khader Abuhammad</i> 63)									Kyrgyzstan 1 (<i>Almazbek Mirzaliev</i> 90+2)								
03/09/15									Australia 2 (<i>Mile Jedinak</i> 2, <i>Tommy Oar</i> 68)								
United Arab Emirates 10 (<i>Mohanad Salem</i> 16, <i>Ali Mabkhout</i> 22, 33, 75, <i>Ahmed Khalil</i> 24, 29, 71, 78, <i>Habib Al Fardan</i> 25, <i>Mohamed Gharib</i> 39)									03/09/15								
Malaysia 0									China 0								
Saudi Arabia 7 (<i>Yahya Al Shehri</i> 3, <i>Mohammed Al Sahlwai</i> 23, 26, 71, <i>Salman Al Faraj</i> 30, <i>Fahad Al Muwallad</i> 74) Timor Leste 0									Qatar 15 (<i>Mohamed Musa</i> 8, 28, <i>Mohammed Kasola</i> 18, <i>Ali Asadalla</i> 21, 45, 63, <i>Hasan Al Haydos</i> 25, 87, <i>Mohammed Muntari</i> 38, 41, 48, <i>Ali Afif</i> 56, <i>Boualem Khoukhi</i> 62, 70, <i>Ismail Mohamed</i> 75) Bhutan 0								
08/09/15									08/09/15								
Palestine 0 United Arab Emirates 0									Maldives 0								
08/10/15									03/09/15								
Timor Leste 1 (<i>Ramon Saro</i> 54) Palestine 1 (<i>Ahmad Abu Nahyeh</i> 90+2)									China 0								
Saudi Arabia 2 (<i>Mohammed Al Sahlawi</i> 45, 90)									Qatar 15 (<i>Mohamed Musa</i> 8, 28, <i>Mohammed Kasola</i> 18, <i>Ali Asadalla</i> 21, 45, 63, <i>Hasan Al Haydos</i> 25, 87, <i>Mohammed Muntari</i> 38, 41, 48, <i>Ali Afif</i> 56, <i>Boualem Khoukhi</i> 62, 70, <i>Ismail Mohamed</i> 75) Bhutan 0								
United Arab Emirates 1 (<i>Ahmed Khalil</i> 18)									08/09/15								
13/10/15									08/09/15								
Timor Leste 0 Malaysia 1 (<i>Amri Yahyah</i> 10)									Maldives 0								
09/11/15									08/09/15								
Palestine 0 Saudi Arabia 0									China 0								
12/11/15									Qatar 3 (<i>Karim Boudiaf</i> 22, <i>Abdelkarim Hassan</i> 62, <i>Mohamed Musa</i> 84)								
Palestine 6 (<i>Jonathan Zorrilla</i> 37, <i>Ahmad Abu Nahyeh</i> 38, 45, 58, <i>Tamer Seyam</i> 88, <i>Jaka Ibbeisheh</i> 90+1) Malaysia 0									08/10/15								
United Arab Emirates 8 (<i>Ali Mabkhout</i> 15, 19, <i>Ahmed Khalil</i> 43, 53, 56, 57, <i>Abdullah Mousa</i> 54, <i>Ahmed Al Hashmi</i> 87) Timor Leste 0									Bhutan 3 (<i>Tshering Dorji</i> 85, <i>Chencho Gyeltshen</i> 88, <i>Biren Basnet</i> 90+1) Maldives 4 (<i>Ahmed Nashid</i> 11, <i>Ali Ashfaq</i> 23, 33, 57)								
17/11/15									Qatar 1 (<i>Karim Boudiaf</i> 22) China 0								
Timor Leste 0 Saudi Arabia 10 (<i>Mohammed Al Sahlawi</i> 29, 42, 55, 70, 89, <i>Osama Hawsawi</i> 34, <i>Yahia Al Shehri</i> 35, <i>Taisir Al Jassim</i> 85, <i>Naif Hazazi</i> 90, <i>Fahad Al Muwallad</i> 90+2)									13/10/15								
Malaysia 1 (<i>Baddrol Bakhtiar</i> 59) United Arab Emirates 2 (<i>Omar Abdulrahman</i> 22, <i>Ahmed Khalil</i> 52)									Bhutan 0 Hong Kong 1 (<i>Chan Siu Ki</i> 89)								
									Qatar 4 (<i>Boualem Khoukhi</i> 28, 70, <i>Mohammed Kasola</i> 69, <i>Mohammed Musa</i> 90+2) Maldives 0								
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Guangzhou Claim Second Crown



China's Guangzhou Evergrande were crowned AFC Champions League winners for the second time in three years as a superb individual second half strike from Brazilian forward Elkeson secured a 1-0 aggregate win over Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates in November's final.

The two sides had ensured that the second leg at Guangzhou's Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium was to be an enthralling affair following a goalless stalemate a fortnight earlier in the first leg at Rashid Stadium in Dubai.

And Elkeson, who also netted the crucial goal as Guangzhou won the 2013 AFC Champions League title, scored the tie's only goal six minutes before the hour with Al Ahli's task was made more even more difficult with defender Salmin Khamis sent-off with 23 minutes remaining.

"In life we have happy days and not so happy days, but tonight it has been a

wonderful night. I have had a few great moments before, but tonight I feel quite extraordinary," said Guangzhou's FIFA World Cup-winning coach Luiz Felipe Scolari, following the final that capped a 28-game unbeaten run since his appointment in June.

"We have now won two AFC Champions Leagues in three years.

"We are growing day-by-day so we can dream of improving further.

"We still have a long way to go, but I have a great team at a great club and great players.

"The winners are those that never give up. Every one of my players has helped me."

Knockout stage debutants Al Ahli, who had never progressed past the group stage in four previous attempts, had enjoyed a historic run to reach the final having eliminated domestic rivals Al Ain, Iranian newcomers Naft Tehran and 2014 finalists Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia to reach the AFC Champions League final for the first time, but struggled to make headway in the first leg at Rashid Stadium in Dubai at the start of November.

Brazilian forward Rodrigo Lima, a summer signing from Benfica, had been in prolific form for Al Ahli with goals in four consecutive AFC Champions Leagues games in the knockout stages, but he and UAE international Ahmed Khalil were denied by the visitors' backline.

And despite having seen off Korea Republic's Seongnam FC in the last 16, and Japanese sides Kashiwa Reysol and Gamba Osaka in the quarter-finals and semi-finals en route to the showdown with Al Ahli, Guangzhou's attack also drew a blank in Dubai despite chances for captain Zheng Zhi, midfielder Huang Bowen and substitute Yu Hanchao.

But in the return fixture in front of a 42,499

crowd at Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium, Guangzhou, having edged the first half, saw Elkeson break the deadlock early in the second half after skillfully spinning past Khamis inside the penalty area and firing past goalkeeper Ahmed Mahmoud.

And after Khamis received his marching orders shortly after for a clash with Zheng Long, Guangzhou held onto their advantage to seal the 1-0 aggregate triumph to add to their 2013 success.

"We have to say congratulations to Guangzhou for winning the trophy. We went close and we tried our best but it wasn't to be," said Romanian coach Cosmin Olaroiu having guided Al Ahli into the knockout stage for the first time following four previous group stage exits.

"It was difficult to score after we were reduced to 10 men. It was hard to create chances after that, as much as we tried. In the AFC Champions League final you only get a few opportunities, and if you don't score them, you pay the price.

"In the beginning, nobody believed we could make the final. With hard work and the sacrifices we made we did it.

"In these kind of games you can see many things about your team. We can learn from this and improve in the future."

Although he failed to add to his eight AFC Champions League goals in the final, Brazilian striker Ricardo Goulart was named the tournament's MVP and top goalscorer.

"I have to thank Guangzhou Evergrande for putting their trust in my qualities and abilities. We have now won two trophies this year – the Chinese Super League and the AFC Champions League," said Goulart.

"Every success we enjoy matters, but significance of each one grows. I am very happy for myself and my family that I have managed to achieve this success."

SEMI-FINALS	
Guangzhou Evergrande v Gamba Osaka 29/09/15 Guangzhou Evergrande 2 (Huang Bowen 36, Zheng Zhi 57) Gamba Osaka 1 (Feng Xiaoting 13 OG) 21/10/15 Gamba Osaka 0 Guangzhou Evergrande 0 Guangzhou Evergrande win 2-1 on aggregate	Al Ahli v Al Hilal 29/09/15 Al Hilal 1 (Ailton 82) Al Ahli 1 (Rodrigo Lima 57) 20/10/15 Al Ahli 3 (Rodrigo Lima 17, Everton Ribeiro 45, Kwon Kyung-won 90+5) Al Hilal 2 (Ailton 51, Carlos Eduardo 64) Al Ahli win 4-3 on aggregate
FINAL	
Guangzhou Evergrande v Al Ahli 07/11/15 Al Ahli 0 Guangzhou Evergrande 0 Rashid Stadium, Dubai 9,480 21/11/15 Guangzhou Evergrande 1 (Elkeson 54) Al Ahli 0 Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium, Guangzhou 42,499 Guangzhou Evergrande win 1-0 on aggregate	



Johor Lift Historic AFC Cup Trophy



Argentinian Leandro Velazquez scored the only goal as Johor Darul Ta'zim became the first Malaysian club to claim a continental title with a 1-0 win over Tajikistan's FC Istiklol in the final of the AFC Cup at the end of October.

Istiklol had the better of much of the exchanges at Republican Central Stadium in Dushanbe only for Johor to net the match-winner against the run of play 23 minutes into the first half after the home side had failed to clear Safiq Rahim's corner convincingly and Velazquez strode into the penalty area before sliding a low shot under goalkeeper Nikola Stosic and into the bottom corner.

"I am happy with my players as we created history for Malaysian football in the AFC Cup. We worked a lot and claimed the trophy," said Johor's Argentinian coach Mario Gomez.

"It was a good match and a great atmosphere in the stadium. Istiklol showed their attacking football. They had some chances in the first minutes, but we changed

the game after it.

"Our goalkeeper and our defenders played well when Istiklol created pressure. I think the players followed their instructions well and I'm proud that we have this victory."

Both teams had faced deficits in the second legs of their semi-finals against Kuwait SC and Qadsia SC.

But FIFA's suspension of the Kuwait Football Association in October meant that Kuwait SC and Qadsia SC were no longer eligible to compete in the tournament, meaning 2012 AFC President's Cup winners Istiklol and Johor, the first Malaysian team to appear in the final of a continental competition since Selangor qualified for the inaugural Asian Club Championship final back in 1967, advanced to the final.

In front of a partisan and passionate crowd in Dushanbe, Istiklol forward Manuchehr Dzhaliilov went closest to claiming the game's first goal when his shot slipped under goalkeeper Farizal Marlias, only for Aidil Zafuan to hack the ball to safety, while at the other end Velazquez forced Stosic into action soon after.

Manuchehr Dzhaliilov was again involved for Istiklol when his attempt was parried clear and just minutes later the home side thought they had taken the lead when Khurshed Mahmudov's effort crossed the line only for play to be called back for an earlier infringement.

Manuel Bleda then volleyed over the crossbar as Istiklol continued to swarm forward but, in the 23rd minute, Velazquez made his game-changing contribution to open the scoring for Johor.

Istiklol cranked up the pressure in the second half in attempt to draw parity and Manuchehr Dzhaliilov had a goal disallowed for offside, before Bleda almost bundled the ball over the line and both Dzhakhongir Dzhaliilov and Manuchehr Dzhaliilov hit the side netting with shots from inside the penalty area.

However, Johor were able to hold on to their lead and claim a historic win to become the first side from the East of the continent to land the title since the competition began in 2004.

"I think my team played good football, but you also need luck in football," said Istiklol coach Mubin Ergashev.

"We didn't give our opponent many chances, but they scored the winning goal.

"It is a very difficult time for us. The team had great motivation and I think we have improved this season anyway. I congratulate Johor Darul on the title."

Johor captain Safiq was named the 2015 AFC Cup's Most Valuable Player, while South China's Australian striker Daniel McBreen and Riste Naumov of Myanmar's Ayeyawady United netted eight goals each to top the scoring chart.



FINAL



0-1



FC Istiklol v Johor Darul Ta'zim

Leandro Velazquez 23



DPR Korea Win Second U-19 Women's Title

Tournament MVP Ri Hae-
yon scored the only goal
of the game as DPR Korea
claimed their second AFC
U-16 Women's Championship
with a 1-0 win over defending
champions Japan in Wuhan in
November.

The 2007 champions went into the
game looking to end a run of three
successive runner-up finishes at the
continental championship. The task
in front of the East Asians, though,
was three-time winners Japan, who
defeated them on penalties following a
1-1 draw in the 2013 final.

But after a cagey first half at a
saturated Xinhua Road Stadium in
which the Young Nadeshiko's Hana
Takahashi had struck the crossbar,
DPR Korea took the lead as half-time
approached as forward Ri curled a
left-foot shot into the top right corner
from just inside the penalty area to end
Japan's 14-match unbeaten run in the
competition.

"We told them to play until the very
last minute of the tournament with the
never-say-die spirit," said coach Hwang Yong-
song, whose side also qualified for the 2016
FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup in Jordan
alongside Japan.

DPR Korea had earlier advanced to the
semi-finals in second place in Group B after
following up wins over Chinese Taipei and
Uzbekistan with a 1-1 draw against table-

toppers Japan before Ri's 87th-minute
winner, her second of the night, helped
see off hosts China in a gripping semi-final
encounter that finished 2-1 to Hwang's side.
"At half-time, we told them not to lose
their tempo, keep going and chase down the
opposition players if they lose the ball.
"The key to our success was our



continued focus," added Hwang, with
his nation's last victory over the Young
Nadeshiko at the U-16 event coming in the
2007 final.
Naoki Kusunose's Japan, meanwhile, also
began their campaign with back-to-back
wins over Uzbekistan and Chinese Taipei
before edging DPR Korea to top spot in

Group B on goal difference following the
sides' 1-1 draw.
An 8-0 win over Thailand in the semi-
finals ensured the East Asians went into
the final showdown as top scorers and
boasting the meanest defence, but the
inaugural winners were unable to add a
fourth continental crown as DPR Korea
claimed the title.

"We struggled with the speed of
DPR Korea, while the conditions
were also very difficult for us," said
Kusunose.

"We had some chances, but overall
we found it hard to keep the ball.
"But we can learn from this defeat
and become better in the future.
"We have to practice together and
grow up more to prepare for next
year's World Cup."

Earlier, Gao Hong's China secured a
third successive third-place finish after
recording an 8-0 win over Thailand.

Forward Wang Yanwen's 89th
minute penalty also ensured she
finished as the tournament's top scorer
with six goals.

"There is only a very little gap
between us and the top teams, but our
major task now is to reduce mistakes and
improve," said former China international
goalkeeper Gao, whose Young Steel
Roses also defeated Thailand 5-0 en route
to topping Group A ahead of the Southeast
Asians, 2009 winners Korea Republic and
Iran.



Group A									
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	
China	3	2	1	0	12	3	9	7	
Thailand	3	2	0	1	5	5	0	6	
Korea Republic	3	1	1	1	8	4	4	4	
Iran	3	0	0	3	0	13	-13	0	
04/11/15 China 3 (Xie Qiwen 16, Zhang Linyan 38, Wang Yanwen 72) Korea Republic 3 (Choi Jeong-min 57, Gwon Hui-seon 68, Mun Eun-ju 90+4) Thailand 4 (Kanyanat Chettabutr 5, 36, Yaowaporn Lohrmann 8, 90+2) Iran 0 06/11/15 Korea Republic 0 Thailand 1 (Nutwadee Pram-Nak 89) Iran 0 China 4 (Ma Xiaolan 22, 90+3, Chen Yuanmeng 27, Wang Yanwen 81) 08/11/15 China 5 (Ma Xiaolan 3, Wang Yanwen 11, 33, Jin Kun 40, 47) Thailand 0 Iran 0 Korea Republic 5 (Choi Jeong-min 14, 30, Jung Min-young 25, Mun Eun-ju 53, Yang Hyeon-ji 90+4)									
Group B									
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	
Japan	3	2	1	0	11	1	10	7	
DPR Korea	3	2	1	0	10	1	9	7	
Uzbekistan	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3	
Chinese Taipei	3	0	0	3	0	14	-14	0	
05/11/15 Japan 4 (Fuka Nagano 54, Riko Ueki 60, Hinata Miyazawa 78, Saori Takarada 81) Uzbekistan 0 DPR Korea 5 (Kim Pom-ui 2, Sung Hyang-sim 8, 33, Ri Hae-yon 43, Ri Un-jong 90+3) Chinese Taipei 07/11/15 Uzbekistan 0 DPR Korea 4 (Kim Pom-ui 45+3, 55, 78, Choe Un-chong 71) Chinese Taipei 0 Japan 6 (Jun Endo 18, Rio Kanekatsu 24, Hinata Miyazawa 31, 38, Hana Takahashi 40, Seira Kojima 88) 09/11/15 Japan 1 (Hana Takahashi 63) DPR Korea 1 (Sung Hyang-sim 2) Chinese Taipei 0 Uzbekistan 3 (Maftuna Panjjeva 45+1, Shahnoza Kurbonova 75, Makhliyo Nazarkulova 88)									
Semi-Finals									
12/11/15 China 1 (Zhang Linyan 62) DPR Korea 2 (Ri Hae-yon 2, 87) Japan 8 (Riko Ueki 5, 68, Hana Takahashi 16, Jun Endo 36, 75, Hinata Miyazawa 55, 56, Saori Takarada 84) Thailand 0									
Third Place Play-Off									
15/11/15 China 8 (Zhao Yujie 14, Wang Yanwen 19, 89, Xie Qiwen 21, 26, 66, Jin Kun 32, Shen Mengyu 90+1) Thailand 0									
Final									
15/11/15 DPR Korea 1 (Ri Hae-yon 41) Japan 0									



Karimi Secures Women's Futsal Crown For Iran

Fereshteh Karimi scored the only goal as Iran won the inaugural AFC Women's Futsal Championship after Forouzan Soleimani's side completed a 100% tournament record with a 1-0 win over Japan in September's final Malaysia.

Karimi's sixth goal of the campaign was undoubtedly her most important as she fired home after eight minutes to down Arihara Masaaki's Japan who had also progressed to the final at Nilai Indoor Stadium with a perfect record.

The strike from the tournament's eventual MVP also helped Iran gain revenge for their extra-time defeat to Japan at the 2013 Asian Indoors Games.

"My players played very well and our tactics worked, so, I'd like to congratulate my players for the determination they put in the game," said Iran coach Soleimani.

"But then it was an extremely difficult match as Japan were the favourites and had very good discipline, tactics and techniques. They really made the game tough for us, but we managed to overcome them.

"We had done a lot in preparation for this game and our patience and perseverance had paid off with this championship.

"I believe the future of Iranian women's

futsal is even brighter now and we are looking forward to participating in more international championships in the future."

Iran had begun their campaign in impressive fashion with Sara Shirbeigi netting four times in a 6-0 win over Hong Kong before a 9-1 defeat of Uzbekistan and a closely fought 4-2 victory over Malaysia secured top spot in Group A ahead of the hosts.

Then Zohreh Meisami scored with eight minutes remaining in a narrow 1-0 semi-final victory over Thailand as Iran edged past Rakphol Sainetngam's side before their showdown with Japan, who had beaten Malaysia 8-1 in their semi-finals.

"The game against Iran was really challenging, but my team played well. After the Iranian goal, our players were confused for a while, but they bounced back in spirit and then stuck to the game plan," said Japan coach Masaaki.

"Especially tough was the second half where I think we made a lot more attempts than the Iranians at goal, but their defence was just too thick to penetrate. We just needed one or two players in front of goal to beat the Iran keeper, but this was hard to come by."

Thailand had earlier defeated Malaysia 4-1 in the third place play-off thanks to strikes from Mamyalee Sawitree, Hataichanok Tappakun

and Darika Peanpailun as well as an own goal despite Masturah Majid having opened the scoring for the hosts.

"I'd like thank my players for their extraordinary efforts. Despite Malaysia leading 1-0 early in the game, my players had perfect faith in their abilities, they had a big heart to win this game and they did it," said coach Rakphol.

"Their faith and tactics made a big difference."

Malaysia's Farahiyah Ridzuan landed the Top Scorer Award after scoring seven goals in the group stage, which included a hat-trick in the 9-4 defeat of Uzbekistan in the campaign opener and four more in the 4-1 win over Hong Kong and 4-2 defeat by Iran.

"I'm very happy that we have become champions and I'd like to dedicate this win to the whole of Iran back home," said MVP Karimi.

"I and my team-mates played from the depths of our hearts in this game and there was a great challenge from our opponents Japan, so this win is even the more meaningful for us.

"But this award and win are not just because of me, but it was the great team effort that the other players consistently showed that made it possible and I'm thankful for them also for this recognition."



Group A										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+	-	Pts	
Iran	3	3	0	0	19	3	16	9		
Malaysia	3	2	0	1	15	9	6	6		
Hong Kong	3	0	1	2	4	13	-9	1		
Uzbekistan	3	0	1	2	8	21	-13	1		

21/09/15
Uzbekistan 4 (Makhliyo Sarikova 25, 32, 35, Mahliyo Yusupova 32) Malaysia 9 (Norhawa Md Yasin 15, 27, 38, Farahiyah Ridzuan 16, 35, 39, Shazreen Munazli 24, Usliza Usman 26, Fatin Azmi 37)
Iran 6 (Faimeh Zarei 5, Sara Shirbeigi 24, 29, 34, 35, Fereshteh Karimi 32) Hong Kong 0
22/09/15
Malaysia 4 (Kwong Wing Yan 7 OG, Fatin Azmi 30, Farahiyah Ridzuan 33, 35) Hong Kong 1 (Wong So Han 5)
Uzbekistan 1 (Mahliyo Yusupova 9) Iran 9 (Fereshteh Karimi 5, 37, Sepideh Zarinrad 8, Nasimeh Gholami 13, Sohila Tarazi 18, Makhliyo Sarikova 25 OG, 26 OG, Sara Shirbeigi 29, Fahimeh Zarei 30)
23/09/15
Hong Kong 3 (Kwong Wing Yan 14, 39, Ng Wing Kum 31) Uzbekistan 3 (Mahliyo Yusupova 22, Makhliyo Sarikova 24, Feruza Turdiboeva 24)
Iran 4 (Fahimeh Zarei 1, Sepideh Zarinrad 23, Fereshteh Karimi 27, 29) Malaysia 2 (Farahiyah Ridzuan 16, 39)

Group B										
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+	-	Pts	
Japan	3	3	0	0	14	5	9	9		
Thailand	3	2	0	1	7	5	2	6		
China	3	1	0	2	5	12	-7	3		
Vietnam	3	0	0	3	5	9	-4	0		

21/09/15
Thailand 3 (Sasicha Phothiwong 4, Niraporn Sriwarom 7, Hataichanok Tappakun 32) China 1 (Mao Yifan 22)
Japan 4 (Chikage Kichibayashi 5, 24, Maiko Higashiyama 10, Akari Takao 12) Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Thi Chau 34, 39)
22/09/15
China 3 (Liu Jing 2, Mao Yifan 30, 35) Vietnam 2 (Pham Thi Tuoi 16, Nguyen Thi My Anh 21)
Thailand 2 (Mamyalee Sawitree 36, Siranya Srimanee 38) Japan 3 (Mutsumi Sakata 6, Chikage Kichibayashi 20, 31)
23/09/15
Vietnam 1 (Pham Thi Tuoi 2) Thailand 2 (Siranya Srimanee 13, Sasicha Phothiwong 38)
Japan 7 (Shiori Nakajima 3, Saori Kato 7, 8, Minako Sekinada 8, Anna Amishiro 20, Maiko Higashiyama 37, Wang Hui 40 OG) China 1 (Liu Jing 33)

Semi-Finals

25/09/15
Iran 1 (Zohreh Meisami 32) Thailand 0
Japan 8 (Mutsumi Sakata 2, 35, Anna Amishiro 12, Kana Kitagawa 15, Maiko Higashiyama 23, Chikage Kichibayashi 39, 40, 40) Malaysia 1 (Norazizah Jamal 35)

Third Place Play-off

26/09/15
Thailand 4 (Mamyalee Sawitree 13, Hataichanok Tappakun 15, Darika Peanpailun 21, Shazreen Munazli 34 OG) Malaysia 1 (Masturah Majid 11)

Final

26/09/15
Iran 1 (Fereshteh Karimi 8) Japan 0



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Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Uzbekistan	3	3	0	0	14	0	14	9
Bangladesh	3	1	1	1	3	5	-2	4
Sri Lanka	3	1	0	2	2	5	-3	3
Bhutan	3	0	1	2	1	10	-9	1

02/10/15
Uzbekistan 7 Bhutan 0
Bangladesh 2 Sri Lanka 0
04/10/15
Bhutan 1 Bangladesh 1
Sri Lanka 0 Uzbekistan 3
06/10/15
Uzbekistan 4 Bangladesh 0
Sri Lanka 2 Bhutan 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Saudi Arabia	3	3	0	0	11	1	10	9
Yemen	3	2	0	1	2	2	0	6
Turkmenistan	3	1	0	2	4	7	-3	3
Syria	3	0	0	3	2	9	-7	0

02/10/15
Yemen 1 Syria 0
Saudi Arabia 5 Turkmenistan 0
04/10/15
Syria 1 Saudi Arabia 4
Turkmenistan 0 Yemen 1
06/10/15
Yemen 0 Saudi Arabia 2
Turkmenistan 4 Syria 1

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
United Arab Emirates	3	3	0	0	15	0	15	9
Palestine	3	2	0	1	3	5	-2	6
Afghanistan	3	1	0	2	2	5	-3	3
India	3	0	0	3	0	10	-10	0

02/10/15
United Arab Emirates 3 Afghanistan 0
Palestine 1 India 0
04/10/15
Afghanistan 0 Palestine 2
India 0 United Arab Emirates 7
06/10/15
United Arab Emirates 5 Palestine 0
India 0 Afghanistan 2

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	3	3	0	0	13	2	11	9
Oman	3	1	1	1	5	3	2	4
Lebanon	3	1	1	1	4	5	-1	4
Kyrgyzstan	3	0	0	3	3	15	-12	0

02/10/15
Qatar 7 Kyrgyzstan 1
Oman 0 Lebanon 0
04/10/15
Kyrgyzstan 1 Oman 4
Lebanon 0 Qatar 4
06/10/15
Qatar 2 Oman 1
Lebanon 4 Kyrgyzstan 1

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iran	3	3	0	0	15	0	15	9
Kuwait	3	1	1	1	3	4	-1	4
Jordan	3	1	0	2	4	5	-1	3
Nepal	3	0	1	2	1	14	-13	1

02/10/15
Iran 10 Nepal 0
Kuwait 2 Jordan 1
04/10/15
Nepal 1 Kuwait 1
Jordan 0 Iran 3
06/10/15
Iran 2 Kuwait 0
Jordan 3 Nepal 0

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iraq	3	3	0	0	11	1	10	9
Tajikistan	3	2	0	1	11	4	7	6
Bahrain	3	1	0	2	7	7	0	3
Maldives	3	0	0	3	0	17	-17	0

02/10/15
Iraq 2 Tajikistan 0
Bahrain 4 Maldives 0
04/10/15
Tajikistan 3 Bahrain 2
Maldives 0 Iraq 5
06/10/15
Iraq 4 Bahrain 1
Maldives 0 Tajikistan 8

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Vietnam	4	4	0	0	11	2	9	12
Myanmar	4	2	1	1	6	2	4	7
Timor Leste	4	1	2	1	5	2	3	5
Hong Kong	4	1	1	2	7	5	2	4
Brunei Darussalam	4	0	0	4	0	18	-18	0

28/09/15
Hong Kong 1 Vietnam 3
Timor Leste 4 Brunei Darussalam 0
30/09/15
Brunei Darussalam 0 Myanmar 4
Timor Leste 0 Hong Kong 0
02/10/15
Myanmar 0 Timor Leste 0
Vietnam 5 Brunei Darussalam 0
04/10/15
Vietnam 2 Timor Leste 1
Hong Kong 1 Myanmar 2
06/10/15
Brunei Darussalam 0 Hong Kong 5
Myanmar 0 Vietnam 1

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	4	4	0	0	26	4	22	12
Thailand	4	3	0	1	14	2	12	9
Singapore	4	1	1	2	14	11	3	4
Chinese Taipei	4	1	1	2	13	12	1	4
Northern Mariana Islands	4	0	0	4	0	38	-38	0

28/09/15
Singapore 2 Korea Republic 6
Northern Mariana Islands 0 Chinese Taipei 10
30/09/15
Chinese Taipei 0 Thailand 3
Northern Mariana Islands 0 Singapore 10
02/10/15
Thailand 7 Northern Mariana Islands 0
Korea Republic 7 Chinese Taipei 1
04/10/15
Korea Republic 11 Northern Mariana Islands 0
Singapore 0 Thailand 3
06/10/15
Chinese Taipei 2 Singapore 2
Thailand 1 Korea Republic 2

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
China	3	3	0	0	16	0	16	9
DPR Korea	3	2	0	1	7	3	4	6
Malaysia	3	1	0	2	4	8	-4	3
Macau	3	0	0	3	1	17	-16	0

02/10/15
DPR Korea 6 Macau 0
China 6 Malaysia 0
04/10/15
Macau 0 China 7
Malaysia 0 DPR Korea 1
06/10/15
DPR Korea 0 China 3
Malaysia 4 Macau 1

Group J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	11	0	11	9
Australia	3	2	0	1	8	3	5	6
Laos	3	1	0	2	2	5	-3	3
Philippines	3	0	0	3	1	14	-13	0

02/10/15
Japan 2 Laos 0
Australia 6 Philippines 0
04/10/15
Laos 0 Australia 2
Philippines 0 Japan 6
06/10/15
Japan 3 Australia 0
Philippines 1 Laos 2



Line-Up Set For U-19s

Group winners Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, Iraq, Vietnam, Korea Republic, China, Japan along with hosts Bahrain and best second-placed finishers Tajikistan, Australia, Thailand, DPR Korea and Yemen qualified for the 2016 AFC U-19 Championship.

With Bahrain being confirmed as hosts in June last year, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran, Iraq, Vietnam, Korea Republic, China and Japan claimed the 10 automatic qualification berths after winning their respective groups during October's qualifiers.

And Tajikistan, Australia, Thailand, DPR Korea and Yemen eventually completed the 16-team line-up for the tournament which will take place in Bahrain in October.

In order to ensure equality when comparing the runner-up team of all groups, the results of the matches against the fifth-placed team in Groups G and H, having five teams, were not considered due to the other groups having only four teams.

In Group A, Uzbekistan comfortably topped the standings with a 100% record after beating Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

The pattern was repeated in Group B as Saudi Arabia won all three of their games as Yemen claimed second place and a ticket to the finals in Bahrain with wins over Syria and Turkmenistan.

The UAE advanced from Group C ahead of Afghanistan, India and Palestine, with Palestine missing out one of the best runners-up spots despite wins over India and Afghanistan.

Qatar, meanwhile, won Group D after beating Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon and Oman, while Iran advanced from Group E with a perfect record without conceding a goal.

Iraq and Tajikistan claimed first and second place in Group F to secure passage to the finals, as did Vietnam who topped Group G with maximum points and Thailand who finished in second place in Group H three points behind table-toppers Korea Republic.

Groups I and J saw China and Japan top the tables with second-placed sides DPR Korea and Australia also making it through among the best runner-ups.

The 16-team 2016 AFC U-19 Championship will take place in Bahrain between October 13-30, with the tournament also acting as the qualifier for the 2017 FIFA U-20 World Cup which will be held in Korea Republic.



Qualifiers Confirmed

Group winners Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Malaysia, DPR Korea, Korea Republic, Australia and Japan joined hosts India as well as best second-placed finishers Vietnam, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Oman in securing qualification for the 2016 AFC U-16 Championship at the end of

September. According to the criteria approved by the relevant AFC committees to determine the four best second-placed finishers, runners-up teams were compared over an equal number of matches.

In order to ensure equality when comparing the runners-up team of all the groups, the results of the matches between the runner-up and the bottom-placed team in Group A, B, C, E, H, I and J which consisted of four teams, or the two sides from the bottom of Group G, which consisted of five teams, were not considered due to Group D, F and K having only three participating in the qualifiers.

Uzbekistan won Group A ahead of Yemen with a 100% record, while Kyrgyzstan topped Group B ahead of Oman after Nepal were excluded from the tournament following a decision by the AFC Disciplinary Committee.

Iraq finished ahead of Tajikistan in Group C, with Saudi Arabia claimed Group D in the three-team group with wins over the UAE and Bangladesh.

Iran scored 11 goals to win Group E with a perfect record ahead of 2016 hosts India, with Kuwait edging out Syria in Group F.

Malaysia topped Group G ahead of Laos, while DPR Korea finished ahead of Thailand to secure top spot in Group H. In Group I, Korea Republic progressed to the finals in dominant fashion after scoring 27 goals in just three games, while in Group J, Australia recorded wins over Vietnam, Myanmar and Guam to top the table.

And in the three-team Group K held in Mongolia, Japan comfortably secured their ticket to India with wins over the hosts and Hong Kong.

The 16-team 2014 AFC U-16 Championship is set to take place in India between September 15 – October 2.

Group A								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Uzbekistan	3	3	0	0	19	2	17	9
Yemen	3	2	0	1	10	5	5	6
Palestine	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Maldives	3	0	0	3	0	17	-17	0

16/09/15
Uzbekistan 8 Maldives 0
Yemen 2 Palestine 0
18/09/15
Maldives 0 Yemen 6
Palestine 0 Uzbekistan 6
20/09/15
Uzbekistan 5 Yemen 2
Palestine 3 Maldives 0

Group B								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Kyrgyzstan	3	2	0	1	7	3	4	6
Oman	3	2	0	1	5	2	3	6
Jordan	3	2	0	1	6	2	2	6
Nepal*	3	0	0	3	0	9	-9	0

16/09/15
Nepal 0 Jordan 3
Oman 2 Kyrgyzstan 0
18/09/15
Jordan 2 Oman 0
Kyrgyzstan 3 Nepal 0
20/09/15
Nepal 3 Oman 0
Kyrgyzstan 4 Jordan 1

**The AFC Disciplinary Committee found that Nepal fielded an ineligible player in all three of its group matches therefore all matches were forfeited by a 3-0 scoreline.*

Group C								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Iraq	3	3	0	0	9	1	8	9
Tajikistan	3	2	0	1	7	4	3	6
Qatar	3	1	0	2	5	2	3	3
Turkmenistan	3	0	0	3	1	15	-14	0

16/09/15
Qatar 5 Turkmenistan 0
Tajikistan 1 Iraq 3
18/09/15
Turkmenistan 1 Tajikistan 5
Iraq 1 Qatar 0
20/09/15
Qatar 0 Tajikistan 1
Iraq 5 Turkmenistan 0

Group D								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Saudi Arabia	2	2	0	0	11	3	8	6
United Arab Emirates	2	1	0	1	8	7	1	3
Bangladesh	2	0	0	2	2	11	-9	0

16/09/15
Saudi Arabia 5 Bangladesh 1
18/09/15
Bangladesh 1 United Arab Emirates 6
20/09/15
Saudi Arabia 6 United Arab Emirates 2

Group E								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Iran	3	3	0	0	12	1	11	9
India	3	2	0	1	11	3	8	6
Bahrain	3	1	0	2	2	12	-10	3
Lebanon	3	0	0	3	2	11	-9	0

16/09/15
Iran 3 Lebanon 1
Bahrain 0 India 5
18/09/15
Lebanon 1 Bahrain 2
India 0 Iran 3
20/09/15
Iran 6 Bahrain 0
India 6 Lebanon

Group F								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Kuwait	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	4
Syria	2	0	2	0	2	2	0	2
Afghanistan	2	0	1	1	2	3	-1	1

16/09/15
Afghanistan 2 Syria 2
18/09/15
Kuwait 1 Afghanistan 0
20/09/15
Syria 0 Afghanistan 0

Group G								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Malaysia	4	3	1	0	22	1	21	10
Laos	4	2	2	0	13	3	10	8
Timor Leste	4	2	1	1	18	2	16	7
Philippines	4	1	0	3	10	24	-14	3
Northern Mariana Islands	4	0	0	4	2	35	-33	0

12/09/15
Philippines 1 Laos 6
Timor Leste 8 Northern Mariana Islands 0
14/09/15
Northern Mariana Islands 0 Malaysia 13
Timor Leste 9 Philippines 0
16/09/15
Malaysia 1 Timor Leste 0
Laos 5 Northern Mariana Islands 0
18/09/15
Laos 1 Timor Leste 1
Philippines 0 Malaysia 7
20/09/15
Northern Mariana Islands 2 Philippines 9
Malaysia 1 Laos 1

Group H								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
DPR Korea	3	3	0	0	12	0	12	9
Thailand	3	2	0	1	6	2	4	6
Singapore	3	1	0	2	3	9	-6	3
Cambodia	3	0	0	3	1	11	-10	0

02/09/15
DPR Korea 7 Cambodia 0
Thailand 5 Singapore 0
04/09/15
Cambodia 0 Thailand 1
Singapore 0 DPR Korea 3
06/09/15
DPR Korea 2 Thailand 0
Singapore 3 Cambodia 1

Group I								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Korea Republic	3	3	0	0	27	0	27	9
China	3	2	0	1	11	4	7	6
Chinese Taipei	3	1	0	2	2	8	-6	3
Macau	3	0	0	3	1	29	-28	0

16/09/15
Korea Republic 17 Macau 0
China 1 Chinese Taipei 0
18/09/15
Macau 0 China 10
Chinese Taipei 0 Korea Republic 6
20/09/15
Korea Republic 4 China 0
Chinese Taipei 2 Macau 1

Group J								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Australia	3	3	0	0	18	1	17	9
Vietnam	3	2	0	1	23	2	21	6
Myanmar	3	1	0	2	12	8	4	3
Guam	3	0	0	3	0	42	-42	0

16/09/15
Australia 14 Guam 0
Vietnam 5 Myanmar 1
18/09/15
Guam 0 Vietnam 18
Myanmar 1 Australia 3
20/09/15
Australia 1 Vietnam 0
Myanmar 10 Guam 0

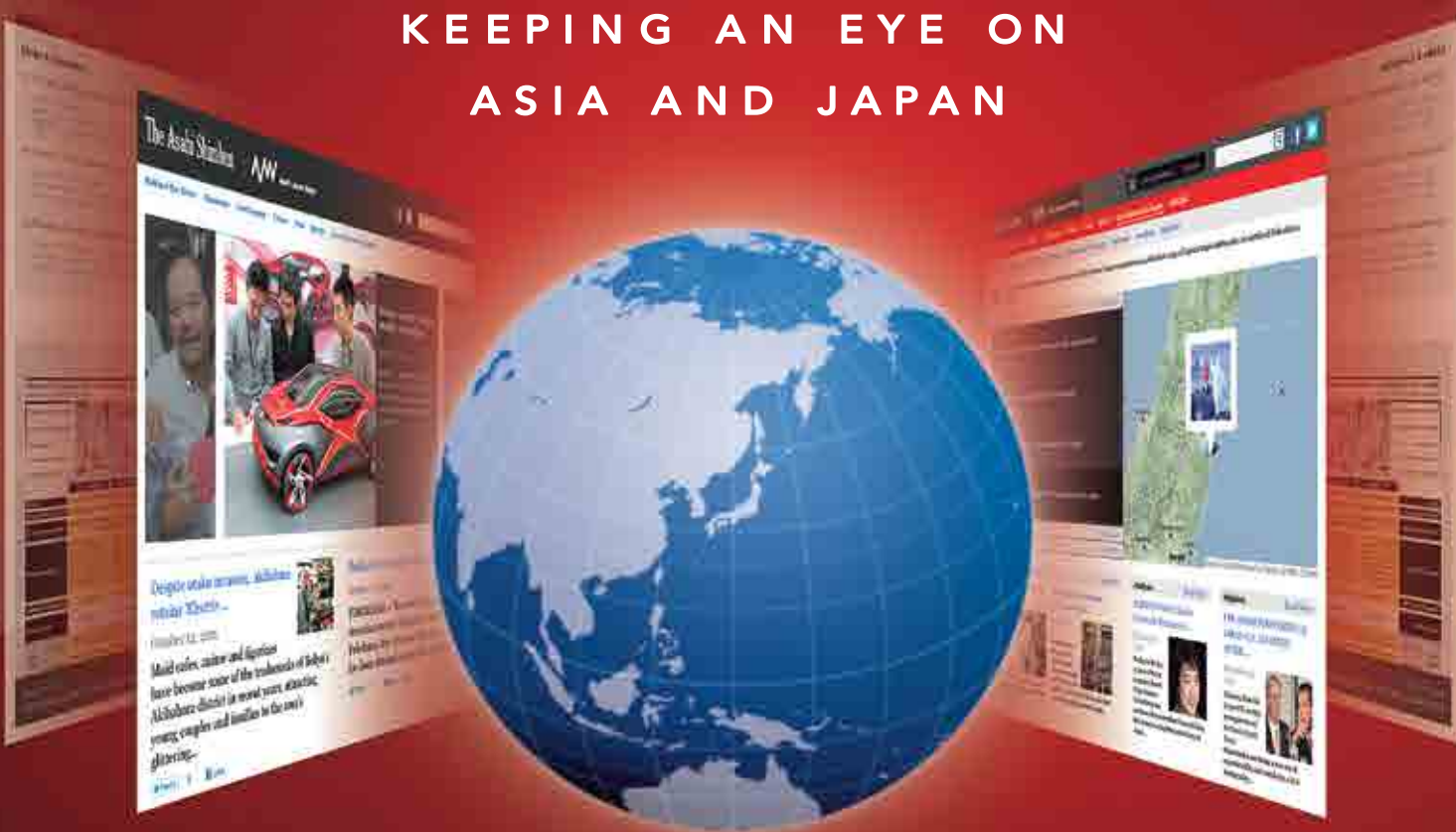
Group K								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/ -	Pts
Japan	2	2	0	0	24	0	24	6
Hong Kong	2	1	0	1	5	9	-4	3
Mongolia	2	0	0	2	2	22	-20	0

16/09/15
Mongolia 0 Japan 17
18/09/15
Hong Kong 5 Mongolia 2
20/09/15
Japan 7 Hong Kong 0



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Vietnam Remain On The Road To Rio

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Vietnam	4	3	0	1	8	4	4	9
Chinese Taipei	4	2	1	1	5	3	2	7
Thailand	4	2	1	1	3	3	0	7
Myanmar	4	2	0	2	8	7	1	6
Jordan	4	0	0	4	1	8	-7	0

14/09/15
Chinese Taipei 1 Vietnam 0
Jordan 0 Myanmar 2

16/09/15
Myanmar 1 Thailand 2
Jordan 0 Chinese Taipei 3

18/09/15
Thailand 1 Jordan 0
Vietnam 4 Myanmar 2

20/09/15
Vietnam 2 Jordan 1
Chinese Taipei 0 Thailand 0

22/09/15
Myanmar 3 Chinese Taipei 1
Thailand 0 Vietnam 2

Vietnam secured the remaining place in the final round of qualifying for the 2016 Olympic Games as the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup hosts topped the table during the second round of qualifiers in Myanmar in September.

On a gripping final day at Mandalay's Mandalay Thiri Stadium, three teams remained in the reckoning with table-toppers Chinese Taipei and Thailand the favourites to progress, with two-time ASEAN champions Vietnam a further point behind in the standings.

However, a brace from Nguyen Thi Minh Nguyet saw Vietnam defeat Thailand 2-0 to leapfrog Nuengrutai Srathongvian's side into pole position with Chinese Taipei's fixture with already-eliminated hosts Myanmar still to come, where a win would see them return to top spot and secure their passage to the final round of qualifiers.

Despite Chinese Taipei boasting an undefeated record in their first three games, Myanmar took the lead through Khin Moe Wai's third of the

campaign on 67 minutes before substitute Than Htwe increased the lead 12 minutes later.

And with seven minutes remaining, Vietnam's place in the final round was assured when Chinese Taipei defender Lin Kai Ling scored an own goal, with Lee Hsiu Chin's stoppage time strike a consolation for the East Asians, who had to settle for second place with Thailand finishing third.

Vietnam had initially begun their campaign disappointingly with a 1-0 defeat to Chinese Taipei, but from then on chalked up consecutive wins over Myanmar and Jordan before their crucial victory against Thailand.

And Takashi Norimatsu's side will join 2012 silver medallists and reigning Asian champions Japan, Australia, DPR Korea, China and Korea Republic in the decisive final round in February.

The top two finishers from the final round of qualifiers will then represent Asia at the 2016 Olympic Games looking to follow in the footsteps of Japan and DPR Korea, who participated in the 2012 Olympic Games in London.



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Field Set For 2016 AFC Futsal Championship



Qualifying round winners Lebanon, Qatar, Kyrgyzstan, China, Thailand and Australia as well as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Tajikistan, Malaysia, Vietnam and Chinese Taipei all advanced to the 2016 AFC Futsal Championship which will be held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Defending champions Japan and 2014 AFC Futsal Championship runners-up Iran had already earned direct qualification, with the hosts, who finished in third place in the 2014 edition, also qualifying automatically.

Lebanon topped the West Zone Group A qualifiers with a 100% record after defeating Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. And Lebanon are joined by regional rivals Jordan who finished in second place and they, alongside best third-placed side Saudi Arabia who replaced suspended Kuwait, will be making their debuts at the finals.

In West Zone Group B, Qatar were the frontrunners as they beat both the United Arab Emirates and Iraq to secure their place in Uzbekistan, with second placed side Iraq also confirming their 10th appearance at the AFC Futsal Championship.

Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, won the Central Zone qualifiers after following up two draws against Turkmenistan and Afghanistan with a crucial win over Tajikistan that saw them leapfrog into first place and win the group by just one point over their opponents.

And third-placed Afghanistan missed out on snatching second place by the narrowest of margins after their 6-5 loss in their opener against Tajikstan proved crucial with the latter going through due to a superior head-to-head record.

In the East, China posted an unbeaten record to top a group that included Chinese Taipei, Korea Republic, Mongolia and Hong Kong to ensure their spot in Tashkent.

Chinese Taipei, who were just a point behind China having won three out of their four games, qualified as one of the best second-placed sides.

Finally, with October's 2015 AFF Futsal Championship doubling as the ASEAN zone qualifiers, tournament hosts Thailand underlined their position as heavyweights in the region by posting a 100% record, plundering 53 goals and conceding just eight on their way to a record 11th title.

Thailand defeated Australia 5-3 in the final and the pair, along with third and fourth placed sides Malaysia and Vietnam, achieved qualification for the 2016 AFC Futsal Championship.

The 16-team 2016 AFC Futsal Championship will take place in Uzbekistan between 10-21 February.

WEST ZONE

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lebanon	3	3	0	0	16	6	10	9
Jordan	3	2	0	1	11	8	3	6
Saudi Arabia	3	0	1	2	4	9	-5	1
Bahrain	3	0	1	2	7	15	-8	1

01/10/15
Saudi Arabia 2 Bahrain 2
Lebanon 5 Jordan 2
02/10/15
Saudi Arabia 0 Jordan 2
Bahrain 2 Lebanon 6
03/10/15
Jordan 7 Bahrain 3
Lebanon 5 Saudi Arabia 2

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	2	2	0	0	4	2	2	6
Iraq	2	1	0	1	4	3	1	3
UAE	2	0	0	2	2	5	-3	0

01/10/15
United Arab Emirates 1 Iraq 3
02/10/15
Qatar 2 United Arab Emirates 1
03/10/15
Iraq 1 Qatar 2

CENTRAL ZONE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Kyrgyzstan	3	1	2	0	6	5	1	5
Tajikistan	3	1	1	1	11	11	0	4
Afghanistan	3	1	1	1	12	11	1	4
Turkmenistan	3	0	2	1	7	9	-2	2

14/11/15
Kyrgyzstan 1 Turkmenistan 1
Tajikistan 6 Afghanistan 5
15/11/15
Kyrgyzstan 2 Afghanistan 2
Turkmenistan 3 Tajikistan 3
16/11/15
Afghanistan 5 Turkmenistan 3
Tajikistan 2 Kyrgyzstan 3

EAST ZONE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
China	4	3	1	0	15	5	10	10
Chinese Taipei	4	3	0	1	18	15	3	9
Korea Republic	4	2	1	1	21	14	7	7
Mongolia	4	1	0	3	15	19	-4	3
Hong Kong	4	0	0	4	10	26	-16	0

14/11/15
Chinese Taipei 6 Korea Republic 4
Mongolia 8 Hong Kong 3
15/11/15
Hong Kong 0 China 5
Korea Republic 7 Mongolia 3
16/11/15
China 3 Chinese Taipei 1
Hong Kong 2 Korea Republic 7
18/11/15
Chinese Taipei 6 Hong Kong 5
China 4 Mongolia 1
19/11/15
Korea Republic 3 China 3
Mongolia 3 Chinese Taipei 5

ASEAN

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Thailand	4	4	0	0	42	5	37	12
Malaysia	4	3	0	1	22	9	13	9
Timor Leste	4	2	0	2	16	31	-15	6
Brunei	4	1	0	3	10	28	-18	3
Singapore	4	0	0	4	4	21	-17	0

08/10/15
Timor Leste 6 Singapore 3
Brunei 1 Malaysia 9
09/10/15
Timor Leste 6 Brunei 5
Singapore 0 Thailand 8
10/10/15
Singapore 1 Brunei 2
Thailand 6 Malaysia 1
11/10/15
Malaysia 7 Timor Leste 2
Brunei 2 Thailand 12
12/10/15
Singapore 0 Malaysia 5
Thailand 16 Timor Leste 2

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Australia	4	4	0	0	37	8	29	12
Vietnam	4	3	0	1	39	9	30	9
Myanmar	4	2	0	2	27	9	18	6
Laos	4	1	0	3	17	43	-26	3
Philippines	4	0	0	4	4	55	-51	0

08/10/15
Laos 1 Vietnam 13
Philippines 0 Myanmar 13
09/10/15
Myanmar 1 Australia 3
Philippines 3 Laos 10
10/10/15
Australia 13 Philippines 0
Vietnam 2 Myanmar 1
11/10/15
Philippines 1 Vietnam 19
Laos 2 Australia 15
12/10/15
Myanmar 12 Laos 4
Vietnam 5 Australia 6

Semi-Finals

14/10/15
Thailand 6 Vietnam 0
Australia 6 Malaysia 2

Third Place Play-Off

16/10/15
Vietnam 5 Malaysia 6

Final

16/10/15
Thailand 5 Australia 3



AFC Aligns Regulations With International Standards

The AFC has published a new AFC Disciplinary Code for 2016 containing amendments including the introduction of new offences and sanctions and a defined table of sanctions for spectator offences.

The amendments, which were approved by the AFC Executive Committee in New Delhi in November, are based on recommendations by an AFC-appointed taskforce which reviewed the 2014 edition of the AFC Disciplinary Code in order to align it with recent judgements of the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

The changes broaden the scope of the AFC Disciplinary Code to include, in addition to matches, all AFC functions and courses, while international friendly matches are now expressly included. Harming match officials physically or otherwise in competitions governed by the Member Associations is now also covered by the Code.

The AFC Disciplinary Code 2016 introduces significant new sanctions, which include: full or partial stadium closure, disqualification from a competition in progress or from future competitions, ordering a match to be replayed, withdrawal of a title or award, withholding of revenues from an AFC competition, prohibition on registering new players or restriction on the number of players to be registered in AFC competitions, and withdrawal of a club licence.

The offences in the AFC Disciplinary Code are clearly defined and specific minimum penalties for all first time offences have been introduced.

New offences have also been introduced to reinforce the fight against match-fixing, including: prohibition on

providing 'special knowledge' which would jeopardise the integrity of matches, failing to report infringements, as well as a prohibition on association with a party convicted of a match manipulation offence.

A ban on betting has also been included in the AFC Disciplinary Code, with the introduction of direct or indirect involvement in betting as an offence.

In addition, other new offences include bringing the game into disrepute, deliberately entering the field of play during a brawl and causing damage to property.

The new AFC Disciplinary Code introduces clarifications which ensure sports integrity is maintained.

It clarifies the definition of a 'ban from taking part in any kind of football-related activity'. Suspensions in all competitions will now be carried over to the same category of football (i.e. football, futsal, or beach soccer) and cannot be served in a different category.

Importantly, pending suspensions earned in club competitions will no longer be carried over to national leagues, but solely to continental competitions in the same category.

Finally, the new AFC Disciplinary Code provides clubs an express right to appeal against decisions against their players or officials.

"The new AFC Disciplinary Code places the AFC at the cutting edge of latest international sports law," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John.

"Commitment to sports justice is at the very heart of the AFC's work. The AFC Disciplinary Code is a vital tool in order to protect the integrity of the AFC competitions and the credibility of the sport in Asia."

AFC Increases Club Competition Prize Money

The AFC has confirmed significant increased prize money for both the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup in 2016 following a meeting of the AFC Executive Committee in New Delhi in November.

The prize money for winning the 2016 Champions League will double from US\$1.5million to US\$3million, with the reward for winning the 2016 AFC Cup rising from US\$350,000 in 2015 to US\$1million in 2016.

"The increases in prize money in both the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup will further increase the appeal of these competitions," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John.

"This is a significant boost and investment in the future of club football in Asia and will make competition for both continental titles even fiercer than before."

AFC Champions League participants stand to earn over US\$3.5million in performance bonuses compared to the previous years, and in addition to the eventual winners receiving US\$3million in 2016, the award for the runner-up will also double to US\$1.5million, while the semi-finalists will receive US\$200,000.

In the AFC Cup, clubs can earn a total of US\$2.1million in 2016 – an increase of US\$1.5million, with the prize for the runner-up doubling to US\$500,000.

	STAGE	2015(US\$)	Difference (US\$)	2016 (US\$)
	Champion	1,500,000	+1,500,000	3,000,000
	Runner-Up	750,000	+750,000	1,500,000
	Semi-Finalists	120,000	+80,000	200,000
	Quarter-Finalists	80,000	+40,000	120,000
	Round of 16	50,000	+30,000	80,000
	STAGE	2015 (US\$)	Difference (US\$)	2016 (US\$)
	Champion	350,000	+650,000	1,000,000
	Runners-Up	250,000	+250,000	500,000
	Semi-finalists	-	+40,000	40,000
	Quarter-Finalists	-	+25,000	25,000
	Round of 16	-	+15,000	15,000

Bangladesh Claim Girls' Regional Championship

Bangladesh won their first AFC U-14 Girls' Regional Championship title for the South & Central Zone after beating defending champions Nepal 1-0 in December's final at Dashrath Stadium in Kathmandu.

Striker Marzia scored the only goal after 16 minutes of the final, which had been postponed from April following an earthquake in Nepal.

Bangladesh, who finished third at the inaugural AFC U-14 Girls' Regional Championship in 2013 before failing to qualify in 2014, had earlier drawn 1-1 with India and beaten Bhutan 16-0 in Group B, while Nepal topped Group A with a 100% record after recording wins over Iran, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

Marzia was then also on target as Bangladesh beat Iran 2-0 in their semi-final, while Nepal recorded a 1-0 win over India.



Referees & Assistant Referees Course Concludes In Dubai

The AFC Men Referees and Assistant Referees Course 2016 came to a successful conclusion in Dubai in December.

The group is the third in a series of four courses for officials, with two courses for officials and another two courses for futsal refereeing officials conducted in Kuala Lumpur also in December.

A total of 18 Referees and 26 Assistant Referees participated in the five-day course, which included theoretical and practical sessions plus an annual fitness test.

Simulated match incidents were also created in practical sessions with instant feedback provided through video recordings.

"The AFC is now aiming for excellence and good is not enough," said Deputy Chairman of the AFC Referees Committee Hany Ballan.

FIFA/AFC Instructors, Ali Altraifi, Farkhad Abdullaev and Ismail Alhafi were in charge of the technical aspects, while C. Ravichandran and Alejo Perez managed fitness matters.



Draw For AFC Futsal Championship Takes Place

The draw for the 2016 AFC Futsal Championship took place in Tashkent in December, with defending champions Japan drawn to face Australia, Malaysia and Qatar in the group stage of February's tournament in Uzbekistan.

Japan will begin their campaign in Group D having edged out Iran on penalties in the 2014 final hosted by Vietnam to claim a third AFC Futsal Championship title.

And having missed out on adding to their 10 AFC Futsal Championship titles last year, Iran will look to go one better in

Group A	Uzbekistan, Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia
Group B	Iran, Iraq, China, Jordan
Group C	Thailand, Vietnam, Chinese Taipei, Tajikistan
Group D	Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Qatar



Uzbekistan in February starting in Group B alongside Iraq, China and Jordan.

Thailand, Vietnam, Chinese Taipei and Tajikistan, meanwhile, will face off in Group C.

Group A pits hosts and 2015 third-placed finishers Uzbekistan with Lebanon, Kyrgyzstan and Saudi Arabia.

The top five teams from the 2016 AFC Futsal Championship, which will be played at Uzbekistan Stadium and Universal Stadium in Tashkent between February 10-21, will also qualify for the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup in Colombia.

Workshop Looks To Enhance Amateur Leagues

A total of 23 representatives from 12 Members Associations gathered in Kuala Lumpur in December for the AFC Kick-Off Amateur League Development Workshop.

As part of the AFC's efforts to enhance the amateur league landscape for each nation, the two-day workshop was designed to focus on strengthening league governance, operations and commercial partnerships to increase revenue generation.

"Co-operation with the MAs and other key football stakeholders is vital to take Asian football to the next level," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Windsor John.

"As you network and exchange ideas, I hope that you will forge strong bonds of friendship that makes football so special.

"I also suggest that you explore future collaborations and partnerships opportunities."

The workshop included presentations by two Member Associations - the Bhutan Football Federation and the Mongolian Football Federation - who provided case studies on their league models and the challenges faced by their respective nations.

"The discussions on governance and club licensing have been particularly useful as we regard them as critical areas of focus in the next phase for Mongolian football," said Mongolian Football Federation Marketing

Manager Ekhjin Batsumber.

"It is also comforting to note that many of us are facing similar challenges and through our dialogues, these workshops provide an opportunity to find common solutions.

"I am very pleased and thankful to the AFC for providing this dedicated platform to enable us to collectively grow, develop and improve the day-to-day running of our leagues."

The AFC introduced the Kick-Off programme in 2013.

It placed an emphasis on enhancing the capabilities of Member Associations in areas including league governance, league administration, management and commercialisation, club commercialisation and administration, as well as professional player support activities.

"While the Kick-Off programme provides support for all AFC Member Associations and their affiliated leagues, semi-professional and amateur football represents an integral part of football development in Asia," said Head of AFC Member Associations Development Stuart Larman.

"I would like to thank our Member Associations for embarking on this journey with us and for their commitment to elevate the standards of league and club administration in their respective nations."



AFC Medical Conference Hailed



The 5th AFC Medical Conference took place in the Indian capital of New Delhi, with the three-day programme attended by around 600 delegates and participants from 67 countries.

The conference featured a plethora of lectures, symposiums and free papers amid a backdrop of knowledge and information exchange.

"Among all the five AFC Medical Conferences held so far, this was the best ever in terms of participation, quality of experts and topics delivered," said Chairman of the AFC Medical Committee and the Scientific Committee Dato' Dr. Gurcharan Singh.

"When we were in the midst of planning this

conference we thought long and hard about what topics to include, but it is clear that we chose the correct subject matter, because it was the subject matter that related directly to you, the participants.

"And that is where the success of the conference lies, because without a good variety of topics and excellent speakers we would not have had the success we have had. I thank you one and all."

The conference also featured the inaugural AFC Medical Awards with 22 professionals, including FIFA Chief Medical Officer Professor Jiri Dvorak and Singapore's Dr. Krishnamoorthy Sittampalam, recognised for their endeavours.



Mini Pitches Boost Development In Kyrgyzstan

AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa inaugurated two state-of-the-art mini pitches built by the AFC in Kyrgyzstan capital Bishkek at the end of November.

The Mini Pitch Scheme, launched in June 2014, is part of the AFC President's initiatives for development of Asian football and the programme will see a total of four pitches built in Kyrgyzstan, including two in the Osh region.

"I am delighted that the AFC can concretely support grassroots and community football through the AFC Mini Pitch Scheme," said AFC President Shaikh Salman.

"Proper facilities and access to them is a challenge in many Member Associations and these pitches will bring the joy of football to children and adults across Asia. In addition, they can also generate vital income, as is the case here in Kyrgyzstan."

Between 2015 and 2016, the scheme will benefit the football development of 15 AFC Member Associations by increasing the number of available facilities across the continent.

"The AFC's Mini Pitch Scheme has made a very valuable

contribution to football in our country," said Football Federation of Kyrgyz Republic President Semetei Sultanov.

"The income from the two pitches in the Osh Region will enable us to develop football in the regions, funding the development activities of our regional football associations. That is crucial for our overall football development plan for the country."



Yadegar Emam Stadium

Tabriz, Iran

Yadegar Emam Stadium was built in 1996 following a seven-year construction period. With a capacity of 67,858, the stadium is the second largest in Iran after the Azadi Stadium in Tehran and features a natural grass pitch measuring 68 metres by 100 metres.

The stadium is located in the foothills of the Iranian city of Tabriz in the northeastern part of the country, and since its opening, has been the home of Persian Gulf Pro League side and AFC Champions League participants Tractorsazi Tabriz who previously played at the much smaller Bagh Shomal Stadium.

As well as top flight Iranian league games, the stadium has hosted three consecutive seasons of AFC Champions League

ties.

And Tractorsazi have also qualified for their fourth continental campaign in a row in the 2016 edition.

The venue has also been host to international friendlies with Iran playing Qatar in May 1996 and Kenya in April 1997, while the venue also hosted the recent 2016 AFC U-16 Championship qualifiers involving Iran, India, Bahrain and Lebanon.



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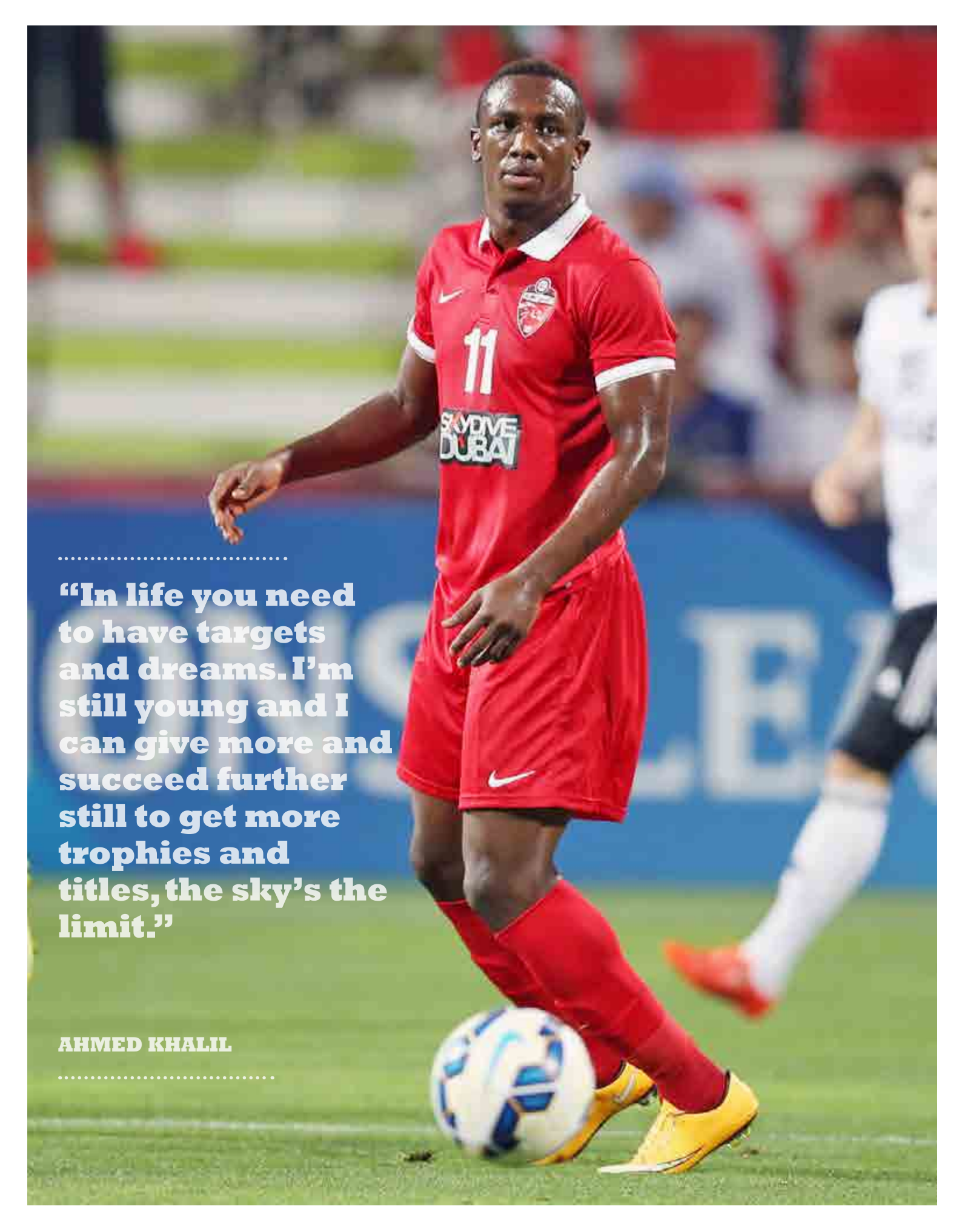
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A full-page background image of a football player, Ahmed Khalil, in a red kit with the number 11, dribbling a ball on a green field. The kit features a 'SHADE DUBAI' sponsor logo. In the background, another player in a white kit is visible, and a blue advertising board with the word 'SLE' is partially seen.

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“In life you need to have targets and dreams. I’m still young and I can give more and succeed further still to get more trophies and titles, the sky’s the limit.”

AHMED KHALIL

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