

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 22

PLUS

Cheng Chin Lung

The Kitchee SC player
reflects on his historic goal



**AFC
ASIAN CUP
UAE 2019™**

Final Line-up Confirmed

Stephanie Al Naber

Jordan captain to lead her country
into historic AFC Women's Asian Cup

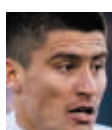
ISSUE 22

April 2018



ALI HASSANZADEH

The IR Iran futsal star who can't stop winning discusses the secrets behind his success with Team Melli



ODILJON XAMROBEKOV

Uzbekistan midfielder reflects on achieving continental glory with the Central Asians at the start of what promises to be a huge year



ALBERTO ZACCHERONI

Italian head coach charged with leading the UAE at the AFC Asian Cup is set for yet another challenge in a distinguished career

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CONTENTS



18
Interview: Stephanie Al Naber
REALISING A DREAM

24 – Odiljon Xamrobekov

The AFC U23 Championship China 2018 MVP looks back on Uzbekistan's historic triumph and discusses his future goals.

28 – Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh

With more team and individual awards racked up over the past 12 months, Islamic Republic of Iran's star futsal player reflects on his trophy-laden career to date.

32 – Erik Paartalu

A successful first season with JSW Bengaluru culminated in Erik Paartalu signing a new two-year deal and the Australian discusses just what it is that makes the club special.

36 – Alberto Zaccheroni

The United Arab Emirates head coach is settling into his new role and looking ahead to the AFC Asian Cup on home soil in early 2019.

40 – Cheng Chin Lung

The Kitchee SC forward wrote his name into the record books when his stunning strike claimed Hong Kong's maiden AFC Champions League win.

Regular Sections

14 – In The News

44 – AFC Asian Cup Qualifiers

46 – AFC Champions League

48 – AFC Cup

50 – AFC U23 Championship

52 – AFC Futsal Championship

54 – Inside AFC

58 – Great Grounds of Asia

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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

www.facebook.com/theafcdotcom

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Designer:
David Chung

Photos:
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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

As we move into the second quarter of 2018 we have an opportunity to look back at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) progress so far with satisfaction and pride and look forward with anticipation and excitement at the future events and tournaments.

Reflecting on early 2018, it was pleasing that the AFC honoured the promise made in the AFC's Vision and Mission to stage world-class competitions which showcase the very best of talent in Asia.

The AFC U23 Championship held in China PR produced some excellent and engaging football – and two first-time finalists in Uzbekistan and Vietnam. They staged a most entertaining final in challenging snowy and cold conditions which was sealed in the most thrilling way – with Uzbekistan scoring the winner in the last minute of extra-time.

The emergence of both Uzbekistan and Vietnam in this competition demonstrated that the talent pool in Asian football is growing and so gripped were the Vietnamese public by their team's progress that the AFC achieved record television and social media numbers in the country.

Quickly following the AFC U23 Championship was the AFC Futsal Championship, with the Islamic Republic of Iran maintaining their dominance of the discipline with their 12th title in 15 tournaments. We congratulate them and also one of the newer hosts of AFC competitions – Chinese Taipei.

Now looking forward – within a few days the AFC Women's Asian Cup will make history when it is staged for the first time in West Asia as the Jordan FA builds on the legacy of hosting the FIFA Women's U-17 World Cup a couple of years ago.

And then, in quick succession, comes the draw for the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 in Dubai on May 4 while at the same time the AFC Women's Futsal Championship is taking place in Thailand from May 2 to 12.

And of course, Asia creates history this summer at the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 with a record five teams competing and Saudi Arabia becoming the first-ever Asian team to play in the opening match of a FIFA World Cup when they face hosts Russia on June 14.

As you can see this is a remarkable time for Asian football.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



At the heart of the image

Gallery



Uzbek Glory

Uzbekistan were crowned AFC U23 Championship China 2018 winners after seeing off a spirited Vietnam side with a 2-1 victory in Changzhou in January.

Gallery



Asia's Finest

Islamic Republic of Iran defeated Japan 4-0 to win the AFC Futsal Championship in Chinese Taipei in February to become kings of the continent for the 12th time.

Gallery



I spy

Al Ahed's Ahmad Zreik came up with an original celebration as the forward netted two goals in the Lebanese side's 4-1 win over Syria's Al Jaish in Group B of the AFC Cup in March.

Gallery



Full House

Azadi Stadium was packed to the rafters for Esteghlal's first game in Tehran in the 2018 AFC Champions League in March as 90,000 spectators witnessed the 1-1 draw with Al Ain.



Uzbekistan Clinch AFC U23 Crown After Late Winner

THE WHITE WOLVES COMPLETED A MEMORABLE TOURNAMENT WHEN ANDREY SIDOROV STRUCK IN THE LAST MINUTE TO SEE OFF VIETNAM IN WINTRY CONDITIONS IN CHANGZHOU.

A last-gasp winner from Andrey Sidorov saw Uzbekistan crowned AFC U23 Championship China 2018 winners following a 2-1 victory over Vietnam in Changzhou in January. The Uzbeks took an early lead when defender Rustamjon Ashurmatov headed in Dostonbek Khamdamov's corner, but Vietnam levelled shortly before the interval through Nguyen Quang Hai's wonderful curling free-kick. But Sidorov got on the end of another Khamdamov corner to break Vietnamese hearts at the death as Uzbekistan secured a 2-1 victory to win the continental title. "We made history today and it's one of the greatest victories for Uzbekistan football and for our country," said head coach Ravshan

Khaydarov. "The players showed the maximum of what they can do. This team is the future of our senior team." The victory capped a superb tournament for Uzbekistan, who defeated Japan and Korea Republic in the knockout rounds, having bounced back from an opening-day defeat to Qatar. Having lost their first game in Group A, Uzbekistan responded in the perfect way by posting a 1-0 victory over hosts China in their second game and then seeing off Oman by the same scoreline in their final group match to advance in second place. A stunning performance in the last eight saw the Uzbeks oust defending champions Japan 4-0, before defeating Korea Republic 4-1 in the semi-finals. Despite the defeat in the final, Vietnam

enjoyed a fine tournament with their performances sparking widespread celebrations across the Southeast Asian country. The Vietnamese also lost their opening match but defeated Australia 1-0 and then claimed a point against Syria to progress. A penalty shootout victory over Iraq in the quarter-finals followed a 3-3 draw before they eliminated Qatar from the spot after Quang Hai scored twice in a 2-2 draw. "To have reached this far in the tournament, we have proven that we are one of the best teams in Asia," said Vietnam captain Luong Xuan Truong. "I feel sad, but we are proud of what we achieved." Qatar finished in third place after Akram Afif scored the only goal of the game against Korea Republic in the third place play-off.



IR Iran Win Record 12th AFC Futsal Championship Title

THE CENTRAL ASIANS' REIGN AS KINGS OF ASIA CONTINUED IN CHINESE TAIPEI AS A 4-0 VICTORY OVER JAPAN IN THE FINAL WRAPPED UP THEIR SECOND SUCCESSIVE AFC FUTSAL CHAMPIONSHIP IN EMPHATIC STYLE.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's dominance at the AFC Futsal Championship continued in February as the Central Asians claimed their second successive title and 12th overall following a 4-0 victory over two-time winners Japan in the final in Chinese Taipei. The tournament's Most Valuable Player Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh opened the scoring in the 19th minute before Farhad Tavakoli doubled Team Melli's advantage a minute after the restart. Hassanzadeh all but secured the title when he made it three in the 28th minute and the competition's 14-goal top scorer Hossein Tayebi put the icing on the cake a minute from time as Iran made it a perfect six wins from six. "Our plan began two years ago, which told

us to pay attention to our youth, keeping them busy with development and grow them as potential national team players, even though we were [already] ahead," said Iran's head coach Mohammad Nazemasharieh. "It is clear that we've shown a fantastic performance and proved to everybody that we're the best team in Asia. We had the top goalscorer, MVP and are the team that conceded the least goals." Iran won the first AFC Futsal Championship in Malaysia in 1999 and went on to win the next six in a row. Japan ended their dominance in 2006, before the two nations shared the next four titles between them. The Iranians reclaimed their crown by defeating Uzbekistan 2-1 in the 2016 final, before ousting Brazil on route to reaching the FIFA Futsal World Cup semi-finals in Colombia later that year and eventually finishing third.

Nazemasharieh's side returned to the continental scene as hot favourites and did not disappoint, sweeping everyone aside to claim back-to-back titles. "I'm more than happy to receive this award. But I don't believe it's mine alone, as it belongs to all the players," said MVP Hassanzadeh. The tournament also marked an upturn in fortunes for Japan, who were ousted in the quarter-finals in 2016 but returned to make their third final in four tournaments. "The only difference today, compared to our other matches, was the efficiency," said Japan's head coach Bruno Garcia. "We need to increase our level and I assure you we will do it." Uzbekistan finished in third place after a penalty shootout victory over Iraq followed an entertaining 4-4 draw.



FIFA Lifts Ban On Iraq Hosting Competitive Games

AFTER ALMOST THREE DECADES WITHOUT HOSTING COMPETITIVE INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL MATCHES, THE WEST ASIAN COUNTRY HAS BEEN APPROVED TO HOST ITS GAMES AT HOME.

Iraq has been given the green light to host international football matches following a FIFA meeting in the Colombian capital Bogota. The governing body ruled that the West Asian country can stage competitive games in the cities of Erbil, Basra and Karbala after the latter two successfully staged friendly internationals last year. Erbil, meanwhile, hosted the first leg of the AFC Cup West Zone semi-final between Iraqi sides Air Force Club and Al Zawraa last May in what was the first continental match to be played in the country in since 2013. “The AFC, and the Asian football family as a whole, have supported this structured return of competitive football to Iraq,” said Asian Football Confederation President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa. “I was in Basra last month to see the friendly

against Saudi Arabia and it was clear that the time had come to lift the restriction on competitive matches – and I am delighted FIFA agree. The decision followed an international friendly between Iraq and Saudi Arabia at Basra Sports City on February 28 in a game that the hosts ran out 4-1 winners in front of almost 60,000 spectators. A month later Basra also staged the match between Iraq and Qatar with 65,000 turning out to watch an entertaining encounter in which the visitors won 3-2, before Iraq and Syria played out a 1-1 draw at the same venue at the end of March. In October and November last year, Iraq faced Kenya and Syria in Basra and Karbala respectively as the potential for competitive international football to return to the country became ever more likely.

The Iraq Football Association has welcomed the decision and will continue to push for the go ahead to stage matches in the capital Baghdad and other cities across the country. “[We will] spare no effort for games to be played in stadiums in other provinces, including Baghdad,” said the IFA. “This decision puts our sport back on the rails.” Iraq enjoyed a successful 2017 in which they won two and drew two of their five FIFA World Cup qualifiers, having suffered four defeats from their first five games. The country played their home ties of the qualifying campaign in Tehran, Amman and the Malaysian city of Shah Alam. The return to home soil should further boost their potential to challenge the best teams of the continent ahead of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.



Final Four Countries Book Ticket To UAE 2019

DPR KOREA, KYRGYZ REPUBLIC, THE PHILIPPINES AND YEMEN ALL CONFIRMED THEIR PLACES AT NEXT JANUARY’S AFC ASIAN CUP IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOLLOWING THE FINAL ROUND OF QUALIFIERS AT THE END OF MARCH.

Kyrgyz Republic, the Philippines and Yemen will make their AFC Asian Cup debuts in the United Arab Emirates next year after securing the wins they needed in the final qualifiers at the end of March. The trio were joined by DPR Korea, who defeated Hong Kong 2-0 to confirm their own qualification, as the 24-team line-up for January’s tournament in the United Arab Emirates was completed. Central Asians Kyrgyz Republic became the 21st team to secure their passage when they ended Myanmar’s hopes of progressing following a 5-1 Group A win in which Anton Zemlianukhin scored twice in what was the sides’ previously postponed fixture. Despite beating India 2-1 in Bishkek in their

final game, Kyrgyz Republic missed out on top spot by virtue of India’s late goal. “We have been able to take the next step in the development of our football,” said Kyrgyz Republic head coach Aleksandr Krestinin. Both qualification spots were still to play for in Group F, with the Philippines, Tajikistan and Yemen seeking to advance to the Emirates. In a thrilling game in Manila, Tajikistan took a second-half lead through Akhtam Nazarov’s penalty, before Kevin Ingreso levelled. A late penalty from Philippines captain Phil Younghusband then wrapped up a 2-1 victory as the Azkals joined the continent’s elite for the first time. “It was an emotional game. It showed the spirit of the Filipino people, the fighting spirit,” said Younghusband, whose goal was his 50th for his country.

The result meant Tajikistan, who had been two points behind the Philippines and level with Yemen, missed out on the competition due to an inferior head-to-head with the West Asians. With their place in the UAE already sealed, Yemen went into their final game with Nepal in Doha a few hours later with no pressure and a brace from Abdulwasea Al Matari helped secure a 2-1 win. Goals from DPR Korea’s Jong Il-hwan and Pak Kwang-ryong in Pyongyang saw off Hong Kong 2-0 in Group B in a game that the visitors needed to win to qualify. The victory saw DPR Korea join table-toppers Lebanon in what will be the continental championship’s biggest ever line-up ahead of a tournament that promises to deliver some thrilling spectacles come next January.

REALISING A DREAM

STEPHANIE AL NABER HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE KICKING A BALL ABOUT THE STREETS OF AMMAN WITH HER BROTHER AS THE MIDFIELDER NOW SKIPPERS HER COUNTRY AS JORDAN BECOMES THE FIRST WEST ASIAN NATION TO HOST THE AFC WOMEN'S ASIAN CUP.

By: Wael Jabir Photos: Lagardère Sports/Jordan Football Association/Getty Images





Four Jordanian players took up positions inside the opposition penalty area, tirelessly attempting to outsmart their markers to find that little bit of space that would allow them to convert the impending cross.

A two-woman wall lined-up to cover the tight angle as she took two steps back and prepared to take the free-kick. With everyone in the box awaiting her delivery from the right flank, Stephanie Al Naber had different plans, she always did.

The Jordan skipper took a quick look and rifled a curling strike past the wall, beating the Uzbek goalkeeper at her near post to send the home crowd into raptures.

With 15 minutes to go in the game, Al Naber's goal, the third in an eventual 4-0 triumph, put the game beyond Uzbekistan, in the process sending Jordan to their first ever AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2014.

Thinking differently has been a constant in Al Naber's life. Defying the stereotypes, she played street football in Amman from an early age, often going head-to-head against her younger brother Youssef, now a Jordanian international midfielder who plies his trade at Shabab Al Ordon, one of the country's leading clubs.

Becoming a footballer developed into an obsession for young Stephanie, and by age 17

she was part of the Shabab Al Ordon side that won the inaugural nationwide women's football championship in Jordan.

The club has a special connection to the Al Naber family, as Stephanie's younger sister Natasha also represents the team and their father, Mazen Al Naber, is a member of the its board of directors.

"THE FEELING I GET EVERY TIME I PUT ON THE JERSEY WITH THE FLAG ON MY CHEST AND THE BAND ON MY ARM IS A FEELING I WILL NEVER EVER FORGET OR GET TO EXPERIENCE ANYTHING CLOSELY AS EMOTIONAL."

Al Naber reflects on that evening at Amman International Stadium when her goal helped realise the dream of an entire generation of women footballers in the country and establish Jordan as pioneers in women's football in the region.

"I have been with the team for so long, but my favourite memory is that game against Uzbekistan," remembers the now 30-year-old.

"A 4-0 win that night in front of our own fans led us to qualify for our first ever AFC Asian Cup in the 2014 edition in Vietnam."

Pitted against hosts Vietnam, eventual

champions Japan and runners-up Australia in Group A, Jordan had their work cut out in the finals and ultimately bowed out with three defeats, but it was a learning experience against sides with a much longer history in the women's game than them.

Despite the frustration of the early exit, there was still a chance for a bit of history to be made as Maysa Jbarah registered the country's maiden AFC Asian Cup goal in the opener against Vietnam and Al Naber left her mark with the team's solitary goal in the 3-1 defeat to Australia.

Four years on from the Vietnam experience, Al Naber and her teammates are back on the continental stage, although this time Jordan did not have to contend with the roller-coaster ride of navigating the qualifying campaign.

Al Nashmiyat had automatically booked their place in the AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018 as the host nation, and Al Naber's pride of leading the national team players out onto the pitch on this big occasion on home soil is unparalleled.

"Being the captain of Jordan women's national team is definitely an honour and privilege for me," Al Naber says, "The feeling I get every time I put on the jersey with the flag on my chest and the band on my arm

is a feeling I will never ever forget or get to experience anything closely as emotional.

"Let alone getting to do so in Jordan at an important tournament that can lead us to a childhood dream that I believed we can do from the start – to qualify to the FIFA Women's World Cup in France in 2019."

A childhood dream for Al Naber it may be, but the squad backed by the Jordan Football Association and the coaching staff are sparing no effort in making sure World Cup qualification becomes a reality.

Despite being the host nation, Jordan did play in the qualifiers, and with their place in the competition guaranteed, the matches offered Al Nashmiyat the chance to get some competitive action and prepare for what is to come.

They flexed their muscles against their Asian opponents, topping the qualifying Group A in style. Al Naber contributed nine goals as Jordan strolled to five wins out of five in the fixtures played in Tajikistan in April 2017. Teammate Jbarah was the only player to score more in the qualifiers, netting 13 times.

After consecutive 6-0 wins over Bahrain and the UAE, Jordan recorded double-digit victories against Iraq and the hosts Tajikistan.

In the final game, they proved too strong for fellow qualifiers the Philippines, who were brushed aside 5-1. The Southeast Asians were drawn against Jordan again in Group A of the finals, alongside China PR and Thailand.

Having conquered their group, Al Nashmiyat then upped the stakes, going on a pre-

Far Left Above
2005 WAFF Women's
Championship

Far Left Above
2005 WAFF Women's
Championship

"IT WAS A DREAM COME TRUE TO PLAY IN EUROPE PROFESSIONALLY AND BE ABLE TO LIVE A LIFE OF A PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PLAYER."

tournament European trip that saw them spend ten days in Madrid, where they were tested against three Spanish top division sides.

Al Naber and co were up for the challenge, earning draws against Rayo Vallecano and Madrid CCF and only losing to Spain's Primera Division leaders Atletico Madrid.

Results were not as good in Jordan's subsequent Alanya Women's Cup in Turkey, where they found themselves clashing with nations much higher in the FIFA Women's World Rankings. Coach Michael Dickey's team lost to Poland, Romania and Mexico, who all rank in FIFA's top 40, and earned a 2-0 win against Latvia.

Challenging themselves against tough opponents is an approach Al Naber has been happy with as Jordan look to make their World

Above & Far Left Below
AFC Women's Asian Cup
Vietnam 2014

Cup dreams come true.

"The main objective that we have been preparing for since April 2017 is to qualify to the World Cup," she admits. "We have worked so hard to be ready for this tournament, we played really important games over the past year in our preparations which taught us exactly what we need to work on and improve to achieve our goals."

Alongside experienced duo Al Naber and Jbarah, Jordan have in their ranks a number of young talents that can take them far in the 2018 AFC Women's Asian Cup and for years to come. The captain is full of praise for her younger teammates.

"Salma Ghazal, our 18-year-old promising goalkeeper; Tasneem Abu Rob, our 17-year-old midfielder; and Rouzbahan Freij our 17-year-old defender [are stars of the future]," she points out.

"Both Tasneem and Rouzbahan have also represented Jordan at the U-17 FIFA Women's World Cup, and that enriched their international experience and self-esteem as well."

Finishing in the top five to reach the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup might be Jordan's stated objective in the tournament they are hosting, but Al Naber has no qualms about setting the bar even higher for herself and her teammates, aiming towards a place in the AFC Women's Asian Cup semi-finals and



Above 2018 Turkish Women's Cup

perhaps going even further.

"If we could reach the World Cup, that means we also have the possibility of finishing in the top four, and that takes us to a whole new level of ambitions. Who knows, maybe even winning the AFC Women's Asian Cup."

Coming top has always been a target Al Naber has eyed and worked for, and with that attitude she has come a long way from the days of kicking a ball about in the streets of Amman with the boys.

Her rapid development almost mirrored that of the women's sport in Jordan. After all, as a teenager, Al Naber was a part of the very first women's national team setup 13 years ago.

"Women's football in Jordan has changed a lot since we started back in 2005," reflects the veteran midfielder. "The support from the Jordan Football Association has increased, the game is more popular, the fan base is bigger, and of course the mentality of the society has changed positively towards women playing football in Jordan."

"That gave young girls the courage to join clubs and play football, which increased the number of players and made them commit to the game."

The results of these efforts are evident today as Jordan is, for the second time in a row, the only West Asian country to be at the AFC Women's Asian Cup. Although club football in the country continues to lag slightly behind, which is one reason that drove Al Naber to pursue playing her football in other leagues in the region.

Now back in Jordan after her career took her to represent clubs across West Asia, from the UAE to Lebanon, Al Naber offers her assessment of the progress of the sport in the area.

"Women's football in the West Asia region started a bit late, where in other regions it was already popular and way ahead. West Asia is a

"WHAT I KNOW FOR SURE IS THAT IT IS A ONCE-IN-A-LIFETIME CHANCE AND FOR ME IT IS MY LAST CHANCE TO QUALIFY TO THE WORLD CUP AND EXPERIENCE IT."

conservative region and it took time for society to understand and accept the fact that women can also play football and there is nothing wrong with that."

"We are getting there, but national associations need to start with girls at a young age with the right training programmes to get them ready physically and mentally to compete at a high level when they reach the senior teams," she adds.

The Jordanian skipper always relished a challenge, and the biggest of all came in 2009, when she was approached by Danish Club Fortuna Hjørring, and without hesitation she took the challenge head on. Al Naber ended up spending one full season with the nine-time Danish champions and scoring six goals from midfield.

"It was one of the most interesting and exciting experiences I have ever had in my life," recalls Al Naber, who played primarily as a left winger for the 2003 UEFA Women's Cup finalists.

"It was a dream come true to play in Europe professionally and be able to live a life of a professional football player. I will not lie to you and say it was easy. No, it was the hardest thing I have ever experienced; living alone in a country where I knew no one, having to play with top players, top teams, and get to experience the UEFA Women's Champions League."

Al Naber insists that she learnt a lot during

her time at Fortuna Hjørring, benefitting from the higher level of training and stricter professional lifestyle. The one thing she could not cope with in Northern Europe was the cold, gloomy Scandinavian weather in addition to being away from her family and friends. Eventually, this was what prompted her to make the decision to return to Jordan after just one season.

Despite the brief spell in Denmark, Al Naber made history in becoming the first Jordanian and Arab female player to play football professionally in Europe. It is a legacy she is proud of and will continue to cherish.

"This experience added a lot to me personally and football wise, I have learned so much from the players, coaching staff, and living by myself. It opened a lot of doors to my football career."

Al Naber's journey is one of determination, challenging the status quo and remaining defiant in the face of obstacles, no matter how difficult. And as one of Jordan's greatest ever female athletes enters the latter years of her career, there is still one more mountain she is determined to climb.

"What I know for sure is that it is a once-in-a-lifetime chance and for me it is my last chance to qualify to the World Cup and experience it."

Despite the ambition, she remains realistic in her assessment of the team's chances of reaching the global event as Jordan also aim to become the first women's team from West Asia to appear at a FIFA Women's World Cup at senior level.

"I know the team will give 100 percent, but after all it is football and just as there is a chance that we will win and qualify, there is also a chance we could lose and not make it. So, I am keeping my fingers crossed, and working hard and we will leave the rest to God."

THE SILENT DESTROYER

ODILJON XAMROBEKOV WAS NAMED THE MOST VALUABLE PLAYER AS UZBEKISTAN WON JANUARY'S AFC U23 CHAMPIONSHIP IN CHINA AND THE NASAF MIDFIELDER BELIEVES HIS GENERATION CAN ONLY GET BETTER AHEAD OF A HUGE YEAR.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Lagardère Sports

The white sheet of snow layering the Changzhou Olympic Sports Center pitch in late January did little to put midfielder Odiljon Xamrobekov off his game in the AFC U23 Championship China 2018 final between Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Neither did the prolonged half-time break or the switch of jerseys.

In extraordinary conditions, the White Wolves of Uzbekistan had been forced to swap their traditional home top for their blue away version at the interval, when a team of workers were frantically shoveling snow off the field so the match could resume. Forty-five minutes after referee Ahmed Al Kaf blew for half-time, the game eventually kicked off again. Xamrobekov was unmoved, and did what he had done so often in the tournament:





posting more successful passes than anyone on the pitch, the highest passing accuracy, and topping the charts with both recoveries and interceptions.

The Central Asians eventually won the match with almost the last kick of the game when substitute Andrey Sidorov diverted Dostonkbek Khadamov's corner from the left into the back of the net to clinch a 2-1 win in the most dramatic of fashion, almost 180 minutes after the game had begun.

The victory marked Uzbekistan's first continental title since the 2012 AFC U16 Championship success and, despite the headlines unsurprisingly going to Sidorov, it was the Nasaf man Xamroboev who was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player following a string of solid performances in the centre of the park.

"This victory was very important for the future," said 22-year-old Xamroboev, sat in a darkened room, clutching his MVP award, in the bowels of Changzhou Olympic Sports Center shortly after the win.

"The Uzbek Football Federation has given us a lot of opportunities to play, arranging training camps, but in the last few years we didn't win any cups. This win can now inspire the younger players to do the same.

"This tournament is very prestigious with a high level, second only to the Asian Cup, so

we are very proud to win it."

While it is hard to argue that Xamroboev's award was not merited – he made almost 150 more passes than any other player in the tournament, topped the interceptions chart and was second in recoveries – it was fellow midfielders Khamdamov (with the most assists) and Azizjon Ganiev (with his eye for the spectacular) that tended to stand out.

But Xamroboev's role in the side was invaluable, allowing others to shine as Uzbekistan bounced back from an opening-day defeat to Qatar to post hard-fought 1-0 victories over hosts China and Oman to advance to a quarter-final meeting with defending champions Japan.

From here, the Uzbeks began to move through the gears as a 4-0 victory over the East Asians – with Khamdamov and three-goal top scorer Jasurbek Yakhshiboev both on the scoresheet – suddenly thrust them into the 'serious contender' category.

The 2016 runners-up Korea Republic were next up in the semi-finals and, after the game ended 1-1 in 90 minutes, the Central Asians eventually advanced resounding 4-1 winners.

Nevertheless, it was Vietnam's stunning march to the final on the other side of the draw that was truly grabbing the headlines as Uzbekistan progressed, if not quietly, then certainly without the fever pitch that was

gripping the Southeast Asian nation.

"The group matches were difficult but in the knockout rounds we started to believe in ourselves, especially after we beat Japan and all the players thought we could do it," admitted Xamroboev when quizzed on when the team started to feel they could win the competition.

"Japan are one of the strongest teams in Asia so it was a great stimulus to win and this gave us more confidence going into the next game."

A small pocket of Uzbek fans made the journey to Changzhou for the final and, although outnumbered by their Vietnamese counterparts, remained vocal in their support of their side.

Rustamjon Ashurmatov headed the Uzbeks in front early on but Vietnam had come so far and were not going to go away without a fight and Ngyuen Quang Hai curled in an exquisite equaliser shortly before the interval.

With the game seemingly heading for penalties, Sidorov, brought on at the death to take a spot kick, ensured the shootout was not necessary as his winner made it five victories in a row since the defeat to Qatar to delight a football-mad nation that has so often fallen just short.

"Wow, absolutely huge celebrations, all the people were very happy," recalled

the midfielder two months after lifting the continental title.

"I could see in their eyes how happy everyone was as our senior national teams have never won an AFC tournament before, so our success was a big surprise. We celebrated this triumph for almost one month.

"But this was not the maximum potential for me or the team, we have more. I've played with this side for four or five years and I know the potential. All the players do not want to stop with this."

In truth, there was barely any time for Xamroboev to stop and ponder the achievement as he headed straight back to Qarshi, alongside midfield partner Ganiev, to help Nasaf return to the AFC Champions League following a 5-1 win over Jordan's Al Faisaly just three days later.

Entry to the continental competition offered up an opportunity any young midfielder would dream of – the chance to pit his wits against Spanish legend Xavi as Nasaf were drawn alongside Qatar's Al Sadd, as well as Persepolis of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Emirati side Al Wasl.

"There's nothing left to be said about Xavi, the whole world knows who he is," said Xamroboev, whose side suffered a 4-0 defeat to Al Sadd in Doha in mid-March as the FIFA World Cup winner scored his first

Left AFC U23 Championship China 2018

Above 2018 AFC Champions League

AFC Champions League goal.

Nasaf had, however, defeated a Xavi-less Al Sadd in Qarshi a week earlier, although the Uzbek side were ultimately eliminated at the group stage.

"Just look at how many matches he's played in his career. We played against him and I'd say he's one of the best, even now.

"The AFC Champions League is on another level as all the teams have very good squads and a high level of player. It's such a big experience for me to play in ACL matches."

The past few months have been a whirlwind for the 22-year-old, who won his first Uzbekistan cap in a friendly defeat to the United Arab Emirates last November and, following his performances in China, was again named in the squad for the recent friendlies with Senegal and Morocco in Casablanca.

The midfielder started alongside Shanghai SIPG's Odil Ahmedov in the 1-1 draw with the Senegalese, before coming off the bench in the 2-0 defeat to Morocco.

Uzbekistan's midfield is not without its role models for Xamroboev, with captain Ahmedov arguably the country's best player

of the current generation and two-time AFC Player of the Year Server Djeparov an inspiration to all up-and-coming Uzbek players.

"Ahmedov was my idol when I was younger. He is the captain and shows fantastic performances on the pitch. I always admire how he plays, his level and his talent," said Xamroboev.

"We all respect Djeparov and Ahmedov and hope this younger generation can eventually replace them. I believe in this [U-23] team and the other young teams we have.

"Before we watched the [senior] national team and admired these players. It's now a great feeling to wear the jersey and represent your country."

There are nine months until the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 kicks off and, should the steady midfielder maintain the form that has produced such a solid start to the year, few would doubt he'll have a role to play.

Uzbekistan's best performance at the tournament was a semi-final appearance in 2011, but with plenty young talent from the U-23 side now boasting a winning mentality and the likes of Ahmedov and forward Sardor Rashidov in their peak years, the White Wolves may just fancy their chances of going one better early next year.



MISTER MVP

ALI ASGHAR HASSANZADEH PROVED HIMSELF ONCE AGAIN AMONG THE CONTINENTAL FUTSAL SCENE'S VERY BEST, AFTER CAPTAINING ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN TO A 12TH AFC FUTSAL CHAMPIONSHIP TITLE IN TAIPEI AS WELL AS PICKING UP YET ANOTHER MVP AWARD. THE 30-YEAR-OLD REFLECTS ON HIS CAREER SO FAR AND TURNS HIS GAZE ON FUTURE GLORY FOR HIS NATION.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: Lagardère Sports





Ali Asghar Hassanzadeh's standing in the Asian futsal world could not be higher right now.

He was voted the AFC Futsal Player of the Year – his third such accolade – last November at the AFC Annual Awards, and followed that with stellar performances as skipper of IR Iran's title-winning side at the AFC Futsal Championship Chinese Taipei 2018.

Yet another MVP award, his third in a row at the continental competition, came too in Taipei and his 12-goal haul was second only to teammate Hossein Tayebi. And, at just 30 years of age, it seems he still has plenty more futsal to play.

Hassanzadeh, arguably the heir-apparent to equally lauded compatriot Vahid Shamsaee, though, is philosophical when it comes to the long list of individual honours bestowed upon him.

"It's always nice to get a prize or a trophy, as an individual or as a team, it's something you never forget," says the softly spoken Hassanzadeh, reclining in a leather sofa at the Fullerton Hotel in Taipei City.

"But futsal is a team sport, I would never, ever think this is all just about myself. If it wasn't for my teammates, I would never get

these kinds of awards. I first of all, thank all the players that helped me.

"We must also be careful to keep those memories together. Sometimes one will forget or not appreciate when one is successful. But it's important to not let the memories just fade away, so that together we will be eager to repeat that success again.

History, past experience, and a constant desire to improve upon the past are mantras that drive the man from the city of Qom, 125 kilometres south of the capital Tehran. Growing up, Hassanzadeh did not have to look far for inspiration, either.

"I am from a futsal family, both my older brothers played futsal. The eldest, 13 years older than me, went on to play for the national team," he says. "He was a good example for me and I was happy to follow in his footsteps.

"He would analyse my game, tell me what I was doing right and wrong, and give me very good advice on how to play. If I have become any kind of success in the game, then it is thanks to him."

With his brothers' encouragement, Hassanzadeh, already a keen football player, first began playing futsal at secondary school before he got a chance to join his local club Eram Kish Qom, where he signed his first professional contract in 2004.

In his first season, Eram finished runners-up

in the league, and Hassanzadeh was already beginning to break into the national team under Brazilian coach Jurandir Dutra.

"Dutra did a lot for Iran's national futsal team, he was coach when I was first called up as a 16, 17-year-old," adds Hassanzadeh.

"It's very important for a young boy to be trusted by the coach, to become a regular player of the national team."

Under Dutra, Hassanzadeh was named in the squad for the 2006 AFC Futsal Championship in Uzbekistan, the first of now seven continental campaigns with the Iran side.

Back then, as it was for so many years of Iranian futsal, Shamsaee was the main event, scoring 16 times to top the scoring charts.

Hassanzadeh, by comparison, had a negligible impact on the side's statistics with just one goal to his name, a 32nd-minute strike in a 14-0 winner over Turkmenistan in their group opener.

Nonetheless, a maiden AFC Futsal Championship goal was still a memorable occasion for the teenager, and the tournament, which ended in a third-place finish after a semi-final elimination by eventual winners Japan, left an impression on Hassanzadeh.

"Back then I was very young, and I was really in need of gaining some experience," he recalls. "I learned a lot from this tournament from both winning and losing."

Having missed out on the following tournament in 2007, Hassanzadeh was back on the continental stage at the 2008 campaign in Thailand and, under coach Hossein Shams, had a far greater impact.

Netting at every stage up until the semi-final, the now 20-year-old was a key part of the side that lifted their ninth Asian title, finishing as the second highest scorer behind Shamsaee.

"I will never forget the first time I won the AFC Futsal Championship as part of the Iran team," says Hassanzadeh.

"The final was in Thailand against the hosts and it was very difficult because a lot of Thai fans were in attendance watching the game. "But we managed to win 4-0, a memory that will stay with me forever.

"Under Mr. Shams, I felt like a professional futsal player for the first time."

In 2009, Hassanzadeh left Eram and signed with champions Foolad Mahan and continued to add to his title collection: a first Iranian Futsal Super League title, a maiden AFC Futsal Club Championship, and a second AFC Futsal Championship title arrived within a year.

Having fallen at the second stage in his FIFA Futsal World Cup debut in 2008, the 2012 edition in Thailand brought similar results with a Round of 16 elimination by Colombia.

However, a third AFC Futsal Championship-winning campaign in 2016 for Hassanzadeh,

Above Far Left AFC Futsal Championship Uzbekistan 2016

Left & Above AFC Futsal Championship Chinese Taipei 2018

Below Far Left AFC Futsal Championship Vietnam 2017

in which he was named tournament MVP for the second time, was arguably among the most important as it saw Iran qualify for the 2016 FIFA Futsal World Cup and the scenes to come of Asia's greatest outing on the world futsal stage.

A third-place finish behind Spain and Azerbaijan in Group F wasn't the most auspicious of starts to the tournament in Colombia, but their results were enough to secure a place in the knockout stages.

Their reward was a Round of 16 clash with defending champions Brazil, and Team Melli shocked the world, winning 3-2 on penalties after drawing 4-4 after extra-time, with Hassanzadeh scoring in regulation time and in the shootout.

"Brazil were five-time champions, no one imagined that we could win," reflects Hassanzadeh.

"We trusted in ourselves though, and played to the best of our abilities.

"Looking back now, I still have trouble believing that we were able to beat them."

The Iranians then defeated Paraguay 4-3 in the quarter-finals, before a heartbreaking loss

by the same scoreline to Russia in the final four.

"We played them a lot – regular friendlies each year – and knew the Russia team well, so we thought we would be able to beat them without too many problems."

Nevertheless, a penalty shootout win over Portugal in the third-place match ensured Iran would secure Asia's best ever finish at the FIFA event.

"Our high position in the tournament was a success, not only for Iran but for the whole continent," says Hassanzadeh.

Following the 2016 World Cup heroics, Iranian eyes had already turned to the next edition in 2020.

A hugely impressive 2018 AFC Futsal Championship campaign, where Iran went undefeated to lift a 12th Asian crown looks to have Iran on the right path.

"I hope we can continue to be a good representative for Asia and play well for our continent at the 2020 FIFA Futsal World Cup," he adds.

"My future futsal ambitions are about my country: I want to see Iran reach the FIFA Futsal World Cup final. We have the potential, the technique and the tactics, we only need that extra bit of luck.

"Hopefully one day, we will have the chance to become world champions."



ERIK THE BLUE

AFTER A SHORT STINTS IN KOREA REPUBLIC AND QATAR, ERIK PAARTALU HAS FOUND A HOME IN INDIA, WHERE LIFE ON AND OFF THE PITCH AT JSW BENGALURU IS PROVING A HUGE SUCCESS FOR THE BIG AUSTRALIAN.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Getty Images/JSW Bengaluru

As the torrential downpour swirled around the West Block of JSW Bengaluru's Sree Kanteerava Stadium in late August 2017, the just under 5,000 fans who had braved the conditions were unaware that they were witnessing the formation of a team that would bring them so much joy in the months ahead. Having won two I-League titles, two Federation Cups and achieved a runners-up finish in the 2016 AFC Cup since their

formation in 2013, Bengaluru's rise to the fore had been spectacular. Their medium-term goal, though, had been to join the burgeoning Indian Super League (ISL), which they ultimately gained entry to ahead of the 2017-18 season. The harsh reality of the move, however, had been realised in the weeks leading up to August's AFC Cup Inter-Zone semi-final with DPR Korea's 4.25 SC. The ISL's draft system meant a side that had formed such a close-knit bond between players and fans had been ripped apart,





and head coach Albert Roca was suddenly handed the task of creating a team capable of challenging both domestically and on the continent.

With many stars departed, Spaniards Dimas Delgado and Toni Dovale, and India's number one goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh made their competitive debuts in the 3-0 win over 4.25. As did Australian Erik Paartalu who, after short spells in Qatar and Korea Republic, had made southern India his next call of port. He hasn't looked back since and recently signed a new two-year deal with the club.

"Having an open mind," says former Brisbane Roar and Melbourne City midfielder Paartalu, when quizzed on why he was able to fit seamlessly into life in a contrasting environment to what he is used to.

"It's not easy to adapt anywhere if you have a closed mindset or negative approach. Bangalore is a great city so I guess I'm very lucky compared to others. I just focus on the good things and keeping my routine as normal as possible."

Bengaluru would go on to advance past 4.25 following a scoreless draw in the second leg in Pyongyang, before exiting at the hands of eventual runners-up FC Istiklol of Tajikistan in October's Inter-Zone final.

Defeat was a bitter pill to swallow after the

hosts, who had been 1-0 down from the first leg, were reduced to 10 men shortly before half-time. A 2-2 draw was ultimately not enough as the Tajik team progressed. For Paartalu and his teammates, the next job was to regroup for the onset of the ISL.

"The effort was there, we ran our socks off and we can be proud of our efforts," said Paartalu in the aftermath of the disappointment.

"Teams go through good and bad times and that's how you grow. It's a learning curve to play together – to win, to lose – it's a big thing for us and hopefully an advantage for us going into the Indian Super League season."

Paartalu's words spoke of unity, something which – according to those who had been at the club over a longer period of time, including captain Sunil Chhetri – was the foundation for their early success. The continental dream may have been over for another year, but Bengaluru were ready to venture into the unknown.

More new arrivals followed, with Spaniard Edu Garcia and Venezuelan striker Miku adding to the Spanish-speaking contingent, which also included 2016 acquisition Juanan in the centre of defence with Englishman John Johnson, a fans' favourite who had been at the club since 2013.

Exciting prospect Udanta Singh provided speed and width, while Chhetri boasted the experience, knowhow and ability to strike when

it matters most. The camaraderie on the training ground, which Roca had initiated during a pre-season trip to Spain, offered hope that this team could form a similar connection to the one that had gone before.

"[The management] picked players with good personalities and obviously some quality, but I think it was more about selecting individuals that wanted to come to India for the right reasons," explains 31-year-old Paartalu, who moved to Bangalore with his wife after joining the club.

"There isn't a player in the dressing room I couldn't sit next to and have a conversation with. There's a lot of mutual respect in the hope we achieve something.

"Again that starts with the management's recruiting strategy. There are no bad apples, so to speak. It ranks up there with my days at Brisbane, we all wanted to prove something to ourselves and to each other which is always a good mix."

Bengaluru would go on to open their ISL campaign with a 2-0 victory over Mumbai City, before Paartalu netted twice as the Karnataka state side eased passed Delhi Dynamos 4-1.

The Australian scored again in a 4-3 defeat to FC Goa, but two more wins made it four from five in a near perfect start to the

season as Roca's team set the early pace.

A slight wobble – the club's only one of the campaign – followed as Bengaluru lost three from five. But they remained in touch with the leaders and, after defeat in Delhi, went unbeaten for the remainder of the league campaign to qualify for the four-team play-offs.

Impressively, the Blues had become the first team in the league's four-year history to record victories over every team.

More than 25,000 turned out at Sree Kanteerava to see stoppage-time goals from Miku and Udanta round off the league season in style with a win over Kerala Blasters to finish eight points clear of second-placed Chennaiyin.

But, after seeing off Pune City in the play-off semi-finals, heartbreak ensued as Chennaiyin were crowned ISL champions following a 3-2 victory in the final in Bangalore.

"It's been a successful season for us, reaching the semi-finals of the AFC Cup and finishing the league with a few records broken along the way," reflects Paartalu, who shifted between midfield and a three-man defence throughout the season.

"But the pain isn't going to go away from this group of players, I can assure you of that. Even afterwards we took a few days off, came back and we are all still very down about it.

"It will be in the back of our minds until

Left & Above 2017-18 Indian Super League

Below Left & Above Right Training with JSW Bengaluru

we win the ISL. I guess in the finals format determining the winner, we will need to have a better plan if we get the chance to win it again. Unfortunately, we couldn't get any silverware for our efforts but we are proud of the season we put in."

The 2017 Federation Cup success, however, meant Bengaluru were thrust straight back into AFC Cup action following the loss to Chennaiyin.

Since debuting in 2015, Bengaluru had impressed on the continent. They reached the Round of 16 at the first attempt, finished runners-up to Iraq's Air Force Club the following year and were just a game away from the final in 2017.

In Paartalu's absence, Bengaluru won their opening game of the 2018 competition against Bangladesh's Abahani Limited Dhaka, but the Sydney-born midfielder is now back and raring to go.

"Without looking too far ahead we have four remaining group games that we are aiming to progress through. Our minds are firmly on that," he adds.

"Teams [in the AFC Cup] have different styles and different qualities so you need to do your homework. From our experience last year

I can tell you that every game was so close.

"In DPR Korea we should have lost by three or four and I felt against Istiklol in the semis we were the better side and a few calls went against us but that's football. You ride the wave of emotions and hopefully come out the other side with a smile.

"Winning the AFC Cup would be an amazing feat, hopefully we put ourselves in a position to do so."

Two more years in the bustling city of Bangalore await Paartalu, who will visit family and friends in Australia and Scotland during the off-season, before returning to Karnataka state full of drive to make up for the recent disappointment.

Unlike many other ISL signings from overseas who have opted for the often lonely hotel life, Paartalu will arrive back to a city he has made home. And a place where he is sure he can win trophies.

"Silverware," is the response when asked what he would like to achieve in the coming years. "I signed here for two more years as I believe it's a club that brings out the best in me. I feel that I will enjoy my football here.

"I've not won anything since my Brisbane days. When you get older you start to think if you will ever get that opportunity again. It won't put me down though it will keep driving me till I win something."



ONE GOAL

ALBERTO ZACCHERONI'S IMPRESSIVE CV INCLUDES A SERIE A TITLE WITH AC MILAN AND AFC ASIAN CUP SUCCESS WITH JAPAN. THE ITALIAN'S NEXT MISSION IS TO STEER A TALENTED UNITED ARAB EMIRATES SIDE TO CONTINENTAL GLORY ON HOME SOIL.

By: Paul Murphy Photos: Getty Images

Since leading Japan to 2011 AFC Asian Cup glory in Qatar and then to the FIFA World Cup three years later, experienced Italian coach Alberto Zaccheroni's only head coach role had been a short spell with Beijing Guoan in the Chinese Super League in 2016.

But in October 2017, the former AC Milan and Juventus manager was the man entrusted with taking over the reins of the United Arab Emirates following the West

Asians' failure to reach the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 and ahead of the highly anticipated AFC Asian Cup in front of home support in early 2019.

Zaccheroni became the third man in charge in a little over six months, taking over after the brief reign of Argentinian Edgardo Bauza, who left to become head coach of Saudi Arabia after being unable to reignite the UAE's fading bid to qualify for the FIFA World Cup.

However, after a bedding in period that included the 2017 Gulf Cup in Kuwait and the recent King's Cup in Thailand, the tactician now has time to work with his team, and he





has stressed that is exactly what he needs as he attempts to build a squad strong enough to reach the later stages of next year's AFC Asian Cup.

"We are going to concentrate solely on building our best national side in order to be ready to face the best national sides from all of Asia in the Asian Cup. My job during this time is to find the best players possible," said Zaccheroni.

He will do well to match the achievement of Bauza's predecessor Mahdi Ali, whose UAE side beat Japan on the way to third place in 2015.

In Zaccheroni's first fixtures, the UAE participated in the Gulf Cup in December and January, where they reached the final of the eight-team tournament, before losing to Oman on penalties.

The most striking aspects of this campaign were the solidity of the defence and the lack of goals up front. In five games, the UAE scored just once and conceded none with the exception of penalties. It looked like the Italian was building from the back.

Zaccheroni's side then played in the King's Cup invitational tournament in Thailand in March but travelled without star playmaker Omar Abdulrahman and striker Ali Mabkhout – two players who will surely play a big part at the AFC Asian Cup.

Mabkhout was the top scorer at the 2015 edition in Australia, while Abdulrahman is widely considered one of the top talents in Asia.

Without these two stars to call upon, Zaccheroni watched his new team lose 2-1 to Slovakia and then 1-0 to Gabon. While the loss to the Slovaks may not have been surprising, the defeat to Gabon was tougher to take, with the African side sitting 16 places below the UAE in the FIFA World Rankings.

Again, scoring goals was a problem as Ahmed Khalil provided the sole strike in 180 minutes, while two of the three goals conceded came in a three-minute spell against Slovakia.

But it remains early days for the Italian, and he is quietly confident that things will come together after he has had more time to work with the players.

In addition to winning the AFC Asian Cup in 2011, Zaccheroni has managed a number of Italian clubs, leading AC Milan to Scudetto glory in 1999. As such, he will not be overawed by the challenge he faces and the pressure he will come under as the tournament approaches.

After five months in the job, the Italian insists that he is first and foremost focused on unearthing the best available talent.

"I am looking to attend as many matches as possible in the UAE Championship to find the best players," said Zaccheroni.

"Unfortunately, several players are currently

injured but at the end of the season, I will have seen all of the players and will build a very strong national team to participate in the Asian Cup.

"The Asian Cup is currently our sole objective. We have had the King's Cup in Thailand, which will be followed by a series of friendly matches on FIFA breaks."

Zaccheroni knows how to win the continental competition, his Japan side having triumphed the hard way, defeating Korea Republic in the semi-final before overcoming current champions Australia in the 2011 final.

In that tournament, the 65-year-old had three of the best Japanese attacking talents of all time, with Shinji Kagawa, Shinji Okazaki and Keisuke Honda all in the squad.

Zaccheroni insists that he will not be attempting to construct a UAE side in the image of this successful team, instead moulding an identity that suits the players at his disposal.

"I haven't had a lot of time with the players so far," admitted Zaccheroni. "I am hoping to use my experience to create a team with a clear identity that fits the characteristics of the UAE players."

"Every team has different characteristics and the UAE is different from Japan. I don't think my UAE side will play in the same way as my Japan team."

"Japan had very fast players and great resilience as a group. With the UAE, I am still trying to find the right balance between attack and defence."

"The Japan team scored a lot of goals and conceded very few. I would like to see the UAE do the same thing."

Knowing what Japan are capable of, Zaccheroni admits he is not too keen on an early reunion at the January 2019 competition.

Indeed, the Italian has identified his former side as the one team he would rather not meet until the later stages, believing his current charges will have a stronger chance of overcoming the Japanese if they meet once they have had time to build some momentum.

While the seeding system ensures that the UAE and Japan will not be drawn together in the group stage, Zaccheroni clearly considers the Samurai Blue as one of the tournament favourites

"I would prefer not to play Japan early on," he confessed. "They have a very strong squad and I would prefer to face them later in the tournament."

"It will be difficult for the UAE side to be at the top of their form from the start of the tournament."

It has been a difficult, transitional year, for the players, following the departure of the long-serving Mahdi Ali and the short reign of Bauza.

*Far Left & Above Left
With Japan in 2012*

*Below Left & Above
New UAE head coach*

Zaccheroni admits that his introduction to the job has not been without its challenges as he attempts to put together a team that is worthy of the host nation in the continental showpiece.

"It's difficult to have so many changes in a short time because when a new trainer arrives, he has to develop relationships with the players and build a team spirit," he said.

"We still need time get to know each other and I am trying to build a team that best fits the qualities of the players."

It is for these reasons that the Italian is reluctant to make any rash predictions about where the UAE might finish the tournament on home soil.

Home advantage will surely help and Zaccheroni's pedigree provides cause for optimism.

However, when asked what he thought the minimum requirement would be to judge the AFC Asian Cup campaign a success, Zaccheroni kept his cards close to his chest.

"Before I can make any predictions, I have to get to know the players. I am new to this job."

The Italian is certainly too experienced to make any comments that could potentially

set him up for failure, particularly given his position in charge of a nation that is desperate for its golden generation to succeed.

Zaccheroni has managed in the high-pressure environments of Italian giants AC Milan, Juventus, Internazionale and Lazio in an illustrious career.

His success with Japan proved he was capable of transferring what he had learned at club level to the international stage on a different continent.

Zaccheroni's early results with the UAE may not have been particularly eye-catching but it would perhaps be unwise to see them as indicators of his team's likely performance in January 2019.

The time to judge will be when he has had enough time to integrate players into the team with a system he believes can make an impression next year.

No doubt, his side will include 2015 AFC Asian Cup top scorer Mabkhout and 2016 AFC Player of the Year Abdulrahman, as well as the formidable striking talent of 2015 AFC Player of the Year Khalil.

Zaccheroni may not have the impressive squad depth that he had with Japan in 2011 but, as victories over Japan and Saudi Arabia in FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 qualifying showed, the UAE can be a match for Asia's best on their day.

HISTORY MAKER

AT JUST 20 YEARS OF AGE, CHENG CHIN LUNG HAS HAD HIS FAIR SHARE OF UPS AND DOWNS, BUT THE KITCHEE SC PLAYER HAS OVERCOME EARLY REJECTION AND SERIOUS INJURY TO WRITE HIS NAME INTO THE RECORD BOOKS AFTER HIS GOAL AGAINST KASHIWA REYSOL SECURED HONG KONG'S MAIDEN AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE VICTORY.

By: Paul Williams Photos: Lagardère Sports/ Kitchee SC

When Cheng Chin Lung woke on the morning of Wednesday, March 14, it was just like any other match day. Little did the 20-year-old know that just 12 hours later he would catapult his name into the record books of Hong Kong football.

Cheng, who had struggled for game time with Kitchee and had only been recalled from a loan spell at fellow Hong Kong Premier

League side Dreams FC to add depth to the AFC Champions League debutants' squad, woke at 11am as he did ahead of every match he plays and proceeded to follow his normal routine – cereal for breakfast, before relaxing around home, taking in some social media and an afternoon nap to prepare himself for the game ahead.

"Actually on that morning it was just similar to a normal match day that I have to prepare for, there was nothing special," Cheng said.

"I didn't give any thought to making an impact or not, but definitely I understood that if I got the chance to get on the pitch what





I needed to do. But really it was just like a normal match day.”

Arriving at the stadium two hours before kick-off against J.League side Kashiwa Reysol, who had beaten Kitchee by just the solitary goal a week earlier, Cheng knew he would be restricted to a bit-part role off the bench – that’s if he was to get any kind of runout at all.

Since returning to Kitchee in late January after being recalled from his loan deal, Cheng had only appeared in one domestic Hong Kong Premier League fixture, while he was restricted to just 26 minutes during the AFC Champions League matches against Tianjin Quanjian and Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

In Kitchee’s 1-0 loss to Kashiwa in Japan he was an unused substitute, so there was no guarantee the youngster would be used in the tie at Hong Kong Stadium.

With just 10 minutes remaining and scores still locked at 0-0, meaning Kitchee were on track to earn their first ever point in Asia’s premier club competition, the call came from coach Chu Chi Kwong. His orders to Cheng were simple.

“At that time the coach’s instructions were to try to hold the ball, try to pass the ball, but most importantly was not to lose the ball,” Cheng recalled.

“I had to help defensively as well, and if I got the chance I could shoot, but most importantly was holding the ball.”

With 91 minutes elapsed, and just two minutes of added time remaining, Kitchee’s star signing Diego Forlan showed the kind of spirit and determination needed to win big matches by chasing down what seemed like a lost cause near the corner flag in front of a small, but vocal, contingent of home fans.

Passing the ball to Cheng, Forlan sprinted around the outside of the 20-year-old looking for the return pass. But Cheng, with ice in his veins, had other ideas, nutmegging his way past Brazilian Ramon Lopes and ignoring the pleas of Forlan to his left.

The attacking midfielder glided into the box, before unleashing a stunning left-footed effort that curled into the top corner, past the outstretched hand of Kazushige Kiriha to win the match for Kitchee. It was the first time any Hong Kong side had won a group stage match in the AFC Champions League.

“When I kicked the ball I knew where it was going,” reflected Cheng. “Of course when it went in everyone knew it was a goal, but as soon as I kicked the ball I knew it was going to be a goal.”

With the back of the net still rippling from his wonder strike, the 7700-strong crowd at Hong Kong Stadium were delirious with joy. The wild

celebrations that followed, that fans will remember for years to come, are but a blur for Cheng.

“After I scored the goal, I don’t remember thinking anything to be honest,” he said.

He does remember, however, why he ignored the pleas of Forlan in the build-up to the goal – he simply couldn’t hear the Uruguayan superstar.

“The area where I took the ball was very close to the fans, so at that time I couldn’t really hear Diego screaming for the ball,” he explained.

“So when I got the ball I just looked to the far post and I saw some teammates around that area and I decided to shoot, but I didn’t hear Diego so that’s why I decided to shoot.”

While Cheng is now a household name in Hong Kong football, it hasn’t always been easy for the attacking midfielder in his battle to forge a professional football career.

He was nine years of age when he first applied to join Kitchee’s youth academy in 2007, but was initially overlooked, before eventually securing his place a year later after his father convinced academy coach Chu Chi Kwong, now the senior coach, to give his son another chance.

Like most parents, his father only wanted what was best for his son, but he made sure

that whether he chose football or his studies he committed to it 100 percent.

“My dad is an open-minded person,” Cheng explained. “That’s why he gave me the choice to either keep studying or choose football. The most important thing for him was that I had to work very hard in whatever I chose to make sure I didn’t regret it.”

After graduating from Kitchee’s academy in 2015, Cheng signed his first professional contract and life was good, making his first-team debut in the 2015 AFC Cup quarter-final against Kuwait SC at the age of just 17.

While opportunities were limited at the end of 2015, the following year heralded a fresh start for the 18-year-old, who played four of the six matches in the AFC Cup group stage, even finding the back of the net in a 4-0 win over Singapore’s Balestier Khalsa, as Kitchee finished top of their group.

There was a league debut in a 2-0 win against Eastern SC – Hong Kong’s maiden AFC Champions League participants last year – and a first league goal in a 4-2 win over Pegasus.

But just when things were looking up, Cheng was dealt a cruel blow when he tore his anterior cruciate ligament in a youth match in June 2016, which forced him to miss the entire 2016/17 season as he worked his way back to full fitness. At such a young age, and

*All
2018 AFC Champions League*

with his career finally taking off, it was a bitter pill to swallow.

Cheng openly admits he struggled mentally, but he wasn’t about to give up on his dream and used the strength he gained from being knocked back by Kitchee as a nine-year-old to guide him through his recovery.

“This was my big love and desire, to play football,” he said. “So when I had difficult moments or got knocked back I kept reminding myself it was not meant to be easy, and when I had a chance I needed to take it.

“That’s why every time I’m in a difficult moment I’ve got to keep going and looking forward. I love football, that’s why I keep going.

“At the same time I had a lot of support from my friends, and the senior players and doctors kept telling me I would come back very soon. They kept motivating me to keep moving and going forward and that helped me get back.”

When he returned for the 2017/18 season, opportunities at Kitchee were limited and he started the campaign out on loan at Dreams FC. While the team had mixed fortunes on the field, winning four, losing three and drawing one of their first eight matches, the move

allowed Cheng to earn much needed game time as he looked to resurrect his fledgling career.

At the start of January this year, Cheng was recalled by Kitchee to add depth to their playing stocks for the dual campaigns in the AFC Champions League and Hong Kong Premier League.

While he has found it hard to break into a side that was so dominant in the domestic league, his wonder strike has cemented his place in the history of the club and in the hearts of its fans.

Cheng is aware, however, that one swallow doesn’t make a summer and is looking to use the confidence gained from his historic goal to springboard his career to new heights and perhaps even new horizons.

“Personally, it increased my self-confidence and is a good milestone to take my game to a higher level in the future,” he said.

“In the short-term I want to compete at Kitchee, especially to get more playing time in the first 11. In the long-term, I think about maybe going to other countries to play outside of Hong Kong, that’s what I want to achieve in the future.”

If he can keep producing moments of magic as he did against Kashiwa Reysol, the world may well be his oyster.



Cast For AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 Complete

After a qualification campaign that began way back in March 2015, the final four teams to progress to the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 were confirmed following the last round of qualifiers at the end of March.

With 20 teams having already booked their ticket, DPR Korea, Kyrgyz Republic, the Philippines and Yemen added their names to the guest list in the United Arab Emirates after rounding off their campaigns with victories.

The four teams join Bahrain, India, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Turkmenistan and Vietnam – as well as the 12 sides that had earlier advanced to Asia’s FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 qualifiers – as the 24 nations to be represented in the continental competition next January.

Kyrgyz Republic were the first of the four sides to seal their place when Anton Zemliannukhin netted a double in Incheon in a comprehensive 5-1 victory over Myanmar, who had been battling it out for second place with the Central Asians in Group A.



The victory, in what was a previously postponed encounter, meant Kyrgyz Republic advanced to their maiden AFC Asian Cup with a game to spare, although they just missed out on top spot despite a 2-1 final day victory over group winners India in Bishkek.

Myanmar, meanwhile, rounded off their campaign with a 1-0 win over bottom side Macau in Yangon.

In Group B, DPR Korea needed to avoid defeat at home to Hong Kong to join table-toppers Lebanon in the continental tournament.

Jong Il-gwan and Pak Kwang-ryong scored inside 25 minutes to ensure the East Asians had few problems in wrapping up second place after finishing six points ahead of their opponents.

Lebanon ended an impressive third round of qualifying undefeated as Hilal El Helwe struck in stoppage time to see off Malaysia 2-1 in Beirut as the Southeast Asians were

denied what would have been just their second point in the group.

The only group with both qualification spots still up for grabs going into the final round of fixtures was Group F, where the Philippines hosted Tajikistan and Yemen faced Nepal.

Drama in Manila saw the Philippines fall behind just after the hour, but Kevin Ingreso and captain Phil Younghusband’s 50th goal for his country in the last minute meant the Southeast Asians secured an historic first berth in the AFC Asian Cup.

Yemen’s better head-to-head against the Tajiks meant they had already taken second place in the standings before Abdulwasea Al Matari’s brace saw off Nepal 2-1.

With Jordan and Vietnam having already claimed the top two places in Group C, only pole position was left to play for when the sides met in Amman.

Vietnam began well and took a first-half lead through Nguyen Anh Duc but the hosts levelled through Monther Abu Amara’s stunning strike from distance as the Jordanians finished two points ahead of the Southeast Asians. Elsewhere, Jabar Sharza scored twice as Afghanistan finished with a 2-1 victory over Cambodia to end their campaign

third in the standings. Top spot was also at stake in Group D, where Oman met Palestine in Muscat with the aim of avenging the 2-1 defeat in the reverse fixture. Khalid Al Hajri, who ended the third round of qualifiers as top scorer with eight goals, netted the only goal of the game in the dying minutes as Oman leapfrogged Palestine by virtue of the goal they scored in Al Ram last June.

In the battle of the bottom two sides, Naiz Hassan bagged four as the Maldives claimed a resounding 7-0 win over Bhutan to finish third in the table.

Finally, Bahrain secured top spot in Group E as Abdulla Yusuf scored twice in a 4-0 victory over second-placed Turkmenistan in Manama.

Chinese Taipei, meanwhile, completed the double over Singapore with Chen Po Liang scoring the only goal of the game in a 1-0 victory over the Southeast Asians.

The draw for Asia’s most prestigious competition will take place on May 4 in Dubai.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
India	6	4	1	1	11	5	6	13
Kyrgyz Republic	6	4	1	1	14	8	6	13
Myanmar	6	2	2	2	10	10	0	8
Macau	6	0	0	6	4	16	-12	0

22/03/18
Kyrgyz Republic 5 Myanmar 1
27/03/18
Myanmar 1 Macau 0
Kyrgyz Republic 2 India 1

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lebanon	6	5	1	0	14	4	10	16
DPR Korea	6	3	2	1	13	10	3	11
Hong Kong	6	1	2	3	4	7	-3	5
Malaysia	6	0	1	5	5	15	-10	1

27/03/18
DPR Korea 2 Hong Kong 0
Lebanon 2 Malaysia 1

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	6	3	3	0	16	5	11	12
Vietnam	6	2	4	0	9	3	6	10
Afghanistan	6	1	3	2	7	10	-3	6
Cambodia	6	1	0	5	3	17	-14	3

27/03/18
Afghanistan 2 Cambodia 1
Jordan 1 Vietnam 1

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Oman	6	5	0	1	28	5	23	15
Palestine	6	5	0	1	25	3	22	15
Maldives	6	2	0	4	11	19	-8	6
Bhutan	6	0	0	6	2	39	-37	0

27/03/18
Oman 1 Palestine 0
Maldives 7 Bhutan 0

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Bahrain	6	4	1	1	15	3	12	13
Turkmenistan	6	3	1	2	9	10	-1	10
Chinese Taipei	6	3	0	3	7	12	-5	9
Singapore	6	0	2	4	3	9	-6	2

27/03/18
Chinese Taipei 1 Singapore 0
Bahrain 4 Turkmenistan 0

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Philippines	6	3	3	0	13	8	5	12
Yemen	6	2	4	0	7	5	2	10
Tajikistan	6	2	1	3	10	9	1	7
Nepal	6	0	2	4	3	11	-8	2

27/03/18
Philippines 2 Tajikistan 1
Yemen 2 Nepal 1





Al Duhail And Shanghai SIPG Progress

Qatar's Al Duhail posted a perfect four wins from their opening four games in the AFC Champions League to advance to the knockout rounds with a game to spare, while China's Shanghai SIPG have also booked their passage to the next stage having recorded three victories from four.

The 2016 winners Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors also have three wins from four and are edging towards the next stage, while last year's runners-up Al Hilal are still looking for their first win in the 2018 tournament.

Participating in their first continental competition since the merger between Lekhwiya and El Jaish, Al Duhail came from a goal down to Zobahan in their first game in Group B to post a 3-1 victory.

Youssef El Arabi then scored three successive braces in victories over Al Wahda and back-to-back wins against Lokomotiv to move to the top of the scoring charts and seal the Qataris' passage to the Round of 16.

Semi-finalists in 2017, Shanghai SIPG began the current campaign in fine form, with their potent forward players Elkeson, Hulk, Wu Lei and Oscar all on the scoresheet in wins over Kawasaki Frontale and Melbourne Victory in Group F

Four points from two games against 2012 winners Ulsan Hyundai then secured a spot in the knockout rounds for the third consecutive year.

Ulsan and Melbourne, both on five points, appear to be in a battle for second place, with Kawasaki propping up the table.

In Group E, Jeonbuk enjoyed a superb start to their return to the competition after winning their opening three games, but a 4-2 reversal to debutants Tianjin Quanjian on Matchday Four meant they will have to wait for confirmation of their progression.

The K League 1 side have scored 17 goals in four games and are by some distance the



competition's leading scorers. Two points behind Jeonbuk, Tianjin sit three points ahead of Kashiwa Reysol and four in front of fellow newcomers Kitchee SC of Hong Kong with two games remaining.

Al Hilal's unbeaten march to the 2017 final was one of the stories of last year's campaign, but since losing the second leg of the showpiece event to Urawa Red Diamonds, they have yet to record a win.

The Saudi Arabian giants prop up Group D

on two points, four behind Esteghlal and Al Rayyan in an intriguing group that looks set to go down to the wire.

Inaugural winners and runners-up in 2016, Al Ain have also yet to record a victory, but the Emirati team remain unbeaten, having drawn all four of their games.

Also in the West, Al Ahli started with two wins from two before playing back-to-back draws with Qatar's Al Gharafa, but the Saudi side look firm favourites to progress from Group A.

Al Gharafa, with the recently acquired Wesley Sneijder and Mehdi Taremi, and the United Arab Emirates' Al Jazira are locked in a tussle for second place, while the Islamic Republic of Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz prop up the table.

Three teams will fight it out for two qualification spots in Group C, with Qatar's Al Sadd and Iran's Persepolis currently occupying the top two positions on nine points.

Uzbekistan's Nasaf, though, won two of their first four games and would take the group down to the wire if they claim victory over 2017 semi-finalists Persepolis in Qarshi.

Two-time winners Guangzhou Evergrande lead the way in Group G, with the Chinese side three points clear of both Buriram United and Cerezo Osaka after four games. Jeju United currently prop up the standings.

Finally, Kashima Antlers remain unbeaten and on top of Group H, a point ahead of Suwon Samsung Bluewings and five in front of Shanghai Shenhua, while Sydney FC sit bottom.



Group Stage																	
Group A			Group B			Group C			Group D								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Ahli	4	2	2	0	5	3	2	8	Al Duhail	4	4	0	0	11	6	5	12
Al Jazira	4	1	2	1	5	5	0	5	Zobahan	4	2	0	2	5	6	-1	6
Al Gharafa	4	1	2	1	7	5	2	5	Lokomotiv	4	1	0	3	8	7	1	3
Tractorsazi Tabriz	4	0	2	2	1	5	-4	2	Al Wahda	4	1	0	3	5	10	-5	3
12/02/18			12/02/18			13/02/18			13/02/18								
Al Jazira 3 (Romarinho 10, Ali Mabkhout 27, Ahmed Al Attas 69) Al Gharafa 2 (Mehdi Taremi 11, Wesley Sneijder 71)			Lokomotiv 5 (Nivaldo 25, Ikromjon Alibaev 53, 87, Salem Sultan 55 OG, Sardor Rashidov 59)			Persepolis 3 (Goodwin Mensha 20, Ali Alipour 66, 71) Nasaf 0			Al Rayyan 2 (Abderrazak Hamdallah 18, Rodrigo Tabata 28) Esteghlal 2 (Rodrigo Tabata 6 OG, Ali Ghorbani 88)								
Tractorsazi Tabriz 0 Al Ahli 1 (Muhammad Assiri 67)			Al Duhail 3 (Karim Boudiaf 74, 76, Youssef Msakni 84) Zobahan 1 (Kiros 12)			Al Wasl 1 (Fabio Lima 26) Al Sadd 2 (Baghdad Bounedjah 79, 90)			Al Hilal 0 Al Ain 0								
19/02/18			19/02/18			20/02/18			20/02/18								
Al Gharafa 3 (Mehdi Taremi 11, 90+4, Sime Gregov 21 OG) Tractorsazi Tabriz 0			Zobahan 2 (Morteza Tabrizi 47, Mohammadreza Hosseini 90+2) Lokomotiv 0			Nasaf 1 (Igor Golban 57) Al Wasl 0			Al Ain 1 (Marcus Berg 10 pen) Al Rayyan 1 (Abderrazak Hamdallah 36, 51, Boualem Khoukhi 66) Persepolis 1 (Siamak Nemati 90+4)								
Ah Ahli 2 (Taiseer Al Jassam 10, Muhammad Assiri 70 pen) Al Jazira 1 (Ali Mabkhout 89)			Al Wahda 2 (Sebastian Tagliabue 4 pen, Mourad Batna 90+3 pen) Al Duhail 3 (Youssef El Arabi 57, 80, Karim Boudiaf 75)			05/03/18			06/03/18								
05/03/18			06/03/18			13/03/18			12/03/18								
Al Jazira 0 Tractorsazi Tabriz 0			06/03/18			Al Sadd 4 (Xavi 3, Abdelkarim Hassan 15, Baghdad Bounedjah 43, Jugurtha Hamroun 71) Nasaf 0			Al Rayyan 2 (Abderrazak Hamdallah 44 pen, Rodrigo Tabata 66) Al Hilal 1 (Yasser Al Qahatani 90 pen)								
Al Gharafa 1 (Rubert Quijada 90+1) Al Ahli 1 (Aqeel Balghaith 62)			25) Lokomotiv 2 (Nivaldo 57, Marat Bikmaev 59)			Al Wasl 0 Persepolis 1 (Kamal Kamyabinia 37)			Esteghlal 1 (Mame Baba Thiam 42 pen) Al Ain 1 (Tsukasa Shiotani 78)								

Group Stage																	
Group E			Group F			Group G			Group H								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jeonbuk	4	3	0	1	17	9	8	9	Shanghai SIPG	4	3	1	0	8	3	5	10
Tianjin	4	2	1	1	11	9	2	7	Ulsan Hyundai	4	1	2	1	7	7	0	5
Kashiwa Reysol	4	1	1	2	4	5	-1	4	Melbourne Victory	4	1	2	1	7	9	-2	5
Kitchee SC	4	1	0	3	1	10	-9	3	Kawasaki Frontale	4	0	1	3	3	6	-3	1
13/02/18			13/02/18			14/02/18			14/02/18								
Jeonbuk 3 (Lee Dong-gook 55, 84, Kim Jin-su 75) Kashiwa Reysol 2 (Ricardo Lopes 10, Ataru Esaka 27)			Ulsan Hyundai 2 (Jung Jae-yong 42, Lee Yeong-jae 66)			20/02/18			20/02/18								
Tianjin Quanjian 3 (Anthony Modeste 32, Paulinho 36 OG, Sun Ke 39) Kitchee SC 0			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								
Kashiwa Reysol 2 (Ricardo Lopes 10, Ataru Esaka 27)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								
Tianjin Quanjian 3 (Anthony Modeste 32, Paulinho 36 OG, Sun Ke 39) Kitchee SC 0			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								
Kashiwa Reysol 2 (Ricardo Lopes 10, Ataru Esaka 27)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								
Tianjin Quanjian 3 (Anthony Modeste 32, Paulinho 36 OG, Sun Ke 39) Kitchee SC 0			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								
Kashiwa Reysol 2 (Ricardo Lopes 10, Ataru Esaka 27)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								
Tianjin Quanjian 3 (Anthony Modeste 32, Paulinho 36 OG, Sun Ke 39) Kitchee SC 0			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)			Kashiwa Reysol 1 (Cristiano 52) Tianjin Quanjian 1 (Alexandre Pato 88)								



Two-time AFC Cup champions Air Force Club of Iraq are in an intriguing battle for knockout stage qualification with Jordan's Al Jazeera despite having yet to suffer defeat, while Ceres Negros of the Philippines and Myanmar's Yangon United have both impressed as they edge closer to topping their respective groups.

Winners in the past two years, Air Force Club drew their opening Group A game 2-2 with Al Jazeera and then won their next two against Oman's Al Suwaiq and Bahrain's Malkiya Club.

But after the return meeting with Malkiya was postponed until mid-April, Al Jazeera moved three points clear at the top of the standings after three successive wins meaning, should the Jordanian side defeat the holders in Amman in their next match, they will secure top spot.

Inter-Zone semi-finalists last year, Ceres Negros equaled the competition's biggest ever winning margin by defeating Cambodia's Boeung Ket FC 9-0 on Matchday One and are now three points clear in Group F with two games to play.

Only Singapore's Home United can catch the Filipino side, while both Shan United of Myanmar and Boeung Ket have been eliminated.

Another Myanmar side, Yangon United, lead the way in Group G after picking up three wins from four, but defeat to Global Cebu of the Philippines on Matchday Four gave the other teams in the table hope.

Indonesia's Bali United look the most likely but sit four points adrift of Yangon, while both FLC Thanh Hoa and Global are five points off the

pace.

Three teams are fighting for top place in Group H, where Vietnam's Song Lam Nghe An, Persija Jakarta of Indonesia and 2015 champions Johor Darul Ta'zim all sit on seven points, while Singapore's Tampines Rover have been eliminated.

Four teams will qualify from the ASEAN Zone, comprising Groups F to H, with the three group winners and the best placed runners-up advancing to the Inter-Zone semi-finals.



Back in the West, Lebanon's Al Ahed are three points clear at the top of Group B although Iraq's Al Zawraa are just three points behind with a game in hand.

Al Jaish of Syria and Bahrain's Manama Club look to have their work cut out in order to finish second and give themselves a chance of progressing.

Two-time champions Al Faisaly of Jordan are in pole position in a congested Group C, where Lebanon's Al Ansar, Syria's Al Wahda and Oman's

Dhofar Club all remain in the hunt for a top-two finish.

Bottom side Dhofar's 1-0 win over Al Faisaly on Matchday Four ensured the group will go down to the wire.

As with the ASEAN Zone, there are four qualification spots up for grabs from the three groups.

In the Central Zone, two-time AFC Cup runners-up FC Istiklol of Tajikistan began with a 1-0 win over Turkmenistan's FC Ahal in Group D, before two stoppage time goals saw another Turkmen side, Altyn Asyr, secure a 2-2 draw with the Tajik team on Matchday Two.

The pair look set to battle it out for top spot, while FC Alay of Kyrgyz Republic remain in search of their first win.

New Radiant of the Maldives have picked up two wins from two in Group E, where 2016 runners-up JSW Bengaluru of India will be their likely challengers.

Bengaluru beat Abahani Limited Dhaka 1-0 in their only game so far while Indian debutants Aizawl's defeat in the Maldives saw them off to a losing start in the South Zone.

Finally, in the East Zone, DPR Korea's 4.25 SC and newcomers Benfica Macau boast 100 percent records in Group I after two games ahead of a double header with each other that is likely to decide the table.

Two more debutants, Hwaebul SC of DPR Korea and Chinese Taipei's Hang Yuen FC have yet to pick up a point.

Only the group winners will advance from the Central, South and East Zones with everything still to play for after two games.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Jazeera	4	3	1	0	10	4	6	10
Air Force Club	3	2	1	0	7	5	2	7
Malkiya Club	3	1	0	2	7	6	1	3
Al Suwaiq	4	0	0	4	3	12	-9	0
12/02/18								
Air Force Club 2 (Hammadi Ahmed 16 pen, Salih Sadir 84) Al Jazeera 2 (Musa Al Taamari 26 pen, Mardik Mardikian 88 pen)								
Malkiya Club 4 (Sayed Hashem 21, Sayed Hashim Isa 32, 71, Sayed Ali Isa 81) Al Suwaiq 1 (Abdulaziz Al Muqbali 45+1)								
26/02/18								
Al Suwaiq 0 Air Force Club 1 (Karrar Ali 85)								
Al Jazeera 1 (Musa Al Taamari 60) Malkiya Club 0								
05/03/18								
Al Suwaiq 2 (Abdoulaye Dieng 33 pen, Khalid Al Hajri 41) Al Jazeera 3 (Yazan Abu Arab 43, Mohammad Tannous 67, Musa Al Taamari 70 pen)								
Malkiya Club 3 (Isa Al Bari 8, 9, Israa Hammwiah 14)								
Air Force Club 4 (Zaher Midani, Amjad Radhi 70, 90+1, Hammadi Ahmad 79)								
13/03/18								
Al Jazeera 4 (Mohammad Khairullah 39, Oday Al Jafal 41, Ahmad Essawi 45+3, Mohammad Tannous 85)								
Al Suwaiq 0								

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Ahed	4	2	2	0	7	3	4	8
Al Zawraa	3	1	2	0	4	2	2	5
Al Jaish	4	0	3	1	2	5	-3	3
Manama Club	3	0	1	2	1	4	-3	1
12/02/18								
Al Ahed 1 (Issah Yakubu 67) Al Zawraa 1 (Safaa Hadi 4)								
Manama Club 0 Al Jaish 0								
26/02/18								
Al Zawraa 0 Al Jaish 0								
Manama Club 0 Al Ahed 1 (Ahmad Zreik 70)								
06/03/18								
Al Ahed 1 (Ahmad Zreik 71) Al Jaish 1 (Hasan Al Owied 56)								
12/03/18								
Manama Club 1 (Mahmood Abdulrahman 1) Al Zawraa 3 (Mohammad Abdurhaheem 15, Haidar Abdulameer 66, Amjad Kalaf 79)								
Al Jaish 1 (Radwan Kalaji 90 pen) Al Ahed 4 (Idrissa Kouyate 24, Ahmad Zreik 45+2, 60, Samir Ayass 90+3)								

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Faisaly	4	2	1	1	7	4	3	7
Al Ansar	4	2	0	2	5	5	0	6
Al Wahda	4	1	2	1	4	4	0	5
Dhofar Club	4	1	1	2	1	4	-3	4
13/02/18								
Dhofar Club 0 Al Ansar 2 (Hassan Chaito 9, Alaa El Baba 90+1)								
Al Faisaly 2 (Lukas Gikiewicz 74, Yousef Al Rawashdeh 82) Al Wahda 2 (Bassel Moustafe 7, 80)								
27/02/18								
Al Wahda 0 Dhofar Club 0								
Al Ansar 1 (El Hadji Malick Tall 48) Al Faisaly 3 (Dominique Mendy 7, Ahmad Hayel 39, Khalil Attiah 88)								
05/03/18								
Al Wahda 2 (Bassel Moustafa 37, Mohamad Al Hasan 60) Al Ansar 1 (El Hadji Malick Tall 12)								
Al Faisaly 2 (Anas Bani Yaseen 43, Lukas Gikiewicz 49) Dhofar Club 0								
13/03/18								
Al Ansar 1 (El Hadji Malick Tall 47) Al Wahda 0								
Dhofar Club 1 (Qasim Said 40) Al Faisaly 0								

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
FC Istiklol	2	1	1	0	3	2	1	4
Altyn Asyr	2	1	1	0	8	5	3	4
FC Ahal	2	1	0	1	5	1	4	3
FC Alay	2	0	0	2	3	11	-8	0
07/03/18								
FC Alay 3 (Ilyaz Alimov 39, Kozho Joel 45, Maksadbek Alimov 57) Altyn Asyr 6 (Myrat Yagsyiyev 11, 51, Altymyrat Annadurdyev 19, 40, 84, Begmyrat Bayov 88)								
FC Istiklol 1 (Gucymyrat Annageldiyev 25 OG)								
FC Ahal 0								
13/03/18								
FC Ahal 5 (Suleyman Muhadov 27, 33, Guwanc Abylov 36, 68, Nuryagdy Muhammedov 90+2)								
FC Alay 0								
14/03/18								
Altyn Asyr 2 (Myrat Yagsyiyev 90, Altymyrat Annadurdyev 90+3) FC Istiklol 2 (Mikalay Zyanko 50, Akhtam Nazarov 59 pen)								



Group Stage

Group E
PWDLFA+/- Pts
New Radiant22004136
JSW Bengaluru11001013
Aizawl100113-20
Abahani Dhaka200202-20
07/03/18
Abahani Dhaka Limited 0 New Radiant 1 (Ali Fisir 58)
14/03/18
New Radiant 3 (Ali Ashfaq 40, 77, 85) Aizawl 1 (Lalkhawpuimawia 33)
JSW Bengaluru 1 (Daniel Lalhimpuia 72) Abahani Dhaka Limited 0

Group F
PWDLFA+/- Pts
Ceres Negros43101311210
Home United421110467
Shan United410325-33
Boeung Ket FC4103419-153
13/02/18
Shan United 0 Home United 1 (Song Ui-young 75)
Ceres Negros 9 (Takumi Uesato 15, 22, Bienvenido Maranon 19, 29 pen, Oj Porteria 31, 85, Sun Sovannarith 58 OG, Carli de Murga 64, Mamnt Ott 81)
Boeung Ket FC 0
27/02/18
Boeung Ket FC 1 (Maicon 28) Shan United 2 (Ko Chit 41, Christopher Chizoba 55)
Home United 1 (Shahril Ishak 23 pen) Ceres Negros 1 (Manuel Herrera 79)
06/03/18
Boeung Ket FC 3 (Maicon 11, 41 pen, Samuel Ajayi 13) Home United 2 (Song Ui-young 2, Faritz Hameed 67)
Ceres Negros 2 (Patrick Reichelt 79, Bienvenido Maranon 83) Shan United 0
14/03/18
Shan United 0 Ceres Negros 1 (Bienvenido Maranon 14 pen)
Home United 6 (Shahril Ishak 37, Song Ui-young 44, Faritz Hameed 55, Anumanthan Kumar 72, 83, Izzdin Shafiq 87) Boeung Ket FC 0

Group G
PWDLFA+/- Pts
Yangon United43019459
Bali United41215505
FLC Thanh Hoa411235-24
Global Cebu411236-34
10/02/18
FLC Thanh Hoa 1 (Pape Omar Faye 74) Global Cebu 0
Bali United 1 (Gede Sukadana 45+1) Yangon United 3 (Emmanuel Uzochukwu 15, Sekou Sylla 18, 25)
27/02/18
Yangon United 2 (Kosuke Uchida 67, Aee Soe 87)
FLC Thanh Hoa 1 (Pape Omar Faye 5)
Global Cebu 1 (Curt Dizon 11) Bali United 1 (Ilija Spasojevic 74)
07/03/18
Bali United 3 (Yabes Roni 66, Demerson 72, Stefano Lilipaly 74) FLC Thanh Hoa 1 (Ryutaro Karube 30)
Yangon United 3 (Maung Maung Lwin 45+3, Sekou Sylla 48, 57) Global Cebu 0
13/03/18
FLC Thanh Hoa 0 Bali United 0
Global Cebu 2 (Darryl Roberts 79, Rifo Sanchez 90+5) Yangon United 1 (Maung Maung Lwin 90)

Group H
PWDLFA+/- Pts
Song Lam Nghe An42114137
Persija Jakarta42115417
Johor Darul Ta'zim42115327
Tampines Rovers401328-61
10/02/18
Tampines Rovers 0 Song Lam Nghe An 2 (Ho Phuc Tinh 49, Ho Khac Ngoc 71)
14/02/18
Johor Darul Ta'zim 3 (Hazwan Bakri 29, Pereyra Diaz 42, Safawi Rasid 76) Persija Jakarta 0
28/02/18
Song Lam Nghe An 2 (Phan Van Duc 22, Pham Xuan Manh 90+4) Johor Darul Ta'zim 0
Persija Jakarta 4 (Marko Simic 12, 74, 86, Rezaldi Hehamusa 41) Tampines Rovers 1 (Khairul Amri 77)
06/03/18
Song Lam Nghe An 0 Persija Jakarta 0
Tampines Rovers 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim 0
14/03/18
Persija Jakarta 1 (Addison 90+3) Song Lam Nghe An 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim 2 (Safawi Rasid 13, Hazwan Bakri 79) Tampines Rovers 1 (Khairul Amri 45 pen)



Uzbekistan Win AFC U23 Championship

Substitute Andrey Sidorov's last-minute winner secured Uzbekistan a 2-1 victory over Vietnam in the final of the AFC U23 Championship China 2018 in January as the Central Asians were crowned continental champions.

In snowy conditions at Changzhou Olympic Sports Center, Rustamjon Ashurmatov headed the Uzbeks in front early on, before Nguyen Quang Hai curled home a fine free-kick on the stroke of half-time as Vietnam's fairytale tournament continued.

But, brought off the bench in the dying minutes of extra-time, Sidorov became an instant hero when the forward was on hand to divert Dostonbek Khamdamov's corner from the left into the back of the net as Uzbekistan won their first continental title since claiming the AFC U-16 Championship in 2012.

Uzbekistan began their Group A campaign with a 1-0 defeat to Qatar in Changzhou after Almoez Ali struck the only goal of the game as one of the tournament favourites began with intention.

Back-to-back victories over China and Oman, though, saw Ravshan Khaydarov's team join Qatar in the quarter-finals as the hosts exited at the first hurdle, having claimed just one win from three games.

Vietnam also got off to a losing start after going down 2-1 to Korea Republic in Group

D in Kunshan, but Quang Hai's second-half goal saw off Australia 1-0 before a scoreless draw with Syria ensured the Southeast Asians finished second behind 2016 runners-up Korea Republic to advance to the last eight.

Holders Japan had few problems progressing from Group B as back-to-back 1-0 wins over Palestine and Thailand in Jiangyin were followed by a 3-1 victory against DPR Korea to ensure the East Asians progressed with a perfect record.

Palestine's 5-1 win over Thailand in the final group game, coupled with DPR Korea's defeat, meant the West Asian debutants qualified for the knockout rounds at the first time of asking.

Third at the 2016 edition, 2014 champions Iraq got off to a positive start by seeing off Malaysia 4-1 in Group C, before the West Asians followed up a scoreless draw with Saudi Arabia by defeating Jordan 1-0 to claim top spot.

Malaysia proved the surprise package as the debutants drew their second match with Jordan and then claimed an impressive 1-0 victory over the Saudis to finish as runners up in the standings.

By the time the quarter-finals arrived, Uzbekistan were in full flow as Javokhir Sidikov, Khamdamov and Jasurbek Yakhshiboev all scored in a 4-0 victory over Japan that ended the defending champions' reign.

Vietnam and Iraq were involved in a thrilling top-and-fro encounter that eventually ended

3-3 after extra-time, before the Southeast Asians advanced to the semi-finals after a 5-3 victory from the spot.

Almoez Ali's quick-fire brace put Qatar two up against Palestine but it was Hashim Ali who scored the decisive goal as the game eventually ended 3-2 and the Qataris advanced to their second successive semi-final.

Korea Republic then ended Malaysia's impressive campaign as Han Seung-gyu struck with five minutes remaining to secure a 2-1 victory.

There was no separating Uzbekistan and Korea Republic over 90 minutes of the first semi-final in Kunshan as a 1-1 scoreline saw the tie go to extra-time, but goals from Azizjon Ganiev, Yakhshiboev and Akramjon Komilov saw the Central Asians progress to the final following a 4-1 win.

And they were joined by Vietnam, who twice came back from losing positions against Qatar to claim a 2-2 draw and eventually advance on penalties after Vu Van Thanh struck the decisive spot-kick in a 4-3 victory.

Qatar then ended their tournament on a high as Akram Afif's first-half goal was enough to post a 1-0 victory over Korea Republic as the West Asians went one better than their fourth-place finish in 2016.

Uzbekistan's Odiljon Xamrobekov was named the tournament's MVP, while six-goal Almoez Ali won the top scorer accolade.



Group A	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	3	3	0	0	4	1	3	9
Uzbekistan	3	2	0	1	2	1	1	6
China	3	1	0	2	4	3	1	3
Oman	3	0	0	3	0	5	-5	0

09/01/18
China 3 (Yang Liyu 30, Li Xiaoming 34, Wei Shihao 53) Oman 0
Qatar 1 (Almoez Ali 55) Uzbekistan 0
12/01/18
Uzbekistan 1 (Khojiakbar Alijonov 14)China 0
Oman 0 Qatar 1 (Akram Afif 43)
15/01/18
China 1 (Yao Junsheng 3) Qatar 2 (Almoez Ali 44, 77)
Uzbekistan 1 (Dostonbek Tursunov 36) Oman 0

Group B	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	5	1	4	9
Palestine	3	1	1	1	6	3	3	4
DPR Korea	3	1	1	1	3	4	-1	4
Thailand	3	0	0	3	1	7	-6	0

10/01/18
DPR Korea 1 (Ri Hun 2) Thailand 0
Japan 1 (Ko Itakura 20) Palestine 0
13/01/2018
Palestine 1 (Oday Dabbagh 16) DPR Korea 1 (Mohammed Bassim 74 OG)
Thailand 0 Japan 1 (Ko Itakura 90)
16/01/2018
Japan 3 (Takahiro Yanagi 32, Koji Miyoshi 43, Kang Ju-lyok 73 OG) DPR Korea 1 (Kim Yu-song 52)
Thailand 1 (Chenrop Samphaodi 44) Palestine 5 (Mohamad Fannoun 15, Oday Dabbagh 26, Mahmoud Yousef 30, Mohamed Darwish 32, Shehab Qumbor 88)

Group C	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iraq	3	2	1	0	5	1	4	7
Malaysia	3	1	1	1	3	5	-2	4
Jordan	3	0	2	1	2	3	-1	2
Saudi Arabia	3	0	2	1	2	3	-1	2

10/01/18
Iraq 4 (Mohammed Jaffal 5, Amjad Attwan 28, Alaa Ali Mhawi 56, Hussein Ali 81) Malaysia 1 (Safawi Rasid 79)
Jordan 2 (Baha Faisal 12, 78) Saudi Arabia 2 (Abdullelah Al Amri 85, Rakan Al Anaze 90+4 pen)
13/01/2018
Malaysia 1 (Safawi Rasid 43 pen) Jordan 1 (Ward Al Barri 16)
Saudi Arabia 0 Iraq 0
16/01/18
Iraq 1 (Bashar Resan 49) Jordan 0
Saudi Arabia 0 Malaysia 1 (Danial Amier Norhisham 28)

Group D	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	2	1	0	5	3	2	7
Vietnam	3	1	1	1	2	2	0	4
Australia	3	1	0	2	5	5	0	3
Syria	3	0	2	1	1	3	-2	2

11/01/18
Australia 3 (George Blackwood 8, 77, Bruce Kamau 43)
Syria 1 (Thomas Deng 53 OG)
Korea Republic 2 (Cho Young-wook 29, Lee Keun-ho 73) Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Quang Hai 17)
14/01/18
Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Quang Hai 72) Australia 0
Syria 0 Korea Republic 0
17/01/18
Korea Republic 3 (Lee Keun-ho 18, 65, Han Seung-gyu 44) Australia 2 (Nick Cowburn 72, Trent Buhagiar 76)
Syria 0 Vietnam 0

Quarter-Finals
19/01/18
Japan 0 Uzbekistan 4 (Javokhir Sidikov 31, Dostonbek Khamdamov 34, Jasurbek Yakhshiboev 39, 47)
Qatar 3 (Almoez Ali 32, 34, Hashim Ali 53) Palestine 2 (Oday Dabbagh 60, Mohamed Darwish 87)
20/01/18
Korea Republic 2 (Cho Jae-wan 1, Han Seung-gyu 85) Malaysia 1 (Thanabalan Nadarajah 67)
Iraq 3 (Hussein Ali 29 pen, 94, Alaa Ali Mhawi 116)
Vietnam 3 (Nguyen Cong Phuong 12, Phan Van Duc 108, Ha Duc Chinh 112)
Vietnam win 5-3 on penalties

Semi-Finals
23/01/18
Qatar 2 (Akram Afif 39 pen, Almoez Ali 87) Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Quang Hai 69, 88)
Vietnam win 4-3 on penalties
Uzbekistan 4 (Zabikhilllo Urinboev 33, Azizjon Ganiev 99, Jasurbek Yakhshiboev 110, Akramjon Komilov 120+1) Korea Republic 1 (Hwang Hyun-soo 58) AET

Third Place Play-off
26/01/18
Qatar 1 (Akram Afif 39) Korea Republic 0

Final
27/01/18
Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Quang Hai 41)
Uzbekistan 2 (Rustamjon Ashurmatov 8, Andrey Sidorov 120) AET





IR Iran Claim 12th AFC Futsal Championship

The Islamic Republic of Iran secured a record 12th AFC Futsal Championship title as Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh scored a brace in a 4-0 victory over Japan in February's final in Taipei.

Hassanzadeh opened the scoring shortly before half-time, before Farhad Tavakoli doubled the advantage after finishing off a fine flowing move just after the interval.

Another strike from Hassanzadeh made it 3-0 on 28 minutes and Hossein Tayebi rounded off the scoring by rolling the ball into an empty net a minute from time for the Central Asians' second successive continental crown.

The win capped another memorable tournament for the Iranians, who have now not suffered defeat in the competition since losing the 2014 final on penalties to Japan.

Iran had earlier topped Group C after wins over Myanmar, China and Iraq.

Neighbours Iraq joined the defending champions in the last eight as earlier wins over China and Myanmar proved enough for a spot in the knockout rounds.

Japan, meanwhile, secured victories over Tajikistan, Korea Republic and Uzbekistan to progress from Group B with a perfect record.

The 2016 runners-up Uzbekistan also booked their passage to the next round, with wins over the Koreans and their fellow Central Asians Tajikistan ensuring second place.

In Group A, Vietnam suffered an opening-

day defeat to Malaysia but bounced back well by beating Bahrain and hosts Chinese Taipei to secure top spot.

The Southeast Asians were joined in the last eight by Bahrain after the West Asians overcame Malaysia 3-1 in their final group game.

Lebanon's superb 5-2 victory over continental powerhouse Thailand in their second group game ultimately ensured the West Asians finished top in Group D, having also drawn with Kyrgyz Republic and defeated Jordan.

Thailand, though, won their two games either side of the loss to the Lebanese to advance in second place.

Iran, who had finished third at the FIFA Futsal World Cup in Colombia since last winning the continental competition, had no problems in disposing of Thailand in the quarter-finals.

Ahmad Esmaeilpour, Hassanzadeh and Tayebi had the defending champions four up after just five minutes before Iran ran out comprehensive 9-1 winners.

Goals from Koichi Saito and Kazuya Shimuza saw the Japanese past Bahrain who, nonetheless, would have been happy with what was only their second appearance at the tournament, having bettered their first round exit in 2002.

Lebanon had impressed in Taipei but fell agonisingly short in the quarter-finals after drawing 2-2 with Iraq in a game that was

ultimately decided from the spot.

With the scores 9-8 in Iraq's favour, Lebanon's Mustafa Rhyem missed the decisive penalty as Iraq advanced to their first ever semi-finals.

Uzbekistan progressed to their third successive semi-finals after bringing an end to Vietnam's campaign as goals from Mashrab Adilov, Davron Choriev and Ilhomjon Hamroev secured a 3-1 win.

But the Uzbeks were no match for Iran in the last four as the holders' dominance continued.

Mahdi Javid scored a hat-trick, while Hassanzadeh and Tayebi each netted braces in a 7-1 victory that saw Iran advance to their 13th continental final.

A thrilling battle for third place ensued between Iraq and Uzbekistan, with the Central Asians taking an early lead before the West Asians went 3-1 up.

The Uzbeks clawed it back to 3-3 but Hasan Dakheel seemed to have given Iraq the win, only for Artur Yunusov to level with a minute left on the clock.

After no further goals in extra-time, Konstantin Sviridov put Uzbekistan 2-1 up in the shootout and third place was secured after Zainal Abdeen missed as the Uzbeks finished in the top three for the third time in a row.

Hassanzadeh was named the Most Valuable Player, while Tayebi finished as top scorer with 14 goals.



Group A							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Vietnam	3	2	0	1	6	4	2 6
Bahrain	3	1	1	1	6	5	1 4
Chinese Taipei	3	1	1	1	8	9	-1 4
Malaysia	3	1	0	2	7	9	-2 3

01/02/18
Vietnam 1 (Vu Duc Tung 19) Malaysia 2 (Mohamad Awalluddin 36, 40)
Chinese Taipei 2 (Huan Tai Hsiang 30, Lin Chih Hung 36) Bahrain 2 (Mohamed Abdulla 27, Ali Saleh)
03/02/18
Bahrain 1 (Mohamed Al Sandi 28) Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Duc Huy 18, Phung Trong Luan 18)
Malaysia 4 (Azwan Ismail 27, Awalluddin Nawi 33, Huang Tai Hsiang 35 OG, Khairul Effendy 38) Chinese Taipei 5 (Lai Ming Hui 8, 32, Lin Chih Hung 13, 39, Chi Sheng Fa 21)
05/02/18
Chinese Taipei 1 (Huang Po Chun 19) Vietnam 3 (Vu Duc Tung 29, Pham Duc Hoa 30, Nguyen Duc Huy 39)
Malaysia 1 (Syed Aizal Daniel 33) Bahrain 3 (Ahmed Abdulnabi 3, 7, Mohamed Al Sandi)

Group B							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	13	6	7 9
Uzbekistan	3	2	0	1	19	8	11 6
Tajikistan	3	1	0	2	11	8	3 3
Korea Republic	3	0	0	3	4	25	-21 0

01/02/18
Uzbekistan 13 (Artur Yunusov 3, Davron Choriev 7, 8, 13, Farkhod Abdumavlyanov 11, Ikhtiyor Ropiev 16, Khushniddin Nishonov 22, Dilmurod Shavkatov 22, Ilhomjon Hamroev 26, Dilshod Rakhmatov 31, Anashon Rakhmatov 37, Mashrab Adilov 40, 40) Korea Republic 2 (Jang Yeong-cheol 25, 38)
Japan 4 (Kazuya Shimizu 1, Kazuhiro Nibuya 9, Shota Hoshi 11, Kaoru Morioka 37) Tajikistan 2 (Fayzali Sardorov 6, Nekruz Alimakhmadov 13)
03/02/18
Tajikistan 2 (Umed Kuziev 18, Dilshod Salomov 39 pen) Uzbekistan 4 (Dilshod Rakhmatov 9, Davron Choriev 12, 37, Mashrab Adilov 26)
Korea Republic 2 (Park Young-jae 14, Chun Jin-woo 29) Japan 5 (Kaoru Morioka 11, 29, 30, 39, Manabu Takita 37)
05/02/18
Uzbekistan 2 (Farkhod Abdumavlyanov 3, Artur Yunusov 26) Japan 4 (Kaoru Morioka 21, Shota Hoshi 24, 35, Ryosuke Nishitani 38)
Tajikistan 7 (Shavqat Halimov 11, Bahodur Khojaev 12, Dilshod Salomov 20, Rahmonali Sharipov 23, Rustam Hamidov 25, Iqbol Vositzoda 27, Umed Kuziev 39) Korea Republic 0

Group C							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
IR Iran	3	3	0	0	30	4	26 9
Iraq	3	2	0	1	10	9	1 6
China	3	1	0	2	8	18	-10 3
Myanmar	3	0	0	3	5	22	-17 0

02/02/18
Iraq 4 (Hassan Ali Jabar 23, 28, Hasan Dakheel 39 pen, Rafid Hameed 40) China 2 (Gu Haitao 6, Zhao Liang 11)
Iran 14 (Mahdi Javid 1, 8, 22, 31, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 1, 4, 8, 39, Hossein Tayebi 6, 8, 15, Mehran Alighadr 7, Saeed Ahmad Abbasi 35, Moslem Oladghobad 37) Myanmar 0
04/02/18
Myanmar 2 (Kin Zaw Lin 18, Pyae Phyto Maung 36) Iraq 3 (Waleed Khalid 15 pen, 36, Hassan Ali Jabar 22)
China 1 (Xu Yang 20) Iran 11 (Hossein Tayebi 3, 14, 37, Farhad Tavakoli 10, 27, Mahdi Javid 10, 14, Mohammad Shajari 14, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 21, 24, Ahmad Esmaeilpour 24)

06/02/18
Iran 5 (Hossein Tayebi 8, 38, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 12, Moslem Oladghobad 26, Farhad Tavakoli 31)
Iraq 3 (Waleed Khalid 8, Firas Mohammed 29, 34)
China 5 (Shen Siming 10, Zhang Yameng 14, 33, Gu Haitao 19, Xu Yang 21) Myanmar 3 (Nyein Min Soe 1 Pyae Phyto Maung 35, 38)

Group D							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Lebanon	3	2	1	0	9	5	4 7
Thailand	3	2	0	1	15	7	8 6
Kyrgyz Republic	3	1	1	1	6	11	-5 4
Jordan	3	0	0	3	3	10	-7 0

02/02/18
Kyrgyz Republic 2 (Maksat Alimov 16, Adilet Imanbekov 34) Lebanon 2 (Ahmad Kheir El Dine 21, 28)
Thailand 5 (Apiwat Chaemcharoen 6, 18, Jirawat Sornwichian 9 pen, Jetsada Chudech 32, Kritsada Wongkao 35) Jordan 1 (Musa Abu Shaikha 20)
04/02/18
Jordan 1 (Qais Shabin 27) Kyrgyz Republic 3 (Maksat Alimov 8, Manas Abdrasul Uulu 11, Adilet Imanbekov 34)
Lebanon 5 (Mohamad Kobeissy 3, Ahmad Kheir El Dine 5, Ali Tneich 22, Hassan Zeitoun 25, Ali El Homs 39) Thailand 2 (Mohammad Abou Zeid 27 OG, Suphawut Thueanklang 29)
06/02/18
Thailand 8 (Suphawut Thueanklang 3, 21, 31 pen, Apiwat Chaemcharoen 20, 20, Nattawut Madyalan 31, Jetsada Chudech 33, 40) Kyrgyz Republic 1 (Iuldashbai Salimbaev 37)
Lebanon 2 (Ali El Homs 15, Ali Tneich 26)
Jordan 1 (Abdel Samara 12)

Quarter-Finals

08/02/18
Lebanon 2 (Kassem Koussan 11, Ali Tneich 22) Iraq 2 (Slim Faisal 7, 26)
Iraq win 9-8 on penalties
Iran 9 (Ahmad Esmaeilpour 1, 3, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 4, Hossein Tayebi 5, 16, 36, Mahdi Javid 21, Mohammad Shajari 24, 35) Thailand 1 (Jirawat Sornwichian 22)
Japan 2 (Koichi Saito 7, Kazuya Shimizu 28)
Bahrain 0
Vietnam 1 (Phung Trong Luan 28) Uzbekistan 3 (Mashrab Adilov 8, Davron Choriev 28, Ilhomjon Hamroev 39)

Semi-Finals

09/02/18
Iraq 0 Japan 3 (Kaoru Morioka 1, Ryosuke Nishitani 6, Yuki Murota 19)
Iran 7 (Mahdi Javid 2, 15, 16, Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 3, 30, Hossein Tayebi 10, 34) Uzbekistan 1 (Anashon Rakhmatov 39)

Third Place Play-off

11/02/18
Iraq 4 (Zaid Ali 14, Waleed Khalid 20, Salim Faisal 22, Hasan Dakheel 34) Uzbekistan 4 (Davron Choriev 2, Artur Yunusov 25, 39, Ilhomjon Hamroev 27)
Uzbekistan win 2-1 on penalties

Final

11/02/18
Japan 0 Iran 4 (Ali Ashgar Hassanzadeh 19, 26, Farhad Tavakoli 21, Hossein Tayebi 39)



AFC-Sportradar Partnership Expanded

The Asian Football Confederation has signed a new agreement with sports data company Sportradar for an historic partnership in the field of integrity, specifically addressing match-fixing.

Sportradar's Intelligence and Investigation Services will now be engaged with the AFC from the 2018 and 2019 seasons to investigate those behind fraud on the pitch in Asia.

This comes after all matches in the top two leagues and cups in the AFC Member Associations, as well as in AFC competitions, will be monitored for betting patterns as part of an existing agreement between the AFC, Sportradar and FIFA.

AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, who joined Sportradar Chief Executive Carsten Koerl at the signing, said: "In the AFC Vision and Mission, the fight against match-fixing is imperative and remains ongoing. We, at the AFC, take this threat extremely

seriously and our actions during recent years demonstrate our zero-tolerance stance.

But we also appreciate that times are changing, and technology is needed to combat this ever-growing threat.

Sportradar's technology and proven expertise will help us to target those corrupting our game."

Koerl said: "We are delighted, honoured and proud that the AFC is taking such a determined step in the fight against match-fixing. Our Fraud Detection System has long been proven as a potent weapon against match manipulation. And now our Intelligence and Investigation products will give the AFC an added layer of protection."

Sportradar's Fraud Detection System and Intelligence and Investigation Services are world leaders in their field, partnering with over 70 football associations and have been involved in investigations leading to 214 sporting sanctions and 24 criminal convictions.



Young Coach Education Programme Held In Beirut

The Asian Football Confederation Dream Asia Foundation together with its Social Responsibility partner SCORT Foundation/Football Club Social Alliance (FCSA) and the United Nations Refugee (UNHCR) agency have completed a grassroots football programme for Syrian refugees and Lebanese children in Beirut.

Ahmed Eid S Al-Harbi, the AFC Social Responsibility Committee chairperson, officiated the conclusion of the third module of the FCSA Young Coach Education Programme which was implemented in co-operation with the Lebanese Football Association (LFA) at Safa Stadium.

Through the FCSA Young Coach Education Programme, young adults – from both the host and refugee population – were given the tools to deliver grassroots football and educational activities for six to 12-year-olds.

Ahmed Eid was accompanied by AFC SR Committee

member, Ahmad Karameddine, who is also Mayor of Lebanon's second biggest city, Tripoli, and the LFA General Secretary Jihad El Chohof.

"The programme helps children develop and play in a safe and peaceful environment and it is something the

AFC, SCORT, the Lebanon FA and the UNHCR are extremely proud to be involved in," said Ahmed Eid.

"The children were clearly enjoying the experience and benefitted from the coaching they received from instructors from some of the big German Bundesliga clubs. We must thank them for their contributions."

The group of coaching instructors came from Werder Bremen and Bayer Leverkusen as well as Swiss side FC Basel and helped deliver the first two modules last year and the third in March.

The programme also included theoretical sessions and a football training session with 20 mentally challenged children.



AFC President Praises Asian Unity

Asian Football Confederation President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa stressed the importance of Asian unity to maintain the stability of the AFC at a meeting with Presidents and Officials from ASEAN Member Associations in mid-March.

Shaikh Salman said the Asian football family shares the same ambition of developing the game across the continent and he stressed the role of Member Associations is crucial in reaching this goal. He added that a stable AFC would allow the Confederation to achieve great things in the coming years.

The AFC President explained the AFC Member Association Development projects that have been implemented in the last few years to help the Member Associations grow stronger on technical and management levels. He also re-iterated that the AFC will

introduce further projects in the future.

Shaikh Salman added that regular meetings with the Member Associations are essential in helping strengthen the relations among the Asian football family as they offer the chance to share ideas, expertise and ambitions.

He also hailed the role of AFC Member Associations in developing the game in their respective countries and said they had raised the level of both national teams and match officials not only in ASEAN but across Asia.

Shaikh Salman congratulated the ASEAN teams on their latest achievements and, in particular, the President praised Vietnam, who had reached the final of the recent AFC U23 Championship in China. The AFC President also thanked the ASEAN countries for successfully hosting several AFC competitions.



New Trophy Launched For AFC Women's Asian Cup

The winners of the AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018 will lift a brand-new trophy at the final in Amman on April 20 after AFC President Shaikh

Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa unveiled the latest version at a ceremony in Kuala Lumpur in March.

Made by world-renowned silversmiths Thomas Lyte of London, the new trophy embodies the spirit of the competition and is an impressive 52.5cm height, crafted from 5.5 kilogrammes of Hallmarked Sterling Silver bullion.

AFC President Shaikh Salman said: "The new AFC Women's Asian Cup trophy is a striking design that reflects the value of the competition as the Continent's top women's football tournament. I look forward to seeing the winning team

lift the coveted piece of silverware at the final on April 20 in Amman, Jordan.

"The AFC has trusted Thomas Lyte for all of our trophy designs since 1997 and I am happy to see this relationship flourish with this magnificent trophy which is fitting of such a prestigious competition."

After unveiling the trophy at the AFC House, Shaikh Salman handed the silverware over to the Jordan 2018 Local Organising Committee's Tournament Director Farah Yahya A. Al-Badarneh.

Ms. Al-Badarneh said: "It is an honour for Jordan to host the 2018 edition

of the competition, featuring this beautiful new trophy. I am sure fans in Jordan look forward to welcoming it in Amman and seeing the winners lift it at Amman International Stadium at the final on April 20."



Malaysia Hosts AFC Coach Education Conference

Coach Education representatives from Asia's 47 Member Associations gathered in Kuala Lumpur for the 2nd AFC Coach Education Conference 2018 in March.

The three-day conference discussed the rules and guidelines of AFC Coaching Convention and the process of developing tomorrow's coaches.

Asian Football Confederation General Secretary Dato Windsor John, in his opening message, said: "In the last two years, the AFC Coach Education Panel, along with the administration, have been working tirelessly to introduce the AFC Coaching Convention, which will be discussed in greater detail over the next three days. "The theme of the conference – Raising Standards



– reinforces the continuity of our efforts. Over the next three days, you will examine the state of coach education in Asia and chart our journey forward, with a particular emphasis on the benefits of the Coaches' Convention."

Participants were introduced to some of the best practices in Coach Education, and gained insights from global experts – including UEFA's Head of Football Education Services Frank Ludolph, John Peacock from England and

German Football Association Head of Coach Training Bernd Stober.

The event was a vital step in the implementation of the AFC Coaching Convention and triggered a new momentum in its vital area of development.

Japan Stages AFC Project Future Referees Course

The AFC Project Future Referees Batch 2016 gathered for their second development course in Japan in mid-March.

The main objective was to assess the 13 referees' performance in real matches as part of the annual Sanix Cup International Youth Soccer Tournament.

The event featured teams from Malaysia, Russia, Korea Republic, Chinese Taipei and host country Japan. A total of eight batches of referees have officiated at the Sanix Cup since 2010 – including this year's edition.

Guided by the tournament's values of unity, effort and professionalism, the AFC refereeing talents have strengthened their preparation and refined their skills.

As 2018 marks the closure of the AFC Project Future Referees programme, the 2016 batch is the last to benefit from the international experience gathered at the Sanix Cup, as well as the last one to graduate in



September 2018.

Prior to the four-day competition, the referees went through practical and theoretical sessions to enhance their fitness condition and technical knowledge on key areas of the Laws of the Game

such as tactical fouls, penalty area incidents and offside situations.

The valuable contribution of the Sanix Sports Foundation, the Japan Football Association, the Kyushu Football Association and the Fukuoka Prefecture Sports Association to the success of the AFC Project Future Referees

programme and the development of Asian referees was appreciated at the welcome ceremony on Wednesday.

The third development course for the referees of the 2016 batch, including the graduation ceremony, will take place from September 20 to 24, 2018.

Success Of Asian Teams Emphasised

The success of Asian teams on the world stage was further strengthened at the inaugural Asian Football Confederation National Coaches Conference for Olympic Coaches 2018 in Kuala Lumpur in early March.

The three-day conference themed "Towards Tokyo 2020" brought together Olympic coaches and technical directors from across the Continent to examine the challenges in international tournament preparations and to map the success of Asian teams when the Olympic Games return to Asia in two years' time.

The final day of the conference ended on a high when participants were given the opportunity to glean insights from Islamic Republic of Iran head coach Carlos Queiroz, who drew on his wealth of experience from stints with Portugal, Manchester United and Real Madrid as well as IR Iran's preparations for the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018.

Stressing the importance of early planning and preparation, Queiroz said: "Nothing is more important than preparation. Asian football continues to face new challenges which demand new solutions that are specific to football in this Continent.

"The players are at the centre of everything that we do and through this conference, our hope is to give coaches in Asia a greater voice to establish a unified approach to quality player development," added Queiroz.

During the three days, this first-of-its-kind conference also featured presentations and sharing sessions from some of the most respected names in football, which

included former Korea Republic captain Park Ji-sung, FIFA Head of Coaching and Player Development Branimir Ujevic and FIFA and AFC Fitness guru and former assistant to Marcello Lippi at Juventus, Jens Bangsbo.



AFC To Study Effects Of Time Zone Travel

A comprehensive study is to be commissioned by the Asian Football Confederation Medical Committee into the effects of travel across multiple time zones on the performance level and medical welfare of footballers.

Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the Committee, chaired by Dato' Dr Gurcharan Singh, reflected on the lack of detailed research into the effects of jet lag and travel fatigue on players due to financial and logistical constraints.

Recognising that the AFC has more time zones than any other Confederation, the Committee felt a study was important adding that, following a consensus meeting on the subject in November 2017, it was agreed that travel

across more than five time zones could affect football participation and performance.

The committee also added that the most effective treatment for jet lag was timed bright light exposure which, if possible, should coincide with training sessions.

At the meeting the Committee also adopted the latest FIFA anti-doping regulations and agreed to support the Football Clinic International Congress which will be held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates in October 2018.

The Committee heard that between September 2017 and March 2018 a

total of 219 tests had been conducted under the AFC's Anti-Doping programme and only one positive test was reported from those samples.



Amman International Stadium

Amman, Jordan

Home of the Jordanian national football team, Amman International Stadium will become the first venue in West Asia to host the AFC Women's Asian Cup final when the showpiece event of the continental competition takes place on April 20, 2018.

Built in 1964 and opened in 1968, the 17,619-capacity venue, which features an athletics track around the pitch, was the setting for the 2007 Asian Athletics Championships. Home to Amman clubs Al Faisaly, Al Jazeera and Shabab Al Ordon, the stadium has hosted regional football competitions including the inaugural WAFF (West Asian Football Federation) Championship in 2000 and one or both legs of the AFC Cup finals between 2005

and 2007 when Jordan ruled supreme. Three out of the first five WAFF Women's Championships – all of which were won by Jordan – were also staged by Amman's main sporting venue. Amman International Stadium hosted the 2016 FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup opener and final, while it will also be one of two venues to stage games during the AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018.



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Hello Tomorrow



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“If we could reach the World Cup, that means we also have the possibility of finishing in the top four, and that takes us to a whole new level of ambitions. Who knows, maybe even winning the AFC Women’s Asian Cup.”

Stephanie Al Naber

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