AFC QUARTERLY

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ISSUE 17



PLUS

MONGOLIA

East Asian nation with ambitions for a bright future

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2017

Group Stage Preview

SARDAR AZMOUN

Iran's striking sensation making waves against the world's best

ISSUE 17

Jan 2017



CAITLIN FOORD

AFC Women's Player of the Year winner reflects on the defining moments in a rollercoaster 2016.



AHMED YASIN

Sweden-raised Iraq international winger with big dreams for his career and his nation.



YAPP HUNG-FAI

A standout 2016 was just the start for Eastern SC's captain as he looks to make his mark at the 2017 AFC Champions League.



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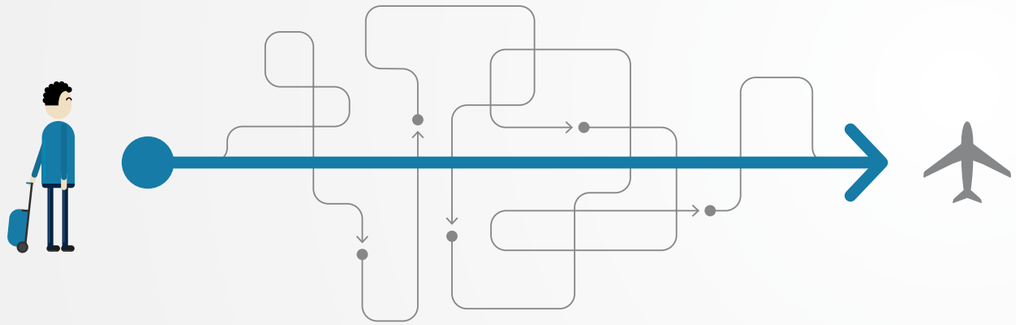
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Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa

AFC President

Dear friends,

The Asian Football Confederation is looking forward to another exciting year in 2017 when Asia hosts not only the FIFA Congress but three FIFA competitions.

The 67th FIFA Congress will take place in Bahrain in May and it is a great honour for our Confederation and the Bahrain Football Association. Later in the year there is the FIFA U- 17 World Cup in India and the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Korea Republic.

Asia will have five representatives in each tournament– India (hosts), Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan and DPR Korea in the FIFA U-17 World Cup and Korea Republic (hosts), Saudi Arabia, Japan, IR Iran and Vietnam will be in the FIFA U-20 World Cup.

These events are in addition to the FIFA Club World Cup which will be returning to Abu Dhabi in December 2017. We have already seen the impact of Asian teams in this tournament with the exceptional display by Kashima Antlers in not only reaching the final in 2016 but also pushing the mighty Real Madrid extremely close before losing in extra time.

There will be the AFC Women's U-16 Championship in Thailand and the AFC Women's U-19 Tournament in China PR this year as well as the usual, end of year club finals of the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup being played in November.

Other dates to note in the coming year are the AFC Women's Football Day on March 8, coinciding with the International Women's Day, the AFC Futsal U-20 Championship in IR Iran, AFC Beach Soccer Championships in Malaysia in March and the AFC Grassroots Day on May 15.

The year will also see a whole host of high-profile AFC events under the banner of One Asia, One Goal and they will bring together experts from our Member Associations, the AFC and further afield, to build a successful future for football in Asia.

I would like to wish you a prosperous and peaceful 2017 which we hope will be filled with many exciting memories of Asian football.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President



Asian Champions

Coach Choi Kang-hee led his Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors side to a second AFC Champions League title a decade after their first as the Korean side defeated Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates 3-2 on aggregate in November's final.

Gallery



Triple Crown

Hammadi Ahmed enjoyed a night to remember as he fired Air Force Club to a 1-0 win over JSW Bengaluru in the final of the AFC Cup in November. The Iraqi striker also earned the tournament's MVP award and Top Scorer accolade after netting 16 goals.

Gallery



Slip And Slide

Nepal overcame difficult conditions to defeat Macau 1-0 in the final of the inaugural AFC Solidarity Cup after a first half goal from Sujal Shreshtha in Kuching, Malaysia in November.

Gallery



Top of The Class

Asia's finest were honoured at the AFC Annual Awards at the beginning of December, with United Arab Emirates midfielder Omar Abdulrahman named AFC Player of the Year after helping Al Ain to the final of the AFC Champions League as the continent's leading lights were recognised.



Abdulrahman Crowned AFC Player of The Year

AL AIN AND UNITED ARAB EMIRATES MIDFIELDER OMAR ABDULRAHMAN WAS NAMED AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR AHEAD OF IRAQ'S HAMMADI AHMED AND CHINA'S WU LEI AT DECEMBER'S AFC ANNUAL AWARDS IN ABU DHABI.

Omar Abdulrahman of the United Arab Emirates was named AFC Player of the Year in December after helping Al Ain reach the AFC Champions League final and his nation remain in contention for a place at the FIFA World Cup 2018 Russia with a string of fine performances in the Asian qualifiers.

Abdulrahman edged out Air Force Club striker Hammadi Ahmed, who was MVP and top scorer in the 2016 edition of the AFC Cup, as well as China and Shanghai SIPG star forward Wu Lei.

Despite failing to land silverware with Al Ain at the end of the domestic season, Abdulrahman shone brightly during his side's quest for AFC Champions League glory, despite the loss to Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors over two legs in the final after which Abdulrahman was duly voted the Toyota Most Valuable Player of the Competition.

"It is a great achievement to have been given this honour," said the 25-year-old who missed out on last year's award to countryman Ahmed Khalil.

"But in general, this trophy is not just for me, it is for everyone – from the players to the coaches and the management at both Al Ain and the United Arab Emirates national team.

"In addition, seeing my father pleased is more important to me than any award. Everything I do is for my father and family."

Australia international Caitlin Foord was named the AFC Women's Player of the Year for 2016, fending off competition from compatriot Lisa De Vanna and China's Tan Ruyin to land the award.

In a glowing testimony to her undoubted talent, Foord becomes only the second player after China's Ma Xiaoxu to receive both the youth and senior accolades following her AFC Women's Youth Player of the Year success in 2011.

Other winners on the prestigious night included Leicester City and Japan striker Shinji Okazaki for AFC International Player of the Year, Choi Kang-hee of Jeonbuk and Chan Yuen-ting of Eastern who were honoured in the categories of AFC Coach of the Year for men and women respectively.

Elsewhere, Japan's Ritsu Doan was named men's AFC Youth Player of the Year while compatriot Fuka Nagano picked up the women's award in the youth category.



Victory For DPR Korea At U-20 Women's World Cup

DPR KOREA COME FROM BEHIND AS EAST ASIANS DEFEAT FRANCE 3-1 IN THE FINAL OF THE 2016 FIFA WOMEN'S U-20 WORLD CUP AT THE START OF DECEMBER IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA.

DPR Korea's U-20 women's side followed in the footsteps of their U-17 counterparts to lift their second FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup after beating France 3-1 at Papua New Guinea's National Football Stadium to win the tournament with a 100% record.

Having finished fourth in the 2014 tournament after a semi-final defeat to Nigeria and then lost out on third place after a 3-2 defeat by France, DPR Korea got revenge for that loss in Montreal with goals from Wi Jong-sim, Kim Phyong-hwa and Jon So-yon to take their second U-20 global title and first since 2006.

Onema Geyoro gave France the lead after just 17 minutes of the final when she stabbed home from close range after DPR Korea goalkeeper Kim Myong-sun fumbled Maelle Garbino's free-kick.

The Koreans were back level on the half hour as Wi finished at the near-post following Kim's cross before the provider became goalscorer on 55 minutes with a header past Mylene Chavas. However, a penalty from Jon settled matters with three minutes remaining.

Worthy winners DPR Korea finished the tournament with a perfect record after topping a group that included Brazil, Sweden and hosts Papua New Guinea before defeating Spain and the United States en route to the final.

Japan also excelled at the tournament, topping Group B before eliminating Brazil in the quarter-finals, only to suffer a heartbreaking extra-time defeat to France. The young Nadeshiko did, though, defeat rivals the United States to ensure third place.

Japan midfielder Hina Sugita was awarded the Golden Ball as the tournament's Most Valuable Player, striker Mami Ueno earned the Golden Boot as tournament top scorer and DPR Korea's Kim So-hyang was awarded the Silver Ball.

"I am very happy and impressed to see DPR Korea and Japan continue to fly the AFC flag high, following on from their women's teams' brilliant performances at the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup in Jordan," said AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

Korea Republic also featured in Costa Rica having progressed from the 2015 AFC U-19 Championship alongside champions Japan and runners-up DPR Korea but exited at the group stage losing to both Germany and Mexico despite a win over Venezuela.



AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors Face Familiar Foes

Defending champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors from Korea Republic will face a re-match with Chinese Super League side Jiangsu FC in the group stage of the AFC Champions League following December's draw in Kuala Lumpur.

Choi Kang-hee's side claimed a second Asian championship on the 10th anniversary over their maiden continental title after edging out Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates 3-2 on aggregate at the end of last year.

And the holders, who took part in two action-packed ties with Nanjing-based Jiangsu in the group stage of the 2016 edition, will also be joined in Group H of the 2017 tournament by Australian champions Adelaide United and a play-off winner.

The 2016 runners-up and inaugural winners Al Ain will, meanwhile, begin their latest AFC Champions League campaign from Group C where the Emirati side are set to face formidable foes in the shape of Al Ahli from Saudi Arabia, Iran's Zobahan and the winner of the play-off between Qatar's El Jaish and Bunyodkor from Uzbekistan.

Elsewhere, 2013 and 2015 winners Guangzhou Evergrande have been drawn in Group G along with Suwon Samsung Bluewings from Korea Republic, Eastern Sports Club of Hong Kong and Japan's third club, while Australia's Western Sydney Wanderers, champions in 2014, find themselves in Group F with K-League Classic winners FC Seoul, Japan's second club and a play-off winner.

And in Group E, Japanese champions Kashima Antlers take on Thai side Muangthong United as well as two additional teams from the play-offs.

In the West, 2015 finalists Al Ahli from the UAE will play Uzbek champions Lokomotiv as well as Al Taawoun of Saudi Arabia and the winner of Iran's Esteghlal and Qatar's Al Sadd in Group A.

In Group B, Iran's Esteghlal Khouzestan were drawn with Emirati side Al Jazira, Qatar's Lekhwiya and a play-off winner.

Finally, Group D will see Qatari champions Al Rayyan line-up against Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia, Persepolis of Iran and a play-off winner.

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Al Ahli (UAE)	Esteghlal Khouzestan	Al Ahli (KSA)	Al Rayyan	Kashima Antlers	FC Seoul	Guangzhou Evergrande	Adelaide United
Lokomotiv	Al Jazira	Zobahan	Al Hilal	Muangthong United	Japan 2nd Club	Suwon Samsung Bluewings	Jiangsu FC
Al Taawoun	Lekhwiya	Al Ain	Persepolis	Play-off winner	Western Sydney Wanderers	Japan 3rd Club	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	Eastern SC	Play-off winner



AFC CUP

Tough Test For Air Force Club

Reigning AFC Cup champions Air Force Club from Iraq have been handed a difficult start to their title defence following the official draw for the competition's 2017 edition in Kuala Lumpur in December.

With the revamped AFC Cup now split into zones, Air Force Club - who in November defeated India's JSW Bengaluru to claim their first continental crown - find themselves in Group B, where they join Bahrain's Al Hidd, Safa from Lebanon and Syrian side Al Wahda.

Meanwhile, defeated finalists JSW Bengaluru will look to make amends for their 2016 disappointment when they begin their latest title assault from the South Zone and Group E. They will face Maldives outfit Maziya S&R, Abhani Limited Dhaka from Bangladesh and a play-off winner in the Group Stage should they fail to qualify for the AFC Champions League through the Preliminary and Play-off stages.

The 2015 champions Johor Darul Ta'zim, meanwhile, have been drawn in Group F of the ASEAN Zone. The Malaysians will be matched with Magwe FC of Myanmar, Global FC or Loyola Sparks of the Philippines and a play-off winner if their AFC Champions League Preliminary and Play-off campaign prove unsuccessful.

Group G of the ASEAN Zone features Hanoi FC or SHB Da Nang of Vientam, Felda United of Malaysia, Tampines Rovers or Geylang International FC of Singapore and Philippines side Ceres Negros FC.

Rounding out the Southeast Asia section is Group H where Myanmar's Yadanarbon or Yangon United will take on Than Quang Ninh of Vietnam, Lanexang United of Laos and a play-off winner.

The East Asia Zone will see four AFC Cup debutants take part in the tournament with April 25 Sports Club from DPR Korea joined by Rovers FC of Guam, Taipower Company of Chinese Taipei and a play-off winner.

In the West, Iraqi champions Al Zawraa Club find themselves in Group A alongside Al Ahli of Jordan, Al Jaish of Syria and a play-off winner, while Group C will include Al Wehdat or Al Jazeera of Jordan, Bahrain's Al Muharraq Club, Saham of Oman and Lebanese side Nejmeh SC.

West Zone			Central Zone	South Zone				East Zone
Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H	Group I
Al Zawraa Club	Club	Al Wehdat or Al Jazeera	FC Istiklol	JSW Bengaluru or Kingfisher East Bengal	Johor Darul Ta'zim or Kedah DA FA	Hanoi FC or SHB Da Nang	Yadanarbon or Yangon United	April 25 SC
Al Ahli	Air Force Club	Al Muharraq	Altyn Asyr	Maziya S&R	Magwe FC	Felda United	Than Quang Ninh	Rovers FC
Al Jaish	Safa SC	Saham	FC Alay	Abhani Limited Dhaka	Global FC or Loyola Sparks FC	Tampines Rovers or Geylang International	Lanexang United	Taipower Company
Play-off winner	Al Wahda	Nejmeh SC	Play-off winner	Play-off winner	4. Play-off winner	4. Ceres Negros FC	Play-off winner	Play-off winner

ON TARGET

TWO YEARS AFTER ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN HEAD COACH CARLOS QUEIROZ TIPPED HIM FOR THE TOP, SARDAR AZMOUN IS CREATING WAVES AGAINST THE BEST TEAMS IN THE WORLD IN THE UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AND STEERING IRAN TO POLE POSITION IN THEIR GROUP IN QUALIFYING FOR THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP FINALS IN RUSSIA.

By: Michael Church **Photos:** Lagardère Sports



Deep in the bowels of Tehran's imposing Azadi Stadium, the smile on Sardar Azmoun's face expresses more than words could ever muster. "You see," he says with the broadest of grins, "I won. I told you!"

It is a bold statement at the end of Islamic Republic of Iran's most important game of the year but, just as Team Melli prevailed against Korea Republic in the nations' crucial qualifier for the FIFA World Cup finals, so Azmoun had triumphed in his own personal battle.

Twenty-four hours before, the FC Rostov forward had distilled the meeting between two of Asia's strongest teams into the simplest of equations: him versus Son Heung-min, the high-flying star of Tottenham Hotspur and the Koreans' talismanic winger.

"It is me against the No. 7," Azmoun had said the night before the game. "And I will be the best."

True to his word, Azmoun outshone the former SV Hamburg and Bayer Leverkusen forward.

Son was stifled – like the entire Korea Republic team – finishing the 90 minutes without a shot on target. By contrast, Azmoun claimed the game's only goal with an accomplished finish from inside the area, moving Iran another step closer to a fifth appearance on the game's greatest stage.

At the time, it was an important goal but, in the context of his continuing rise, that strike was another example of Azmoun's unquestionable talent. With some of the biggest clubs in the European game now tracking his every move, he could soon be about to show the wider world just how good he has become.

Not that the attention will faze the precociously talented striker. Since announcing his arrival on the Asian football scene in Australia two years ago, Azmoun has proven that confidence and assuredness are characteristics he possesses in abundance.

The murmurs and rumblings that had been steadily building in the 18 months prior to the 2015 AFC Asian Cup turned into the loudest of roars at Sydney's Stadium Australia when Azmoun scored the goal that woke up the rest of the continent to his ability.

It came against Qatar in the group stages of the continental championship and, after Andranik Teymourian stole possession deep inside the Qatari half, Ashkan Dejaghan sent a low cross in the direction of Azmoun.

In an instant, the youngster had









pirouetted past the defence, back heeling the ball towards goal before prodding his shot beyond the goalkeeper. It was an audacious moment of skill and perception that marked Azmoun out as a remarkable talent.

"Brilliant goal, it was a special movement of the centre forward to make a great turn at the level of some of the best centre forwards I have worked with in my life, like Ruud van Nistelrooy," said Iran coach Carlos Queiroz after the game. "It was a brilliant goal.

"I think we knew that we should try those turns and we should try to attack the space behind, but the way he moved the ball for a young player, he has a great future in front of him."

Queiroz, of course, is no stranger to the best players in the world. Having worked with van Nistelrooy during his time as assistant coach to Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United before becoming head coach at Real Madrid and leading the Portugal national side, the opinions of the well-travelled tactician carry significant weight. And that is a fact not lost on Azmoun.

"Of course, those kind of comparisons make my duties and my responsibilities a lot more difficult," says Azmoun. "When a big coach like Carlos Queiroz, our coach, when he compares a young player like me in an official press conference to Ruud van Nistelrooy then of course it's a great privilege.

"Carlos worked with Van Nistelrooy, so he knows his abilities and he knows my abilities, so that was a great honour for me.

"We have many great strikers at the minute, like Karim Ansarifard and Reza

"IT IS ME AGAINST THE NO.7 [SON HEUNG-MIN] AND I WILL BE THE BEST."

Ghoochannejhad. All these players, the current crop of strikers, are all fine players but perhaps some of them haven't shone as much as they can and haven't shown their full potential.

"We can't forget that Iran is a big country with 80 million people and there is a lot of potential, a lot of brilliant talent in Iran and I believe we can have good strikers, and good footballers altogether, in Iran."

With 16 goals in 22 appearances since breaking into Team Melli back in May 2014, Azmoun is leading the way for the next generation of Iranian forwards, following in the footsteps of legends such as Ali Daei and Vahid Hashemian.

Daei's record of 109 goals for the national team is already being talked about in some quarters as an achievable target for Azmoun, but the 21-year-old – he celebrates his 22nd birthday on January 1 – contests such landmarks have yet to enter his mind.

"I really haven't thought about this kind of thing," he says. "What I try to concentrate on and be determined to do is to make sure I do my best for the national team, and when I'm playing for the national team I give my best performance inside the pitch so that I can serve my nation as best as I can.

"Ali Daei has the highest number of national team goals in the world, so that record belongs to an Iranian guy, so if he holds it or I hold it, it doesn't make a difference. He comes from Iran and he makes us all proud and I'm very proud of that.

"He was my hero when I was a kid. If Ali Daei had been born in another country they would have made a statue of his legs and put it in the middle of the city because he has achieved so much. I met him and have trained with him a couple of times. We know each other, but we haven't really talked to each other too much."

Daei – still widely regarded as Iran's greatest ever player – was a late bloomer, making his move to Europe at the age of 28 before becoming the first Asian player to score in the UEFA Champions League when he netted twice for Hertha Berlin against Chelsea following earlier stints with Arminia Bielefeld and Bayern Munich.

Azmoun, by contrast, made his move to Europe at the age of just 17, joining Rubin Kazan in Russia from Sepahan before signing for FC Rostov in the summer after a stint on loan at the club and making his debut in the UEFA Champions League at the start of the current campaign.

Leaving Iran at such an early stage of his career brought with it significant challenges, and the support of his family was key to Azmoun kicking off the next phase of life as a footballer.

"It was extremely difficult for me being away from my family at the age of 17," he says. "I actually couldn't handle it and after one week I called my family and I said: 'You guys have to come here and stay with me'.

"It was very difficult. But it's a completely different level for playing. It was a lot more professional: my sleeping patterns, my routine, everything, was in a completely different way, but I'm very happy I moved to Rubin Kazan when I was 17.

"For me coming from a sporting family – my father is a volleyball coach and was a player – so that really helped me. All of my family members, my mum, my sister, they all came to Kazan and really supported me. Of course, family is the most valuable thing and having a family like mine has helped. They really understand sport and they also helped me to improve in certain aspects of my career. It's really helped a lot.

Left FIFA World Cup Qualifiers 2018 *Above* AFC Asian Cup 2015

"IRAN IS A BIG COUNTRY WITH 80 MILLION PEOPLE AND THERE IS A LOT OF POTENTIAL, A LOT OF BRILLIANT TALENT IN IRAN."

"My father has undergone a lot of difficulties in volleyball, especially in the city that we're from, Gonbad-e-Kavus. It's completely focused on volleyball. My father didn't achieve to the extent that he deserved, so he always wanted me to become a football player. It was his dream, his desire for me to become a football player, so I got into football.

"Now, everything is good for me. I made a promise to my dad and I'm really hopeful and optimistic that I can fulfil that promise. I can't reveal the promise," he says with a smile, "but it's an extremely difficult promise to achieve. If I tell you now and I can't achieve it, then I'm going to be embarrassed! If I achieve it, I'll tell you what it was."

The current season has taken Azmoun to a higher level, and the forward has responded in impressive fashion.

Two goals in the preliminary rounds of the UEFA Champions League – against Anderlecht and Ajax Amsterdam – were followed by eye-catching strikes against Atletico Madrid and Bayern Munich in the group phase of the competition that have intensified speculation over his future.

Former European champions Liverpool have been linked with a move to sign the forward, as have Ajax and PSV Eindhoven, and the speculation is welcomed by a player keen to test himself against the finest players in the best leagues within the game.

"This season is my first time playing in the UEFA Champions League, although I had played in the Europa League before," he says. "But the Champions League is at a completely different level. For me, it's been a great experience and I'm looking forward to proving myself again and perhaps some bigger clubs in Europe will see my performances and it will be great for me, especially at this stage of my career.

"I still believe I can improve more and progress more. I don't think I have achieved all that I can achieve. If I had made some better decisions perhaps I'd be in a better place than I am now, but I still have a long way to go and I'm always trying to develop and progress and get better and better every day and hopefully I can achieve a lot more in the future."

In addition to his exploits at club level, Azmoun has his sights set firmly on bringing success to the Iran national team as the





Left AFC Asian Cup 2015

Right FIFA World Cup Qualifiers 2018

country continues to look for a way to end a disappointing run at continental level without a major title.

Despite making his debut for Team Melli in the build-up to the 2014 FIFA World Cup finals in Brazil, Azmoun was not included in Queiroz's final 23-man squad for the trip to Brazil, where the Iranians faced off against Argentina, Nigeria and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Two defeats, including a narrow loss against the Argentinians thanks to a late winner from Lionel Messi, and a draw – against the Nigerians – saw Iran leave Brazil at the conclusion of the group stages with their heads held high.

Their performances in Brazil, coupled with the retention of Queiroz as coach, saw Iran go to the Asian Cup amongst the favourites, only for Team Melli to slip up in a penalty shoot-out at the end of a thrilling encounter with Iraq in Canberra in the quarter-finals, extending the country's drought in the continental championship to more than 40 years.

"One thing I need to say is that we were unlucky in the 2015 Asian Cup in Australia," says Azmoun. "We really had a good team, and at the moment we have a great team with many, many great players. We have different options for each position, so we have a team with a lot of capacity to grow and a lot of room to prove ourselves in different competitions.

"But we are hopeful we will qualify for the World Cup with this great team and also with our great coach. We hope we can go to the second round at the World Cup and we think we can win the Asian Cup. We deserve it. We have been the number one Asian team in the FIFA rankings for a long time now and even if you look at the current players who are playing in Europe, there is an increasing number of Iranians in different European leagues, which is of course a great achievement for Iranian football."

> "WE ARE HOPEFUL WE WILL QUALIFY FOR THE WORLD CUP WITH THIS GREAT TEAM AND ALSO WITH OUR GREAT COACH."

The European influence on the Iran national team has been growing in recent years, with Azmoun joined at FC Rostov and in the national team by Saeid Ezatolahi, a midfielder in the mould of Iranian legend Javad Nekounam, while full back Milad Mohammadi signed earlier this year for another Russian side, Terek Grozny.

Alireza Jahanbakhsh, meanwhile, plies his trade with Dutch side AZ Alkmaar while others, such as Ansarifard and Ghoochannejhad as well as veterans like Masoud Shojaei, are dotted elsewhere around Europe, bringing an added level of professionalism to the squad.

It is with that in mind that Azmoun is confident Iran can go on to not only qualify for the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018, but that the current generation within Team Melli – and with Queiroz at the helm – can finally succeed where the likes of Daei, Nekounam and others fell short.

"There's no doubt that with coach Queiroz, one aspect of his personality is that he does not like losing," says Azmoun. "He hates it. He's got that winning mentality. He loves winning and he does his best and he tries to get his team to do their best to win.

"We have achieved a lot over the last few years, we're now the best Asian team in the FIFA rankings and also our results speak for themselves. But unfortunately there has not been enough proper support for coach Queiroz. There have been a lot of people that don't really want the national team to achieve good results.

"But we're hopeful that, if the team is properly supported and under the leadership of coach Queiroz we can keep going strong and qualify for the World Cup."

And there can be little doubt it will be Azmoun who will be leading the charge to Russia for Iran.

THE QUEST FOR GLORY

A TOTAL OF 47 TEAMS FROM 19 MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS LEARNED THEIR DESTINY FOR THE 36TH EDITION OF ASIA'S PREMIER CLUB TOURNAMENT IN DECEMBER, WITH THE DRAW FOR THE GROUP STAGE AND PLAY-OFFS OF THE 2017 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE PROMISING SEVERAL EXCITING TIES.

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors ended a 10-year wait for their second AFC Champions League title on an historic night at Al Ain's Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium at the end of last year, but now thoughts are already switching to their continental championship defence with December's 2017 group stage draw in Kuala Lumpur setting up some mouth-watering ties and an even fiercer battle to come for Asia's premier club tournament title.

Before the group stage even kicks off, there are a series of fascinating fixtures ahead with 23 clubs from Amman to Adelaide taking part in the play-offs.

Included in their number are a host of big name teams including former continental champions in Iran's Esteghlal and Al Sadd of Qatar, while the powerhouses of the Chinese Super League will be represented by Shanghai SIPG and Shanghai Shenhua. All are aiming for one of eight places on offer to join the 24 sides already qualified for the AFC Champions League group stage.

The group stage will begin at the end of February and culminate in early May ahead of the home-and-away Round of 16 ties later that month. The quarter-finals will kick off at the end of August, with the semi-finals begin the following month.

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

But to get to the summit of Asian club football, there is still a long road ahead for 47 teams on the quest for glory.



	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	HISTORY	DID YOU KNOW?
Al Ahli United Arab Emirates GROUP A	Dubai club Al Ahli lifted their seventh UAE league title, ahead of rivals Al Ain by nine points at the culmination of the 2015-16 season.	The team was born following a merger in 1974, when Al Wehdah, Al Shabab and Al Najah combined. 	Al Ahli striker Asamoah Gyan was the 2014 AFC Champions League top scorer when he netted 10 goals in just eight continental appearances.
Lokomotiv Uzbekistan GROUP A	Lokomotiv won their first-ever Uzbek league title to secure a third consecutive appearance in the AFC Champions League group stage. 	Lokomotiv made their first appearance in the AFC Champions League group stage in the 2015 edition after they were eliminated in the play-offs in 2013 and 2014.	In April 2015, Lokomotiv signed a partnership with Lancashire-based League One side Fleetwood Town.
Al Taawoun Saudi Arabia GROUP A	Buraidah city side Al Taawoun finished fourth in the Saudi Pro League but qualified directly for the 2017 AFC Champions League group stage after Al Ittihad were withdrawn.	Al Taawoun are taking part in their second competition outside of Saudi Arabia following their appearance in the 2015 Gulf Club Cup tournament.	Al Taawoun are one of three AFC Champions League debutants who qualified directly for the 2017 group stages. 
Esteghlal Khouzestan IR Iran GROUP B	After surviving a relegation play-off at the end of the 2014-15 season, Esteghlal Khouzestan shocked the Iran football scene by winning their first league championship the very next year.	Esteghlal Khouzestan have only been operating as a licensed side since 2011 but were promoted to the top flight after just two years in the second tier.	Esteghlal Khouzestan compete in the Ahvaz derby against city rivals Foolad Khouzestan with both sides sharing the city's Ghadir Stadium.
Al Jazira United Arab Emirates GROUP B	Back for an eighth AFC Champions League appearance, Al Jazira's penalty shoot-out victory over Al Ain saw them lift a third President's Cup and claim a place in the 2017 continental tournament.	Although formed in 1974, the bulk of Al Jazira's silverware has arrived in the last decade having won the UAE League Cup in 2010, their maiden domestic league title in 2011, and the President's Cup three times.	Al Jazira were established after a merger between two local Abu Dhabi teams, Al Khalidiyah Club and Al Bateen Club. 
Lekhwiya Qatar GROUP B	Lekhwiya ensured a sixth appearance in the AFC Champions League after they lifted their first Qatar Emir Cup. 	In the 2013 tournament, Lekhwiya defeated Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal in the Round of 16 to reach the quarter-finals before losing to eventual winners Guangzhou Evergrande of China.	Lekhwiya won their maiden Qatar Stars League title in their very first season after promotion from the Qatari Second Division.
Al Ahli Saudi Arabia GROUP C	Al Ahli lifted their third Saudi Pro League title, their first since 1984, eight points clear of runners-up Al Hilal.	Set-up in 1937, Al Ahli have reached the AFC Champions League on seven previous occasions with runners-up finishes at the 2012 edition and the 1985/86 Asian Club Championship.	Al Ahli's Syrian striker Omar Al Soma was the Saudi Pro League's top scorer for the second season running with 27 goals. 
Zobahan IR Iran GROUP C	Hazfi Cup holders Zobahan defeated capital city side Esteghlal on penalties to defend their title and lift the trophy for the fourth time and also qualify for a fifth AFC Champions League appearance.	After a group stage exit on their maiden AFC Champions League appearance in 2004, Zobahan reached the final in the 2010 edition, losing to Seongnam Ilhwa 3-1, as well as the quarter-finals in 2011.	Zobahan and Isfahan city-rivals Sepahan are sponsored by rival Steel companies. Zobahan are sponsored by Isfahan Steel Company, while Mobarakeh Steel Company own Sepahan.

DID YOU KNOW?	HISTORY	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	
Al Jahili Fort, represented on the club badge, is one of the largest castles in Al Ain and seen as an important symbol of the city. 	Al Ain won the inaugural AFC Champions League title in 2003, although they failed to recreate that feat after losing in the 2005 and 2016 finals.	2016 runners-up Al Ain earned their place at their 12th AFC Champions League tournament after finishing as runners-up in the UAE Pro League.	**Al Ain** United Arab Emirates GROUP C
Al Rayyan reached the last 16 of the AFC Cup in 2010 only to lose on penalties to Thailand's Muangthong United.	Before their 2016 league championship success, Al Rayyan had not won their domestic title since 1995. 	Al Rayyan ensured a seventh appearance in the group stage of the AFC Champions League after they romped to an eighth Qatari league title, ahead of second placed El Jaish by 14 points.	**Al Rayyan** Qatar GROUP D
Al Hilal have won 56 official championships since being founded in 1957. 	One of Asia's most successful club sides, Al Hilal won the Asian Club Championship in 1991 and 2000 as well as the Asian Cup Winners' Cup and Asian Super Cup.	Two-time continental champions Al Hilal finished runners-up in the 2015-16 Saudi Pro League season behind Jeddah's Al Ahli.	**Al Hilal** Saudi Arabia GROUP D
Persepolis have won a record nine Iranian league titles and boast a number of notable alumni including Ali Karimi, Ali Daei, Ali Parvin and Mehdi Mahdavikia.	Winners of the inaugural Asian Cup Winners' Cup in 1991, Persepolis have reached the Round of 16 of the AFC Champions League on three occasions, most recently in 2015 where they were eliminated by Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia.	Tehran giants Persepolis qualified for their sixth AFC Champions League campaign after finishing second in Iran's top flight behind surprise winners Esteghlal Khouzestan.	**Persepolis** IR Iran GROUP D
Kashima's latest domestic triumph is the club's eighth title since the J.League was formed in 1992 with their previous win coming in 2009. 	Kashima's best finish at a continental competition is their third place at the 1999 Asian Cup Winners Cup but their best spell to date was from 2008 to 2011 when they made four AFC Champions League knockout stages.	Back for a second continental campaign in three years after they were crowned 2016 J.League champions, Kashima will be making their sixth appearance in the AFC Champions League.	**Kashima Antlers** Japan GROUP E
This is only the second time Muangthong have qualified directly for the tournament proper, with the club falling at the final playoff hurdle on four previous occasions.	Founded in 1989 as Norgjorg Pittayanusorn Football Club and it wasn't till 2007 when they were renamed Muangthong United. Two years later, the club were promoted to the top division and have now won the domestic title four times.	Muangthong qualified as Thai League champions following a shortened league season due to the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. 	**Muangthong United** Thailand GROUP E
FC Seoul relocated to Seoul World Cup Stadium in 2004 from the satellite city of Anyang. 	FC Seoul reached the 2013 AFC Champions League final only to lose on away goals to China's Guangzhou Evergrande. They also reached the semi-finals in 2014 and 2016.	FC Seoul were knocked out of the 2016 AFC Champions League semi-finals by Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, but returned the favour by pipping the latter to the K.League Classic title on a nail-biting final day to qualify as champions.	**FC Seoul** Korea Republic GROUP F
Western Sydney have a linkage to the first ever game of football played in New South Wales on August 14, 1880 between the King's School and the Wanderers in North Parramatta.	Western Sydney made history in 2014, winning the AFC Champions League at the first attempt after a 1-0 aggregate win over Al Hilal. Tomi Juric scored the only goal in Sydney before they managed a 0-0 draw in Riyadh to lift the trophy.	Western Sydney, the first and only Australian team to win the AFC Champions League, return to the competition for the third time thanks to their runners-up finish in the 2015-2016 A-League regular season.	**Western Sydney Wanderers** Australia GROUP F

	HOW THEY QUALIFIED	HISTORY	DID YOU KNOW?
Guangzhou Evergrande China GROUP G	2015 champions Guangzhou return to the competition after winning the Chinese Super League for a sixth consecutive season. 	The southern Chinese club claimed a second AFC Champions League title in three years by defeating Al Ahli of the United Arab Emirates 1-0 on aggregate in the 2015 edition.	Both former coach Marcello Lippi and incumbent Luiz Felipe Scolari are the only head coaches to have won both the AFC Champions League and FIFA World Cup.
Suwon Samsung Korea Republic GROUP G	Suwon finished in seventh place in the 2016 K-League Classic, but a penalty shootout victory over FC Seoul saw them claim the FA Cup and a place in the AFC Champions League for the third year running.	Suwon won back-to-back continental titles in 2001 and 2002, the latter of which was the last edition of the Asian Club Championship before the competition's revamp into the AFC Champions League.	Asia's Player of the Century Cha Bum-kun was the manager of the club from 2004 to 2010. 
Eastern Sports Club Hong Kong GROUP G	Eastern made headlines by winning the 2015-16 Hong Kong Premier League title by a point over Kitchee SC for their first league championship since 1995.	Easten enjoyed a golden period in the early 1990s when they won three back-to-back league titles but had a stint in the Hong Kong third tier as recently as 2010. 	Under Chan Yuen-ting's guidance, Eastern became the first men's professional football team to win a domestic top flight title with a woman coach in charge.
Adelaide United Australia GROUP H	After finishing runners-up in their two previous A-League Grand Finals, Adelaide finally won the title with a 3-1 win over Western Sydney Wanderers last May.	Adelaide became the first Australian team to reach the final of the AFC Champions League at the 2008 edition but were defeated at the last hurdle by Japan's Gamba Osaka.	Adelaide were premiers in the inaugural 2005-06 A-League season, although finished third in the Grand Finals that year. 
Jiangsu FC China GROUP H	After their maiden appearance in 2013, Jiangsu FC earned a third ticket to the AFC Champions League group stage after a runners-up finish in the league. 	In their two previous AFC Champions League appearance, Jiangsu have missed out on a place in the Round of 16 by the narrowest of margins: on goal difference to Buriram United in 2013 and by a point in 2016.	Jiangsu, then known as Jiangsu Maint, were a member of the inaugural season of professional association football in China, the 1994 Jia-A League season.
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors Korea Republic GROUP H	Champions Jeonbuk ensured they will defend their AFC Champions League title and an eighth consecutive appearance after finishing runners-up in the 2016 K-League Classic.	Jeonbuk became the first East Asian side to win the revamped AFC Champions League in 2006 after beating Syria's Al Karamah 3-2 on aggregate before losing the 2011 final on penalties to Qatar's Al Sadd.	Jeonbuk striker Lee Dong-gook is the all-time leading scorer in the AFC Champions League with 32 goals, six ahead of Al Hilal forward Nassir Al Shamrani. 





Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D
Al Ahli (UAE)	Esteghlal Khouzestan	Al Ahli (KSA)	Al Rayyan
Lokomotiv	Al Jazira	Zobahan	Al Hilal
Al Taawoun	Lekhwiya	Al Ain	Persepolis
Play-off Qualifier	*Play-off Qualifier*	*Play-off Qualifier*	*Play-off Qualifier*

Group E	Group F	Group G	Group H
Kashima Antlers	FC Seoul	Guangzhou Evergrande	Adelaide United
Muangthong United	*Japan 2nd Club*	Suwon Samsung Bluewings	Jiangsu FC
Play-off Qualifier	Western Sydney Wanderers	*Japan 3rd Club*	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
Play-off Qualifier	*Play-off winner*	Eastern SC	*Play-off winner*

WALTZING MATILDA

CAITLIN FOORD WAS NAMED 2016 AFC WOMEN'S PLAYER OF THE YEAR BECOMING THE SECOND PLAYER TO RECEIVE BOTH THE YOUTH AND SENIOR ACCOLADES FOLLOWING SUCCESS IN 2011. AND HAVING CAPPED AN EVENTFUL 2016 SEASON WITH THE CROWN OF ASIA'S BEST, THE AUSTRALIA INTERNATIONAL IS ON THE HUNT FOR EVEN MORE SUCCESS IN 2017.

By: Paul Williams **Photos:** Lagardère Sports/FIFA/Getty Images

At just 22 years of age, Caitlin Foord, born in the small New South Wales town of Shellharbour on the Illawarra coast about an hour south of Sydney, has already achieved so much in her career.

Twice she has played at the FIFA Women's World Cup, including in 2011 when as a fresh-faced 16-year-old she was named the tournament's best young player as her Matildas side made it to the quarter finals, where they were knocked out by Sweden, who went on to finish the tournament in third place.

As a result of her standout performances in Germany she was also named the AFC Women's Young Player of the Year.

Now, after another standout year in which she helped lead Australia to their first appearance at the Olympic Games since Athens 2004, she can add another accolade to her name – AFC Women's Player of the Year, making her just the second female in history after China's Ma Xiaoxu to win both the Young Player and Player of the Year awards.

"It's obviously a massive achievement," Foord said at the AFC Annual Awards in Abu Dhabi.

"Looking back at the young player award, I was just so young and just took all these awards and didn't really expect them or think











too much of them.

"Now when I look back I am very honoured and privileged with how well I did do and I think I will do the same when I look back on this trophy."

And while it is Foord's name that will be forever etched on the trophy, she explained that the trophy belongs to all her Australian teammates.

"It's obviously a massive honour and to be alongside Lisa (De Vanna) and to have two Aussies up there is pretty cool," she explained.

"I think just for Australian football to have two of us nominated for such a big award is obviously a massive honour for us (personally), but our country as well.

"I think it reflects on our team as a national team. Personally I think any one of the girls could be up there and we'd be happy for them."

De Vanna, who for so long has been the mainstay of the Australian attack, was proud of her young protege and was effusive in her praise of Foord.

"From day one I knew she had something special," De Vanna, who has 117 caps and 40 goals for Australia, said.

"I knew that when my day was over she was someone who could continue that legacy. There's something special in her ability and knowing that I'm coming to the twilight of my career and it's the start of hers, it means a lot to have it [the nomination] with someone that I feel can continue the legacy."

The award for Foord, who started her career as a defender but has been moved into a more attacking role in recent years by Australian coach Alen Stajcic, came after what she described as a rollercoaster year.

"It was obviously a good year, it was an interesting year," Foord explained.

"I would explain it as a massive rollercoaster, I've hit the highest high you could hit and then the lowest lows. A lot of emotions, and I think a lot of learning curves to take out of the year."

Foord, who now plays for Sydney FC in Australia's W-League competition, started the season in the recovery room after injuring her collarbone in a W-League match for Perth Glory, which put her in doubt for Australia's Olympic Games qualification in in March.

She recovered in time and played in each of the five matches, which were played in the space of just 10 days in March, to help her Australian team steamroll their way through qualifying, which included a shock 3-1 win over host nation Japan in the opener, setting the tone for the rest of their qualification campaign.

Not content with just qualifying for the Olympics for the first time in 12 years, the Australians had an eye on a medal and while they made a disappointing start against Canada, the second group stage match against world number two Germany perfectly encapsulated Foord's rollercoaster year.

Foord was the architect for Australia's opening goal, with a barnstorming run from midfield setting up Samantha Kerr for the opener, while it was Foord with a deft finish right on half time that doubled Australia's lead.

But after reaching the peak in the first half, the opposite was the case in the second as Foord missed two opportunities to extend Australia's lead before Germany equalised just before full time.

Further heartbreak, of the more excruciating kind, was waiting in the quarter final.

Having progressed from a difficult Group F that included Canada, Germany and Zimbabwe, Australia faced the unenviable task of taking on home nation Brazil in front of over 50,000 screaming fans in Belo Horizonte.

With the match locked at 0-0 a penalty shootout would decide who would advance to the semi-finals to face Sweden.

With both nations scoring their first four penalties each, it looked like goalkeeper Lydia Williams would be the hero for Australia when she saved Brazilian legend Marta's spot kick.

Katrina Gorry, the AFC Women's Player of the Year in 2014, was the woman tasked with the crucial penalty, but was denied by an excellent save by Barbara. It was the Brazilian custodian's heroics that would ultimately end Australia's campaign when she dived to her left to save Alana Kennedy's penalty and crush Australia's dreams.

Over five months on from that match Foord admits that the emotional scars have almost healed, but not completely.

"I've been asked this a few times," she began. "I think sometimes yes and sometimes no, because some of the feelings I was feeling during that match, especially the penalty shootout, I've never ever been so nervous in my life.

"Obviously that still haunts you a little bit. I think I'm over it, but when it happened it was just 'I have to wait four years for this to come around again', and even then we hadn't qualified for 14 years to get there.

"But its highs and lows (of football), looking back at it was a good tournament and hopefully we are in Tokyo."

So while the pain still lingers, Foord and the rest of the Australian team are choosing to look forward and have their eyes set on re-claiming the AFC Women's Asian Cup, which they won for the first time back in 2010 before relinquishing their title to Japan in 2014.

Left Olympic Games Qualifiers 2016

Right AFC Annual Awards 2016

Above Olympic Games 2016

"Obviously the team we have is a pretty young team," Foord said.

"We've been together through a World Cup and an Olympic Games, so we all know what that feels like to be there and we're obviously going to go into qualifiers knowing that."

But before then Foord knows she needs to continue to perform at club level, and to do so she has made the switch from Perth Glory to Sydney FC for this W-League season to play alongside her Matildas teammates Kyah Simon and Alana Kennedy.

While another injury, this time to her left ankle that saw her sporting a stylish moonboot at the AFC Annual Awards in Abu Dhabi, temporarily halted her season it wasn't enough to keep her on the sidelines for long.

With women's sport in Australia experiencing a boom at the moment, Foord and the rest of her Matildas teammates know how important it is that women's football continues to develop and lead the way.

It is the Manchester City-owned Melbourne City, who won last season's W-League title undefeated and has just built a dedicated training facility for their W-League team, who are leading the way but Foord is confident her Sydney FC team, who narrowly lost to Melbourne City in last year's Grand Final, can push them all the way.

"I like to think so, we haven't come up against them yet but I think it will obviously be a good game," she said.

"I didn't play for Sydney last year but obviously we lost to them in the grand final, so obviously we want to go one better and hopefully I can help the team to do so."

She was also full of praise for what Melbourne City are doing when it comes to raising the professionalism of the women's game in Australia.

"It's massive and it's definitely showing all the other clubs this is the standard you have to get to," she said.

"I love to see how they've done that. I've seen the facilities and they're incredible and I think it's just the stepping stone now and all the other clubs have to reach that standard."

And it's the standard set in 2016 that Foord hopes she can repeat going forward. For Foord, like women's football in Australia, the very best may still be yet to come.



IRAQ AT HEART

AHMED YASIN MOVED FROM HIS NATIVE IRAQ TO SWEDEN AS AN INFANT, BUT THE WINGER HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT MEMBER OF RADHI SWADI'S TEAM ON AND OFF THE FIELD AS THE LIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA SET THEIR SIGHTS ON BOOKING TICKETS FOR THE FINALS OF THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP.

By: Michael Church **Photos:** Lagardère Sports









By his own admission, Sweden is home for Ahmed Yasin. His earliest memories were created there, his football identity forged in the nation that gave the world Tomas Brolin and Zlatan Ibrahimovic.

But when he pulls on the white shirt of Iraq and hears the national anthem reverberate around football stadiums across the continent, there is no doubting where his loyalties reside.

"I don't remember so much from Iraq because I was only one or two years old when I came to Sweden for the first time, so I've been living there all my life," he says. "But I'm never going to forget where I'm from and that's Iraq.

"It's in my heart and that's why I chose to play for the Iraq national team. When I say Sweden's my home, it's where I belong, it's what I'm used to, the language and everything and all of my friends are there.

"I don't have so much left in Iraq, but of course when I play for the national team and wear the jersey it's a big moment for me and my family who are living in Sweden and that's perfect."

Born in Baghdad in April 1991 but raised in the town of Orebro in Sweden's interior, football provided Yasin and his three brothers the perfect way to integrate into life in a new country.

His is a familiar tale for new arrivals in a foreign land, with sport playing a key role in gaining acceptance in new surroundings. After moving through the youth ranks at BK Forward, Yasin was signing professional terms with the club in 2009 as an 18-year-old.

"It was harder for my family because when they first arrived there weren't so many people from outside Sweden who were there," he says. "I think they were the first immigrants to move there and it was hard for them because they didn't know the language. I came there when I was two years and I know the language and I know who to act and to do things, so it's not so hard for me. I feel at home there and all my friends are there.

"In the last 10 years, or over the eight years that I have been playing professional football, in my home city everybody knows my family and now they know me, so when the name Yasin comes up they know they have a player who has played there for the last four or five years and my name's become even bigger in Sweden because of the national team in Iraq and the things I've done in the Swedish league, so it's good."

Soon, though, he was on the move, joining cross-town rivals Orebro SK in 2011, where he spent four seasons before playing for a year with Denmark's AGF in Aarhus and returning last year to Sweden to sign for AIK in Stockholm, one of the biggest clubs in the country and the former home to the likes of Olof Mellberg and Anders Limpar.

But it was making his debut for Iraq's senior team in 2012 – having previously played for the country's Olympic team – that took Yasin to another level. After spending his early years at the lower end of the game in Scandinavia, making his debut for Iraq at Japan's Saitama Stadium gave him an appetite for more.

"I got a lot of experience from the national team because of the teams we have played. "I played my first game for the national team against Japan away in front of 55,000 or 60,000 people and that was a big thing for me. I came from playing in front of 10,000 in Sweden to 60,000 and I was watching like this," he says, his mouth dropping open and his eyes bulging.

"But that kind of thing is not what you're thinking of when the referee blows the whistle.

"I've never been too far away from Iraq. My family has always been talking about Iraq and we always watch the Iraqi channels and stuff like that. I started to like and see the football in Iraq in 2007 when they came to the final of the Asian Cup. That was when I got my eyes on them and of course players like Younes Mahmood, Nashat Akram, they were very big players and when I first came to the team and saw the big players from 2007 I thought: Shit, now I'm here! Now it's time to show them. I have big respect for them. They have done a lot for this team and for Iraq and it's not something anyone can take away from them."

Much has changed since for Yasin, who has gone from the squad's awe-struck new kid to becoming one of the leading lights of the team. And it's not just his entrancing wing play that has marked him out as an important member of the Iraq national set-up.

As the number of overseas-raised players joining the team has increased in recent years, so the burden of responsibility has been heightened on Yasin, who has taken on the role of mentor to the new arrivals. In that position, he points out what it is that makes playing for Iraq unique.

"When you play in Europe, it's different," he says. "I'm not going to say it isn't structured within the Iraq national team, but it is a lot more so in Europe. When I came to play with the national team it is different compared to Europe. I had a hard time at the beginning but I've been with the team now four or five years and I'm coming into that more and more.

Left AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015

Right FIFA World Cup Qualifiers 2018

"Now I'm teaching the other players who are coming from the outside. I was the first player who came from Europe, so I try to speak with them and help them with what I have gone through. I think I've been able to help these players.

"The language, first of all, was the most difficult thing and second of all the meetings we have are not like in Europe. In Europe you have meetings on the game day, and that's the only meeting you have. Of course, you have a meeting two days before the game to watch the opponent we're going to play against.

"But with the national team there are a lot of meetings, people want to talk and people want to say something. The Iraqi people, when they come to the team they play with their heart and soul and they think of all the people who have been killed every day in Iraq and they want to make the people happy.

"So when they come here they come to give 100 percent and they see every minute is their chance to give something. And that's what I try to explain to the players who are coming here, that this is very important and it has a big, big meaning to be here. Of course, there is that with every national team but with Iraq it's more special I think.

"It's a heavy bag to carry. For me, especially when we go to other countries and we see the fans coming to you like they want to eat you with photos and the like, then you get a special feeling in your heart. Football means a lot to them. For us to win and to see them happy, it's a big thing.

"Football is everything to them. When you just think about them you will give 110 percent. It's much bigger. The only happiness they have is to see us play and to see us win."

The situation Iraq and its people have found themselves in over the last two decades has made it all the more remarkable that the country continues to perform at the very pinnacle of the Asian game.

And for Yasin himself, he sees his playing future away from his adopted homeland and performing on the game's greatest stages, week in week out.

"I'm happy in Sweden but my goal is to go to the biggest arenas and the biggest leagues," he says. "I'm still young and I can make it there and do a good job there. I have the qualities and I believe in myself. It would be wrong of me to tell you that I'd like to stay in Sweden. I have big goals and I think and I hope I will get there."

IN SAFE HANDS

AFTER A STANDOUT 2016 SEASON, HONG KONG AND EASTERN SPORTS CLUB GOALKEEPER YAPP HUNG-FAI AIMS TO MAKE HIS MARK IN 2017 WHEN HE CAPTAINS THE HONG KONG PREMIER LEAGUE CHAMPIONS IN THEIR DEBUT AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE CAMPAIGN AND ATTEMPTS TO GUIDE THE REPRESENTATIVE TEAM TO 2019 AFC ASIAN CUP QUALIFICATION.

By: Peter Alsop **Photos:** Lagardère Sports



When an eight-year-old Yapp Hung-fai asked to join his elder peers in a neighbourhood kick-around they allowed him on the condition that he would go in goal. He had envisaged scoring rather than preventing goals, but as the youngest on the pitch he had little choice but to take his position between the sticks.

Eighteen years on Yapp admits he got little joy from the initial experience. But he stuck it out and several games later he recalls a fine save that instantly transformed his enthusiasm towards playing in football's most lonely position. That joyful feeling stayed with him, Peter Schmeichel later became his idol and by 15 he already had aspirations of turning professional.

Now 26, Yapp is not only Hong Kong's first-choice goalkeeper with more than 50 caps to his name, he is also the national team captain and last year skippered Eastern Sports Club to their first top-flight title since 1995. Next month he is set to make his bow at the highest level of continental football when Eastern become Hong Kong's first ever participants in the AFC Champions League group stage.

"At 15 I was in the Hong Kong youth team and enjoying life," recalled Yapp.









"I liked training and then eating with my teammates afterwards. That was when I started to think maybe I could play professionally.

"In Hong Kong that's not always easy as every parent wants their children to study hard at school because they think there's no money in football. But my parents let me choose without any pressure."

Yapp's first spell with Eastern came as an 18-year-old in 2008. But a year later, with the side struggling to perform at the highest level, the club made the decision to drop from the first to the third tier. Yapp would move on, first to TSW Pegasus and then South China, but not before promising the board he would return if and when the team regained its top-flight status.

Although 2009 hadn't gone to plan, the year reached a perfect finale when Yapp was part of the Hong Kong side that hosted and won the East Asian Games following a penalty shootout victory over Japan in the final.

After coming through a group comprising Korea Republic and China, Hong Kong then saw off DPR Korea on penalties in the semi-final to set up a date with Japan.

In front of a packed Hong Kong Stadium the final ended 1-1, before Yapp made one crucial save in a shootout that ultimately ended 4-2 in favour of the home side. The custodian's performance would earn him the nickname Ying Hung-fai (Hero Fai) and by just 19 years of age he had already showcased his potential at national level.

"It was like a dream because we didn't even expect to qualify from the group stage," admitted Yapp. "After we did, we realised there was a chance we could get the gold medal, and the final was the best atmosphere I've ever experienced.

"But I didn't actually like the nickname; I think the whole team deserved the credit, not only me. I wanted them to focus on every player, the coaches and all the staff."

A four-year spell with South China included a league title, an FA Cup and League Cup double and several AFC Cup campaigns. But when a newly enriched Eastern returned to the top tier in 2014 Yapp kept to his word and put pen to paper to rejoin a side that would later receive global headlines under the stewardship of head coach Chan Yuen-ting.

In the goalkeeper's first season back the team finished as runners-up to Kitchee. But a year later, with Chan now at the helm, Eastern became the first club to ever claim a top-division title under the guidance of a female coach when they saw off South China 2-1 last April to win the Hong Kong Premier League with a game to spare.

Twenty-seven-year-old Chan's feat was covered internationally, but Eastern had also marked a return to the glory days of two decades earlier. Their championship-winning campaign was a first since 1995 brought the last of three successive league titles in an era coined the Eastern Dynasty.

"When I came back the resources and the coaches were better," explained Yapp. "Before we only had two coaches but now there were four or five and we were ready to challenge for the title. Finishing second gave us the belief we could win the championship.

"After Coach Chan got the job, I thought we all had to support her because she didn't have experience. We had to ensure the team stayed united and, in the end, not much changed and everything went so smoothly.

"She cares a lot and has a very detailed mind. She has a lot of focus off the pitch and this helps us prepare for games. She has a very open mind so if we have a problem we can talk to her and she will listen."

Perhaps even more significantly than the title success, though, was that the club had timed their rise with that of Hong Kong's AFC member association rankings. This meant, for the first time, the Special Administrative Region would be represented in the AFC Champions League in 2017.

And the draw for the continental tournament threw up some mouthwatering fixtures, tasking Eastern with a pair of two-time winners in Guangzhou Evergrande and Suwon Samsung Bluewings.

"Everyone wants to play at the highest level possible," said Yapp. "It's going to be very difficult because we'll be playing against the best teams in Asia.

"Technically they'll be much better than us but as a player I'm looking forward to playing against the top Asian clubs. But, honestly, there is such a difference between them and us.

"I don't want to put too much pressure on myself or the rest of the team. The most important thing is to learn from the games because when we play at a higher level we will improve."

And 2017 promises to a huge year not just at club level but internationally too. Hong Kong, under head coach Kim Pan-gon, performed admirably in the second round of 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifiers, finishing third in their five-team group behind Qatar and China, and will next begin their campaign to reach the 2019 AFC Asian Cup in March.

It was a pair of goalless draws against the Chinese – in which Yapp was exceptional – that stood out.

Top Left East Asian Games 2009

Right Joint 2018 FIFA World Cup & AFC Asian Cup 2019 qualifiers

Left Hong Kong Premier League 2015/2016

"It was exciting to play in those games [against China] because, before, everyone thought we would lose 3-0 or 4-0," admitted Yapp, who also played under Kim at South China.

"But it was not a miracle because our defence has improved a lot. Before we always conceded two or three goals but in the past few years Coach Kim has worked a lot on the defence. In the World Cup qualifying we conceded just five goals.

"At the beginning of the group stage we didn't expect to get these results but after four or five games we started to think we could qualify. In the end we were disappointed but we have to look forward to the Asian qualifiers."

The recently expanded AFC Asian Cup will feature 24 teams for the first time, and Hong Kong will be confident they can return to a tournament they last graced in 1968 in Iran.

With the continent's top 12 teams having already confirmed their passage to the United Arab Emirates, Yapp believes the representative side have the potential to be among the remaining dozen qualifiers.

"Last year we played very well and the fans were very excited about our performances," said Yapp. "I want to give them this feeling again.

"We have to improve when we play West Asian teams because in the past we have not played so well – they have a different style to us and are stronger.

"But I think we have a good chance. We have a lot of naturalised players who have helped the team, especially physically."

An exciting year undoubtedly lies ahead for the talented custodian, with opportunities to progress for both club and country.

But Yapp is holding on to the dream of also one day having the chance to ply his trade outside of his home city. And 2017 promises to be a huge year.

"If I can move to another country I can learn more and improve by being part of a different football culture," he added. "I'd like to play in Japan, but Thailand is another country that has got a lot better recently.

"After retiring, I'd like to become a coach because I want to help Hong Kong achieve better results."



ON THE UP

AFTER YEARS IN THE FOOTBALLING WILDERNESS THE MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION HAS LOFTY AMBITIONS TO IMPROVE STANDARDS ACROSS THE BOARD, WITH FOCUS ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND NATIONWIDE EXPOSURE TWO OF A NUMBER OF KEY STRATEGIES TO DO SO.

By: Peter Alsop **Photos:** Mongolia Football Federation







Above & Left AFC *Solidarity Cup 2016*

Below Ganbold Ganbayar

Below President *Ganbaatar Amgalanbaatar*







Above Turbat Daginaa

Sandwiched between the global powerhouses of China and Russia, Mongolia is the world's 18th largest yet most sparsely populated independent nation. Around half of the 2.8 million population live in the capital, Ulaanbaatar.

The national sport, wrestling, is one of the traditional 'Three Manly Skills' of Mongolia – the other two being archery and horsemanship – and is where the country has excelled in a sporting sense. Nine of its 26 Olympic medals have come in wrestling since first competing at the Games in 1964. The remainder have been in judo, boxing and shooting.

While football has enjoyed a certain level of popularity over the years, it has remained some way from the forefront of Mongolia's sporting culture.

Long, bitterly cold winters in which temperatures can drop to as low as -40 degrees centigrade, not to mention its vastness and lack of infrastructure such as proper roads connecting the country, provide huge obstacles for the beautiful game's development.

18th

Mongolia's ranking in world's largest nations

But ambition within the Mongolian Football Federation (MFF) is the highest it's ever been with President Ganbaatar Amgalanbaatar, who took over at the helm in late 2014, aiming to break boundaries on a number of fronts.

"I expect a positive and brighter future," said Ganbaatar. "Since I have been MFF president my priorities have been grassroots, women's football, the national team and the improvement of sporting infrastructure.

"Hence, I have initiated many activities and programmes within this time."

Among the key alterations during Amgalanbaatar's time has been the launch of a three-tier league system. Previously just a single division, Mongolia's footballing pyramid now features promotion and relegation for the first time and there are obvious benefits.

-40

Possible temperature in centigrade in winter

National team captain Turbat Daginaa, a 24-year-old defender who plays for Ulaanbaatar-based Khoromkhon, has witnessed the changes first-hand.

"We started the new league two years ago and have just finished the second year," said Turbat, who skippered Mongolia at the AFC Solidarity Cup in Kuching, Malaysia, in November.

"Things have improved a lot because



there are more games and it is much more competitive. Before only a few clubs dominated but now it's anybody's game as even the small teams can beat the big teams so it's getting better and better and will keep doing so in the coming years."

When Turbat was young football was not part of the sporting curriculum so he honed his skills first on the streets of the capital and later at a local club.

But these days children have the opportunity to take up the game during school hours with increased emphasis being placed on the world's most popular sport.

"Every year the facilities are improving and now even schools are implementing football programmes," added Turbat. "We want to bring more attraction to our national league so one day our players might have the chance to play abroad."

While nine of the 10 teams in the two-year-old Khurkhree National Premier League are from Ulaanbaatar, there is a big drive underway to take football to all corners of the country.

Traditionally popular towards the Russian border in the north, where pre-1990 Soviet influence meant the game was practiced more regularly than elsewhere, exposure across the entire country is another of Ganbaatar's priorities.

21

Provinces in Mongolia with regional associations

"Until 2014 all competitions and activities were in centralised areas or venues," explained the MFF president.

"But I have established regional associations in the 21 provinces in order to develop football in a balanced way. It would be unfair if it could not develop nationwide."

Last year a tournament involving each province was staged outside Ulaanbaatar, in the eastern province of Dornod, for the first time. This provided a much-needed opportunity for the talent away from the capital to showcase their skills and gain recognition from those within the industry.

Youth development and women's football have also been at the forefront of the MFF's strategy to make positive strides.

Earlier in 2016, two of the country's most promising teenagers – Ganbold Ganbayar and Soyol-Erdene Gal-Erdene – travelled to England to train with fourth-tier side Barnet FC and gained valuable experience in a different footballing culture. Ganbold, who is just 16 years old, is currently spending a year with the youth academy at Puskas Akademia FC in Hungary.

Furthermore, national U-13, U-15 and U-17 boys' and girls' championships have been held over the past couple years, while Mongolia's first ever women's league kicked off in 2015.

In a region considered one of the footballing powerhouses of women's football – with DPR Korea claiming the 2016 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup and Japan winning the 2015 AFC U-19 Women's Championship a year earlier – Ganbaatar hopes the country's female talent can, if not yet challenge, at least join the elite in years to come.

"Women's football is a key priority that we have put a lot of emphasis on. The U-15



and U-18 girls' national teams have been established by Japanese head coaches, and we want both teams to qualify for the AFC U-16 and U-19 championships in 2019."

Crucial to progress in youth development will be the nationwide introduction of FIFA's Grassroots initiative. Its aims include: increasing participation among six-to-12-year-old boys and girls; improving the standards of coach-educators and the number of training courses; and preparing a detailed plan for development at local, regional and national levels.

Around half of the country's 21 provinces are currently involved in the scheme and the hope is to have all 21 of them initiated by 2018. As Ganbaatar notes: "This is the future of our football; I believe that the young generation will prosper in the near future."

One man who knows the Mongolian game inside out is the national team's assistant coach Battulga Zorigt, a winger for his country between 2007 and 2013 who has been part of the coaching set-up since hanging up his boots.

Speaking during the AFC Solidarity Cup, Battulga echoed Ganbaatar's views that focus on youth is essential, while he also discussed the challenges faced both at national and international level.

"Of course, I think everyone agrees that the weather is the biggest obstacle," Battulga acknowledged.

"From November until March it's impossible to play outside and there's a lack of indoor facilities. Instead the players change to futsal in the winter and then when they go back outside they are at a disadvantage because they must adjust their game to the bigger pitches again."

Another challenge for the MFF is lack of international fixtures. A 5-1 aggregate defeat to Timor-Leste in the first round of the 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign in March 2015 meant Mongolia was one of the few Asian teams who would take no part in the ensuing second-round group stage. A void was left in the national team's calendar.

5-1

Aggregate defeat to Timor-Leste in the first round of 2018 FIFA World Cup qualifying

The Blue Wolves also failed to advance past the first qualifying round of the EAFF East Asian Cup in July, leaving the AFC Solidarity Cup – a tournament arranged for teams with no further part to play in World Cup qualifiers – as the only competitive matches on offer for the foreseeable future.

"Lack of games is a problem," admitted Battulga. "No one will come to Mongolia in December and for us to fly to other countries is very expensive so it's hard to arrange official matches.

"That's why competitions such as the Solidarity Cup are so important for our football development and give the younger players the chance to learn and gain international experience."

Under the charge of ex-Chinese Taipei coach Toshiaki Imai – brought in on a short-term basis to expose the players to "more professional football ethics, culture and lifestyle," according to Battulga – Mongolia suffered a narrow 2-1 reversal to Macau in their Solidarity Cup opener.

The Blue Wolves then went on to record a 2-0 victory over Sri Lanka, but a 3-0 defeat to Laos saw them eliminated at the first stage.

Despite the early exit, and the Japanese coach's expected departure, the future outlook remains a positive one with the target being long-term development.

With such emphasis placed on the next generation of footballers, it is equally important to improve the opportunities on offer to aspiring coaches.

This has been yet another priority for Ganbaatar and the MFF over the past 12 months and plans are in motion for the likes of Battulga to work towards their AFC 'A' or UEFA 'A' licences.

Zuunmod, a small town around 45 minutes south of Ulaanbaatar, has already benefitted. With the help of the AFC, a number of training pitches have been built and, after interviewing prospective coaches, a footballing programme was launched. If such initiatives are replicated nationwide then future prospects could well be bright.

"After the Soviet Union collapsed we became democratic and it was a hard time as even food rations were low," recalled Battulga. "Football almost disappeared as there were no resources to focus on it.

"The parents and grandparents of these kids had nothing to do with the game. But with this focus on youth, I have no doubt that things will change for the better very soon."



Left AFC Solidarity Cup 2016 *Above* MFF Stadium

Right Coach Battulga Zorigt







Q&A

President of Mongolia Football Federation Ganbaatar Amgalanbaatar

How has the Mongolian Football Federation looked to develop in recent times?

Since I was elected as president, the Mongolian Football Federation has developed rapidly on and off the field. The quality of the domestic league used to be poor, but after increasing the prize money and possibility of participation – promotion and relegation – the number of stakeholders and the public awareness [of the game] have improved.

What support has the Mongolian Football Federation received?

We get support from both the AFC and FIFA with the aim of developing football in our country. We are also supported by the Mongolian government when it comes to football at both grassroots and school level. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Sports help us promote children's football.

What do you expect from Mongolian football in the next five to 10 years?

I anticipate plenty of ongoing infrastructural projects – such as AFC Mini Pitches built with the support of AFC President Sheikh Salman Bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa and the national team training centre in cooperation with FIFA – will be fully implemented by 2019. Therefore, I am totally sure that the development of football nationwide will succeed in the coming years and I expect a positive and brighter future for Mongolian football.

With such a long winter, how can the players enjoy the year-round training needed for their development?

The winter season means football ceases for around six months of the year and we shift to futsal. However, football and futsal are completely different sports so I have initiated plans to construct indoor stadiums and sports halls where football can be played throughout the year. The project is now at its early stages.

Korea Republic And Japan Close The Gap

Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to set the pace after the conclusion of the fifth Matchday in the final round of qualifiers for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, but dropped points from the pair sees the gap closed by the chasing pack and an exciting conclusion on the Road to Russia set to come in 2017.

In Group A, Iran's goalless draw with Syria at a drenched Tuanku Abdul Rahman Stadium in Malaysia means that they maintain their unbeaten record in qualifying but with their lead at the top of the table narrowed to the slimmest of margins, with Korea Republic now just a point behind.

"I'm proud of every single one of my players. They gave their best right until the end," said Iran coach Carlos Queiroz.

"These were tough conditions to play football in. We are top of the group after five games and there are still five games to go. There is still lots of hard work ahead but we are working hard and we are still unbeaten and have not conceded a goal. We now look towards the next game."

Meanwhile in Seoul, second half goals from Nam Tae-hee and Koo Ja-cheol saw Korea bounce back from Marat Bikmaev's spectacular first half opener to ensure a thrilling comeback 2-1 win over Uzbekistan at Seoul World Cup Stadium.



"It was a very tough game; Uzbekistan had conceded just one goal in the last five games so we knew how strong they were defensively," said Korea coach Uli Stielike.

"It became even tougher when we conceded but even though we were behind, we kept calm and tried to keep playing our game."

Uzbekistan now lie in third, a point behind Korea and two further back from Iran, with Syria in fourth and on four points fewer than the Central Asians after they shared the spoils with Iran.

In Group A's other tie in Kunming, Marcello Lippi oversaw his first tie as China coach against Qatar and, in front of 32,763 spectators, his side put on an improved performance although they were still unable to secure their first victory of the qualifying campaign as the pair played out a 0-0 draw.

"Our team have done a good job and I told them so in the dressing room," said Lippi. "They should be satisfied by their performance. What we were short of today was a bit of luck"

In Group B, Japan slashed Saudi Arabia's lead at the top to a matter of goal difference as the Samurai Blue defeated the Green Falcons 2-1 in Saitama to join the West Asians on the top of the standings.

Goals from Hiroshi Kiyotake and Genki Haraguchi meant Omar Hawsawi's reply in injury time came too late to prevent Japan ending the Saudi's previously unbeaten run in qualifying and put the East Asians well placed ahead of the second half of ties beginning in March.

Saudi Arabia put on arguably the most impressive performance as they thrashed the United Arab Emirates 3-0 in Jeddah on Matchday Four with Fahad Al Muwallad, Nawaf Al Abed and Yahya Al Shehri all getting on the scoresheet at the King Abdullah Sports City.

"I'm proud of my players to have defeated a strong Saudi Arabia side that up to now have been the best team in the group," said Japan coach Vahid Halilhodzic.

"It's a good victory and we deserved to win and could have scored more goals although it's disappointing to have conceded late."

Australia, by contrast, missed out on the chance to open up a two point lead at the top of Group B when they could only draw 2-2 away at bottom side Thailand with the ASEAN team picking up their first points of the campaign thanks to Teerasil Dangda's brace.

Instead, it was the United Arab Emirates who caught up with the now third-placed Socceroos after Mahdi Ali's side secured a 2-0 win over Iraq thanks to goals from Ahmed Khalil and Ismail Matar.

"The match was decisive for us and that is why we took the initiative and put pressure on our opponents," said UAE coach Ali.

"I want to thank the players for their good performance tonight that helped us to get a good victory. We did our best tonight in order to make a good comeback after the last defeat.

"Our position in the group is excellent as this win has put us close to the top since there is only one point between us and the leaders."



Group A

	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
I.R. IRAN	5	3	2	0	4	0	4	11
KOREA REPUBLIC	5	3	1	1	8	6	2	10
UZBEKISTAN	5	3	0	2	5	3	2	9
SYRIA	5	1	2	2	1	2	-1	5
QATAR	5	1	1	3	3	6	-3	4
CHINA	5	0	2	3	2	6	-4	2

15/11/16
KOREA REPUBLIC 2 *(Nam Tae-hee 67, Koo Ja-cheol 85)* UZBEKISTAN 1 *(Marat Bikmaev 25)*

CHINA 0-0 QATAR

SYRIA 0-0 IR IRAN

Group B

	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
SAUDI ARABIA	5	3	1	1	9	5	4	10
JAPAN	5	3	1	1	8	5	3	10
AUSTRALIA	5	2	3	0	8	5	3	9
UAE	5	3	0	2	7	6	1	9
IRAQ	5	1	0	4	6	8	-2	3
THAILAND	5	0	1	4	3	12	-9	1

15/11/16
JAPAN 2 *(Hiroshi Kiyotake 45, Genki Haraguchi 80)*
SAUDI ARABIA 1 *(Omar Hawsawi 90)*

THAILAND 2 *(Teerasil Dangda 20, 57)* AUSTRALIA 2 *(Mile Jedinak 9, 65)*

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES 2 *(Ahmed Khalil 26, Ismail Matar 90+3)* IRAQ 0

Jeonbuk Claim Second Title







Korea Republic's Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors claimed a second AFC Champions League title on the 10th anniversary of their first after a 3-2 aggregate win following a 1-1 draw with Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates in the final second leg at Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium in November's final.

Han Kyo-won, who had come off the bench to replace Ricardo Lopes early in the match, scored the tie's opener on 30 minutes for the 2006 winners and put his side 3-1 up on aggregate following the 2-1 win for the Jeonju-based club a week prior.

Lee Myung-joo netted the leveller on the night just three minutes later for Al Ain but after Douglas passed up a chance from the penalty spot to tie the scores on aggregate Jeonbuk's one-goal advantage from the first leg at Jeonju World Cup Stadium ended up being the telling factor as the Koreans held on to exorcise the demons of their 2011 final defeat to Qatar's Al Sadd.

"It's our first title since 2006 I'm so really happy," said Jeonbuk coach Choi Kang-hee, whose side had defeated compatriots FC Seoul in the semi-finals, China's Shanghai SIPG in the quarter-finals and Urawa Reds of Japan in the Round of 16.

"We were motivated even though the game was very tough, we needed to overcome Al Ain even if they played very well. In every position all the players worked together to become one team and finally we became the 2016 AFC Champions League winners.

"There were two key points in the match, the first goal and the missed penalty from Al Ain. I just gave the players a positive mind to deal with any problems in the game.

"We had planned for lots of situations. We have had lots of plans since January, we were planning for 2016 to get the AFC Champions League title back and we want to share this with the fans."

"When we lost in 2011, I saw the fans were so dispirited, so winning the AFC Champions League is an unforgettable dream.

"Since coming back to Jeonbuk from the national team in 2014 we have been building this team so that we can win the AFC Champions League. Finally, it has happened. I want to thank the fans. This is for them."

Inaugural champions Al Ain were looking to hand the UAE a first AFC Champions League title since they lifted their maiden continental trophy in 2003, but after failing to convert their second leg home advantage, Zlatko Dalic's side saw their third appearance in the final end in disappointment having eliminated Qatar's El Jaish in the penultimate round.

"The defeat is a big shock for everyone. It's a big shock for my players, a big shock for me, and a big shock for the fans," said Croatian coach Dalic, whose side had also defeated Iran's Zobahan and Lokomotiv of Uzbekistan on their way to the final.

"Tomorrow is a new day, a new training for a new game. We have to recover very quickly and get set to face a new challenge.

"In the meantime, I have to say congratulations to Jeonbuk. They are the champions of Asia."

Although he failed to lift the coveted AFC Champions League title, Al Ain captain and star playmaker Omar Abdulrahman was named as the tournament's MVP while FC Seoul's Brazilian striker Adriano was named the competition's top scorer.

"I want to tell the fans I'm sorry about the result and I hope they will support us like they did today, with a full stadium," said Abdulrahman. "We promise them we will fight in every competition, for the AFC Champions League, in the domestic league, the cup and everything.

"I want to thank God for everything, we had hoped to win the AFC Champions League and we promise to try to get the title next year.

"I don't usually think about personal trophies, we had hoped to win the AFC Champions League but it will give me a lot of motivation in the future to be the best in the AFC Champions League."



FINAL

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors vs Al Ain

19/11/16
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 2 *(Leonardo 70, 77)*
Al Ain 1 *(Danilo Asprilla 63)*
•
Jeonju World Cup Stadium, Jeonju
36,158

26/11/16
Al Ain 1 *(Lee Myung-joo 34)*
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 1 *(Han Kyo-won 30)*
•
Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium, Al Ain
23,239

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors
win 3-2 on aggregate

Air Force Club Crowned AFC Cup Champions







Hammadi Ahmed scored the only goal of the game as Air Force Club became the first Iraqi club to claim an AFC Cup title with a 1-0 win over India's JSW Bengaluru in the 2016 final at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium in November.

Ahmed scored in the 70th minute from close-range to secure the trophy for the Iraqi side, who had become the second club from their nation to appear in the AFC Cup final after Arbil finished as runners-up in the 2012 and 2014 editions.

"I think this victory is very important not just for the fans of Air Force Club but also for the people of Iraq," said Air Force Club Coach Basim Qasim.

"I am grateful because even though we were under a lot of pressure and were missing four players, we still managed to take our chances well and win the title.

"Our players were the better team tonight as you can tell from the number of missed opportunities throughout the match although that does not mean the other team weren't playing well."

Played out in front of a lively contingent of supporters, many of whom had travelled from India to support Bengaluru, Air Force Club edged an even opening exchange with Amjed Radhi curling a free-kick narrowly wide inside the quarter-hour mark.

Air Force Club, however, then suffered a blow on 27 minutes as playmaker Humam Tareq was brought off with an injury to be replaced by Osama Ali.

With five minutes of the half remaining the Iraqi Premier League side sprung the Bengaluru offside trap but goalkeeper Lalthuammawia Ralte turned behind Radhi's low cross as Ahmed lurked with intent.

Radhi, who was Air Force Club's most influential player throughout, had a golden opportunity five minutes after the restart when the ball fell to him by the penalty spot but the midfielder blazed narrowly over.

Bengaluru responded as the game began to open up and Air Force Club had defender Ali Al Saadi to thank as he blocked Eugeneson Lyngdoh's on target effort from Sunil Chhetri's pull-back.

On the hour mark, Saad Natiq's header was well saved by Ralte as the action swung from end-to-end, with Bengaluru coach Albert Roca duly throwing on substitutes Seiminlen Doungel and Udanta Singh.

But it was the Iraqis who found the crucial goal with 20 minutes remaining as Ahmed Kahdim picked out Radhi on the edge of the area, the Iraq international delightfully dancing past three defenders on his way into the box before squaring for Ahmed to fire home his 16th of the tournament.

Radhi then thought he had gone from provider to goalscorer shortly after when Emad Mohsin played him in, but his effort was ruled out for offside.

As time ran out, Bengaluru struggled to create opportunities for the leveller with CK Vineeth failing to connect with Cameron Watson's free-kick on 89 minutes and, despite their increasing desperation, the I-League side were unable to find a way through and Air Force Club held on to claim an historic victory.

"I want to say congratulations to Air Force Club," said JSW Bengaluru coach Roca. "I think they were superior and they deserved their win.

"From the very first moment we could see that we were not as comfortable on the ball and Air Force were playing at a level that we perhaps cannot achieve for now. This was another kind of football that we have never experienced before."

Ahmed was named 2016 AFC Cup's Most Valuable Player as well as the tournament's top scorer. Ceres FC's Spanish striker Adrian Gallardo and Safiq Rahim Johor Darul Ta'zim tied for second place with eight goals each. Rahim's teammate Jorge Pereyra Diaz and Christopher Chizoba of Myanmar's Ayeyawady United rounded out the top five with six goals apiece.

Hammadi's 16th goal of the tournament saw him move to joint second place in the all-time top scorers of the competition alongside Tunisia's Issam Jemaa, who netted 16 times for Kuwait SC in their 2013-winning campaign, but he finishes three behind Brazilian striker Rico who tallied 19 goals during Al Muharraq's run to the 2008 title.



FINAL

Air Force Club vs JSW Bengaluru

05/11/16
Air Force Club 1 *(Hammadi Ahmed 70)* JSW Bengaluru 0

Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium, Doha
5,806

AFC U-19 CHAMPIONSHIP BAHRAIN 2016

Japan Claim Their First U-19 Title

Japan claimed the AFC U-19 Championship for the first time in the tournament's 57-year history as Koki Ogawa's decisive spot kick at Bahrain National Stadium secured a 5-3 penalty shootout victory over Saudi Arabia after defences remained on top in a goalless 120 minutes.

The East Asian powerhouses had finished runners-up six times – the last of which came in 2006 – while the Saudis were looking to add to the titles won in 1992 and 1986.

Ayman Al Khulaif saw his early effort tipped onto the post by Japan custodian Ryosuke Kojima and that was as close as either side came in an uneventful 120 minutes of play.

Then with the shootout 4-3 in Japan's favour, Abdullah Magrshi fired the eighth spot kick over the crossbar and Ogawa kept his composure to coolly slot past Amin Al Bukhari as the Japanese were crowned continental champions having not conceded a goal.

"When I started with this team we had a lot of games where we made mistakes and gave easy goals to our opponents," said Japan coach Atsushi Uchiyama.

"But finally the players are starting to understand what I want them to do and we are starting to have a good balance.

"You have to spend a lot of time to get good results and we are finally proving the programme in Japan is good."

Despite the loss for Saudi Arabia, it was not all doom and gloom, with the tournament's four semi-finalists – which also included Islamic Republic of Iran and surprise package Vietnam – qualifying for the 2017 FIFA U-20 World Cup in Korea Republic.

Saad Al Shehri's Saudi Arabia had earlier advanced to the last eight as Group A runners-up behind hosts Bahrain after the Gulf nations, and 12-time champions Korea Republic, had all finished on six points. The East Asians were eliminated by the narrowest of margins while Thailand exited pointless.

Iraq topped Group B on seven points having not conceded a goal, while Vietnam advanced to the knockout phase for the first time in seven attempts ahead of the United Arab Emirates and 2014 runners-up DPR Korea after picking up a win and two draws.

Another big name fell in Group C as holders Qatar saw eventual winners Japan and Iran beat them to the qualification spots while Yemen propped up the table without registering a point or a goal.

Victories over neighbours Tajikistan and Australia in Group D ensured Uzbekistan advanced to the last eight after just two games ahead of a scoreless draw with China. Australia and Tajikistan had earlier defeated the Chinese, and it was the Tajiks who progressed to a first ever quarter-final on goal difference following a scoreless draw with the Joeys.

Awn Al Saluli netted the decisive penalty as Saudi Arabia saw off Iraq 6-5 in a shootout following a 2-2 draw in the quarter-final to seal their place at the U-20 World Cup in dramatic style.

Vietnam then claimed arguably the most important result in their footballing history as Tran Thanh's second-half goal secured a 1-0 victory over hosts Bahrain to book their ticket to a first ever football World Cup.

Tajikistan offered no resistance to Japan, who scored four without reply against the Central Asians, including a goal by tournament MVP Ritsu Doan, to advance to the last four.

Another double, this time from Reza Jafari, saw Iran oust Uzbekistan 2-0 in the tightly contested fourth quarter-final.

An incredible 11 goals were scored as Saudi Arabia eventually defeated Iran 6-5 in the first semi-final with Abdulrahman Al Yami netting a hat-trick, including the Saudis' decisive sixth goal, in the match of the tournament.

There was no such drama in the second semi-final, though, as a Shunta Nakamura brace helped Japan to a 3-0 scoreline over Vietnam as the Southeast Asians' brave run was brought to an end.











Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Bahrain	3	2	0	1	7	6	1	6
Saudi Arabia	3	2	0	1	8	4	4	6
Korea Republic	3	2	0	1	6	4	2	6
Thailand	3	0	0	3	3	10	-7	0

13/10/2016
Thailand 1 *(Anon Amornlertsak 76)* Korea Republic 3 *(Jeong Tae-wook 13, Han Chan-hee 41, Kang Ji-hun 90+3)*
Bahrain 3 *(Mohamed Marhoon 41, Mohamed Yusuf 49 pen, Ahmed Mohamed 90+4)* Saudi Arabia 2 *(Rakan Al Anaze 56, Sami Al Naji 80 pen)*
16/10/2016
Saudi Arabia 4 *(Rakan Al Anaze 43, Mansour Al Muwallad 60, Ayman Al Khulaif 68, Abdulrahman Ghareeb 90+3)* Thailand 0
Korea Republic 2 *(Cho Young-wook 84, 90+2)* Bahrain 1 *(Sayed Ebrahim 56)*
19/10/2016
Bahrain 3 *(Mohamed Yusuf 12 pen, Ahmed Bughammar 47, Talal Al Naar 51)* Thailand 2 *(Sittichok Paso 30, Supachai Chaided 84)*
Korea Republic 1 *(Kim Geun-ung 32)* Saudi Arabia 2 *(Sami Al Naji 38, Abdulelah Al Amri 64)*

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iraq	3	2	1	0	5	0	5	7
Vietnam	3	1	2	0	3	2	1	5
UAE	3	1	1	1	4	3	1	4
DPR Korea	3	0	0	3	2	9	-7	0

14/10/2016
DPR Korea 1 *(Ryang Hyon-ju 90+2)* Vietnam 2 *(Ha Duc Chinh 71, Doan Van Hau 90)*
UAE 0 Iraq 1 *(Waleed Karim 26)*
17/10/2016
Vietnam 1 *(Ho Ming Di 21)* UAE 1 *(Husain Abdulla 58 pen)*
Iraq 4 *(Mazin Fayyadh 54 pen, Waleed Kareem 63, 65, Alaa Abbas 79)* DPR Korea 0
20/10/2016
DPR Korea 1 *(Han Kwang-song 8)* UAE 3 *(Ahmed Rashid 31, Faisal Al Matroushi 52, Jassim Yaqoob 77)*
Iraq 0 Vietnam 0

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	2	1	0	6	0	6	7
Iran	3	1	2	0	2	1	1	5
Qatar	3	1	1	1	2	4	-2	4
Yemen	3	0	0	3	0	5	-5	0

14/10/2016
Japan 3 *(Koki Ogawa 47, Yuto Iwasaki 79, Hara Teruki 88)* Yemen 0
Qatar 1 *(Abolfazl Razzaghpour 38 OG)* Iran 1 *(Abolfazl Razzaghpour 58)*
17/10/2016
Iran 0 Japan 0
Yemen 0 Qatar 1 *(Abdulrasheed Umaru 84)*
20/10/2016
Qatar 0 Japan 3 *(Yuto Iwasaki 14, Koji Miyoshi 45 Takehiro Tomiyasu 62)*
Yemen 0 Iran 1 *(Abolfazl Razzaghpour 45)*

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Uzbekistan	3	2	1	0	5	3	2	7
Tajikistan	3	1	1	1	3	2	1	4
Australia	3	1	1	1	3	3	0	4
China	3	0	1	2	0	3	-3	1

15/10/2016
Uzbekistan 2 *(Sayidjamol Davlatjonov 67, Jasurbek Yakhshiboev 72)* Tajikistan 1 *(Karomatullo 20)*
China 0 Australia 1 *(Mario Shabow 46)*
18/10/2016
Tajikistan 2 *(Ehsoni Panshanbe 3, Nuriddin Hamroqulov 65)* China 0
Australia 2 *(Liam Youlley 63 pen, Tariq Maia 90+3 pen)* Uzbekistan 3 *(Bobir Abdixolikov 29, Doston Ibragimov 40, 46)*
21/10/2016
Uzbekistan 0 China 0
Australia 0 Tajikistan 0

Quarter-Finals

23/10/2016
Iraq 2 *(Sajjad Hussein 75, Mazin Fayyadh 79)*
Saudi Arabia 2 *(Rakan Al Anaze 65, Abdulrahman Al Yami 69)*
Saudi Arabia won 6-5 on penalties
Bahrain 0 Vietnam 1 *(Tran Thanh 72)*
24/10/2016
Japan 4 *(Koki Ogawa 8, 73, Ritsu Doan 19, Yuto Iwasaki 88)* Tajikistan 0
Uzbekistan 0 Iran 2 *(Reza Jafari 14, 47)*

Semi-Finals

27/10/2016
Saudi Arabia 6 *(Sami Al Naji 18 pen, 51, Ayman Al Khulaif 42, Abdulrahman Al Yami 45+1. 64, 76)*
Iran 5 *(Reza Jafari 45, Aref Aghasi 45+3, Reza Shekari 62, Mehdi Mehdikhani 75, Reza Karmollachaab 83)*
Vietnam 0 Japan 3 *(Takeru Kishimoto 6, Shunta Nakamura 10, 51)*

Final

30/10/2016
Japan 0 Saudi Arabia 0
Japan won 5-3 on penalties



Nepal Lift Inaugural Solidarity Cup



A solitary first half goal from Sujal Shreshtha was enough to seal a 1-0 victory for Nepal over Macau in the final of the first-ever AFC Solidarity Cup in Kuching, Malaysia in November.

Shreshtha scored in the 29th minute to give Nepal the title and cap an impressive performance throughout the tournament that saw Koji Gyotoku's side emerge as the champions.

Nepal dominated from start to finish in difficult conditions but, while Macau's defence held firm for the majority of the game, Tam Iao San's team rarely threatened at the other end of the pitch.



"We participated in this competition and it has a lot of meaning for us," said Gyotoku. "Normally we can't arrange international matches and that was four matches we had and we were fighting and we could be strong.

"After we go back to Nepal we will discuss (what the future holds). Now we're just happy."

The Himalayan side reached the final on the back of an undefeated record after topping Group A with a win over Brunei Darussalam and a draw with Timor Leste, before a narrow penalty shoot-out victory over Laos in the semi-finals saw them secure their place in the tournament's climax.

Runners-up Macau followed a similar route after finishing in pole position of Group B courtesy of victories of Mongolia, Laos and a draw with Sri Lanka before a semi-final win on penalties over Brunei.

"Even though we lost the final I still thank God for the team's effort," said Macau coach Tam Iao San.

"My players gave 100 percent in the game and congratulations to Nepal. They had a better performance today and honestly they created many chances, more than us, so I think they deserved it.

"It's a very good experience to have a chance to play with Nepal because this is another style compared to how we play in east Asia."

Macau striker Leong Ka Hang was named the competition's Most Valuable Player while Brunei's Shahrazen Said's four goals helped him earn the Top Scorer accolade. The Fair Play Award was presented to Laos.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
NEPAL	2	1	1	0	3	0	3	4
BRUNEI DARUSSALAM	2	1	0	1	4	3	1	3
TIMOR LESTE	2	0	1	1	0	4	-4	10

02/11/16
Brunei 4 Timor Leste 0
05/11/16
Timor Leste 0 Nepal 0
08/11/16
Nepal 3 Brunei Darussalam 0

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
MACAU	3	2	1	0	7	3	4	7
LAOS	3	2	0	1	6	5	1	6
MONGOLIA	3	1	0	2	3	5	-2	3
SRI LANKA	3	0	1	2	2	5	-3	1

03/11/16
Sri Lanka 1 Laos 2
Macau 2 Mongolia 1
06/11/16
Laos 1 Macau 4
Mongolia 2 Sri Lanka 0
09/11/16
Sri Lanka 1 Macau 1
Mongolia 0 Laos 3

Semi-finals

12/11/16
Nepal 2 Laos 2
Nepal win 3-0 on penalties
Macau 1 Brunei 1
Macau win 4-3 on penalties

Third Place Play-off

14/11/16
Laos 3 Brunei 2

Final

14/11/16
Nepal 1 Macau 0

AFC Hosts Inaugural Women's Football Conference

The AFC hosted the first ever Women's Football Conference, bringing together some of the world's leading women's football experts in Kuala Lumpur in November.

Women's national team coaches and technical directors from AFC Member Associations and experts from the AFC's sister Confederations from across the world took part in the inaugural three-day event to share expertise and experience for the benefit of women's football in Asia.



Moya Dodd, AFC Women's Football Committee Chairperson and Executive Committee Member, said: "Five of the top twenty women's football teams in the world are from the AFC. Our youth teams are picking up trophies in FIFA competitions.

"The AFC is fully committed to supporting all our Member Associations to realise their women's football potential, in all the four categories of development across Asia: emerging countries, developing countries, challengers and FIFA World Cup finalists."

Speakers included Australia's women's national team coach Alen Stajcic, China national team coach Bruno Bini, FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup Jordan 2016 finalists, DPR Korea coach Sin Jong-bok and Japan assistant coach Miyo Okamoto, Pia Sundhage, current Sweden women's national team coach and two-time Olympic Games winner with the US women's team; as well as former Chinese women's national team assistant coach.

One of the highlights was the interview with Chan Yuen-ting, HK Eastern Sports Club head coach, who received international media attention leading her club to win the Hong Kong Premier League, as a female coach of a male team, last year.

Hope Powell, former coach of the English women's national team and current coach educator at the Professional Footballers' Association for England and Wales, was also a guest speaker.

AFC Raises Awareness Of Disability Football

The AFC joined forces with international football stars on Thursday to showcase disability football at the AFC Annual Awards 2016 in Abu Dhabi in December.

The nominees for the AFC Player of the Year and AFC Women's Player of the Year Awards, Omar Abdulrahman, Hammadi Ahmed, Wu Lei, Lisa de Vanna, Caitlin Foord and Tan Ruyin attended the event in the United Arab Emirates capital.

Abdulrahman said: "Football is about hope and joy and it is a real pleasure to see the bright smiles on the kids' faces here. I know how special these kinds of moments are, for both me and the children here.

"Asia is a special continent where football can have a big social impact. The AFC is doing a great job with social responsibility events like this."

Chairman of the AFC Social Responsibility Committee Ahmed Eid said: "Football is a powerful tool for social development and social responsibility is a key element of the AFC's mission statement. We have the power to make a difference in many parts of Asia.

"I would like to thank the Abu Dhabi Sports Council, the UAE Ministry of Health and the Disabled Sports Federation, and especially the UAE Football Association for the beautiful partnership which has made this event possible.

"But the true stars today are the children and their families. Football is for all and events like this are an important way to raise awareness and remind people of that."

The guests were given an introduction to disability football and the children had a training session with the players at the football pitch adjacent to the Emirates Palace Hotel where the AFC Annual Awards took place.



Tsingtao Renews Partnership With AFC

Tsingtao has become the latest high-profile company to enter into a commercial partnership with the AFC after the announcement of a four-year extension to their existing deal was made on in Kuala Lumpur in December.

Tsingtao will be partners for the AFC Champions League and the new format of the AFC Cup from the start of the 2017 season in the ASEAN, East and South Asia regions of the world's most populous football Confederation.



Prior to the official launch in the Malaysian capital which took place before the draws of the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup for the 2017 season, Dato' Windsor John, the AFC General Secretary, said: "We are delighted at the renewed commitment of companies like Tsingtao to the ever-improving and fast developing landscape of club football in Asia. We thank them for the support of the AFC club competitions.

"The AFC's Vision and Mission states our objective is to provide top level competitions to provide the platform for our teams to continue to raise their standards and challenge on the world stage. It is a challenge that we are determined to meet.

"The AFC Champions League and AFC Cup in 2016 were the richest in history and the AFC Champions League has the highest prize money for the winners of any club competition outside Europe. It is a clear signal that the AFC is determined to reward success.

"And now, from the 2017 season, we have revamped the AFC Cup so that it will be played in each of the five existing regions of the AFC and will deliver a champion in each region for the first time. The four champions from ASEAN, Central, East and South will also play off to provide an overall East champion. That team will then face the West Champions in the AFC Cup final."

Attending the draw in Malaysia, Cai Zhi Wei, Vice-President of Sales and Marketing of Tsingtao, who also have the rights to present a Man of the Match Award in the designated territories, said: "Tsingtao's continued commitment to make a seven-year partnership with AFC Champions League and AFC Cup displays Tsingtao's support to the future of Asian Football."

AFC Coaching Course Held In Singapore

The Football Association of Singapore kicked off the first module of the AFC 'A' Coaching Certificate Course at the Jalan Besar Stadium in November.

Twenty-two coaches from Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Britain and Belgium took part in the course delivered by FIFA and AFC Coaching instructor Vincent Subramaniam who was assisted by Mohamed Basir and M.S. Arasu.

Basir, who is also FAS Head of Coach Education, said: "The course is part of our continued development plans to increase the knowledge base of our coaches. At the same time, we need to impress our national development and playing philosophies into our coaching landscape for us to move forward in unison."

The first module, one of a total of four, ran from November 14 to 19, and will be followed by subsequent modules in April and September 2017.



AFC Launch Nepal Relief Project

After a year of planning, AFC Social Responsibility Committee Chairman Ahmed Eid Al Harbi exchanged the Memorandum of Understanding which will allow the rebuilding of the Sethi Devi Secondary School in the earthquake hit region of Sindhupalchowk in Nepal in December.



The project is the latest example of the AFC's determination to provide targeted humanitarian aid where it is needed most across the continent – in line with the AFC's Mission Statement to use Football for Social Development.

Al Harbi also joined the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) President Narendra Shrestha in laying the first brick in the project which will see the construction of two blocks consisting 18 classrooms at the school, which was at the epicentre of the 2015 earthquakes.

The school rebuilding, which is being carried out in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Nepal Rebuilding Authority and Nepal Ministry of Education, began in full on December 18 and has been funded by donations from the AFC and its Member Associations.

Al Harbi said: "Sadly Asia faces many challenges – whether they be climatic, natural disasters or through conflict – but on each occasion, through the ever-growing social responsibility programmes, the AFC and its Members have responded and the rebuilding of this school in Nepal is a case in point.

"The AFC is grateful for the support from ANFA as well as the invaluable assistance and guidance of the Nepal Rebuilding Authority, the Nepal Ministry of Education, the district council, our technical advisers, the school management and of course the teachers and pupils in getting this project started."

Club Workshops Held In Kyrgyzstan

The AFC concluded a League and Club Marketing Workshop at the Football Federation of Kyrgyz Republic (FFKR) House with representatives from all top league clubs participating in Bishkek in November.

The workshop aimed to introduce the marketing and revenue generation concept among the top league clubs in Kyrgyzstan.

During the workshop, Football League of Kyrgyzstan (FLK) marketing manager Elvira Abdiramanova shared with the participants the new FLK Marketing Regulations, which included commercial rights of the clubs, television rights, advertisement, sponsorship, online marketing and the importance of cooperation between the FLK and FFKR.

AFC Marketing Consultant Elnur Mammadov then comprehensively covered various aspects of marketing in modern-day football. Some of the important topics covered were the key concepts of marketing, marketing strategy, advantages of sponsorship, the role of the government, ticketing and working with fans and supporters.

FLK Director Kemel Tokabaev said: "The top league clubs in Kyrgyzstan have been successfully implementing the Club Licensing Regulations for the past three seasons. As part of the implementation of the regulations, each club has already appointed a marketing manager.

"The FLK and AFC Development Department give priority to educating the marketing managers on a variety of related topics because these are the challenges faced by the clubs and leagues.

"I would like to thank the AFC for bringing in expert consultant Elnur Mammadov, who has vast knowledge and experience in marketing."

The FFKR and AFC will continue to monitor and follow up on the top league clubs' marketing plans with another visit and an Infrastructure Management Workshop be held in Kyrgyzstan in 2017.



AFC Expands Social Responsibility Reach

The AFC has extended the reach of its social responsibly efforts with 5,400 ultra-durable footballs being donated to the Football Federation of Sri Lanka (FFSL) in Colombo in November.

Supplied in partnership with the One World Play Project, the ultra-durable balls initiative won gold in the 'Best Sports CSR Initiative' category at the prestigious Asia Sports Industry Awards in October. The initiative features the award-winning, ultra-durable One World Futbols developed by One World Play Project.



Recognised as a breakthrough in ball technology, the One World Futbol never needs a pump, never goes flat and is designed to withstand the harshest environments.

AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa said: "As we have witnessed across the continent, football has the power to improve lives and empower communities. One of our missions under the AFC's Vision and Mission is to use football for social development.

"Through this contribution, we are committed to demonstrating how football, under the banner of One Asia, One Goal, can be a gateway to bring about positive social outcomes. I would like to thank our friends from One World Play Project for their significant role in bringing our aspirations to life."

As part of the launch, the Sri Lankan national team players lent their support to the project by participating in a grassroots football clinic and health awareness campaign for aspiring footballers organised by the FFSL.

Anura De Silva, FFSL President, expressed his appreciation to the AFC for the impact that the contribution would create on Sri Lankan football: "We would like to express our gratitude to the AFC and One World Play Project for sharing the belief in using football as a platform to enrich lives.

"Through this generous contribution, we are able to give tomorrow's generation wider access to football and inspire hope and purpose to lead more fulfilling lives."

New Integrity Policies Introduced

The AFC Executive Committee introduced a ground-breaking 'Do the right thing' policy to further strengthen the Confederation's regulations to protect integrity and transparency at its meeting in Abu Dhabi in December

The AFC Vision and Mission sets out a mission objective of improving both the governance and integrity of the Confederation and the new 'Do the right thing' whistle-blower policy is another positive step.

"This is an important proposal from the AFC Governance Reform Task Force and now we need to appoint an Independent Head of Integrity," said AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa.

"The Administration will write to all Member Associations and also undertake a headhunting process to recommend to the ExCo the most suitable candidate, who will then be approved at the next Congress."

The ExCo also confirmed the decision made to establish an independent AFC Entry Control Body for the AFC club competitions which will make recommendations on areas such as eligibility of clubs for competitions.



Jeonju World Cup Stadium

Jeonju, Korea Republic

Jeonju World Cup Stadium was constructed for the 2002 FIFA World Cup jointly hosted by Korea Republic and Japan.

The stadium was officially opened by then Korea Republic President Kim Dae-jung on 8 November, 2001. The striking ground has a capacity of 42,477 and hosted three matches of the 2002 FIFA World Cup, two group stage fixtures and one Round of 16 tie between the United States and Mexico.

Its unique design comes from the Korean traditional fan, known as Hapjukseon in Korean.This fan represents the beauty of traditional Korean design.

The stadium grounds cover an area of 562,929 m2, with one above ground level and six underground levels and are located north-west of the city of Jeonju, approximately 10 kilometres from central Jeonju. The stadium is known as “Fort Jeonju” by Korean football fans, especially by those of resident side Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

The venue hosted its third AFC Champions League final in November last year as Jeonbuk faced Emirati club Al Ain, having also been involved in the staging of the 2006 and 2011 continental showpieces.











"We hope we can go to the second round at the World Cup and we think we can win the AFC Asian Cup. We deserve it. We have been the number one Asian team in the FIFA rankings for a long time now."

SARDAR AZMOUN