FROM RUSSIA TO THE UAE – AND BEYOND
by AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh

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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH
FÉLIX SÁNCHEZ BAS
Think back to the 2019 Asian Cup semi-final in Al Ain (UAE) and the decisive moment of the match. With 55 minutes gone and no breakthrough for either side, the Iranian players lost their concentration. While five of them protested to the referee, the Japanese played on and scored the opening, crucial goal. For Carlos Queiroz, the coach of Iran, the 3-0 defeat was hard to take because he had repeatedly reminded his players of the need to remain focused. As he said afterwards; ‘Sadly, we had an emotional breakdown in this game.’ After a successful eight-year tenure, his Iranian adventure had finished on an evening of regret.

Fast rewind to the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia’s Rostov Arena when the Japanese suffered the pangs of regret. Having dominated the first hour of their round-of-16 match against much-fancied Belgium, the Blue Samurai lost a two-goal lead and were hanging on for a draw. However, with the game in added-time, they were in control of the ball and the situation, having been awarded a corner kick on the left-hand side. Instead of keeping possession, the ball was delivered into the centre of the penalty box and the safe, welcoming hands of Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois. A classic fast-paced counter-attack ensued and Nacer Chadli scored the winner for the Red Devils. Ninety-four minutes had elapsed and Japan were out of the World Cup – heartbroken and lost in their own thoughts of what might have been.

Now, following the biggest Asian Cup ever, it is time to look forward. During the next few years, Asian football has a big chance to shine on the world stage with the 2020 Olympic Football Tournaments in Japan (men and women) and the men’s 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. When these global events are over, there should be no regrets, no recriminations, because every effort should have been made by the participating teams to perform at their optimum level on the world’s stage. So what is required to attain ‘optimum level’?
It’s probably the only sport in the world where you can control possession, have more chances on goal, spend more time in the opponent’s half and still lose.

Graham Arnold
Australian Head Coach

The priorities are to establish a settled team; to use the matches between now and then to build up a solid foundation; to develop an appropriate style of play; and to have worked on the details that can make the difference at the top-level of football. Continuity of staff will also be an important factor in producing successful, competitive teams. Plus, key elements, such as a scouting network, media planning, performance analysis, sports science support, administrative arrangements, not-to-mention the quality of coaching, management and leadership. ‘Design, not chance’ is the maxim, and no area of team preparation can be neglected. The aim is to minimise the influence of ‘Lady Luck’ who will undoubtedly play her unpredictable part when the tournaments come around. As Australian Head Coach, Graham Arnold said about football during the 2019 Asian Cup: ‘It’s probably the only sport in the world where you can control possession, have more chances on goal, spend more time in the opponent’s half and still lose.’ Yes, even if you play well and work hard, there will always be an element of good fortune and we have to accept that as part of the challenge.

For those with long-term ambitions of qualification and success in a world, continental or regional competition, the focus needs to be on ‘slow-burning’ development: topics such as coach education; the nurturing of talents in academies/training centres; the establishment and upgrading of regular competitions, including youth league structures; and the promotion of mass participation which encourages fast technique and movement, often through the use of small-sided games, will all play a part. The value of a patient, structured approach was highlighted by Qatar’s ‘surprise’ victory in the 2019 Asian Cup in United Arab Emirates. Al Saad midfielder, and former Barcelona legend, Xavi reacted to the ‘Maroons’ achievement by declaring: ‘This is no miracle. This is due to the preparation over many years and the great efforts and plans at Aspire Academy.’ As the Qataris proved, when you prepare well and you play to your potential, regret is not a word on anyone’s lips.

On his retirement, after 114 appearances for England and 504 games for Liverpool FC, Steven Gerrard publicly announced that he ‘had no regrets.’ When a player of that calibre has given everything and has always tried to perform to his limits, there is no room for self-recrimination. As Asia looks forward to the international challenges ahead, it would be wise for players to reflect on the view that ‘talent is never enough.’ They will also need desire and know-how if they are to compete with the world’s best. They should remember that the best preparation for tomorrow is doing your best today. Post 2022, it is to be hoped that, no matter the outcome, Asian players, coaches and officials will be able, with hand on heart, to echo the words of Edith Piaf, the celebrated French singer, when she sang: ‘Non, je ne regrette rien.’ Literally translated: ‘No, I regret nothing.’ Success beckons for Asia’s elite, but it won’t come without sacrifice and total dedication.

This is no miracle. This is due to the preparation over many years and the great efforts and plans at Aspire Academy.

Xavi Hernández
Al Saad midfielder
and former
Barcelona legend

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It might seem an exaggeration to describe a 43-year-old coach with one senior title to his name as a role model. But, in a footballing world so often dominated by the search for quick results, Qatar's victory at the AFC Asia Cup 2019 may offer the game's decision-makers food for thought. The coach who masterminded success was in his first senior job. He had not been a professional player. The first entry on his coaching c/v was a ten-year spell at the youth academy of FC Barcelona, the home-town team his family had always supported.

The club's relationship with Qatar led him to Doha way back in 2006, to become a member of the coaching team at the Aspire Academy and, since then, he has steadily climbed towards the summit via an AFC U-19 title in Myanmar in 2014; an early exit from the FIFA U-20 World Cup a year later; promotion to the U-23 team; and, ultimately the step up to the senior team in July 2017. All with squads based heavily on players who had graduated from the Aspire Academy. He is a rare example of a man who has matured as a coach while helping a group of boys to mature as players. He and his 'boys' are champions of Asia. He is...
IT'S A FASCINATING COACHING C/V. CAN YOU TALK US THROUGH IT?

Well, I arrived in Qatar to work at the Aspire Academy, which is a high-performance centre to develop youth players. I started with the U-16 group, following the programme that the academy had established. Then, in 2009, I began to work with the generation born in 1996 and taking them into AFC events. So I started growing with them as a national team. We went to Iraq to play in the U-16 qualifiers – and couldn't reach the finals. At that stage I was working with them at the academy and, at the same time, with the national team. Because, in the end, the best players were in the academy and when they played for the national team, the only thing to do was to change the shirt. Once we reached the U-18 level, we played the AFC qualifiers again and this time we were successful. That was a landmark because they finished their Aspire cycle, and we started to work only as the national team. They joined clubs and I only coached them when they came to the national team. We played several AFC competitions with the U-19s, the Olympic team... and then the U-23 competition in China in 2018. And then, there we were, as the senior national team at the Asian Cup.
WHAT ASPECTS OF THE BARCELONA PHILOSOPHY HAVE INFLUENCED YOUR WORK IN QATAR?

From a very young age, I realised I liked coaching and I worked with the Barcelona youth teams for 10 years. It was a great experience, especially as I was born there and was a Barça fan. Of course, there is a special philosophy associated with the club but, when you arrive in a new place, you need to look at the culture, the philosophy, the people and the players. There are many things I have kept from Barcelona, but I have adapted to the place where I am working.

HOW LONG DID THAT TAKE? WAS IT A LONG PROCESS AS WELL?

I think it was very natural for me, even though in the beginning the language was an issue because I wasn’t that fluent in English – and not all the players were either! After some time at the academy, their English improved. Sometimes it was frustrating not to be able to explain all that I wanted to say. But it didn’t take long and communication with the players became easier. For me the most important thing is that the players understand the message and understand what we want. Personally, I found myself in a nice country, where people were very kind and there were plenty of experts to talk football with. So I would say I was very fast to adapt.
WE’VE TALKED ABOUT CONTINUITY AS A POSITIVE. BUT ARE THERE ADVANTAGES ON THE PITCH AND ON THE TRAINING GROUND?

Since 2009 I have been working with players like Akram, Madibo, Tarek, Bakri, Yousof… 11 players from that generation. When I think they made history for the country and I’ve known them since they were kids, it makes me feel very proud of them. But when we talk about the first team, we have to mix players from different groups. The fact that everyone adapted to each other so quickly at the Asian Cup gave us the opportunity to win. Working with the team for a long time also gave me the advantage that they know how you want to do things, the way you want them to play, the demands you are going to make on them. This meant it was easier to make a strong group for the competition.

Felix Sanchez (C) poses for a picture with his players after winning the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 final match against Japan.

Felix Sanchez (C) and forward Almoez Ali (L) help up their teammate Akram Hassan Afif after their AFC U23 Championship 2016 semi-final match between Qatar and Korea Republic.

DURING THIS PROCESS OF MATURING, HOW MUCH ATTENTION DID YOU PAY TO DEVELOPING THEM AS PEOPLE AS WELL AS FOOTBALLERS?

We as coaches have to know the players as individuals. They have different personalities, different motivation. It’s important to stress that some may play more than others but that doesn’t make them more important than others. My standpoint is to be honest with them. They should know your targets, what you expect from them. You have to address reality, to know what they have to do, what they can improve, how they can help the team. At the Asian Cup, I had players who I had seen playing many times and I knew as quality players but hadn’t coached. I didn’t know them as individuals. So that was another process for me – to get to know the individual and his motivation.

TURNING TO THE ASIAN CUP, WHAT WERE THE KEYS TO YOUR SUCCESS?

First of all, the quality of our players, their commitment to the team. I saw during the preparation the motivation they had. They wanted to play a good Asian Cup as it was the last one before the World Cup. Qatar hadn’t had good results at the Asian Cup, and they were aware of that. It was a good time to show they could perform well in big competitions. So they were very motivated. And the federation made a good plan for the players with very good friendly games. This helped a lot. I heard from colleagues who had greater difficulties and, for us, a small country means we can get together easily even when they are working with their clubs. But the key was the desire of the players and their quality.

Qatar’s forward Almoez Ali (R) celebrates with coach Felix Sanchez after winning the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019.
WHAT WERE YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES DURING THE COMPETITION?

To make sure the players were ready and focused in every game. At the beginning, each mistake will affect the result and make the things more difficult. And once you reach the knockout stage, every single detail can put you out of the competition. So we talked a lot with them. In fact small details did make big differences, as we saw in IR Iran against China PR or when Japan scored against Iran when players went to the referee to complain. Small things can make you to lose focus. It happened to us against Korea Republic - a very difficult moment. We scored, lost focus and, within a minute, they scored. Luckily for us, it was offside and we could reboot. Keeping the team focused was one of our biggest challenges because to play so many games in few days at such a high level it is easy to lose focus. We had other difficult moments: Iraq, once we scored, pushed really hard and we had to be very well organized as they have a lot of quality. And we were aware that Qatar had never won a knockout game... The last 15 minutes against Korea seemed very long to me. And, of course, the final. We had the advantage going into the second half but, especially in the first 25 minutes, we didn’t feel at all comfortable. Their positional play improved and they put us under a lot of pressure, even though they weren’t creating that many clear chances. And they were a high-quality team. But these are the moments that make you grow as a team because you have to know how to deal with this type of situation. We were strong enough to stay organised and to defend well.

WHEN DID YOU START TO BELIEVE YOU COULD WIN THE TITLE?

Without saying I believed we could win the title, the first game told me a lot. The first is always difficult but the opponents were very well organised and difficult to break down. For the first 60 minutes, things were not going well and it was hard to create chances. But in the last 30 minutes we changed. We played well and you could see the attitude, the aggressive attacking, the desire of the players. I didn’t think about winning the tournament but I did feel that we had a high enough level to take on the sort of opposition you can expect at such a tournament. I felt that we had enough qualities to compete.

DID YOU HAVE TO CONVINCE YOUR PLAYERS THAT THEY COULD WIN THE TITLE?

Not really, because of our preparation process. We went to Europe, we played Switzerland, Iceland, China, Palestine, Ecuador, Turkmenistan, and I think the players started to feel they could compete against all these teams. But, of course, friendlies are one thing and the Asian Cup is another. You have to be prepared for seven games in little more than three weeks and you have to perform well every three or four days. It is difficult. But once you start to win, the dynamism, mood and confidence start growing. Before games I could see that everyone was fine, ready to play, with the substitutes ready to help the team. That was the most important.
11 WHY DID YOU CHANGE YOUR SYSTEM OF PLAY DURING THE TOURNAMENT?

There are coaches who decide to play always in their own way and never change, which is very good. In our case, we decided to have different options depending on the availability of players and, secondly, the opponents. We have our own style but we know we have opponents with strong qualities, especially at an Asian Cup. So during our preparation, we started trying a different system, just to be ready to face different situations even within the same game with a view to strengthening our own performance and counter the opponents’ strong points. Also I think that more options mean less predictability – which can make it more difficult for the opposition. Sometimes we needed to change players to implement this but we also had players who could give us options during the game without changing. For example, in the final we changed twice because after their goal Japan started to play excellent attacking football and we had to change to deal with this. The most important thing is that the players believed in it. They not only understood it, they believed in it.

12 IN TRAINING DO YOU DISTRIBUTE ATTACKING AND DEFENSIVE WORK ABOUT FIFTY-FIFTY OR DO YOU FOCUS MORE ON THE DEFENSIVE ASPECT?

No, it depends on the game we are going to play. If the opponent team has some special feature, we might shift the balance one way or another. But, in general, when we start our preparation we have our standard rules in defending and attacking, and after that we focus on opponents.
YOU GENERALLY HAD VERY SMOOTH DEFENCE-TO-ATTACK TRANSITIONS WITH YOUR MIDDLEORS IN THE TRIANGLE REACTING VERY QUICKLY. IS THAT AN IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR TRAINING WORK?

At the end of the day, you don’t have too much time to train with the national team. So we try to focus a lot on real game situations and, with the profiles of the players we have, it’s a very important phase. We know we can create and score goals in this phase and we try to put in practice different game situations and promote this kind of action. Players like, Akram, Almoez or Hasan Al Haydos have the quality in counterattacking to generate chances.

WHEN YOU COME TO A BIG TOURNAMENT LIKE THIS, IS IT A DIFFERENT JOB FOR A COACH IN TERMS OF HOW YOU MANAGE A GROUP OF PLAYERS FOR A MUCH LONGER TIME?

Yes, it is different because you spend weeks in preparation, then you go to the tournament. It adds up to a long time. The good thing about this group is that they are used to final tournaments. It is important to manage the load and you need to give them time to switch off if it is possible. You need to manage workloads yet prepare games. Sometimes you need to show them videos rather than work them – which not all of them like. But they are professional and they understand.

WHAT ABOUT THE COACH, HOW DOES HE SWITCH OFF?

He can’t! At a tournament with 51 games, when you are not playing you are watching other games and you are preparing your own. It is difficult but you get into a routine that you have to be prepared for. You know you are going to be very busy and, to be honest, it is also your motivation that you have to play another game and another game. We managed to switch off during lunch time and dinner time – and talk football for a while!

APART FROM YOUR OWN SUCCESS, WHAT IMPRESSION OF FOOTBALL IN ASIA DID YOU TAKE HOME FROM THE ASIAN CUP?

After the years I have been working in Qatar, I would say everyone is better prepared and more competitive. I think every team found it difficult to win games – and I interpret that as a sign that the level is increasing. I think football in Asia is definitely growing.
As it happened, the final of the AFC Asian Cup was a shop window for long-term projects. Coincidence, maybe. Or maybe not. Like Qatar, Japan had made an impact in AFC age-limit competitions and had underlined consistency with victory at the 2018 AFC U-16 Championship in Malaysia. Hajime Moriyasu, prior to leading the senior team to the Asian Cup final, had been at the helm of the U-23 side and a member of the coaching team when Japan made an impact at the 2018 FIFA World Cup. On stage at the recent AFC National Team Coaches’ Conference, he commented on his country's aims and ambitions.
First of all, what was your overall evaluation of the Asian Cup in the UAE?

Well, about half the squad was changed in relation to the FIFA World Cup in Russia and I have to admit this affected the team in terms of experience. But our performances got better and we improved throughout the tournament. I was participating as head coach for the first time. I played the 1992 Asian Cup in Hiroshima and won the competition. Comparing, I realised that the level of Asian teams is now much higher. It was difficult to win games and predict a tournament winner. Gaps between the top teams in Asia are getting narrower and we should be getting closer to world level. After the Asian Cup, we have to improve ourselves to compete in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics followed by the Qatar World Cup in 2022. My impression was that qualification for the next World Cup will be definitely difficult for us.

What can be done to develop Japanese football even further?

One of the things to focus on is to improve individual quality. I realised this via playing Asian teams during the competition in UAE. It is about everything. Attacking, defending, physical factors, technique. Also some specific aspects of match-play. Our players showed their good movement but there is room to be more efficient - the decision-making about when to move and where to move.

How important is it to have a consistent philosophy?

AND HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE JAPANESE STYLE OF PLAY?

First of all, the strong points of Japanese players are the high quality of individual technique, awareness and quick determination, plus physical strength in terms of agility and mobility. Those strong points, along with our disciplined approach to the game mean that we can play a high-tempo passing game. I believe that this is an appropriate playing style at the moment. Furthermore, many Japanese players are in competitive leagues in Europe, which not only benefits the players’ individual quality but also brings added value to our team performance. I always stress to the players our basic principle, which is to focus on individual roles and then play for the team. We all have to understand that individuals cannot contribute to the game if they don’t play for the team.
4. AT THE ASIAN CUP, YOU ROTATED YOUR SQUAD AND Adjusted YOUR PLAYING SYSTEMS. HOW IMPORTANT WAS THIS?

It was very important because we needed to put special players in the right place to create a good team. It is like a puzzle. It is not enough to have players with same characteristic to create a strong team. We need variety of playing styles and playing systems because that gives us options to use specific players to create a good team that is efficient against a certain type of opposition.

5. YOU’VE EMPHASISED DISCIPLINE AND ONE OF THE FEATURES COMMON TO ALL JAPANESE NATIONAL TEAMS IS THE HIGH LEVEL OF EMOTIONAL CONTROL. HOW DO YOU DEVELOP THESE ELEMENTS AS THE PLAYERS ARE COMING THROUGH THE YOUTH LEVELS TO THE SENIOR TEAM?

In terms of discipline, it is not only related to football. It exists everywhere in Japan because it comes from education. It is rooted in our culture. In football, it is definitely important for players to focus on showing their best individual performance, but at the same time it is also important to make sure their behaviour contributes to the team’s performance. I always inform this to players before matches.
BY COINCIDENCE, YOU AND QATAR HAD ALREADY BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THE COPA AMÉRICA. WHAT DID YOU EXPECT TO GAIN FROM THIS?

Firstly, I expected that the players could improve themselves in matches that would be tough mentally and physically. And, from the competition in South America, I also wanted my players to learn individual tactics and learn how to win a game. Players from that part of the world are good at those elements.

THE JFA’S LONG-TERM PROJECT IS TO WIN A WORLD CUP. WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES IN TERMS OF ACHIEVING THAT OBJECTIVE?

We have to keep learning from the World Cup about how to compete with the best and kept searching for the best ways to effectively use our strengths to compete against strong teams from all over the world. We cannot copy and paste from the manuals in other countries, no matter how good we think they are. What we have to do is to learn from countries in Asia and all over the world, and see if there are elements to use for our football. Then we have to find out how to maximise our mental, physical and technical strength in order to deliver our best performance in a game. By maintaining these efforts, I believe that we can obtain the result we want. Of course, it will be super if we can make it during my era. But the most important thing as a head coach is to leave a legacy for the national team, even just a small step, and contribute to the up-coming generations. I believe that it is what I should aim at as one of the Japanese coaches in the role of the national team of Japan.
**HAJIME MORIYASU FACT FILE**

**NATIONALITY**
Japanese

**AGE**
50

**INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS**
AFC U-23 Championship 2018, Asian Games 2018, AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019

**HONOURS CLUB/COUNTRY**
Japanese Super Cup – 2013, 2014
FIFA Club World Cup 2015 – third

Asian Games 2018 – silver medal
AFC Asian Cup 2019 – runners-up

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**FELIX SANCHEZ FACT FILE**

**NATIONALITY**
Spain

**AGE**
43

**INTERNATIONAL TOURNAMENTS**
AFC U-19 Championship 2014, AFC U-23 Championship 2016, AFC U-23 Championship 2018, FIFA World Cup 2018 qualifiers, AFC Asian Cup 2019

**HONOURS CLUB/COUNTRY**
AFC U-19 Championship 2014
AFC U-23 Championship 2018 – Third placed
AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019

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What messages were transmitted to Asia from the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia? What were the pointers to emerge from the AFC Asian Cup 2019 in the United Arab Emirates? Those were the simple but highly pertinent questions which activated the 2nd AFC National Coaches Conference recently staged in Kuala Lumpur and attended by national team coaches and technical directors from the four corners of the confederation. On stage at the opening ceremony, AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa was flanked by the coaches of the Asian Cup finalists – and excerpts from interviews with Qatar’s Félix Sánchez and Japan’s Hajime Moriyasu are featured elsewhere in this issue of the Coaches Circle.

The Conference, however, had other dimensions, ranging from the relevance of media management at a major tournament to the player’s perspectives as expressed by former Korea Republic captain Park Ji-sung, based on his national team experiences and his playing career at PSV Eindhoven and Sir Alex Ferguson’s Manchester United. And, to raise the curtain on the second morning of the three-day event, FIFA’s Head of Coaching & Player Development, Branimir Ujevic, presented some thought-provoking observations on the World Cup in Russia and his view of the Asian Cup in the UAE.

Statistics provided a full menu of food for thought. The AFC representatives in Russia performed creditably in terms of distance covered: Australia were 4th in the ranking; Korea Republic 9th; Japan 16th; IR Iran 20th; and Saudi Arabia 25th. In the chart related to distances covered at high speed, all five appeared among the top 13. But, when it came to penetration into the opposition’s penalty area, Australia and Saudi Arabia were joint 19th, while Japan, Korea Republic and IR Iran occupied positions 29, 30 and 31 among the 32 contestants. In terms of goal attempts, Saudi Arabia ranked 13th while the other four were scattered around the bottom half of the table. Japan, the leading AFC contender in Russia, exceeded the tournament average by
16% in terms of building from their own half, and by 25% in middle-to-front construction. Moves in the final third, however, were 9% below the World Cup average.

In the 16 matches they played in Russia, the AFC representatives accumulated 15 goals: seven from set plays (including five penalties); and the same number in open play. The other was an own goal. Including the latter, the stats indicate one open-play goal per 180 minutes of football. At the AFC Asian Cup in the UAE the ratio was reduced to one per 53 minutes.

During his keynote presentation on the opening day, AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh signalled scoring efficiency as one of the main ingredients of Qatar’s historic success story. Félix Sánchez’s side were top scorers at the first 24-team final tournament with 19 in their seven fixtures at an eyebrow-raising average of one goal per 2.7 attempts. In Russia, France had donned the world crown by scoring once in every six attempts – an average which, in the UAE was bettered by Uzbekistan (5.0) and silver-medallists Japan (5.2). At the other end of the spectrum, Germany had made a group-stage exit from the World Cup after scoring one goal per 36 attempts while, in the Asian Cup, DPR Korea followed suit with a ratio of 1:22.

Debate on the value of possession was fuelled by the fact that both Qatar and France had lifted trophies after finals in which they had enjoyed only 39% of the ball. In the UAE, Australia, Korea Republic and Saudi Arabia were alone in bearing the ‘possession team’ label in that they had the lion’s share of the ball during every match they played.

The coaches and technical directors at the Conference were also invited to reflect on some of the other data to emerge from the Asian Cup. Discussion of the amounts of training-ground time legitimately dedicated to dead-ball plays was sparked by the fact that almost one-third of the goals (32% to be precise) could be attributed to set plays – a figure which more or less aligned with the 35% registered at the World Cup. Unusually, direct free-kicks accounted for more goals (nine) than the indirect variety and underlined the value of dedicating efforts to the development of free-kick specialists.

Much the same could be said about rehearsing effective mechanisms for defence-to-attack transitions. At the Asian Cup, counterattacks accounted for 16% of the tournament’s 89 open-play goals, with the champions demonstrating just how valuable a weapon this can be in a team’s attacking armory. Qatar also showcased the value of tactical flexibility by switching seamlessly between a four- and five-man defensive line. As Andy Roxburgh remarked, this clouded the issue of team shapes. It could be said, nevertheless, that 11 teams opted for 1-4-3-3 or 1-4-2-3-1 as their default setting in the UAE, with six preferring 1-4-4-2 and seven opting for shapes based on three centre-backs and two wing-backs.

The tournament statistics also offered a clear signpost for future development. Whereas wing play accounted for 40% of open-play goals, only 6% were derived from combination play in the final third – a trend which has emerged as a prevalent factor from recent AFC age-limit tournaments and has invited speculation about whether there is over-reliance on imported talent to provide this type of creative element at the top levels of club football.
All this information – and a lot more – appears in the Technical Report on the AFC Asian Cup 2019, featuring observations by AFC's technical team at the final tournament. A selection of their comments provided the basis for a session at the Conference which challenged the participants to reflect on questions such as “is there a lack of strikers?”; “are we good enough at transition play?”; “do more defenders lead to better defending?”; or “how can top-level ‘game appreciation’ be developed?”

Apart from all the healthy self-questioning, there was no lack of praise for the balanced, well-equipped teams on show in the UAE and especially, of course, for Qatar who started the tournament as dark-horse debutants and went home with the trophy. As Andy Roxburgh commented, “they were well-balanced, adaptable, diverse, quick, composed, ruthlessly efficient, competitive and talented”. After blushing at the praise, Félix Sánchez reflected on the impact of the first Conference he had attended. “When we are playing in a competition, we don’t have time to share our thoughts and views on football with other coaches. So it was a great opportunity to share experiences with coaches from other countries; for me to share how and why Qatar was so successful; and to talk about football and the things we did, so other teams can learn and add to what we have to say. This conference was valuable for other coaches to have an idea of what other coaches are doing. At the end of the day, small or big countries, you have to be realistic and have a plan and goal which you want to reach. It is a good place for all coaches to learn and get new ideas from other national teams.”

Félix Sanchez shares his thoughts on his side’s momentous achievement in the recently published AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 Technical Report. Within the publication, the AFC Technical Study Group examines the strategies deployed by Asia’s best through various statistical analyses. Individual team profiles and performance statistics, along with each team’s key features are also presented within the document.
After Spain had won the FIFA World Cup in 2010, Vicente del Bosque commented “Our youth football has become very well structured and the education of our coaches has been fundamental to our success”. When Germany took the baton in 2014, Joachim Löw remarked “Coach education has to be well structured, multi-layered and constantly adapted to the evolutions of the game. UEFA realised this many years ago with the introduction of their Coaching Convention”. Didier Deschamps, who led France to the world title in 2018, insists “Coaching is a profession. It’s something you have to learn. So the training process is vitally important”. The comments by the last three world champions bear testimony to the value of competent coach education in the construction of platforms for success.

Del Bosque’s appraisal of the elements that had brought success to the Spanish national team after decades of drought included another pertinent remark. “In the past,” he reflected, “we went to see what coaches were doing in places like the old Yugoslavia, Russia, France or Italy. But now, due to better coach education in Spain, people come to us, with coaches like Pep Guardiola, Rafa Benítez and others bringing attention to the Spanish school. There is no doubt that investment in the training of our young players and the education of our coaches were keys to our success.” Is it far-fetched to imagine coaches, in a not-too-distant future, trooping to AFC countries in search of inspiration and ingredients for success?

That question might easily have been posed to the participants from 45 member associations who recently convened in Kuala Lumpur for the 3rd AFC Coach Education Conference, where one of the key issues was the requirement for coach educators to keep abreast, if not ahead of a game which is evolving rapidly. As AFC technical director Andy Roxburgh maintained during his keynote presentation, “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”.

On the pitch, symptoms of that evolution are levels of intensity; the physical demands in terms of speed endurance, explosive power and sustained high-speed running; the technique required to deal with intense pressure on the ball; the capacity to negotiate 90 minutes or more of fast transitional play and turnovers; and the
The amount of high-speed running is a distinguishing factor between top-class footballers and those of a lower level.

Bert van Marwijk

levels of the game from grassroots through elite youth to professional – a process which, at the same time, protects players (and the game of football) from the potentially damaging influence of incompetent, unqualified coaches. Good educators also help the specialised areas of the profession (goalkeeping, futsal, youth development...) within the general aim of encouraging individuals to maximise their potential. For the coach educator, a job well done may be instrumental in developing a footballing culture and a style of play most appropriate to his or her environment. During the Conference, Lars Isecke, coach instructor at the China PR football association, stressed the importance of not regarding ‘uniformity’ as a goal within the coaching community. “To be good coach educators,” he insisted, “you must understand cultural differences and factor them into the educational process.” This is among the key elements in creating the positive learning environment which is essential if coach education courses are to inspire the technicians of the future.

But the launching pad for inspiration is a meticulously designed coach education course. The blueprint starts with a manageable group of students in terms of numbers so that the educational process can be fully interactive. Practical elements should not be overshadowed by theory; and courses need to focus on reality-based problem-solving. And, importantly, the curriculum should face the pitch rather than focus on assessments. As legendary Belgian coach Guy Thys remarked “the match still remains the ultimate examination”.

The programme for the three-day Conference addressed issues such as the coaching implications derived from the AFC Asian Cup. It was not, however, exclusively about listening. In fact it adhered to the blueprint for successful
The role of the coach educators is to inspire, protect, tutor and prepare student coaches for the reality which will confront them.

Andy Roxburgh

Raising the bar in standards of coach education plays a crucial role in the further development of football in Asia and marches hand-in-hand with the AFC Coaching Convention, which sets out guidelines for the education of the coaches of the future. The eighth meeting of the AFC Coach Education Panel on the day before the Conference kicked-off served to illustrate the growing momentum of the Convention. Japan, at ‘Pro’ level, and the Philippines, at ‘A’ level, had been the front-runners along the pathway to Convention membership but the minutes from the Panel meeting reveal that no fewer than 33 member associations have now applied to join.

At the meeting, the Coach Education Panel passed on six approvals for official ratification – one of them provisional, pending amendments to the content of coach education courses, while Panel members were assigned to initiate the evaluation processes related to 25 new applications which reflect not only the fast growth of the Convention itself but also the firm commitment by AFC and its member associations to upgrade standards of coach education.

courses in that it was fully interactive via forum sessions, discussion groups and interviews. As Anthony Frost, Football Federation Australia’s Coach Education Director, put it “participants will benefit from an event that focused on educating the coaches of the future. It was a great opportunity to share ideas and it was a positive step from the AFC. We are excited to come to these events to gain more knowledge.” “At a Conference like this,” Lars Isecke added, “you talk to a lot of people who understand football, which means we can exchange and share knowledge. This can be extremely beneficial because you can learn so many new things, no matter how big or small the footballing countries might be.”

As Andy Roxburgh summarised, “the role of the coach educators is to inspire, protect, tutor and prepare student coaches for the reality which will confront them.”
Although the year started with the high-profile AFC Asian Cup at the peak of the footballing pyramid, work on the foundations has maintained a steady pace. Barely a year after the first three member associations were endorsed as members of the AFC Grassroots Charter, Myanmar became No15 on the teamsheet. Acceptance for Bronze membership was based on the association’s commitment to leagues for the U-12 to U-19 age bracket; grassroots projects for girls and women; a range of social programmes; and a three-year strategic plan aimed at stimulating further growth right through to 2022. Much the same could be said for the associations of Laos and Thailand, whose bronze-level membership of the Charter has also been endorsed since the turn of the year.

The initial success, however, offers no excuses for resting on laurels. This was definitely the mood when the AFC Grassroots Panel held its seventh meeting in April. The Panel itself reflected the momentum of the grassroots programme, with six new members increasing its breadth to 15 member associations. AFC’s declared standpoint is that grassroots football is the foundation of the game and the primary purpose of the Grassroots Charter is to increase the levels of interest and participation among players, coaches, leaders, volunteers and organisers. To achieve this aim, the Charter serves as a tool for AFC to encourage member associations to develop their grassroots programmes and to support work and projects that further develop grassroots football in line with the criteria set out in the AFC Grassroots Charter.

So the clear objective for the Panel members was to encourage more member associations to request endorsement for their grassroots work by applying for membership. This entails further clarification of the Charter’s concepts and guidelines, along with a streamlining of application and assessment processes to make sure that they run as smoothly and rapidly as possible.

The endorsement of Myanmar brought the total of Bronze level members to ten, with Singapore, China PR and Jordan forming a trio of Silver members and Japan joining Australia at the head of the table with Gold membership. The AFC grassroots plans for 2019 also feature the AFC Grassroots Football Day and, later in the year, the second edition of the AFC Special Grassroots Awards.
While the Grassroots Charter has been picking up speed, there has been intensive work in progress on a new, more user-friendly AFC Elite Youth Scheme that member associations are being invited to study in depth.

The concept echoes the principles of the Grassroots Charter in that the aim is to support and offer recognition to member associations in their efforts to further develop their elite youth programmes in ways that harmonise with the criteria established by AFC. Work on this project dominated the agenda for the 7th meeting of the AFC Youth Panel at AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur in March.

The criteria for enrolment in the Scheme focus on eleven areas of core activity in the specialised youth development field, one of which is the youth academy. Ratification for full membership entails AFC recognition of at least one academy at club or national level, though provisional endorsement may be granted if the remaining ten criteria are met.

The documentation and incentives related to the new-look AFC Elite Youth Scheme are being distributed to member associations with the aim of pushing endorsements past the halfway mark (in other words, 24 associations) within a time-span of two years.
One of the three elements of AFC’s Vision and Mission was to maintain football’s position as the top sport in Asia by increasing participation and engagement at all levels and by stimulating greater interest in each aspect of the game.

The introduction of AFC’s Grassroots Charter, an endorsement tool, supports the Member Associations in their core task of implementing grassroots programmes and activities. The MAs’ grassroots programme is evaluated at gold, silver and bronze levels to demonstrate the progress they have made.
Action at the FIFA Women’s World Cup France 2019 got underway on June 7 when host nation France overcame Korea Republic 4-0 in Paris. China PR legend Sun Wen is in France as a member of FIFA’s Technical Study Group (TSG).

The world governing body has assembled a select group of experts for its TSG, whose analysis of the 52 matches will comprise a detailed breakdown of the action on the pitch and the identification of potential trends for inclusion in the technical report that will be distributed after the competition.

An icon of women’s football, Sun was named FIFA Women’s Player of the Century alongside former United States star Michelle Akers. Whilst representing the Chinese women’s national team, she made it to the final of both the 1996 Women’s Olympic Football Tournament and the FIFA Women’s World Cup in 1999 – where she landed the Golden Ball and Golden Boot awards.

Sun is casting her experienced eye over proceedings alongside fellow TSG members April Heinrichs from the United States, Germany’s Nadine Kessler, France’s Elisabeth Loisel and Clémentine Toure from the Côte d’Ivoire.

The TSG experts are being supported by FIFA TSG Deputy Project Leader Patricia Gonzalez, FIFA Goalkeeping Specialist Pascal Zuberbuhler, FIFA TSG Coordinator and former Swiss women’s national team captain Prisca Steinegger, and FIFA Performance & Game Analyst Chris Loxston.

Japan, Australia, Korea Republic, China PR and Thailand are representing Asia at this year’s FIFA Women’s World Cup, a tournament which many believe will, in terms of pace, be the fastest ever.

“I think this is going to be the fastest Women’s World Cup ever if you consider how transitions from defence to attack, or from in possession to out of possession, will be executed from a technical and tactical point of view,” said TSG head Heinrichs, ahead of the tournament.

“We can expect to see plenty of adjustments, and in the end I believe that tactical decision-making will be very important. The teams will be taking the initiative, playing proactive football, and trying to win and score as many goals as possible,” she added.

All eyes will be on Lyon on the 7th July where the tournament culminates with the final.
**KEY DATES**

**JUNE/JULY ‘19**
- 7 June - 7 July ‘19: FIFA Women’s World Cup France 2019 (France)
- 4 - 5 September ‘19: 4th AFC Elite Club Coaches Forum (Shanghai, China PR)
- 10 September ‘19: 9th AFC Coach Education Panel Meeting (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- 10 - 13 September ‘19: Goalkeeping Tutors Course (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- 15 - 28 September ‘19: AFC U16 Women’s Championship 2019 (Thailand)
- 17-20 September ‘19: Fitness Tutors Course (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

**SEPTEMBER ‘19**
- 11 November ‘19: AFC U19 Women’s Championship 2019 (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- 19 - 21 November ‘19: 2nd AFC Women’s Football Conference (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- 12 - 14 November ‘19: 3rd AFC Youth Conference (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- 18 November ‘19: 8th AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

**OCTOBER ‘19**
- 5 - 27 October ‘19: FIFA U17 World Cup Peru 2019 (Peru)
- 27 Oct - 9 Nov ‘19: AFC U19 Women’s Championship 2019 (Thailand)
- 11 November ‘19: 8th AFC Youth Panel Meeting (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

**OCT/NOV ‘19**
- 10 - 13 September ‘19: Goalkeeping Tutors Course (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

**NOVEMBER ‘19**
- 12 - 14 November ‘19: 3rd AFC Youth Conference (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
- 18 November ‘19: 8th AFC Grassroots Panel Meeting (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)
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