



# COACHES CIRCLE

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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH  
**FUTOSHI IKEDA**



## MATILDAS' MAGIC

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

In Australia, during the final phase of the FIFA Women's World Cup, the Matildas' star striker Sam Kerr became the sporting face of a nation. The girl from Fremantle in the West became omnipresent across the whole country, on and off the pitch. In Sydney, way over on the East coast, her name was on the back of jerseys worn by both boys and girls. The newspapers lauded her and her team-mates on the front and back pages. Book stores prominently displayed publications by her or about her. Meanwhile, the player herself remained humble. "What we've achieved as a team is amazing and I'm just really grateful that I could be part of it," she said as the final tournament reached its climax.

For Australia's Head Coach Tony Gustavsson, the team's exploits created something beyond football and results. Before the Semi-Final against England, he passionately proclaimed "our team can inspire the next generation; they can unite a nation; they can leave a legacy that is much bigger than 90 minutes of football". Tony's enthusiasm was triggered by record crowds, massive TV audiences and an overwhelming atmosphere of national support. No fewer than 11 million viewers watched the Australia v England match – the biggest viewership in Australian TV history for any type of programme.

In addition, the team's popularity opened the door to debate on important women's issues such as equality



and opportunity. The Matildas steered football into the mainstream of Australian society and, in doing so, brought matters concerning women, not just in sport, into the collective consciousness of a nation.

The Australian team also helped to raise the standard of play on the pitch. The nations who competed in the Knockout Phase of the competition produced performances that set a new benchmark for the women's game. The Final match between England and Spain was not only dramatic and entertaining. It was a technical and tactical masterclass for women's football. Player of the Match and selected for the tournament's Best Player Award, Spain's Aitana Bonmatí proved that women's football also has its maestros. Legendary coach Pep Guardiola spoke for many of us when he said "Aitana

Bonmatí is a football player who has me completely in love with her for the way she plays. She is like a women's Andrés Iniesta."

The 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand was a major success in terms of footballing quality and public interest. FIFA President Gianni Infantino summed up the global view when he declared "this has been the best, the greatest and the biggest World Cup ever." Although the results for Asian teams at the final tournament were mixed, there were grounds for optimism. Korea Republic, Vietnam, Philippines and China PR all had their moments while Japan and Australia were outstanding – the latter finishing in the top four. So, the challenge now is to maintain the momentum, to retain the interest in the women's game.



“Women’s football will be the world’s second-biggest sport behind men’s football.”

Kelly Simmons

One person who has no doubts about the future is Kelly Simmons, a former Director at the Football Association and a pioneer of the women's game in England. She confidently stated that "women's football will be the world's second-biggest sport behind men's football." For this prediction to be realised, FIFA, the confederations and MAs need to increase their investment and upgrade their player development and general efforts, especially in establishing top-level competitions, in order to enable the necessary progress to be made.

If inspiration is required, we need to look no further than Sam Kerr and the Matildas. Their magic has shown what is possible. When Kerr, winner of the 2023 AFC Women's Player of the Year Award, scored her team's equaliser in the Semi-Final against England with a spectacular long-range drive, prompting a crowd of almost 76,000 in Sydney's Stadium Australia to erupt in joyous celebration, those with big aspirations for the future applauded a moment that brought the potential of women's football into sharp focus.

## AGILITY, MOBILITY AND UNITY

**B**earing in mind his impressive track record and the fact that he received an AFC Special Recognition Award in 2018, there is every excuse to trot out the old cliché about a man who ‘needs no introduction’. But he deserves one. His career has been an exemplary transition from player to top-level coach, negotiated with dedication and humility. After a university education, he played professional football in the defensive line of Urawa Red Diamonds and, after hanging up his boots, initiated a coaching career with the Japanese club’s youth team. He then scaled another rung on the ladder as one of the coaches attached to the first team before doing likewise at Avispa Fukuoka, where he gained experience as head coach on a caretaker basis. Drafted into the national-team set-up in 2017, his immediate victory at the AFC U19 Women’s Championship™ in China PR (where Japan scored 21 goals and conceded one) was a prelude to another famous success at the FIFA U20 Women’s World Cup in France in 2018, when his team saw off Germany and England in the Quarter-Final and Semi-Final before defeating Spain 3-1 in the Final to become only the fourth nation to have its name engraved on the trophy – prompting FIFA to declare that Japan had “lit up the competition with their sublime passing game”. Five years later, and now with the senior women’s team, Japan again crossed paths with Spain at the FIFA Women’s World Cup 2023 and made global headlines by beating the eventual world champions 4-0. In the meantime, he had created a distinct playing philosophy in which he maintains that agility, mobility and unity are the key concepts. He is, of course...



FUTOSHI IKEDA

## WHAT WAS YOUR GENERAL VIEW OF THE 2023 FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP?

As the number of participating countries expanded from 16 – 32, there were many first-time entrants, but I do not feel that there was much difference in terms of competitiveness. Instead, most of the matches were very competitive, which made me feel that the level of the competition has increased a lot.

## IN THE MATCH WHEN YOU DEFEATED SPAIN, DID YOU DO ANYTHING SPECIAL IN TERMS OF YOUR STRATEGY AND TACTICS?

Rather than something special, we prepared for our next opponent, as we usually do. First, we shared with the players two contexts: firstly, that we had already qualified for the Knockout Stages. Secondly, our opponents might dominate us for longer than in previous matches. We also let the players understand that it is important to play without feeling stressed about being dominated. In training on the pitch, we had prepared the players to exploit the space created when the opponents possess the ball and attack, especially behind the back line. In that respect, I think the players played well with intent.

## HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR TEAM'S STYLE OF PLAY?

Rather than the style of play, we just focused on pursuing our "Concept" or "Play Model" that we had been aiming for. That each individual should perform and capitalise on their own weapons, even in combination or in collective plays.



Being able to do that kind of collaboration and interlocking with dedication is, I believe, one of our strengths. I think that might be what others see as our style of play.

## WHAT ARE YOUR REFLECTIONS ON THE DECISIVE MATCH VERSUS SWEDEN?

In the games leading up to that point, we had achieved results by starting with a high defensive awareness and then going immediately to attack. However, this might have appeared as a slightly passive tendency, even if not consciously, in the first half against Sweden. If we had started actively pressing and aggressively going on the attack, as we did in the second half, there is a sense that the result might have been different.

## ON THE EVIDENCE OF THE FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND, DO YOU THINK THAT THE WOMEN'S GAME IS IMPROVING FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE?

I feel that football has progressed remarkably over the past few years, with high-intensity football being developed, led by the USA and especially in European MAs. And, in addition, by MAs that were not previously recognised as major forces. This made us feel that the balance of power could be threatened and could change soon if we were satisfied with the status quo and stopped moving forward. So, we must not stop going forward.

## IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT DO ASIAN TEAMS NEED TO DO TO BE COMPETITIVE ON THE WORLD STAGE?

I think that Asian teams can compete well if we develop ourselves with a global perspective. To further enhance international competitiveness, it will be essential for both teams and individuals to accumulate experience at international level. Today, it is being developed at continental level in Europe during international windows, particularly in their Nations League, for example. To keep up with them, we in the AFC need to develop our football by playing competitively at a continental level. For this reason, I believe it is crucial for each MA to develop domestic competitions with greater intensity and competitiveness.

## YOU WON THE U20 WOMEN'S WORLD CUP IN 2018 AND PLAYED THE FINAL IN 2022 AGAINST SPAIN. IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT ARE THE KEY FACTORS IN SUCCESS AT YOUTH LEVEL?

I believe that the system from grassroots to elite youth for girls in Japan is the most important factor. I also feel that success with the national team would not be possible without the hard work of the coaches in each of these areas. In addition, I think the main driving force is that the players enjoy playing football with their own dreams and goals, such as becoming a professional player, joining the "Nadeshiko Japan" senior women's national team and so on. As a youth coach, I often tell my players that they should feel the joy of playing against the world. It means facing football with high aspirations. And I think



The main driving force is that the players enjoy playing football with their own dreams and goals, such as becoming a professional player.

Futoshi Ikeda



the players are fully expressing this. After the U20s, I am now the senior national coach, and I ask my players to exhibit their own weapons and also bring out the best in their teammates. I think Spain has established a style of play from development ages, based on moving the ball very well from the back.

Japan also has its own style of football, which is based on technique, a lot of interaction between each other, an attack that makes use of combinations with agility and endurance, including the mental perspective, and to play for 90 minutes. I think it is important for the players to value their identity and to build a team with it.

## POST THE FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP, YOU WON THE ASIAN GAMES. IN THE CONTEXT OF THE OLYMPICS, WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED FROM THIS EXPERIENCE?

What I felt after the 2023 Women's World Cup was the changing power structure in the world of women's football. As I said, various countries around the world that were not previously considered powerhouses have improved technically and tactically, and the overall level of women's football has significantly increased. And that experience gave us a sense of urgency and the feeling that if we were to stand still and stagnate, that would mean a regression. On the other hand, I also felt that if we can brush up on Japan's strengths, such as agility, endurance and combination play involving many players, we can compete against the top teams in the world. There is also a need for increased understanding and adaptability among the players in terms of different ways of playing the game, as well as the skills and speed to put them into practice.

Fortunately, we were able to win the subsequent Asian Games and, in that competition, we could identify the different possibilities of more young players. It will definitely be tough, but we hope to improve our team's strength further and go on to the Olympic qualifiers and the Olympic Games.

## WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEW AFC WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FOR ELITE CLUBS?

At national level, you get to experience international competition. But, so far, at club level, there have been almost no official opportunities to compete. So, I believe that players and clubs will definitely improve when they are able to experience competition in a tough environment – including the transportation aspects – with teams from different cultures and countries. I also feel that it is very positive that more clubs and players can share the image and awareness of competing with Asia and the world. I think it is a great motivation for players and clubs, especially if it is a tournament with a big title, deciding the champion of Asia.

In the long term, the hope is that this will trigger further development of domestic leagues, which in turn will feed back into national team football. I also hope that competition at club level will help to raise the level of football across Asia and make it more competitive against other confederations. We in Japan, a country located in the Far East of Asia, have always needed to make the most of our limited international experience, so we are very grateful for these new opportunities. It is also to be hoped that the expansion of the market will raise the quality of football so that the competition will develop into a high-value event.



## WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO COACHING COLLEAGUES WHO ARE WORKING IN WOMEN'S FOOTBALL WITH A NATIONAL TEAMS?

When I took on the role of coach of the senior Nadeshiko Japan team, I set the direction for the team as a whole with a big goal in mind if you look at it from a macro perspective. On the other hand, I set about my own work

with the belief that I can develop every single player with love and care. I don't really have any advice to offer because, conversely, each country probably has different requirements and targets. But I would like to exchange views and share experiences about what other colleagues are involved in. I would also like to work together, sometimes competing as rivals in Asia and sometimes cooperating as football fellows, to ensure that Asian countries can achieve high rankings in international competitions.

## FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP REVIEW

### ROLLER-COASTER RIDES FOR AFC TEAMS

A three-figure online audience gathered in October to focus on the performances by Asia's six representatives at the FIFA Women's World Cup which turned out to be a grandiose advertisement for women's football brilliantly co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand. In her overview of the event, AFC's Head of Women's Football, Bai Lili, highlighted the positives – and there were plenty of them, not least Australia's top-four finish. But a tournament of highs and lows was illustrated by the final matchday of the Group Stage. On the one hand, there were thought-provokingly heavy defeats for three AFC contenders against European opposition: Vietnam's 0-7 against the Netherlands; a 0-6 scoreline for the Philippines against Norway; and China PR's 1-6 defeat against England. Over on the sunny side of the street, Japan posted a 4-0 win over eventual champions Spain; Australia bounced back from defeat by Nigeria with an identical scoreline against Canada; and Korea Republic produced an outstanding performance to earn a 1-1 comeback draw



with Germany. That matchday summarised the highs and lows of a roller-coaster tournament for AFC teams that provided grounds for satisfaction and optimism along with steep gradients on learning curves.

AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh led a technical review, directing the spotlight towards the England v Spain final which, he felt "was a fantastic match that set benchmarks. Spain had some incredibly talented players with Aitana Bonmatí in the top-top category. They produced some exceptional compact combination play, holding a high line that helped them to press the ball in numbers and win the ball back quickly. They almost encouraged opponents to press them because they were



calm, composed and comfortable in playing out from the back, rarely playing long. Adding the senior title to the ones they have earned at age-limit tournaments was a tribute to the development work they have done over the years. England were fully professional," he added, "a group with discipline and physicality, comfortable in building from the back, hitting great diagonal passes on a par with men's teams, along with exceptional deliveries of a wide variety of crosses."

During the Group Stage of the first 32-team final tournament, when all the participants were in action, the average margin of victory fell from 2.06 goals in 2019 to 1.92, while the average over the whole tournament was



1.8. During the Knockout Rounds, four ties required extra-time and three of them were decided by penalty shoot-outs. France, Nigeria and defending champions USA went home unbeaten. The impression that games were more competitive and had gained in intensity was endorsed by Harry Lowe, leader of FIFA's Performance Analysis & Insights team at the final tournament, whose in-depth data confirmed, for example, that the width of defensive blocks was smaller than in 2019 or that goalkeepers, on average, positioned themselves further from the goal and closer to the back line while also making a higher percentage in terms of saving on-target finishing. In other words, defending was more compact, and goals were generally more expensive – as confirmed by a downturn in goalscoring to 2.55 per game plus increases in the numbers of drawn games and clean sheets.

Apart from technical and tactical aspects, mental strength was regarded as a key component – as illustrated by Spain's recovery from the resounding defeat by Japan and Australia's resilience after losing to Nigeria. Tony Gustavsson, head coach of the Matildas, acknowledged that co-hosting the tournament created an additional burden. "It was a privilege to be part of something that we can talk to our grandchildren about," he said to the online audience. "One of the key issues was how to get the group to play together under such a tremendous amount of pressure. We had done two years of mental preparation to be ready to handle this and we changed the word 'expectation' to 'belief'. We had a nation believing in us, so we felt we had support from beneath rather than pressure from above. The players handled it tremendously well considering that we had Sam Kerr



This World Cup will have made a lot of people want to be part of women's football. This event wasn't the end of something – it was the start of something big.

Tony Gustavsson



injured on the day before our opening game. The way we managed that blow as a group was tremendous."

The inevitable question, however, was why European teams had monopolised the podium. "I think Europe's success is related to the amount of investment that they've done," was Gustavsson's response, "having more fully professional players in domestic leagues and doing good youth development work with the age-limit national teams, making sure that every single national team is active in every single window, whether it's U17, U19, U23 or the senior team, giving players more opportunities to compete in high-level professional games and getting good international experience, such as what it means to travel abroad to play. We realised this when we took our

U23 team to Italy to gain experience and being exposed to the realities of travel and playing abroad.”

“I know it sounds simple,” he continued, “but I think it all comes down to investment – something that Spain, for example, have done over the last 10-15 years. Their successes in youth tournaments have been down to investment in player development. More players have been getting opportunities to develop and reach their full potential. I know we have potential in Asia. We have the players, the skills, the coaches but we need more opportunities to play at truly professional level.” Asked whether the standard of domestic competitions is a critical issue, he said “It could be a bit dangerous to generalise and say that all European leagues have become better. For example, Sweden has been exporting a lot of players, which means that the national league relies on a lot of youth and has become more of a development competition. That applies to some of the other leagues in Europe as well. But I’m coming back to the topic of investment because there are more leagues now where the players are full-time professionals at clubs with more resources, more support staff with full-time coaches, analysts and so on. There are more resources around the players- which makes it easier to develop them. Having players who are full-time means that their football is obviously going to get better. It is important to dedicate resources to help players achieve their full potential.”

Korea Republic head coach Colin Bell agreed: “If you look at Europe’s Nations League, I think that is ideal. You compete with teams of similar levels; you can get promoted or relegated. I think that level of competitiveness is something we should aim at. League structures in Asian countries need to be reviewed – just as Japan did a few years ago. In our eight-team league, for example,



the intensity is not as high as we saw in the World Cup. I think we need to be more often in stress situations so that we can learn to compete. The Women’s Champions League is certainly a step in the right direction, so that top teams can play against each other on a regular basis, as they do in Europe.”

This provided a cue for Bai Lili to present details of the pioneering AFC Women’s Champions League, scheduled to kick-off in the 2024/25 season, with the Semi-Finals and Final to be played at a centralised venue in May 2025. She also unveiled plans to rationalise national team schedules to interlock more smoothly with FIFA competitions and, in the more immediate future, to organise, at the end of November, a second AFC Coach Education Tutors Course for female coach educators, an initiative interrupted by the pandemic shortly after its launch. All of this was in the section of the meeting



dedicated to the future development of competitions, coach education and academies for talented female players in Asia.

The aim is to sustain the enormous momentum generated by a final tournament watched by record-breaking crowds totalling almost 2million and a global TV audience of 2billion. “We created role models,” Tony Gustavsson reflected, “and I’m 100 per cent certain that this tournament will have encouraged more girls to play football and will enhance development. I think it was so much more than 90 minutes of football. We’ve been part of something much bigger. This World Cup will have made a lot of people want to be part of women’s football. It can be a catalyst for investment and people will want to be on board. This event wasn’t the end of something – it was the start of something big. I’m really excited about the future of women’s football.”

## AFC ELITE COACHES FORUM

# STRENGTHENING WINDS

PRESENTS  
**AFC ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM 2023**  
7 September 2023 | Online Forum



**W**inds of Change was the headline of our report on the previous AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum. With hindsight it was a pity to have used it, as the same title would have been equally valid for this review of the 2023 edition. In terms of long-term impact on the club coaching community, the most salient feature was a presentation by Kim Kyungryul, head of the AFC Planning and Coordination Unit, who outlined how, hard on the heels of the innovations already in place for the current season, a major restructuring of AFC's club competitions is scheduled for the 2024/25 campaign with the aim, as he put it, of "transforming AFC's elite club football into a more attractive stage by improving technical performance and driving its commercial value". In addition to an inaugural AFC Women's Champions League, the men's competitions will take on a three-tier format comprising an AFC Champions League Elite, an AFC Champions League 2 and an AFC Challenge League. A feature of great significance in terms of coaching options will be the removal of restrictions on the number of imported players eligible to appear on team sheets. The winds of change are strengthening and bringing in exciting times for club coaches in Asia.

### TODAY'S TRENDS

But the lion's share of the Forum was not so much about tomorrow as the day-to-day realities of coaching at the top level. The eighth edition was, for the fourth year in a row, staged in the 'second-best' format of an online event which, admittedly, hampers interaction among the participants. But, as usual, it was a high-quality line-up featuring 18 coaches from clubs in 10 different MAs, including Maciej Skorza, who joined Urawa Red Diamonds in time to lead them to victory over defending champions Al Hilal when the AFC Champions League™ Final returned to its traditional home-and-away format



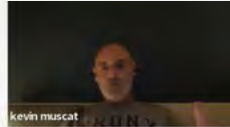


When there is effort, attitude and desire, nothing is impossible.

Lionel Messi



after two seasons as a single fixture. During the Forum, Takeshi Ono, Deputy Technical Director at the Japan FA and AFC's Technical Observer at the second leg of the Final, commented on commendable intensity levels and vigorous counterpressing by both teams which frequently led to rapid turnovers in midfield areas. Al Hilal's technical ability, he added, helped them to play comfortably out from the back in the face of high pressing – which ultimately persuaded Urawa Red Diamonds to prefer mid-block defending rather than high-energy pressing in more advanced areas.

The topic of high pressing was picked up by Kevin Muscat (Yokohama Marinos) who reported that higher, more aggressive pressing was becoming more prevalent in the J-League, albeit on a more sporadic basis over the season, due to periods of high heat and humidity which act as a deterrent to sustained high-energy activity. Steve Corica (Sydney FC) echoed this view, feeling that more teams in Australia now hold higher lines and press harder, rather than operate with the low blocks of yesteryear.



What are the main trends in your domestic or regional football?

But, for similar reasons, it is still a relative rarity to see sustained high-intensity pressing and counterpressing.

This was a cue for AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh to lead the Forum team through a brief review of some of the trends which, despite the abnormal format of the competition, had become visible during the campaign, such as the relative scarcity of successful combination moves through defensive blocks compared with data from Europe's equivalent competition; the percentage of open-play goals (27%) derived from crosses; or the eye-catching 63% increase in goals from counterattacks, mostly fast breaks from low defensive blocks. "It will be interesting to see if this decreases again," he reflected, "now that the competition is reverting to its home-and-

away format." By the way, these and other statistics are to be found in the Technical Report on the AFC Champions League™ 2022 season which ran well into the calendar for 2023.

### THE UNIVERSITY OF FOOTBALL

The main topics of conversation, however, were related to wider concepts and the challenges facing today's top coach rather than technical details. And this is where the two special guests took centre stage: David Moyes, fresh from leading West Ham United to the London club's first continental trophy in 58 years; and Ange Postecoglou, AFC Asian Cup™ winner with Australia, an AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum participant as head coach of Yokohama Marinos and, after collecting all sorts of silverware at

Celtic, currently aiming to lead Tottenham Hotspur closer to the top of England's Premier League tree.

When asked about his preferred style of play, he responded: "We all have some inherent beliefs about how we want the game to be played and how we can win games and be successful – which is what it is all about if you want to earn longevity in this job. So, you drive towards the way you like to go for the win, and this evolves over time, as you gain more experience. It's no secret that I've always preferred to play an attacking aggressive type of football. As coaches, we all study at the University of Football and we all do similar courses with similar structures, and we get the same information. Then, it's a bit like studying medicine - we all go off and specialise in different areas. That's the key, along with examining yourself and asking yourself what kind of manager you want to be. You should just immerse yourself in football and try to learn as much as you can about it. I've come to the stage in my career when I know what I do best. If you ask me to do something differently then I am capable of it. But I know it won't turn out as well as if I focus on what I do best and remain in the area where I feel the most comfortable as a person and as a manager. Irrespective of the way the team plays, I think this gives you more of a chance of success and people will more readily believe in what you're saying."

### FEW OF US CAN BE WINNERS

Whereas Ange Postecoglou's resume has been dominated by high-expectation environments, David Moyes pointed out that most coaches work with teams who are not expected to lift trophies – and even at clubs where 'success' can be avoiding relegation. "Very few of us can be winners," he said, "and, if most of the time your team is not challenging for trophies, I think the key



Most of us have run into difficult times of not doing so well. And then it's about how we adjust and re-value ourselves.

David Moyes



is often to adapt rather than sticking to a single playing philosophy. Overall, I've always preferred a solid, well-organised, well-structured defence as the starting point. And I would say that my longevity at top level has been based on that, along with readiness to adapt according to the players I've had and the clubs I've worked at."

He cited last season as an example of needing to prioritise survival. "The English Premier League was as tough as it had ever been and when we got to the FIFA break for the World Cup, we were in the bottom three. So, I had to find a way of winning more often. Firstly, it was back to basics, trying to make sure we didn't make so many individual mistakes or collective errors. But, as a coach, I don't think you really change your principles. Obviously if you make big changes, it can mean you had things wrong in the first place. We were playing in a European competition, and I think coaches in AFC countries who've been involved in Champions League football might agree that playing continental games can take a huge toll. I'm sure coaches in Asia have the same problem with travelling, recovery time and how to get your players ready to compete again. That was our problem. We just about found a way of winning enough games to stay up, thank goodness."

One of the realities of coaching is that time-spans of job tenure are declining rapidly – and David Moyes stressed the importance of resilience. "Most of us have run into difficult times of not doing so well. And then it's about how we adjust and re-value ourselves. I've been out of work a couple of times and it was quite difficult. But I didn't want to feel sorry for myself. I went to games and went to clubs to watch training and to re-educate myself. I wanted to learn and to discover things that could be useful when I came back. In the business we're in there's no guarantee that it will happen, but my advice is to keep learning and to get ready for your next job."

### DEALING WITH DATA

During the Forum, Andy Roxburgh recalled a comment made by FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development, Arsène Wenger. "When I started," said the former Nagoya Grampus Eight and Arsenal boss, "I was alone. Now there

is a second bus for the support team.” AFC Champions League winner Maciej Skorza commented “Many people were involved in our preparations including the team of analysts who helped to carefully plan the tactics and the small details.” One of the questions posed at the Forum was to what extent data collection and the work of performance analysts is influencing the job of today’s top club coach.

“The analysts have added to the coach’s volume of work,” David Moyes responded. “We spend hours going through data about our own team and our opponents. As a manager, it can give you so much information that you feel you have to act on – and we do. We try to make use of as many data as we can. We have more information on how opponents build their game, what they do in possession and out of possession. But there’s a lot of it – and that can make it difficult for the coach, who has to decide what to present to the players and how you present it. You need to filter what you want to use and what you don’t want to use.”



Ange Postecoglou added: “there is so much specialised information, provided by an army of people. As managers, we’re usually curious in nature, so we want all the information we can get and, if people are coming up with ideas and innovations, I want to know about them. So, your most important role is deciding what information to pass on to the players. They are the important people. So, the information that you find interesting is not necessarily what you would need to pass on. Sometimes it’s better to use it for yourself or your coaching staff to help you design training sessions, for example. You don’t need to pass everything on to the players because some of them will certainly find it overwhelming. Depending on their personalities, many

of them will prefer to focus on their own role and, of course, you’re dealing with an age-span among the group. So the important thing is to decide what to pass on and then what to share with the people around you. After so many years in the game I’ve realised just how important it is to have the best possible people around me. I think the development over the last 10-15 years has been great and, as David says, I think there will be more and more specialised roles – which, for the head coach, makes it even more important to make sure that everything is streamlined in a way that’s most effective for you. Going back to what Arsène said, we do have two buses – that’s the reality. And you’ve got to manage both buses because they’re equally important.”

“Staff levels,” David Moyes agreed, “have increased so much that you need to pay even more attention to communication and leadership skills.”

## J-LEAGUE IS OK LEAGUE

One of the interesting moments during the Forum came when Michael Stibbe, head coach of Sanfrecce Hiroshima, enquired whether Ange Postecoglou had harboured doubts about taking Japanese players to Scotland during his two highly successful seasons at Celtic. “I knew that, wherever I might go in Europe, there was some great talent in Japan. Both the players I had been working with and those I had seen at other clubs. At Celtic there was an element of fear – not about how players would adapt

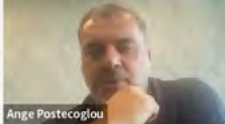





How would you describe your style of play?

in a footballing sense but from a cultural perspective. Asian players don't know the language, have a different culture...and so on. I didn't see that as a problem because I'd been working with them every day and I had seen players who were hardworking, disciplined, respectful and ready to take on information. The first player I signed was Kyogo Furuhashi. Then I tried to sign Mitoma but Brighton were too quick for me. Then in January I brought in Daizan Maeda who I'd coached at Yokohama. Based on that experience I had no doubts about the football they would be able to play. People had doubts about them being able to cope with the physical, competitive side of the game in Scotland. But I never had any fears about them being a success. I was certain about that. Others might have seen it as a big risk, but I saw it as no-risk. And when they arrived at Celtic the other players adapted to them. When they saw the Japanese players staying on after training to do some extra work, some of the others started staying out as well and by the time I left the whole group would be staying out to work on some aspect of their game. They created a culture. I've said to people that the J-League is comparable to any European competition outside the top five leagues. To be successful in the J-League you need to be a good manager and you need to have a good team because it's a very competitive competition."

### BREAKING NEW GROUND

With the AFC Coaching Convention continuing to develop and reciprocal agreements with other Confederations in the offing, Ange Postecoglou's progress in Europe can be regarded as a groundbreaking advance. Asked about it during the Forum, he said "breaking stereotypes about coaches from Australia or other AFC countries is a satisfaction. In a way I'm still seen as a bit of an oddity, but I think it's good that people judge you on knowledge,



What has been your biggest achievement to date?

experience and performance rather than on where you've come from. That's what I'm most proud of. Because I haven't got here on account of networking or playing achievements. I've got to where I am today because I've worked really hard. Bearing in mind where I started, it's an achievement to work at one of the biggest clubs like Celtic and now to compete in the Premier League. But I'm not done yet. I've still got a bit to do. And I hope I can carry on breaking down some barriers and opening some doors."

Asked to pinpoint the key elements in adapting to the different environments of Japan, Scotland and England,

he replied: "I think the main thing is consistency as a person. I haven't changed who I am or the way I work. When you move into a different environment there are different challenges. But the football climate is pretty much the same and I've tried to remain true to myself during the whole process. You might need to adapt to things like language, culture, different competitions, different players...but through it all I'd like to think that anyone who knew me when I first started as a manager in Australia would feel that I haven't changed as a person." Words of wisdom at a time when the winds of change are strongly blowing fresh air into AFC's club competitions.

## PLAYER DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCES

## FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS AT BACK-TO-BACK CONFERENCES

Mid-November was a period of intense activity at the AFC where, in quick succession, the fourth AFC Youth Conference and the third AFC Grassroots Conference allowed Technical Directors, Heads of Youth Football, National Youth Team Coaches and, at the second event, Grassroots Football Managers to renew in-person relationships after the long hiatus of second-best online gatherings. The opportunities for face-to-face dialogue were among the common denominators between the two events in Kuala Lumpur – one of the others being the presentation of AFC Special Awards in the Elite Youth Development and Grassroots categories during the opening session of each Conference. Another common feature was FIFA participation in the form of a





statistical analysis of the FIFA U20 World Cup by High-Performance Specialist Kelly Cross and, during the Grassroots Conference, an insight into FIFA's Amateur Football Research Project, led by Head of Technical Development Services Jürg Nepfer and Global Football Development Consultant Max De Vylder.

Another shared feature was highly varied content with emphasis on group work, interaction and the exchange of knowledge and experiences among the participants. The programme for the AFC Youth Conference also featured a National Youth Coaches Forum where Ishfaq Ahmed (head coach of India's U17 team), Ahmed Mubarak Al'Alawi (Oman U19) and Ayder Kurbaev (Uzbekistan U18) aired their coaching philosophies, their methods of detecting and selecting promising talents, along with the challenges they face during their elite youth development work.

### CROSSING THE BRIDGE

This dovetailed neatly with the youth development story told on stage during the second day by Korea Republic and Manchester United legend Park Ji-sung, who currently chairs the AFC Professional Football Taskforce. He recalled that in an era when elite youth development pathways were much less clearly defined, he still harboured, even at the age of 19, serious doubts about making the grade. And this, in turn, dovetailed again with a group-discussion session on the final morning where the participants addressed the vital issue of how best to help young talents to cross the bridge between the elite youth pathways and the high road of top-level, maximum-intensity football in the club first team or the senior national side.

This was a good follow-up to the keynote presentation on the opening afternoon when AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh had examined the key areas which affect



the quality of football development. His session, entitled 'Guiding the Best', stressed that the best way to nurture young talents is to create an environment where all aspects are the best, ranging from coaching to facilities, scouting, medical support, technology and a large etcetera of vital details which not only develop a player's talent but also their character and mentality on and off the pitch. He mentioned youth development academies of renown, such as FC Barcelona's 'La Masía' or the Aspire Academy in Qatar and this theme was pursued on the final morning when a review of 'Benchmark Academies' featured the JFA Academy in Fukushima – recipient of the AFC's Youth Academy of the Year Award on the opening day.

### COACHING AND LEADING

Staying with the AFC Special Awards, it was significant that Masukatsu Setowaki stepped on stage as Best Grassroots Leader, as opposed to coach. This highlighted one of the differences between the two Conferences with, as Andy Roxburgh stressed during his keynote presentation, leadership qualities vying with coaching abilities on the top

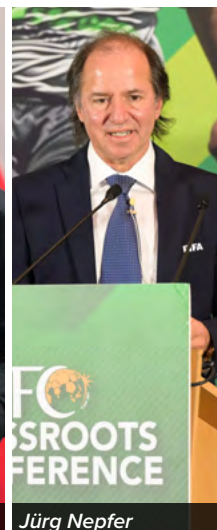


Good coaches use the basic criteria of street football for their vision of grassroots development.

Rinus Michels



Kelly Cross



Jürg Nepfer



Max De Vylder

shelf in grassroots tool-boxes, recalling the comment by legendary Dutch coach Rinus Michels that “good coaches use the basic criteria of street football for their vision of grassroots development”. The AFC’s guiding principles for grassroots football, the AFC Technical Director emphasised, are Football for All, for Life, for Society, for Health, for Sport, for Education and for Fun. Objectives are also to increase participation, promote the game of football, encourage volunteers to take part, promote social inclusion, advocate healthy lifestyles, inspire young people and foster a life-long interest in the sport. As the AFC General Secretary Datuk Seri Windsor John said in his opening address, “not every child who embarks on this journey will go on to play professionally but the values that are instilled at this formative stage will empower them for the rest of their lives”.



Lennard van Ruiven

Robin Russell

The varied programme also featured a fascinating presentation by Lennard van Ruiven, Director of football Development in the Netherlands, whose case study of the landscape in Dutch grassroots football allowed participants to gain an understanding of how their existing structures could be improved in the future. AFC Grassroots Consultant Robin Russell, who led a session dedicated to Global Grassroots Development, commented afterwards “it was heartening to see such a young, enthusiastic group of male and female Grassroots Managers who were curious and thirsty for knowledge. They formed a sort of ‘Class of 2023’ most of whom, thanks in part to the pandemic, had not had the chance to get together before. They created a great atmosphere which was very heartening for the future.” His words could be applied to both of the back-to-back AFC Conferences.



I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Maya Angelou



## PROJECT UPDATES

### FAST FORWARD

The brakes are off. And, after the pandemic-induced deceleration, the three main AFC coaching projects are moving through the gears and picking up speed. Notably, the AFC Coaching Convention which, bearing in mind the impediments since its inception in 2017, has made astonishing progress. Fully revised regulations were published in 2021 and the new upgraded edition currently in the offing contains major innovations. As the AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh commented during the recent online session dedicated to Coach Education, “Coach Educators, more than anybody, need to be totally up to date in their approach to the job. After all, it’s pointless to train coaches for a game that existed 20 years ago. Football has evolved very quickly, and educators have to keep pace with that.”

Normally, the pages dedicated to Project Updates give individual treatment to the AFC Coaching Convention, the AFC Elite Youth Scheme and the AFC Grassroots Charter. But, this time, there is a degree of interlocking – especially between the first two. By the way, the recent ratification of Australia has increased the 3-star membership in the AFC Elite Youth Scheme to seven MAs, with five on board with 2-star status and a further



nine on the 1-star list. Mongolia’s provisional membership rounds up the overall total to 22 MAs.

The main news on the youth development front, however, is that the new edition of the AFC Coaching Convention features guidelines for the introduction of specialised branches attached to the main trunk of the Coach Education tree which grows vertically from the AFC ‘C’ Diploma aimed at grassroots coaching right up to the AFC Pro Diploma at the summit. The major innovations start with the new AFC Elite Youth ‘B’ Diploma (minimum 60 hours) primarily for coaches engaged in leading young players from grassroots or amateur level up to elite standards. Then the AFC Elite Youth ‘A’ Diploma (minimum 120 hours) is aimed at coaches responsible for leading youth players along the pathway between the elite level and a career in professional football.



The Diplomas represent a clear affirmation that Elite Youth Coaching is a specialised subject at the University of Football, as Ange Postecoglou described it at the AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum, with a clear philosophy of developing and improving performance levels rather than focusing on winning, along with a need to marry individual development with positive group dynamics. And, of course, the coach is dealing with players at various stages of the often-complex route towards physical and emotional maturity. In other words, the course content differs substantially from the parameters of mainstream coaching. The requirements at both levels are comparable with those in Europe, where around 20 MAs already organise Elite Youth courses. In Asia, Japan is the front runner in terms of implementing the new concept which, it is hoped, will quickly take root.

Meanwhile, renewed post-pandemic impetus within the framework of the AFC Coaching Convention has allowed the 2023 membership target of 43 MAs to be reached with a couple of months to spare, with Syria and the Northern Mariana Islands the latest to be welcomed on board. Since our last Coaches Circle, the number of MAs endorsed at the Pro level has been increased by Kuwait, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Saudi Arabia with, at the time of writing, no fewer than eight MAs going through evaluation procedures, namely Bhutan, IR Iran, Iraq, Philippines, Thailand, Turkmenistan, UAE and Oman, the latter bidding to upgrade directly from 'B' to Pro. The

number of MAs endorsed at the 'A' level stands at 18, with Cambodia, Lebanon, Mongolia and Chinese Taipei the most recent additions to the 'A' team. In addition, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Maldives, Nepal and Timor-Leste are bidding to join them, while Sri Lanka is being evaluated at the 'B' level.

The AFC Grassroots Charter is beginning to regain momentum after the severe pandemic-induced disruption. The endorsement of Hong Kong, China's application to upgrade makes them the sixth MA to achieve Gold status – and that is the only variation

visible on a scoreboard where the membership figure remains stationary at 40 MAs. But behind-the-scenes activity is picking up. At the time of writing, nine evaluation procedures are under way. China PR, Jordan and Uzbekistan are bidding for Gold membership; Palestine and UAE are requesting Silver; Saudi Arabia and Islamic Republic of Iran are in line for endorsement at the Bronze level. At the same time, Japan (Gold) and Lebanon (Bronze) are going through renewal procedures, having first been ratified as members in the pre-pandemic days of 2018. Thankfully, the three AFC projects are on the move again.



## AFC COACHING CONVENTION CATEGORIES

### PRO - Level



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

### A - Level



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN

### B - Level



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE

## AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME CATEGORIES

### ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

#### 3 - STAR



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA  
KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QFA  
QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FA THAILAND  
THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VFF  
VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

#### 2 - STAR



INDIA  
ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JFA  
JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



SAFF  
SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TFF  
TAJKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

#### 1 - STAR



FA BHRAIN  
BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BAF  
BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BFF  
BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FA HONG KONG  
THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



KFU  
THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LFA  
LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FA MALDIVES  
FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYFF  
MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FA SINGAPORE  
FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

#### PROVISIONAL



MFF  
MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

## AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER CATEGORIES



### GOLD



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA  
KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

### SILVER



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FA THAILAND  
THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

### BRONZE



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



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ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF SRI LANKA



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

## KEY DATES

Jan - Feb  
2024

Jan 12 – Feb 10

AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023™  
(Physical)

Mar  
2024

Mar 12

AFC Coach Education Panel Meeting  
(Online)

Mar 14

AFC Youth Panel Meeting  
(Online)

Mar 19

AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting  
(Online)

Apr  
2024

Apr 16

AFC Women's Online Session  
(Online)

Apr 18

AFC Coach Education Online Session  
(Online)

May  
2024

May 3

2nd AFC Technical Committee Meeting  
(Physical)

May 7 – 9

AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023  
National Coaches Conference  
(Physical)

May 21

AFC Grassroots Online Session  
(Online)

May 23

AFC Youth Online Session  
(Online)



## AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023™

### MATCH SCHEDULE

Venue	Date	GROUP STAGE														KNOCKOUT STAGE															
		Match Day 1				Match Day 2				Match Day 3						Round of 16		Quarter-Finals		Semi-Finals		Final									
		Friday 12 January	Saturday 13 January	Sunday 14 January	Monday 15 January	Tuesday 16 January	Wednesday 17 January	Thursday 18 January	Friday 19 January	Saturday 20 January	Sunday 21 January	Monday 22 January	Tuesday 23 January	Wednesday 24 January	Thursday 25 January	Friday 26 January	Saturday 27 January	Sunday 28 January	Monday 29 January	Tuesday 30 January	Wednesday 31 January	Thursday 1 February	Friday 2 February	Saturday 3 February	Sunday 4 February	Monday 5 February	Tuesday 6 February	Wednesday 7 February	Thursday 8 February	Friday 9 February	Saturday 10 February
Khalifa International Stadium (45,857)			06   17:30 UAE v HKG		12   20:30 KSA v OMA			20   20:30 HKG v IRN			25   18:00 QAT v CHN			34   14:30 JOR v BHR	Rest Day		39   14:30 1D v 3BEF			Rest Day		45   14:30 W 38 v W 39		Rest Day		49   18:00 W 45 v W 46			Rest Day		
Ahmad bin Ali Stadium (45,032)		02   14:30 AUS v IND		09   17:30 IDN v IRQ			16   17:30 IND v UZB			24   20:30 KGZ v KSA							38   19:00 2A v 2C					45   14:30 W 38 v W 39									
Al Janoub Stadium (44,325)				10   20:30 MAS v JOR			17   20:30 PLE v UAE						27   14:30 AUS v UZB				41   14:30 2B v 2F					46   18:30 W 37 v W 42									
Al Bayt Stadium (68,895)						14   17:30 TJK v QAT							28   14:30 SYR v IND				40   19:00 1A v 3CDE					48   18:30 W 40 v W 41									
Lusail Stadium (88,000)	01   19:00 QAT v LBN																														
Jassim bin Hamad Stadium (13,030)		04   20:30 UZB v SYR		08   14:30 KOR v BHR			15   14:30 SYR v AUS		22   17:30 BHR v MAS		26   18:00 TJK v LBN			32   14:30 IRQ v VIE			37   14:30 1B v 3ACD					47   14:30 W 44 v W 43									
Education City Stadium (44,667)			07   20:30 IRN v PLE				18   14:30 IRQ v JPN				29   18:00 IRN v UAE			25   18:00 KSA v THA			42   19:00 1F v 2E					47   14:30 W 44 v W 43									
Al Thumama Stadium (44,400)			05   14:30 JPN v VIE			13   14:30 LBN v CHN			21   14:30 JOR v KOR				31   14:30 JPN v IDN				43   14:30 1E v 2D					50   18:00 W 47 v W 48									
Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium (10,000)		03   17:30 CHN v TJK			11   17:30 THA v KGZ			19   17:30 VIE v IDN		23   17:30 OMA v THA		30   18:00 HKG v PLE		36   18:00 KGZ v OMA			44   19:00 1C v 3ABF														

Group A	Group B	Group C	Group D	Group E	Group F
A1 Qatar (QAT)	B1 Australia (AUS)	C1 Islamic Republic of Iran (IRN)	D1 Japan (JPN)	E1 Korea Republic (KOR)	F1 Saudi Arabia (KSA)
A2 China PR (CHN)	B2 Uzbekistan (UZB)	C2 United Arab Emirates (UAE)	D2 Indonesia (IDN)	E2 Malaysia (MAS)	F2 Thailand (THA)
A3 Tajikistan (TJK)	B3 Syria (SYR)	C3 Hong Kong, China (HKG)	D3 Iraq (IRQ)	E3 Jordan (JOR)	F3 Kyrgyz Republic (KGZ)
A4 Lebanon (LBN)	B4 India (IND)	C4 Palestine (PLE)	D4 Vietnam (VIE)	E4 Bahrain (BHR)	F4 Oman (OMA)



## AFC U17 ASIAN CUP THAILAND 2023™ REVIEW

### THAILAND REVISITED

Japan's 3-0 victory over Korea Republic in Thailand allowed Yoshiro Moriyama's team to become the first to engrave its name on the new AFC U17 Asian Cup™, while semi-finalists IR Iran and Uzbekistan joined the top two in qualifying for the FIFA U17 World Cup, along with Indonesia, hosts of the final tournament. The 16-team event in Thailand reignited a development competition obliged by the pandemic to remain idle since Malaysia 2018 when it had been disputed by U16 teams. Just over three-quarters of the players on squad lists in Thailand had been born in 2006, meaning that their development opportunities had been restricted since they were 12 years old. While it would be premature to calibrate the longer-term impact, another dimension was that two-thirds of the squads in Thailand had birthdays between January and June, raising additional question-marks against the amount of beneficial exposure to international football offered to the teenagers born in the last six months of the year.



Focusing on the field of play, the team of AFC Technical Observers flagged up a variety of topics that are being relayed via the AFC Technical Report on the event to



coaches engaged in youth development. The lengthy hibernation and the change of age-limit erected barriers against comparisons with previous tournaments, yet the proceedings in Thailand maintained the high-scoring tradition at this level with an average of 3.19 goals per game, aided by the 8-4 scoreline when Japan took on India. The striking feature of goalscoring, however, was the abnormally low 18% derived from set plays, with seven of the 16 teams travelling home without scoring from a dead-ball situation. While free kicks accounted for crucial goals in the Knockout Rounds of the tournament (three of the four successes from direct free kicks were scored by the two finalists at critical moments, including Japan's opener in the Final), the eyebrow-raising fact was a meagre harvest of five goals from 291 corners at a success ratio of 1:58 – a statistic which provokes thoughts on the value of training-ground time dedicated to rehearsals of set-play mechanisms.



Potential is not a matter of where you start, but how far you travel.

Adam Grant



The technical observers also picked out as a fairly common denominator the lack of composure in front of goal – even the general average was pulled upwards by the finishing efficiency of the two finalists. Semi-Finalists IR Iran, for example, totalled 87 goal attempts (only Japan, with 111, had more) and scored eight. The champions, by contrast, converted 22.

The fact that through passes accounted for over one-quarter of the tournament's open-play goals also provoked discussion amongst the technical observers about the role of centre-backs who, especially during attack-to-defence transitions, are required to control greater amounts of space. They pinpointed awareness as a key development issue, commenting on situations where they were caught flat-footed and were outpaced by a striker whose starting position was facing the goal. Some teams corrected this during the tournament, they added, paying attention to body-shape and, bearing in mind that 15 of the 99 goals were headers, eliminating ball-watching errors that left defenders second-best in aerial duels. The observers also stressed the importance of working on the art of ball-winning in this age group, taking into account the frequency of unnecessary fouls during the tournament.

The observers also rated standards of passing technique and reception of the ball as key development areas, especially when under pressure. They felt that this facet of the game could be linked with a lack of high-level competitive football in many MAs and noted that the two finalists, Japan and Korea Republic, are among those who have structured competitions for young players in this age group. The overall quality of passing was a talking point – and it was noticeable that finalists Japan and Korea Republic were ahead of the field in terms of pass completion rates – in other words, the percentage of



The best sports people in the world, practice more than they play.

Sean Fitzpatrick



passes received by a team-mate. Both finalists regularly posted figures between 80% and 90%, while Thailand, Uzbekistan and Vietnam topped 80% in certain matches. But, at the other end of the scale, there were teams whose pass completion rates struggled to exceed 60% with the consequent losses of possession originating problematical situations.

There were also question marks about passing accuracy in the opponents' half. Whereas Japan (72%) and Korea Republic (69%) once again set the benchmarks followed by Uzbekistan (68%), Vietnam (66%) and Yemen (63%), in 11 matches one of the teams posted a completion rate inferior to 50% and dipping as low as 40%, meaning that six of every ten passes went either to an opponent or out of play.

Most of the teams in Thailand set out to build from the back, arguably aided and abetted by the heat and humidity which, especially in the games played at 5pm, hampered the viability of sustained collective high pressing – a feature rated by the technical observers as no more than sporadic. The most successful teams preferred a short-passing style, although the use of the long pass (or the long ball) varied considerably from game to game. Over the tournament, 11% of the passing by the two finalists exceeded 30m, with Uzbekistan and Vietnam both averaging 10%. At the other end of the scale, the use of the long pass by Tajikistan, Laos, IR Iran and Qatar was in excess of 20% with the latter registering a tournament peak of 31% in the group game against IR Iran.

All this and more can be found in the AFC Technical Report on the tournament which represented a welcome return to normality for teenagers at a critical stage of their development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### EDITORIAL GROUP

Andy Roxburgh  
Graham Turner  
Isaac Christian

### DESIGN

Raja Amy  
Esther Low

### TECHNICAL ADMINISTRATION

Jose Carpio  
Mandy Leong

### PHOTOGRAPHY

Asian Football Confederation  
Member Associations  
Adam Aidil Padali



**Asian Football Confederation**

AFC House, Jalan 1/155B, Bukit Jalil, 57000 Kuala Lumpur

T: +603 8994 3388 F: +603 8994 2689

**the-AFC.com**