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CHAMPIONS
LEAGUE

FINAL 2015



OFFICIAL PROGRAMME

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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

AFC President

Dear friends,

As President of the Asian Football Confederation I would like to congratulate both Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates and Guangzhou Evergrande of China on the wonderful achievement in reaching the final of the AFC Champions League. This promises to be an exciting final which will provide a fitting climax to a record breaking season in this, the AFC's pinnacle club competition.

Never before have so many supporters attended AFC Champions League games and never before has the average attendance for the matches been so high. More than 2.25 million people have watched the 141 matches so far and the average attendance is almost 16,000. Those are extremely impressive and encouraging statistics.

The supporters who have packed the stadia across this great continent - and those who have watched on television- have also been rewarded with some outstanding football - with many goals of remarkable quality. I am sure that the two legs of this final will live up to the great play and sportsmanship that has gone before in the matches played so far.

Thanks must also go not only to our officials who have worked with such dedication throughout the AFC Champions League, but also to the other 47 competing clubs and the other 19 Member Associations for the role they play in making the event such a success. We must also recognise the two host Member Associations for the logistical support they provide for the final matches.

I should also like to add my gratitude to our commercial partners, broadcasters and media who play such an important role in supporting the AFC Champions League each year, helping to grow its appeal not only in Asia but across the world.

As the AFC looks to become a leading confederation in the world, we will also look to improve the quality of our players and our teams, and there is no doubt that the AFC Champions League aids us in that ambition. So finally, I would like to wish both sides the very best of luck in these two matches and may the best team win.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President
FIFA ExCo Member



AFC MESSAGE



THE STORY SO FAR... FINAL 2014



THE 13TH EDITION OF THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL WILL PROVIDE A PLATFORM FOR AN ENTHRALLING CLIMAX BETWEEN TWO CLUBS WITH A POINT TO PROVE.

A decade since inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain took on Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad in the 2005 final, the United Arab Emirates once more have a team in the continental climax with Dubai's Al Ahli looking to replicate the achievements of their domestic rivals in the 2002/2003 tournament.

Having never even reached the knockout stage in their four previous attempts, Al

Ahli's remarkable run to the final included the scalps of their celebrated countrymen in a closely-fought Round of 16 second leg tie in Al Ain, before they edged out debutants Naft Tehran, and then last year's finalists Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia in dramatic fashion.

Continental club success for teams from the Emirates had often rested previously on the shoulders of the men from the Garden City with Al Ain also reaching the semi-finals in 2014, although Sharjah's Al Shaab did reach the final of

the 1994/1995 Asian Cup Winners' Cup.

But since Al Ain's 2-1 aggregate victory over Thailand's BEC Tero Sasana in October 2003 that crowned the first winner of the AFC Champions League, the rise of sides from Saudi Arabia, Korea Republic and Japan began to dominate proceedings.

While Emirati clubs Al Wahda and Sharjah went as far as the quarter-finals of the 2004 edition, they were eliminated by heavy

scorelines as Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad went on to claim their first continental title, before the same side successfully defended the trophy the following year and denied Al Ain their second taste of glory in the final.

And while Al Wahda reached the semi-final in 2007, the UAE had to wait until last year's tournament to reach the final four once again, although Al Ain fell to Al Hilal.

A drought of 12 years since Al Ain's continental triumph, though, was topped and, in fact, nearly doubled by China's wait for glory from

when Liaoning won the 1989/90 Asian Club Championship to when this year's finalists Guangzhou Evergrande lifted the 2013 AFC



Champions League title.

The southern Chinese heavyweights, though, can now look to become the ninth two-time

continental champion since the Asian Club Championship began in 1967.

Israel's Maccabi Tel Aviv was the first with titles in 1969 and 1971 and since then Iran's Esteghlal, Thailand's Thai Farmers Bank, Al Hilal, Korea Republic's Suwon Samsung and Seongnam FC and Qatar's Al Sadd, along with Al Ittihad, have been crowned Asia's best on two occasions.

Korea's Pohang Steelers, though, still lead the way with the 2009 AFC Champions League title added to back-to-back Asian



Club Championships in 1996/97 and 1997/98.

But should Guangzhou prevail this year to claim their second title in three years, they will strengthen their claim as one of the powerhouses of the modern era and the frontrunner in the Chinese Super League's surge to prominence.

Al Ahli, though, bear the banner for the Emirates and West Asia on merit after building on the UAE's third-placed finish at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.



HISTORY

Roll of Honour

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

* won on penalties
agg - aggregate (away goals win if level)

g-s - group stage
w-o - walkover



GOING THE DISTANCE

AL SADD'S MARATHON RUN TO THE 2011 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL FROM THE PLAY-OFFS ENCOMPASSED NEARLY AN ENTIRE CALENDAR YEAR THAT FEATURED A ROLLERCOASTER CAMPAIGN OF UPS, DOWNS AND IMPROBABLE TWISTS. QATAR CAPTAIN HASAN AL HAYDOS WAS STILL A TEENAGER WHEN HE TOOK PART IN THE WILD RIDE, BUT IT WILL LIVE LONG IN HIS MEMORY.





“To be honest, when we started the competition in the play-offs, I never even imagined that we would be able to go all the way and win the AFC Champions League,” says Al Sadd forward Hasan Al Haydos about his team’s legendary run to the title in the 2011 AFC Champions League.

Not only becoming the first Qatari side to win Asia’s top title in the AFC Champions League era, the men from Doha became the first and to date only side to do so from

the play-offs.

“We started in early February and ended in November, we were playing domestic games, national team games and AFC Champions League games at the same time. Many times we were exhausted,” adds Al Haydos, now 24-years-old and Qatar captain, but back then, still a teenager breaking into the first team.

Having finished as runners-up in the 2009/10 Qatar Stars League season behind winners Al Gharafa, Al Sadd then successfully negotiated the AFC Champions League play-offs, which had been introduced to

the tournament format two years earlier, with victories over 2010 AFC Cup winners Al Ittihad of Syria and India’s Dempo to secure a place in the group stage.

Jorge Fossati’s side were drawn in Group B alongside Saudi Arabia’s Al Nassr, Uzbekistan’s Pakhtakor and Esteghlal of Iran, with the Qataris securing a 1-1 draw in their opener in Tehran.

Narrow home wins over Pakhtakor and Al Nassr followed before a 1-1 draw in Riyadh that meant if Al Sadd could secure at least a point at home to Esteghlal, they would



be assured a spot in the knockout stage with a game to spare.

The visitors, though, were determined to keep the group in the balance and were two goals up at half-time.

Former AFC Player of the Year Khalfan Ibrahim pulled a goal back 10 minutes into the second half, but with 18 minutes remaining and the deficit enduring, Fossati turned to the bench and signaled to Al Haydos.

“I was on the bench and I was angry about being a substitute. I really wanted to make something happen, to score for the team as we were still down,” recalls Al Haydos, who got his opportunity just four minutes after coming on.

“Leandro played the ball over to me on the right side. I saw a chance, cut inside into the penalty box, got the ball onto my left and curled it past the goalkeeper.

“I didn’t know at the time it

was the most crucial goal I was going to score, that it would mean we qualified for the knockout stage. I just wanted to show I was good enough to start the game.”

Al Haydos duly started the following tie in Tashkent where the 1-1 draw, coupled with Esteghlal’s last-gasp 2-1 win over Al Nassr, was enough for Al Sadd to go through to the Round of 16 as group winners.

A narrow 1-0 win in the one-legged last 16 tie against Saudi side Al Shabab saw Al Sadd meet Iran’s Sepahan in the quarter-final where they were awarded a 3-0 win in the first leg after the home side fielded an ineligible player.

Any premature ideas of an easy ride were almost extinguished in the second leg, though, as Sepahan struck twice in the opening half hour.

But with four minutes remaining, Senegal striker Mamadou Niang fired home to settle any nerves and seal a 4-2 win on aggregate.

In the semi-finals, Al Sadd were drawn against Suwon Samsung of Korea Republic, and in the first leg in Suwon, the hosts’ striker Stevica Ristic, along with the visitors’ Abdul Kader Keita and Niang, who had scored Al Sadd’s second on 81 minutes after Ibrahim’s 70th minute opener, were sent-off as the visitors claimed a 2-1 win.

“After what happened in the first leg, the atmosphere was electric in the second leg in Doha and the Koreans were trying to play very offensively,” says Al Haydos, who made his third start of the campaign as Al Sadd lost 1-0 at home.

“They managed to score one goal early which put us under a lot of pressure and we basically had to park the bus in front of goal.”

The 2-1 aggregate score line was enough to put Al Sadd into the final which, unlike the 2009 and 2010 editions when the



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tournament climax was hosted at a neutral venue, was played at the home of opponents Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

In front of a club record 41,000 at Jeonju World Cup Stadium, Jeonbuk took the lead through Eninho's free-kick on 19 minutes before Sim Woo-yeon headed past his own goalkeeper to make the scores level at the half hour mark.

Keita then added Al Sadd's second on the hour mark as Fossati's side took the initiative, but deep into stoppage time, Jeonbuk hit back as substitute Lee Sung-hyun turned in a corner at the backpost to dramatically take the final into extra-time.

"When they scored the equaliser, I started to feel that maybe it wouldn't be our day and after such a late goal maybe it meant Jeonbuk would win," recalls Al Haydos, who was introduced as a 74th minute substitute.

"Fossati gathered us together and told us that everyone in Qatar was watching us, and we needed to give everything and make them proud."

In extra-time, Jeonbuk striker Lee Dong-gook missed a golden opportunity and then the Koreans hit the post after Eninho's corner had hit an Al Sadd defender and bounced off the base of the upright, before goalkeeper Mohamed Saqr denied Jeong Shung-hoon with a magnificent save, as the Qatari side held on for penalties.

And after Niang and Eninho had successfully converted the opening spot-kicks, it was Al Haydos' turn.



"Before I walked up to the spot Fossati told me please don't shoot the ball high, keep it low," says Al Haydos, who blasted his penalty off the underside of the crossbar and into the net.

"I still don't know why I shot high. Fossati told me afterwards I'd nearly given him

a heart attack, but if I had a chance to take it again I would do it exactly the same way." Three consecutive misses then gave Al Sadd a slim advantage with Ibrahim Majid and Kim Sang-sik's successful conversions handing Fossati's side a 3-2 advantage.

And that gave Algerian Nadir Belhadj the chance to score the winning spot-kick, which he did.

"When the winning penalty went in, I broke down and started crying. My mind went to Doha, to my family and my friends. They were happy tears, for sure," Al Haydos recalls.

"In the celebration photos you can see that I'm far to the left on the stage, I wanted to see what everyone else was doing, how they were reacting. I was trying to work out if I was dreaming or this was real. I couldn't believe what we had accomplished.

"We had to make sacrifices in the league to do what we had achieved; we couldn't play with our full force, because we were totally focused on the AFC Champions League. But it ended up being the right choice."

THE LAST HURDLE

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' AL AHLI AND CHINA'S GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE WILL COLLIDE IN THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL FOLLOWING A SEVEN MONTH CONTINENTAL CAMPAIGN.

Emirati history-makers Al Ahli have enjoyed a fairytale run to this year's AFC Champions League final, while China's Guangzhou Evergrande know all about what it takes to win the continent's greatest prize having lifted the trophy in 2013 and will look stamp their mark as one of Asia's heavyweights.

In four previous attempts, Al Ahli have fallen at the first hurdle on the continent with group stage eliminations in 2005, 2009, 2010 and 2014, but this year, under Romanian coach Cosmin Olariu, they have been a different proposition and are the first Emirati side since inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain in 2005



to reach the final.

Guangzhou, meanwhile, have gone on an unbeaten run in the AFC Champions League since their first leg Round of 16 defeat to Seongnam FC at the end of May to earn a return to the final for the second time in three years.

Twelve months after their latest continental campaign ended in the group stage, Al Ahli entered Group D of the 2015 AFC Champions League as UAE champions, opening their campaign with a hard-fought 3-3 draw with Al Ahli from Saudi Arabia.

By the midway point, though, Olariu's side were still yet to pick up three points after a narrow 1-0 defeat away to Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz and a goalless stalemate with Uzbekistan's Nasaf.

But in their second overseas trip in the competition, a late goal from Brazilian playmaker Everton Ribeiro gave Al Ahli a priceless first win over Nasaf in Uzbekistan, although this was followed by a defeat to Al Ahli in Jeddah.

With Al Ahli needing a win against Tractorsazi to progress,

it was their captain Ahmed Khalil who delivered the decisive blows with the powerful striker scoring twice in the final 13 minutes after the Iranians had twice taken the lead and Al Ahli eventually recorded a 3-2 win.

And then a two-legged last 16 tie against domestic rivals Al Ain in May proved another close-fought battle for Olariu's side and a goalless first leg in Dubai left the outcome in the balance.

But after Al Ain took the lead after just five minutes of the second leg, three quickfire goals in five second half minutes from Salmin Khamis and a brace from Khalil swung the tie in Al Ahli's favour.

And even though the hosts hit back twice to secure a 3-3 draw, Al Ahli advanced on the away goals rule.

The draw for the quarter-finals brought Al Ahli into contact with another team in the knockout stage for the first time as they faced debutants Naft Tehran of Iran.

Al Ahli were now bolstered, though, by the signing of striker Rodrigo Lima from Benfica, and the Brazilian forward immediately repaid the investment with the

first leg's only goal in Tehran with 11 minutes remaining.

Lima was on target again in the return fixture as his opener, coupled with a second half penalty from Khalil, secured a 2-1 win and set-up a semi-final meeting with 2014 runners-up Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia.

And in the first leg in Riyadh, a goal from Lima temporarily silenced the 53,000 fans in attendance at the King Fahd International Stadium before Ailton netted a late equaliser.

It was to be a rollercoaster return leg at Rashid Stadium



three weeks later, but Kwon Kyung-won's stoppage-time winner sealed a thrilling 3-2 win as Al Ahli became only the second Emirati club to reach the AFC Champions League final after completing a 4-3 aggregate success over the two-time continental champions.

"I'm happy for my players; they are heroes for what they have done. Nobody gave them a chance and they are in the final and I told them they don't have to stop here," said Al Ahli coach Olariou following the second leg success.

"We are going to try our best to make the dream real. We have been scoring and we



know how to play in this kind of competition. Even though we don't have big experience, we compensate with good attitude and effort."

Final opponents Guangzhou, meanwhile, began their campaign after winning their fourth straight Chinese Super League title in 2014 to continue their unbroken run of AFC Champions League appearances since their debut in 2012.

With Fabio Cannavaro having replaced Marcello Lippi as coach, Guangzhou were drawn in Group H against Korea Republic's FC Seoul, defending champions Western Sydney Wanderers of Australia and Japan's Kashima Antlers.

And the Italian coach saw new Brazilian signing Ricardo Goulart open his continental account in a 1-0 home victory over 2013 finalists FC Seoul on Matchday One.

The prolific South American forward continued his rich vein of form throughout the first half of the group stage with a hat-trick in a 3-2 away victory over Western Sydney before a brace in Guangzhou's goal-laden 4-3 win against Kashima.

Surprisingly, Guangzhou then went three straight games without a win, although a point in the penultimate fixture away at FC Seoul was enough to top the group.

Drawn against another

K-League Classic side, Seongnam FC, in the last 16, midfielder Huang Bowen scored a stunning long-range strike to claim a vital away goal in the 2-1 defeat in the first leg in Korea.

And a Goulart brace in the return meeting at Tianhe Sports Centre Stadium secured the 2013 winners a 3-2 aggregate win.

Cannavaro, though, would not be around for the resulting quarter-final match with Japan's Kashiwa Reysol as the Italian was replaced by Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari in June.

The change did not prove a disruptive one, though, as an own-goal from Daisuke Suzuki, a spectacular long-range free-kick from Paulinho, and a header from

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At the heart of the image



Gao Lin saw Guangzhou earn a 3-1 first leg win in Japan. And after the pair shared a 1-1 draw in the return fixture in Guangzhou, the 4-2 aggregate win meant Scolari's side bettered their 2014 performance by reaching the semi-finals for the second time.

Another J.League side, Gamba Osaka, who won the 2008 AFC Champions League, stood in the way of Guangzhou's second final in three years.

But after captain Zheng Zhi and Huang cancelled out the first half own-goal from Feng Xiaoting in the first leg to take a 2-1 lead to Japan,

Scolari's side had the final within their sights.

And while a goalless draw was not the most comfortable result for those on the Guangzhou bench at Expo '70 Commemorative Stadium, it was sufficient to take the Chinese champions through to the continental showpiece against Al Ahli.

"This match was really hard because both teams are high quality and very good. We had many opportunities, at least four good chances to score, but we could not score. But in the end we drew so we could reach our goal to get to the final," said Scolari after the stalemate in Osaka.

"I would like to say a special thank you to all the players, especially the Chinese players. We have to be proud we have such good players in our team."

The first time in the 2015 edition that sides from the West will meet their counterparts from the East will take place at Rashid Stadium on Saturday 7 November, with Al Ahli looking to extend their six-game undefeated streak on home soil, while Guangzhou will look to continue their own lengthy unbeaten run on the continent ahead of the decisive return fixture at Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium in China two weeks later.

ROUTE TO THE FINAL

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AL AHLI FROM THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES ARE MAKING THEIR FIRST APPEARANCE IN THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL THIS YEAR.

Having failed to progress beyond the group stage in their last four AFC Champions League campaigns, Al Ahli are making the most of their maiden knockout stage appearance after securing United Arab Emirates representation in the final for the first time in 10 years.

That's not to discredit the

work done by the club in the weeks and months before the prolific Brazilian's arrival, because Al Ahli have shown a resilience in the continental club championship throughout 2015 that had previously been absent. The road to the final, however, has been a long one and, while the arrival of Lima could be seen as the final piece in completing the team that has emerged triumphant from the west of the continent, it was the signing of coach Cosmin Olariou a little more than two years ago that kick-started the club's ascent.

The Romanian, already a seasoned campaigner across

the Middle East having won the league title in Saudi Arabia with Al Hilal and the cup in Qatar with Al Sadd, made the move from Al Ain having just steered the club from the oasis town to the domestic league title. Olariou has, since taking over, steadily built his side into an impressive unit, winning the UAE league title in 2014 while also claiming the Emirates Cup and the UAE Super Cup. Last year was the first time he had taken the club into the AFC Champions League but, while Al Ahli missed out on a place in the knockout stage, that experience held the club in good stead in the

2015 campaign. Despite a disappointing season in the domestic league, Al Ahli advanced to the Round of 16 alongside namesakes Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia and just ahead - thanks to a better head-to-head record - of Uzbekistan's Nasaf. A major obstacle lay in their path in the first phase of the last 16 as Al Ain - fresh from winning the UAE league title and reaching the semi-finals of last year's AFC Champions League - were to be their opponents.

A 0-0 draw in the first leg set up a fascinating return, which ended in a 3-3 draw in Al Ain that meant Al Ahli

GROUP D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
Al Ahli (KSA)	6	3	3	0	11	7	4	12
Al Ahli	6	2	2	2	8	8	0	8
Nasaf	6	2	2	2	5	5	0	8
Tractorsazi Tabriz	6	1	1	4	7	11	-4	4

- Results**
- 25/02/15 Al Ahli 3-3 Al Ahli (KSA)
Ismail Al Hammadi 19, 79, Ahmed Khalil 43; Osvaldo 1, Hussain Al Moqawhi 41, Taisceer Al Jassam 57
 - 04/03/15 Tractorsazi Tabriz 1-0 Al Ahli
Farshad Ahmadzadeh 40
 - 18/03/15 Al Ahli 0-0 Nasaf
 - 07/04/15 Nasaf 0-1 Al Ahli
Everton Ribeiro 81
 - 21/04/15 Al Ahli (KSA) 2-1 Al Ahli
Muhannad Asiri 78, Bruno Cesar 90+4; Everton Ribeiro 16
 - 05/05/15 Al Ahli 3-2 Tractorsazi Tabriz
Everton Ribeiro 58, Ahmed Khalil 77, 88; Mehrdad Bayrami 21, Saman Narimanjahan 67
 - Round of 16**
 - 20/05/15 Al Ahli 0-0 Al Ain
 - 27/05/15 Al Ain 3-3 Al Ahli
Asamoah Gyan 5, 78, Rashed Eisa 90+2; Salmin Khamis 51, Ahmed Khalil 53, 56
(Al Ahli win on away goals following a 3-3 draw on aggregate)
 - Quarter-Finals**
 - 26/08/15 Naft Tehran 0-1 Al Ahli
Rodrigo Lima 79
 - 16/09/15 Al Ahli 2-1 Naft Tehran
Rodrigo Lima 26, Ahmed Khalil 48; Vahid Amiri 50
(Al Ahli win 3-1 on aggregate)
 - Semi-Finals**
 - 29/09/15 Al Hilal 1-1 Al Ahli
Ailton 82; Rodrigo Lima 57
 - 16/09/15 Al Ahli 3-2 Al Hilal
Rodrigo Lima 17, Everton Ribeiro 45, Kwon Kyung-won 90+5; Ailton 51, Carlos Eduardo 64
(Al Ahli win 4-3 on aggregate)





advanced on the away goals rule.

Al Ahli already had the core of an impressive unit at this stage, with the likes of Ismail Al Hammadi, Ahmed Khalil and the influential Everton Ribeiro carrying the form that had helped the club win the 2014 league title into the continental competition.

The trio had been instrumental in the team's progress to the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League for the first time, but the arrival of Lima has taken the team up another notch in the intervening months.

The 32-year-old scored the only goal in the first leg win over Naft Tehran in the quarter-finals and also netted in the 2-1 victory in front of the club's own fans at Rashid Stadium.

He was also on target in both legs of the dramatic semi-final win over Al Hilal while also making a prolific start to life in the UAE league.

Lima's arrival has everyone connected with Al Ahli believing 2015 could be the year they prove that club football in the UAE has much to offer at continental level at a time when the national team continues to soar.



Al Ahli



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Rodrigo Lima

Signed just before the AFC Champions League summer registration deadline, Brazilian striker Rodrigo Lima has been a revelation since his arrival from Portuguese club Benfica. Swiftly building a prolific understanding with countryman Everton Ribeiro and strike-partner Ahmed Khalil, Lima has been in lethal form on the continent with four goals in four AFC Champions League games including in both legs of the semi-final against Al Hilal.



FW 9

Born 11/05/1983



Ahmed Mubarak

Born 01/01/1986 GK 1



Salmin Khamis

Born 09/10/1991 DF 2



Saif Yousif

Born 10/01/1989 GK 33



Humaid Salmein

Born 09/06/1996 MF 37



Habib Al Fardan

Born 11/11/1990 DF 4



Walid Abbas

Born 11/06/1985 DF 5



Majed Naser

Born 01/04/1984 GK 55



Mohamed Sebil

Born 13/04/1993 MF 57



Kwon Kyung-won

The semi-final match-winner against Al Hilal, Korean Kwon Kyung-won has been an ever-present in Al Ahli's historic 2015 AFC Champions League run since joining from Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors in February. The 23-year-old was a member of the Jeonbuk side that lifted the 2014 K-League Classic title and the versatile Kwon can excel in either a defensive midfield or centre-back role.



FW 21

Born 31/01/1992



Hassan Abdulrahman

Born 11/02/1989 MF 6



Ismail Al Hammadi

Born 01/07/1988 MF 7



Everton Ribeiro

Born 10/04/1989 MF 8



Ahmed Mahmoud

Born 30/03/1989 GK 12



Ossama Assaidi

Born 15/05/1988 MF 14



Abdelaziz Sanqour

Born 07/05/1989 MF 62



Waleed Husain

Born 15/05/1992 MF 70



Nawaf Mubarak

Born 31/08/1981 DF 71



Yousuf Al Sayed

Born 11/08/1989 DF 77



Mohamed Al Khoori

Born 01/01/1993 FW 79



Ali Karam

Born 02/05/1996 MF 19



Saeed Ahmad

Born 17/01/1994 FW 20



Ahmed Khalil

Former AFC Young Player of the Year Ahmed Khalil is the highest-scoring Asian player in the 2015 AFC Champions League with six goals and one of the Gulf region's leading strikers. Khalil, 24, first came to prominence in the United Arab Emirates' 2008 AFC U-19 Championship-winning side and he has since helped his nation to the 2013 Gulf Cup title and third place at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.



FW 11

Born 08/06/1991



Humaid Abdulla

Born 16/04/1988 MF 80



Majed Hassan

Born 01/08/1992 MF 88



Saeed Jassim

Born 02/03/1995 FW 92



Ahmed Moosa

Born 23/06/1995 MF 97



Adel Al Hammadi

Born 07/12/1991 DF 23



Abdulaziz Haikal

Born 10/09/1990 DF 26

Coach

Former central defender Cosmin Olaroiu has built an impressive reputation in the Gulf region since first joining Al Hilal in Saudi Arabia as coach, with the Romanian also working at Al Sadd in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates' Al Ain before taking over at Al Ahli in 2013. Olaroiu had previously



Cosmin Olaroiu

taken Steaua Bucharest into the group stage of the UEFA Champions League before moving to the Middle East and he also coached Saudi Arabia in the group stage at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup.



IN FOCUS: AHMED KHALIL

AL AHLI

For Al Ahli striker and captain Ahmed Khalil, winning the AFC Champions League would be the completion of a life's work for the one-club United Arab Emirates international.

Born in June 1991 in the Emirate of Sharjah as the youngest of six brothers, Khalil joined Al Ahli's youth set-up aged just seven having seen his father and all but one of his siblings turn to football at some point in their lives.

Khaili's father played for Dubai-based club Al Hamriya while brothers Faoud and Faisal plied their trade with Al Ahli with the latter enjoying significantly the most success – until now.

"I started playing with Al Ahli when I was seven years old, but I loved football before I joined Al Ahli, especially when I saw my father and brothers playing. Since then I have loved football very much, and this has given me more motivation to play more," says 24-year-old Khalil.

Elder brother Faisal won the Gulf Cup with the UAE in 2007 as well as the domestic league title with Al Ahli on two occasions in 2006 and most recently in 2009 with his younger brother alongside him with Khalil completing just his third season with the first



team having made his debut as a 16-year-old.

"My big brother Faisal is someone I look up to. I learnt a lot from him. I was very sad when Faisal stopped playing football," adds Khalil.

Khalil had made his debut for Al Ahli during the 2006/07 season and netted his first league goal in May 2007 aged just 16 against Al Wahda.

"Before I played for the first team I wanted to play for the first time as I saw my big brother Faisal playing and he was one of the best players when I was 16. I loved my first day with the first team so much and in my first match I scored against Al Wahda and it was one of the best goals in that season," says Khalil.

Khalil helped Al Ahli win the UAE President's Cup in April 2008 before the striker was named the MVP as the UAE won the AFC U-19 Championship thanks to two goals from the striker in the final against Uzbekistan.

The 2008 AFC Young Player of the Year trophy was the next to find its way into Khalil's hands before in May 2009, Khalil along with brother Faisal, helped Al Ahli land the domestic crown.

"I will never forget 2008. In 2008 I won the President's Cup and then the league with



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the club, and in the same year I was named the best player in Asia. I can't describe how I feel about this year, but I know I want to win this prize again," says Khalil.

"It was a great moment for me in my career and now I must work hard and I hope to continue to be successful and achieve this again."

Khalil also helped the UAE reach the quarter-finals of the 2009 FIFA U-20 World Cup as well as a silver medal at the 2010 Asian Games.

Appearances at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup and 2012 Olympic Games in London followed

before Khalil helped the UAE win the 2013 Gulf Cup.

The UAE did fail to defend their title prior to the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 after Khalil had earlier helped Al Ahli win the 2013/2014 Arabian Gulf League crown, which secured their place in the 2015 AFC Champions League.

But Khalil then netted four goals as the UAE finished third at the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia, and thankfully for Al Ahli, the striker was able to continue that form into the AFC Champions League with six goals.



Al Ahli





GUANGZHOU EVERGRANDE RETURN TO THE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINAL FOR THE SECOND TIME AFTER WINNING THE 2013 TITLE.

Two years on from their historic 2013 AFC Champions League success, which ended China's 23-year wait for another continental champion, Guangzhou Evergrande are back in the showpiece final.

But after the success of two years ago was largely inspired by the South American attacking prowess, and brilliance of Brazilian tournament MVP and top scorer Muriqui and Argentinean playmaker Dario Conca, the 2015 Guangzhou side which developed first under Italian coach Fabio Cannavaro and now fellow FIFA World Cup winner Luiz Felipe

Scolari is arguably a more balanced and mature version. More mature as the likes of 2013 winners Zheng Zhi, Huang Bowen, Feng Xiaoting, Zhang Linpeng, goalkeeper Zeng Cheng and Kim Young-gwon, who all remain key figures, are two years older but also in the way Guangzhou's largely settled side go about their business.

Gone are the eye-catching and high scoring wins over the likes of Japan's Kashiwa Reysol and Qatar's Lekhwiya in the knockout stage two years ago which were secured thanks to the goals from Muriqui and Conca, along with 2015 mainstay Elkeson, the goals now come from variety of

sources. While Guangzhou netted 14 goals in their 2013 quarter-final and semi-final successes, wins at the same stage this year over the Kashiwa and fellow J.League side Gamba Osaka were secured by two and one goals margins.

Chinese duo Zheng and Huang scored the goals which ultimately won the semi-final against 2008 winners Gamba, with the latter adding to equally eye-catching strikes against Korea Republic's Seongnam FC in the Round of 16 and Kashiwa in the quarter-finals - all of which would win most goal of the tournament votes.

That is not to say

Guangzhou's crop of 2015 overseas players have not made their contribution.

Brazilian Ricardo Goulart is the tournament's leading scorer with eight goals, while compatriot Paulinho has established an impressive midfield partnership with captain Zheng and the ever-improving Huang following his mid-season arrival.

Elkeson also remains key to the forward line, while at the back, Korea Republic international Kim and Feng continue to develop their understanding as a solid central defensive pair supported by right-back Zhang and goalkeeper Zeng.

Fellow 2013 winner Gao

GROUP H	P	W	D	L	F	A	GD	PTS
Guangzhou Evergrande	6	3	1	2	9	9	0	10
FC Seoul	6	2	3	1	5	4	1	9
Western Sydney Wanderers	6	2	2	2	9	7	2	8
Kashima Antlers	6	2	0	4	10	13	-3	6

- 25/02/15
Guangzhou Evergrande 1-0 FC Seoul
Ricardo Goulart 31
- 04/03/15
Western Sydney Wanderers 2-3 Guangzhou Evergrande
Iacopo La Rocca 57, Romeo Castelen 90+5; Ricardo Goulart 19, 58, 64
- 18/03/15
Guangzhou Evergrande 4-3 Kashima Antlers
Ricardo Goulart 10, 62, Elkeson 57, Zhao Xuri 90+2; Hiroyuki Takasaki 36, Shoma Doi 51, Gaku Shibasaki 90+3
- 07/04/15
Kashima Antlers 2-1 Guangzhou Evergrande
Yasushi Endo 19, Hiroyuki Takasaki 90+3; Elkeson 75
- 21/04/15
FC Seoul 0-0 Guangzhou Evergrande
- 05/05/15
Guangzhou Evergrande 0-2 Western Sydney Wanderers
Mark Bridge 33, Tomi Juric 90+3
- Round of 16
- 20/05/15
Seongnam FC 2-1 Guangzhou Evergrande
Jorginho 23, Kim Do-heon 90+5; Huang Bowen 42
- 27/05/15
Guangzhou Evergrande 2-0 Seongnam FC
Ricardo Goulart 27, 57
(Guangzhou Evergrande win 3-2 on aggregate)
- Quarter-Finals
- 25/08/15
Kashiwa Reysol 1-3 Guangzhou Evergrande
Masato Kudo 89; Daisuke Suzuki 5 OG, Paulinho 40, Gao Lin 58
- 15/09/15
Guangzhou Evergrande 1-1 Kashiwa Reysol
Huang Bowen 30; Cristiano 12
(Guangzhou Evergrande win 4-2 on aggregate)
- Semi-Finals
- 30/09/15
Guangzhou Evergrande 2-1 Gamba Osaka
Huang Bowen 36, Zheng Zhi 57; Feng Xiaoting 13 OG
- 21/10/15
Gamba Osaka 0-0 Guangzhou Evergrande
(Guangzhou Evergrande win 2-1 on aggregate)

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Lin has found himself used as a substitute in the later stages of the campaign, but provides Scolari with a reliable and experienced option from a bench which includes the likes of Yu Hanchao and Zhao Xuri, who was also in the side two years ago.

The likes of Zhang, Huang and Feng have hugely benefited from working under first 2013 winning coach Marcello Lippi, fellow Italian Cannavaro and now Brazilian Scolari providing Guangzhou with a solid spine, with Zheng continuing to lead by example as he did two years ago when the AFC Player of the Year award arrived soon after the away goals success over FC Seoul.

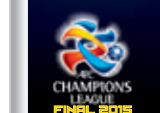
That is not to say Guangzhou have not had it all their own way this year after losing to both Japan's Kashima Antlers and 2014 winners Western Sydney Wanderers from Australia in the group stage as well as Seongnam in the first leg of the last 16 tie.

But the way in which the side have been able to recover from these losses shows the strength that has taken Guangzhou to the verge of becoming two-time continental champions just five years after winning promotion from the second division in China.

Line-up



Guangzhou Evergrande





Zheng Zhi

Captain Zheng Zhi continues to be the heart of the Guangzhou Evergrande team, the spine of which remains from the 2013 AFC Champions League-winning side. The 35-year-old was an ever-present in the southern Chinese club's run to their second AFC Champions League final in three years and scored an ultimately decisive goal in the semi-final first leg against Gamba Osaka.



MF 10

Born 20/08/1980



Liao Lisheng

Born 29/04/1993 MF 2



Mei Fang

Born 14/11/1989 DF 3



Zhao Xuri

Born 03/12/1985 MF 21



Li Shuai

Born 18/08/1982 GK 22



Zhang Jiaqi

Born 09/12/1991 MF 4



Zhang Linpeng

Born 09/05/1989 DF 5



Yang Xin

Born 25/01/1994 MF 23



Liang Xueming

Born 02/08/1995 FW 24



Huang Bowen

Midfielder Huang Bowen has been in scintillating form for Guangzhou Evergrande in the knockout stage of the AFC Champions League. Huang's strikes in the Round of 16, quarter-final and semi-final are arguably all contenders for goal of the tournament. A member of 2013 AFC Champions League-winning team, the 28-year-old has proven to be a crucial component in this year's campaign.



MF 16

Born 13/07/1987



Feng Xiaoting

Born 22/10/1985 DF 6



Paulinho

Born 25/07/1988 MF 8



Elkeson

Born 13/07/1989 FW 9



Wang Shangyuan

Born 02/06/1993 MF 12



Fang Jingqi

Born 17/01/1993 GK 13



Zou Zheng

Born 07/02/1988 MF 25



Wang Jingbin

Born 09/05/1995 FW 26



Zheng Long

Born 15/04/1988 MF 27



Kim Young-gwon

Born 27/02/1990 DF 28



Gao Lin

Born 14/02/1986 FW 29



Liu Jian

Born 20/01/1985 MF 17



Dong Xuesheng

Born 22/05/1989 FW 18



Ricardo Goulart

Brazilian Ricardo Goulart joined Guangzhou Evergrande at the start of the 2015 season from Campeonato Brasileiro side Cruzeiro after the forward was a member of the 2014 championship winning side. And in a deal that was among the highest ever paid by a Chinese club, the 24-year-old has proved to be an inspired signing and currently leads the AFC Champions League scorers' standings with eight goals.



FW 11

Born 05/06/1991



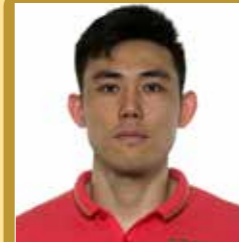
Rong Hao

Born 07/04/1987 DF 33



Wang Junhui

Born 18/05/1995 FW 34



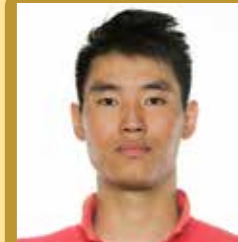
Li Xuepeng

Born 18/09/1988 DF 35



Wang Rui

Born 24/04/1993 MF 49



Liu Weiguo

Born 03/05/1992 GK 53



Zeng Cheng

Born 08/01/1987 GK 19



Yu Hanchao

Born 25/02/1987 MF 20

Coach

Hugely experienced Brazilian coach Luiz Felipe Scolari joined Guangzhou Evergrande in June after stepping down from the Gremio helm to take the role vacated by Italian Fabio Cannavaro. The FIFA World Cup winner is in his third AFC Champions League campaign



Luiz Felipe Scolari

after experiencing the 2009 and 2010 tournaments with Uzbek club Bunyodkor, whom he led to the quarter-finals and Round of 16 respectively, and has so far been unbeaten on the continent with the southern Chinese side.



IN FOCUS: ZHENG ZHI

Guangzhou Evergrande



Guangzhou Evergrande



Captain for both club and country, Guangzhou Evergrande's Zheng Zhi will look to continue China's rise as a continental footballing powerhouse by leading his side to a second AFC Champions League title in three years.

In 2013, the southern Chinese side ended the 23-year continental title drought that had dogged clubs from the Chinese Super League ever since Liaoning defeated Japan's Nissan FC to win the 1990 Asian Club Championship.

A meteoric rise from the second tier to three successive Super League championships came before FIFA World Cup winning-coach Marcello Lippi guided the side to their greatest triumph: lifting the AFC Champions League title with an away goals victory over FC Seoul.

And it was former Charlton Athletic and Celtic midfielder Zheng, wearing the captain's armband, who raised the trophy high into

the sky on that balmy and historic November evening at Guangzhou's Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium.

"Winning the 2013 AFC Champions League title was like a dream to us as all Chinese football fans were well aware that it had been 23 years since any of our clubs had won the continental title," says Zheng.

"It was a historic moment when we won the title and we draw the attention of everyone. Not just throughout Asia, but in many places worldwide, in Europe and in South America, people know that in Asia, in China, there is a team called Guangzhou Evergrande."

Not only an achievement for Zheng and his team-mates, the crowning of Guangzhou as continental champions in 2013 was the beginning of an upturn in fortunes for the entire nation.

"I think it had a very positive effect because our Chinese professional football league is moving in a stable direction and winning

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the AFC Champions League was an affirmation of the whole country's effort in these last few years," adds Zheng.

"And I hope all Chinese football clubs, including our Guangzhou Evergrande, can keep going on the right track, buoyed by the success we showed Chinese teams can achieve playing in the AFC Champions League.

"Everybody hopes that the national team can be like Guangzhou Evergrande to be on the top of Asia, or qualify to the FIFA World Cup. As a player of Evergrande, and a player of our national team, I believe winning the AFC Champions League title can help all teams from China, and can enhance the confidence of every player from China, including our national team to play better in international games.

"For example, in the 2015 AFC Asian Cup, we qualified top of our group and made it to the quarter-finals – and I'm sure Guangzhou's 2013 AFC Champions league winning spirit

certainly helped this."

Zheng has been a key feature of Guangzhou's continental success this year, too, and the ever-present rock in midfield also netted a rare but vital goal in the semi-final first leg against Gamba Osaka.

"This is really a great chance for us to be the champion of Asia a second time. It would be a very significant achievement and everybody in China hopes we can win the AFC Champions League title once more," says Zheng.

"In our club's new five-year scheme, we targeted winning the AFC Champions League title again as one of our goals. Everybody has great expectations for us, and we don't want to let them down.

"We hope to be the champion of the AFC Champions League this season, and to increase confidence in Chinese football, and to bring more happiness to Chinese fans."

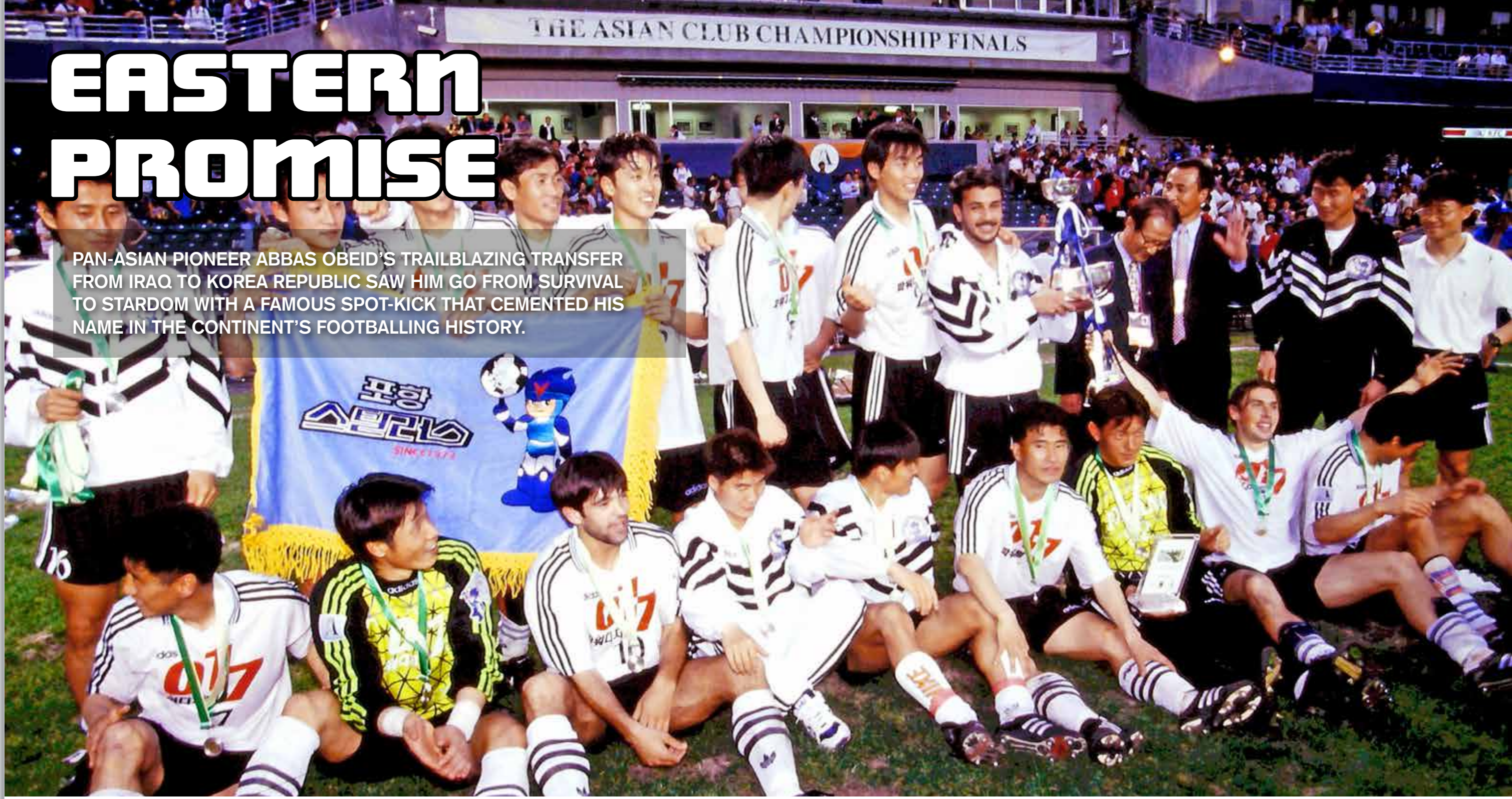


Guangzhou Evergrande



EASTERN PROMISE

PAN-ASIAN PIONEER ABBAS OBEID'S TRAILBLAZING TRANSFER FROM IRAQ TO KOREA REPUBLIC SAW HIM GO FROM SURVIVAL TO STARDOM WITH A FAMOUS SPOT-KICK THAT CEMENTED HIS NAME IN THE CONTINENT'S FOOTBALLING HISTORY.



While there have been many East Asian players who have travelled West to find success on the other side of the continent, including the likes of AFC Champions League winners Kwak Tae-hwi, Lee Jung-soo and Matthew Spiranovic, few have made the journey from West to East as successfully as 1998 Asian Club Championship winner

Abbas Obeid. Born to a poor family in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad in 1973, Obeid began the first steps in his footballing career on the streets of the city as a seven-year-old before joining his first official club, Al Sinaa, in 1986. Obeid then took in spells at three of Baghdad's biggest clubs with Al Talaba, Al Zawraa and Al Qowa Al Jawia all employing the services of the tricky midfielder with an eye

for goal. However, while his name was becoming well-known in the capital, things were not well at home. "The situation in Iraq was terrible during the 90's. Food was scarce and very bad. Even football boots were rare; you could not afford such things. If you gave a pair of football boots to a player back then, it was like giving him a house," says Obeid. "My family especially had a

hard time. My father was too old to continue working, and I got paid maybe US\$3 each month as the main breadwinner." Obeid's life changed, though, in July 1995 when he stormed on to the international scene in the Merdeka Independence Anniversary Tournament in Kuala Lumpur. Scoring on his Iraq debut in a 2-2 draw against Korea Republic, Obeid was also on target against the hosts in a 2-1 win that grabbed the attention

of onlooking Anyang Cheetahs' assistant coach Pak Hung-suk, who would eventually sign both Obeid and countryman Sadiq Sadoun and bring them to the Korean top flight. And while Sadoun left Anyang, a satellite city of Seoul, after one season, Obeid flourished on the field despite the initial cultural differences off it. "I tried to eat Korean food, but it is too difficult for me," recalls Obeid. "The language was also a big

problem. I spent one and a half years learning some words to use in matches, but there was no official Korean teacher to help. "The football was very fast and I was surprised at first, but I had to adapt to learn how to be like a Korean player. The players and coach helped me to understand the style, and the Korean people were nice to me. "I got a lot more money, so I could send more home – my life changed 100% and I got a very good life when I moved to Korea.



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And now I speak Korean very well, better than English."

After two years at Anyang, Obeid signed for reigning Asian Club Championship winners Pohang Steelers in July 1997 in time to join their campaign to retain their continental title.

Comfortable double digit victories over Bangladesh's Mohammedan SC and Maldivian side Victory SC saw Pohang progress to February's East Asia group stage in Zhejiang, China, and they topped a group that included hosts Dalian Wanda, Japan's Kashima Antlers and Myanmar's Finance and Revenue, to advance to the semi-finals in Hong Kong in April.

Pohang winger Park Tae-he's goal was then enough to secure a 1-0 win over Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal which set-up a re-match with Dalian in the final at Hong Kong Stadium.

Wang Tao and Hao Haidong both came close in a first half

dominated by Dalian, but in a classic game of two halves, Pohang came out stronger after the break, with Park volleying just over.

But as the game neared full time, penalties looked more and more likely, with both sides looking tired in front of goal.

"What I remember from the final against Dalian is we played 120 minutes and then it came to penalty kicks - I hate penalty kicks, I didn't want it to go to penalty kicks," says Obeid, who started against Dalian.

"When you score a penalty everyone says 'Ah it's too easy, anyway', but when you lose it the whole world is saying 'How can you miss? It's so easy.'

"Anyway, the score went to 5-5 and I turned round and the coach looked at me and said, 'Hey, you are next'. I felt like the coach had killed me.

"The Dalian player went up first, and he put the ball wide. I hated the pressure. But you have to be professional, the club signed you to help them - so if you miss a penalty in a shootout it's a big problem."

IN FOCUS: THE 1998 FINAL





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Obeid did initially miss after hitting the post, but after the referee ordered the kick to be re-taken, he made no mistake a second time, sending Dalian goalkeeper Han Wenhai the wrong way to win the shootout for Pohang.

"After scoring I took my shirt off and started running and the players ran after me, it was a very good feeling," he recalls.

"Iraqi TV came to do a one hour programme on me and

we were talking about this penalty kick; that Abbas scored this penalty and helped the Korean people.

"This was a very good chance to let the people outside of Iraq really know me, as it was the first chance to play in the Asian Club Championship.

"There are many people in the continent who know Abbas from this final."

In the wake of his success overseas, Obeid became Iraq captain and led them to a

perfect record in qualifying to reach the 2000 AFC Asian Cup in Lebanon, where he helped them to a quarter-final finish.

His Korean adventure ended in 2001 with a return to West Asia and a five-year spell at Bahrain SC before his retirement in 2007.

Obeid is now passing on his pan-Asian knowledge and experience to his nation's next generation and was assistant coach for Iraq at last year's AFC U-19 Championship.

IN FOCUS: THE 1998 FINAL



Rashid Stadium, Dubai

The 9,390 capacity Rashid Stadium, which was built in 1948, is a multi-purpose stadium in the north of Dubai. Used to host both football and

rugby matches, Rashid Stadium has also played host to the United Arab Emirates national team and friendly matches involving European sides Paris Saint-Germain and AC Milan.

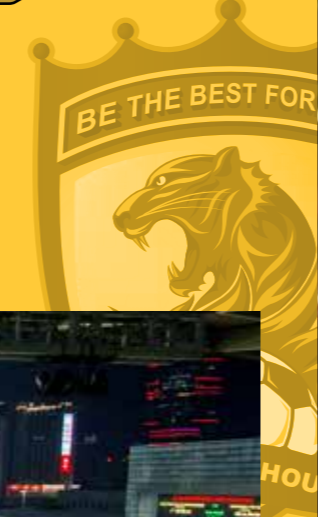


STADIUMS

Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium, Guangzhou

Tianhe Sport Centre Stadium was built to host the 1987 National Games. Occupying a land area of 54.54 square kilometres, the

stadium hosted the second leg of the 2013 AFC Champions League Final, the final of the inaugural FIFA Women's World Cup in 1991 and was the venue for the 2010 Asian Games.



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