

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 18

PLUS

ALI ADNAN

Iraq defender on breaking boundaries both on and off the pitch



NTV BELEZA

An in-depth look at one of Japan's most successful women's football teams

ODIL AHMEDOV

Uzbekistan captain eyeing FIFA World Cup qualification as well as ACL success with Shanghai SIPG

ISSUE
18

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Western Sydney Wanderers' youngster on journey from refugee camp to Australia, ACL debut and future aspirations



KAWIN THAMSATCHANAN

Thailand's goalkeeper has lofty ambitions with War Elephants and aims for ACL progression with Muangthong United



AMIR HOSSEIN PEYROVANI

Islamic Republic of Iran U-20 coach looks ahead to 2017 FIFA U-20 World Cup as Central Asians return after 16-year absence

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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Dear friends,

It has been an historic start to 2017 for football in Asia, as once again the AFC breaks new ground in its pinnacle club competition, the AFC Champions League.

On February 22, 2017 at Tianhe Stadium in Guangzhou, Chan Yuen-ting became the first female coach to lead a club side into a men's continental competition. Her Eastern SC team from Hong Kong took on the two-time AFC Champions League winners Guangzhou Evergrande.

It is another moment during 12 months of achievements that all Asian football can be proud of as it shows once more the diversity within our Confederation.

In the objectives of the AFC's Vision and Mission, we set the target of not only seeing more successful Asian teams on the global stage but also to provide top-level competition.

That has been wonderfully illustrated by Kashima Antlers, Japan's champions, taking the mighty Real Madrid to extra time in the FIFA Club World Cup - but also by the level of competition which now exists in the AFC Champions League.

There is no doubt that the additional prize money allocated to the winners of the AFC Champions League and the re-formatted AFC Cup have added to the competitiveness of the last two seasons - and we expect for years to come.

Not only has our club football started with intense rivalry but also the international game, with the return of the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers Final Round Russia 2018 and the final qualifying campaign for the remaining places in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.

The draws were held in Abu Dhabi for the qualifying rounds in which 24 teams will compete to provide 12 more finalists to join the 12 teams who are already competing in the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers.

For the first time we will have 24 teams in the finals in the UAE, providing opportunities for teams that have not qualified before to take part in our biggest event. This is an example of how the AFC will continue to grow the sport and increase engagement across the continent.

We also had the draw for the AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018 qualifiers which was held in Amman, and Malaysia hosted the AFC Beach Soccer tournament which provided the three Asian representatives for the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup to be held in the Bahamas at the end of April.

Football continues to excite and to unite cultures and people across the continent. An exciting time reflected in this AFC Quarterly magazine.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



At the heart of the image

Gallery



Historic Moment

The AFC Champions League's first-ever female coach Chan Yuen-ting meets FIFA World Cup-winner Luiz Felipe Scolari ahead of Eastern SC's clash with two-time winners Guangzhou Evergrande at the end of February.

Gallery



Hold The Line

Australia defence alert as Iraq attack jostles for space as the pair play out a 1-1 draw in Group B of the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 qualifying campaign in March.

Gallery



Vocal Support

Fans enjoy FC Istiklol's 2017 AFC Cup opener as Tajikistan champions and 2015 runners-up defeat FC Dordoi of the Kyrgyz Republic 2-0 in March.

Gallery



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Beach Kings
.....

Mohammad Ahmadzadeh performs acrobatics as the Islamic Republic of Iran defeat the United Arab Emirates 7-2 in March's AFC Beach Soccer Championship Malaysia 2017 final to lift a second continental crown.



IR Iran Land Second Beach Soccer Crown

DOMINANT DISPLAY FROM ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN SAW THE CENTRAL ASIANS CLAIM A SECOND AFC BEACH SOCCER CHAMPIONSHIP TITLE AFTER DEFEATING THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES IN MARCH'S FINAL.

Islamic Republic of Iran claimed the AFC Beach Soccer Championship Malaysia 2017 after recording a 7-2 win over the United Arab Emirates in March's final. Moslem Mesigar tapped home to hand his side an early lead before IR Iran immediately doubled their advantage through Seyed Hosseini's strike. With the UAE failing to make an impression, IR Iran netted again as Mohammadali Mokhtari's penalty rounded off a fine first period for the Iranians. Mesigar's cool header found the net past keeper Humaid Jamal to make it 4-0. It was to be Jamal who eventually dragged the UAE back into the game with an impressive finish four minutes from time, before Haitham Mohamed scored the Emiratis' second. It was, however, not to be for the UAE, as a Seyed Nazem free-kick, followed by

Amir Akbari's volley and a Mokhtari penalty sealed a win - and the title - for the Iranians. "We were ready for this game and we knew that the UAE were tired as it was a tough semi-final game against Lebanon for them," IR Iran coach Mohammad Mirshamsi said. "I think today's game was easy for us. The most important advantage that we had over the UAE today was physical fitness. We were thankful for that." IR Iran and runners-up UAE as well as third placed finishers Japan secured qualification to represent Asia at April's 2017 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup to be played in the Bahamas. "We had aimed to become champions but we couldn't achieve that. But I am proud of my team's attitude and achievement," said UAE coach Mohamed Abbas.

"Now we have to focus on the World Cup. We will be looking at some potential new players to join the squad and will select the best. We'll also train more." IR Iran player Mokhtari won the Most Valuable Player and Top Scorer awards. The 26-year-old scored a total of 12 goals, including two in the final against the United Arab Emirates, a double in IR Iran's semi-final defeat of Japan, four against hosts Malaysia in their campaign opener, three against China and one in his side's win over Bahrain. "The most important thing was to win the championship and going forward to prepare for the World Cup, which definitely will be a different tournament from the Asian championship," said Mokhtari. "I'll give my best and do even better in the World Cup."



AFC And MAs Celebrate Women's Football Day

AFC WOMEN'S FOOTBALL DAY IS CELEBRATED ACROSS THE CONTINENT BY ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION AND MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS ON MARCH 8, COINCIDING WITH INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY.

The AFC and its Member Associations observed the AFC Women's Football Day on March 8, which coincided with International Women's Day. AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa said: "Women's football has special significance across the AFC as we excel on the world stage. Asia is the world's biggest football community and women and girls are an important part of the future success of the game in the continent. Fulfilling Asia's football potential is possible only if it includes everyone: women, men, boys and girls." This year, 30 AFC MAs from Bhutan to Guam, from IR Iran and Singapore to the United Arab Emirates marked the AFC Women's Football Day with festivals, tournaments, workshops, skills clinics and seminars involving children and

adults, women's national team players and other women's football role models to celebrate the annual continent-wide campaign dedicated to the promotion and development of women's football. AFC Head of Women's Football Development Bai Lili said: "Women's football in Asia is already world class, we have a FIFA World Cup winner in Japan, FIFA age-group champions from DPR Korea and five teams among the top twenty teams in the world. "But we have some more work to do in lifting the level across all our MAs, who are very diverse. We continue to see encouraging developments around the continent, with a steady increase in the number of MAs taking part in the AFC youth competitions. This is great news for the future of the women's game in our continent." A significant milestone for women's football

in Asia was reached in October last year as the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup final was dominated by AFC MAs: the match was played in Jordan, and in addition to the location, everyone on the pitch represented the AFC: the final match was played between DPR Korea and Japan and the refereeing team were from Australia and India. DPR Korea went on to win the final, as well as the FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup in December. The AFC women's youth competitions will take place later this year, with the AFC U-16 Women's Championship played on 9-23 September in Thailand and the AFC U-19 Women's Championship on 14-28 October in China P.R. The qualifiers for the AFC Women's Asian Cup, meanwhile, will be played in April in DPR Korea, Palestine, Tajikistan and Vietnam. The final tournament will take place in April next year in Jordan.



Draw For FIFA U-20 World Cup Takes Place

Asian sides learned their FIFA U-20 World Cup Korea Republic 2017 opponents following the tournament's official draw in Suwon in March.

Asia will have five teams flying the continent's flag at the global extravaganza - Japan, Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Vietnam who all qualified thanks to their top four finishes at last year's AFC U-19 Championship, while Korea Republic will appear as hosts.

At a memorable AFC U-19 Championship in Bahrain last October, Japan defeated Saudi Arabia on penalties following a 0-0 draw in the final at Bahrain National Stadium in Riffa to lift their first continental U-19 title.

Meanwhile, beaten semi-finalists IR Iran and Vietnam ensured their place at the FIFA U-20 World Cup after placing in the final four teams in Bahrain following quarter-final wins over Uzbekistan and the hosts respectively. For the Southeast Asians, this will represent a first-ever appearance at the U-20 finals.

Asia has a good record at the FIFA U-20 tournament with Qatar (1981) and Japan (1999) having finished as runners-up before while Korea (1983) and Iraq (2013) have placed third. However, no Asian side has yet to be crowned champions.

In this year's edition, Korea Republic will meet Guinea, who return after a 38-year

Group A	Korea Republic • Guinea • Argentina • England
Group B	Venezuela • Germany • Vanuatu • Mexico
Group C	Zambia • Portugal • IR Iran • Costa Rica
Group D	South Africa • Japan • Italy • Uruguay
Group E	France • Honduras • Vietnam • New Zealand
Group F	Ecuador • USA • Saudi Arabia • Senegal

absence from the tournament, six-time FIFA U-20 champions Argentina, as well as England in Group A.

In Group C, IR Iran will come up against African champions Zambia, Portugal and Costa Rica, who will be appearing at their ninth U-20 FIFA World Cup.

Reigning 2016 AFC U-19 champions

Japan will face South Africa, Italy and CONMEBOL champions Uruguay in Group D.

Vietnam will have their work out to progress from Group E where they have France, Honduras and recently crowned Oceania Football Confederation champions New Zealand for company.

Meanwhile, AFC U-19 Championship runners-up Saudi Arabia are grouped with Ecuador, USA who will be making their maiden appearance, and Senegal in Group F.

The competition is set to get underway on May 20 with former winners Germany taking on Venezuela in the tournament's opening tie in Daejeon.

The five other host cities are Jeonju, Seogwipo, Incheon, Cheonan and Suwon, where the final will be staged on June 11.

It will be the third time Korea Republic has hosted a FIFA World Cup having co-hosted the 2002 FIFA World Cup – at which the Koreans came fourth – and the 2007 FIFA U-17 World Cup.



AFC U-23 Championship 2018 Teams Learn Their Opponents

Forty AFC U-23 Championship China 2018 hopefuls discovered their qualifying opponents during the stage's official draw at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in March.

The ten group winners and five best second-placed teams among all the groups will advance to the finals.

Although directly qualified as the finals host, China expressed interest to participate in the qualifying stage. Therefore, if China finish top of their group or finish among the five best second-placed teams, the next (sixth) second-placed team will qualify to the final stage of the competition in January, 2018.

Some of the stand-out qualifying fixtures see defending champions Japan face a mouth-

watering tie with hosts China in Group J while also being paired with Southeast Asian duo Cambodia and the Philippines.

Group B will also see a repeat of the inaugural final between 2014 champions Iraq and runners-up Saudi Arabia with the young Green Falcons looking to avenge the 1-0 loss in Muscat. Bahrain and Afghanistan round up the four sides that will play their qualifiers in Saudi Arabia.

Jordan finished third place in that inaugural tournament, after defeating Korea Republic on penalties at Seeb Stadium, and their road to China 2018 will see them play their Group E qualifiers in Palestine against the hosts, Tajikistan, and Bangladesh.

Korea, meanwhile, followed up their fourth place in Oman with a runners-up spot at Qatar

2016 and the East Asians will be looking to go one better in next year's competition. To get there, though, they will first have to negotiate the challenge of Vietnam, Timor-Leste and Macau in Group I.

AFC U23 Championship 2016 hosts Qatar fell at the final hurdle in the quest for a place at the Summer Olympics in Rio after they finished fourth, their best-ever finish at the U23 Championship.

The West Asians will look to build on that performance and qualify from Group C where they face Syria, India and Turkmenistan.

The qualifiers will take place from July 19 to 23, 2017 in the respective host countries which are Kyrgyz Republic, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Palestine, Myanmar, DPR Korea, Thailand and China.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H	Group I	Group J
IR Iran	Iraq	Qatar	UAE	Jordan	Australia	DPR Korea	Thailand	Korea Republic	Japan
Oman	Saudi Arabia	Syria	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Myanmar	Laos	Indonesia	Vietnam	China
Kyrgyz Republic	Bahrain	India	Lebanon	Palestine	Singapore	Chinese Taipei	Malaysia	Timor-Leste	Cambodia
Sri Lanka	Afghanistan	Turkmenistan	Nepal	Bangladesh	Brunei Darussalam	Hong Kong	Mongolia	Macau	Philippines



LEADER OF THE PACK

After spending six seasons in Russia, Odil Ahmedov joined Shanghai SIPG at the beginning of the year, and the midfielder is now aiming for AFC Champions League glory with his new club as well as leading the White Wolves of Uzbekistan's charge towards a first-ever FIFA World Cup.

By: Andrew Strong Photos: Lagardère Sports





Since the dismantling of the former Soviet Union in 1991, the nation of Uzbekistan has undergone profound governmental, societal and cultural changes. Growing up in this post-independent state, football can represent both a challenge and an opportunity, with political stability understandably taking precedence over sporting success.

The lack of modern sporting facilities and infrastructure can at once stunt the development of raw talent whilst simultaneously help foster an environment in which only those who remain entirely dedicated to their footballing future have even a remote chance of making a career out of the game, never mind spearheading their country's drive toward a first ever FIFA World Cup appearance.

Growing up in the Namangan region of what was then known as the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, current Uzbekistan captain Odil Ahmedov's opportunities to showcase or develop his talent were limited. This prompted him to take a leap of faith and relocate to the nation's capital city.

"When I was very young, I always loved football and was training all the time," said Ahmedov, who signed for Chinese Super League side Shanghai SIPG at the beginning of 2017. "There were very few competitions or

tournaments or even coaches, which is why I took myself to Tashkent, to the sports university there."

It was this keen desire to explore the outer reaches of his talents, combined with a

"THE WHOLE TEAM IS VERY FRIENDLY WHICH MAKES ADJUSTING VERY EASY. BUT THE MAIN THING HAS ALWAYS CALL ON HIM - ANY MISTAKES OR PROBLEMS, HE IS VERY UNDERSTANDING AND CAN RESOLVE THEM IMMEDIATELY."

concerted government effort towards the end of the decade to raise the level of the sport in the country, that would later make him a star in his homeland, and attract regular attention from a host of top clubs in Europe and Asia throughout his career.

"Towards the end of the '90s, our government saw a big opportunity to develop its football culture and introduced a number of changes, which I certainly benefitted from," explained the midfielder.

Those changes saw local facilities begin to gradually increase both in quantity and quality, something which has accelerated under the

country's new presidency, and something Ahmedov hopes will see others follow in his footsteps for generations to come.

"Our government has done a lot to help young players and students to improve through new facilities and sports centres," he noted. "I hope in the future these changes can take the Uzbekistan national team to the next level."

As a youngster, former Pakhtakor midfielder and Uzbek international Mirjalol Qosimov was Ahmedov's idol and, although their playing career paths never crossed, the current national team captain would come under his idol's tutelage once Qosimov took the reins as Uzbekistan head coach for the first time in September 2008.

"He is a legend in Uzbekistan," enthused Ahmedov. "Everybody loves him, he was a superstar of the Uzbek football world. I liked watching him play and train, and learnt many things from him."

Beginning his career in a much more defensive capacity to that which he currently occupies, Ahmedov's progression further forward, combined with the player's penchant for a long-range effort, certainly bear the hallmarks of his mentor's game. The Uzbek captain, however, knows that in his box-to-box midfield role he must balance attack and defence.

"At the beginning of my career, I started at number six then moved to nine, so now I'm a

central midfielder but also help the attack," said Ahmedov. "I always try to get into good positions to score on the pitch, whether that's from short or long distance. But my main job is to win the ball back and give to my teammates."

Making his club debut at 18 years old, Ahmedov made an instant impression with Tashkent giants Pakhtakor, as he helped the team to claim their fifth consecutive league title in his first season with the senior squad. His performances soon caught the eye of a number of Russian Premier League clubs, however, in a decision made more and more infrequently by similar promising talents in modern football, he decided to remain with the club until 2011.

"I don't think I was ready to move to another club in Europe," admitted Ahmedov. "That's why my coach and I decided it would be best to stay at the club to gain experience before moving."

Whilst the next four years saw him collect another league title, two Uzbek Cups, the 2007 CIS Cup, and secure the first of his four Uzbekistan Player of the Year Awards, by 2011 it was inevitable that the player would be destined to hit even greater heights.

At that year's AFC Asian Cup, Ahmedov announced himself to the continent, as well as the wider world, in spectacular fashion by rifling a long-range drive from 35 metres into the top corner in the opening game of the tournament against the hosts, Qatar.

"The best goal I have ever scored, as far as

Bottom Left AFC Asian Cup 2011

Left AFC Asian Cup 2015

Above World Cup Qualifiers 2018

"IF WE MAKE IT TO THE WORLD CUP IT WOULD BE AMAZING FOR ME, THE TEAM AND THE WHOLE COUNTRY. IT WOULD BE SOMETHING INCREDIBLE, I CAN'T EVEN DESCRIBE IT."

I can remember," said the 29-year-old, whose two goals and consistent commanding displays throughout the tournament propelled Uzbekistan to the semi-finals for the first time in their history.

Such performances on the international stage soon brought suitors from all corners of the globe, with clubs from England, France, Spain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Korea Republic joining their Russian counterparts in monitoring him. Ultimately, it was Anzhi Makhachkala, backed by a new billionaire owner, Suleyman Kerimov, who secured his signature.

"There was a lot of interest from different clubs but Anzhi were the only club to really put forward a firm offer," he explained. "It was only after I signed with Anzhi that the other teams seemed to come forward."

Ahmedov had no problem adapting to life in Russia and was voted the club's best player at

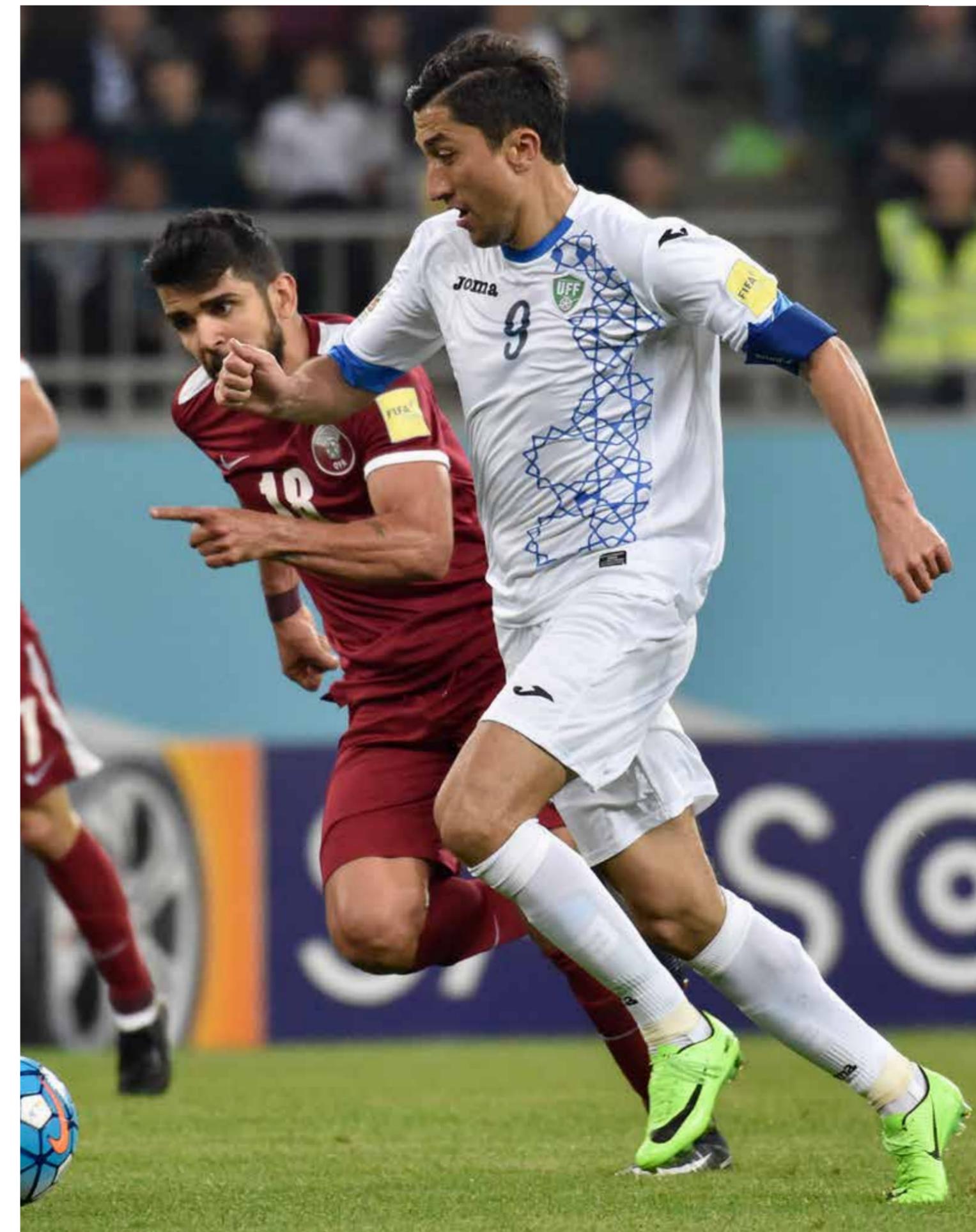
the end of his debut season with Anzhi, ahead of distinguished names like Samuel Eto'o, Roberto Carlos and Yuri Zhirkov. Key to the smooth transition was the language,

"Coming from the Soviet Union and being able to speak Russian certainly helped," acknowledged Ahmedov. "The team had some huge players like Samuel Eto'o and Roberto Carlos so adjusting to that level was a little difficult at first. But after that period of adjustment we became good friends and good teammates."

Despite respective fifth and third place finishes in the Russian Premier League in his first two seasons with the club, in 2013 Kerimov slashed the Anzhi's budget and offloaded a raft of the side's most influential players in a radical shift in approach. With the team's best talents now gone, Ahmedov was powerless to prevent his side being relegated to the Russian Football National League following a dismal campaign, and left for up and coming Russian Premier League side, FC Krasnodar.

"The main reason I left Anzhi was due to management problems," said Ahmedov. "After the move to Krasnodar, the first season went very well with a very spirited team, and we finished the season in third place."

That first season went very well for the player on a personal level too, as Ahmedov again collected the club's player of the year



award, as well as picking up his third Uzbekistan Footballer of the Year accolade. He is quick to play down his apparent innate ability to settle into a side and make an immediate impact, preferring to focus instead on the merits of the coaches and team around him - something he repeated following his arrival at Shanghai SIPG.

"The whole team is very friendly which makes adjusting very easy. But the main thing has been the coach. You can always call on him - any mistakes or problems, he is very understanding and can resolve them immediately," Ahmedov noted.

That coach, André Villas-Boas, has already stated that he was well aware of the midfielder from his time in Russia. When asked how big a factor the Portuguese coach was in his move to Shanghai, Ahmedov is unequivocal.

"I had many friends at Zenit [Saint Petersburg where Villas-Boas was formerly head coach], who told me all about his coaching style and personality, and he always sounded like a coach I would want to play for," explained Ahmedov. "So when I got the call from him to come and join SIPG, I didn't have to think twice before coming here. I can say he is the best coach I have ever worked with, and as a person he is a very good man."

Despite the draw of playing for a coach such as Villas-Boas playing a major factor in his decision to switch Krasnodar for Shanghai, Ahmedov also found himself fortunate enough to be able to lean on the opinions of international teammates Egor Krimets and Anzur Ismailov - both currently plying their trade in the Chinese Super League - before making the move.

"Before I came here, I was aware of the situation - the league, the lifestyle and so on. Talking with my friends in the national team, they gave me some good information about the country before coming here."

Unlike his compatriots, however, Ahmedov finds himself as a key component in his club's

Left & Above
2017 AFC Champions League

"I ALWAYS TRY TO GET INTO GOOD POSITIONS TO SCORE ON THE PITCH, WHETHER THAT'S FROM SHORT OR LONG DISTANCE. BUT MY MAIN JOB IS TO WIN THE BALL BACK AND GIVE TO MY TEAMMATES."

push for AFC Champions League glory this year, seven years after he last experienced the competition with Pakhtakor.

"Nowadays, the standard is very high," Ahmedov noted. "Whereas before it was normally the Japanese and Korean teams winning; now there are many teams who can play very well, including the Chinese and Australian teams, the quality has improved a lot."

"In this team now, we have a very good team spirit, very good foreign players and staff, and the relationship amongst the team is much better than it was [at Pakhtakor]." However when pushed on exactly how far he believes Shanghai SIPG can progress in only their second year in the competition, he is rather more reserved, "It's hard to say; it's football - nobody knows what will happen. But of course we want to win it."

Whilst aiming for glory at club level, Ahmedov is also focused on helping Uzbekistan navigate through a difficult Group A, which also includes China and thus several of his club teammates, in order to reach the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018.

Uzbekistan, who are aiming to qualify for their first ever FIFA World Cup, currently occupy third place in the standings with the top two progressing to Russia and third competing in a continental play-off. China, meanwhile, sit second from bottom with chances of progression all but extinguished.

Ahmedov's fine curling free-kick on Matchday Seven gave the Central Asians a slender 1-0 win over Qatar in March as Uzbekistan rebounded from a 1-0 defeat to Syria five days earlier. With three games to play, and ahead of a meeting with China in August, the White Wolves are just a point behind second-placed Korea Republic.

"We are all professionals, whether it's playing for the national team or for my club. When we play for our countries it doesn't affect the relationships between players at the club. I've wished them luck and hope they play well, and we will meet them when they play Uzbekistan," noted Ahmedov, whose country will round off their campaign with a match against the Koreans in Tashkent in September.

"If we make it to the World Cup it would be amazing for me, the team and the whole country. It would be something incredible, I can't even describe it. Being the first time going to the FIFA World Cup - the whole country wants to see the team make it."

And amongst the 32 million population desperate for the Central Asians to make history and reach the FIFA World Cup finals in 2018, one person who will be keeping a keen eye on proceedings - in between takes, that is - is Yoqub Ahmedov, Odil's older brother and household name in Uzbekistan, who stars in hit drama, *Sensiz*.

When asked who is the bigger celebrity in his homeland, Odil is clear on the distinction between the brothers' two sets of fans.

"Well wherever we go in Uzbekistan it seems we both get recognised," he said. "But I think women like actors more, while the men seem to like me more because I'm a football player."

If Ahmedov were to lead his country out in Russia in 2018 in what would be Uzbekistan's first World Cup appearance, he may just win over a few of his brother's fans.



NATIONAL HERO

ALI ADNAN GRABBED GLOBAL HEADLINES WHEN HE APPEARED WITH THE IRAQI ARMY ON THE FRONTLINES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ISIS IN 2014. ON THE FOOTBALL PITCH HE IS FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ONE OF HIS COUNTRY'S ALL-TIME GREATS, HIS UNCLE ALI KHADIM, AND IN 2015 BECAME THE FIRST-EVER IRAQI TO PLAY IN SERIE A WHEN HE SIGNED FOR ITALIAN SIDE UDINESE.

By: Michael Church Photos: Lagardère Sports





Ali Adnan was already on his way to making a name for himself before the photographs that amplified his fame were uploaded onto the Internet. Clad in military fatigues and surrounded by members of the Iraqi armed forces, the rumours circulated around the world.

Iraq's 'Gareth Bale' Ali Adnan Takes Up Arms To Fight ISIS Jihadists ran the headline on The International Business Times website as Adnan, then just 20 years old and having signed a contract with Turkey's Rizespor, stared intensely from out of the computer screen.

Side-by-side not only with the members of Iraq's armed forces, Adnan stands with his coach and mentor Hakim Shaker, the man who led the country's team – including Adnan – to the semi-finals of the FIFA U20 World Cup. Military hardware is present in abundance.

Taken in the summer of 2014, the images are a powerful statement of Adnan's love of his country and his people. But in some ways, the pictures lack the clout of the young star's words when he recounts that day almost three years ago.

"I felt, as an Iraqi, I have to defend my country, especially against ISIS," he says. "These terrorists kill and cause damage, not only in Iraq but the whole world. As a player I give everything, but I felt it was not enough. I have to support my Army, my brothers, my friends and my relatives. I wanted to express this feeling with my coach, Hakim Shaker. It was a sign to the whole armed forces and all Iraqis that I'm Iraqi and I want to defend my country. I am ready, now, at any time to defend my country, in football and in the war against terrorism.

"It was a great feeling, really, to be among those people who are defending my country. This is my country and I belong to it and I owe everything to my country, so it was a great feeling to be there. I wish I could do much more at that time. I want to be like those who leave their families, their towns, their friends and who came to defend our country. It was a great feeling for me and I wish I could do more in football and in defending my country.

"I am ready to do anything at any time for my country. Even if I have to quit football. If I have to choose between defending my country and football, I would choose to defend my country."

Those are powerful words from a young man who, at just 23 years of age, has already

established himself among the elite of the Asian game, and whose departure from the scene – were it to happen – would be a huge loss to Iraq and the continent as a whole.

Fortunately, Adnan's commitment to the cause of achieving as much success as possible for his homeland means early retirement is unlikely. Despite the headlines and the sensational stories, he did not take up arms, but instead returned to Turkey, where he was just about to start the next stage of a career that was already showing promise.

"The reaction of my club was very positive," says Adnan. "They understood why I did that and the media – not just in Turkey but even in Europe – called me The Iraqi Lion. I explained to them why I did this and they responded very positively and they understood the reasons behind wearing the military uniform and going to the front and it was something positive and accepted by them.

"I had a very nice response from the president of my club. He called me. The situation at that time was very difficult, the airport in Baghdad was closed with no flights. He said he was ready to send a special plane to take me back to Turkey.

He understood what I was doing and he supported me. I managed to get back okay."

Born into a family with a footballing pedigree of significance, Adnan was always destined to make an impact on the game in Iraq. His father, Adnan Kadhim, was one of the leading players in the Iraqi league during the nation's golden period of the 1970s and 1980s. Such was the strength in depth within Iraq, his father never progressed to the senior national team despite playing in the country's 1977 Asian Youth Championship winning team.

His uncle, Ali Kadhim, did and went on to become one of the most feared strikers in the region, holding the record for the highest number of goals scored by an Iraqi in international football until it was surpassed by the legendary Hussain Saeed. He still stands in fourth on the all-time list, just behind Iraqi Asian Cup-winning icon Younus Mahmood. Not surprisingly, both men have had a major impact on the career of Adnan.

"Of course, this is something that's very good for a player," he says. "My father and my uncle were players and it had a positive effect on me. But it brings difficulties because there was pressure to become like them. My uncle was one of the most famous stars of football in Iraq. I want to be like him,

Left Asian Cup 2015 left

Right World Cup Qualifiers 2018

but I still have a long way to go.

"The pressure comes from outside. Inside my family I get advice and support from them all. My duty is to keep the name of my family shining. I have to protect the name of my family. When I need advice I go to my father, my uncle, my brothers. All of them support me and give me good advice. But the pressure comes from outside my family, from the media and others.

"I found support from people outside my family at the start of my career. I listened to their advice and criticism and I would like to thank them because they made the way clearer and easier for me. I took their advice, listened to what the media said. It's important for me to achieve at least what my father and my uncle did.

"I've seen a lot of videos of my uncle scoring goals. Of course, there was no internet or YouTube and the films I've seen weren't so clear but I have seen many. It had a great effect on me. He was a great player, people around me were always talking about him and my father and that was really good for me."

After starting his professional career with

Baghdad FC, Adnan's talent soon saw him stand out, even amongst the ranks of Iraq's gifted under 20 team that qualified for the FIFA U20 World Cup in Turkey after finishing as runners-up at the AFC U19 Championship in the United Arab Emirates a year earlier. Before long, he was making a return to the country where he had caught the eye of many, signing for Rizespor in 2013.

"Even before I went to Turkey and during my career in Iraq, I always found my father and my uncle beside me, encouraging me, advising me and helping me with what to do so since the beginning they have had a wonderful effect on me," he says.

"When I played for Iraq at the FIFA U20 World Cup, both of them told me: 'This is a very important occasion. This will introduce you to the world, so you have to make good use of taking part in this competition.' I think I was a success in the U20s and the evidence of this is that many teams showed interest, but my father and my uncle told me: 'You have to not join a big team. It might be difficult for you and you might not play. Go to a team like Rizespor and you will find the chance to play and this will develop your football.' I listened to them and I went to Rizespor. This is the most important advice



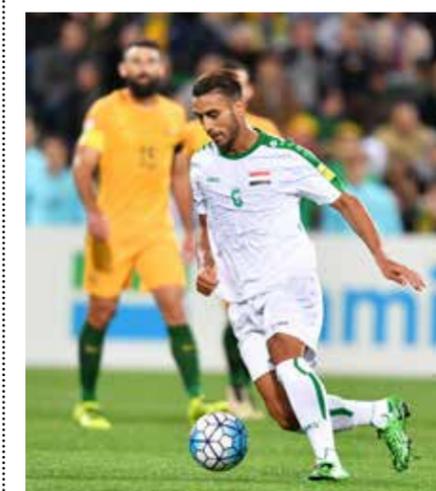
Above World Cup Qualifiers 2018

I have had from anyone else and it's how I managed to go to Udinese. It was the first step."

Although the learning curve was steep - "I didn't know what professionalism meant because I moved from Iraq" - Adnan quickly settled, learning the language and started to make an impact. By the end of his first season, he was already attracting interest from clubs beyond Turkey and at the end of his second he was moving again, this time to Italy's Serie A and Udinese.

"In the first season with Rizaspor, Udinese showed interest and came to the club asking for my transfer, but the club asked for a big amount," he says. "So it failed. In the second season I had some problems with the coach and he put me out of the team for many games and the interest became a little weaker than before. But Udinese continued to show interest in me. Roma also showed interest but the club wanted a lot of money. Then the club responded to the offer from Udinese and I agreed and I think joining Udinese is the second step towards moving to one of the big clubs.

"This is my ambition, but I have to do my best in Udinese. This season and next season I will do my best and do everything I can to try to move to another, bigger club. I



am facing two choices, either to go forward or to stay where I am. I want to go forward. There's no specific team, but the target is to play for a big club."

And then there is Iraq, a country that has produced so many talented players despite the on-going issues that have blighted the

nation for far too long. After the AFC Asian Cup-winning generation of Mahmood and Nashat Akram, Adnan is leading the way for the country's footballing future, even if he concedes that the current crop need time to establish their own legacy.

"This is a time of changing generations," he says. "It's not a problem to bring one or two new players into a team, but when the majority of the stars of the team have retired then it's difficult to compensate very quickly. Radhi Shenaishil, the head coach, has made a lot of changes, bridging the gap left by the former players and the new players need time. It's not easy to bring many new players in. I think we are going in the right way to create a new team for Iraq.

"(Mahmood and Akram) were great footballers, but they also needed time to be stars. It didn't happen in one hour or one day. They needed time. But now we have good talent and if they are given time and get to play games at a high standard and play good football they will be better than the others.

"We will have another Younus or another Nashat. But at this time we have a young team that needs experience and experience comes from playing football at the highest level. But I'm optimistic."



A FAMILY AFFAIR

AMIR HOSSEIN PEYROVANI WILL LEAD IR IRAN TO THE FINALS OF THE FIFA U20 WORLD CUP IN KOREA REPUBLIC IN MAY, FURTHER EXTENDING HIS FAMILY'S LENGTHY LINKS WITH THE BEAUTIFUL GAME.

By: Michael Church Photos: Lagardère Sports

Iran's standing within Asian football is unquestioned. Carlos Queiroz's Team Melli stand on top of the Asian rankings and the country proudly boasts one of the finest resumes in the continental game, with three consecutive AFC Asian Cups and four appearances at the FIFA World Cup since 1978.

Passionate fans pack out the Azadi Stadium while Persepolis and Esteghlal are two of the best-supported teams in west Asia. The country's players have featured in some of Europe's biggest clubs in the world's most demanding leagues.

And yet, despite all those achievements, IR Iran's under 20 team are appearing at the

FIFA U20 World Cup, to be held in Korea Republic in May, for the first time in 16 years after reaching the semi-finals of the AFC U19 Championships in Bahrain late last year.

Their qualification marked only the third time the country has booked a berth in the finals, joining the inaugural championship in Tunisia in 1977 and Nigeria in 2001 as the only times IR Iran's best young players have had the chance to test themselves against the world's best.

"Maybe the Peyrovani name is important in this," says Amir Hossein Peyrovani, the man who helmed the team that reached the last four in Bahrain. "Sixteen years ago my brother was a coach with the under 19s





team and when Iran last won the Asian Youth Championship, the captain of that team was my eldest brother.

"It seems each time Iran does well at under 19 level, there is a Peyrovani involved."

The Peyrovani clan certainly has a significant sporting pedigree. One of seven brothers, Amir Hossein grew up in an athletic household in Shiraz, a city in the south of the country often known as the cultural centre of the nation.

It was sport, however, rather than poetry or horticulture that consumed Amir Hossein and his siblings. His eldest brother, Gholam Hossein, represented IR Iran at the Asian Youth Championship in 1973 and 1974, when the country either won or shared the title at the start of a run of extraordinary success for the Persian nation.

He would go on to become a coach of note, leading IR Iran to fourth place at the 2010 Asian Games and played a role in nurturing the careers of numerous players who would go on to play for the Iranian national team.

Amir's younger brother, Afshin, is no stranger to success either. As a player, he represented IR Iran 66 times and was part of the squad that ended a 20-year absence from the World Cup when Team Melli

qualified for France in 1998. He now works as team manager within the current national team set-up.

"There are seven of us brothers," he says. "In my family going to the national team is very normal. My daughter, she is 14, and she is one of the national champions in swimming, then she went to rowing and after one year she was selected for the national team and was second in Asia. And now she's going to the US to go to university."

"Raham Peyrovani is the son of my brother and is one of best swimmers in Iran and he went to the Youth Olympics. We have others who have been in the water polo national team. My eldest brother was in the national football team and was coach of the national team and he was also one of the best coaches at finding players."

"Maybe more than 50 players went to the national after he found them: Mehdi Rahmati, Mehrzad Madanchi, Parvis Broumand, Hassan Bekhzadeh, Gohamreza Razaee and so many others."

As for Amir, he too had a promising career ahead of him. A striker in his youth, his chances of the big time came to an end with a cruciate ligament injury that forced him down a different route.

"A long time ago, my family had a lot of money," he says. "We had a huge house and

in that house we had a big pool and outside we had a small football field, and badminton court. We had a big garden and we could play there. We had so many brothers and we played together and every time we wanted to exercise we could do it at the house. Another of my brothers was in the national wrestling team."

"I started playing football seriously when I was 17 and I played for the local team, but I ruptured my ACL when I was in university and that's when I started coaching. Now I'm a doctor of physical education and I've been teaching in the university for 15 years."

"Fourteen or 15 years ago I started to coach, working in an academy, working then up to U14s, U17s and U19s and after that I worked in the league as an assistant coach, including with (former Esteghlal coach and Iranian goalkeeping legend) Nasser Hejazi and I worked with the Olympic team."

"I'm crazy about football. I love the game. All the day, 10 hours, 11 hours I'm watching games or doing something involved with football. My colleagues don't love me because they get tired of me always working!"

That passion has helped ensure IR Iran will finally make their return to the FIFA U20 World Cup, with Peyrovani's team drawn to meet Zambia, Portugal and Costa Rica in the

group stages after the draw was conducted in March. He hopes the team's qualification is the sign of a new approach in his home nation.

"In Iran the focus is on the national team," he says. "Maybe we need to change the view and show that the U23s and U20s are important."

"Football is important in our country. When the national team plays 100,000 people turn up at the stadium, and if the stadium could hold 200,000 then it would still be full. And it's the same when Persepolis and Esteghlal play. The TV and the journalists all focus on the game, too."

"But they don't have any focus on U19s or U17s, although that is changing. I had a meeting with the federation and told them if we want success we must make more training camps, selecting my players for the camp. The players must spend so many months in the camp and get to know one another."

"Some people think the players must be playing in their clubs. They think that is enough and maybe, in 40 years, we will be Asian champions again. But in 16 years we haven't been to the World Cup. At that time (in 2001) the federation focused on the clubs and the U17s and U20s were able to find good players from the clubs, and at that time both teams went to the World Cup."

Above AFC U19 Championship 2016

"I've been working with this team for 20 months and we have spent 10 months together and we have had 15 camps, each one is seven, eight, 10 days, so we've had about 150 days together. We train, we sleep, we eat together. We have done 200 training sessions and there's now good communication between the coaching staff and the players. Everyone knows my ideas."

"Two years ago when I started with this team, we didn't have any players who were playing in the first division. But now nine players are in the premier league teams. Sometimes they are the fixed players, sometimes they are the substitutes but it's something I'm happy about."

"Some people don't like what we have done and if we had failed at this competition I'm sure I would have been asked why we did what we did, because the clubs need the players. But I think the players are very close to me. I love God, because God helped us."

"We are getting a good atmosphere within the team and also in the country. But this is football: sometimes you are in the sky and the next day you have to crawl along the floor and hope no one can see you!"

With IR Iran's senior team currently in a

strong position to qualify for the FIFA World Cup finals in Russia in 2018 – in what would be the first time the country has appeared at back-to-back tournaments – the qualification of Peyrovani's team for the U20 World Cup marks what could be the continuation of a golden period for the game in the country.

And, with their berth in Korea Republic assured, Peyrovani was quick to thank national team boss Queiroz for his input along the way.

"It's been a long time since the Iranian U19 team could go to the World Cup, we've had good players but we haven't had the chance to go," says Peyrovani.

"This success isn't just for me, this success is for the coaches who are working with all of the teams in Iran, the U16s, the U19s and U23s at all of the clubs and all over Iran. This success I dedicate to my colleagues who have helped me in this job."

"It's especially for the instructors who have taught me and I would like to give special thanks to Carlos Queiroz, the head coach of the national team. So many times in our meetings he was with me and he helped me to change the programme and to bring success."

It seems the Peyrovani family will have played a central role in even more success in the years to come.

THAILAND'S NUMBER ONE

CURRENTLY PLAYING AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF BOTH INTERNATIONAL AND CLUB FOOTBALL ON THE CONTINENT, THAILAND GOALKEEPER KAWIN THAMSATCHANAN CONTINUES TO GO FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH FROM HIS POSITION BETWEEN THE GOALPOSTS FOR HIS NATION AND CLUB MUANGTHONG UNITED.

Interview: Peter Alsop By: Daniel Pordes Photo: Lagardère Sports

Goalkeepers have often been described as a little bit crazy, eccentric, or even loners. Often it's the youngest sibling or last man picked who is forced between the nets. Cool, though, is not an adjective commonly used to describe the team's custodian. But it's exactly the word Kawin Thamsatchanan picks to describe the reasons he set himself on the path to becoming Thailand's number one two decades ago.

"I realised that I wanted to be a goalkeeper when I was around seven or eight years old," says the 27-year-old, who has been an ever-present in Thailand's FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 qualifying campaign.

"I was playing football with my friends in the park and this was my first time in goal. My friend took a shot and it went through my legs but I managed to stop it with my hands behind me. Everyone was convinced that I could be the best goalkeeper in Thailand.

"After that I went back home and told my parents that I wanted to be a goalkeeper. I went straight out to the market to buy some goalkeeping gloves but they didn't have any so I just bought a pair of motorcycling ones.

"I wore them in front of my mirror at home and I thought I looked cool. That was when I decided I wanted to be a goalkeeper."

By the age of 16, Kawin's professional career was beginning at Raj Pracha but it was the move two years later to Muangthong United that has seen the goalkeeper truly flourish and by 2010 he had made his international bow in the King's Cup under former England and Manchester United midfielder Bryan Robson.

Since then the man from Bangkok, known as "Flying Kawin", has scooped up a plethora of honours with both club and country including four Thai Premier League titles, two AFF Championship titles and an SEA Games gold medal.

However, the last seven months, in particular, have been ones that has seen Kawin take his career to the next level.

Last September saw Thailand begin their FIFA 2018 World Cup Russia qualifying campaign, the first time for the goalkeeper to be involved in the final stage, and this February he and his Muangthong teammates reached the group stage of the 2017 AFC Champions League.

While World Cup qualifying hasn't gone as well as Thailand fans may have hoped after just one point from their seven games so far, it's clear that playing at the upper echelons of the continental game can only improve the War Elephants' prospects going forward.

"After we qualified for this round we knew that every team is a top team in Asia so it was not going to be easy for us," admits Kawin.

"But we tried our best in every game to gain three points. We just have one point but we will still try our best in the games remaining.

"Even though there is less time now for us to qualify from this round, we will try our best to learn from our mistakes, to adapt and to develop our football to gain a better chance to get to the next World Cup."

By contrast, the AFC Champions League campaign can only be described as a success so far with Muangthong second in Group E at the midway stage after hard-fought draws away at Brisbane Roar and Ulsan Hyundai came either side of a hugely

impressive 2-1 win over Japan's champions Kashima Antlers.

"The game that we beat Kashima Antlers, the champions of the J.League. It was a wonderful moment for me and the club," says Kawin.

"We were drawing 1-1 and Kashima missed a penalty, then everyone in the team became more hopeful that we could win the match.

"It was a huge boost in confidence for us and after we scored the winning goal in the last minute, it was an amazing experience for me that cannot be explained in words.

"After our new head coach came in last year, he worked very hard on tactics and teamwork and the results of this is what you have seen in the AFC Champions league this year.

"The results have been very good. I think Thai players need to change their attitude so they are ready for every team, to challenge them and get a win."

Such performances at the highest levels of both national and club continental football again mark out Kawin as among the best goalkeepers from his region if not in Asia.

Former Thailand custodian Chaiyong Khumpiam, who boasts 64 caps for the national team, and represented the side at the 1992 AFC Asian Cup calls Kawin "unquestionably the best in Southeast Asia with the potential to be the continent's best".

As modest as he is talented, though, Kawin insists there is still work to be done on his craft.

"I don't know about whether I'm the top ASEAN goalkeeper or about where I stand on any ranking. I just try to do the best I can in training and when it's match day I just try to focus on the game and do my best. I push myself to the limit every day and keep learning."



RISING STAR

BORN IN A SOUTH SUDAN REFUGEE CAMP IN KENYA, ABRAHAM MAJOK MOVED TO AUSTRALIA AS A YOUNG CHILD BEFORE DEVELOPING A LOVE FOR FOOTBALL. AFTER A SURPRISE AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE DEBUT FOR WESTERN SYDNEY WANDERERS IN FEBRUARY, THE 18-YEAR-OLD NOW HAS HIS EYES SET ON REPRESENTING HIS ADOPTED COUNTRY AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL.

By: Michael Church Photo: Lagardère Sports

Blacktown International SportsPark, in the green and tranquil surroundings of Sydney's distant western suburbs, is about as far removed as possible from where Abraham Majok made his start in life.

Born in a refugee camp in Kenya as his family sought to escape the horrors of war and famine in South Sudan, Majok's journey to the starting line-up in Western Sydney Wanderers' opening game in the 2017 AFC Champions League has been both eventful and inspiring.

"All I remember was that we were living in a camp and when I speak to my grandma at times she tells me about it," says the 18-year-old, who made his debut for the 2014 champions against Urawa Red Diamonds in mid-February.

"We were living in a refugee camp there. It was rough, it was hard at times. There was civil war at times, not enough resources, not enough food or access to water, so it was tough.

"When I talk to my family I get an idea of what it was like. The only thing that's in my mind was the time of the civil war, that's something that comes up in my mind. Having to leave where you live, to go in hiding. That's the only thing I can remember."

Since leaving Africa for a new life in Australia just prior to his seventh birthday, the youngster has faced frequent change. Upheaval has, perhaps, been the one constant in his life.

But even that did not prepare him for the shock of Wanderers' head coach Tony Popovic selecting him for this first-ever start for the club, just months after joining from New South Wales Super League side Mount Druitt Town Rangers.

"I was very surprised to be honest, to be picked to play," he says. "I actually didn't think I was going to play for a while, until

towards the end of the season, but playing against those guys was something you would dream of. It was something new to me.

"I found out the day before the game. The coach pulled me aside before we started training and he asked me what I want to do with my football. He said he wanted to give me a chance, and I still wasn't sure what he was talking about before the game.

"But when we were training before the game, when we were preparing, I was surprised that I was actually getting so involved in this and the rest of the boys were saying: 'Get ready, you're starting!' And I was still in shock.

"My energy was through the roof until the next day. I was literally struggling to sleep. Your first game at this level, the next level up from A-League. I was struggling but I was excited at the same time."

Despite being on the end of a 4-0 defeat from the Japanese side, Majok made a positive impression, much as he has since joining the club's National Youth League set-up late last year. He was rapidly promoted to the first team squad and, at the end of March, signed a two-year professional contract with the club.

Majok's journey towards the professional game started soon after arriving in Australia, his family – he's one of 10 siblings – settling in Sydney's western suburbs before his mother signed him up for the local club. But it wasn't exactly love at first sight.

"My mum signed me and my two brothers up at a club and to be honest I wasn't into sport," he says. "I did play, but I didn't understand the game and how it works. We started at the club and we were playing and I remember my first game, we got smacked 8-0. But from there I started going to training more often and watching videos on YouTube and from there I tried to learn something new.

"I would always ride my bike to training,

train there with my younger brother until the team would come and then I got hooked on the game. I got used to it, learning something different and from there it became my passion."

Hours spent analyzing the performances of Cristiano Ronaldo and others on YouTube led to even more time practicing in the park until he had honed the skills to the level required to be able to test them out in match situations. A strong work ethic, gained after such a demanding childhood, has played a major role in creating the player he is today.

"Where I come from has really shaped who I am as a person, my personality and it really motivated me to keep going in everything I do because not a lot is handed to you," he says. "You've got to fight for it.

"To be able to get out of there to a place where you are really safe, connected, it just motivates you to feel like you can do anything. I don't know how to describe it. You feel new. You forget the past. You say to yourself that nothing is impossible and I have all the opportunities in front of me. All I have to do is work and I can do whatever I want.

"I'm not too sure what the future holds, but to me I just want to keep working hard and do the best I can to show that I want to stay here. I want to play. As long as I keep working hard so that I can get game time here the rest can sort itself out.

"I'm a big believer in God and if I can do what I can control, then what I can't control God will do the rest. Everything I'm doing at the minute I have to keep doing and show the people what I can do and get myself in the picture to get game time and hopefully I can get my career to a higher level."

Part of that future, he hopes, is to represent Australia on the international stage. "It would be nice to play for Australia," he says. "They've done so much for me, so it would be nice to give something back. The establishment of Australia is really good, it would be a dream to play for Australia."

After such a rapid rise and with a strong work ethic, don't bet against him.



A PRINCE AMONG MEN

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM WINGER FAIQ BOLKIAH WANTS TO BE TREATED LIKE ANY OTHER FOOTBALLER AND, HAVING JOINED PREMIER LEAGUE CHAMPIONS LEICESTER CITY AFTER A STINT AT CHELSEA, THE 18-YEAR-OLD IS LOOKING TO BE RECOGNISED FOR HIS TALENT ON THE FIELD RATHER THAN HIS CONNECTIONS OFF IT.

By: Michael Church Photo: Lagardère Sports

It's not hard to spot Faiq Bokiah when he takes to the field with his Brunei Darussalam team mates; a distinctive, Samurai-style top knot and his powerful physique mark him out as he leads his compatriots onto the field of play. At just 18 years of age, Faiq already wears the captain's armband as he strides towards the pitch with the gait of a boxer about to enter the ring.

As one of the few South East Asian players to appear on the books of a European club at any stage of his career, the expectations of Faiq are already considerable. Born in the United States but raised in England, it's only natural that his football apprenticeship is being served in the country that dubs itself 'The Home of Football'.

After stints in the academies of Southampton and Chelsea, English Premier League champions Leicester City snapped the winger up last summer on a three-year professional contract as he aims to take the next step towards becoming a regular in one of the world's toughest leagues.

Faiq's talent ensures he stands out on merit. Quick, strong and direct, he possesses a threat with the ball at his feet, running at pace towards desperately backpedaling defenders. And yet, for all his potential, it is his family background that attracts the most attention.

Liverpool legend Kenny Dalglish was known as the 'King of the Kop', Eric Cantona referred to simply as 'Le Roi' by Manchester United fans, but few players at any level can claim to be genuine royalty. But for Faiq being the son of Brunei's Prince Jefri Bolkiah is just part of who he is, and it doesn't mean he has everything his own way.

"People look at me differently, and I don't blame them," says Faiq of his regal heritage. "It's natural if you see someone coming from a royal background that they must think whatever it is that they think.

"I've had a few occasions, actually a handful of occasions where I would go in (to

a club) and even if I was playing well when they find out who I am – because normally I wouldn't say anything – and they don't want anything to do with me. So when I go to a club now they know everything.

"Some people look at me and they don't want anything to do with me. They think I'm lazy and that I'm here because of my family background, but people who have watched me play know that it's not because of that. I know I've worked hard from a young age, non-stop. No one can take that away from me.

"I use it as motivation. I don't know why people would think that it would make things easier because of my family background. It makes it 20 times harder and it's a big name to carry."

Faiq's family background will always ensure he is judged differently to other players. It comes with the territory when you are the nephew of the Sultan of Brunei, a man known as being one of the wealthiest on the planet and owner of, amongst other things, the world's largest residence and one of the biggest luxury car collections.

But his proximity to wealth and power has not stopped Faiq from putting in the work in his attempt to make the grade at the highest level.

After being released by Chelsea last summer, he was snapped up by Leicester City just weeks after the club had claimed an unlikely Premier League crown. The move saw him do more than swap one champion of England for another.

"I saw more of a pathway for young players," he says of the reason behind his switch to his current employer. "I was told when I had a meeting with the people higher up at the club, they told me what they wanted to do, they want to push me, to work closely with the first team. I was training with the first team at Chelsea but I never got anywhere close to regular training. It shows me a more open path, that's what I thought. And once I saw

that then I knew it was right for me to go to Leicester.

"Chelsea's academy has the strongest players in the world, 100 percent. I've never played with better players. I'm at Leicester now, but the players at Chelsea are at a different level because Chelsea being Chelsea they like to pay five million, six million for 14, 15 year olds, which is crazy because they're not even fully developed. That's what I saw when I was there. My contract was finishing there, they didn't want to renew so I spoke to a few other clubs and I think I made the right decision to go to Leicester."

Leicester's Thai owner Vichai Srivaddhanaprabha brings a familiar South East Asian flavour to the club for Faiq, who admits to modelling his game on Arsenal striker Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, who also started his career at Southampton, and watching videos of Ronaldo – the Brazilian vintage rather than the Portuguese – before games to prepare himself for the task at hand.

And while the focus is on day-to-day life in England, there is also the matter of playing for Brunei on the international stage, a challenge Faiq enjoys despite the difficulties that come with representing a nation ranked 184th in the world.

"It's definitely a challenge because the players in our team are not at that level yet but it's better now," he says. "(The AFC Solidarity Cup was) the second time I've played for Brunei and this is the first time with the senior team. I played at the last South East Asian Games and we couldn't compete. I was touching the ball maybe once a half and we just couldn't compete.

"But we have a better team now who can actually compete and keep possession and find me with the ball. It's a different game. I enjoy playing with my country. It's hard to adapt. I'm not normally a captain, and when I'm a winger I don't normally come inside and get the ball. It's hard to adapt, but I like playing for Brunei. It's good."





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LEADING THE WAY

NTV BELEZA HAVE BEEN DEVELOPING THE FINEST FEMALE TALENT IN JAPAN FOR MORE THAN 35 YEARS.

THE CLUB PROVIDED EIGHT OF THE EAST ASIAN COUNTRY'S 2011 FIFA WORLD CUP-WINNING SQUAD AND WANTS ITS NEXT GENERATION TO APPEAR AT THE 2020 OLYMPIC GAMES IN TOKYO.

By: Sean Carroll Photos: Tokyo Verdy





Success is impossible without strong, well-laid foundations, and in NTV Belezza Japanese football has a club inextricably bound to the roots of the women's game.

Founded in 1981 as Yomiuri Soccer Club Women (Beleza), the team has been at the forefront of developing women's football in Japan from the outset. Far and away the most successful club in Japan with 14 league titles, 11 Empress's Cup triumphs, and four League Cup crowns, Beleza's impact can not only be measured in silverware but also the legacy it has left – and continues to leave – on the national team.

Eight of the 21 women who created history as Nadeshiko Japan won the 2011 Women's World Cup in Germany were current or former Beleza players, for instance, and that tradition of providing a core for the international stage is a central principle of the club.

Kazuhiko Takemoto managed Beleza for 11 years between 1986 and 1997, during which time he was in charge of such pioneers as Akemi Noda, who would go on to captain

Japan at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic games, the legendary Homare Sawa, and current Nadeshiko manager – and Takemoto's wife – Asako Takakura.

"When I was coaching women's football

"When I was coaching women's football I felt there was the potential to become the best in the world."

Former NTV Belezza manager Kazuhiko Takemoto

I felt there was the potential to become the best in the world," Takemoto, now general manager of Beleza and men's side Tokyo Verdy, says.

"Japanese people have enthusiasm, intelligence, and organisation – our bodies our smaller but we are nimble. If we could find a style of football that suited us I felt it

was possible to aim for that."

The determination to formulate a winning approach permeates the club as a whole, and is explained more precisely by Mayumi Teratani, a former player and manager who is now technical director of Tokyo Verdy Ladies Group and manager of the Beleza youth team, Menina.

"In our team a particular focus is placed on watching the opponent and then playing football," she says. "It's not so much a case of learning football in a particular way, but encouraging players to master the skill of thinking while playing.

"Perhaps repeating things in training is an easier way to achieve quick results, and of course we want to win, but we feel that if you become trapped in that way of playing you won't acquire the ability you need at the most important time once you have become an adult, and then the results won't come."

For Teratani, coaching the Menina players, aged between 12-18, is about more than simply imparting advice on technique and tactics.

"Everyone is still in middle school or high school so it's not just about teaching football

but also providing an education in terms of developing them as people."

That objective permeates every aspect of the club, including the clubhouse.

"The men's top team train at the same facilities, so the players and coaches from all the teams are able to speak to each other and do stretching together and so on," Takemoto says.

"That co-existence means the players can watch each other play and discuss things. Having everyone in the same place hasn't changed since the beginning, which I think

"I really like the sense of unity within the club. There's a feeling of it being my second family, I guess."

Azusa Iwashimizu, captain and centre-back, NTV Belezza

Far Top Left
Mayumi Teratani

Bottom Left
Azusa Iwashimizu

Above
2016 Nadeshiko League Cup Winners

Top Left and Far Bottom Left
2016 Nadeshiko League Champions

builds into the strength of the club.

"It's not just football, but life skills – being on time, keeping promises, respecting people – those things are all important in football."

One of Beleza's most trusted servants is Azusa Iwashimizu, who has been a one-club woman since joining the youth team in 1999.

"I feel lucky that I joined Menina, and once I was in I was aware that this was a club that could boast being the best women's team," the 30-year-old says.

"There is the top team and also the youth levels and I really like the sense of unity within the club. There's a feeling of it being my second family, I guess."

As well as captaining Beleza to back-to-back league titles in the last two years, centre-back Iwashimizu scored the winning

goals in the finals of both the 2010 Asian Games and 2014 AFC Women's Asian Cup. She was also part of the Beleza spine that sealed glory for Nadeshiko Japan in Frankfurt six years ago.

"I think Beleza provided the base of the team that won the World Cup in 2011," Teratani says.

"For that generation things were not as ordered when they started out as they are now. These days, for instance, there are under category teams too, and so 15- and 16-year-old players don't just all of a sudden get thrown into the top team. For the earlier generation that was normal, and so they were gaining experience of full national team football from when they were teenagers."

Iwashimizu, who made her first start for Beleza aged 16, agrees that everything seemed to fall into place for Norio Sasaki's side at the World Cup, and combined with unfortunate circumstances that drove the players forward.

"The Great East Japan Earthquake had just happened, and so to a certain extent we had the sense of a duty to send some good news back to Japan," she recalls.



"There was that unseen spirit there, but the players were at good ages too, with experience and youth, we had momentum, and everyone was in a good condition to deal with the competition."

Sawa's heroics came to define Japan's triumph, but Iwashimizu made a similarly vital contribution in additional time of extra time in the final, receiving a straight red card for a last-ditch challenge on Alex Morgan, as the USA forward looked certain to strike the winner.

Iwashimizu still insists she was playing the ball, but either way she kept the game alive for Japan and set the scene for the remarkable penalty shoot-out that was to follow.

"I feel like Beleza, who had been working towards that goal from so long ago, had had some kind of influence on the success," Teratani says.

"If Beleza hadn't existed maybe that wouldn't have happened. Of course it's not just us, every team played a part, but I really felt pleased we had kept at it for all that time.

And keep at it they had. After the bubble burst on Japan's economy in the mid-1990s a whole host of women's teams were wound up.

"There was also talk of closing Beleza too," Takemoto recalls. "But thanks to the enthusiasm of the coaches and others at the club they were able to overcome the threat."

For Teratani that period remains the toughest of her career.

"Of course we didn't make it to the Olympics last year," she says of Japan's failure to appear

"I feel like Beleza, who had been working towards that goal that from so long ago, had some kind of influence on the [World Cup] success."

Mayumi Teratani, manager of NTV Beleza's youth team, Menina

at the Rio Games, "but there was another time too, for Sydney in 2000.

"Many company teams were folding, and after we missed that chance the four years until Athens produced lots of doubts about whether the league would continue and whether the club would continue. There were times when we really thought that was it, but then we appeared at Athens and bit by bit things improved."

The women's game has certainly made huge strides since then, with Iwashimizu having experienced the growth first-hand.

"There's not such a big difference in the quality of teams in the Nadeshiko League now," she says. "Before there was a bigger gap and there'd be 10-0s and lots of easy games, but now every game is closely contested."

Looking ahead, she would be keen for Beleza to test themselves on a bigger stage.

"I'd like it if there was an Asian Champions

League or Club World Cup like the men have. I think this Beleza team would have the ability to compete and I'd like to be able to show our style."

As for what exactly constitutes 'Japanese style', Teratani believes it will have to evolve if the country is to preserve its status among the world's elite.

"Previously other countries were stronger than Japan but we were able to overcome them to become champions with special characteristics, such as our combination play and so on," she says. "Now, though, we have to try and add new physical aspects to our play."

Takemoto's eyes are also set firmly on the future, and ensuring Beleza maintains a leading role in the women's game.

"I think we are a club that can lead straight into the national team," he says.

"The 2020 Olympics is coming up in Tokyo, at which we want several players to appear and where the aim is to win gold. Three years after that there is a chance that Japan will host the 2023 Women's World Cup too. The national team's schedule further down the line is our present; we want to make a strong team to compete there."

That approach has seen Beleza serve Japanese women's football well for almost 40 years, and the fruits of their labours look sure to keep prospering for club and country alike.



Trio Edge Closer To FIFA World Cup

After all 12 teams vying for FIFA World Cup qualification played two crucial matches at the end of March, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan and Saudi Arabia remain in strong positions to advance to Russia, while Korea Republic and Uzbekistan returned to winning ways on Matchday Seven after defeats on Matchday Six, and Australia ended a run of four straight draws.

IR Iran travelled to Doha on Matchday Six to take on a Qatar side desperate for points if they were to have any chance of catching the top three in Group A. But it was Mehdi Taremi who scored the only goal of the game seven minutes after half-time as Carlos Queiroz's team extended their lead at the top of the standings following surprise defeats for Korea Republic and Uzbekistan.

Team Melli then returned to Tehran five days later for the visit of China, who arrived at Azadi Stadium on the back of a commendable 1-0 victory over second-placed Korea Republic as Yu Dabao's first-half strike ensured a first win of the campaign for Marcello Lippi's side.

But the group leaders proved too strong for the East Asians as Taremi continued his rich vein of form by netting shortly after the interval to extend IR Iran's unbeaten run and edge them closer to booking their place in Russia next year.

Korea Republic lost ground on IR Iran on Matchday Six but responded well by seeing off Syria when they returned to the Korean capital five days later as Hong Jeong-ho's early strike was enough to seal a 1-0 win.

Syria had gone into the encounter at Seoul World Cup Stadium just a point behind third-placed Uzbekistan after Omar Khrbin's late

penalty ensured a 1-0 victory over the Central Asians on Matchday Six.

Uzbekistan, though, bounced back from that disappointment as captain Odil Ahmedov's second-half free-kick ensured a vital 1-0 win over Qatar as the White Wolves remained a point behind the Koreans in the race for second place in a week that saw all six Group A games end in the same scoreline.

IR Iran need just one more win to advance to a fifth FIFA World Cup finals and will host Uzbekistan in June, while fourth-placed Syria – four points behind the Uzbeks – remain in the



hunt for a top-three finish. For China and Qatar, the Russian dream is surely over.

In Group B, goals from Mohammed Al Sahlawi and Salman Muwashar, either side of a Tanaboon Kesarat own-goal, helped Saudi Arabia defeat Thailand 3-0 in Bangkok on Matchday Six.

Bert van Marwijk's team then made it two wins from two after Yahya Al Shehri's second-half goal ensured a hard-fought 1-0 victory over

Iraq in Jeddah.

Despite recording back-to-back wins, the Saudis conceded top spot in Group B to Japan, who ran out impressive 2-0 victors in the United Arab Emirates before a resounding 4-0 scoreline at home to Thailand.

Yuya Kubo opened the scoring in Al Ain before teeing up Konno Yasuyuki for the second as Japan kept pace with Saudi Arabia.

The following week goals from Shinji Kagawa, Shinji Okazaki – his 50th for his country – Kubo and captain Maya Yoshida saw the Samurai Blue leapfrog the Saudis on goal difference at the top of the standings and brought an end to bottom side Thailand's World Cup hopes.

Australia needed a win against Iraq on Matchday Six to end a run of three straight draws but could only manage a 1-1 scoreline after Ahmed Yasin's equaliser cancelled out Mathew Leckie's opener.

But the Socceroos returned home to finally claim three points instead of one as Jackson Irvine and Leckie scored in a 2-0 win over the UAE to complete a miserable five days for the Emiratis, who now face a mountain to climb to reach Russia after successive defeats that saw head coach Mahdi Ali resign from his position.

With three games left to play, Japan and Saudi Arabia sit joint top on 16 points, three ahead of third-placed Australia, who moved four clear of the UAE following their win in Sydney.

Iraq, on four points, are all but eliminated while Thailand prop up the standings and are now playing only for pride.



Group A

	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
IR Iran	7	5	2	0	6	0	6	17
Korea Republic	7	4	1	2	9	7	2	13
Uzbekistan	7	4	0	3	6	4	2	12
Syria	7	2	2	3	2	3	-1	8
China	7	1	2	4	3	7	-4	5
Qatar	7	1	1	5	3	8	-5	4

23/03/2017

China 1 (Yu Dabao 76) Korea Republic 0
 Syria 1 (Omar Khrbin 90+1 pen) Uzbekistan 0
 Qatar 0 IR Iran 1 (Mehdi Taremi 52)

28/03/2017

Korea Republic 1 (Hong Jeong-ho 4) Syria 0
 IR Iran 1 (Mehdi Taremi 46) China 0
 Uzbekistan 1 (Odil Ahmedov 65) Qatar 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Japan	7	5	1	1	14	5	9	16
Saudi Arabia	7	5	1	1	13	5	8	16
Australia	7	3	4	0	11	6	5	13
UAE	7	3	0	4	7	10	-3	9
Iraq	7	1	1	5	7	10	-3	4
Thailand	7	0	1	6	3	19	-16	1

23/03/2017

Iraq 1 (Ahmed Yasin 76) Australia 1 (Mathew Leckie 40)
 Thailand 0 Saudi Arabia 3 (Mohammed Al Sahlawi 26, Tabanoon Kesarat 84 OG, Salman Muwashar 90+2)
 United Arab Emirates 0 Japan 2 (Yuta Kubo 14, Konno Yasuyuki 52)

28/03/2017

Australia 2 (Jackson Irvine 7, Mathew Leckie 78) United Arab Emirates 0
 Japan 4 (Shinji Kagawa 8, Shinji Okazaki 19, Yuya Kubo 57, Maya Yoshida 83) Thailand 0
 Saudi Arabia 1 (Yahya Al Shehri 53) Iraq 0



Chinese Sides Start ACL With A Bang

Chinese duo Shanghai SIPG and Jiangsu FC both posted perfect records in their opening three games of the 2017 AFC Champions League, while debutants Esteghlal Khouzeestan of the Islamic Republic of Iran have also impressed as the tournament reaches the midway point of the group stage.

Andre Villas Boas' Shanghai SIPG opened up a three-point lead at the top of Group F as Brazilian striker Hulk maintained his record of having scored in every game following a 3-2 victory over second-placed Urawa Red Diamonds on Matchday Three.

The top-of-the-table clash came after the sides had secured victories over 2014 AFC Champions League winners Western Sydney Wanderers and 2016 semi-finalists FC Seoul prior to Shanghai's third win on the bounce in March.

Jiangsu, meanwhile, are already looking good for a maiden last 16 appearance after Brazilian Ramires netted a stunning match-winner in the 1-0 defeat of 2008 champions Gamba Osaka on Matchday Three on the back of wins over Jeju United and Adelaide United in Group H.

Jeju, making only their second appearance on the continent, currently occupy second place having showcased their tournament credentials in a resounding 4-1 Matchday Two victory at Gamba Osaka, who have suffered successive defeats since opening with an impressive 3-0 win in Adelaide.

An intriguing Group E looks set for a three-team battle for two qualification spots, with Kashima Antlers leading the way ahead of Muangthong United and 2012 champions Ulsan Hyundai, while Brisbane Roar prop up the table

on just a solitary point. Muangthong, who picked up a first-ever AFC Champions League victory thanks to Xisco's stoppage-time goal in a 2-1 win over Kashima on Matchday Two, remain unbeaten following a goalless draw with Ulsan in mid-March.

But it's Japanese champions Kashima out in front after posting two wins from three including a 3-0 victory over Brisbane on Matchday Three.

Three into two also won't go in Group G, where two-time champions Guangzhou Evergrande began their continental campaign with a comprehensive 7-0 win over nine-man Eastern SC of Hong Kong, before posting successive draws with Suwon Samsung Bluewings and



Kawasaki Frontale.

Suwon began their tournament with back-to-back draws against Kawasaki and Guangzhou and, after substitute Johnathan's goal saw off Eastern 1-0 on Matchday Three, sit behind Luiz Felipe Scolari's table-toppers on goal difference alone.

Debutants Eastern's first-ever AFC Champions League point following a 1-1 draw with Kawasaki on Matchday Two, meanwhile, could well prove costly in the long run for the J.League side.

In the West, debutants Esteghlal Khouzeestan

occupy top spot in Group B after the Iranian champions followed up successive 1-0 wins over Al Fateh and Al Jazira with a 1-1 draw against Lekhwiya, who boast three-goal hitman Youssef El Arabi within their ranks.

After one win and two draws, Lekhwiya remain favourites for second place, but Al Fateh's first-ever win in the tournament – a 3-1 victory over bottom side Al Jazira on Matchday Three – moved them to within a point of the Qatari team.

Another Iranian side who have started well are two-time Asian champions Esteghlal, whose 2-0 Matchday Three win over 2016 quarter-finalists Lokomotiv moved them to the top of the Group A standings.

Both Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates and debutants Al Taawoun have a win, a draw and a loss from three games, while Lokomotiv prop up a compact table after picking up their only points in a 2-0 win over Al Ahli on Matchday Two.

Namesakes Al Ahli of Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, lead the way in Group C after a 2-2 draw with Al Ain left them two points ahead of the Emiratis after three games.

Omar Al Soma scored an unstoppable late winner on Matchday Two against Zobahan, who are hot on the tails of second-placed Al Ain after a 2-0 victory over Bunyodkor in mid-March.

Finally, Rodrigo Tabata's brace in a 3-1 victory over Persepolis saw Qatar Stars League champions Al Rayyan move to the top of the Group D standings after two wins from three games.

Unbeaten Al Hilal sit just a point behind the Qataris after a 2-2 draw with bottom side Al Wahda, while Persepolis remain in the hunt and have the firepower of three-goal Mehdi Taremi to fall back on.



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												
Esteghlal	3	2	0	1	6	2	4	6	Esteghlal Khouzeestan	3	2	1	0	3	1	2	7	Al Ahli	3	2	1	0	6	3	7	Al Rayyan	3	2	0	1	6	4	6										
Al Ahli	3	1	1	1	2	3	-1	4	Lekhwiya	3	1	2	0	6	3	3	5	Al Ain	3	1	2	0	6	5	1	5	Al Hilal	3	1	2	0	5	4	1	5								
Al Taawoun	3	1	1	1	1	3	-2	4	Al Fateh	3	1	1	1	5	4	1	4	Zobahan	3	1	1	1	4	3	1	4	Persepolis	3	1	1	1	5	6	-1	4								
Lokomotiv	3	1	0	2	2	3	-1	3	Al Jazira	3	0	0	3	1	7	-6	0	Bunyodkor	3	0	0	3	2	7	-5	0	Al Wahda	3	0	1	2	5	7	-2	1								
20/02/2017	Al Taawoun 1 (Talat Al Absi 67) Lokomotiv 0	20/02/2017	Esteghlal Khouzeestan 1 (Abolfazl Alaii 80)	21/02/2017	Zobahan 1 (Jerry Bengtson 57)	21/02/2017	Persepolis 1 (Mohsen Mosalman 68) Al Hilal 1 (Carlos Eduardo 82)																																				
Al Ahli 2 (Makhethe Diop 45+1, 90) Esteghlal 1 (Omid Ebrahimi 74)	27/02/2017	Lekhwiya 3 (Youssef El Arabi 11, 90, Youssef Msakni 80) Al Jazira 0	28/02/2017	Bunyodkor 0	28/02/2017	Al Rayyan 2 (Gonzalo Viera 13, Victor Caceres 60) Al Wahda 1 (Rim Chang-woo 35)	28/02/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 6 (Kim In-sung 10, 68, Mislav Orsic 13, 34, Ivan Kovacec 55, Lee Jong-ho 90+3)																																			
Lokomotiv 2 (Salamat Kutibaev 1, Marat Bikmaev 57)	27/02/2017	Al Fateh 2 (Nathan Junior 40 pen, Sayyaf Al Bishi 56) Lekhwiya 2 (Youssef El Arabi 18, Nam Tae-yeong 86)	28/02/2017	Bunyodkor 2 (Vadim Cemirtan 10, Dostonbek Khamdamov 43) Al Ain 3 (Omar Abdulrahman 8, 89 pen, Caio 15)	28/02/2017	Al Wahda 2 (Ismail Matar 58, Jorge Valdivia 64) Persepolis 3 (Vahid Amiri 4, Mehdi Taremi 80, 90)	14/03/2017	Kashima Antlers 3 (Yuma Suzuki 43, Naomichi Ueda 76, Yasushi Endo 80) Brisbane Roar 0																																			
Esteghlal 3 (Kaveh Rezaei 1, Mohsen Karimi 70, Leandro Padovani 89) Al Taawoun 0	14/03/2017	Al Jazira 0 Esteghlal Khouzeestan 1 (Aloys Nong 2)	14/03/2017	Zobahan 1 (Mahdi Rajabzadeh 45+2 pen) Al Ahli 2 (Abdulfattah 29, Omar Al Soma 86)	13/03/2017	Al Wahda 2 (Sebastian Tagliabue 45+1, Balazs Dzsudzsak 55) Al Hilal 2 (Nawaf Al Abid 5, Omar Khrbin 69)	14/03/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 0 Muangthong United 0																																			
Esteghlal 2 (Farshid Esmaili 78, Ali Ghorbani 84) Lokomotiv 0	15/03/2017	Lekhwiya 1 (Ismail Mohamad 11)	15/03/2017	Bunyodkor 0 Zobahan 2 (Jerry Bengtson 55, Morteza Tabrizi 90+4)	15/03/2017	Al Rayyan 3 (Rodrigo Tabata 19, 58 pen, Sergio Garcia 88) Persepolis 1 (Mehdi Taremi 6)	15/03/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 0 Muangthong United 0																																			
Al Ahli 0 Al Taawoun 0	15/03/2017	Al Fateh 3 (Ali Al Zaqan 12, 51, Hamad Al Juhayyim 45+1) Al Jazira 1 (Ali Mabkhout 38)	15/03/2017	Al Ahli 2 (Aqeel Al Sahabi 26, Giannis Fetfatzidis 50) Al Ain 2 (Nasser Al Shamrani 28, Aqeel Al Sahabi 52 OG)																																							

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												
Kashima	3	2	0	1	6	2	4	6	Shanghai SIPG	3	3	0	0	9	3	6	9	Guangzhou	3	1	2	0	10	3	7	5	Jiangsu FC	3	3	0	0	4	1	3	9								
Muangthong	3	1	2	0	2	1	1	5	Urawa	3	2	0	1	11	5	6	6	Suwon	3	1	2	0	4	3	1	5	Jeju United	3	1	1	1	7	5	2	4								
Ulsan Hyundai	3	1	1	1	6	2	4	4	Western Sydney	3	1	0	2	4	11	-7	3	Kawasaki	3	0	3	0	3	0	3	Gamba Osaka	3	1	0	2	4	5	-1	3									
Brisbane Roar	3	0	1	2	0	9	-9	1	FC Seoul	3	0	0	3	4	9	-5	0	Eastern SC	3	0	1	2	1	9	-8	1	Adelaide United	3	0	1	2	4	8	-4	1								
21/02/2017	Western Sydney 0 Muangthong United 0	22/02/2017	Kawasaki Frontale 1 (Yu Kobayashi 10) Suwon Samsung Bluewings 1 (Shogo Taniguchi 23 OG)	22/02/2017	Adelaide United 0 Gamba Osaka 3 (Shun Nagasawa 21, Yasuyuki Kormo 45+1, Dylan McGowan 81 OG)																																						
Kashima Antlers 2 (Mu Kanazaki 64, Yuma Suzuki 82) Ulsan Hyundai 0	28/02/2017	Urawa 5 (Yuki Muto 9, Tadanari Lee 11, Takahiro Sekine 15, Tomoya Ugajin 21, Yoshiaki Komai 45) FC Seoul 1 (Park Chu-young 14)	01/03/2017	Jeju United 0 Jiangsu FC 1 (Ramires 90)	01/03/2017	Gamba Osaka 1 (Ademilson 90 pen) Jeju United 4 (Yasuhito Endo 43 OG, Lee Chang-min 45+1, 72, Marcelo Toscano 51)																																					
28/02/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 6 (Kim In-sung 10, 68, Mislav Orsic 13, 34, Ivan Kovacec 55, Lee Jong-ho 90+3)	Shanghai SIPG 5 (Hulk 2, Oscar 17, Shi Ke 25, Elkeson 27, Wu Lei 75) Western Sydney 1 (Mitch Nichols 20)	01/03/2017	Suwon Samsung Bluewings 2 (Santos 15, Johnathan 32) Guangzhou Evergrande 2 (Ricardo Goulart 25, Alan 81)	14/03/2017	Jiangsu FC 2 (Alex Teizeira 14, 72) Adelaide United 1 (Eli Babalj 90+3)																																					
28/02/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 0 Muangthong United 2 (Theerathon Bunmathan 12, Xisco 90+4) Kashima Antlers 1 (Pedro Junior 47)	15/03/2017	Shanghai SIPG 5 (Hulk 2, Oscar 17, Shi Ke 25, Elkeson 27, Wu Lei 75) Western Sydney 1 (Mitch Nichols 20)	15/03/2017	Adelaide United 3 (Papa Diawara 51 pen, Sergio Cirio 72, Mark Ochieng 85) Jeju United 3 (Frederic Mendy 61, Marcelo Toscano 71, Kwon Soon-hyung 84)																																						
28/02/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 0 Muangthong United 0	15/03/2017	FC Seoul 2 (Yun Il-lok 66, 71) Western Sydney Wanderers 3 (Lachlan Scott 24, Terry Antonis 40 pen, Jaushua Sotirio 63)	15/03/2017	Gamba Osaka 0 Jiangsu FC 1 (Ramires 39)																																						
28/02/2017	Ulsan Hyundai 0 Muangthong United 0	15/03/2017	Shanghai SIPG 3 (Shi Ke 10, Elkeson 45, Hulk 52) Urawa 2 (Rafael Da Silva 72 pen, Wataru Endo 84)	15/03/2017																																							



Holders Remain Unbeaten in AFC Cup Title Defence

Defending AFC Cup champions Air Force Club and 2015 winners Johor Darum Ta'zim both posted unbeaten records in the opening three games of the 2017 edition, while sides from Syria and the Philippines have also impressed in the early stages of the competition.

Iraq's Air Force Club began the defence of their title with a scoreless draw against Safa SC of Lebanon in Group B, before securing their first win of the campaign by seeing off Bahrain's Al Hidd 2-1.

But another scoreless draw, with Syria's Al Wahda, means the holders occupied second place in the standings at the midway stage behind the Syrian team, who claimed seven points from their first three games and have yet to concede a goal.

In the East, Malaysia's Johor have also picked up seven points from their opening three Group F games and are the tournament's leading scorers on eight goals.

Wins against Cambodian debutants Beoungket Ankor and the Philippines' Global FC, either side of a 1-1 draw with Magwe FC of Myanmar, ensured the Malaysian side look good after three games.

Global also recorded two wins and will be favourites to advance to the knockout stage alongside the 2015 winners, while Beoungket's 1-0 victory over Magwe ensured Cambodia's first-ever points in the AFC Cup.

Another Philippines side who have begun well are Ceres Negros, who sit on top of Group G after an impressive 5-0 victory over

Tampines Rovers and draws with Vietnam's Hanoi FC and Felda United of Malaysia. Hanoi sit below Ceres on goal difference having also picked up five points and will be confident of securing a round of 16 berth.

Myanmar's Yadanarbon are out in front in the three-team Group H after beating Singapore's Home United 1-0 and drawing 1-1 with Vietnamese debutants Than Quang Ninh, who prop up the table following a 3-2 defeat in Singapore.

Back in the West, inaugural AFC Cup winners



Al Jaish of Syria sit on top of Group A after back-to-back 1-0 victories over Jordan's Al Ahli and Al Suwaiq of Oman, although Iraq's Al Zawraa moved to within a point of Al Jaish following a 3-1 victory over the Syrians on Matchday Three.

Jordan's Al Wehdat are looking strong in Group C after wins against Lebanon's Nejmeh and Saham Club of Oman either side of a draw

with Al Muharraq of Bahrain.

After losing their opening game to Saham, 2008 winners Al Muharraq responded by picking up four points from two games, but the Omanis' Mohammed Al Ghassani will be disappointed his side are propping up the standings after scoring in each of his three Group C games.

Runners-up in 2015, Tajikistan's FC Istiklol lead the way in Group D after one game following a 2-0 victory over Dordoi FC of the Kyrgyz Republic, while Turkmenistan's Altyr Asyr saw off another Kyrgyz Republic side, FC Alay, 2-1 to join the Tajik team as the early pacesetters.

After losing 1-0 to Air Force Club in last year's final, India's JSW Bengaluru began their 2017 campaign by defeating countrymen Mohun Bagan 2-1 in their Group E opener, but it is the Maldives' Maziya Sports & Recreation who occupy top spot after one game following a 2-0 victory over Abahani Limited Dhaka of Bangladesh.

Finally, Group I got underway in mid-March and produced a resounding 6-0 victory for DPR Korea's 4.25 SC over Mongolia's Erchim FC. Five goals from Kim Yu-song has him out in front as the tournament's leading scorer. The second side from DPR Korea, Kigwancha SC, kick off their campaign in early April.

Each group winner, along with the highest-placed runner-up in the West and ASEAN, advance to zonal semi-finals. In the Central, South and East zones, meanwhile, the group winners qualify for inter-zonal play-off semi-finals.



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 Jaish 3 2 0 1 3 3 0 6	Al Wahda 3 2 1 0 3 0 3 7	Al Wehdat 3 2 1 0 4 2 2 7	FC Istiklol 1 1 0 0 2 0 2 3
Al Zawraa 3 1 2 0 4 2 2 5	Air Force Club 3 1 2 0 2 1 1 5	Al Muharraq 3 1 1 1 5 5 0 4	Altyr Asyr 1 1 0 0 2 1 1 3
Al Ahli 3 0 2 1 1 2 -1 2	Al Hidd 3 1 0 2 4 4 0 3	Nejmeh 3 1 0 2 3 4 -1 3	FC Alay 1 0 0 1 1 2 -1 0
Al Suwaiq 3 0 2 1 0 1 -1 2	Safa SC 3 0 1 2 1 5 -4 1	Saham Club 3 1 0 2 5 6 -1 3	Dordoi FC 1 0 0 1 0 2 -2 0
20/02/2017 Al Jaish 1 (Mohammad Hamdkou 24) Al Ahli 0 Al Zawraa 0 Al Suwaiq 0	20/02/2017 Safa SC 0 Air Force Club 0 Al Hidd 0 Al Wahda 1 (Osama Omari 40)	21/02/2017 Saham Club 3 (Badar Jabri 33, Mohsin Al Khaldi 45, Mohammed Al Ghassani 88) Al Muharraq 2 (Ismael Hasan 11, Abdulla Yaser 51 pen)	14/03/2017 FC Alay 1 (Akramzhon Umarov 55) Altyr Asyr 2 (Altymyrat Annadurdyev 43, Akramzhon Umarov 55 OG)
06/03/2017 Al Suwaiq 0 Al Jaish 1 (Mohammad Hamdkou 68) Al Ahli 1 (Tall Malik 35) Al Zawraa 1 (Alaa Al Azzawi 61 pen)	06/03/2017 Al Wahda 2 (Mohammed Fares 28, Raja Rafie 66) Safa SC 0 Air Force Club 2 (Hammadi Abdullah 62, Emad Mejbil 70) Al Hidd 1 (Uche Agba 76)	07/03/2017 Al Wehdat 1 (Monther Abu Amara 63) Nejmeh 0 07/03/2017 Nejmeh 2 (Akram Moghrabi 45, Nicholas Cofie 70) Saham Club 1 (Mohammed Al Ghassani 47)	FC Istiklol 2 (David Muwator 16, Jahongir Aliiev 22) Dordoi FC 0
13/03/2017 Al Suwaiq 0 Al Ahli 0 Al Zawraa 3 (Mohamad Karrar 41, 90+1, Ezzeddin Al Awad 50 OG) Al Jaish 1 (Bashar Khashrif 54)	14/03/2017 Al Wahda 0 Air Force Club 0 Al Hidd 3 (Ifedayo Olusegun 11, 62, Uche Agba 32) Safa SC 1 (Standly Echabe 33)	13/03/2017 Nejmeh 1 (Khaled Takaji 65 pen) Al Muharraq 2 (Doris Fuakuputu 16, 47) Al Wehdat 2 (Ahmed Wridat 27, Mohammad Mustafa 49) Saham Club 1 (Mohammed Al Ghassani 13)	

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
Maziya 1 1 0 0 2 0 2 3	Johor Darul Ta'zim 3 2 1 0 8 1 7 7	Ceres Negros 3 1 2 0 6 1 5 5	Yadanarbon 2 1 1 0 2 1 1 4
JSW Bengaluru 1 1 0 0 2 1 1 3	Global FC 3 2 0 1 3 4 -1 6	Hanoi FC 3 1 2 0 6 2 4 5	Home United 2 1 0 1 3 3 0 3
Mohun Bagan 1 0 0 1 1 2 -1 0	Beoungket Angkor 3 1 0 2 1 5 -4 3	Tampines Rovers 3 1 0 2 2 10 -8 3	Than Quang Ninh 2 0 1 1 3 4 -1 1
Abahani Ltd Dhaka 1 0 0 1 0 2 -2 0	Magwe FC 3 0 1 2 1 3 -2 1	Felda United 3 0 2 1 2 3 -1 2	
14/03/2017 Abahani Limited Dhaka 0 Maziya Sports & Recreation 2 (Mohamed Umair 5, Abdulla Asadhulla 88)	21/02/2017 Global FC 1 (Misagh Bahadoran 39) Magwe FC 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim 3 (Gabriel Guerra 3, Muhammad Nazmi 11, Safiq Rahim 89) Beoungket Angkor 0	21/02/2017 Hanoi FC 1 (Nguyen Van Dung 57) Ceres Negros 1 (Bienvenido Maranon 49)	22/02/2017 Yadanarbon 1 (Aung Thu 45+2) Home United 0
07/03/2017 JSW Bengaluru 2 (Sandesh Jhingani 51, Sunil Chhetri 57) Mohun Bagan 1 (Yuya Katsumi 36)	07/03/2017 Magwe FC 1 (Sekou Sylla 89) Johor Darul Ta'zim 1 (Gopi Ramachandra 28) Beoungket Angkor 0 Global FC 2 (Paul Mulders 5, 65 pen)	07/03/2017 Felda United 1 (Zah Rahan Krangar 23) Hanoi FC 1 (Do Hung Dung 90+1)	08/03/2017 Than Quang Ninh 1 (Vu Minh Tuan 45 pen)
	14/03/2017 Beoungket Angkor 1 (Jeon Oulai 34 OG) Magwe FC 0 Johor Darul Ta'zim 4 (Mahalli Jasuli 30, Safiq Rahim 34 pen, Brian Ferreira 87, Marcos Antonio 90+2) Global FC 0	15/03/2017 Hanoi FC 4 (Loris Arnaud 16, Nguyen Van Quyet 65, Do Hung Dung 89, Gonzalo Marronkle 90+3) Tampines Rovers 0 Ceres Negros 0 Felda United 0	14/03/2017 Home United 3 (Song Ui-young 3, 84, Faris Ramli 58) Than Quang Ninh 2 (Patiyo Tambwe 32, Vu Minh Tuan 40)
			Group I
			P W D L F A +/- Pts
			4.25 SC 1 1 0 0 6 0 6 3
			Kigwancha SC 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
			Erchim FC 1 0 0 1 0 6 -6 0
			14/03/2017 4.25 SC 6 (Kim Yu-song 12, 22, 24, 31, 59, Om Chol-song 77) Erchim FC 0

IR Iran Claim Second AFC Beach Soccer Championship

The Islamic Republic of Iran won the AFC Beach Soccer Championship Malaysia 2017 in March after a resounding 7-2 victory over the United Arab Emirates in the final in Kuala Terengganu.

Moslem Mesigar and Mohammadali Mokhtari both scored braces, while goalkeeper Seyed Hosseini, Amir Akbari and Seyed Nazem also got on the scoresheet as IR Iran added to the title won in 2013 to move level with their opponents and Japan on two AFC Beach Soccer Championships.

Mokhtari, meanwhile, was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player and, in a day of triple success, also picked up the top scorer accolade after netting 12 times in just six games.

The win meant IR Iran, along with the UAE and third-placed Japan, secured the three places up for grabs at the 2017 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in the Bahamas in April and May.

"We were ready for this game and we knew that the UAE were tired as it was a tough semi-final game against Lebanon for them," said IR Iran head coach Mohammad Hoseyn Mirshamsi.

"I think today's game was easy for us. The most important advantage that we had over the UAE today was physical fitness. We were thankful for that."

IR Iran had earlier topped the five-team Group A on maximum points ahead of Bahrain, Afghanistan, hosts Malaysia and China, scoring 35 and conceding just three.

A comprehensive 14-0 victory over Malaysia – in which Mokhtari and Farid Bouloukbashi bagged four goals apiece – showcased IR Iran's early tournament credentials, before Afghanistan and China were next to be put to the sword as 6-1 and 10-0 wins ensued.

But, with Bahrain also on maximum points going into the final group game, there remained all to play for. The Gulf nation did, indeed, offer up a challenge as they raced into a two-goal lead early on before IR Iran eventually ran out 5-2 victors.

With just three teams in Group B, Lebanon and defending champions Oman both played out wins over Thailand ahead of their winner-takes-all showdown.

Oman led on three occasions only to be pegged back each time, before Ahmed Grada grabbed a late winner as Lebanon advanced 4-3.

Two-time AFC Beach Soccer Championship winners UAE took to the stage in Group C, claiming 6-0 and 8-1 victories over Iraq and Qatar respectively in their opening two fixtures.

But they would have competition from fellow two-champions Japan, who notched up an incredible 25 goals in wins over the

same opponents.

The final Group C encounter saw the pair face off for top spot and it was Ahmed Salem who proved the hero with the decisive goal in a 5-4 UAE victory. Japan, though, joined the Gulf nation in the last four as the best second-placed team.

A clash of the heavyweights in the semi-finals saw IR Iran take on Japan, and it was the Japanese who raced into an early 3-1 lead in a high-scoring encounter that eventually was won 8-6 by the Iranians, who claimed one of the three places up for grabs at the 2017 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in the Bahamas.

The second semi-final was even closer as the UAE and Lebanon ended 4-4 in a game that the Emiratis' Ali Mohammad and Lebanon's Mohamad Merhi notched doubles. Moustafa Al Zein and Mohamad Sleiman missed in the ensuing shootout as UAE advanced to the final 2-1 on penalties while also booking their ticket to the Bahamas.

That left it all to play for in the third-place play-off between Japan and Lebanon with the winner to join IR Iran and the UAE in the Caribbean at the end of April.

And it would be Japan – who held the lead from the second minute – that would claim the third and final spot at the 2017 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup following a 6-3 victory in which Takasuke Goto scored four.



Group A

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
IR Iran	4	4	0	0	0	35	3	32	12
Bahrain	4	3	0	0	1	19	14	5	9
Afghanistan	4	2	0	0	2	17	17	0	6
Malaysia	4	1	0	0	3	10	26	-16	3
China	4	0	0	0	4	3	24	-21	0

04/03/2017

China 0 Bahrain 5 (Rashed Jamal 1, 17, Hesham Ahmed 31, Mohamad Abdulla 31, Ayoub Salem, 35)
Afghanistan 5 (Hazrat Baran 5, Zainuddin Sharifi 11, Raof Qaderi 28, 30, 31) Malaysia 3 (Qushairie Asaari 5, 31, Khairul Nizam 34)

05/03/2017

Afghanistan 7 (Sami Mohammadi 3, 17, Raof Qaderi 11, 20, 28, Zainuddin Sharifi 16, Hamidullah Gulzar 35)
China 2 (Qiu Hao 11, Liu Yi Si 16)
Malaysia 0 IR Iran 14 (Moslem Mesigar 3, 7, Mohammadali Mokhtari 7, 12, 17, 30, Farid Bouloukbashi 11, 17, 23, 30, Mostafa Kiani 12, Seyed Nazem 14, Haid Behzadpour 17, Mohammad Ahmadzadeh 21)

06/03/2017

Bahrain 6 (Abdulla Al Malki 11, Rashed Jamal 12, Saleh Mohamed 13, Mohamed Abdulla 17, Ayoub Salem 19, Abdulla Abdullatif 32) Malaysia 5 (Shafiq Huzair 11, Zaharim Yusof 19, 35, Fakhrullah Mohamed 23, Khairul Nizam 28)

IR Iran 6 (Farid Bouloukbashi 7, 18 pen, 34, Seyed Nazem 10, Moslem Mesigar 19, Hassan Abdollahi 36) Afghanistan 1 (Raof Qaderi 7)

07/03/2017

Bahrain 6 (Rashed Jamal 6, 15, Hesham Ahmed 10, Mohamed Ashoor 14, Abdulla Al Malki 22, Salman Al Yaqoobi 32) Afghanistan 4 (Raof Qaderi 21, 31, Murtaza Jafari 24, Shahab Alavi 27)
China 0 IR Iran 10 (Mohammadali Mokhtari 1, 8, 13, Farid Bouloukbashi 6, 31, Moslem Mesigar 6, Seyed Hosseini 10, Seyed Nazem 13, Mohamad Moradi 14, Amir Akbari 19)

08/03/2017

Malaysia 2 (Zaharim Yusof 2, Fakhruddin Mohamad 12) China 1 (Liu Yi Si 16)
IR Iran 5 (Mohammad Ahmadzadeh 12, 15, Hamid Behzadpour 14, Seyed Nazem 23, Mohammadali Mokhtari 28) Bahrain 2 (Abdulla Alabdulla 4, Hesham Ahmed 6)

Group B

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lebanon	2	2	0	0	0	10	4	6	6
Oman	2	1	0	0	1	6	6	0	3
Thailand	2	0	0	0	2	3	9	-6	0

06/03/2017

Oman 3 (Khalid Al Oraimi 29, 35 pen, Yahya Al Araimi 30) Thailand 2 (Komkrit Nanan 6, Jullawan Pinkaew 27)

07/03/2017

Thailand 1 (Manus Madtoha 29) Lebanon 6 (Ahmed Grada 1, Sameh Jalal 3, Mohamad Merhi 13, Hussein Abdullah 26 pen, Mahmoud Matar 27, Mohamad Sleiman 33)

08/03/2017

Oman 3 (Yahya Al Araimi 11, Nooh Al Zadjali 22, Abdullah Salim 28) Lebanon 4 (Moustafa Al Zein 16, Mohamad Merhi 28, 36, Ahmed Grada 36)

Group C

	P	W	WE	WP	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE	3	3	0	0	0	19	5	14	9
Japan	3	2	0	0	1	29	7	22	6
Iraq	3	0	0	1	2	5	19	-14	1
Qatar	3	0	0	0	3	3	25	-22	0

06/03/2017

UAE 6 (Ali Karim 2, Haitham Mohamed 9, Kamal Ali 12, 19, Waleed Salem 16, Ahmed Salem 32) Iraq 0
Japan 14 (Takaaki Oba 5, Ozu Moreira 7, 11, 13, 25, Takasuke Goto 16, 24, Takuya Akaguma 19, 19 pen, 25 pen, Jun Sakata 20, 27, Tomoyuki Iino 29, 31) Qatar 0

07/03/2017

Qatar 1 (Fawaz Daoud 22) UAE 8 (Waleed Salem 3, 12, Ali Mohammad 3, Abbas Daryaei 7, Rashid Al Jassam 8 OG, Haitham Mohamed 13, Ahmed Salem 26, Walid Mohammed 33)
Iraq 2 (Hussein Ibrahim 16, Mustafa Mohammed 28) Japan 11 (Takaaki Oba 1, 5, 26, 35, Takuya Akaguma 6, 9, Takasuke Goto 12, Shingo Terukina, 15, Shotaro Haraguchi 23, Jun Sakata 27, Ozu Moreira 28)

08/03/2017

Iraq 2 (Mohammed Najji 8, Rashid Al Jassim 11 OG) Qatar 2 (Fawaz Daoud 14, 28)
Iraq win 3-2 on penalties AET
Japan 4 (Ozu Moreira 6, Takasuke Goto 21, 29 pen, Takaaki Oba 36) UAE 5 (Ali Karim 23, Hashim Al Muntaser 24, Ali Mohammad 25, Haitham Mohamed 31, Ahmed Salem 36)

Semi-Finals

10/07/2017

IR Iran 8 (Mohammad Ahmadzadeh 4, 27, Moslem Mesigar 11, Mohammadali Mokhtari 12 pen, 23, Hassan Abdollahi 14, 33, Seyed Nazem 31) Japan 6 (Takasuke Goto 3, 36, Takuya Akaguma 9, 29, Takaaki Oba 11, Ozu Moreira 13)
UAE 4 (Ahmed Salem 5, Haitham Mohamed 20 pen, Ali Mohammad 24, 27) Lebanon 4 (Ahmed Grada 5, Mohamad Matar 24, Mohamad Merhi 25, 25)
UAE win 2-1 on penalties AET

Third Place Play-off

11/03/2017

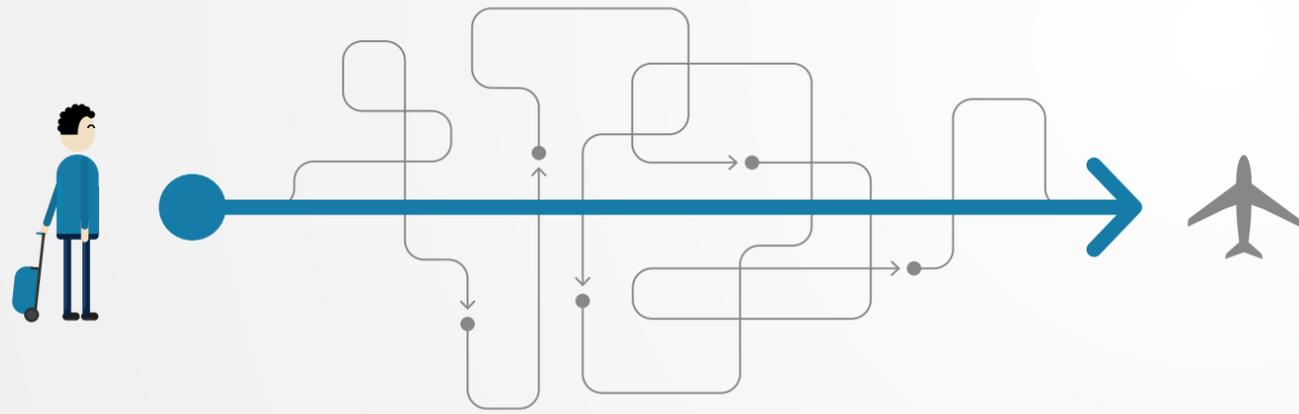
Lebanon 3 (Haitham Fattal 16, 28, Mohamad Merhi 25)
Japan 6 (Takasuke Goto 2, 16, 27, 36, Shotaru Haraguchi 12, Takaaki Oba 31)

Final

UAE 2 (Humaid Jamal 20, Haitham Mohamed 22)
IR Iran 7 (Moslem Mesigar 2, 18, Seyed Hosseini 3, Mohammadali Mokhtari 10, 35 Amir Akbari 24, Seyed Nazem 32)



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Third Round of AFC Asian Cup Qualifying Kicks Off



Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
India	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
Kyrgyz Republic	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	3
Myanmar	1	0	0	1	0	1	-1	0
Macau	1	0	0	1	0	1	-1	0

28/03/2017
Myanmar 0 India 1
Kyrgyz Republic 1 Macau 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Lebanon	1	1	0	0	2	0	2	3
DPR Korea	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Malaysia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hong Kong	1	0	0	1	0	2	-2	0

28/03/2017
Lebanon 2 Hong Kong 0

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	1	1	0	0	7	0	7	3
Afghanistan	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Vietnam	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1
Cambodia	1	0	0	1	0	7	-7	0

28/03/2017
Afghanistan 1 Vietnam 1
Jordan 7 Cambodia 0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Oman	1	1	0	0	14	0	14	3
Palestine	1	1	0	0	3	0	3	3
Maldives	1	0	0	1	0	3	-3	0
Bhutan	1	0	0	1	0	14	-14	0

28/03/2017
Oman 14 Bhutan 0
Maldives 0 Palestine 3

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Turkmenistan	1	1	0	0	3	1	2	3
Bahrain	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Singapore	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Chinese Taipei	1	0	0	1	1	3	-2	0

26/03/2017
Chinese Taipei 1 Turkmenistan 3
28/03/2017
Bahrain 0 Singapore 0

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Philippines	1	1	0	0	4	1	3	3
Yemen	1	1	0	0	2	1	1	3
Tajikistan	1	0	0	1	1	2	-1	0
Nepal	1	0	0	1	1	4	-3	0

28/03/2017
Philippines 4 Nepal 1
Yemen 2 Tajikistan 1

With 12 remaining places at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 up for grabs, the third and final round of qualifying got underway at the end of March with 24 teams in six groups

looking to advance to the continent's showpiece event.

India left in late in their Group A opener but once again had their captain and star striker Sunil Chhetri to thank as his injury-time goal secured a 1-0 win in Myanmar. The Kyrgyz Republic were also indebted to their captain as Azamat Baimatov scored the only goal of the game against Macau in Bishkek.

Lebanon are the early pacesetters in Group B after Mohamad Ghaddar and Hassan Maatouk struck first-half goals against Hong Kong in a 2-0 victory. Malaysia and DPR Korea, meanwhile, have yet to kick off their campaign.

Hamza Al Daradreh netted a hat-trick as Jordan

routed Cambodia 7-0 in Group C to move two points clear of both Afghanistan and Vietnam, who shared a 1-1 draw in Dushanbe.

The biggest score of the first round of matches came in Muscat, where Oman ran out 14-0 victors over Bhutan in Group D. Abdul Al Maqbali scored an incredible six goals, while second-half substitute Khalid Al Hajri bagged four. Elsewhere, a brace for Ahmed Wridat helped Palestine to a 3-0 win over the Maldives.

Turkmenistan's 3-1 victory over Chinese Taipei puts them in pole position in Group E after Singapore and Bahrain played out a scoreless draw in Manama.

And finally, Philip Younghusband scored twice as the Philippines defeated Nepal 4-1 in Group F, but Yemen kept pace with the Southeast

Asians as Ala Al Sasi's winner saw off Tajikistan 2-1 in Doha.

After six games the top two teams from each group will progress to the continental tournament in the United Arab Emirates, while the next round of matches are set to take place in June.



AFC To Boost Women's Development In UAE

United Arab Emirates will be the next country to draw benefits for its women's football from the Asian Football Confederation's (AFC) Women's Assistance Programme (WAP). AFC Head of Women's Football Development Bai Lili and AFC Technical Committee Member Fan Yunjie visited the country in March to assess the Member Association's specific needs for the programme.

The three-day assessment visit coincided with the AFC Women's Football Day on March 8 and the AFC representatives took part in the celebrations

at the festival organised by the UAE Football Association (UAEFA). The second day saw a friendly match between the UAE and Uzbekistan women's team, in preparation for the AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018 qualifiers, with Uzbekistan securing a resounding 1-8 victory over



the hosts.

The UAEFA Technical Director Dr. Balhasan Malouch commented after the match: "This was a good experience and learning process for our players and coaches. We still have one month to prepare for the Women's Asian Cup qualifiers and we have a chance in our group - let's see how much we can do!"

There was a press conference after the match where Bai Lili told the media about the AFC's Women's Assistance Programme and the plans for helping to take the UAE's women's football to the next level.

On the third and last day of the visit, Bai Lili and

Fan Yunjie visited the Under-14 and Under-16 women's leagues and had a meeting with the coaches. This was followed by a strategic planning meeting to wrap up the findings of the visit and to chart the next steps of the programme.

Chengdu To Host Medical Conference 2019

Following the highly-successful 5th AFC Medical Conference in New Delhi, India, in 2015, the AFC Medical Committee decided in March to award the hosting rights of the next AFC Medical Conference in 2019 to Chengdu, China.

The three-day quadrennial event, which will see the continent's most established sports science and medicine practitioners gather to discuss the latest advancements in the field, will take place in March 2019.

Chairman of the AFC Medical Committee Dato' Dr Gurcharan Singh underlined the importance of the Committee's work in setting the best possible environment for the continent's players and teams to achieve success on the world stage, as underlined by the AFC's Vision and Mission.

The AFC Medical Committee also agreed to establish a network of AFC Medical Centres of Excellence in Asia, which will see the AFC endorse referral centres that demonstrate excellence and leadership in football

medicine.

Other important areas that impact football and players in particular, were discussed namely, guidelines for extreme environmental conditions and updates on several research studies and initiatives currently ongoing, which include the AFC Champions League injury project; injuries in the AFC competitions, the use and abuse of medications as well as the benefits of nutrition and supplements.

In his closing remarks, Chairman Dato' Dr Gurcharan praised the impact of the various sports science and medicine projects in recent months, including the recently concluded AFC Medical Officers "Train the Trainers" course, which

was held on March 2-5 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Looking ahead, he added that the AFC Medical Committee will continue to ensure that the continent's practitioners and doctors provide professional scientific support, as the AFC strives to realise its aspirations under the banner of One Asia, One Goal.



Assessment Visit Concludes In Jordan

The AFC Executive Committee reiterated its long-term objectives to become the world's leading football Confederation and of football becoming the continent's num AFC ASSESSMENT VISIT CONCLUDES IN JORDAN ber one sport at its meeting in Kuala Lumpur in March.

United behind the sentiment of 'One Asia, One Goal', the AFC Executive Committee also pledged to further strengthen ties with other football bodies.

"Our stated ambition is to increase engagement with the billions of potential football fans across this continent, as well as becoming the world's leading Confederation," said AFC President Shaikh

Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

"The AFC will continue to work closely with other Confederations – strengthening our links with CAF, CONCACAF, UEFA and OFC as well as building on the understanding we have with other key stakeholders.

"We must work harder than ever at the AFC to sustain the momentum Asian football is gathering on the global stage. However, we need, as we said in the Vision and Mission, to make our teams stronger so we can close the gap on world football powerhouses.

"That must be our focus in the coming months and years."



AFC Host Two-Day Workshop In Male

Club licensing managers from Maldivian football clubs were given an update on the AFC club licensing criteria, while communications and media representatives were encouraged to use communication tools to the benefit of football development in a two-day AFC workshop in Malé, the capital of the Maldives, that concluded in March.

AFC Development Officer Yogesh Desai opened the workshop, explaining the criteria for clubs taking part in AFC competitions. From the next season in 2018, it will become compulsory for clubs to implement the criteria in order to gain entry into the AFC Cup.

There were fruitful discussions between club, Member Association and AFC representatives around the preparations needed ahead of next season, as well as deadlines and other practical issues related to the national league. The AFC encouraged clubs to focus on youth team development as part of the club licensing criteria and the Football Association of Maldives offered its support for this process.

The second session focused on the Club Licensing Administration System (CLAS) and how it is used as a

reporting mechanism and to share information between clubs around Asia and the AFC.

On day two of the workshop, club representatives and journalists discussed media and communications matters. AFC's Head of Media Emilia Hinkkanen led the session, which started by establishing why communications and media matter in football and how they can be utilised to the benefit of football development. The central role of

communications in the AFC's Vision and Mission for the future of Asian football was outlined and strategic communication and media operations in relation to the AFC and national league matches were discussed.

An open discussion took place between the participants about the challenges they face when covering football news in the Maldives, one of which was the geography of the country, which comprises thousands of islands.

The journalists stressed the importance of working closely with FAM and information-sharing between all parties in the small island nation was identified as essential. Addressing challenges and next steps, including possible training opportunities, were brought up at the concluding session of the day.



AFC President Inaugurates Mini-Pitch Project In Laos

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) President, spent time in early March in the Laotian capital of Vientiane holding meetings with top Government and Lao Football Federation (LFF) officials and the ground-breaking for the latest AFC Mini-Pitch project.

During the trip – the AFC President's third to the country – he met Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) Vice-President H.E. Prof. Dr Phankham Viphavan and Vice-Minister of Education and Sports H.E. Prof. Dr Kongsy Sengmany at the Presidential Palace.

Shaikh Salman then visited the LFF headquarters for the ground-breaking ceremony for the AFC Mini-Pitch which is being provided under the President's Initiatives. He cut the ribbon alongside LFF President Viphet Sihachakr and HE Prof. Dr. Kongsy Sengmany.

The AFC President said: "The AFC's commitment to the Lao Football Federation shines through with the AFC President's Initiatives. The AFC completely

understands that for an aspiring Member Association, a little help and assistance from the AFC can make a big difference on their football landscape.

Shaikh Salman acknowledged that Lao 'punches above its weight in AFC competitions', praised the LFF for their stance on match-fixing, saying: "I congratulate Lao Football Federation and its President on the initiatives taken against match-fixing. Match-fixing is a disease and we must eradicate it from football."

He added that the unity and solidarity within the AFC now presents great opportunities: "Now the AFC is a stable organisation and this is something we should be

proud of. Your support enabled us to get together as a family again. Now that there is stability, we have more confidence to do bigger things.

"We look to the future with high hopes. Our duty is to make a difference. The level of football in a country does not depend on one organisation. We must all join hands and work together."



Draw Concluded For U-20 Futsal Championship

Twenty-one AFC Futsal U-20 Championship Thailand 2017 hopefuls learned their opponents on Thursday when the official draw for the inaugural competition took place in the capital of Thailand on March 30.

The 21 teams were drawn into one group of six teams and three groups of five teams.

Football Association of Thailand Vice President Thanasak Suraprasert welcomed the audience and said: "We are delighted and honoured to be hosts of this new competition, and we welcome the new competition at U-20 level as an important step to support the development of futsal in Thailand."

The tournament will take place in the Thai capital between May 16 and 26, 2017 at the Bangkok Arena

and the Huamark Indoor Stadium, with the top two from each group qualifying for the quarter-finals.

AFC U-20 FUTSAL CHAMPIONSHIP THAILAND 2017			
GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D
A1 THAILAND	B1 VIETNAM	C1 UZBEKISTAN	D1 IR IRAN
A2 IRAQ	B2 JAPAN	C2 QATAR	D2 KYRGYZ REP.
A3 MALAYSIA	B3 CHINESE TAIPEI	C3 LEBANON	D3 CHINA PR
A4 BRUNEI	B4 TAJIKISTAN	C4 MYANMAR	D4 MONGOLIA
A5 SAUDI ARABIA	B5 INDONESIA	C5 HONG KONG	D5 UAE

Players Media Training Workshop Held In UAE

A Players Media Training Workshop was conducted in three United Arab Emirates cities - Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah - which concluded at the end of March.

The three-day course organised by the UAE Pro League Committee (PLC), in collaboration with the AFC League Development Programme and local sports councils, aimed to educate the players on dealing with the media.

The PLC Acting CEO Waleed Al Hosani, who gave the opening speech in Abu Dhabi, emphasised on the committee's decision to train the UAE Pro League players in handling the media as part of efforts to improve various aspects of football in line with the process of professionalisation.

The workshop began with the topic of appearance as media consultant Sally Al Asaad shared on the importance of players' image during an interview. Al Asaad explained the

significance of displaying a good conduct when engaging with fans, media crew, photographers and media officers, because it presents a positive impact not just on the club or country, but on the player's career as well. As public figures, Al Asaad cautioned the players to be aware of the emergence of new media and its influence when using social network services.

UAE television presenter Lutfi Al Zobi gave a presentation on TV and media interviews, delivering dos and don'ts.

The course also touched on the players' media rights and responsibilities in promoting the UAE Pro League beyond



the UAE in terms of television interviews and press conferences. Television broadcast manager Ammar Hina spoke about the technical aspect of media statistics, viewership ratios and financial revenues for clubs from television rights.

AFC Reaffirm Development Commitment In Cambodia

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) President, Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, reaffirmed the AFC's commitment to football development

in Cambodia and praised the new leadership of the Football Federation of Cambodia (FFC) for stabilising the organisation during his visit to the nation in March.

Meeting General Sao Sokha, the FFC President, in the Cambodian capital, Shaikh Salman said that he was delighted to be back in the country and added that the new leadership gave FFC an opportunity to develop football in the coming years.

Both Presidents re-affirmed their total commitment to tackle the evils of match-fixing and Gen Sao Sokha added: "We are taking match-fixing very seriously in Cambodia and promise we will spare no efforts in fighting this menace. We need the AFC's help to fight this cancer - this disease."

Shaikh Salman stressed the AFC's zero-tolerance to match fixing and promised the FFC every assistance

possible and added: "We have to work hard to preserve the integrity of football. There should be no place for dishonesty in football."

The AFC President also thanked the FFC for their support for unity in Asian football which has allowed the AFC to embark on new initiatives with great commitment and confidence. He said: "Under the banner of One Asia, One Goal we have seen Asian football make enormous strides and gain the admiration of Confederations around the world. We appreciate your support."

The FFC President announced the launch of football schools in the country's 25 provinces which will further encourage development. Gen Sao Sokha added: "We want to use football as a power for good and an education tool for our youth. Football can be a real force for social development in our country."



My Dinh Stadium

Hanoi, Vietnam

The centerpiece of Vietnam's National Sports Complex, My Dinh Stadium is a multi-purpose venue and home to Vietnam's national football team. Located 10 kilometres west of central Hanoi, the 40,192-capacity stadium is the Southeast Asian country's second-largest sporting arena.

Costing US\$53 million to construct, My Dinh Stadium features arched roofs that cover the east and west sides and a running track around the pitch. The venue officially opened on September 2, 2003, when it hosted a friendly between Vietnam U-23 and Shanghai Shenhua. It was then used for the Southeast Asian Games later that year.

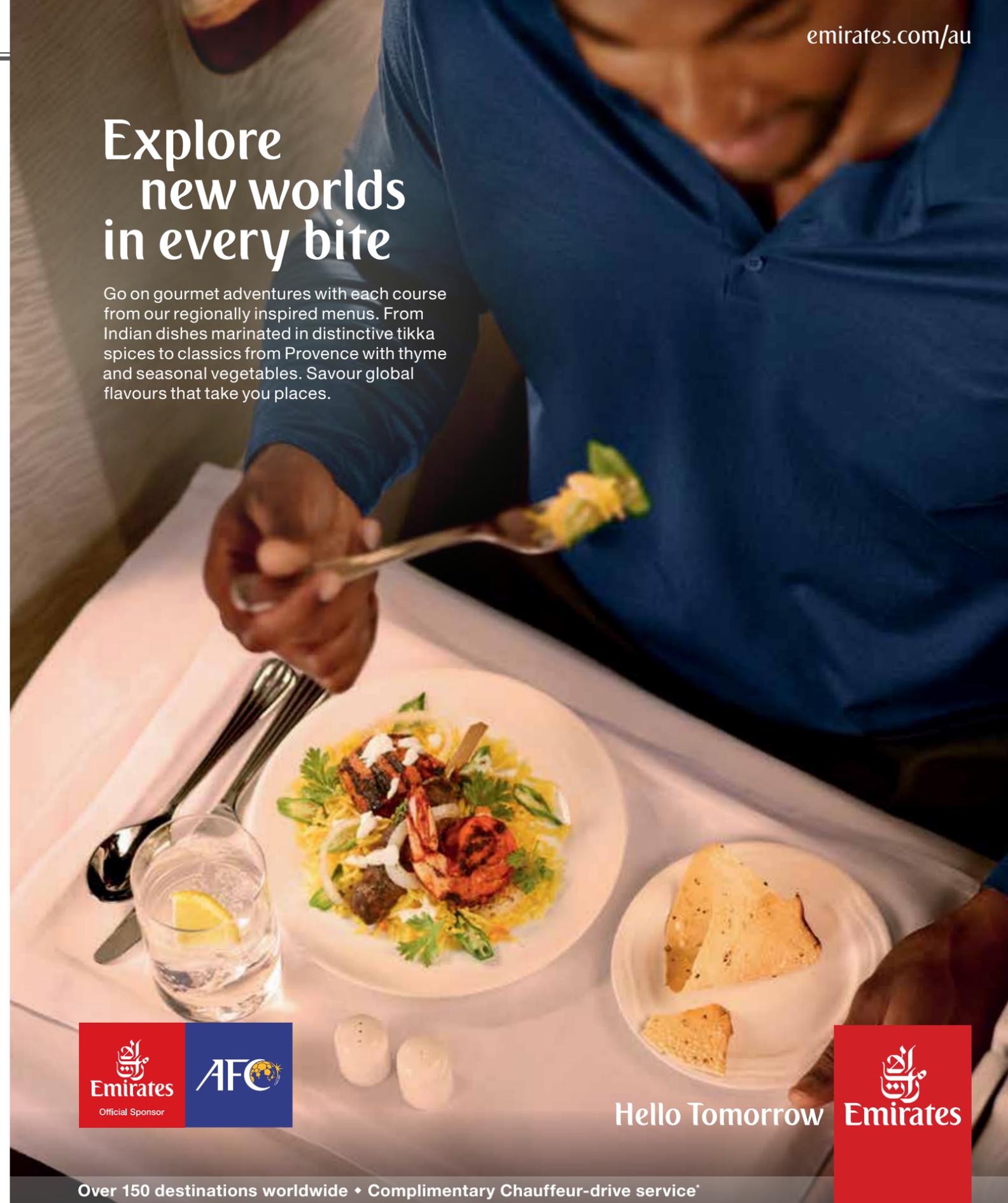
In 2007, when the AFC Asian Cup was staged in Southeast Asia, My Dinh Stadium

hosted all but one of the Group B games as Vietnam advanced to the last eight in second place. It also staged Japan's quarter-final and semi-final wins over Australia and Saudi Arabia respectively. A year later the venue hosted Vietnam's greatest footballing triumph when the nation won the AFF Championship for the first time by defeating Thailand 3-2 on aggregate.



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Go on gourmet adventures with each course from our regionally inspired menus. From Indian dishes marinated in distinctive tikka spices to classics from Provence with thyme and seasonal vegetables. Savour global flavours that take you places.



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“If we make it to the World Cup it would be amazing for me, the team and the whole country. It would be something incredible, I can’t even describe it. Being the first time going to the FIFA World Cup - the whole country wants to see the team make it.”

Odil Ahmedov
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