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

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

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

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

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

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East Asian nation with ambitions for a bright future
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Dear friends,

The Asian Football Confederation is looking forward to another exciting year in 2017 when Asia hosts not only the FIFA Congress but three FIFA competitions. The 67th FIFA Congress will take place in Bahrain in May and it is a great honour for our Confederation and the Bahrain Football Association. Later in the year there is the FIFA U-17 World Cup in India and the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Korea Republic. Asia will have five representatives in each tournament—India (hosts), Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan and DPR Korea in the FIFA U-17 World Cup and Korea Republic (hosts), Saudi Arabia, Japan, IR Iran and Vietnam will be in the FIFA U-20 World Cup. These events are in addition to the FIFA Club World Cup which will be returning to Abu Dhabi in December 2017. We have already seen the impact of Asian teams in this tournament with the exceptional display by Kashima Antlers in not only reaching the final in 2016 but also pushing the mighty Real Madrid extremely close before losing in extra time.

There will be the AFC Women’s U-16 Championship in Thailand and the AFC Women’s U-19 Tournament in China PR this year as well as the usual, end of year club finals of the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup being played in November. Other dates to note in the coming year are the AFC Women’s Football Day on March 8, coinciding with the International Women’s Day, the AFC Futsal U-20 Championship in IR Iran, AFC Beach Soccer Championships in Malaysia in March and the AFC Grassroots Day on May 15. The year will also see a whole host of high-profile AFC events under the banner of One Asia, One Goal and they will bring together experts from our Member Associations, the AFC and further afield, to build a successful future for football in Asia.

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

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
AFC President

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Abu Dhabi Airport is proud to launch a faster, hassle-free way to travel. A five-step smart and simple process leads you straight to your gate. Less time spent in queues and more time to travel smoothly through Abu Dhabi Airport, at your own pace.

Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa
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Coach Choi Kang-hee led his Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors side to a second AFC Champions League title a decade after their first as the Korean side defeated Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates 3-2 on aggregate in November’s final.
Hammadi Ahmed enjoyed a night to remember as he fired Air Force Club to a 1-0 win over JSW Bengaluru in the final of the AFC Cup in November. The Iraqi striker also earned the tournament's MVP award and Top Scorer accolade after netting 16 goals.
Nepal overcame difficult conditions to defeat Macau 1-0 in the final of the inaugural AFC Solidarity Cup after a first half goal from Sujal Shreshtha in Kuching, Malaysia in November.
Asia’s finest were honoured at the AFC Annual Awards at the beginning of December, with United Arab Emirates midfielder Omar Abdulrahman named AFC Player of the Year after helping Al Ain to the final of the AFC Champions League as the continent’s leading lights were recognised.
IN THE NEWS

Abdulrahman Crowned AFC Player of The Year

AL Ain and United Arab Emirates midfielder Omar Abdulrahman was named AFC Player of the Year ahead of Iraq’s Hammadi Ahmed and China’s Wu Lei at December’s AFC Annual Awards in Abu Dhabi.

Despite failing to land silverware with Al Ain and the United Arab Emirates national team, Abdulrahman edged out Air Force Club striker Hammadi Ahmed, who was MVP and top scorer in the 2016 AFC Cup, and his nation remain in contention for a place at the FIFA World Cup 2018 Russia with a string of fine performances in the Asian qualifiers.

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

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

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

“In addition, seeing my father pleased with what I am doing is more important to me than any award. Everything I do is for my father and family. Australia international Caitlin Foord was picked up the women’s award in the youth category.

DPR Korea Come From Behind As East Asians Defeat France 3-1 In The Final Of The 2016 FIFA Women’s U-20 World Cup

Despite a win over Venezuela, the Korean women’s side failed to make it out of Group A as they were defeated by hosts Papua New Guinea in the semi-finals.

Victoria For DPR Korea At U-20 Women’s World Cup

DPR Korea come from behind as East Asians defeat France 3-1 in the final of the 2016 FIFA Women’s U-20 World Cup at the start of December in Papua New Guinea.

Japan also excelled at the tournament, topping Group B before eliminating Brazil rivals the United States to ensure third place. Japan midfielder Hina Sugita was awarded the Golden Ball as the tournament’s Most Valuable Player, striker Mami Ueno earned the Golden Boot as tournament top scorer and DPR Korea’s Kim So-hyang was awarded the Silver Ball.

Phoebe Smith is 2006.ファンスに感謝を。今後も更に努力していきます。"
IN THE NEWS

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors Face Familiar Foes

Defending champions Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors from Korean Republic will face a re-match with Chinese Super League side Jiangsu FC in the group stage of the AFC Champions League following December’s draw in Kuala Lumpur. Choi Kang-hee’s side claimed a second Asian championship on the 10th anniversary over their maiden continental title after edging out Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates 3-2 on aggregate at the end of last year.

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

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

Elsewhere, 2015 and 2016 winners Guangzhou Evergrande have been drawn in Group G along with Suwon Samsung Bluewings from Korea Republic, Eastern Sports Club of Hong Kong and Japan’s K-League Classic champions.

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

In Group B, Iran’s Esteghlal Khouzestan were drawn with Emirati side Al Jazira, Qatar’s Lehiyana and a play-off winner. Finally, Group D will see Qatar champions Al Rayyan line-up against Al Hilal from Saudi Arabia, Persepolis from Iran and a play-off winner.

Meanwhile, defeated finalists JSW Bengaluru will look to make amends for their 2016 disappointment when they begin their latest title assault from the South Zone and Group E.

Tough Test For Air Force Club

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

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

Meanwhile, defeated finalists JSW Bengaluru will look to make amends for their 2016 play-off winner if their AFC Champions League Preliminary and Play-off campaign prove unsuccessful.

Group C of the ASEAN Zone features the 2015 champions Johor Darul Ta’zim, Australia’s Western Sydney Wanderers, champions in 2014, find themselves in Group F with K-League Classic winner.

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

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

In the West, Iraqi champions Al Zawraa Club find themselves in Group A alongside Al Ahli of Jordan, Al Jaish of Syria and a play-off winner, while Group C will include Al Wasl of Dubai and Al Jazira of Jordan, Bahrain’s Al Muharraq Club, Saham of Oman and Lebanese side Nejmeh SC.
TWO YEARS AFTER ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN HEAD COACH CARLOS QUEIROZ TIPPED HIM FOR THE TOP, SARDAR AZMOUN IS CREATING WAVES AGAINST THE BEST TEAMS IN THE WORLD IN THE UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AND STEERING IRAN TO POLE POSITION IN THEIR GROUP IN QUALIFYING FOR THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP FINALS IN RUSSIA.

Deep in the bowels of Tehran’s imposing Azadi Stadium, the smile on Sardar Azmoun’s face expresses more than words could ever muster. “You see,” he says with the broadest of grins, “I won. I told you!” It is a bold statement at the end of Islamic Republic of Iran’s most important game of the year but, just as Team Melli prevailed against Korea Republic in the nations’ crucial qualifier for the FIFA World Cup finals, so Azmoun had triumphed in his own personal battle.

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

“It is me against the No. 7,” Azmoun had said the night before the game. “And I will be the best.” True to his word, Azmoun outshone the former SV Hamburg and Bayer Leverkusen forward. Son was stifled – like the entire Korea Republic team – finishing the 90 minutes without a shot on target. By contrast, Azmoun claimed the game’s only goal with an accomplished finish from inside the area, moving Iran another step closer to a fifth appearance on the game’s greatest stage.

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

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

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

By: Michael Church  Photos: Lagardère Sports
Carlos Queiroz, our coach, when he compares difficult,” says Azmoun. “When a big coach like and leading the Portugal national side, the before becoming head coach at Real Madrid to Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United players in the world. Having worked with van young player, he has a great future in front of him.” Queiroz, of course, is no stranger to the best players in the world. Having worked with Van Nistelroy during his time as assistant coach to Sir Alex Ferguson at Manchester United before becoming head coach at Real Madrid and leading the Portugal national side, the opinions of the well-travelled tactician carry significant weight. And that is a fact not lost on Azmoun.

“Of course, these kind of comparisons make my duties and my responsibilities a lot more difficult,” says Azmoun. “When a big coach like Carlos Queiroz, our coach, when he compares a young player like me in an official press conference to Raul van Nistelroy then of course it’s a great privilege.

"Carlos worked with Van Nistelroy, so he knows his abilities and he knows my abilities, so that was a great honour for me. "We have many great strikers at the minute, like Karim Ansarifard and Reza Ghoochannejhad. All these players, the current crop of strikers, are all fine players but perhaps some of them haven’t shone as much as they can and haven’t shown their full potential. "We can’t forget that Iran is a big country with 80 million people and there is a lot of potential, a lot of brilliant talent in Iran and I believe we can have good strikers, and good footballers altogether, in Iran. "With 16 goals in 22 appearances since breaking into Team Melli back in May 2014, Azmoun is leading the way for the next generation of Iranian forwards, following in the footsteps of legends such as Ali Daei and Vahid Hashemian. "Dan has the highest number of national team goals in the world, so that record belongs to an Iranian guy, so if he holds it or I hold it, it doesn’t make a difference. He comes from Iran and he makes us all proud and I’m very proud of that. "He was my hero when I was a kid. If Ali Daei had been born in another country they would have made a statue of his legs and put it in the middle of the city because he has achieved so much. I met him and have trained with him a couple of times. We know each other, but we haven’t really talked to each other too much.”

Daei – still widely regarded as Iran’s greatest ever player – was a late bloomer, making his move to Europe at the age of 28 before becoming the first Asian player to score in the UEFA Champions League when he netted twice for Hertha Berlin against Chelsea following earlier stints with Ammanni Bielefeld and Bayern Munich. "Azmoun, by contrast, made his move to Europe at the age of just 17, joining Rubin Kazan in Russia from Sepahan before signing for FC Rostov in the summer after a stint on loan at the club and making his debut in the UEFA Champions League at the start of the current campaign. Leaving Iran at such an early stage of his career brought with it significant challenges, and the support of his family was key to Azmoun looking past the next phase of life as a footballer. "It was extremely difficult for me being away from my family at the age of 17,” he says. “I actually couldn’t handle it and after one week I called my family and I said: ‘You guys have to come here and stay with me’. "It was very difficult. But it’s a completely different level for playing. It was a lot more professional: my sleeping patterns, my routine, everything, was in a completely different way. But I’m very happy I moved to Rubin Kazan when I was 17. “For me coming from a sporting family – my father is a volleyball coach and was a player too – so that really helped me. All of my family members, my mum, my sister, they all came to Kazan and really supported me. Of course, family is the most valuable thing and having a family like mine has helped. They really understand sport and they also helped me to improve in certain aspects of my career. It’s really helped a lot.

"My father has undergone a lot of difficulties in volleyball, especially in the city that we’re from, Gonbad-e-Kavus. It’s completely focused on volleyball. My father didn’t achieve to the extent that he deserved, so he always wanted me to become a football player. It was his dream, his drive for me to become a football player, so I got into football. "Now, everything is good for me. I made a promise to my dad and I’m really hopeful and optimistic that I can fulfil that promise. I can’t reveal the promise,” he says with a smile, “but it’s an extremely difficult promise to achieve. If I tell you now and I can’t achieve it, then I’m going to be embarrassed! If I achieve it, I’ll tell you what it was.”

The current season has seen Azmoun to a higher level, and the forward has responded in impressive fashion. Two goals in the preliminary rounds of theUEFA Champions League – against Anderecht and Ajax Amsterdam – were followed by eye-catching strikes against Atletico Madrid and Bayern Munich in the group phase of the competition that has intensified speculation over his future. Former European champions Liverpool have been linked with a move to sign the forward, as have Ajax and PSV Eindhoven, and the speculation is welcomed by a player keen to test himself against the finest players in the best league in the game. "This season is my first time playing in the UEFA Champions League, although I had played in the Europe League before,” he says. “But the Champions League is at a completely different level. For me, it’s been a great experience and I’m looking forward to proving myself again and perhaps some bigger clubs in Europe will see my performances and it will be great for me, especially at this stage of my career. "I still believe I can improve more and progress more. I don’t think I have achieved at that I can achieve. If I had made some better decisions perhaps I’d be in a better place than I am now, but I still have a long way to go and I’m always trying to develop and progress and get better and better every day and hopefully I can achieve a lot more in the future.” 

In addition to his exploits at club level, Azmoun has his sights set firmly on bringing success to the Iran national team as the
country continues to look for a way to end a disappointing run at continental level without a major title.

Despite making his debut for Team Melli in the build-up to the 2014 FIFA World Cup finals in Brazil, Azmoun was not included in Queiroz’s final 23-man squad for the trip to Brazil, where the Iranians faced off against Argentina, Nigeria and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Two defeats, including a narrow loss against the Argentinians thanks to a late winner from Lionel Messi, and a draw – against the Nigerians – saw Iran leave Brazil at the conclusion of the group stages with their heads held high.

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

“One thing I need to say is that we were unlucky in the 2015 Asian Cup in Australia,” says Azmoun. “We really had a good team, and at the moment we have a great team with many, many great players. We have different options for each position, so we have a team with a lot of capacity to grow and a lot of room to prove ourselves in different competitions. “But we are hopeful we will qualify for the World Cup with this great team and also with our great coach. We hope we can go to the second round at the World Cup and we think we can win the Asian Cup. We believe it. We have been the number one Asian team in the FIFA rankings for a long time now and even if you look at the current players who are playing in Europe, there is an increasing number of Iranians in different European leagues, which is of course a great achievement for Iranian football.”

The European influence on the Iran national team has been growing in recent years, with Azmoun joined at FC Rostov and in the national team by Saeid Ezatolahi, a midfielder in the mould of Iranian legend Javad Nekounam, while full back Milad Mohammadi signed earlier this year for another Russian side, Terek Grozny. Alireza Jahanbakhsh, meanwhile, plies his trade with Dutch side AZ Alkmaar while others, such as Afsaneh and Masoud Shojaei, are dotted elsewhere around Europe, bringing an added level of professionalism to the squad.

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

“But we’re hopeful that, if the team is properly supported and under the leadership of coach Queiroz we can keep going strong and qualify for the World Cup.”
A total of 47 teams from 19 member associations learned their destiny for the 36th edition of Asia’s premier club tournament in December, with the draw for the group stage and play-offs of the 2017 AFC Champions League promising several exciting ties.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**United Arab Emirates**

**GROUP A**

Al Ain lifted their first ever UAE league title, ahead of rivals Al Jazira by nine points at the culmination of the 2015-16 season. Al Ain striker Asmaoah Gyan was the 2014 AFC Champions League top scorer when he netted 10 goals in just eight continental appearances. Al Ain won the inaugural AFC Champions League title in 2003, although they failed to recreate that feat after losing in the 2005 and 2016 finals. In 2016 runners-up Al Ain earned their place at their 12th AFC Champions League tournament after finishing as runners-up in the UAE Pro League.

**GROUP A**

Al Hilal

**Saudi Arabia**

Al Hilal are one of three AFC Champions League debutants who qualified directly for the 2017 AFC Champions League on seven previous occasions with runners-up finishes at the 1999 Asian Cup and Asian Super Cup.

**GROUP D**

Persepolis

**Iran**

Persepolis have won a record nine Iranian league titles and boast a number of notable alumni including Ali Karimi, Ali Daei, Ali Parvin and Mehdi Mahdavikia. Al Hilal finished runners-up in the AFC Champions League on four previous occasions with runners-up finishes at the 1999 Asian Cup and Asian Super Cup. This is only the second time two local Abu Dhabi teams, Al Khalifa and Al Bateen, have reached the Round of 16 of the AFC Champions League.

**GROUP E**

Kashima Antlers

**Japan**

Kashima's latest domestic triumph is the club's eighth title since 1999. Japan's best continental finish is perched at the 1999 Asian Cup won by Kashima while a second best spell to date is from 2008 to 2011 when they made four AFC Champions League knockout stages.

**GROUP F**

Muangthong United

**Thailand**

Maungthong qualified as Thai League champions following a shortened league season due to the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. This is only the second time Muangthong have qualified directly for the tournament proper, with the club falling at the final playoff hurdle on four previous occasions.

**GROUP A**

Al Masdar

**Abu Dhabi**

Al Jazira were established after a merger between two local Abu Dhabi teams, Al Khalifa and Al Bateen Club.

**GROUP A**

Al Taawoun

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**GROUP D**

FC Seoul

**South Korea**

FC Seoul reached the 2013 AFC Champions League final only to lose on away goals in several occasions. They also reached the semi-finals in 2014 and 2016. Western Sydney have a linkage to the first ever game of football played in Australia when a 1-0 aggregate win over Al Hilal. Tommy Juric scored the only goal in Sydney before they managed a 0-0 draw in Riyadh to lift the trophy.

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Al Ain

**United Arab Emirates**

Al Ain lifted their first ever UAE league title, ahead of rivals Al Jazira by nine points at the culmination of the 2015-16 season. Al Ain striker Asmaoah Gyan was the 2014 AFC Champions League top scorer when he netted 10 goals in just eight continental appearances. Al Ain won the inaugural AFC Champions League title in 2003, although they failed to recreate that feat after losing in the 2005 and 2016 finals. In 2016 runners-up Al Ain earned their place at their 12th AFC Champions League tournament after finishing as runners-up in the UAE Pro League.

**GROUP A**

Al Hilal

**Saudi Arabia**

Al Hilal are one of three AFC Champions League debutants who qualified directly for the 2017 AFC Champions League on seven previous occasions with runners-up finishes at the 1999 Asian Cup and Asian Super Cup. This is only the second time two local Abu Dhabi teams, Al Khalifa and Al Bateen, have reached the Round of 16 of the AFC Champions League.
Guangzhou Evergrande

2015 champions Guangzhou return to the competition after winning the Chinese Super League for a sixth consecutive season.

China

Hyundai Motors

Suwon Samsung

Suwon finished in seventh place in the 2016 K-League Classic, but a penalty shootout victory over FC Seoul saw them claim the FA Cup and a place in the AFC Champions League for the third year running.

Korea Republic

Eastern Sports Club

Eastern made headlines by winning the 2015-16 Hong Kong Premier League title by a point over Kitchee SC for their first league championship since 1995.

Hong Kong

Adelaide United

After finishing runners-up in their two previous A-League Grand Finals, Adelaide finally won the title with a 3-1 win over Western Sydney Wanderers last May.

Australia

Jiangsu FC

In their two previous AFC Champions League appearances, Jiangsu have missed out on a Champions League appearance, finishing runners-up in the 2013 and by a point in 2016. After their maiden appearance in 2013, Jiangsu FC earned a third ticket to the AFC Champions League in 2013, although finished third in the Grand Finals that year.

China

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors

Champions Jeonbuk ensured they will defend their AFC Champions League title and an eighth consecutive appearance after finishing runners-up in the 2016 K-League Classic.

Korea Republic

HOW THEY QUALIFIED

GROUP G

GROUP H

GROUP A

GROUP B

GROUP C

GROUP D

GROUP E

GROUP F

GROUP G

GROUP H

PLAY-OFFS - WEST

PLAY-OFFS - EAST

GROUP A

Al Ain (KSA)

Esteghlal Khouzestan

Al Rayyan

Play-off winner

Group B

Al Sadd

Al Jazira

Al Hilal

Play-off winner

Group C

Al Nasr

Zobahan

Persepolis

Play-off winner

Group D

Al Fateh

Al Ain

Al Hidd

Play-off winner

Group E

Jeju United

Eastern SC

Jiangsu FC

Play-off winner

Group F

Tampines Rovers

Brisbane Roar

FC Seoul

Play-off winner

Group G

Group H

Shanghai Shenhua

Japan 3rd Club

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors

Play-off winner

PLAY-OFFS - GROUPS
Caitlin Foord was named 2016 AFC Women’s Player of the Year becoming the second player to receive both the youth and senior accolades following success in 2011. And having capped an eventful 2016 season with the crown of Asia’s best, the Australia international is on the hunt for even more success in 2017.

**WALTZING MATILDA**

At just 22 years of age, Caitlin Foord, born in the small New South Wales town of Shellharbour on the Illawarra coast about an hour south of Sydney, has already achieved so much in her career. Twice she has played at the FIFA Women’s World Cup, including in 2011 when as a fresh-faced 16-year-old she was named the tournament’s best young player as her Matildas side made it to the quarter finals, where they were knocked out by Sweden, who went on to finish the tournament in third place.

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

“It’s obviously a massive achievement,” Foord said at the AFC Annual Awards in Abu Dhabi. “Looking back at the young player award, I was just so young and just took all these awards and didn’t really expect them or think...
PROFILE CAITLIN FOORD

40 goals for Australia, said.

of her young protege and was effusive in her praise of Foord.

but our country as well.

two Aussies up there is pretty cool,” she explained.

while it was Foord with a deft finish right on half time that doubled Australia’s lead. But after reaching the peak in the first half, the opposite was the case in the second as Foord missed two opportunities to extend Australia’s lead before Germany equalised just before full time. Further heartbreak, of the more excruciating kind, was waiting in the quarter final. Having progressed from a difficult Group F that included Canada, Germany and Zimbabwe, Australia faced the unenviable task of taking on home nation Brazil in front of over 50,000 screaming fans in Belo Horizonte. With the match locked at 0-0 a penalty shootout would decide who would advance to the semi-finals to face Sweden. With both nations scoring their first four penalties each, it looked like goalkeeper Lydia Williams would be the hero for Australia when

Olympic Games 2016

though too much of them.

Nervous in my life.

When it comes to raising the professionalism of the women’s game in Australia.

“Obviously that still haunts you a little bit. I think I’m over it, but when it happened it was just ‘I have to wait four years for this to come around again’, and even then we hadn’t qualified for 14 years to get there. But its highs and lows (of football), looking back at it, was just ‘I have to wait four years for this to come around again’.

Williams would be the hero for Australia when she saved Brazilian legend Marta’s spot kick. Katinka Gorry, the AFC Women’s Player of the Year in 2014, was the woman tasked with the crucial penalty, but was denied by an excellent save by Barbara. It was the Brazilian custodian’s heroics that would ultimately end Australia’s campaign when she dived to her left to save Alana Kennedy’s penalty and crush Australia’s dreams. Over five months on from that match Foord admits that the emotional scars have almost healed, but not completely.

Crush Australia’s dreams.

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

“That’s massive and it’s definitely showing all the other clubs this is the standard you have to get to,” she said.

“Obviously what still haunts you a little bit. I think I’m over it, but when it happened it was just ‘I have to wait four years for this to come around again’, and even then we hadn’t qualified for 14 years to get there. But its highs and lows (of football), looking back at it, was just ‘I have to wait four years for this to come around again’, and even then we hadn’t qualified for 14 years to get there. But its highs and lows (of football), looking back at it, was just ‘I have to wait four years for this to come around again’, and even then we hadn’t qualified for 14 years to get there.
AHMED YASIN MOVED FROM HIS NATIVE IRAQ TO SWEDEN AS AN INFANT, BUT THE WINGER HAS BECOME AN IMPORTANT MEMBER OF RADHI SWADI’S TEAM ON AND OFF THE FIELD AS THE LIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA SET THEIR SIGHTS ON BOOKING TICKETS FOR THE FINALS OF THE 2018 FIFA WORLD CUP.
by his own admission, Sweden is home for Ahmed Yasin. His earliest memories were created there, his football identity forged in the nation that gave the world Zlatan Ibrahimovic. But when he pulls on the white shirt of Iraq, and hears the national anthem reverberate around football stadiums across the continent, there is no doubting where his loyalties reside.

“I don’t remember so much from Iraq because I was only one or two years old when I came to Sweden for the first time, so I’ve been living there all my life,” he says. “But I’m never going to forget where I’m from and that’s Iraq. It’s in my heart and that’s why I chose to play for Iraq national team. When I say Sweden’s my home, it’s where I belong, that’s what I’m used to, the language and everything and all of my friends are there. I don’t have so much left in Iraq, but of course when I play for the national team and wear the jersey it’s a big moment for me and my family who are living in Sweden and that’s perfect.”

Born in Baghdad in April 1991 but raised in the town of Orebro in Sweden’s interior, football provided Yasin and his three brothers the perfect way to integrate into life in a new country. His is a familiar tale for new arrivals in a foreign land, with sport playing a key role in gaining acceptance in new surroundings. After moving through the youth ranks at BK Forward, Yasin was signing professional terms with the club in 2009 as an 18-year-old.

“It was harder for my family because when they first arrived there weren’t so many people from outside Sweden who were there,” he says. “I think they were the first immigrants to move there and it was hard for them because they didn’t know the language. I came there when I was two years old and I know the language and I know who to ask and to do things, so it’s not so hard for me. I feel at home there and all my friends are there. In the last 10 years, or over the eight years that I have been playing professional football, in my home city everybody knows my family and now they know me, so when the name Yasin comes up they know they have a player who has played there for the last four or five years and my name has become even bigger in Sweden because of the national team in Iraq and the things I’ve done in the Swedish league, so it’s good.”

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

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

“I got a lot of experience from the national team because of the teams we have played. I played my first game for the national team against Japan away in front of 55,000 or 60,000 people and that was a big thing for me. I came from playing in front of 10,000 in Sweden to 60,000 and I was watching like this,” he says, his mouth dropping open and his eyes bulging. “But that kind of thing is not what you’re thinking of when the referee blows the whistle. I’ve never been too far away from Iraq. My family has always been talking about Iraq and we always watch the Iraq channels and stuff like that. I started to like and see the football in Iraq in 2007 when they came to the final of the Asian Cup. That was when I got my eyes on them and of course players like Younes Mahmood, Nashat Akram, they were very big players and when I first came to the team and saw the big players from 2007 I thought: Shit, now I’m here! Now it’s time to show them. I have big respect for them. They have done a lot for this team and for Iraq and it’s not something anyone can take away from them.”

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

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

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

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

“I’m happy in Sweden but my goal is to go to the biggest arenas and the biggest leagues,” he says. “I’m still young and I can make it there and do a good job there. I have the qualities and I believe in myself. It would be wrong of me to tell you that I’d like to stay in Sweden. I have big goals and I think and I hope I will get there.”
AFTER A STANDOUT 2016 SEASON, HONG KONG AND EASTERN SPORTS CLUB GOALKEEPER YAPP HUNG-FAI AIMS TO MAKE HIS MARK IN 2017 WHEN HE CAPTAINS THE HONG KONG PREMIER LEAGUE CHAMPIONS IN THEIR DEBUT AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE CAMPAIGN AND ATTEMPTS TO GUIDE THE REPRESENTATIVE TEAM TO 2019 AFC ASIAN CUP QUALIFICATION.

IN SAFE HANDS

WHEN AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD YAPP HUNG-FAI ASKED TO JOIN HIS ELDER PEERS IN A NEIGHBOURHOOD KICK-AROUND THEY ALLOWED HIM ON THE CONDITION THAT HE WOULD GO IN GOAL. HE HAD ENVIASED SCORING RATHER THAN PREVENTING GOALS, BUT AS THE YOUNGEST ON THE PITCH HE HAD LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO TAKE HIS POSITION BETWEEN THE STICKS.

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

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

“At 15 I was in the Hong Kong youth team and enjoying life,” recalled Yapp.
PROFILE: YAPP HUNG-FAI

April to win the Hong Kong Premier League with a game to spare.

Profile: Yapp Hung-fai

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

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

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

"She cares a lot and has a very detailed mind. She has a lot of focus off the pitch and this helps us prepare for games. She has a very open mind so we have no problem we can talk to her and she will listen."

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

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

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

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

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

And 2017 promises to a huge year not just at club level but internationally too. Hong Kong, under head coach Kim Pan-gon, conceded just five goals.

As 2016 went to plan, the year reached a perfect finale when Yapp was part of the Hong Kong side that hosted and won the East Asian Games following a penalty shootout victory over Japan in the final.

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

The recently expanded AFC Asian Cup will feature 24 teams for the first time, and Hong Kong will be confident they can return to the tournament they last graced in 1998 in Iran. With the continent's top 12 teams having already confirmed their passage to the United Arab Emirates, Yapp believes the representative side have the potential to be among the remaining dozen qualifiers.

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

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

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

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

"I want to become a coach after retiring, I'd like to become a coach for the United Arab Emirates, Yapp believes the representative side have the potential to be among the remaining dozen qualifiers.

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

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

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"After retiring, I'd like to become a coach because I want to help Hong Kong achieve better results."
AFTER YEARS IN THE FOOTBALLING WILDERNESS THE MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION HAS LOFTY AMBITIONS TO IMPROVE STANDARDS ACROSS THE BOARD, WITH FOCUS ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND NATIONWIDE EXPOSURE TWO OF A NUMBER OF KEY STRATEGIES TO DO SO.

By: Peter Alsop
Photos: Mongolia Football Federation
S

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

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

While football has enjoyed a certain level of popularity over the years, it has remained some way from the forefront of Mongolia's sporting culture. Nine of the 10 teams in the two-year-old AFC Solidarity Cup in Kuching, Malaysia, in February 2016 and have just finished the second year," said Turbat, who skippered Mongolia at the event.

In the eastern province of Dornod, for the first time. This provided a much-needed platform for the talent away from the capital to showcase their skills and gain recognition from those within the industry. Youth development and women's football have also been at the forefront of the MFF's strategy to make positive strides.

Further to that, the MFF president.

While nine of the 10 teams in the two-year-old Khukhray National Premier League are from Ulaanbaatar, there is a big drive underway to take football to all corners of the country. Traditionally popular towards the Russian border in the north, where pre-1990 Soviet influence meant the game was practiced more than elsewhere, exposure across the entire country is another of Ganbaatar’s priorities.

"Until 2014 all competitions and activities were centralised areas or venues," explained the MFF president. "But I have established regional associations in the 21 provinces in order to develop football in a balanced way. It would be unfair if it could not develop nationwide."

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

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

Earlier in 2016, two of the country's most promising teenagers – Ganbold Ganbayar and Soyol-Erdene Gal-Erdene – travelled to England to train with fourth-tier side Barnet FC in Hungary. Furthermore, national U-13, U-15 and U-17 boys' and girls' championships have been held over the past couple years, while Mongolia's first ever women's league kicked off in 2015.

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

"Women's football is a key priority that we have put a lot of emphasis on. The U-15 different footballing culture. Ganbold, who is just 16 years old, is currently spending a year with the youth academy at Puskas Akademia FC in Hungary.

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"Women's football is a key priority that we have put a lot of emphasis on. The U-15
and U-18 girls' national teams have been established by Japanese head coaches, and we want both teams to qualify for the AFC U-16 and U-19 championships in 2019.”

Crucial to progress in youth development will be the nationwide introduction of FIFA’s Grassroots Initiative. Its aims include: increasing participation among six-to-15-year-old boys and girls; improving the standards of coach-educators and the number of training courses; and preparing a detailed plan for development at local, regional and national levels.

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

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

Speaking during the AFC Solidarity Cup, Battulga echoed Ganbaatar’s views that focus on youth is essential, while he also discussed the Blue Wolves’ 4-1 defeat by Timor-Leste in their Solidarity Cup opener.

The Blue Wolves have played six games in the tournament so far and are yet to win a match, finishing third in their group stage. A 1-1 draw with Laos, a 6-0 loss to Vietnam and a 0-0 draw with Kyrgyzstan saw the team knocked out of the tournament at the group stage.

Despite the early exit, and the Japanese coach’s expected departure, the future outlook remains a positive one with the Blue Wolves aiming to qualify for the AFC U-16 Championship next year and the AFC U-18 Championship in 2019.

Battulga also expressed his wish to see professional football ethics, culture and lifestyle among young Mongolians.

Q&A

President of Mongolia Football Federation
Amgalanbaatar

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

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

What support has the Mongolian Football Federation received?

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

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

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

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

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

Korea Republic And Japan Close The Gap

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

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

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

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

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

“It was a very tough game; Uzbekistan put pressure on our opponents,” said Korea coach Uli Stielike.

“We are now just a point behind. We are still unbeaten and have not conceded a goal. We now look towards the next game.”

Lead at the top to a matter of goal difference as the Samurai Blue defeated the Green Falcons 2-1 in Saitama to join the West Asians on the top of the standings.

“Goals from Hiroshi Kiyotake and Genki Haraguchi meant Omar Hawsawi’s reply in injury time came too late to prevent Japan getting on the scoresheet at the King Abdullah Sports City.”

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

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

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Korea Republic: 15/11/16 KOREA REPUBLIC 2 (Nam Tae-hee 15, Koo Ja-cheol 75) UZBEKISTAN 1 (Ismail Matar 25)

Japan: 15/11/16 JAPAN 2 (Hiroshi Kiyotake 45, Genki Haraguchi 80) SAUDI ARABIA 1 (Omar Hawsawi 90)
Korea Republic’s Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors claimed a second AFC Champions League title on the 10th anniversary of their first after a 3-2 aggregate win following a 1-1 draw with Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates in the final second leg at Hazza Bin Zayed Stadium in November’s final.

Han Kyo-won, who had come off the bench to replace Ricardo Lopes early in the match, scored the tie’s opener on 30 minutes for the 2006 winners and put his side 3-1 up on aggregate following the 2-1 win for the Jeonju-based club a week prior. Lee Myung-joo netted the leveller on the night just three minutes later for Al Ain but after Doukbas passed up a chance from the penalty spot to tie the scores on aggregate Jeonbuk’s one-goal advantage from the first leg at Jeonju World Cup Stadium ended up being the telling factor as the Koreans held on to exorcise the demons of their 2011 final defeat to Qatar’s Al Sadd.

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

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

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

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

“When we lost in 2011, I saw the fans were so dispirited, so winning the AFC Champions League is an unforgettable dream. Since coming back to Jeonbuk from the national team in 2014 we have been building this team so that we can win the AFC Champions League. Finally, it has happened. I want to thank the fans. This is for them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t usually think about personal trophies, we had hoped to win the AFC Champions League but it will give me a lot of motivation in the future to be the best in the AFC Champions League.”
Hammadi Ahmed scored the only goal of the game as Air Force Club became the first Iraqi club to claim an AFC Cup title with a 1-0 win over India's JSW Bengaluru in the 2016 final at the Suhaim Bin Hamad Stadium in November.

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

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

"I am grateful because even though we were under a lot of pressure and were missing four players, we still managed to take our chances well and win the title. "Our players were the better team tonight as you can tell from the number of missed opportunities throughout the match although that does not mean the other team weren't playing well."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Japan have claimed the AFC U-19 Championship for the first time in the tournament’s 57-year history as Koki Ogawa’s decisive spot kick at Bahrain National Stadium secured a 4-3 penalty shootout victory over Saudi Arabia after defences remained on top in an uneventful 120 minutes of play. Then with the shoot-out 4-3 in Japan’s favour, Abdullah Magrshi fired the eighth spot kick into the back of the net to level the scores 4-4, with Japan keeping their composure to coolly slot past Amin Al Buhairi as the Japanese were crowned continental champions having not conceded a goal.

“We started with this team we had a lot of games where we made mistakes and gave easy goals to our opponents,” said Japan coach Assu Uchiyama.

“But finally the players are starting to understand what I want them to do and we progressed to a first ever quarter-final on goal difference following a scoreless draw with the Joyce. Now Ali Saadi netted the decisive penalty as Saudi Arabia saw off Iraq 6-5 in a shootout following a 2-2 draw in the quarter-final to seal their place at the U-20 World Cup in dramatic style. Vietnam then claimed arguably the most important result in their footballing history as Tran Thanh’s second-half goal secured a 1-0 victory over hosts Bahrain to book their ticket to a first ever football World Cup.

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

Another double, this time from Reza Jafari, saw Iran oust Uzbekistan 2-0 in the tightly contested fourth quarter-final. An incredible 11 goals were scored as Saudi Arabia eventually defeated Iran 6-5 in the first semi-final with Abdulrahman Al Yami netting a hat-trick, including the Saudis’ decisive sixth goal, in the match of the tournament.

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

The East Asian powerhouse had finished runners-up six times – the last of which came in 2006 – while the Saudis were looking to defend their 12-time champions having not conceded a goal and 12-time champions Korea Republic, who had all finished on six points. The East Asians advanced to the last eight as Group A runners-up six times – the last of which came in 2006 – while the Saudis were looking to runners-up six times – the last of which came in 2006 – while the Saudis were looking to

When I started with this team we had a lot of experience in the squad, Koki Ogawa’s spot kick to break the deadlock was a moment when he felt the tournament was taking shape. But when we beat Qatar 1-0 victory over hosts Bahrain to book their ticket to a first ever football World Cup.

When I started with this team we had a lot of experience in the squad, Koki Ogawa’s spot kick to break the deadlock was a moment when he felt the tournament was taking shape. But when we beat Qatar 1-0 it was a moment of change for both of us. We knew we had to go all out for the win and that was as close as either side came in an uneventful 120 minutes of play.

Qatar 1-0 Bahrain (Koki Ogawa 47, Yuto Iwasaki 79, Hara 71, 79)

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Quarter-Finals

20/10/2016
Iraq 2-0 (Tariq Al Jibouri 60, 88) Uzbekistan 1-0 (Ahmad Al Shatly 46)

21/10/2016
Japan 3-0 (Takeru Kishimoto 6, Shunta Nakamura 19, Yuto Iwasaki 79) Qatar 1-0 (Hara 71, 79)

Semi-Finals

20/10/2016
Japan 3-0 (Takeru Kishimoto 6, Shunta Nakamura 19, Yuto Iwasaki 79) Qatar 1-0 (Hara 71, 79)

Final

20/10/2016
Japan 3-0 (Takeru Kishimoto 6, Shunta Nakamura 19, Yuto Iwasaki 79) Qatar 1-0 (Hara 71, 79)
A solitary first half goal from Sujal Shreshtha was enough to seal a 1-0 victory for Nepal over Macau in the final of the first-ever AFC Solidarity Cup in Kuching, Malaysia in November. Shreshtha scored in the 29th minute to give Nepal the title and cap an impressive performance throughout the tournament that saw Koji Gyotoku’s side emerge as the champions.

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

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

“After we go back to Nepal we will discuss (what the future holds). Now we’re just happy.”

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

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

“Even though we lost the final I still thank God for the team’s effort,” said Macau coach Tam Iao San. “My players gave 100 percent in the game and congratulations to Nepal. They had a better performance today and honestly they created many chances, more than us, so I think they deserved it.

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

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

Nepal Lift Inaugural Solidarity Cup

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At the heart of the image.
The AFC has hosted the first ever Women’s Football Conference, bringing together some of the world’s leading women’s football expertise in Kuala Lumpur in November. Women’s national team coaches and technical directors from AFC Member Associations and experts from the AFC’s sister Confederations from across the world took part in the inaugural three-day event to share expertise and experience for the benefit of women’s football in Asia.

Moya Dodd, AFC Women’s Football Committee Chairperson and Executive Committee Member, said: “Five of the top twenty women’s football teams in the world are from the AFC. Our youth teams are picking up trophies in FIFA competitions. “The AFC is fully committed to supporting all our Member Associations to realise their women’s football potential, in all the four categories of development across Asia: emerging countries, developing countries, challengers and FIFA World Cup finalists.”

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

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

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

The nominees for the AFC Player of the Year and women’s national team coach of the Year awards, said: “Football is a powerful tool for social development and social responsibility is a key element of the AFC’s mission statement. We have the power to make a difference in many parts of Asia. “I would like to thank the Abu Dhabi Sports Council, the UAE Ministry of Health and the Disabled Sports Federation, and especially the UAE Football Association for the beautiful partnership which has made this event possible. “But the true stars today are the children and their families. Football is for all and events like this are an important way to raise awareness and remind people of that.”

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

AFC Hosts Inaugural Women’s Football Conference

Tsingtao Renews Partnership With AFC

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

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

Prior to the official launch in the Malaysian capital which took place before the draws of the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup for the 2017 season, Dato’ Windsor John, the AFC General Secretary, said: “We are delighted at the renewed commitment of companies like Tsingtao to the ever-improving and fast developing landscape of club football in Asia. We thank them for the support of the AFC club competitions. “The AFC’s Vision and Mission states our objective is to provide top level competitions to provide the platform for our teams to continue to raise their standards and challenge on the world stage. It is a challenge that we are determined to meet.”

“The AFC Champions League and AFC Cup in 2016 were the richest in history and the AFC Champions League has the highest prize money for the winners of any club competition outside Europe. It is a clear signal that the AFC is determined to reward success. “And now, from the 2017 season, we have revamped the AFC Cup so that it will be played in each of the five existing regions of the AFC and will deliver a champion in each region for the first time. The four champions from ASEAN, Central, East and South will also play off to provide an overall East champion. ‘That team will then face the West Champions in the AFC Cup final.”

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

AFC Coaching Course Held In Singapore

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

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

Basir, who is also PAS Head of Coach Education, said: “The course is part of our continued development plans to increase the knowledge base of our coaches. At the same time, it is a key to impress our national development and playing philosophies into our coaching and player landscape for us to move forward in unison.”

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

AFC Coaching Course

AFC Raises Awareness Of Disability Football

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

The nominees for the AFC Player of the Year and AFC Women’s Player of the Year Awards, Omar Abdulrahman, Hammad Ahmad, Wu Lei, Lisa de Vanna, Caitlin Foord and Tan Ruyin attended the event in the UAE Ministry of Health and the Disabled Sports Federation, and especially the UAE Football Association in the UAE Ministry of Health and the Disabled Sports Federation in Kuala Lumpur in December.

AFC QUARTERLY 59

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AFC QUARTERLY 59
After a year of planning, AFC Social Responsibility Committee Chairman Ahmed Eid Al Harbi exchanged the Memorandum of Understanding which will allow the rebuilding of the Sethi Devi Secondary School in the earthquake hit region of Sindhupalchok in Nepal in December.

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

At Harbi also joined the All Nepal Football Association (ANFA) President Narender Shrestha in laying the first brick in the project which will see the construction of two blocks consisting 18 classrooms.

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

Al Harbi said: “Sadly Asia faces many challenges – whether they be climatic, natural disasters or through conflict – but on each occasion, through the ever-growing social responsibility programmes, the AFC and its Members have responded and the rebuilding of this school in Nepal is a case in point. “The AFC is grateful for the support from ANFA as well as the invaluable assistance and guidance of the Nepal Rebuilding Authority, the Nepal Ministry of Education, the district council, our technical advisers, the school management and of course the teachers and pupils in getting this project started.”

Club Workshops Held In Kyrgyzstan

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

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

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

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

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New Integrity Policies Introduced

The AFC Executive Committee introduced a ground-breaking ‘Do the right thing’ policy which is further strengthened the Confederation’s regulations to protect integrity and transparency at its meeting in Abu Dhabi in December.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The stadium grounds cover an area of 562,505 m², with one above ground level and six underground levels and are located northwest of the city of Jeonju, approximately 10 kilometres from central Jeonju. The stadium is known as “Fort Jeonju” by Korean football fans, especially by those of resident side Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors.

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

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

SARDAR AZMOUN