

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 10



AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015

Hosts land maiden continental title at record-breaking tournament

ISSUE
10

April 2015

PLUS

PARK JI-SUNG

Iconic former Korea Republic midfielder looks to the future

MASSIMO LUONGO

Swindon Town man dazzles to claim AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 MVP award



AHMED KHALIL

The UAE striker seeks to build on a strong AFC Asian Cup after delivering on his teenage potential in January



PERSEPOLIS

One of Iran's most popular and successful clubs is ready for a return to former glories in this year's AFC Champions League



NORIO SASAKI

The coach of the FIFA Women's World Cup champions Japan looks ahead to their title defence having defied the odds four years ago

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CONTENTS



24 – AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015

AFC Quarterly reviews one of the most successful tournaments Asian football has witnessed in the 59-year history of the continental championship.

28 – AHMED KHALIL

Striker Ahmed Khalil looks to build on a stellar performance at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 by firing the United Arab Emirates to the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

34 – PARK JI-SUNG

One of Asia's finest ever exports, former Korea Republic and Manchester United midfielder Park Ji-sung, reveals plans to use his post-playing career to boost the game in his home continent.

38 – REZA GHOOCHANNEJHAD

Overseas-born striker Reza Ghoochannejhad is leading from the front as Iran's foreign legion aim to help Team Melli return to their former heights.

42 – IN FOCUS: MYANMAR

Once a dominant power in Asian football, Myanmar could be on the brink of a new Golden Age with their debut at the FIFA U-20 World Cup on the horizon.

48 – NORIO SASAKI

FIFA Women's World Cup-winning coach Norio Sasaki recalls Japan's fairytale 2011 triumph ahead of their title defence in Canada in June.

54 – YASER KASIM

Midfielder Yaser Kasim is ready to use Iraq's AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 semi-final finish as a foundation for more glory.

60 – CLUB PROFILE: PERSEPOLIS

Amongst Iran's most popular and successful clubs, Persepolis boast a pedigree and history to match the best in Asia, but instability in recent times has seen their empire lie dormant.

Regular Sections

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 14 – In The News | 73 – Women's Olympic Games Qualifiers |
| 66 – AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 | 74 – Inside AFC |
| 68 – AFC Champions League | 78 – Great Grounds of Asia |
| 70 – AFC Cup | |

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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

The year kicked off in tremendous fashion with the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, and the tournament proved to be a fitting tribute to the excitement and passion that is ingrained in Asian football.

From the first whistle until the last, fans were treated to an action-packed football tournament full of goals, quality play and a tremendous atmosphere. Legends sealed their names in the history books, while emerging talents became stars of the game.

Congratulations to Australia for their maiden AFC Asian Cup win. Being able to lift Asia's most prestigious trophy in front of their home crowd was a truly special moment for each member of that team. Their determination was fittingly rewarded and should serve as an inspiration to the rest of Asia.

I would also like to thank the Organising Committee for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, the Local Organising Committee, Football Federation of Australia, and not to mention the hard-working volunteers, whose collaborative effort was pivotal to the success of the 23-day tournament.

The tournament will now move to the United Arab Emirates for its 17th edition in 2019, and I have every confidence that the Gulf state will uphold the remarkable legacy of the AFC Asian Cup.

The AFC Congress will meet at the end of April in my home country, Bahrain. I am honoured the AFC Member Associations have entrusted me with a new term as AFC President and I am delighted to carry on working with the Asian Football family to raise the level of the game across Asia.

Let's continue the good work, and enjoy Asian football!

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary



Dear friends,

2015 is a major year for Asian football, and it could not get any bigger than the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 that was played in front of excited crowds in January.

The eventful tournament was a rousing success and this edition of the AFC Quarterly features some of the best action from the memorable 23-day festival of football.

This edition features an interview with one of the stars to emerge from the tournament, Australia's Massimo Luongo, who grabbed the Most Valuable Player Award. The Swindon Town midfielder's rise to becoming a household name in the land down under is chronicled in this edition of the AFC Quarterly.

We also talk to some of the other stars of the tournament, including Iraq's Yaser Kasim, Iran's Reza Ghoochannejhad and the United Arab Emirates' Ahmed Khalil, while Korea Republic legend Park Ji-sung also provides us with his insights.

The year 2015 will also see Japan defend their title at the FIFA Women's World Cup title in Canada in June and we spoke with the Nadeshiko's coach, Norio Sasaki, on the team's preparation for the tournament.

The 2015 editions of Asia's top continental club football competitions have begun, and we profile one of the veterans of the AFC Champions League, Iran Pro League runners-up Persepolis, who are making a comeback in the tournament after a two-year absence.

The AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 kicked off the year in great spirit, and it has certainly created a positive momentum for Asian football for the rest of the season to come.

Dato' Alex Soosay
AFC General Secretary



At the heart of the image

Gallery



.....
Home Comforts
.....

Hosts Australia won the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 after beating Korea Republic 2-1 after extra-time in January's final at Stadium Australia in Sydney thanks to goals from tournament MVP Massimo Luongo and James Troisi.

Gallery



In The Hunt

Jordan's Al Wehdat beat Lebanon's Salam Zgharta 5-1 at King Abdullah International Stadium in Amman before downing Oman's Al Nahda in Group A to remain in contention for a place in the Round of 16 of the AFC Cup heading into the second half of the group stage.

Gallery



.....
Perfect Start
.....

Zhao Xuri scored as Guangzhou Evergrande edged out Kashima Antlers 4-3 having earlier beaten FC Seoul and Western Sydney Wanderers in Group H of the AFC Champions League to hand Fabio Cannavaro's side a perfect record at the start of the group stage.



Bhutan Make History As Line-Up Confirmed

BHUTAN, TIMOR-LESTE, CAMBODIA, INDIA, CHINESE TAIPEI AND YEMEN SECURED THEIR PLACES IN THE SECOND ROUND OF JOINT QUALIFIERS FOR THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP AND 2019 AFC ASIAN CUP AHEAD OF APRIL'S DRAW IN KUALA LUMPUR.

Bhutan claimed a famous win to join Asia's elite in the second round of joint qualifiers for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup after the Himalayan nation beat Sri Lanka 3-1 on aggregate in the two-legged first round of qualifiers in March.

Ranked 209th in the world at the time, Bhutan joined fellow second round debutants Timor-Leste and Cambodia, as well as Chinese Taipei, India and Yemen, in the draw which will take place on April 14.

Automatic qualifiers Iran, Japan, Korea Republic, Uzbekistan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Jordan, China, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, Kuwait, the Philippines,

Maldives, Vietnam, Tajikistan, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, DPR Korea, Syria, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Laos, Guam and Bangladesh had already secured their places in the second round draw.

The 40 nations will be drawn into eight groups of five, with the home-and-away round robin format second round beginning in June and finishing in March 2016.

The eight group winners and four best placed runners-up will advance directly to the 2019 AFC Asian Cup as well as the final round of qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

The next best 24 teams from the second round of the joint qualifiers will compete in a separate competition for the remaining slots in the 24-team 2019 AFC Asian Cup finals due to be hosted by the UAE.

Timor-Leste 4 Mongolia 1 Mongolia 0 Timor-Leste 1 <i>Timor-Leste win 5-1 on aggregate</i>
Cambodia 3 Macau 0 Macau 1 Cambodia 1 <i>Cambodia win 4-1 on aggregate</i>
Sri Lanka 0 Bhutan 1 Bhutan 2 Sri Lanka 1 <i>Bhutan win 3-1 on aggregate</i>
Chinese Taipei 0 Brunei Darussalam 1 Brunei Darussalam 0 Chinese Taipei 2 <i>Chinese Taipei win 2-1 on aggregate</i>
India 2 Nepal 0 Nepal 0 India 0 <i>India win 2-0 on aggregate</i>
Yemen 3 Pakistan 1 Pakistan 0 Yemen 0 <i>Yemen win 3-1 on aggregate</i>



Stage Set For 26th AFC Ordinary Congress 2015

INCUMBENT PRESIDENT SHAIKH SALMAN BIN EBRAHIM AL KHALIFA WILL STAND UNOPPOSED FOR A SECOND TERM, WHILE AFC AND FIFA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE POSITIONS WILL BE DECIDED AT THE END OF APRIL.

The AFC Electoral Committee has finalised the list of candidates standing for election at the 26th AFC Ordinary Congress 2015 which will take place at the Gulf Convention Centre in Manama, Bahrain, on April 30, The AFC Congress is the Asian Football Confederation's highest decision-making body, with all its Member Associations represented at its biannual meetings.

The main items on the agenda are the elections for key AFC and FIFA positions.

Incumbent President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa will stand unopposed for a second term.

Candidate for AFC President and FIFA Vice President ex officio (1 position)
Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa (Bahrain; uncontested)

Candidates for FIFA Executive Committee members (3 positions; 2 – 2015-2019; 1 – 2013-2017)

HRH Prince Abdullah Al-Haj Ibni Sultan Hj Ahmad Shah (Malaysia; Zone: ASEAN)

Dato' Worawi Makudi (Thailand; Zone: ASEAN)

Chung Mong-gyu (Korea Republic; Zone: East)

Kohzo Tashima (Japan; Zone: East)

Saoud A. Aziz M A Al Mohannadi (Qatar; Zone: West)

HE Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al Ahmad Al Sabah (Kuwait; Zone: West)

HE Al Sayyid Khalid Hamed Hamood Al Busaidi (Oman; Zone: West)

Candidates for AFC Vice President (5 positions; one from each zone)

Winston Lee Boon Aun (Singapore; Zone: ASEAN)

Zhang Jilong (China; Zone: East)

Ali Kafashian Naeini (Iran; Zone: Central)

Saoud A. Aziz M A Al Mohannadi (Qatar; Zone: West)

Makhdoom Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat (Pakistan; Zone: South)

Praful Manoharhai Patel (India; Zone: South)

Candidates for AFC Female Executive Committee Member (5 positions; one from each zone)

Moya Dodd (Australia; Zone: ASEAN)

Han Un-gyong (DPR Korea; Zone: East)

Zohra Mehri (Afghanistan; Zone: Central)

Susan R. A. Shalabi (Palestine; Zone: West)

Mahfuza Akhter (Bangladesh; Zone: South)

Candidates for AFC Executive Committee member (11 positions)

Zaw Zaw (Myanmar; Zone: ASEAN)

Viphet Sihachakr (Laos; Zone: ASEAN)

Francisco Kalbuadi Lay (Timor Leste; Zone: ASEAN)

Dr. Tran Quoc Tuan (Vietnam; Zone: ASEAN)

Mariano V. Araneta Jr. (Philippines; Zone: ASEAN)

Richard King Lai (Guam; Zone: East)

Chung Mong-gyu (Korea Republic; Zone: East)

Kohzo Tashima (Japan; Zone: East)

Sardor Rakhmatullaev (Uzbekistan; Zone: Central)

Hachem Sayed Ali Haidar (Lebanon; Zone: West)

HE Al Sayyid Khalid Hamed Hamood Al Busaidi (Oman; Zone: West)

HE Mohamed Khalifan Matar Saeed Al Romaithi (UAE; Zone: West)

Ahmed Eid S Al Harbi (Saudi Arabia; Zone: West)

Warnakulasuriya Ranjith Rodrigo (Sri Lanka; Zone: South)

Makhdoom Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat (Pakistan; Zone: South)

Mohamed Shaweed (Maldives; Zone: South)

Ugen Tsechup (Bhutan; Zone: South)



UAE Named As Host For 2019 AFC Asian Cup

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES WILL HOST THE 2019 AFC ASIAN CUP FOLLOWING A DECISION BY THE AFC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE TO AWARD THE EXPANDED 24-TEAM FINALS TO THE 2015 THIRD PLACE FINISHERS.

The AFC Asian Cup will be played in the United Arab Emirates for a second time after the AFC Executive Committee awarded the 2015 third place finishers the hosting rights for the expanded 24-team 2019 continental championship.

The UAE and Iran had submitted final bids to host the 17th edition of the continental championship, with the AFC Executive Committee confirming their decision in Bahrain at the start of March for the tournament which will be played in six stadiums in January 2019.

The decision arrived just over a month after the UAE beat Iraq 3-2 in the third place play-off at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, which represented their best finish at the

continental championship since reaching the final on home soil in 1996.

"I would like to congratulate the UAE FA on their successful bid to host the AFC Asian Cup 2019," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa having signed the 2019 AFC Asian Cup hosting certificate together with United Arab Emirates Football Association President Yousuf Yaqoob Yousuf Al Serkal at the meeting in Manama.

"The AFC Executive Committee was convinced by the merits of the UAE bid. I firmly believe that the UAE FA will host a tournament that could match and potentially even surpass the stunning AFC Asian Cup 2015 in Australia that we have all just witnessed."

The expanded 52-match tournament will be played in six stadiums in January 2019

with 24 teams following an earlier decision to increase the number of participants from the 16 which took part in the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

"The success of the UAE bid to host the 17th edition of the continent's premier football championship is evidence of the strong position occupied by the UAE within the Asian countries and the excellent links it has established," said UAE FA President Yousuf Yaqoob Yousuf Al Serkal.

"Everybody knows the capabilities of the UAE in hosting mega international events in all sports."

The UAE will also host the FIFA Club World Cup in 2017 and 2018 following a decision by FIFA's Executive Committee in March having previously hosted the prestigious tournament in both 2009 and 2010.



Inaugural AFC Women's Football Day Celebrated

THE AFC BECAME THE FIRST-EVER FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION TO MARK INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WITH A SPECIAL EVENT AFTER THE INAUGURAL AFC WOMEN'S FOOTBALL DAY TOOK PLACE IN MARCH.

The AFC and its Member Associations observed the inaugural AFC Women's Football Day on March 8, which coincided with International Women's Day.

The AFC was the first football confederation to mark a special day for women's football during which everyone across Asia was encouraged to celebrate through diverse football activities.

"I am delighted to see that the inaugural AFC Women's Football Day has triggered activities in dozens of countries around Asia. Girls' grassroots days, women's football festivals and carnivals, seminars, female referee workshops and various other activities will take place around the continent," said AFC Women's Committee Chairperson Moya Dodd.

"It's a credit to our Member Associations and

their commitment to make football accessible for girls and women. This is a historic moment for football, as the AFC is the first confederation to have such an event."

Japan will defend their FIFA Women's World Cup title later this year after the Nadeshiko became the first-ever AFC nation to win a world title at any level in 2011.

"We drew up the 'Nadeshiko Vision' to develop our women's football. We think it is important to share the vision with the stakeholders in order to make a big movement in the development, improvement and grassroots for women's football. Especially as we are focusing on the promotion of grassroots activities," said Akemi Noda, the Chairperson of the Japan Football Association Women's Committee.

"We at the JFA try to create as many opportunities as possible for women to be

involved in football through the 'JFA Ladies/Girls Festival' and 'Nadeshiko Friendly Square', which are good and casual occasions to play football all over Japan.

"We plan to celebrate the AFC Women's Football Day during our events, and I expect the activities to make a positive and significant impact on the participants and hope to share the joy of football with our Asian friends."

March also saw the first round of qualifiers take place for the Women's football tournament at the 2016 Olympic Games.

"The roadmap ahead has already been set," said Kushal Das, General Secretary, All India Football Federation.

"Even as we stick to our strategic plan, we understand that developing women's football does not solely mean developing the sport on the field."

ABOVE AND BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

MASSIMO LUONGO WAS NAMED THE MVP AS AUSTRALIA WON THE AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015 DESPITE HAVING ONLY MADE HIS INTERNATIONAL DEBUT A YEAR EARLIER WHILE PLAYING FOR A CLUB IN THE THIRD TIER OF ENGLISH FOOTBALL.

By: Andrew Mullen Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images





Massimo Luongo did not play a single game at the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Massimo Luongo was only expected to play a limited role at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015. Massimo Luongo went on to be named the tournament's MVP ahead of a host of established players as Australia landed a first AFC Asian Cup title with the midfielder opening the scoring in the final against Korea Republic. Not bad for a 22-year-old from England's third tier who only made his international debut some 10 months before the start of the continental showpiece.

That progress puts Luongo as the poster boy for the regeneration and redevelopment of the Australia squad witnessed under national team coach Ange Postecoglou, who took over in October 2013, with the midfielder having joined League One side Swindon Town seven months earlier after ending a two-year spell with Premier League side Tottenham Hotspur.

"When I was at the World Cup I knew this wasn't my tournament and I would focus on getting into the Asian Cup squad and getting myself established, and I thought I would get a lot of my minutes there," says Luongo.

"We played a few friendlies in the build-up

and I started a few, but I didn't do anything to really sandwich myself in the team so I doubted that I would get into the Asian Cup squad. I thought I would get picked, but I didn't think I would play that many minutes

"WE PLAYED A FEW FRIENDLIES IN THE BUILD-UP AND I STARTED A FEW, BUT I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO REALLY SANDWICH MYSELF IN THE TEAM SO I DOUBTED THAT I WOULD GET INTO THE ASIAN CUP SQUAD. I THOUGHT I WOULD GET PICKED, BUT I DIDN'T THINK I WOULD PLAY THAT MANY MINUTES AND HAVE THAT MUCH OF AN IMPACT."

and have that much of an impact. But when the first game came around I didn't expect it along with a lot of other people."

Less than a year between making your international debut and leading your country to a major title may seem a rapid rise, but when you consider Luongo had been virtually overlooked by the Australia setup until Postecoglou's arrival, it makes the story even

more remarkable.

The son of a football-obsessed Italian father and an Indonesian mother, Luongo learnt his trade in the schools and club sides in Sydney but missed out on selection for state and youth level teams at international level including Australia's squad for the 2011 FIFA U-20 World Cup despite being called into a pre-tournament camp.

"They used to have a camp in Europe and I was called in under Holger Osieck. Unfortunately I was injured, but he told me to come in anyway and get treatment and also to meet everybody. It was a good camp, I didn't get to train or play, I was just there to meet everyone and the coach and that was for less than a week," says Luongo, who worked under current Aston Villa manager Tim Sherwood during his time in the youth setup at Tottenham prior to joining Swindon following a spell on loan with Ipswich Town.

"Ange came in and I read in the papers he wanted to broaden his range of where he gets his players from and build a new generation, and then I heard he was coming to a Swindon game when we played Shrewsbury Town and it was the coldest, wettest and windiest day he could have come to watch.

"The game was terrible, but luckily he sat next to Tim Sherwood in the stands and he talked me up and so I was called up to my

first camp in London against Ecuador.

"I felt relieved that there were people out there that will give you a chance."

Luongo was finally given his Soccerroos debut against the South Americans at Millwall's New Den in March 2014 as the midfielder came on as a late substitute, although Australia eventually lost 4-3 having squandered a three-goal lead.

"I felt at home playing and training with them even though their style is something I had never experienced before and I struggled at the start, but when I got on in the game I felt comfortable playing alongside them," says Luongo.

"It was good to get my debut, it was a strange game to do it in, but I think I did OK in those 10 minutes."

Luongo had done enough and was subsequently named in Australia's 23-man squad for the 2014 FIFA World Cup as Postecoglou kept faith with youth having blooded a number of players in the build up to Brazil.

Luongo, though, watched from the bench as Australia eventually exited in the group stage after losing to Chile, the Netherlands and Spain.

"I thought Brazil would have been a long shot, and even though I didn't play, to train and be around the others in that environment to witness the games at first hand, when I

*Left & Above
AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015*

*Bottom Left
Playing for Swindon Town*

"I THOUGHT BRAZIL WOULD HAVE BEEN A LONG SHOT, AND EVEN THOUGH I DIDN'T PLAY, TO TRAIN AND BE AROUND THE OTHERS IN THAT ENVIRONMENT TO WITNESS THE GAMES AT FIRST HAND, WHEN I CAME BACK TO SWINDON I WAS MUCH MORE CONFIDENT."

came back to Swindon I was much more confident," says Luongo.

"I felt like a new player even though I had just trained with them, but with the intensity, the atmosphere and the professionalism, I was able to change my game on the training pitch."

The midfielder, though, would not have to wait long for his chance with Postecoglou putting further faith in youth, and in particular Luongo, as the midfielder started at Melbourne Rectangular Stadium as Australia took on Kuwait in the opening game of the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Luongo did not disappoint, and in his first competitive international was named man

of the match after setting up Tim Cahill's 33rd minute equaliser after tournament hosts Australia had fallen behind after just eight minutes of the Group A opener before the 22-year-old headed home his maiden international goal shortly before half-time.

And with Mile Jedinak and James Troisi extending the advantage in the second half, 2011 finalists Australia secured the ideal start to the campaign for a squad which included several other players with only a handful of international appearances.

Luongo was substituted with six minutes remaining against Kuwait, and after also starting against Oman, was withdrawn just after half-time as Australia eased to a 4-0 win in Sydney.

He then played every minute of the remaining four games as the Soccerroos lost to Korea Republic at the end of the group stage before beating both China and the United Arab Emirates in the knockout stage, with Luongo again named man of the match in the 2-0 semi-final success over the Emirates in Newcastle.

Luongo also racked up 120 exhausting minutes in the final at Stadium Australia having opened the scoring at the end of the first half with a finish any international striker would have been proud of as Australia eventually prevailed 2-1 thanks to Troisi's extra-time strike.



Massimo Luongo

Nationality:
Australia

DOB:
25/09/1992

Position:
Midfielder

Current club:
Swindon Town
(England)

Previous clubs:
Tottenham Hotspur,
Ipswich Town
(Both England)

“It is the greatest moment so far in my career. Looking back, I didn’t think that I would be involved in all the games and Ange told me after he didn’t expect me to be involved in as many games,” says Luongo.

“But in League One we play many back-to-back games so I am used to the load, replicating that in a tournament is different, but I felt good physically right up to the final. It was a good tournament for me and I scored in the final which was massive for me. I am from Sydney and all my friends and family were there and all the emotions came out that I didn’t know I had. I exceeded my own expectations and I really enjoyed the tournament.”

Australia and Postecoglou can thank Luongo’s footballing upbringing for his high level of fitness which saw the midfielder rank behind only goalkeeper Mat Ryan and defender Trent Sainsbury in terms of minutes played during the tournament despite not turning 23 until September.

“My Dad was born in Italy and was a mad fanatic with football and loves football and wanted to get me involved as soon as he could, so from the age of seven I used to play for Queen’s Park in the Eastern suburbs of Sydney and that was just with my mates and I was just enjoying it,” says Luongo.

“I loved to play football with my mates and I wasn’t any good or anything special at

that age. I did a few football camps under a guy called Hector Martinez and he had an Argentinean upbringing so he tried to coach all the skills and that was holiday football camps and that is really where I started.”

Luongo followed in the footsteps of his friends and older brother Tiziano trying out for representative sides and teams in Sydney’s Eastern suburbs and eventually, after joining a private high school, the 13-year-old was playing two games at the weekend following an intense weekly training schedule.

“FROM THE AGE OF 14 UNTIL I WAS 17, WE TRAINED EVERY MORNING MONDAY TO FRIDAY BEFORE SCHOOL AND I HAD TO BALANCE TRAINING WITH HIM IN THE MORNING, AND THEN GOING TO SCHOOL.”

“My schedule was quite demanding at a young age as I was training almost every day, twice a day sometimes,” says Luongo. “That probably helped a lot as all I could think about was football.”

And within a year, Luongo was emulating the life of a professional footballer further under mentor David Magrone, the man who

would eventually take the midfielder to England before his 18th birthday.

“I was 14 and playing for St. George when my career took off. My team was doing well and the technical director was the man who eventually took me to England three years later. He set up an academy with only selected players from St. George, there was about 12 of us at the time,” says Luongo.

“From the age of 14 until I was 17, we trained every morning Monday to Friday before school and I had to balance training with him in the morning, and then going to school. I had school training after school and then I had club training after school training, so sometimes I was training three times a day – those three years was really tough for me.”

All the hard work over that period, though, paid off as Tottenham offered Luongo a trial after the midfielder had impressed on a tour to Holland and Belgium with his academy team.

Luongo did have to wait to turn 18 to sign his contract at White Hart Lane and spent around a year travelling between Australia and England training with Tottenham having spurned interest from several A-League clubs.

Signed initially as a holding midfielder due to his high work rate, Luongo progressed through the ranks under youth team

manager Sherwood and first team manager Harry Redknapp which led to a Tottenham debut as a second half substitute in the League Cup against Stoke City in September 2011.

Tottenham did eventually lose the tie on penalties with Luongo missing in the shootout in what proved to be his only first team appearance for the club.

“Under Tim Sherwood, he changed the club a little bit and I knew he liked me and wanted to push me into the first team under Harry Redknapp and I got a few more opportunities training up in the first team than the other boys did so I was ahead of the other players,” says Luongo.

“My first appearance was Stoke away in the cup. I didn’t think I was even going to get on and I ended up getting on and playing and missing the deciding penalty. That Stoke match put me on the map in Australia as no one had ever heard of me.”

He opted to pursue a much-trodden path of making a loan move in order to boost his first team opportunities at Tottenham, but after Andre Villas-Boas took over as manager and the midfielder returned from a short spell with second tier Ipswich, Luongo found himself even further down the pecking order.

“Under Harry Redknapp and Tim Sherwood I felt like I was going to be a Tottenham player and everyone around me was telling

Above & Left AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 Final *Top Right AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 MVP*

me: you are going to be a Tottenham player with your style,” says Luongo.

“Before I went to Ipswich, Andre Villas-Boas came in and they brought in five or six new midfielders. It still felt the same, but then I went to Ipswich and that didn’t work out so well as the manager got sacked and I had to come back early to Tottenham and it felt like everyone had forgotten about me.”

Luongo would spend the next six months in the reserves under Sherwood before being offered the chance to join Swindon on loan in March 2013 before signing a permanent deal ahead of the start of the 2013/14 season.

“The Swindon opportunity came about and when I came in they were pushing for promotion. We didn’t get promotion, but coming back to Tottenham, I thought I should either go back on loan at Swindon as it felt like a good club for me to be at with the way they were playing, or sign permanently. And then they wanted to sign me and for me to stay for three or four years so I said yes as I thought it was the best move for me,” says Luongo.

“It is a good club to be at. They don’t have the money or the facilities like the big clubs, but the players they bring in and the coaches and the way the club is run, it is quite relaxed

and enjoyable to be at the club.”

The decision proved vital for Luongo and Australia, and thankfully Postecoglou was able to find his way to Swindon’s County Ground on that now fateful, albeit wet and windy, night in January 2014 as Luongo and team-mate Yaser Kasim, who would go on to help Iraq reach the semi-finals at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015, secured their side a 3-1 win over Shrewsbury.

And just over a year later, Luongo was back in his hometown of Sydney with an AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 winner’s medal around his neck and the tournament’s MVP trophy in his hand with aspirations of the 2018 FIFA World Cup firmly in his sights following his watching brief in Brazil.

“It will be tough to qualify for Russia. Our goal is to take it one game at a time, but as a nation we want to put ourselves on the map. We grew over the three months around the Asian Cup in terms of how we play as a team and compete with the world’s best,” says Luongo.

“We are confident we will qualify for the World Cup and my goal is to be an established player with the Socceroos as I have got a long way to go to get where I want to be. As a team, our goal is to be a dominant force at the next World Cup.”



AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 Ticks All The Boxes

HOSTS AUSTRALIA COMPLETED A FAIRYTALE AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015 VICTORY ON HOME SOIL, AND WITH RECORD CROWDS EMBRACING THE TOURNAMENT ACROSS ALL FIVE VENUES, THE 16TH EDITION OF THE CONTINENTAL CHAMPIONSHIP WILL GO DOWN AS ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL TOURNAMENTS EVER SEEN IN ASIA.



The 'SOLD OUT' signs hanging above the ticket booths at Stadium Australia in the hours leading up to the final told the story; the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 had been one of the most successful tournaments Asian football had witnessed in the 59-year history of the continental championship.

That Ange Postecoglou's rebuilt and rejuvenated Socceroos would claim the silverware in a thrilling finale against Korea Republic was the icing on the cake for an event that boasted record crowds, high quality football and served as the warmest embrace between one of the Asian Football

Confederation's newest members and the rest of the continent.

Brisbane, Canberra, Newcastle, Sydney and Melbourne threw open their doors to greet Asia's 16 leading nations, and in return hundreds of thousands of fans witnessed a football spectacle like few others.

James Troisi scored the winning goal late in the first period of extra-time to secure Australia's first men's AFC Asian Cup – at the third time of asking – sending the majority of the 76,385 crowd into raptures, and completing the country's move to the summit of the Asian game.

With Western Sydney Wanderers already in possession of the AFC Champions League title, Australian teams at senior men's and women's as well as at club level

can now lay claim at one time or another over the last decade to being the continental champions.

"We came into this confederation knowing it would be a huge challenge,"

said Postecoglou after the final. "The Matildas won the Asian Cup first and then it was great to see Western Sydney win the Champions League and now we have won it at national team level.

"But that shouldn't be the full stop, we need to keep pushing on. We need to push on and make sure this is not the end of the journey, and for us this is the beginning."

With qualifying for the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia on the horizon, the Australians have laid down the challenge to the rest of Asia with a team that features a mix of experience and youth; when Tim Cahill raced to laud Massimo Luongo following the 22-year-old's goal against Kuwait in the tournament opener in Melbourne, it could be seen in hindsight as a passing of the torch.

Cahill, for so long Australia's poster boy, remained influential for the Socceroos throughout the tournament – his two goals against China in the quarter-finals were as spectacular as they were important – but it was Luongo who emerged as the star of the AFC Asian Cup, scoring again in the final and impressing throughout with his energetic and dynamic displays in midfield.



The Swindon Town man, along with central defender Trent Sainsbury and goalkeeper Mat Ryan, were the players whose names were on the lips of the majority as captain Mile Jedinak received the AFC Asian Cup

trophy from AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

Their success was testimony, too, to the job done by Postecoglou over the 15 months since replacing Holger Osieck, with the former Brisbane Roar coach quickly setting the AFC Asian Cup as his target, using the FIFA World Cup as his team's testing ground.





Mixing the young and the promising with the experienced, tried and tested, Postecoglou struck upon a balance that allied physical strength with skill and guile.

Luongo's goal – a sweetly struck effort from long range after a turn that left Ki Sung-yueng out of position and scrambling in vain to recover – gave the Socceroos the lead in the final, but it was his overall performance that impressed most.

Cool-headed, with an eye for the right pass and the capability to chip in with the occasional goal, it's safe to assume the 22-year-old will soon be trading life in England's League One for a club of significantly greater status, with his status as the AFC Asian Cup Most Valuable Player only adding to his profile.

Mathew Leckie, meanwhile, built on his impressive showing in Brazil while between the posts Ryan firmly established himself as the country's first-choice goalkeeper.

The central defensive partnership of Sainsbury and Matthew Spiranovic formed an impressive understanding, while Jedinak's position at the heart of the midfield ensures Australia have a very solid core.



Many of the question marks that were put beside the team's name prior to the competition after a difficult build-up have now disappeared, with the only one emerging is over how far the current Socceroos vintage can go.

"It's up to us really," says Luongo. "This Asian Cup could be a massive stepping stone for us as a team with our performances.

"If in every game we get better, as we have been at this Asian Cup, then the tougher games will come with the qualifying

games and playing away. If we can step up there, then we can go anywhere. We can be a real threat at the World Cup."

With the AFC Asian Cup now in their possession, having been won on home soil, the question is whether Postecoglou and his team can move on from here and perform outside Australia in a similar manner.

Successive Australian teams have had problems performing in qualifying matches – especially in the Middle East – and if the Socceroos are to become truly dominant in the way nations like Iran and Japan have in the past, they need to be able to take their form with them on the road.

Making that more difficult will be the emergence of some young and exciting teams from the Middle East.

While Saudi Arabia's AFC Asian Cup woes extended into another tournament and Palestine made history just by qualifying, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman and Gulf Cup winners Qatar showed themselves to be well short of the mark.

The United Arab Emirates and Iraq, however, highlighted their promise with runs to the semi-finals.

Neither side's progress was much of a



surprise; for the UAE – led by hugely gifted playmaker Omar Abdulrahman – it was another step forward for a team that has grown together over the last seven or eight years, and coach Mahdi Ali and his side will now be eyeing a place in Russia in 2018 with relish.

Iraq, meanwhile, have undergone a changing of the guard similar to that undertaken by the Australians.

A new, vibrant team featuring many of the players that impressed at the FIFA U-20 World Cup in 2013 and mentored by Younus Mahmood underlined once again the huge amount of talent residing in the war-ravaged nation.

China, too, showed that, with a steady, sensible coach they can make a mark.

Thanks to the commonsense approach taken by Alain Perrin, who has worked hard to build a new team, China progressed to the quarter-finals for the first time since 2004. With time and additional patience, they could finally be stirring from a decade-long slumber.

Korea Republic, meanwhile, more than made up for their showing at the FIFA World Cup finals in Brazil, which led to the departure of the legendary Hong Myung-bo from his position as head coach.

Uli Stielike, Hong's replacement, has done a lot of positive work in a short period of time, although the country's inability to produce a striker capable of matching the talents of Cha Bum-kun, Choi Soon-ho, Hwang Sun-hong, Choi Yong-soo or Lee Dong-gook is a puzzle which the German must solve.

Lee Jeong-hyeop was plucked from the obscurity of Korea's second division – where he plays for the army team Sangju Sangmu – and although he scored twice in the tournament, the 23-year-old looked raw and

inexperienced.

Son Heung-min, however, dazzled in the latter stages of the tournament – scoring twice in the quarter-final win over Uzbekistan – after overcoming the illness that lessened his involvement in the group stages.

"The problem in Korea is what they do in these schools and universities is they teach the young boys to win," said Stielike after the final. "But we have to teach them to play football. This is the difference."



And then there was Japan. The defending champions rarely looked as if they moved beyond second gear in a tournament where Javier Aguirre consistently stuck with the same players, much as Alberto Zaccheroni did in the final 12 months of his reign.

It should not be surprising, then, that the outcome was similar and the loss to the UAE on penalties in the quarter-finals bore such a close resemblance to Japan's draw with Greece in Brazil that it should be enough in itself to lead to wholesale changes ahead of qualifying for the FIFA World Cup under new coach Vahid Halilhodzic

Just as the outcome of the AFC Asian



Cup was almost impossible to predict going into the tournament – any one of six or seven nations had genuine hopes of winning the title – so the battle for the places in Russia will be difficult to gauge.

Australia, Japan, Korea Republic, the UAE and Iraq will all be hopeful, as will Iran, who were unfortunate to lose out to the Iraqis on penalties in the game of the tournament in Canberra in the quarter-finals.

Should Iran continue their momentum and Javad Nekounam hold on for another couple of years, it would be foolish to write them off.

The new Asian champions, though, will go in as favourites to book a ticket for Russia after a tournament they not only won, but at which the nation embraced not only football but the country's status as a member of the Asian Football Confederation.

Australian society in general has been slow to accept the sport's place within the continent, but crowds attending the tournament far exceeded pre-event estimates. More than 650,000 spectators turned up at the 32 games – an average of more than

20,000 per match – a testimony to the hard work and dedication of the local organising committee.

Media coverage, too, was beyond expectations in a country where football has traditionally been a minority sport behind the likes of cricket, Australian rules and both rugby union and rugby league.

Thanks to the country's hosting of the AFC Asian Cup, football could, finally, be establishing itself in Australia's sporting mainstream and, 50 years from now, many will look back on AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 as a pivotal point in the history of football in Asia.



FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

AHMED KHALIL COMES FROM A FOOTBALLING FRATERNITY AS ONE OF SIX BROTHERS, AND AFTER STARRING FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AT THE AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015, THE AL AHLI STRIKER IS NOT ONLY THE BEST PLAYER IN HIS FAMILY, BUT IS ONE OF THE BRIGHTEST STARS ON THE CONTINENT.

By: Andrew Mullen Photos: World Sport Group/Asian Football Confederation





Choosing footballer as your profession brings with it a weight of expectation and pressure. And for Ahmed Khalil, these pressures were further increased at a young age as the then 17-year-old striker was named the 2008 AFC Young Player of the Year after top scoring at that year's AFC U-19 Championship for the United Arab Emirates, where he was also named the tournament's MVP.

And for just over six years Khalil had been trying to live up to those expectations with moderate success at the likes of the 2010 AFC U-19 Championship, 2012 Olympic Games and 2013 Gulf Cup for the UAE as well as with club side Al Ahli on the continental stage.

But the striker delivered on the biggest stage on the continent as Khalil scored four goals for Mahdi Ali's side as the UAE claimed third place at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015.

Still aged just 23 at the tournament in Australia, Khalil was also recognised by highly-rated coach Ali who named the striker as the UAE's captain for the crucial third place play-off with Iraq in Newcastle.

"Ahmed has been in the national team the longest, even though there are some players who are older than him," said Ali following the third place play-off.

"He has played a number of games for the national team and has played for the national team since he was 16-years-old, so based on the number of games he has played and he was also first to be selected for the national team compared to the other players, that's why he was selected as the captain of the team."

Khalil duly delivered a brace to double his personal tally for the tournament before then showing maturity beyond his years as the striker stepped aside with a hat-trick on the line to allow fellow striker Ali Mabkhout to net what proved to be the winning penalty as his team-mate claimed the top goal scorer award with five goals in six games.

"I am very proud to be the captain of the team. I have played for the national team for a long time, since I was young, and to be captain of the team gives me more responsibility during the game and gives me more confidence and more motivation to score goals," said Khalil after the UAE had claimed their best-ever finish at the AFC Asian Cup since reaching the final in 1996 following an entertaining 3-2 win over Iraq having exited in the group stage four years

earlier in Qatar.

"In 2011 there was a lot of young players in the team, but now the players have been together for a long time and this helps the team a lot. In Doha, some players gained experience and now there is a big difference between 2011 and 2015. Also, we are working with Mahdi Ali as coach. He has been working with us for many years.

"If another coach joined the team, he wouldn't do as well as Mahdi Ali as he knows everything about the players and it was a huge positive when he joined us. Since I started playing I have always worked with him.

"We now have goals and all the players are focused on these goals and we must work to achieve our next target which is to qualify for the World Cup in 2018. The coach has a lot of experience in all competitions, especially with all the players in the group."

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

Khalil'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," adds Khalil.

"I have now reached a good level, but I must keep working hard and I can't stop as I have loved football since I was a child. I will never stop and will try harder and harder to reach my targets.

"I am only 23 and I have a lot more to give in the future. I have not taken all the chances with Al Ahli, but I am now working hard especially with the national team and I want to keep working hard as I am only 23 years old."

Elder brother Faisal won the Gulf Cup with the UAE in 2007, as well as the UAE 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 father played in the UAE for Al Hamriya in Dubai, but after that he stopped, but my brothers Faoud, Faisal, Fateh and Mohammed also played. Fahed likes

Far Left
2008 AFC Young Player of the Year

Above & Left AFC Asian Cup
Australia 2015

football, but he does not play with a club," says Khalil.

"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. All my brothers have stopped playing and work in business now.

"I am now the only one who is playing. I am the youngest and especially with the national team, I am the best and have achieved the most."

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.

"After that I continued and I was named the best young player of the season. And when I was around 17 or 18 years old we

Bottom Left
Captain against Iraq
in Newcastle

won the league and the cup. That was great for me to win this for the first time, especially the President's Cup which was the fifth time Al Ahli had won it and it was very important for the club."

More, though, was still to come for the teenager with Al Ahli first landing the UAE President's Cup in April 2008 before the striker teamed up with the UAE national team for that year's AFC U-19 Championship having scored a hat-trick against Kuwait during the qualifiers a year earlier.

Khalil continued his goalscoring form at the tournament in Saudi Arabia with the stoppage time winner in the group stage meeting with Korea Republic as the UAE eventually topped the table with a 100% record.

And having helped his side to a slender 1-0 win over the host in the quarter-finals, Khalil's third of the campaign after just four minutes of the semi-final with Australia ensured the UAE advanced to the final after eventually posting a 3-0 win.

Khalil then ensured he returned home laden with trophies with his two goals in the final against Uzbekistan securing a 2-1 win for the UAE under current national team coach Ali, and also sealing the top scorer's accolade.

The 2008 AFC Young Player of the Year



trophy was the next to find its way into his hands before in May 2009, along with brother Faisal, he 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 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.

"The proudest moment of my career was to win the best player in Asia in 2008 and I took the prize from the president of the AFC."

The UAE's victory in Saudi Arabia earned Ali's side an appearances at the 2009 FIFA U-20 World Cup and Khalil scored two goals in five games in Egypt as the Emirates reached the quarter-finals only to be edged out 2-1 after extra-time by Costa Rica.

"The U-20 World Cup was very important for me. We gained a lot of experience and it was very important for all the players," says

Khalil.

"When I scored, I wanted to score more, but I only scored two goals. I was not happy with myself as I didn't feel like I had played as well as I did in 2008. But we gained a lot of experience from playing against different footballing schools.

"The level was not too high, but our team did not have experience playing at the World Cup and the small things made a big difference."

Ali's young side continued to thrive as the UAE claimed a historic silver medal at the 2010 Asian Games after losing 1-0 to Japan in the final with Khalil scoring three goals at the tournament in China.

"We worked hard to go to the final. We lost to Japan, but we achieved a good result. In the final we lost, but the players were not sad because we played well," says Khalil.

"That competition gave all the players a new experience and inspiration to work hard for the future."

Despite that, the UAE failed to progress beyond the group stage at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar with Khalil starting all the games as they lost to Iraq and Iran following an opening goalless draw with DPR Korea.

The 2012 Olympic Games in London,

though, was the next on the radar for the UAE having secured a dramatic qualification with a 3-2 final day win over Uzbekistan in Tashkent thanks to two goals from Khalil and a stoppage time winner from Haboosh Saleh.

And Ali's side drew numerous plaudits on their debut in the tournament as they rounded off their campaign with a 1-1 draw against Senegal having pushed both Uruguay and hosts Great Britain all the way in earlier defeats.

The performances showcased in London, which underlined the huge potential of the young and exciting team assembled under Ali, then delivered the biggest prize to date as the UAE won the 2013 Gulf Cup after beating Iraq 2-1 after extra-time in the final in Bahrain.

The UAE failed to defend their title in the months leading up to the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 after Khalil had earlier helped Al Ahli win the 2013/2014 Arabian Gulf League crown, but that did not reduce expectations or dampen spirits as the Emirates headed into the tournament as genuine title contenders.

And Khalil played his part with two goals in the opening 4-1 win over recently

Top Left Coach Mahdi Ali

Bottom Left 2010 AFC U-19 Championships

Left 2012 Olympic Games Qualifying

Above 2014 AFC Champions League

crowned Gulf Cup champions Qatar.

The UAE then beat Bahrain 2-1, and despite a stoppage time winner from Iran on the final Matchday ruining a perfect start in Australia, Ali's side bounced back in style as Mabkhout's earlier strike eventually earned a 1-1 draw with Japan after extra-time in the quarter-final.

Khalil had earlier been sacrificed before the hour mark as the UAE sought to protect their lead, and while Japan did equalise, Ali's side edged out the defending champions 5-4 on penalties.

Hosts Australia, though, proved one step too far and the eventual champions recorded a relatively comfortable 2-0 win in Newcastle in their semi-final to deny the UAE a return to the continental final.

But Ali's side would end the tournament on a high as a goal in each half from captain Khalil and a 57th minute penalty from Mabkhout earned the UAE their second-best finish at the AFC Asian Cup.

"When a group works together for a long time it gives positive aspects," says Khalil.

"The most important thing is that we have

worked together for a long time and this has helped us achieve all of these successes."

And having secured a third place finish, the UAE are now firmly established amongst the continent's elite who will be chasing four automatic qualification places at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in June.

The UAE received a further boost after they returned home from Australia as coach Ali signed a three-year contract extension in order to guide the side through the qualifying campaign for the tournament in Russia.

"Russia will be the moment for the group to go to the World Cup as so far, this group has achieved nothing," says Khalil.

"We must work hard if we want to go to the World Cup. We don't think about Qatar in 2022, Russia in 2018 is what we are thinking about.

"All the players and the whole group must think about the next step and not too far in the future. When the coach signed with the federation, his goal was to finish in the top four at the Asian Cup and we achieved it. The second goal was to qualify for the World Cup."



Ahmed Khalil

Nationality:

United Arab Emirates

DOB:

08/06/1991

Position:

Striker

Current club:

Al Ahli
(United Arab Emirates)

AIMING HIGH

FOLLOWING A TROPHY-LADEN SEVEN-YEAR STINT WITH MANCHESTER UNITED, PARK JI-SUNG IS ONE OF THE MOST RECOGNISABLE FACES IN ASIAN FOOTBALL. AND NOW KOREA REPUBLIC'S HUMBLE HERO IS HOPING TO USE HIS PROFILE AND EXPERIENCE TO FURTHER ENHANCE THE GAME ACROSS THE CONTINENT.

By: Michael Church Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images

With a UEFA Champions League winner's medal, four English Premier League titles, two Dutch Eredivisie crowns and numerous personal and team accolades, Park Ji-sung stands alone as one of Asia's most successful export to European football.

And yet, for all his immense success in far-flung lands, it is a feat achieved on home

soil that the former Kyoto Purple Sanga, PSV Eindhoven and Manchester United midfielder lauds as his greatest endeavour.

There was no trophy raised high into the sky, but rather a coming of age – for both a nation and a group of players – as Korea Republic not only successfully co-hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup with Japan, but broke new ground for Asian football.

"For me the best moment was the 2002 World Cup, we had great success," says Park almost 13 years after helping Guus Hiddink and his squad advance to the semi-finals of the FIFA World Cup.





"It was my first World Cup and I was always dreaming to play in the World Cup for the national team. It happened, our own country had it and the fans, the results were unbelievable really.

"The whole country changed. They were all crazy. I couldn't believe that happened and football has so much power for the people. The reaction and the atmosphere was fantastic."

Millions thronged the streets, a red tide sweeping the entire nation in a euphoric wave for five weeks that summer that culminated in the Koreans seeing off the likes of Portugal, Poland, Italy and Spain before slipping in the semi-finals to eventual champions Germany.

Korea's passion for the FIFA World Cup and the Taeguk Warriors was palpable; but the 2002 tournament held a significance beyond the end of the global jamboree, which resonated long after the advertising hoardings were cleared, the street parties ended and life settled back into its regular grind.

Korea's run to the last four of the FIFA World Cup changed the lives of country's footballers – especially the younger members of the squad – forever, and none more than Park.

Deemed too small by clubs in his native

Korea to be deserving of a professional contract, Park had been picked up by Kyoto and, playing under German coach Gert Engels, the youngster helped guide the club to Japan's top flight.

By the end of 2002, Park was ready to move on from the J.League. A successful FIFA World Cup had alerted European clubs and, after winning the Emperor's Cup in his farewell game for Kyoto, he was joining up with Hiddink, now coach of Dutch giants PSV.

More success followed, with a pair of Dutch league titles and an impressive run in the UEFA Champions League and, before long, Sir Alex Ferguson and United came calling, taking Park to Old Trafford and turning him into a global superstar overnight.

"It was a great time," he says of his stay with the English club, who he represented 205 times, scoring 27 goals. "I had seven years there and actually when I first joined Manchester United I couldn't believe I could stay there seven years, but I did it.

"In seven years I had so many great times. I can train with world-class football players, and I can play against world-class players in the Champions League and the Premier League as well.

"It was an unbelievable experience for

me. I never thought I could join such a great football club. It happened. It was a really fantastic time."

Park was not the only Korean player spending time in Europe; Lee Young-pyo had also joined PSV, while Kim Nam-il, Lee Chun-soo, Cha Du-ri and Song Chung-gug were among those who had also travelled west.

It sparked a change in perspective within Korean football; where previously qualification for the FIFA World Cup was all that mattered, the AFC Asian Cup – a trophy Korea has not won since 1960 – reemerged as a primary goal.

"After the 2002 World Cup many players went to Europe and played and they know how important the European tournament is there," says Park. "We realised, a few players, how the Asian Cup is important for Asian teams.

"After that, more players were talking about how this was an important tournament, and also in the press they said: 'We haven't won in so many years and how can we say we are one of the best teams in Asia?'"

"That's why we changed our mind and we have focused on the Asian Cup. It's not easy to win the tournament; many Asian teams are good: Japan, Saudi Arabia,

Australia, Iran. Now they know and they push hard, but we still need luck and we need to prepare well. But there's a different mentality and attitude and we can really fight to win the tournament."

Park featured prominently for Korea in Qatar at the AFC Asian Cup 2011 but, after an epic semi-final against Japan, Cho Kwang-rae's team were eliminated, and with that went Park's last chance for continental glory.

"I don't want to remember that game, because we lost it and I really, really wanted to win the tournament because I knew it was my last tournament," he says of the shootout defeat against his country's great rivals, a game which brought up a century of caps for Park.

"I really tried my best to win that game, but in the semi-final against Japan we lost by penalties. We didn't have enough luck to get through the semi-finals, and it was very disappointing for me and for the country as well.

"It was a great honour to get 100 caps for our country, but the Asian Cup, for me, is quite a disappointing tournament and I have bad memories, because I really wanted to win that tournament.

"It was a very good team, and we really enjoyed to play and our performance was

Far Left & Bottom Left
2011 AFC Asian Cup in Qatar

Above
Playing for
Manchester United

Top Left
2002 FIFA World Cup

good. It was good to watch that team play. I really enjoyed playing with the young players as well, and it's been good to watch them grow up during the tournament.

"But if you want to win the tournament you need luck, a little bit. Even if you have a good quality team, you can't reach the title."

That loss saw the curtain come down on Park's international career and, three-and-a-half years later, he hung his boots up for good having left United in 2012 to join Queens Park Rangers for a year before a final season with PSV.

United were quick to anoint Park as an official ambassador, while the 34-year-old is seeking ways he can use his vast knowledge of the top-end of the sport to benefit his home continent in the future.

And to do that, he believes there is a need to put new infrastructure in place to take advantage of the strengths of the region and mitigate against the weaknesses.

"I want to share my experience with all of Asia," he says. "I'm from South Korea, so maybe I'll do more in South Korea. But we still have Asian players who have the talent

to compare with European players, so we can get to that level and compare ourselves to that level.

"We have so much potential, but we couldn't do it because we don't have proper systems or education or the proper circumstances. I know the systems between Asia and Europe are different so we need to develop as quickly as we can, but as soon as we do then we can really be similar to Europe.

"It's definitely a long-term project because the weather is different, everything is different. But we need to adapt what we can use from Europe and adapt it for Asia.

"We can't use everything from Europe because the circumstances are totally different. But we have to think about that, and I need to take what is good from Europe and deal with everything in Asia.

"In China, there's a big market. China can be one of the best leagues in the world, because their potential is quite high. There are some good players going to China to play and that could be a great chance to develop Asian football.

"If they go to China, people can see how they play and train with them and develop themselves. They're small things, but step-by-step we can close the gap on European football."

PUSHING BOUNDARIES

REZA GHOOCHANNEJHAD IS ONE OF A GROWING NUMBER OF OVERSEAS-RAISED PLAYERS TO HAVE STARRED FOR IRAN, WITH HIS GOALS HELPING TEAM MELLI QUALIFY FOR THE 2014 FIFA WORLD CUP FINALS IN BRAZIL LAST SUMMER. AS THE 27-YEAR-OLD STRESSES, HE JUST WANTS TO MAKE THE FANS HAPPY.

By: Michael Church Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images

Cricket, it is fair to assume, does not have a huge following in either the Netherlands or Iran, the two countries Reza Ghoochannejhad calls home.

So it's little wonder he still screws his face up in bewilderment when he explains why, during his time at English Championship side Charlton Athletic, his team-mates knew him simply as 'Graham'. "It has something to do with someone who played cricket," says the man

commonly known by the more glamorous nickname 'Gucci'. "I think it was an old player."

Former England cricket captain Graham Gooch was the inspiration for the Charlton players seeking an easier option to Ghoochannejhad's lengthy family name, a sporting reference point largely lost on a player who grew up in the Netherlands after moving from Iran at the age of eight.

But having an ability to adapt to the nuances and idiosyncrasies of different nations is something the Team Melli striker has had to develop in a life that has taken him from the Middle East to Europe and





Reza Ghoochannejhad

Nationality:
Iran

DOB:
20/09/1987

Position:
Forward

Current club:
Al Wakra (Qatar)

Previous clubs:
Heerenveen,
Go Ahead Eagles, Cambuur
(all the Netherlands)
Sint-Truiden, Standard Liege
(both Belgium)
Charlton Athletic (England)
Kuwait SC (Kuwait)

back.

Despite being just 27 years old, Ghoochannejhad has already played in the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Kuwait and Qatar, where he recently joined Al Wakra club on loan from Charlton.

"We moved out when I was young and I grew up in Holland, so I missed out on a lot of things," he says of his formative years. "But my parents gave me a lot of things, too."

"It's very important to keep your culture, know where you are from and where you are born. And also, what is very interesting for me was because I was eager to learn and know things about my past so I've always tried to get as much information as I could."

"Me and my brother, we never forgot where we came from. We speak the language, we can read, we can write, we have a lot of contact with our family and our relatives in Iran. We always had that bond with Iran and it's something natural."

"You have some situations when kids go to Europe and they forget where they come from, but in our family it wasn't like that. I always got the cultural things from my past and I was very interested in Iran, it was the place where I was born and the

place where I was most connected with. I've always got the information on a football basis."

The heroes of Iran's qualification for the 1998 FIFA World Cup finals in France were the touch points for the young Ghoochannejhad, who was thrilled by the exploits of Khodadad Azizi, Ali Daei and Karim Bagheri as they took the Iranians back towards the summit of Asian football.

That was a golden generation for Iranian football, but also an inspirational one, especially for expatriate youngsters such as Ghoochannejhad and fellow legionnaire Ashkan Dejagah, growing up in Europe but keeping a close eye on the exploits of their countrymen.

Successive Iranian teams had struggled to reach similar heights in the intervening years, leading to successive coaches looking towards the overseas community for possible recruits.

Ferydoon Zandi, who had represented Germany at youth level, was one of the first in the mid-2000s, but it was with the arrival of former Real Madrid and Portugal coach Carlos Queiroz in 2011 that the numbers increased.

Ghoochannejhad had been selected to play for the Netherlands at youth level

while also coming through the ranks at Heerenveen – at the same time as studying for a law degree – before joining Go Ahead Eagles. Stints at Cambuur and Sint-Truiden in Belgium followed before he received the call from Queiroz.

"Before I came to Iran I expected it to be more difficult," he says of his first foray into the Team Melli environment. "When I arrived in Iran, it was amazing. I clicked with all of the lads on the pitch, outside the pitch, everyone was amazing with me."

"Of course, it's different because you're coming from Europe and you have to adjust and see how things are going. But I picked it up very quickly and the guys were great and comfortable with me. I'm playing now nearly three years with the national team and it's been going well so far."

"In the beginning, I don't want to say I was nervous, but I was curious. What can I expect, with the football, how are the lads? But it was all positive and until today I'm glad to be here. It's an amazing feeling to play for your country."

While the reaction within the squad was receptive, Iran's famously fanatical supporters were not shy about airing their reservations towards players few knew much about.

Far Top Left Playing for Charlton Athletic

Far Bottom Left & Bottom Left AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015

Top Left 2014 FIFA World Cup Qualifying

Above AFC Cup 2014 with Kuwait SC

"It wasn't that positive in the beginning, to be honest," he says. "Coach Queiroz helped us a lot, especially the guys from overseas because they wanted to bring in more experience into the squad, especially from outside."

"He brought in me and Askhan, we were among the first and then he brought in other lads. He wanted more experience. I don't want to say people were negative but everybody was asking: these lads coming from Europe, are they going to add something to the squad?"

"There were some questions about us at first, but I'm glad that has been solved right now and everybody's positive especially for the guys from overseas who came to help Team Melli. Everybody's positive and we're very glad that has happened. But it wasn't like this in the beginning."

With expatriate Persian populations across the globe – overseas Iranian communities are present all over Europe, as well as in the United States and Australia – the likelihood is the number of overseas-born players featuring for Team Melli will only increase in

the future. Ghoochannejhad is confident the performances of players such as himself have changed the mood within the Iranian game and that the ultimate goal remains giving the fans a team of which they can be proud.

"It was something new, bringing overseas players into the national team," he says. "People were asking questions: who are these lads, we've never heard of them, we haven't seen them play, are they any good? So, it was a normal reaction to be honest."

"But I'm glad we can show that we can help Team Melli and we've been doing well so far. Most of the people are happy right now but it's a process. It will never end. "We're here right now and the people are very happy because it's not only about us, it's about Team Melli. We want to get good results to make the people happy."

"The fans are fantastic and when you're on the pitch they give you so much energy, they give you a real boost and you just want to return the favour. We hope we won't disappoint them."





A NATION IN TRANSITION

OFTEN APPLIED TO THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE, THE WORD 'TRANSITIONAL' UNDOUBTEDLY APPLIES TO THE CURRENT STATE OF FOOTBALL IN MYANMAR. AND WITH THEIR JUNIORS PREPARING FOR THE FIFA U-20 WORLD CUP, THE NATION THAT WAS ONCE DOMINANT IN ASIAN FOOTBALL, ARE READY TO RETURN FROM THE WILDERNESS.

By: Matt Roebuck Photos: World Sport Group





Below
MFF President Zaw Zaw



Left & Above
2014 AFC U-19
Championship

Below
Gerd Ziese



Above
Raddy Avramovic

Left 2014 AFC
U-19 Championship

Between 1965 and 1973, the 'White Angels' enjoyed what has gone down in the annals of Myanmar's sporting history as their 'Golden Age'. Then known as Burma, the team won every football trophy going in Southeast Asia; appeared at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich; won gold at the Asian Games in 1966 and 1970; and made their one and only appearance at the 1968 AFC Asian Cup, where they finished runners-up to hosts Iran.

Myanmar won the AFC Youth Championship – the tournament that evolved into the AFC U-19 Championship – seven times between 1961 and 1970.

And it was their semi-final appearance as hosts of that tournament in October that booked Myanmar a ticket to New Zealand for what will be their debut in a FIFA World Cup at any age group for the U-20 tournament which begins on May 30.

Ba Pu was the left winger in the 4-2-4 formations of 1964-70 and arguably Myanmar's

1947

Myanmar Football Federation founded

second most celebrated footballer after striker and captain, Suk Bahadur.

And speaking before he passed away in advance of October's AFC U-19 Championship,

Ba Pu was of no doubt where Myanmar should be looking.

"Myanmar lost its track for a long time, it will take time to rebuild and we should focus on the youth," he said.

After 1975, as the country became more isolated from the international community, with Myanmar playing less international games in the 32 year period up until 2008 than they did in the 11 years of glory days from 1965-75.

And that lack of competitive international football was one of the factors that stunted their development.

"There must be continuity across age selections," says current Myanmar national

1968

Myanmar made their only AFC Asian Cup appearance

team coach Raddy Avramovic

"By continuity I mean regular training and regular competition at each age group. If a team are knocked out of an age group competition early, it used to mean they might not come together again until they have moved up an age. Instead, they need to continue to come together for regular training and regular competition; this is the best test and the best way to create a pathway to better quality football."

And it is that continuity that allowed Myanmar to qualify for the FIFA U-20 World



Cup after reaching the semi-finals of the AFC U-19 Championship last year under German coach Gerd Ziese.

"People ask why we are so strong and it is because we spend every day together, we train every day together like a club team – like a family – after two years, we are like family," says Ziese, who saw his side eventually lose a thrilling semi-final 3-2 after extra-time to eventual champions Qatar at a sold-out Thuwunna Youth Training Centre Stadium in Yangon.

Ziese and Serbian former Singapore coach Avramovic represent a return to the openness of the Myanmar Football Federation (MFF) to gaining valuable insight and experience from beyond their borders.

During the golden age, U Sein Hlaing was coach of the youth and senior sides from 1962-1979 and he had assistance from a number of foreign coaches including goalkeeper Bert

3-2

Myanmar lost to Qatar in the semi-finals of the 2014 AFC U-19 Championship

Trautmann, who helped lead the team during 1972-74 as part of a development programme ran by the German Football Association.

Trautmann, though, was the last foreign coach to work with the MFF until the Serbian Ratimir Djukovic arrived in 1996.

"Myanmar football became insular, we were only playing against each other and players from other countries began to move between nations," said former central midfielder Aye Maung Gyi, who played for Myanmar between 1966-74.

"In our time we were much better than Thailand, but they learnt how to develop their football."

While regional rivals Thailand continue to set the benchmark in Southeast Asia after Thai Farmers Bank FC won back-to-back Asian Club Champions in the mid-1990s and with Thai Premier League clubs regular participants in the AFC Champions League

since its inauguration in 2002, Myanmar's club representatives are also beginning to see success on the continent since the newly formed professional league began in 2009.

"We want all our clubs to receive their FIFA club license," says MFF President Zaw Zaw.

"With more academies we can train more youth. We want to see clubs affiliate with international clubs, for technical assistance, friendly matches and more, this way we can learn and improve."

Yadanarbon's success at the 2010 AFC President's Cup was followed by Myanmar National League sides appearing in the AFC Cup for the first time two years later after both



Yangon United and Nay Pyi Taw advanced to the Round of 16 last year, after the former had become the first Myanmar club to do so at the 2013 edition.

“To put the quality of Myanmar’s football on a higher level this cannot be done without improvement in the club scene – they are the base of any national selection,” says Avramovic, who led Singapore to the ASEAN Football Federation Championship title in 2004, 2007 and 2012.

“There is a big push to improve clubs and in the long term I’m sure we will see the benefits for all the nation’s sides not just the senior national squad.”

Myanmar’s credentials, though, will be sternly tested at the FIFA U-20 World Cup with Ziese’s side drawn in Group A alongside hosts New Zealand, Ukraine and the USA.

“In the league the training is very different, it takes time for the players to adapt to the international scene and our methods, though this depends on the ability of the coaches,” says Ziese.

“We need good educated coaches with the highest licences throughout the system; this will be a good investment – if they work with the clubs, academies and further down the line even the schools.”

The MFF have begun to lay the foundations to ensure their success at the AFC U-19 Championship is not just an isolated incident, with significant investment made to establish academies in Mandalay and Patheingyi as well

as the development of modern facilities in Yangon.

“We need to improve the process of talent identification, to select a wider profile of players rather than just quick players,” says Avramovic.

“We also need to develop the mental side

U-20

Myanmar will make their debut at the FIFA U-20 World Cup in 2015

of the game and that particularly includes an understanding of the tactical elements of the game.”

At last year’s ASEAN Football Federation Championship, Myanmar finished at the bottom of their group after defeats by Singapore and Thailand followed an opening goalless draw with Malaysia.

“The current players are good, but they do not have the unity and the will,” added Aye Maung Gyi, who is now the chief executive officer of Myanmar National League side Zwegabin United. “Back then we did not earn much, but there was a desire to win.

“This is a team game, we had players that played well together as one, we had a strong understanding of each other and a spirit. Now it is not the same, when I say this was how we once played, the modern players say, this is the old system, I say some things may change but this should be the same. They should want to win, for our game, for the country.”

Myanmar’s football development is a work in progress with the MFF hoping to see football played in every school, every province, every region, while plans are in place to work with regional federations to increase competition and pitches as well as introduce educated coaches from the grassroots to the Myanmar National League.

But success breeds success, and as Myanmar focuses on one day returning to the upper echelons of Asian football, the FIFA U-20 World Cup is first on the agenda.

“This team can fight and bite. I don’t go only to participate. I want to survive the group,” says Ziese.

“Get them mentally fit, and then many things are possible. 60% of this team will be usable for the national team after this tournament.”

And with the joint qualifiers for the 2019 AFC Asian Cup and 2018 FIFA World Cup beginning in June, some of the players who travel to New Zealand could get that chance sooner rather than later.

“I always think and say the national team should play the best players – whatever their age,” says Avramovic.

“Myanmar can be a top side in Asia once again. It won’t be done overnight, there will be ups and downs, but you must have the will to work forwards and not be discouraged, to keep focused and achieve your goals.

“Eight competitive games and preparative friendly games; that is the kind of continuity of competition we need.”



Left & Above
2014 AFC U-19 Championship

Right & Below
2014 AFF Suzuki Cup



Q&A



Myanmar Football Federation President Zaw Zaw

How has the development of academies affected the game in Myanmar?

Without a good academy system, you can have no success in any sport. The academy system is not just about football though, it is about health, education and mental development. It also instills a love of the game and the benefits of the academy can be seen in our players who will feature in the U-20 World Cup. We must target a stronger player pathway across the country.

How do you overcome a lack of resources and infrastructure?

We need infrastructure, for without that infrastructure we cannot host international events. We hosted the AFC U-19 Championship and we hope to host more events in the near future because they can provide the most many benefits, not just in football but for the others such as the tourism sector. We wish to develop competitions in the provinces that will help develop the economy by providing an income for people. We will also focus on engaging with the education sector to get more children involved in organised football.

What is the next step for football in Myanmar?

We want football in every school, every province. We want regional tournaments played throughout the country from the grassroots to the Myanmar National League. We are working with our regional federations to see more competitions, more pitches, and more qualified coaches. On the grassroots level we also want to continue and improve our corporate social responsibility programmes such as Football4Health. It is very important that we became the first Asian country to adopt this and work on our HIV/AIDS awareness programme, Protect the Goal.

THE DIRECTOR

NORIO SASAKI AND THE JAPAN WOMEN'S TEAM WON A HISTORIC FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP IN 2011 IN THE AFTERMATH OF ONE OF THE NATION'S WORST-EVER NATURAL DISASTERS, AND NOW THE COACH IS LOOKING TO MASTERMIND A SUCCESSFUL DEFENCE AT THE 2015 EDITION IN CANADA.

By: Daniel Pordes Photos: World Sport Group/The Asian Football Confederation

The story of the Japan women's team at the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup reads like a plot written in Hollywood. A national tragedy in the March 11 earthquake and tsunami preceded the tournament by four months, but for three weeks that summer, the Nadeshiko helped bring hope back to the land of the Rising Sun.

At the culmination of the 32-match tournament, in true sports movie fashion, underdogs Japan faced the number one seeded United States of America in Frankfurt in front of near 50,000 spectators and, despite twice going behind, would claw their way back each time before going on to triumph in a penalty shootout to scenes of unprecedented joy back home.

And at the helm of the historic milestone for Asian football, which represented the first senior male or female side from the continent to lift a world title, was coach Norio Sasaki.

"The matches of the Nadeshiko always played with people's emotions, making them nervous or excited. We never won two or three nil without any concerns, there was – and is always – some drama and excitement about it," says Sasaki, whose own slivers of grey amidst his black hair bear a visible testament to his words.

"That's why I call myself Steven Spielberg, because I direct all this drama and story of the team."

Sasaki's own backstory prior to his involvement in women's football is relatively undistinguished. A career as a professional player for NTT Kanto Soccer Club ended with retirement aged 33 and a





move into various coaching roles at the same club which would become Omiya Ardija.

The Yamagata-native's star began to rise, though, when he took on the role of assistant to Koji Ohasi, coach of the Japan women's national team, as well as the position of coach of its U-20 team, in 2006.

Under Ohasi and Sasaki, Japan finished fourth at the 2006 AFC Women's Asian Cup before Sasaki took the U-19 team to the final of the 2007 AFC U-19 Women's Championship.

And Sasaki's continued success with the development side saw him take over the helm of the senior team a year later.

The Nadeshiko had previously finished as runners-up on four occasions at the AFC Women's Asian Cup, as well as reaching the quarter-finals at both the 1995 FIFA Women's World Cup and 2004 Olympic Games, and were routinely on the cusp of a top 10 ranking.

"When I first took over as national team coach, I felt the team had a high potential," recalls Sasaki.

"Looking at the team, they had skills and strong teamwork, and I felt we could take advantage of this aspect and add my tactics to take them to the next level.

"The strategy was to be able to play

defence and offence at the same time. To press the ball high, win it, and keep possession. And step-by-step the players began to put into practice on the field what I had imagined."

One of Sasaki's first tests as coach was the 2008 EAFF Women's East Asian Cup in Chongqing, China and the Nadeshiko passed with it flying colours after winning the tournament with a 100% record ahead of DPR Korea, China and Korea Republic.

And Sasaki and his charges were back in China for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing where a fourth place finish after losing out on the bronze medal to Germany, represented a best ever result.

A third trip to China the following year, this time with the U-19 team, saw Sasaki successfully guide the development side to a continental title at the AFC U-19 Women's Championship, and in 2010 Japan added the Asian Games title, whilst also defending their EAFF crown.

The main focus for Sasaki that year, though, was on the 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup, with not only a maiden title, but also FIFA World Cup qualification on the line.

And although the Nadeshiko came up short on the first target, losing to eventual winners Australia in the semi-finals, their third place

finish was enough to secure them a spot in Germany for the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup.

"The tournaments we played in the build up to the World Cup were very important as they helped to give confidence and momentum to the team," says Sasaki.

"Being in the best four at the Beijing Olympics meant we then started to get invitations for international matches against the United States and Germany, which was a big thing for us. That's how we could improve our game further and we got a lot of lessons from playing against the United States, in particular."

Football, though, was far from many people's minds on Friday 11 March 2011 when the most powerful earthquake ever recorded to have hit Japan rocked the nation. Near to 16,000 people lost their lives as extensive and severe structural damage shook north-eastern Japan and the resulting tsunami also caused nuclear accidents in the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant complex that necessitated the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents.

It was a disaster on such a scale that then Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan labelled it "the toughest and most difficult crisis for Japan in the last 65 years".

Left 2010 AFC Women's Asian Cup

Above 2011 AFC Coach of the Year

Right 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup

And it was with this backdrop of such a catastrophe which Sasaki and his players travelled to Germany for the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup in June.

"We knew people back home were having a tough time and trying to cope with this difficult situation. So we were hoping we could perform well in Germany to give them hope," says Sasaki, whose side were drawn in a group with England, New Zealand and Mexico.

And the tournament began well for the Nadeshiko with a 2-1 opening victory against New Zealand with Yuki Ogimi and Aya Miyama scoring the goals. A comprehensive 4-0 victory against Mexico with a Homare Sawa hat-trick followed that seemed to put Japan in control of the group, but a 2-0 defeat by England meant Sasaki's side would finish second and up against it in the quarter-final, with reigning champions and hosts Germany their opponent.

"The team had improved a lot from the first game to the second game, although our defeat against England had seen our confidence go down massively. As we had such a short time to prepare for the game against the Germans, the most important thing was to erase the

memory of that defeat and change the mood of the team," recalls Sasaki.

"So I showed the players videos of news clips from back home of people who had lost their homes in the earthquake, who had to stay in gymnasiums instead. Despite their loss, they were still trying to restore and clean up their homes. And videos of the volunteers who were helping people to restore the towns and houses.

"By thinking about how we could work together like those volunteers, like the people back home, to help give courage to our countrymen with our performances, we gave power to the team. This motivation from the videos helped the players become united. It let the players know that it would be a joyful thing to play Germany in such a big game and I believe this change in mindset helped us get victory."

In front of a capacity crowd in Wolfsburg, Sasaki's side duly pulled off the shock of the tournament as they beat the hosts with substitute Karina Maruyama scoring with 12 minutes of extra-time remaining to secure a 1-0 victory.

The stunning result and boost in morale meant not even Sweden forward Josefine Qvist's 10th minute opener in the semi-final that followed could hold back the Nadeshiko, who scored three times through Nahomi Kawasumi's brace and Sawa's fourth of the tournament to seal a 3-1 win.

But with two-time champions the United States defeating Brazil in the other semi-final, Japan were set to face a side they had failed to beat in 25 previous matches, drawing three and losing the rest.

"There was no real pressure for me. I always think that when it gets to matchday as a coach there is not a lot I can do during the game, so I don't think I have a lot of pressure," says Sasaki.

"I always think that preparing for the match is my job, but during the game, it's the players who need to play on the field. I can't play for them.

"But I was confident that now we are in a final, we are already in the situation that the Japanese people can praise us because we made it to there. I just hoped that the players could enjoy it."

After dominating the first half, the United States took the lead after 69 minutes through Alex Morgan before Miyama equalised from close range with nine minutes of normal time



remaining. Extra-time saw Abby Wambach put the Americans ahead again, but with three minutes of the additional 30 left, Sawa scored her tournament-leading fifth from a corner to take the game to penalties.

"The penalty takers were very nervous and they were feeling a lot of responsibility. So I went to have a conversation with the players, it was nothing special, but the team's mood made us laugh," says Sasaki, who is captured in footage from the final smiling as he talks to his players before the spot-kicks.

"In the semi-finals the United States had won in a penalty shoot-out against Brazil and we had all the details from that." Shannon Boxx, Carli Lloyd and Tobin Heath all stepped up and failed to convert for the Americans, with goalkeeper Ayumi Kaihori saving two, and although Yuki Ogimi also saw her penalty saved by Hope Solo, Miyama, Mizuho Sakaguchi and Saki Kumagai all scored to give Japan a stunning victory.

"All the penalty takers for the US were the same as against Brazil and they went the same way again. If they'd changed their tactics maybe we wouldn't have won," recalls Sasaki.

"At the time, I maybe didn't realise what a big achievement it was. I went to the US bench to shake hands, then to do the same

Left 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup

Above 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup

with the referees, and waved to my wife and daughter in the stadium.

"But it wasn't until we got back to Japan that I realised how big what we achieved in Germany was, as all the people praised us in many ways. If I'd realised how a big deal this was, I wouldn't have been smiling before the penalty shootout!"

The entire team were granted the People's Honour Award for their achievement, only the 19th time the accolade had been bestowed since 1977, with Miyama named 2011 AFC Women's Player of the Year for the second time and Sasaki named the 2011 AFC Coach of the Year as well as FIFA World Coach of the Year for Women's Football.

Since those heady days in Germany, the Nadeshiko have continued to thrive with a silver medal at the 2012 Olympic Games, the first for a Japanese women's football team, and in Vietnam at the 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup, Japan ended their 37-year wait for a maiden women's continental championship after defeating defending champions Australia.

"Winning the AFC Women's Asian Cup was one of my biggest projects, but the AFC

Asian Cup was not just a tournament in its own right, and a qualifier for the World Cup, but also a preparation for the World Cup. We were figuring out about the members of the squad and the combination of each player and also how to play tactically," says Sasaki.

"I wasn't totally satisfied by the performance of the players, for example, in some of the games we should have got better results, and the team still had a lot of work to do to improve before the World Cup."

After the AFC Women's Asian Cup, though, Japan finished a disappointing ninth at the Algarve Cup in March ahead of the side's trip to Canada for the FIFA Women's World Cup in June where they are drawn in Group C with Switzerland, Cameroon and Ecuador.

AFC Women's Asian Cup runners-up Australia, semi-finalists China and Korea Republic along with debutants Thailand, who defeated hosts Vietnam in the fifth place play-off, will also make the trip to Canada.

"As the defending champions, the tournament will be a new challenge for us. There are more teams in the tournament and it will be tougher than before," says Sasaki.

"All the teams will come to beat us and we need to use that mentality to make us stronger. I want to prepare my players with the pride of champions."

THE FAMILY MAN

AS A TEENAGER, YASER KASIM TURNED DOWN A PROFESSIONAL CONTRACT FROM ONE OF ENGLAND'S TOP SIDES, BUT THE MIDFIELDER HAS NOT LOOKED BACK AND IS OUT TO HELP IRAQ BUILD ON THEIR SEMI-FINAL APPEARANCE AT THE AFC ASIAN CUP AUSTRALIA 2015.

By: Andrew Mullen Photos: World Sport Group/Getty Images

His family took him to England, albeit via Jordan, and it was a familial feeling which led Iraq midfielder Yaser Kasim to make the initially surprising decision to turn down a professional contract with a Premier League side and eventually settle with a team in the third tier of the country's footballing setup. "I wanted a more family connection and the owner to be involved and know the

players and that the youth team system was looking after the players," says Kasim, who turns 24 in May. "I didn't think that was the case, but the more you move around, the more you know football is becoming a business and it is tough to hold onto that family culture, so when there is a club that looks after you very well, as a player, you want to give back and that is what I really want." Having been born in Iraq in 1991 a matter of months after the end of the Gulf War, Kasim's passion for the game had begun at a





young age on the streets of Baghdad.

"I lived in Iraq until I was six years old. I don't know how young I was when I started to play, but before I left we used to play a lot of football on the streets," says Kasim.

"It is a very sunny and hot climate so we used to play on the streets and there were a lot of people playing 20 a-side sometimes on the tarmac and there were a few rolled ankles and a few chipped toe nails, but I loved it and we used to be outside all day."

Kasim eventually left Iraq with his father unable to support the family due to a decline in his business as a used car parts salesman, and after spending a year in Jordan where he experienced his first taste of school, the family arrived in England.

"I started to play at the school, but it was the same passion, although we had shoes as we had to wear a uniform," says Kasim of his time in Jordan. "But there would still be a load of kids running around and the ball would not be in the best condition."

The family, with an aunt and uncle nearby to help, spent the first six months of their time in England in a hotel before eventually settling in a house in west London, near the district which top-flight sides Chelsea and Fulham call their home.

"At the time you don't have many friends, you have left all your friends at home, you can't go out much as it is a different life in

England and the weather is different so you can't go outside, so I just got the ball and started to play by myself," says Kasim.

"And when we moved to North West London, after getting a house sorted, I started playing after school every day and then I started to go to football clubs and a coach at one of my sports centres took me to Fulham."

Kasim's spell with Fulham lasted only a matter of months as the 15-year-old left Craven Cottage only to switch to North London and Tottenham Hotspur.

He was eventually offered a professional contract after leaving school, but in 2010 Kasim turned down the deal having been part of the same youth setup as the likes of current England international Andros Townsend and established Premier League duo Danny Rose and Steven Caulker.

"I turned 18 and they offered me professional terms, but I saw the way it was going as they were bringing in a lot of players and how they were taking care of the players," says Kasim.

"There was a lot of competition; I don't mind competition as the more the competition, when growing up especially, the better it is, but they were bringing in players without plans on how to look after them and I felt they weren't doing things right by the players so I saw that my opportunities would

be limited and I thought this was not for me."

Kasim joined third-tier side Brighton & Hove Albion under Uruguayan Gus Poyet in August 2010 with the side pushing for promotion.

He also spent time on loan with non-league duo Luton Town and Macclesfield Town before being released by Brighton in May 2013, although he did not have to wait long until finding a new and finally permanent home as Kasim joined Swindon Town ahead of the 2013/14 season.

"I got to Brighton, but the situation was a little bit different. Poyet was there, they were going for promotion, but also they took me to the office and talked to me a lot. The assistant manager, Luke Williams, is now at Swindon and he is one of the best coaches I have worked with. This guy is at another level and I can always go to him," says Kasim.

"I feel like I have an influence at Swindon and we are doing well and we can build something. If we keep that vibe of helping each other out we can do really well. They don't have the millions that other teams do when they buy players in and you lose a bit of the reality.

"I don't want to be pampered, but I don't want to be looked at like an asset, I want

to be looked at like a human being and I don't think Tottenham would do that, so that's why I moved on."

But while his time at Brighton did not result in a run in the first team, with Kasim only making two appearances in three years with the Seagulls while also playing 16 times on loan at both Luton and Macclesfield, the midfielder had obviously done enough to catch the eye in his homeland with German coach Wolfgang Sidka in charge of the Iraq national team at the time.

"When I was at Brighton someone sent me a message through Facebook and he asked me if would I like to join the national team for a training camp. He was a journalist and also with the Iraq team at the time they had Sidka the German coach, around 2010-11, and I made my way to Qatar," says Kasim.

"There was a group of player who went for the first time to Germany and someone took us from Germany to Iraq after staying in Germany for a few days. This was the first time I had gone back to Iraq since I was six. It was a bit surreal as it was far away from home, but it was in the north in Arbil so there was no trouble.

"At the time I was not playing much first team football at Brighton, I had only just signed, and I was playing with Nashat Akram and other pivotal midfielders from the 2007 AFC Asian Cup and it was just a great

Far Left Playing for Swindon Town

Left & Above AFC Asian Cup 2015 Australia

learning experience."

Kasim eventually made his Iraq debut in March 2014 in the crucial AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 qualifier against China with the 2007 champions needing to win in Sharjah to qualify from Group C having been an unused substitute during the 2012 Olympic Games qualifier against the United Arab Emirates a month earlier.

And Kasim played the full 90 minutes as Iraq won 3-1 at Al Sharjah Club to ensure qualification for the continental finals.

A first international goal soon followed at the 2014 Gulf Cup with Kasim netting the opener in the first half against Oman, although Iraq were eventually forced to settle for a 1-1 draw – which represented their only point of the campaign after losing to both Kuwait and the UAE in Saudi Arabia.

"It was a great and amazing feeling to get my first international goal at the Gulf Cup. I thought I played OK and we played well against Kuwait, but the result went against us. Then going onto Oman knowing we had to do something and I could only play those games because of the FIFA dates, and luckily I got the goal," says Kasim.

"From then Oman took control and looking back at it, I was happy with the goal, but not

happy with our performance and we didn't get through the group stage of the Gulf Cup."

Iraq and Kasim, though, were on course for significantly greater success at the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 with the midfielder netting the only goal as Radhi Shenaishil's side began their campaign with a 1-0 win over Jordan in Brisbane.

And Iraq eventually finished second in Group D behind Japan after beating Palestine 2-0 following an earlier 1-0 defeat by the defending champions.

Kasim had played every minute during the group stage and that run continued in the thrilling quarter-final with Iran as Iraq eventually won 7-6 on penalties following a 3-3 draw after extra-time in Canberra, with the midfielder holding his nerve to net during the shootout.

Kasim, though, had earlier picked up a second yellow card of the campaign and, having also been cautioned in the opening day win over Jordan, he missed the 2-0 semi-final defeat by Korea Republic due to suspension.

He was able to return in the following game and racked up another 90 minutes, although Kasim was unable to help Iraq claim third place as Shenaishil's side lost an entertaining play-off in Newcastle 3-2 to the United Arab Emirates.



The Asahi Shimbun AJW

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Above AFC Asian Cup 2015 Australia

"At the beginning the coach said this was a project. I don't know if he said it to relieve the pressure, but we need to do the right things from the top to the bottom and get more training camps so that we can start learning more about football as you cannot stop learning in life," says Kasim.

"We need to put down aims for what we want to achieve over the next couple of years and if we don't achieve them we need to ask questions of ourselves. This needs to come from the top and they need to start pulling things together for the team because if we have the right direction this team can do very well in the next couple of years as 18 of the 23 in the squad at the Asian Cup haven't played in a major tournament and here we are at the semi-finals, so imagine what we can achieve with more experience if we do it right."

Kasim, like many Iraqis, will remember Younus Mahmood's iconic header in the final of the 2007 AFC Asian Cup final against Saudi Arabia for the rest of their lives.

And having helped the Lions of Mesopotamia bounce back from their quarter-final exit at the 2011 AFC Asian Cup in Australia, hopes are high for the future.

"I watched the final in 2007 and watched that goal and celebrated. It was a great game; it was

a great atmosphere and something special. I am not sure what the team was going through at the time, probably a lot of problems, as their manager only took over recently at the time," says Kasim.

"But looking back at history, I don't want us to come to a tournament and win it and then for the next five or six years we don't do anything and that is what regrettably happened before. We won the Asian Cup in 2007 and then it petered out and we can't let that happen.

"We have reached the semi-finals and we have to build that up over the next couple of years and get to a level we are happy with and keep that level high and consistent. It is very important for us as players because with a young squad you only have a certain amount of years at the top level."

And after looking to boost Swindon's promotion push from League One alongside AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 MVP Massimo Luongo, another former Tottenham youngster now playing his trade at the County Ground, Kasim and Iraq will turn their attentions to the start of the joint qualifiers for the 2018 FIFA World Cup and 2019 AFC Asian Cup.

"2018 is three years from here and the qualifiers start in June and I want to be playing in the World Cup, that's why we need to step up and do well," says Kasim.

"I am not going to be happy at just reaching the semi-finals of the Asian Cup."



Yaser Kasim

Nationality: Iraq

DOB: 10/05/1991

Position: Midfielder

Current club: Swindon Town (England)

Previous clubs: Fulham, Tottenham Hotspur, Brighton & Hove Albion, Luton Town, Macclesfield Town (all England)



SLEEPING GIANTS

PERSEPOLIS, ESTABLISHED IN 1963, ARE ONE OF IRAN'S MOST FAMOUS AND SUCCESSFUL CLUBS BUT THE NINE-TIME DOMESTIC CHAMPIONS HAVE STRUGGLED IN RECENT YEARS TO LIVE UP TO THAT DURING A LONG AND DECORATED HISTORY.

By: Mani Djazmi Photos: World Sport Group





“O Cyrus, great King, King of Kings ... I, the Shahanshah of Iran, offer thee salutations from myself and from my nation. Rest in peace, for we are awake, and we will always stay awake.”

Those were the words of the Shah of Iran, Mohammadreza Pahlavi, as he addressed the long-dead founder of the Persian Empire, Cyrus the Great, during his lavish celebrations to commemorate the empire's 2,500-year anniversary in 1971 at the ancient capital of Persepolis.

Just a few months later, in the present-day capital Tehran, a new era of Persepolis domination would begin as the football club that was destined to become one of Iran's most popular and successful won its first major title.

Were you to look at a colour chart of Iran's football history, you would probably see three particularly vivid splashes, representing three particularly significant decades: the 1970s, when the national team ruled Asia and made its FIFA World Cup debut, the 1990s, when it returned to the FIFA World Cup and won its first match, and the 1940s, when it all began.

All three periods, in one way or another, are

linked inextricably with the red of Persepolis.

Many of the pioneers who faced Afghanistan in Iran's first match in 1941 went on to play for Shahin FC, a club setup in Tehran a year later.

It is said that its founder came up with the name of Shahin, which means falcon in Farsi, after seeking random inspiration in the book of Hafez, the revered 13th century Persian poet.

The Falcon ruled the roost in Iranian football for a generation, inspiring many clubs of its name throughout the country and bestowing upon the national team such stars as Iran's first captain, Masoud Boroumand, and strikers Homayoun Behzadi and Hossein Kalani, top scorers at the 1968 and 1972 AFC Asian Cups. Behzadi was inducted into the AFC Hall of Fame in 2014.

However, in 1968, Shahin was disbanded by the Iranian football federation and its players, who had won the Tehran league two years earlier, spent a year playing for other Tehran clubs, before Persepolis, which had been established in 1963, took them in.

At the same time, a young boy called Afshin Ghotbi was playing street football

with his friends in Tehran, commentating on himself as he scored in the guise of Kalani.

Decades later, Ghotbi became coach of Persepolis and is the last man to win the league with the Reds when they defeated their only title rival, Sepahan, with a goal in the sixth minute of injury time in the final match of the 2007/08 season. That achievement earned him the nickname of 'Emperor'.

"As a coach, every moment there was something from the past," says Ghotbi.

"You wake up in the morning and go into the streets and you're touched by someone who either loves or hates Persepolis."

As more and more Shahin players joined Persepolis, taking the club out of the second division of Tehran's provincial league, so they brought the club's popularity with them.

In 1969, Persepolis became the first Iranian club to compete in Asia and, two years later, as preparations were being made for that extraordinary demonstration of royal generosity at Persepolis, they won the first of nine league titles, finishing top with 13 wins and a draw from their 14 fixtures. It was the first of three championships in the 1970s.

But if Shahin's popularity had come with its players, so too had its rivalry with one of Tehran's other clubs, Taj.

"Before the Revolution, Taj (which means Crown) enjoyed the royal patronage," says Persepolis historian Hossein Ghoddoosi.

"But Shahin and, then, Persepolis, were of the people; the working classes. Of course Taj were popular too, but the club was linked to the aristocracy."

“You wake up in the morning and go into the streets and you're touched by someone who either loves or hates Persepolis.”

Former Persepolis coach Afshin Ghotbi

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, precisely because of its associations with monarchy, Taj was renamed as Esteghlal, or Independence.

Meanwhile, the authorities attempted to rename Persepolis to Pirooz, or Victory, but had little success.

"They didn't like the fact that Persepolis was a word with Greek roots, even though it refers to one of our greatest archaeological sites," says Ghoddoosi.

"So they wanted the club to have a Farsi name. But the fans didn't accept that and continued to call the team Persepolis."

Eventually, in 2012, the club announced that, henceforth, it would officially be known as Persepolis again.

The derby is part of the very fabric of Tehran life. During Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980s, fans packed the Azadi Stadium to watch matches that were squeezed out of the television schedules by reports from the front and propaganda bulletins.

For some years in the 1990s, foreign

referees were brought in to officiate after a particularly vicious brawl broke out when Esteghlal players thought bias was at play.

But perhaps the most-talked about Tehran derby took place in 1973 when the Reds routed the Blues 6-0. It's still the largest winning margin in the history of the fixture.

"What's really special is the literal migration of fans from all over Iran," says Ghotbi.

"They surround the stadium 24 hours before the game and you can sense it in the team. Players have a tension of how their lives will change if they win or lose."

One man who etched his name, indelibly, into the history of the derby and Persepolis is Eamon Zayed. Half Irish, half Libyan, Zayed moved to Persepolis in 2011 from Derry City in the League of Ireland, much to the surprise of the Reds' Turkish coach, Mustafa Denizli.

"The first thing he said to me was 'who are you?' and he asked what position I played," says Zayed. "There were six games in January and I wasn't involved in any of them. At the start of February, we had a game, and he was told by the President to use me so he brought me on as a second half sub.

"The following game was the derby. To be

Top Left
1997/98 Asian Club Championship

Above
2009 AFC Champions League

Bottom Left
2000/01 Asian Club Championship



honest I didn't expect to play any of it."

But Zayed came on with half an hour to go, with Persepolis 2-0 down. Moments later, they were a man down too and braced for the most public of humiliations: defeat in the derby.

"I looked over to the bench and a midfielder was getting ready to come on, and he was going to come on for me," says Zayed. "Whilst he was getting ready, I scored the first goal."

There was more to come as Persepolis somehow drew level, again through Zayed.

"Into injury time we got a throw-in by the corner flag and the manager was shouting to just keep the ball by the sideline because it was 2-2, we were down to 10 men, it would have been a great result," continues Zayed.

"But the left winger crossed it into the box and I turned and scored."

A hat-trick, the first by a non-Iranian in the fixture, in just eight minutes on his derby debut.

"At the time I didn't realise how big it was. I was just happy that I'd proved the manager wrong," adds Zayed. "That game definitely changed my life in Iran."

But Zayed's match, back-to-back Hazfi

"At the time I didn't realise how big it was. I was just happy that I'd proved the manager wrong. That game definitely changed my life in Iran."

Former Persepolis striker Eamon Zayed

Cups whilst under the charge of Iran's record goalscorer Ali Daei and Ghotbi's dramatic championship apart, Persepolis fans have had slim pickings since their last golden decade in the 1990s.

Then, they won the Asian Cup Winners' Cup in 1991 and were runners up two years later. Four league titles were also claimed during that time.

Of Iran's squad that returned to the FIFA World Cup in 1998, seven came from the Reds and two more, Daei and Karim Bagheri, had just

left to play in Germany.

But with the advent of professionalism in the Iranian league after 2000 came a host of strengthened rivals. Clubs like Sepahan and Zobahan have enjoyed private investment in the last 15 years, Persepolis, which is owned by the Iranian state, has known only instability as 11 coaches have come and gone since Ghotbi's own departure in 2008.

"I'd love to win a championship in Asia with Persepolis at some point," says the 51-year-old.

"The only reason I'd go back is because I love the fans and the passion and emotion that surrounds the club. It transcends people's spirituality."

Time will tell if the Emperor returns, or if this Persepolis Empire can rise again having finished as runners-up in the Iran Pro League in 2014 to earn a return to the AFC Champions League this year.

But, with an estimated 30 million supporters in Iran alone, in the words of the Shah, the club will always stay awake.



Far left
2015 AFC Champions League

Above & Left
2012 AFC Champions League

Top Right
Eamon Zayed

Right
Mustafa Denizli

Bottom Right
Ali Daei

Bottom Left
Azadi Stadium



Australia Land Maiden Continental Crown

Hosts Australia won the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 after edging out Korea Republic 2-1 after extra-time in the final at a sold-out Stadium Australia at the end of January.

Captain Mile Jedinak raised the trophy into the Sydney night sky as the tournament hosts capped a remarkable 23 days after James Troisi's extra-time strike had settled a thrilling final of the 16th edition of the continental championship.

Tournament MVP Massimo Luongo had opened the scoring in the first half for Australia, and despite Son Heung-min netting in the dying minutes of regulation play, substitute Troisi struck at the end of the first half of extra-time.

And with their success, the Socceroos joined Japan – the defending champions going into the 2015 edition – Saudi Arabia, Iran, Korea Republic, Kuwait, Iraq and Israel on the AFC Asian Cup Roll of Honour.

"We came into this confederation knowing it would be a huge challenge," said Socceroos head coach Ange Postecoglou after Australia's men matched the achievement

of the country's women, who won the AFC Women's Asian Cup in 2010.

Defeat in the final was the first loss of the tournament for the Koreans, who were chasing their first AFC Asian Cup title since 1960, with Uli Stielike's side losing out in what was the nation's first appearance in the final since losing on penalties to Saudi Arabia in 1988.

With the two eventual finalists seeing off Oman and Kuwait to emerge from Group A, it was Uzbekistan and China who progressed from Group B to take their places in the quarter-finals.

While Uzbekistan – semi-finalists in 2011 – were expected to advance, it was China who topped the group to reach the last eight of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time since appearing in the final on home soil in 2004.

The pair saw off three-time champions Saudi Arabia, who had another disappointing tournament, and AFC Challenge Cup 2012 winners DPR Korea, while in Group C Gulf Cup champions Qatar and Bahrain were eliminated as Iran finished top ahead of the United Arab Emirates.

Defending champions Japan, meanwhile, cruised through Group D with three wins

out of three, to be joined by 2007 winners Iraq as the involvement of Jordan and tournament debutants Palestine came to an early end.

China's fairytale run was ended in the quarter-finals thanks to a pair of spectacular Tim Cahill goals in Brisbane as the tournament hosts set up a semi-final against the United Arab Emirates after Mahdi Ali's side saw off the Japanese in a penalty shootout in Sydney.

In the other half of the draw, Iran succumbed to Iraq in a pulsating clash in Canberra that was also decided in a penalty shootout, with the winner meeting the Koreans after they had defeated Uzbekistan 2-0 in extra-time thanks to a pair of goals from Son.

Iraq's hopes of a second appearance in the final of the AFC Asian Cup, however, faded quickly against the Koreans, who ran out comfortable 2-0 winners in Sydney to book their first final showing in 27 years, while the Australians scored two early goals to see off the Emirates.

The UAE, though, eventually finished third after beating Iraq 3-2 in an entertaining play-off a day before the final.



Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	3	0	0	3	0	3	9
Australia	3	2	0	1	8	2	6	6
Oman	3	1	0	2	1	5	-4	3
Kuwait	3	0	0	3	1	6	-5	0

09/01/15

Australia 4 (Tim Cahill 33, Massimo Luongo 45, Mile Jedinak 62, James Troisi 90+2) Kuwait 1 (Hussain Fadhel 8)

10/01/15

Korea Republic 1 (Cho Young-cheol 45+1) Oman 0

13/01/15

Kuwait 0 Korea Republic 1 (Nam Tae-hee 36)
Oman 0 Australia 4 (Matt McKay 27, Robbie Kruse 30, Mark Milligan 45+2, Tomi Juric 70)

17/01/15

Australia 0 Korea Republic 1 (Lee Jeong-hyeop 33)
Oman 1 (Abdulaziz Al Maqbali 69) Kuwait 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
China	3	3	0	0	5	2	3	9
Uzbekistan	3	2	0	1	5	3	2	6
Saudi Arabia	3	1	0	2	5	5	0	3
DPR Korea	3	0	0	3	2	7	-5	0

10/01/15

Uzbekistan 1 (Igor Sergeev 62) DPR Korea 0

Saudi Arabia 0 China 1 (Yu Hai 81)

14/01/15

DPR Korea 1 (Ryang Yong-gi 12) Saudi Arabia 4

(Naif Hazazi 37, Mohammed Al Sahlawi 52, 54, Nawaf Al Abid 76)

China 2 (Wu Xi 54, Sun Ke 68) Uzbekistan 1 (Odil Ahmedov 23)

18/01/15

Uzbekistan 3 (Sardor Rashidov 2, 78; Vokhid Shodiev 71) Saudi Arabia 1 (Mohammed Al Sahlawi 60)

China 2 (Sun Ke 1, 42) DPR Korea 1 (Gao Lin 57 OG)

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iran	3	3	0	0	4	0	4	9
United Arab Emirates	3	2	0	1	6	3	3	6
Bahrain	3	1	0	2	3	5	-2	3
Qatar	3	0	0	3	2	7	-5	0

11/01/15

Iran 2 (Ehsan Haji Safi 45+1, Masoud Shojaei 71) Bahrain 0

United Arab Emirates 4 (Ahmed Khalil 37, 52, Ali Mabkhout 56, 90) Qatar 1 (Khalifan Ibrahim 23)

15/01/15

Bahrain 1 (Jaycee John 26) United Arab Emirates 2

(Ali Mabkhout 1, Mohamed Hasan 74 OG)

Qatar 0 Iran 1 (Sardar Azmoun 52)

19/01/15

Iran 1 (Reza Ghoochannejhad 90+1) United Arab Emirates 0

Qatar 1 (Hasan Al Haydos 68) Bahrain 2 (Sayed Shubbar 34, Sayed Ahmed 82)

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	7	0	7	9
Iraq	3	2	0	1	3	1	2	6
Jordan	3	1	0	2	5	4	1	3
Palestine	3	0	0	3	1	11	-10	0

12/01/15

Japan 4 (Yasuhito Endo 8, Shinji Okazaki 25, Keisuke Honda 43, Maya Yoshida 49) Palestine 0

Jordan 0 Iraq 1 (Yaser Kasim 77)

16/01/15

Palestine 1 (Jaka Hbaisha 84) Jordan 5 (Yousef Ahmad 32, Hamza Al Dardour 34, 45+2, 75, 79)

Iraq 0 Japan 1 (Keisuke Honda 23)

20/01/15

Japan 2 (Keisuke Honda 24, Shinji Kagawa 82)

Jordan 0

Iraq 2 (Younus Mahmood 48, Ahmed Yasin 88)

Palestine 0

Quarter-Finals

22/01/15

Korea Republic 2 (Son Heung-min 104, 120)

Uzbekistan 0 AET

China 0 Australia 2 (Tim Cahill 48, 65)

23/01/15

Iran 3 (Sardar Azmoun 24, Morteza Pouraliganji 103, Reza Ghoochannejhad 118) Iraq 3 (Ahmed Yasin 56, Younus Mahmood 93, Ismael Dhurgham 116) AET

Iraq won 7-6 on penalties

Japan 1 (Gaku Shibasaki 81) United Arab Emirates 1 (Ali Mabkhout 7) AET

United Arab Emirates won 5-4 on penalties

Semi-Finals

26/01/15

Korea Republic 2 (Lee Jeong-hyeop 20, Kim Young-gwon 50) Iraq 0

27/01/15

Australia 2 (Trent Sainsbury 3, Jason Davidson 14) United Arab Emirates 0

Third Place Play-off

30/01/15

Iraq 2 (Waleed Salim 28, Amjed Kalaf 42) United Arab Emirates 3 (Ahmed Khalil 16, 51, Ali Mabkhout 57)

Final

31/01/15

Korea Republic 1 (Son Heung-min 90+1) Australia 2 (Massimo Luongo 45, James Troisi 105) AET



Guangzhou And Beijing Lead The Way

Former champions Guangzhou Evergrande and fellow Chinese Super League side Beijing Guoan put their AFC Champions League rivals on notice after posting 100% records at the halfway mark of the group stage of this year's tournament.

Guangzhou posted three consecutive wins to quickly establish a five-point lead at the top of Group H after beating Kashima Antlers 4-3 in a thrilling contest at home on Matchday Three following earlier successes over 2013 finalists FC Seoul and defending champions Western Sydney Wanderers.

And with Australia's Western Sydney sharing a goalless stalemate with FC Seoul in the Korea Republic capital, the 2014 winners find themselves level on points with the K-League Classic side in second place with three games remaining.

"As long as we are winning the games, it means we scored more goals than our opponents," said Guangzhou coach Fabio Cannavaro, who has seen Brazilian striker Ricardo Goulart score six goals in three games for 2013 winners Guangzhou.

"Football is a difficult sport and if you want us to beat the other team by four or five more goals in every game, then you are being unrealistic."

Super League runners-up Beijing, meanwhile, followed up their back-to-back 1-0 wins over Brisbane Roar and Suwon Samsung by maintaining their own perfect start by beating Urawa Red Diamonds 2-0 on Matchday Three to also sit five points clear at the top of Group G.

A-League champions Brisbane and Korea's Suwon sit tied for second place after the pair shared an enthralling 3-3 draw in Australia.

"It was not an easy game. Urawa were very aggressive because they lost all their previous matches, but I have to say this match was the best from my team so far in the season," said Beijing coach Gregorio Manzano.

China are on course to have at least two sides in the Round of 16 for the first time since 2013, although Guangzhou R&F and Shandong Luneng have slipped off the pace in their respective groups.

After suffering a second consecutive defeat to second placed Seongnam FC, qualifiers Guangzhou R&F slipped down to third in Group F, with Thai champions Buriram United topping



the table with an unbeaten record after sharing a 1-1 draw with Gamba Osaka.

Like Guangzhou R&F, Shandong began their campaign with a win, but that victory at Vietnamese champions Becamex Binh Duong has been followed by back-to-back defeats to Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors and Kashiwa Reysol which has left the Jinan side four points off the pace in Group E.

In the West, Al Sadd pulled off the most eye-catching result of Matchday Three with a 6-2

demolition of Lokomotiv that puts the 2011 winners three points clear of last year's runners-up Al Hilal at the top of Group C.

Former AFC Player of the Year Khalfan Ibrahim scored twice while Hasan Al Haydos, Nadir Belhadj, Abdelkarim Hassan and Grafite were also on target as the Qatari club eased to a convincing win.

"The result is the biggest victory for us this season and we deserved to win this match with such a big score," said Al Sadd coach Lhoussaine Ammouta, whose side are undefeated.

"We should continue with similar good performances in our next matches in order to win and qualify for the next round."

Al Hilal, meanwhile, remained a point ahead of Foolad Khuzestan in second place after sharing a goalless draw with the Iranian champions in Ahwaz.

Saudi Arabia's form team on the continent, instead, is Christian Gross' Al Ahli with the Jeddah club yet to lose after their 2-0 win over Iran's Tractorsazi Tabriz on Matchday Three lifted them three points clear of Nasaf in Group D after the Uzbekistan side shared a draw with Al Ahli from the United Arab Emirates.

Elsewhere, inaugural winners Al Ain are a point clear at the top of Group B following a 1-0 win over Pakhtakor, with the Uzbekistan side sharing second with Iranian debutants Naft Tehran who beat Saudi Arabia's Al Shabab 2-1 at home.

Finally in Group A, Persepolis saw their lead at the top cut to one point after losing 3-0 to Al Nassr, with Qatari champions Lekhwiya just a point further back after posting a 1-0 victory against Uzbekistan's Bunyodkor in Tashkent.



Group Stage

Group A											Group B											Group C											Group D										
P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts												
Persepolis	3	2	0	1	4	3	1	6	Al Ain	3	1	2	0	2	1	1	5	Al Sadd	3	2	1	0	7	2	5	7	Al Ahli (KSA)	3	2	1	0	7	4	3	7								
Al Nassr	3	1	2	0	5	2	3	5	Pakhtakor	3	1	1	1	4	4	0	4	Al Hilal	3	1	1	1	3	2	1	4	Nasaf	3	1	1	1	3	3	0	4								
Lekhwiya	3	1	1	1	2	4	-2	4	Naft Tehran	3	1	1	1	4	4	0	4	Foolad	3	0	3	0	1	1	0	3	Tractorsazi	3	1	0	2	2	4	-2	3								
Bunyodkor	3	0	1	2	1	3	-2	1	Al Shabab	3	0	2	1	3	4	-1	2	Lokomotiv	3	0	1	2	4	10	-6	1	Al Ahli (UAE)	3	0	2	1	3	4	-1	2								
24/02/15 Persepolis 3 (Mohsen Bengar 60, Hadi Norozi 66, Mohammad Noori 83) Lekhwiya 0 Al Nassr 1 (Fabian Estoyanoff 51) Bunyodkor 1 (Zabikhillo Urinboev 14) 03/03/15 Bunyodkor 0 Persepolis 1 (Mohammad Noori 21) Lekhwiya 1 (Vladimir Weiss 51) Al Nassr 1 (Mohamed Musa 47 OG) 17/03/15 Bunyodkor 0 Lekhwiya 1 (Nam Tae-hee 28) Al Nassr 3 (Adrian Mierzejewski 32, Fabian Estoyanoff 86, Hassan Al Raheb 90+5) Persepolis 0	24/02/15 Pakhtakor 2 (Kakhi Makharadze 48, Igor Sergeev 85) Naft Tehran 1 (Ali Ghorbani 59) Al Ain 0 Al Shabab 0 03/03/15 Naft Tehran 1 (Siamak Kooroshi 50) Al Ain 1 (Asamoah Gyan 58) Al Shabab 2 (Abdulahman Al Khaibary 35, Naif Hazazi 84) Pakhtakor 2 (Igor Sergeev 62, Kakhi Makharadze 71) 18/03/15 Pakhtakor 0 Al Ain 1 (Miroslav Stoch 61) Naft Tehran 2 (Arslan Motahhari 86, Leandro Padovani 90) Al Shabab 1 (Naif Hazazi 43)	25/02/15 Foolad Khuzestan 0 Al Sadd 0 Al Hilal 3 (Saud Kariri 11, Yousef Al Salem 14, Thiago Neves 71) Lokomotiv 1 (Sardor Mirzayev 39) 04/03/15 Lokomotiv 1 (Oleg Zoteev 6) Foolad Khuzestan 1 (Mehrdad Jamaati 32) Al Shabab 1 (Khalfan Ibrahim 29) Al Hilal 0 17/03/15 Foolad Khuzestan 0 Al Hilal 0 Al Sadd 6 (Khalfan Ibrahim 27, 50; Hasan Al Haydos 34, Nadir Belhadj 40, Abdelkarim Hassan 63, Grafite 66) Lokomotiv 2 (Damir Kojasevic 56, Jasur Khasanov 77)	25/02/15 Nasaf 2 (Ilkhom Shomurodov 46, Khamza Karimov 52) Tractorsazi Tabriz 1 (Edinho 32) Al Ahli (UAE) 3 (Ismail Al Hammadi 19, 79, Ahmed Khalil 43) Al Ahli (KSA) 3 (Osvaldo 1, Hussain Al Moqalwi 41, Taiseer Al Jassam 57) 04/03/15 Tractorsazi Tabriz 1 (Farshad Ahmadzadeh 40) Al Ahli (UAE) 0 Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Omar Al Soma 22, Saleh Al Amari 78) Nasaf 1 (Artur Gevorkyan 65) 18/03/15 Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Taiseer Al Jassam 71, 79) Tractorsazi Tabriz 0 Al Ahli (UAE) 0 Nasaf 0																																								

Group Stage

Group E											Group F											Group G											Group H										
P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts												
Jeonbuk	3	2	1	0	7	1	6	7	Buriram United	3	2	1	0	5	3	2	7	Beijing Guoan	3	3	0	0	4	0	4	9	Guangzhou	3	3	0	0	8	5	3	9								
Kashiwa	3	2	1	0	7	2	5	7	Seongnam FC	3	2	0	1	4	2	2	6	Suwon	3	1	1	1	5	5	0	4	Western Sydney	3	1	1	1	5	4	1	4								
Shandong	3	1	0	2	5	8	-3	3	Guangzhou R&F	3	1	0	2	3	3	0	3	Brisbane Roar	3	1	1	1	4	4	0	4	FC Seoul	3	1	1	1	1	1	0	4								
Binh Duong	3	0	0	3	3	11	-8	0	Gamba Osaka	3	0	1	2	1	5	-4	1	Urawa	3	0	0	3	1	5	-4	0	Kashima Antlers	3	0	0	3	4	8	-4	0								
24/02/15 Buriram United 2 (Ganiyu Oseni 48, Wang Qiang 56 OG) Shandong 3 (Wang Yongpo 47, Yang Xu 61, 81) Jeonbuk 0 Kashiwa 0 03/03/15 Shandong 1 (Yang Xu 61) Jeonbuk 4 (Edu 21, Han Kyo-won 71, Lee Jae-sung 76, Leonardo 90+3) Kashiwa 5 (Masato Kudo 42, 67, David Vrankoic 44 OG, Kim Chang-soo 56, Hidekazu Otani 75) Binh Duong 1 (Ganiyu Oseni 82) 17/03/15 Kashiwa 2 (Kosuke Taketomi 23, Naoki Wako 90+2) Shandong 1 (Walter Montillo 51) Jeonbuk 3 (Eninho 16, Lee Dong-gook 41, 88) Binh Duong 0	24/02/15 Buriram United 2 (Deeprom Prakrit 16, Gilberto Macena 18) Seongnam FC 1 (Narubadin Weerawatnodom 87 OG) Gamba Osaka 0 Guangzhou R&F 2 (Abderrazzaq Hamedallah 10, Wang Song 80) 03/03/15 Seongnam FC 2 (Ricardo Bueno 8, Hwang Ui-jo 67) Gamba Osaka 0 Guangzhou R&F 1 (Lu Lin 27) Buriram United 2 (Ko Seul-ki 44, Gilberto Macena 90) 17/03/15 Guangzhou R&F 0 Seongnam FC 1 (Hwang Ui-jo 27) 18/03/15 Gamba Osaka 1 (Hiroyuki Abe 39) Buriram United 1 (Theerathon Bunmathan 62)	25/02/15 Brisbane Roar 0 Beijing Guoan 1 (Shao Jiayi 90+3) Suwon 2 (Oh Beom-seok 56, Leo 87) Urawa 1 (Ryota Moriwaki 45+1) 04/03/15 Urawa 0 Brisbane Roar 1 (Brandon Borrello 3) Beijing Guoan 1 (Dejan Damjanovic 65) Suwon 0 17/03/15 Beijing Guoan 2 (Pablo Batalla 78, Yu Dabao 84) Urawa 0 Brisbane Roar 3 (Brandon Borrello 13, Devante Clut 22, 80) Suwon 3 (Seo Jung-jin 39, 50; Jong Tae-se 71)	25/02/15 Kashima Antlers 1 (Shoma Doi 68) Western Sydney 3 (Gen Shoji 54 OG, Yojiro Takahagi 86, Mark Bridge 90+3) Guangzhou 1 (Ricardo Goulart 31) FC Seoul 0 04/03/15 Western Sydney 2 (Iacopo La Rocca 57, Romeo Castelen 90+5) Guangzhou 3 (Ricardo Goulart 19, 58, 64) FC Seoul 1 (Kim Jin-kyu 66) Kashima Antlers 0 18/03/15 FC Seoul 0 Western Sydney 0 Guangzhou 4 (Ricardo Goulart 10, 62; Elkeson 57, Zhao Xuri 90+2) Kashima Antlers 3 (Hiroyuki Takasaki 36, Shoma Doi 51, Gaku Shibasaki 90+3)																																								



Indonesia And Hong Kong Set The Standard

Indonesia and Hong Kong's South China and Indonesia's Persipura Jayapura lead the way at the halfway stage of the AFC Cup with the duo posting 100% records, while compatriots Kitchee and Persib Bandung are also undefeated to cap a fine start of the campaign for their respective leagues.

South China failed to get out of the group stage last year after a slow start, but the Carolinians made a fast start in 2015 with a 6-1 victory over Global FC in Manila before posting back-to-back wins over Yadanarbon and Pahang FA in Group G.

Malaysia's Pahang are a further five points back in second after their opening day 3-2 win against Yadanarbon in Mandalay was followed up by a disappointing home draw with Global and then a narrow defeat to South China, with Yadanarbon a further point adrift in third ahead of winless Global.

"It was a very tough game, but I am happy we came out of this match with three points," said South China coach Mario Gomez after Chan Siu Ki's early strike secured a 1-0 win over Pahang.

"The conditions were challenging and Pahang gave us a hard time, but we showed discipline to hold on for the win."

Persipura, who reached the semi-finals in last year's AFC Cup, began 2015 on the front foot with a 3-1 win over Warriors FC in Singapore before recording further victories over India's JSW Bengaluru and Maziya Sports & Recreation Club in the Maldives to lead Group E.

India champions Bengaluru beat Maziya and Warriors at home either side of their defeat in

Indonesia to sit three points adrift in second, with Maziya three points further off the pace after beating bottom side Warriors.

"I am happy for the win but still we need to work hard and get three more points to confirm our place in the second round," said coach Osvaldo Lessa, after Persipura's 2-1 win over Maziya.

And domestic rivals Persib also lead the way in Group H after home wins over the Maldivian side New Radiant and debutants Lao FC either side of a draw with Ayeyawady United in Yangon. Ayeyawady were able to recover from their disappointing 2-2 home draw with



Lao FC to secure a hard-fought point against powerhouse Persib and a comprehensive 3-0 win over New Radiant in Male.

"We never took Lao lightly, they have played well in the first two matches, but we needed to rotate the players to give them a feel of the game," said Persib coach Emral Abus.

Kitchee are also well set to secure a place in the Round of 16 following victories over Balestier Khalsa and Johor Darul Ta'zim either side of a draw in India against Kingfisher East

Bengal to leave last year's semi-finalists at the top of Group F.

Elsewhere, defending champions Qadsia SC and compatriots Kuwait SC are also in a strong position to return to the knockout stage.

Qadsia, who edged out Iraq's Arbil on penalties to lift the title last year, top Group C with an unbeaten record after consecutive wins against Turkmenistan's Ahal FC and Arbil before being held to a surprise 2-2 draw at home by Tajik debutants FC Istiklol.

The draw allowed Istiklol to move a point clear in second after bouncing back from an opening round loss to Arbil to defeat Ahal in Ashgabat.

Arbil, though, find themselves adrift at the foot of the table alongside Ahal after the Turkmen side claimed their first-ever win in the AFC Cup on Matchday Three after posting a 2-1 victory at home over the 2014 finalists.

Three-time champions Kuwait SC, meanwhile, are unbeaten in Group D alongside inaugural winners Al Jaish of Syria with the pair having posted two wins before sharing a goalless draw in Kuwait City on Matchday Three.

Riffa from Bahrain sit four points adrift in third, with Lebanon's Nejmeh bottom following three defeats.

Also in the West, Iraq's Al Shorta lead Group B after adding a convincing 6-2 victory over Palestinian champions Wad Alness to earlier draws with Bahrain's Al Hidd and Al Jazeera of Jordan.

Finally, Syria's Al Wahda and Jordan's Al Wehdat share the lead of Group A, three points ahead of Lebanon's Salam Zgharta and Al Nahda of Oman.



Group Stage

Group A		Group B		Group C		Group D																													
P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts				
Al Wahda	3	2	0	1	4	2	6	Al Shorta	3	1	2	0	9	5	4	5	Qadsia SC	3	2	1	0	5	2	3	7	Kuwait SC	3	2	1	0	6	2	4	7	
Al Wehdat	3	2	0	1	8	2	6	Al Hidd	3	0	3	0	4	4	0	3	FC Istiklol	3	1	1	1	5	6	-1	4	Al Jaish	3	2	1	0	2	0	2	7	
Salam Zgharta	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3	Al Jazeera	3	0	3	0	3	3	0	3	Ahal FC	3	1	0	2	3	5	-2	3	Riffa	3	1	0	2	3	4	-1	3
Al Nahda	3	1	0	2	3	6	-3	3	Wad Alness	3	0	2	1	4	8	-4	2	Arbil	3	1	0	2	4	4	0	3	Nejmeh	3	0	0	3	2	7	-5	0
24/02/15								25/02/15								25/02/15																			
Al Wehdat 5 (Mahmoud Shelbaieh 7, 82; Saleh Ibrahim 24, Mahmoud Zatar 90+2, 90+3) Salam Zgharta 1 (Lucas Galan 34)								Al Shorta 1 (Abuhammad Sameeh 90+4) Al Jazeera 1 (Raed Fraeh 31)								Kuwait SC 4 (Ahmad Al Saqer 16, Husain Hakim 52, Chadi Hammami 83, Ahmad Dhahi 89) Nejmeh 1 (Sy Cheikh 40)																			
Al Wahda 1 (Mohamad Jaafar 15) Al Nahda 2 (Ely Cheikh Samba 41, Salim Juma 68)								Al Shorta 2 (Waleed Salim 2, Amjed Kalaf 13) Al Hidd 2 (Rico 28, Jasim Ayyash 45+1)								Riffa 0 Al Jaish 1 (Bassel Moustafa 66)																			
10/03/15								10/03/15								11/03/15																			
Salam Zgharta 0 Al Wahda 2 (Abdulkader Deka 45, Mohammad Hamdkou 90)								Al Jazeera 1 (Franco De Souza 12) Al Shorta 1 (Mahdi Kareem 7)								Al Jaish 1 (Abdulatif Salkeni 88) Nejmeh 0																			
Al Nahda 0 Al Wehdat 3 (Monther Abu Amara 20, Mahmoud Zatar 76, Tall Malik 90+2)								Al Hidd 1 (Sayed Adnan 4) Wad Alness 1 (Hazem Abuhammad 90+4)								Kuwait SC 2 (Sami Al Sanea 51, Abdullah Al Buraiki 73) Riffa 1 (Abdallah Deeb 27)																			
17/03/15								17/03/15								17/03/15																			
Salam Zgharta 2 (Abou Bakr Al Mel 38, 62) Al Nahda 1 (Said Al Razaqi 45+2)								Al Shorta 6 (Alaa Abdul Zahra 20, 35; Amjed Kalaf 34, Marwan Hussein 45+1, 90+1; Dhurgham Ismail 63) Wad Alness 2 (Fadi Zidan 40, 86)								Al Jaish 0 Kuwait SC 0																			
Al Wehdat 0 Al Wahda 1 (Osama Omari 6)								Al Hidd 1 (Rico 54) Al Jazeera 1 (Amer Abuhudieb 68)								18/03/15																			
																18/03/15																			
																Riffa 2 (Jhon Obregon 5, Sayed Dhiya 35) Nejmeh 1 (Khaled Takaji 45+2)																			

Group Stage

Group E		Group F		Group G		Group H																													
P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts				
Persipura	3	3	0	0	8	3	5	9	Kitchee	3	2	1	0	6	1	5	7	South China	3	3	0	0	10	2	8	9	Persib Bandung	3	2	1	0	6	2	4	7
JSW Bengaluru	3	2	0	1	4	4	0	6	Johor Darul Ta'zim	3	2	0	1	5	3	2	6	Pahang FA	3	1	1	1	3	3	0	4	Ayeyawady	3	1	2	0	6	3	3	5
Maziya	3	1	0	2	4	4	0	3	Balestier Khalsa	3	1	0	2	2	5	-3	3	Yadanarbon	3	1	0	2	5	6	-1	3	New Radiant	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Warriors FC	3	0	0	3	1	6	-5	0	East Bengal	3	0	1	2	3	7	-4	1	Global FC	3	0	1	2	1	8	-7	1	Lao FC	3	0	1	2	3	5	-2	1
24/02/15								24/02/15								25/02/15																			
JSW Bengaluru 2 (Sunil Chhetri 67, Shankar Sampingiraj 90+3) Maziya 1 (Mohamed Umair 89)								Kitchee 3 (Xu Deshuai 21, Ngan Lok Fung 67, Jordi Tarres 90) Balestier Khalsa 0								Yadanarbon 2 (Damion Stewart 35 OG, Djedje Djawa 55) Pahang FA 3 (Dickson Nwakaeme 6, 12; Gopinathan Ramachandra 89)																			
Warriors FC 1 (Andy Ahmad 69) Persipura Jayapura 3 (Lancine Kone 30, Boaz Solossa 34, Nelson Alom 58)								Johor Darul Ta'zim 4 (Nazrin Nawi 9, Safiq Rahim 38, Suppiah Chanturu 47, Safee Sali 53) Kingfisher East Bengal 1 (Ranti Martins 35)								Global FC 1 (Michael Jonsson 87) South China 6 (Daniel McBreen 2, 27; Lo Kong Wai 39, Chan Wai Ho 50, Mahama Awal 66, 75)																			
10/03/15								10/03/15								11/03/15																			
Persipura Jayapura 3 (Ian Kabes 4, Robertino Pugliara 23, 50) JSW Bengaluru 1 (Vineeth Chekiyot 90)								Kingfisher East Bengal 1 (Ranti Martins 74)								South China 3 (Lo Kong Wai 13, Mahama Awal 19, Daniel McBreen 38) Yadanarbon 1 (Zaw Lin Tun 88)																			
Maziya 2 (Asadhulla Abdulla 47, Pablo Rodriguez 88)								Kitchee 1 (Juan Belencoso 30)								Pahang FA 0 Global FC 0																			
Warriors FC 0								Balestier Khalsa 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim 1 (Asraruddin Omar 90+3)								18/03/15																			
17/03/15								17/03/15								18/03/15																			
Maziya 1 (Asadhulla Abdulla 78) Persipura Jayapura 2 (Boaz Solossa 35, Lancine Kone 77)								East Bengal 2 (Juan Belencoso 27, Jordi Tarres 35) Johor Darul Ta'zim 0								Yadanarbon 2 (Djedje Djawa 52, Win Htay Kyaw 90+4) Global FC 0																			
JSW Bengaluru 1 (Joshua Walker 36) Warriors FC 0																Pahang FA 0 South China 1 (Chan Siu Ki 13)																			



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Group A							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Myanmar	2	2	0	0	23	0	23 6
India	2	1	0	1	4	7	-3 3
Sri Lanka	2	0	0	2	0	20	-20 0

11/03/15
Sri Lanka 0 Myanmar 16
13/03/15
India 4 Sri Lanka 0
15/03/15
Myanmar 7 India 0

Group B							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Jordan	3	3	0	0	9	0	9 9
Uzbekistan	3	2	0	1	7	2	5 6
Hong Kong	3	0	1	2	2	4	-2 1
Palestine	3	0	1	2	2	14	-12 1

11/03/15
Uzbekistan 6 Palestine 0
Jordan 1 Hong Kong 0
13/03/15
Hong Kong 0 Uzbekistan 1
Palestine 0 Jordan 6
15/03/15
Hong Kong 2 Palestine 2
Uzbekistan 0 Jordan 2

Group C							
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/- Pts
Chinese Taipei	2	2	0	0	5	0	5 6
Iran	2	1	0	1	5	2	3 3
Laos	2	0	0	2	1	9	-8 0

20/03/15
Laos 0 Chinese Taipei 4
22/03/15
Iran 5 Laos 1
24/03/15
Chinese Taipei 1 Iran 0

Trio Remain On Road To Rio 2016

Group winners Myanmar, Jordan and Chinese Taipei advanced to the second round of qualifiers for the women's football tournament at the 2016 Olympic Games after topping their groups during March's qualifiers.

Myanmar won Group A with a 100% record following wins over Sri Lanka and India, while 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup qualifiers Jordan also posted a perfect record to top Group B ahead of Uzbekistan, Hong Kong and Palestine.

And with Chinese Taipei beating Iran on the final Matchday in Group C to complete their own unbeaten campaign, the trio advanced to the second round of qualifiers where they will join Thailand and Vietnam.

The winner of the five-team second round of qualifiers, which will be played in September, will then join 2012 silver medalists and reigning Asian champions Japan, Australia, DPR Korea, China and Korea Republic in the decisive final round.

The top two finishers from the final round of qualifiers will then represent Asia at next year's Olympic Games looking to follow in the footsteps of Japan and DPR Korea who participated in the

2012 Olympic Games in London.

In Group A, Khin Moe Wai and Win Theingi Tun each scored five as hosts Myanmar began their campaign with a 16-0 win over Sri Lanka.

India then beat Sri Lanka 4-0, but with Myanmar winning the decisive final fixture 7-0, it was the hosts who progressed.

Jordan began their Group B campaign with a 1-0 win over Hong Kong thanks to Maysa Jbarah's eighth minute strike in Amman, while Uzbekistan recorded a 6-0 win over Palestine.

The same scores were repeated on Matchday Two as Kamola Riskieva scored the only goal for Uzbekistan against Hong Kong, while Jbarah netted a hat-trick for Jordan against Palestine.

And with Hong Kong and Palestine sharing a 1-1 draw, Stephanie Al Naber and Luna Al Masri scored inside the final 15 minutes as Jordan claimed top spot with a 2-0 win over Uzbekistan.

Finally in Group C, the qualification place was decided on the final Matchday after Chinese Taipei earlier recorded a 4-0 win over Laos, who then also lost 5-1 to Iran.

And with Lee Hsiu-Chin scoring the only goal at the end of the first half at Taipei Municipal Stadium, the hosts secured a 1-0 win over the Iranians to top the table.

Toyota Presents AFC With Innova MPV

Toyota underlined its commitment to Asian football by presenting the Asian Football Confederation with a Toyota Innova multi-purpose vehicle during a ceremony at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur at the end of February.

The Japanese automobile company has been an official sponsor of the AFC's National Team Programme since 2012, and at the start of this year, strengthened its involvement by committing to the AFC's Club Programme for a further two years in addition to their existing agreement.

Having added to their National Programme involvement which includes the AFC Asian Cup, Toyota now also supports events including the AFC Champions League and AFC Cup.

"As a symbol of Toyota's partnership with the AFC, a Toyota Innova is presented to the AFC," said Masanao Tomozoe, President and CEO, Toyota Motor Sales and Marketing Corporation.

"The Innova is a regional model developed for Toyota's customers in Asia. It has been long loved for nearly 40 years, giving it, I believe, something in common with the AFC's football promotion activities



rooted in various countries in Asia.

"Going forward, Toyota, in its partnership with the AFC, intends to promote grassroots activities, such as football clinics and programmes for the youths and children, through its distributor and dealer network in Asia, the Middle East and Australia.

"We would be grateful if such activities are able to contribute, even in the smallest way, to the prosperity the AFC aims to achieve for the sport of football in Asia."

The addition of the Club Programme to their existing National Programme involvement has seen Toyota build on a relationship which began when the Japanese automobile company first sponsored the AFC Champions League in 2005.

"Football in Asia is going from strength to strength as the recent AFC Asian Cup demonstrated. It is through the contribution of such great partners like Toyota that Asian football has been able to grow and is gaining momentum globally," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Alex Soosay.

"Sponsor support is crucial for the AFC in our education programmes and grassroots and youth initiatives, creating a foundation for sustainable success for football in Asia."

Women Futsal Referees Create History

Seven women created history in March by becoming the first AFC Women Futsal Referees.

The trailblazing women completed a two-day orientation programme before joining the four-day AFC Futsal Referees course which started at the beginning of March, an annual refresher which makes up Part Three of the AFC Refereeing Seminar 2015.

Altogether, 33 referees took part in the main course which prepares referees who will be officiating in AFC and other international futsal tournaments.

"It's the first time we have women futsal referees in our seminar. This is a step forward and AFC now have all the different categories of referees listed in its panel," said Yoshimi Ogawa, Director of the AFC Referees Department.



Two futsal referees and one futsal referee instructor from UEFA were also involved in the course as part of the exchange programme which began in 2009.

"The exchange programme has been very beneficial to the AFC and has helped raise the level of futsal refereeing in Asia," added Ogawa.

"I hope that this will be extended to competitions where referees and instructors from AFC can get the opportunity to learn from the experience of being involved in the tournaments in Europe."

As in all referee courses, the content included theoretical and practical sessions which touch on the technical area of refereeing and latest developments, as well as updates on the futsal laws of the game and their interpretation.

Refereeing Development Meetings Conclude

The final meetings between the AFC Pilot Member Association Project for Refereeing Development and the Oman Football Association and the Jordan Football Association took place in March.

The AFC Pilot Member Association Project for Refereeing is aimed at assisting participating Member Associations improve their refereeing administration.

In Muscat, chairman of the Oman Football Association (OFA) Referees Committee Humaid Al Jabri headed the OFA delegation, while AFC Head of Referees Operation Section Abdul Razak Anuar led the team from the continental football body during the meeting.

Several matters were discussed during the meeting including the OFA's Strategic Plan introduced last year, better teaching material and referees performance review, improved training for referee instructors and assessors.

"Within a period of two years, the OFA Referees Department has implemented all the recommendations

made by AFC and they have learned many things," said Al Jabri. "We still have more things to implement and are looking forward to more support from AFC even after this project ends."

In Amman, the final meeting was held at the Jordan Football Association (JFA) headquarters and delegates expressed their view that Jordan's refereeing administration had benefited tremendously from the project and confirmed that it had followed all of AFC's recommendations for improvement and vowed to implement more development.

Director of Referees Salem Mujghef headed the JFA delegation, while Referees Department's Head of Referees Operation Section Abdul Razak Anuar led the AFC team during the meeting.

"It has been a good two years since AFC and JFA first came together to discuss how to chart the way upward for the JFA Referees Department," said Mujghef.

No Evidence Of Match Fixing At Asian Cup

The extensive integrity action plan and key stakeholder collaboration implemented to combat the threat of match-fixing during the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 was highly successful with no evidence of match manipulation uncovered at the tournament.

The planning and cooperation between the AFC and its key partners, including the Australian Government and law enforcement authorities, Football Federation Australia, the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 Local Organising Committee and betting monitoring service provider Sportradar was pivotal in proactively upholding the integrity of the tournament.

"It is extremely encouraging to see that the detailed integrity planning and collaboration for our premier tournament, the AFC Asian Cup, was a success. This would not have been possible without the support and focused efforts of each stakeholder and in particular Australian law enforcement and Sportradar, who worked hand-in hand with AFC's Integrity Unit throughout the tournament," said AFC General Secretary Dato' Alex Soosay.

"The effective implementation of this action plan could be a blueprint for other Asian sporting events and sports governing bodies. Continued efforts will be made to ensure a similar outcome for future AFC competitions. Upholding the integrity of all our competitions remains a

key priority for AFC."

The AFC Integrity Action Plan for the tournament was made up of several core elements, including awareness-raising and training of players, team officials and match officials before the event and detailed and technologically advanced monitoring of global betting markets through Sportradar's Fraud Detection System.

Other key components of the strategy were suspicious-activity reporting through AFC's confidential reporting mechanism and utilisation of the Australian Crime Stoppers program.

In addition, collaborative incident response procedures between AFC and the Australian law enforcement authorities were established and tested, with unprecedented levels of cooperation and mutual support.

"FFA takes the issue of match-fixing very seriously and as part of its integrity strategy has been working closely with law enforcement and Sportradar over recent years," said Football Federation Australia CEO David Gallop.

"FFA welcomed the AFC's proactive approach which demonstrates that planning, information exchange and cooperation among all stakeholders are critical to combating match-fixing. The Asian Cup overall was a great success for football in Australia and the Asian region with record crowds and TV audiences. The integrity of such major tournaments is integral to the popularity and growth of football."



AFC Holds Competitions Calendar Workshop

A workshop for the AFC Competitions Calendar 2016-2018 took place at AFC House in February.

The AFC Competitions Calendar is produced by the AFC Competitions Division and provides a guideline for Member Associations to plan their activities. It is also designed to accommodate the best possible competition dates for all parties concerned.

The calendar is, therefore, of vital importance to players, clubs, participating Member Associations, competition-hosting Member Associations and match officials.

"The competitions calendar is always an interesting topic to the Member Associations, domestic leagues, clubs and the AFC," said AFC Deputy General Secretary



Dato' Windsor John.

"This workshop provides a chance for all the participants, who are representatives from the concerned Member Associations, to give their feedback, ideas, comments and suggestions regarding our competitions calendar, which we will then collate and present to the relevant committees. There will also be a meeting with the Task Force Members

of the Competitions Calendar after the workshop.

"We know the challenges and difficulties the Member Associations face, therefore, we will take into account all elements in all the regions and I'm sure with your co-operation and expertise of the Task Force Members, we will be able to create a calendar that will be good for all."

Referees Complete England Stint

Four members of the AFC Project Future Referees Batch 2012 visited England as guests of the Professional Game Match Officials Limited, the body which organises refereeing in the English Premier League.

Jin Jingyuan of China, Venkatesh Ramachandran from India, Qatari Abdul Rahman Al Marri and UAE's Omar Mohamed Ahmed Hassan enjoyed a six-day programme which was the sixth time such a visit had taken place due to a close relationship between the AFC and the Professional Game Match Officials Limited (PGMOL)

The quartet had an opportunity to watch Premier League games, visit Wembley Stadium, train with the PGMOL and some of the top referees in England as well as referees officiating matches in the English U-21 and Under-18 Youth Leagues.

"This was a great learning experience for me. I also received excellent advice from Steve Dunn, one of the full-time PGMOL Senior Referee Coaches," said Venkatesh, who refereed a match between

Wolverhampton Wanderers and Stoke City.

"He pointed out aspects of my refereeing which I should work on such as positioning, use of the whistle and managing players."



Colley Named Most Outstanding Futsal Referee

Australia's Daniel Colley has been named as the most outstanding AFC Futsal Referee for 2014.

The 36-year-old police officer received a plaque from AFC Deputy General Secretary Dato' Windsor John during the closing ceremony of an AFC Futsal Referee Course 2015 in Kuala Lumpur at the start of March.

"AFC believes that the investment will produce results in improved performances," said Dato' Windsor during the closing ceremony.

"As the teams prepare well, the referees must also be equally prepared. They must have good fitness and also sound technical knowledge. Modern futsal is growing and the referees must be aware of the latest trends and developments taking place in the world of futsal.

"It's the first time the AFC is organising a course for Women Futsal Referees. Seven women have created history by becoming the first AFC Women Futsal Referees. As they make history, they will also set the standards,

thus they have to make sure that they are able to carry out this important task well."

Thirty-three participants including some from UEFA attended the four-day AFC Futsal Referees Course, which forms part of the UEFA-AFC exchange programme that started in 2009.



Focus On Fitness Strategy

March's five-day AFC Fitness Coaching Instructor Level 2 Course closed with the focus now shifting to the implementation of the strategies across Asia following almost a decade of content development.

The course covered various theoretical and practical lessons and was delivered to the instructors by Copenhagen University's Professor of Human Physiology and Exercise Physiology Jens Bangsbo and Universities of the Faroe Islands and Gothenburg's Associate Professor Magni Mohr.

"After almost a decade of content development for our AFC fitness courses and very specific instructors' identification, training and refinement by Professor Bangsbo and Associate Professor Mohr, we can finally realise the fruition of our labour," said Mohamed Basir of

the AFC Technical Division.

"We can now really focus on the next phase, which is consistent implementation throughout our vast continent. The roll-out of our fitness courses and the updated fitness contents in our C, B, A and Pro-Diploma coaching courses will see a whole new generation of fitness coaches who will be armed with knowledge to develop this aspect of the game.

"We remain indebted to both Professor Bangsbo and Associate Professor Mohr for the years of dedication and patient work expended in this long process and our panel of Fitness Instructors for their commitment and constant yearning for knowledge to be competent educators.

"We assure all of them that AFC shall continue to support all endeavours to be at the cutting edge of football fitness education."

PAKHTAKOR STADIUM

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Pakhtakor Stadium was built in 1956 coinciding with the establishment of Uzbekistan club side Pakhtakor. And after the residents of Tashkent helped build the stadium, Pakhtakor played their first match at their 56,000 capacity new home on August 20 and

continued to use the venue throughout their 22 seasons in the Soviet League and into the current Uzbek League. Located in the centre of Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent on the edge of a picturesque park, with its distinctive blue and yellow seats – the colours of home side Pakhtakor – the venue is also used by the Uzbekistan national team as well as other Uzbek League sides.

Pakhtakor Stadium, which now has a capacity of 34,000, hosted the finals of the AFC U-16 Championship in both 2008 and 2010 as well as the 2014 FIFA World Cup play-off between Uzbekistan and Jordan. Renovations in 2008 upgraded all the seats from wood to plastic, while new changing rooms and a VIP area was added along with a new giant screen.



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“It is the greatest moment so far in my career. Looking back, I didn’t think that I would be involved in all the games and Ange told me after he didn’t expect me to be involved in as many games.”

Massimo Luongo
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