



COACHES CIRCLE

KEEPING COACHES IN ASIA UP TO DATE WITH TECHNICAL NEWS AND DEVELOPMENTS



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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH 

PARK JI SUNG

WHEN THE BALL STOPPED ROLLING

by Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

A few months ago, in the company of my old teammate Sir Alex Ferguson, I attended the UEFA Europa League match at Old Trafford between Manchester United and Club Brugge of Belgium. United won 5-0 and the vast majority of the 70,000 fans went home happy. Little did we realise that a few weeks later football across the globe would be put on hold due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ball stopped rolling and the silence was deafening. Rightly, people's health and welfare overshadowed everything else. We also began to realise that a world without football was a poorer place. The game was at a standstill and the only positive was that we had time to reflect. The recently departed decade (2010-2019), during which football had reached new heights of popularity, seemed like a good place to start.

The events of the past 10 years have already been consigned to history; to our collective memory of football highlights, significant developments and influential trends, both in Asia and in the rest of the world.

Considering the trendsetters during this recently departed era, Jorge Valdano, Argentinian World Cup winner and former manager of Real Madrid, had this to say: "Spain and Germany produced a



Al Hilal won the AFC Champions League 2019, defeating Urawa Red Diamonds 3-0 on aggregate to lift the trophy for the third time.

revolution of ball domination during the last decade, creating a yardstick by which the game was measured."

He could have added that Pep Guardiola's FC Barcelona, with its mesmerising possession play and attack 'with and without the ball' philosophy, was the inspiration behind this winning style - an approach that caught the imagination of a whole generation of coaches and players. Even Japan's international team that won the 2011 FIFA Women's World

Cup were devotees of the combination game that could have been honed on the Iberian Peninsula. And current Asian champions Qatar, although varied in their approach, were primarily possession-orientated, and were led by Félix Sánchez, a former Barça Academy coach.

But football's evolutionary process never stops, and a lot can happen in a ten-year period. With the relentless waves of time, refinements appear, elements increase and



Australia's Caitlin Foord in action during the FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019 Group C match against Italy.

EDITORIAL

decrease, and certain styles, because they are successful, come sharply into focus and are copied.

By the time we had reached the latter stages of the decade, the faces and ideologies of most high-profile winners had changed. France, Liverpool and Al Hilal were the kings and the dominant forces: Les Bleus, the 2018 World Champions, a shining example of pragmatism, counter efficiency and pace; while in 2019 Liverpool FC (European and World Club champions) and Saudi's Al Hilal (the first team from

West Asia to win the AFC Champions League since 2011) won with a direct, high-intensity, counter-pressing game. Make your choice: contain and counter, like France, or take the initiative, like the title-winning clubs? Whatever the approach, certain aspects of the elite game became non-negotiable during the last decade: football athleticism, speed of thought and action, team compactness, finishing efficiency and total concentration. The lazy winger disappeared, the overweight midfielder became a luxury and the slow, crunching centre-back a liability.

The women's game was also swept along on this directional tide, with recently crowned World Champions the USA the epitome of power and precision, displaying a built-in winning mentality honed over 50 years in a highly competitive soccer-in-schools environment.

Japan, China PR and Australia, each with impressive qualities, reached the last 16 of FIFA Women's World Cup France 2019, but found themselves in the slipstream of seven European nations, not to mention the winners. Japan played beautifully, but lost to the Netherlands; China fell to the Italians; and Australia were unlucky to be outgunned by Norway in a penalty shoot-out. It was clear in the aftermath of the Finals that dramatic improvements in the women's game had taken place and the intense growth of professionalism, especially in Europe, was having a major impact. The departing decade saw women's football reach an exceptional level of investment,

development and interest. The bar had been raised and no-one could rest on past glories - to do so would be tantamount to regression.

As I have often said:



No players, no game; no coaches, no development, no success.



Yes, football is about players, but coaches have a vital role to play in identifying and nurturing new talent, building teams, designing strategies and tactics, promoting the game and winning football matches. Coach education is therefore a crucial aspect of technical development, and, in 2018, the AFC launched its Coaching Convention - an endorsement programme, with set criteria, regulations and guidelines for the training of technicians at all levels of the game. A similar project was established in Europe twenty years previously and its impact has been far reaching and significant in raising the quality of the game on that continent.

Two years ago, the AFC also introduced two new endorsement projects under the umbrella of player development: The Member Associations were invited to join the Elite Youth Scheme, which supports the progressive education of talented young players and the establishment of youth academies, and

the Grassroots Charter, which promotes mass participation, organised play and a love of the ball.

The need for better players, better coaches and better teams was too important to leave to chance. AFC and its Member Associations (MAs), like a high-pressing team, took the initiative and designed the way forward with a trinity of technical projects, each aimed at raising performance standards in football throughout Asia.

It is often said that football reflects life, and, during the last 10 years, technology has become omnipresent. Think of German national coach Jugi Löw at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and his references to the use of Big Data, or the fact that some teams in Russia 2018 had more football analysts than coaching staff. And then there was VAR (Video Assistant Referee), like Internal Affairs, the police policing the police. The aims are laudable, the technology exists and there is a political will, so it is here to stay. But, as it evolves, great care must be taken to protect the flow and spirit of the game and to minimise disruption. Otherwise, football will become just another staccato sport, like rugby or baseball.

For those of us who view football as an art rather than a science, the overload of numbers, the excessive data, analysis by drone and the assessment of offside reduced to millimetres has caused some consternation. Of course, sports science and technology can help football, but simplicity, creativity, freedom of expression, risk, romance and joy should not be drowned by too much information or oppressive scrutiny.

And so a new decade (2020-2029) has begun, albeit under an unprecedented cloud. But, football people are resilient and optimistic by nature, and, once normality returns, a new period of innovation and opportunity will be with us. The

Tokyo Olympics will now take place in 2021, the FIFA Women's U-17 World Cup in India will be rescheduled, and all eyes will turn to Asia when the FIFA World Cup is staged in Qatar at the end of 2022. These events will further stimulate development projects and competitions, both at Continental and domestic level. Many things will modify, alter and transform.

When Sir Alex Ferguson, who managed Manchester United for 26 years and won 38 trophies in the process, was asked to share his secret for success,

he replied: "The thing I have done well is to manage change."

Asian football will need to display that capacity in abundance after the pandemic has subsided. If there is a collective effort, a commitment to the cause, and those in leadership show adaptability, vision and desire, then the twenties could be another decade of outstanding development, one in which the ball rolls freely and, once again, the crowd noise is deafening.



Japan players react after clinching the FIFA Women's World Cup 2011 title with a 3-1 penalty shoot out victory against the USA. It was the first time an Asian team had won a FIFA World Cup.



France lifted the FIFA World Cup 2018 trophy following a triumphant 4-2 win against Croatia in the Final, held in Moscow, Russia.

SEARCHING FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE

The 19 trophies collected by Park Ji Sung make the former Korea Republic and Manchester United star Asia's most successful ever player. Here he talks to Coaches Circle.

The exceptional career kicked-off at the turn of the century when Kyoto Purple Sanga signed a relatively unknown 19-year-old who had been playing university football in his native Korea Republic. Within two years, he was a member of the national team that took fourth place at the FIFA World Cup under the guidance of Guus Hiddink. A year after that, the Dutch coach persuaded him to follow his footsteps to PSV Eindhoven, where his performances prompted Sir Alex Ferguson to recruit him in 2005. During seven seasons at Manchester United, he became the first Asian footballer to play UEFA Champions League finals – though two defeats by Pep Guardiola's Barcelona signified a bittersweet experience.

With the Korea Republic team he played – and scored – at three successive World Cups and captained the side in South Africa in 2010, as he racked up 100 appearances.

In the meantime, his talent, athleticism and work ethic had earned him the nickname of Three Lungs and such a deep-rooted place in hearts at Old Trafford that, after hanging up his boots, he was invited to play his current role of global ambassador for Manchester United. He is, of course ...



PARK JI SUNG

THE BIG INTERVIEW

1 YOU REACHED THE PEAK OF THE PROFESSIONAL PYRAMID, BUT YOU ARE NOW ALSO ACTIVE AT THE BASE OF IT THANKS TO YOUR JS FOUNDATION. HOW MUCH IMPORTANCE DO YOU GIVE TO GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL?

“If you want to be a good coach or a good footballer, you have to start at grassroots level. That’s where you build foundations. That’s where the roots of the tree are. You can’t see them, but they are absolutely vital. So, if you want to improve your players or develop them to a high level, the grassroots game is so important. Everything starts from there. And if you can organise proper grassroots football, you have greater opportunities to produce good players.

“At my Foundation, well, on the football side we organise tournaments and give young people opportunities to play. And when we see somebody with a talent that can be developed, that’s when we try to help them with a scholarship. The emphasis is on football, of course, but we also offer encouragement to young people engaged in other sports, such as baseball, basketball, wrestling or even figure skating. Not only young players but also young artists. Ok, I was a football player. But I also want to help people who have talents in other sports and in artistic areas, like pianists or violinists. Basically, I am a human being – not just a footballer – so the real aim is simply to help human beings develop their talents and qualities, to give them opportunities to help themselves. The message is that if you work hard you can maybe become what you dream about. If you have a talent and you are prepared to work hard to develop it, you can be the person you want to be. It’s not so much about money as about giving them hope.”



Park Ji Sung (L) being interviewed on stage during the third AFC Youth Conference in Kuala Lumpur in November 2019.

2 THE FANS GAVE YOU A HERO’S WELCOME WHEN YOU ATTENDED THE AFC U23 CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL IN THAILAND IN JANUARY – AND YOU WERE HAPPY THAT KOREA REPUBLIC WON IT. HAVING BEEN IN EUROPE WHERE THERE IS NO EQUIVALENT COMPETITION, HOW DO YOU RATE U-23 FOOTBALL?

“Comparing with Europe is interesting because, over there, they don’t need this tournament. By this age, players are usually first-team regulars at professional clubs in countries where the game is more highly developed than over here. I mean, in the top nations, even the second and third divisions have high quality and are very competitive – which means that the players, by 23, are very experienced and are already expressing themselves as footballers. In Asia we have a very different situation. It happens quite a lot that talented players, when they reach 21, 22 or 23 are still not getting that many opportunities to play in the first team. That means they don’t have enough chances to compete at a high level. So, the AFC tournament for the Under-23s is really good for young Asian players because they can get together as a group, train as a group and compete against other nations with different characteristics but a similar level. It is an opportunity to improve themselves and to measure themselves against international opponents. Another aspect is that there are maybe European scouts watching the tournament. And the chance to qualify for the Olympics means that it is very competitive.”

3 HOW IMPORTANT IS OLYMPIC FOOTBALL?

“This time it is important to make an impact as the tournament is being played in Asia. In Europe, I realised that Olympic football is not as important as a EURO or a World Cup. But, for players in Asia, it’s a chance to perform on a world stage and compete against opposition from Europe or South America and a number of other countries. It is a great opportunity to see what you have to do to improve yourself.

“I remember going to the Sydney Olympics and coming away convinced that I should try to gain some experience in Europe. We played against Morocco and Chile – and their top players were already in Europe. I played against Xavi there, as Spain were the other team in the group. Their level was so high that the experience made me want to compete in Europe, to improve myself and try to reach the same standard. I was determined to try to work hard and see if I was good enough. We won two of our games and lost against Spain, so we didn’t qualify from the Group Stage. But those two wins had an impact because we wondered what we needed to do to go just that little bit further, individually and collectively. The same applies to today’s young players. They can use the experience to reflect on what they can do to improve, what they would like to do with their careers. The Olympic tournament can be a great encouragement.”

4 YOU MENTIONED EUROPEAN SCOUTS EARLIER AND YOU WERE ONE OF THE FIRST PLAYERS TO GO THAT WAY. IS IT POSITIVE FOR ASIAN PLAYERS TO GO TO EUROPE – AND MAYBE BRING THAT EXPERIENCE BACK TO THEIR NATIONAL TEAMS?

Yes, definitely. In Asia, it is a problem to gain experience against footballers from other continents. And the challenge for national teams is to count on players who can compete against other countries. It’s getting more difficult because it’s hard to break into league football. So, when you come to a World Cup and players are short of experience, it becomes a difficult proposition. And that’s the reason why we haven’t made as much impact as we would like at World Cups. It’s lack of international experience.

That’s why it’s so positive if we can get players into European football and then bring that knowledge and experience back. It can only be positive for World Cups in the future. That’s a way to bring our level up. And, looking further ahead, they can become coaches and help to develop different mindsets in Asia. So, we’re talking about getting players into Europe and then exploiting that experience if they can become managers in Asia.”



Park Ji-Sung (L) is challenged by Greece defender Vasillis Torosidis during a Group B clash of the FIFA World Cup 2010.

5 TALKING ABOUT COACHES, HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT BECOMING ONE?

“No! Not at senior level anyway. I’m more interested in focusing on the younger age groups – coaching at grassroots and youth levels. In my career there were two main coaches who influenced me a lot and shaped my development. I’m talking about Guus Hiddink and Sir Alex Ferguson. It was a great privilege to work with them during my career. But they are the reason I don’t want to be a senior coach!”

YOU’LL HAVE TO EXPLAIN THAT ...

Well, Guus Hiddink came to the Korea Republic national team at a time when the mentality among players was just to follow whatever the boss said. Then, when I went with him to PSV, it was totally different. The players were ready to say things to the coach. They had their ideas about the right way to do things and they were prepared to tell the boss he was wrong. That possibility had never crossed my mind! I had grown up believing you had to do what the coach said. So, this came as a big culture shock. But I soon realised that in Europe it was possible to discuss things with the coach. It was up to the boss to persuade his players that his ideas and methods were correct and convince them it was right to do things his way. Guus was good at that. He persuaded and convinced the players that what he said was logical and correct. So, the key quality for a coach is to have clear ideas and to know how to persuade his players to believe in them.”

THE BIG INTERVIEW



6 WHAT ABOUT SIR ALEX FERGUSON AT UNITED?

Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson (R) speaks with Park Ji Sung during the final match of the FIFA Club World Cup 2008 against Ecuador's Liga de Quito in Yokohama (Manchester United won 1-0).

"It's true that Sir Alex is a different personality. But not so much as you would think. People remember the stories – you know, the hair-dryer, the boots and that sort of thing. But it was very different inside the dressing-room. I discovered that he was a very kind person who treated me very well and always had a smile. And on the training ground he was quite relaxed – unless he felt that a player was being lazy and needed to wake up. Then it was different. But that's the way it should be. Sometimes you need to wake up and sometimes players need to have a kind of tension and intensity in their work if they are going to perform well. He managed that really well. He watched very closely, and he always seemed to find the right time to do the right thing. I mean, he knew when it was time to be kind and he knew when it was the right moment to be tougher. He really controlled the temperature, the tension very well. His timing was excellent."

7 ARE YOU SAYING THAT PERSON-MANAGEMENT ASPECTS CAN BE JUST AS OR MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR TECHNICAL AND TACTICAL KNOWLEDGE?

"Yes. Even if you have a great tactical mind and clear concepts, you cannot implement your ideas if the player doesn't buy into them. The coach doesn't play. Out on the pitch, it's down to the players to execute every detail of what you want. If you cannot communicate your ideas to the players, your skills are irrelevant. That brings us back to the importance of communicating individually with each and every player, as their personalities and learning processes are very different.

It's not an easy proposition. But if you want to be a top manager, you have to deal with that challenge. You need to mix kindness and anger and you need to have a feeling for the right time to do it. These two possessed really great skills in this – they had the qualities that are absolutely necessary if you want to be a top coach. That's why I don't see myself as a coach – I really don't think I could do that!"

8 HAVING PLAYED THOSE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE FINALS IN EUROPE, HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THEM WITH THE AFC EQUIVALENT?

"First of all, there are the geographical differences. Asia is big, enormous. In Europe it is feasible to compete very often with all the other countries. In Asia, there is still the situation where you compete within the East and West zones and don't have many opportunities ever to play against teams from the other half. Only in the Final, in fact. So, you have to accept the realities of club football in Asia ... eight hours flying, different time zones ... it's totally different from Europe, where you're talking about flying time of five hours or less and a maximum of two or three hours' time difference.

"What you can definitely say is that the Champions League in Asia has plenty of room for growth. It's a young competition, whereas in Europe it dates back a long way and people have accumulated a lot of experience in organising it and playing it. In Asia, there are important issues to address, but it's becoming more exciting to watch Champions League matches and the level is, I think, improving. We have to work on projecting the competition to a wider public – on TV and, these days, on the internet platforms that allow us to watch almost everything. What we have to do is to attract an audience – persuade fans to look for games."

THE BIG INTERVIEW

9 WHAT ABOUT NATIONAL TEAM COMPETITIONS?

“In Asia, there are many clubs who do not have a broad fan base, whereas national teams have a great following and are very, very important. We are steadily improving on the past – and we can see that at World Cups. There are still gaps between us and the highest level, but our results are getting better. As I see it, our challenge is to make sure that our improvement is not only about a small number of top teams who qualify for major tournaments. There are big differences in standards – too big – and the key to the future is to help the smaller countries to improve and to become more competitive. The problem is that there are so few opportunities to meet top-class opposition from other continents. It is difficult to arrange matches against, say, Brazil or Argentina. So, if we cannot expose our players to the top nations from elsewhere, we have to find ways of improving ourselves and becoming more competitive within Asia. Our objective must be to reduce the gap between top and bottom.

“One of the positive things is that when we talk about football in Asia, we talk about a lot of different footballing cultures. So, we can learn from each other and make good use of the variety we have. Another issue is to attract

supporters into stadiums at big events like the AFC Asian Cup. OK, the host country usually has a good following. But we need to encourage the fans to watch other games, persuade them that football is an attractive game to watch – not just their own club or national team.

“In Europe, football is a culture. When people go to school or work, they usually talk about football at some point. We must try to promote that sort of football culture. For example, if England were to host a EURO, the public would be interested in all the games. They would go to watch Germany or Italy ... because they love football. We need to implant the same sort of culture in Asia. Of course, that also means playing attractive football with real quality, so that people enjoy watching it. The question is how to achieve that. Because it is not a short-term project. It is probably a very long-term process. So, we have to think about how we can reach that goal. Coaching has a big role to play in this. If you don't have good coaching, it's difficult to play good football – the sort that will attract the public. It means that we also have to educate coaches who can perform well in this area. That's why coach education is so important from grassroots level right up to the national teams.”

10 THE RECEPTION YOU RECEIVED AT THE FINAL IN THAILAND UNDERLINED YOUR STATUS AS IDOL AND ROLE MODEL. WHICH OTHER ASIAN PLAYERS WOULD COME INTO THAT CATEGORY?

“At the moment, I don't think we need to look further than Son – I think most people agree that he is a role model. He has been playing very well in the Premier League, proving that Asian footballers can be among the top, top players in the world. It makes a huge difference because young players now dream of becoming one of the best players in the world – not just one of the best players in Asia. He gives hope and motivation to all Asian footballers.”

11 WHAT ARE YOUR AMBITIONS FOR ASIAN FOOTBALL?

“Winning a World Cup would be an amazing success. But it takes time. A lot of people shake their heads and say, ‘it's not possible’. But I can't identify with that attitude. You have to believe. If not, it won't happen.

You need to believe and work hard to make it happen. It's our dream. But dreaming is not enough. We must plan to try to make that dream come true. We mustn't forget that the Netherlands have never won the World Cup. They have wonderful players, some of the best coaches in the world but they are proof that it's not easy at all. It's not impossible because we have some very talented Asian footballers. But we must improve our average level. We must be more competitive across the board – not just in a select few countries.”



Park Ji Sung with the trophy prior to the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 final match between Japan and Qatar.





ELITE CLUB COACHES FORUM

TALKING AND LISTENING

A standard scenario is for the coach to talk and hope that his audience of players, backroom staff or media are listening. But, in the coach's repertoire, there is a place for the art of listening.

As Sir Alex Ferguson maintains: "particularly if you are a young coach, absorb everything you hear from older colleagues – those who have survived in the profession. Because they have a story to tell".

Sir Alex made the comment at a Forum in Europe where, for the last two decades, elite club coaches have relished the opportunity to meet in a non-competitive setting and simply 'talk football'.



A while back, Gérard Houllier summed up the experience by reflecting: “Being a top coach can be a lonely existence, so meeting like this is like going on a refresher course. It gives you new ideas and makes you reflect on a lot of issues”. Since 2016, an Elite Club Coaches Forum, chaired by AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh, has also become an annual fixture on the AFC agenda, and, as it happens, Houllier was one of the names on the teamsheet at the most recent event staged in Shanghai.

Teamsheets, admittedly, don't make the most riveting of reading. But the line-up in Shanghai does say a lot about the calibre of the event: Rafa Benítez (Dalian Yifang), Gabi Calderón (Persepolis), Steve Corica (Sydney FC), Kim Do Hoon (Ulsan Hyundai), Luís García (Beijing Renhe), Bruno Génésio (Beijing Sinobo Guoan), Heimir Hallgrímsson (Al Arabi), Branko Ivanković (Al Ahli Saudi), Tomohiro Katanosaka (Oita Trinita), Jose Morais (Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors), Kevin Muscat (ex-Melbourne Victory), Vítor

Pereira (Shanghai SIPG), Ange Postecoglou (Yokohama Marinos), Wang Baoshan (Henan Jianye) and Li Xiaopeng (Shandong Luneng Taishan).

The Class of 2019 lifted the total to around 60 top coaches from 39 leading Asian clubs and nine MAs who had visited the Forum during its four-year lifespan – including AFC Champions League winners such as Choi Kang-hee (Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors) and Holger Osieck (Urawa Red Diamonds), along with Ange Postecoglou, AFC Asian Cup victor with Australia in 2015 and J-League winner with Yokohama Marinos four years later. Branko Ivanković, his team-mate at the 2019 Forum, had been silver-medallist with Persepolis in 2018 and, further round the table, Li Xiaopeng was hoping to add managerial titles to his playing career with Shandong Luneng and the run of two AFC Asian Cups and one World Cup with the China PR national team.

In other words, the Forum broadcasts voices that are well worth listening to. And, flicking back through previous editions, the same applies to the likes of Andre Villas-Boas, Fabio Capello, Sven-Göran Eriksson, Felix Magath, Paulo Sousa, Dragan Stojković or the current Australia



coach, Graham Arnold, who attended the Forum during his time on the bench at Sydney FC.

Any MA that stages similar gatherings will recognise that the primary aim is to allow the coaches to exchange views and to gather and interchange information. In the AFC context, the objective is also to listen to opinions on international competitions – in particular, the AFC Champions League. Coaches are encouraged to share their views on leadership and management issues; to discuss technical trends; to suggest strategies that could further improve AFC competitions; and to influence changes for the better.

The AFC Champions League is the benchmark in Asia, but, inevitably, Europe's equivalent is cited as the global benchmark in club football. As Choi reflected: “the AFC Champions League has strong characteristics of its own, so it is not always fair to compare. But I do admit that the European club competition can be a useful reference point for us. The quality of our Champions League is still a bit lower than in Europe, but I see a gradual improvement in the level every year.”

When encouraged to pinpoint the main differences, the most common denominator among the coaches' responses was ‘intensity’. During the inaugural Forum in 2016, Eriksson had remarked: “I'm not sure that it matches the UEFA Champions League for quality and intensity yet, but the Asian Champions League is impressive, and it is on the way up.”

Three years later, Benítez, a relative newcomer to Asia, reflected: “The biggest difference between Chinese and European teams is intensity. It is the pace of the game. Balance and intensity are the key elements.”

The viewpoint was interesting, coming as it did from a former manager of Liverpool who, as UEFA Champions League and World Club Cup winners, serve as the current benchmark and provide thought-provoking contrasts with the previous major trend-setting team: Pep Guardiola's Barcelona.

Interestingly, analysis of Jürgen Klopp's team's playing style dovetailed with an AFC Fitness Course in 2017 where Magni Mohr, a football-orientated sports scientist at Copenhagen University, revealed that a study of ten seasons in the English Premier League had confirmed that the game had become more intense and explosive with an increase of 80% in the number of sprints per game and 35% in distances covered at sprint speeds. The AFC Technical Report on that year's AFC Champions League remarked "his comments extend an invitation to reflect on how best to prepare players to cope, on a sustainable basis, with high-intensity speed-endurance issues".

In the same report, the issue was approached from a different angle. The Technical Topics section opened with a quote from the Elite Club Coaches' Forum of that year: "Teams from the East play with higher intensity than teams from the West". At the following Forum, Branko Ivanković, 2018 AFC Champions League silver-medallist with Persepolis, fuelled



further debate by saying: "There are big differences and a great diversity in the way teams play. There is no such thing as Asian football. You could discuss a lack of power in the West; you could ask whether fitness levels are always top-level; and you could ask whether there is the same appetite for duels."

Divergences between East and West became a perennial debating point during the seven-year sequence of AFC Champions League victories for teams from the East. But, just 12 weeks after the 2019 Forum, that trend was bucked when Razvan Lucescu's Al Hilal took the trophy to Saudi Arabia.

After the second-leg win in Japan had clinched a convincing aggregate victory, AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh reflected: "The intensity of Al Hilal's game was exceptional. A positive feature, especially bearing in mind all the comments about lack of intensity among teams from the West. Time will tell whether it sets a trend. But it certainly represented a shift in the tide."

The AFC Technical Report on the 2019 season notes: "One of the key components in the intensity of the Al Hilal game was the readiness to press aggressively in advanced areas. Al Hilal applied high pressure in both defending and attacking and kept pressing high

throughout the game. Central striker Bafetimbi Gomis was the initiator, constantly and immediately putting Urawa's build-up play under pressure. Sebastian Giovinco, operating in the slipstream of the leading striker, was on hand to turn the screw even further and frustrate the opposition's construction work."

The report mentions that Fabio Cannavaro's Guangzhou Evergrande implemented aggressive advanced pressing, while Xavi Hernández's Al Sadd was also equipped for Barça-style collective pressing in high areas. "Significantly," the report indicates, "three of the season's top four teams were set up to implement advanced-pressing philosophies." At the 2019 Forum, Andy Roxburgh provoked debate on adjusting to Champions League parameters by asking "is high pressing common in your league?"

Tidal movements in the AFC Champions League – and comparisons with domestic football – take on added significance at a time when the imminent expansion of the competition to 40 teams will allow more coaches and players (from more MAs) to engage at the top level. In Europe, coaches and players regularly declare that Champions League football requires them to step up a gear – and the same applies in Asia. Li Xiaopeng warned



quality of playing surfaces that can do much the same; the lack of big-match atmosphere due to low attendance figures or venues where the distances between fans and players practically require binoculars. Not much can be done about AFC geography and travel times, but at each and every Forum there was strong support for the AFC Champions League and the efforts to make it a world-class competition.

There are also difficulties that affect some clubs more than others: discrepancies between domestic competition calendars and match scheduling; or conflicts between domestic and international regulations regarding the eligibility of imported players; or even difficulties in adjusting nutrition to the requirements of a top-level athlete. On the coaching front, concerns were expressed about the recruitment of translators (an outstanding linguist does not necessarily possess the skills to communicate football language). As Vítor Pereira commented: “visual presentations and practical work can be vital if you run into language problems.” And, on the other side of the coin, there was the feeling that “native coaches can find it difficult to gain the trust of foreign players”.

Returning to the training ground, player development issues were raised, such as concerns that youth coaches are not allowing enough room for players to express themselves; or that in-possession qualities are being developed, to the detriment of basic defensive skills, such as the art of tackling.

“In some cases,” commented Mirko Jeličić (coach of Uzbek club FC Lokomotiv) at the 2017 Forum, “levels of knowledge are not good enough.” At the same meeting, Alireza Mansourian (during his time at Esteghlal in IR Iran) responded: “in order to improve our knowledge of the game, it would help if there were more competitive exchanges between East and West Asia.”

newcomers: “The Champions League has a big impact on the domestic game and requires greater intensity. So, desire, motivation and physical elements are even more crucial.”

Steve Corica added: “Sometimes you need to adopt a different style in the Champions League”.

“In my view,” said Ange Postecoglou, “Asian football needs to be more aggressive, more possession-orientated and more attack-minded. So, in the long run, experience of these aspects in the Champions League will be the key to future successes with our national teams.”

At the 2019 Forum, this led to reflections on the national team performances at the AFC Asian Cup, and, with a more distant perspective in the rear-view mirror,

the FIFA World Cup in 2018. Was it coincidence, the coaches wondered, that Qatar and France had won the two titles after having a mere 39% of possession in the finals? As Gérard Houllier commented: “possession doesn’t guarantee a result. Some teams keep the ball - some keep the result”.

For the record, in the two legs of the AFC Champions League final, Al Hilal had 70% of the ball at home and won 1-0; 45% during the return match in Japan and won 2-0. The question put to the coaches in Shanghai was ‘to what extent do you promote ball possession?’.

The annual Forum reviews both sides of the balance sheet: the credit column and the debit column. In the latter, entries tend towards similarity from year to year. The disparity of climatic conditions that influence playing styles and performance levels; the irregular

“There is a need to teach tactics,” Ange Postecoglou said at the 2019 Forum. “So, the key figure is the coach.”

Steve Corica added: “Game understanding is the key. That is what we have to work the most on. And, the better the player, the smaller the amount of information you need to give him.” A year earlier, Paulo Sousa, the coach at Tianjin Quanjian had commented: “In the Asian competitions, it is often the foreign players’ know-how that makes the difference because of their game appreciation and understanding – especially timing and use of space. These are the qualities that need to be developed.”

According to Gabi Calderón, “the personality of the coach is also a key factor” – and this opened the door to debate on the coach’s image and handling of the media. Back in 2016, Sven-Göran Eriksson had urged his colleagues: “don’t lose twice. If you have lost a match, don’t lose at the press conference.” Since then, as Ange Postecoglou remarked, “social media has changed the game. Immediately after a match, the debate has begun – and you need to be ready to address all sorts of issues”. Graham Arnold agreed: “social media has become a major influence. They’re a Big Brother, always watching.” At the Forum, the general belief was that the need to ensure a healthy reputation needs to be at the centre of the coach’s thoughts – not only in dealing with the media but also in presenting a positive image on the touchline. The realities of today’s workplace also require working with the media to create a ‘brand’ and a need to stay in the public eye.

At the same time, there is core work to be done away from the public gaze – in managing mentalities and dealing with egos, for example. Dragan Stojković maintained:

“In terms of being suitably motivated, some are easily satisfied; some are never satisfied. It is the latter mentality that is required.” Gérard Houllier talked of three different species of ego: firstly, the player who is obsessed with perfection, so needs care and trust; secondly, the ‘king of the world’ who feels he doesn’t need the coach – but needs to be controlled; and thirdly, the player who craves recognition and requires constant praise. “Coaches,” he said, “must realise which type they are dealing with, as it is important to protect, appreciate and care for each individual.”

He and fellow ex-Liverpool manager Rafa Benítez teamed-up to offer the Forum participants a privileged look at the DNA of a special club – in terms of tradition, support, the ability to rebound from tragedy, sustained success, high standards and great sporting rivalries. But Benítez was impressed by what he had heard rather than what he had said. “The opportunity to come to this Forum and listen to all these great and experienced coaches in Asia’s top club competition has been an enlightening experience and I am convinced that, for the rest of the coaches, this information exchange has been useful in order to improve their teams’ performances in the future.”



YOUTH CONFERENCE

TEACHING TALENT REQUIRES TALENT



“At AFC we have underlined our ambition to ensure our teams and players succeed on the world stage and our best chance to bring that to life relies on our investment in our youth footballers. Our youth competitions are already producing world-class teams and today we recognise all those working tirelessly behind the scenes to raise the bar for our players to develop more systematically through their hard work and dedication. We are confident that the achievements of today’s winners will inspire more coaches, leagues and academies to strengthen their youth development structures, which will ultimately transform the landscape of elite youth development in Asia.”

The words, delivered by AFC General Secretary Dato’ Windsor John to a hundred or so delegates from MAs at the third AFC Youth Conference in Kuala Lumpur in November 2019, neatly highlight the vital importance of the work by coaches with talented teenagers who are negotiating the key transitional stage of their development.

“Working in youth football is an adventure,” commented AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh during a keynote presentation where he outlined the rewarding challenges facing coaches on the front line of what he called ‘The Asian Adventure’. “The identification, development and management of elite youth players,” he said, “is fundamental to the future success of a national team.”

From a coaching perspective, the Big Adventure is undoubtedly a Big Job. One of the pertinent questions raised at the Conference was about what young players need to learn if they hope to realise their dreams of reaching the top. The starting point for discussion was a blueprint drawn up by Germany’s Norbert Elgert, who, as U-19 coach at FC Schalke 04 since 1996, could be described as one of the unsung

gurus of youth coaching. His wisdom is summarised by Seven Pillars of Success on which, he believes, player development can be built.

The first is the perfection of technique under pressure – a prime requisite as the game continues to evolve in tempo and intensity. On the physical side, the key components are athleticism and speed. But the other factors flagged by Elgert require the coach to be competent in psychological preparation and person-management skills. How best to develop game intelligence and awareness? What can be done on the training ground to sharpen mental quickness and mental strength? How best to persuade young starlets to integrate their solo talents into collective teamwork? How best to convince them to adopt professional standards of lifestyle and nutrition? How best to imbue them with sporting values and encourage them to become role models for others? Teaching talent, as Andy Roxburgh remarked, requires talent.

Even if coaching staff find valid answers to those questions, the additional challenge is to translate training-ground education on to the competitive field of play. The head coach can often feel pressure from above in terms of obtaining results – which means that a balance between development and winning can easily be tilted towards an excessive focus on the latter. The keynote presentation at the Conference featured a job description for a youth coach responsible for leading squads of players, organising teams, selecting players, educating groups of teenagers, sharing knowledge with them, promoting the development of individual and collective qualities ... and winning football matches.

At the Conference, Mohd Ikhmarol Izzat Haji Omar, head coach of Brunei Darussalam’s U-16 and U-19 national teams, commented: “In youth development,



everyone wants to win, but development must be the priority because we are responsible for producing the next generation of players and we need to nurture them through the best possible pathway.”

Milestones along development pathways are provided by competitions – an aspect underlined by Park Ji Sung’s interview earlier in this publication where he comments: “we must be more competitive across the board – not in just a few countries”. AFC Asian International Player of the Year Son Heung-min added: “competition makes us all better and better”, while Paulo Sousa insisted “three things help you develop as a player: your coach, your colleagues in the dressing-room and the level of competition”.

While the AFC competitions offer opportunities for young players to measure themselves against international opposition, competitive levels in domestic leagues have a crucial role to play. And the Youth League of the Year was one of the first-ever AFC Youth Football Development Awards presented at the Conference in recognition of

work already in progress. Uvaydo Davlatbekov, Director of the Youth League in Tajikistan, said on receiving the Award: “We launched the youth league just three years ago. So, to receive this prestigious award from the AFC is a great achievement. We are already seeing the fruits of our labour, but this award is only the beginning and we are determined to grow and improve our league in coming years.”

Liu Baoyu, President of the Shandong Luneng Taishan Football Academy, which took the Youth Academy of the Year Award said: “Youth development continues to be among the key strategies for success in Chinese football and we are extremely pleased to be playing our part to achieve our larger national objectives. This award serves as great motivation for us to produce more future stars of the game.”

Abdulwahab Alharbi, when he stepped on stage to receive the Youth Coach of the Year Award in recognition of his youth development work at club level and the U-15 national side, was quick to treat the individual honour as a tribute to teamwork within the coaching staff of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation.

“They have given so much to the game and our success on the pitch is a tribute to a united sense of purpose as a collective group of coaches to provide the best possible environment for our players to succeed.”

Looking back over the Conference, Lebanon Technical Director Bassem Mohamad said: “I am always looking to improve our youth teams, and the Conference has educated me to strengthen our methods of teaching and training especially in terms of our philosophy and methodology. It was valuable to understand the best practices and structures that have been successful in Asia. Our aim now is to transfer the knowledge, the different philosophies and viewpoints in youth coaching and education to help our colleagues.

“It was an extremely motivational agenda and I have no doubts that the last three days have inspired every Member Association to improve.”

Which brings us neatly to a quote from American writer and poet William Ward, which Andy Roxburgh used in his ‘Asian Adventure’ presentation: “The mediocre teacher tells; the good teacher explains; the superior teacher demonstrates; and the great teacher inspires”. It is to be hoped that the AFC Youth Conference inspired the desire to continue to improve coaching at youth development levels.



THE AFC YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FOOTBALL AWARDS 2019

The AFC celebrated the development Continent's future stars with the first-ever AFC Elite Youth Football Awards, which were presented during the opening of the 3rd AFC Youth Conference.



YOUTH COACH OF THE YEAR

WINNER

ABDULWAHAB ALHARBI
SAUDI ARABIA

*2019 West Asian Football Federation
U-15 Boys Championship*



RUNNER-UP

HJ OMAR BIN HJ JAMIL
BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

*Head Coach, Projek Ikan Pusu
Football Development Programme*

SPECIAL MERIT

XU GENBAO
CHINA PR

*Coach, Shanghai Genbao
Football Training Base*

LUI MAN FAI JASON
HONG KONG

*Head Coach, U-18 Southern
District FC*

**MANIAM A/L
PACHAIAPPAN**
MALAYSIA

*Head Coach, U-15
national team*

NARUEPHON KAENSON
THAILAND

*Head Coach, U-16 Girls
national team*

AFC YOUTH ACADEMY OF THE YEAR

WINNER

**SHANDONG LUNENG
TAISHAN**



RUNNER-UP

**JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION
ACADEMY FUKUSHIMA**

SPECIAL MERIT

**ALBADR FOOTBALL ACADEMY
IR IRAN**

AFC YOUTH LEAGUE OF THE YEAR

WINNER

**TAJIKISTAN
YOUTH LEAGUE**



RUNNER-UP

JAPAN U-18 FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

SPECIAL MERIT

**THAILAND YOUTH LEAGUE
UZBEKISTAN ACADEMY YOUTH LEAGUE**

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL CONFERENCE

DARING TO DREAM

Those who view life through rose-tinted spectacles have ample reason to feel optimistic about the state and status of women's football in Asia.

At FIFA U-17 World Cups, AFC countries have won four of the six titles disputed – thanks to DPR Korea (2008, 2016), Korea Republic (2010) and Japan (2014). At U-20 level, Asia has won three of nine tournaments via DPR Korea (2006, 2016) and Japan (2018) in addition to taking three silver medals and three bronze. At senior level, despite the dominance of the United States (four gold medals, one silver and three bronze in nine World Cups), Japan beat them in the Final when they donned the world crown in 2011, and, at the most recent tournament in France, three AFC countries successfully came through the group phase.

But the annoying things about roses – as opposed to spectacles – are the thorns. And those who wear spectacles of a darker hue might well raise a thorny issue or two. If we inject the most recent AFC U-16 and U-19 Championships into the equation, the roll of honour at both tournaments reads: 1 Japan; 2 DPR Korea; 4 Australia. The variation was that that the bronze medals were taken home by China PR (U-16) and Korea Republic (U-19).

At the turn of the year, the FIFA ranking in women's football healthily featured five AFC Member Associations among the global Top 20: Australia (7th), Japan (10th), DPR Korea (11th), China PR (15th) and Korea Republic (20th).



By now, the thread holding all these statistics together is probably showing through. The names are the same. Significantly, after those five top guns, there was no further sign of Asia in the FIFA rankings until Vietnam in 32nd place.

This, yet again, links with the opinion expressed by Ji Sung Park on earlier pages: "We have some very talented Asian footballers. But we must improve our average level. We must be more competitive across the board – not just in a select few countries."

And the stimulating challenges of enhancing the top teams' performances whilst upgrading competitive levels in other MAs were among the key themes addressed at the 2nd AFC Women's Football Conference in Kuala Lumpur, where the banner fluttering over the three-day event was 'Dare to Dream'. The elite teams can legitimately dream of winning races to Asian and global titles; the time has come for

their pursuers to dream of making up ground on the front-runners.

At the Conference, standards of coaching and coach education were seen as core elements in the further development of a sport enjoying explosive worldwide growth – as demonstrated by the TV audience of one billion for the FIFA Women's World Cup 2019. On stage, Japan's Asako Takakura acted as standard-bearer for the coaching profession, stepping up to receive, for the seventh time, the AFC Women's Coach of the Year award and to share her experiences with the participants.

Her impressive CV encapsulates the rapid rise of the women's game: her good fortune, as a young girl, to persuade a grassroots coach to allow her to play in a boys' team; the playing career in which 79 games and 29 goals in midfield for Japan included the first two World Cups and six



AFC Championships; the coaching licence and the first work experience as assistant coach with the U-17 national team; the rise to head coach; the AFC U-16 and U-19 titles; the FIFA U-17 World Cup triumph in 2014; and, ultimately, the honour of becoming, in 2016, the first female coach of Japan's senior national team. When asked to summarise her coaching philosophy, she humbly maintains: "to create the right atmosphere for the players to perform at the peak of their abilities". One of her other comments neatly dovetailed with the Conference slogan: "Little girls with dreams," she said, "become women with vision."

Women with vision – and men – have been offered further incentives by FIFA's vision for women's football, which not only features increased investment and prize money but also a 32-team World Cup; a Women's Club World Cup; and even the prospect of a World League – all of which translate into stimulating challenges for the coaching profession in terms of developing players and teams equipped to compete at the highest international levels.

At the Conference, this interlocked with discussions on the key areas of the AFC Vision: grassroots football, development competitions, elite youth programmes and coach education. In terms of the latter, FIFA's strategy includes the creation of smoother pathways for women towards careers in coaching and the implementation of, to use FIFA's own words: "mentoring programmes to

ensure that female coaches have the same education and opportunities as their male counterparts".

Where does Asia go from here? What dreams do we want to convert into reality? These two basic questions were posed by AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh during his keynote presentation at the Conference. With a view to provoke debate, he pinpointed three important areas.

Firstly, we want more girls to play football. FIFA's strategy, incidentally, embraces 'vastly improving access to the game for girls' with a target of reaching 60 million players by 2026 and doubling the number of MAs with organised youth leagues for female players. Among the AFC countries, there are hurdles to leap over, such as shortfalls in terms of infrastructure, investment and domestic competitions – not to mention cultural influences and, it has to be said, some negative attitudes towards women's football.

Secondly, we want talented girls to have opportunities to practise more and to receive high-quality coaching.

And, thirdly, we want AFC clubs and national teams to compete successfully at the highest level. These two items on the wish list are inter-related in terms of providing incentives to upgrade standards of coaching and coach education. We want coaches – and players – to read the game shrewdly enough to spot, understand and respond to what is happening during a particular match. We want coaches who not only understand strategies and tactics but are also willing to study other coaches, to profit from experience, to continually increase their knowledge and to become ever more familiar with the subtleties of the game.

By bringing together representatives from so many Member Associations, the Conference added momentum to the development of women's football in Asia. Soleen

Al-Zoubi, Head of Women's Football at the Jordan Football Association and member of the AFC Women's Football Committee, said: "this Conference has been vital in providing insights on the latest trends and shifts in women's football. We have collected so many ideas and identified several areas for improvement, particularly in technical development, which we plan to include as part of our wider strategy for women's football in Jordan."

The enthusiasm was echoed by Maymol Rocky, who, in 2017, became the first woman to lead the national team of India, as the country prepares to host the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup.

"This conference has been a great opportunity to learn from the best. But above all, the quality of content and conversations has been hugely beneficial. Women's football is now given greater priority. Nutrition, infrastructure, quality coaching - all areas of development have grown significantly and the future of the women's game in Asia is brighter than ever."

In other words, Asian women's football can dare to dream.



COACHING CONVENTION

BADGES OF DISTINCTION

Foundations for the future of Asian football are being laid at a heartening rate thanks to a trinity of technical projects, each aimed at raising performance standards in football throughout Asia. And work is progressing apace on the trio aimed at producing a coherent picture from the many-hued pieces of the Asian jigsaw puzzle.

Barely two years have passed since the AFC Coaching Convention was presented to the participants at the 2nd AFC Coach Education Conference staged in Kuala Lumpur in, to be precise, mid-March 2018. AFC-endorsed coaching diplomas, they were informed, signified no guarantee of success but provided a confirmation of professional competence. The Convention set out to be an endorsement tool based on regulations and guidelines for minimum standards in coach education. The launch of the AFC project came 20 years after a similar scheme had taken shape in Europe, and, as the editorial in this issue comments, “its impact has been far-reaching and significant in raising the quality of the game on that continent”.



The Convention guidelines have a clear objective of properly preparing student coaches for the realities of their profession. This entails stepping away from a tutor-dominated academic approach based on classroom environments and an emphasis on theoretical learning. At AFC-approved ‘B licence’ and ‘A licence’ courses, a minimum of 50% of the duration (120 and 180 hours respectively) need to be devoted to practical aspects such as coaching, teaching or observing, including work experience on training grounds and study visits. ‘Pro licence’

courses go a considerable step further, with a requirement that at least 216 of the 360 hours of tuition are dedicated to reality-based practical work.

Since the beginning of 2019, AFC-endorsed diplomas are being issued exclusively to MAs who have become signatories to the Convention and whose coach education courses meet the Convention criteria. Even in such a short space of time, Member Associations have reacted positively – not least because they have spotted a golden opportunity to develop the skills of their staff coaches and to implement coherent footballing philosophies, marrying the minimum AFC standards with their individual circumstances.

As the chart reveals, Australia, China PR, Japan, Korea Republic and Qatar have already been ratified at ‘Pro licence’ level. This quintet is followed by a group of 11 accepted at ‘A licence’ level. Half a dozen with ‘B licence’ status (Kyrgyz Republic and Palestine are the most recent arrivals on board) round off the total of 22 MAs whose rapid responses allowed the project to be fast out of the blocks – until the global pandemic applied the brakes to evaluation processes involving a further 19 Member Associations (two at ‘Pro’ level; five at ‘A’ and 12 at ‘B’). It means that, after barely two years, only half a dozen MAs have yet to apply for membership. Hearteningly, it also confirms that Asian football as a whole recognises coach education as a crucial aspect of their future development.

AFC COACHING CONVENTION

CATEGORIES

PRO - Level



FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA LIMITED



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA
KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QFA
QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

A - Level



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



Jordan Football Association



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



Football Association of Malaysia



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

B - Level



NATIONAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

GRASSROOTS VIGOROUS GROWTH

In the meantime, grassroots have also been spreading at considerable pace. The AFC Grassroots Charter has been greeted with an equally enthusiastic response since its launch in 2018 to promote mass participation in grassroots football; organised play with appropriate coaching; and, quite simply, love of the game. Levels of dedication could be measured when the AFC Grassroots Awards were presented as a curtain-raising ceremony at the AFC Women's Football Conference at the end of 2019 – and by the statements made by the winners when they stepped on stage.

Japan's Eiichiro Matsuki, named Best Grassroots Leader for his work (since 1977) in providing pitches in kindergartens, primary schools and parks as part of the JFA Green Project, commented: "I'm proud to receive this award but my involvement in grassroots football is from pure passion. A big thank you to the AFC and JFA for their strong support and vision to continue promoting football at the grassroots level. It is important that the sport reaches different communities across Asia."

Paro FC of Bhutan took the Best Grassroots Club award thanks to their 'Catch Them Young' and 'Keep Them Moving' programmes, allied with fun football for parents, monks and the disabled.

Paro president Karma Jigme said: "We believe that football is for everyone and our goal is to ensure that



people from different cultures and backgrounds have the opportunity to play. Football is a tool for social change, and we will continue to reach out to more people in our grassroots activities."

The ISF Football Programme in Cambodia won the Best Grassroots Project award for offering fun football to 3,500 youngsters of all abilities, including games for the blind, those with hearing impediments and HIV positives, along with wheelchair football.

Receiving the award, Vicheka Chourp said: "Football can empower communities regardless of their abilities. Our projects target different groups and we can use the sport as a tool for character building and to instil lifelong values."



BEST GRASSROOTS LEADER 2019

EIICHIRO MATSUKI

BEST GRASSROOTS CLUB 2019

PARO FOOTBALL CLUB

BEST GRASSROOTS PROJECT 2019

ISF FOOTBALL PROGRAMME



AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER

CATEGORIES

GOLD



FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA LIMITED



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

SILVER



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PHILIPPINES FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

BRONZE



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



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KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



FEDERACAO FUTEBOL TIMOR-LESTE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



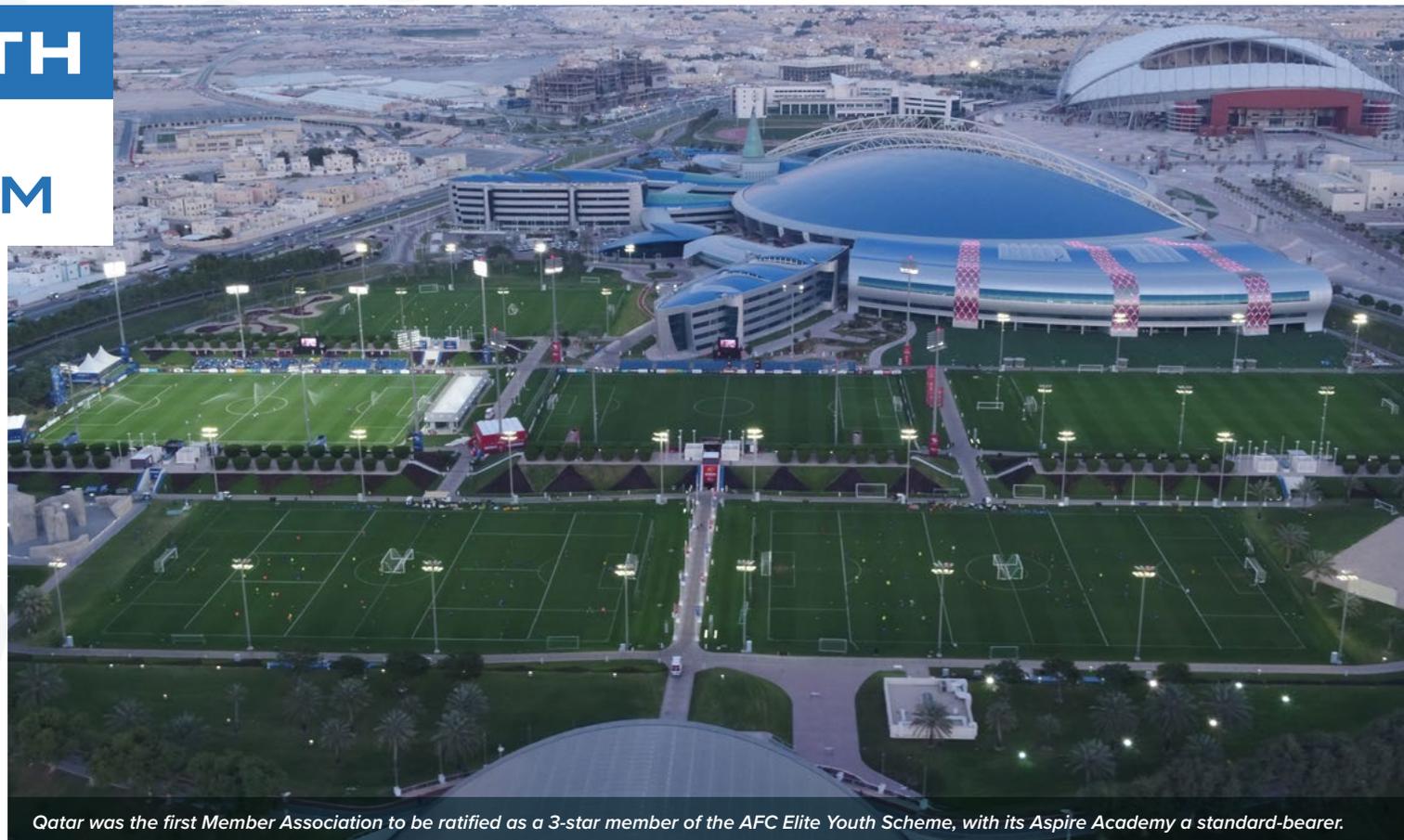
VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

Meanwhile, the success of the AFC Grassroots Charter can be statistically measured. As recently as the previous issue of the Coaches Circle, the number of affiliated MAs stood at 15. By March 2020, this had practically doubled. Australia, Japan and Korea Republic continued to form the leading trio, having been ratified at Gold level, while the endorsement of Tajikistan brought the tally to six at Silver level, with the 19 Bronze ratifications bringing the total to 28 – which could have been higher had the pandemic not hampered the endorsements of Qatar (Gold) or Iraq (Silver), or the upgrading of Hong Kong to Silver level.

ELITE YOUTH YOUTHFUL ENTHUSIASM

Just about every page in this publication highlights the crucial relevance of youth development to the future of Asian football. And the last issue commented on the launch of a brand-new AFC Elite Youth Scheme designed to support the education of talented young players – and to promote the creation of youth academies as a means to that end. The Scheme sets out to lend a helping hand to MAs in the development of their elite youth programmes in harmony with criteria set out by AFC.

AFC ratification takes the form of a three-star structure based on 11 criteria. AFC endorsement for full membership requires at least one academy at club or national level, though provisional ratification may be granted if the remaining ten criteria are met. The project was launched with a target of engaging half of AFC's Member Associations within a time-span of two years, and, even though the pandemic has tightened the reins, that milestone remains within the field of vision.



Qatar was the first Member Association to be ratified as a 3-star member of the AFC Elite Youth Scheme, with its Aspire Academy a standard-bearer.

Qatar, with the Aspire Academy as standard-bearer, was the first to be ratified as a 3-star member, followed by Korea Republic (with the Jeonbuk FC Academy), Japan (the Fukushima Academy was runner-up in the 2019 AFC Youth Academy of the Year award), Malaysia (with their National Football Development Programme), Myanmar (with three AFC-endorsed academies) and Uzbekistan (with the FC

Bunyodkor and FC Nasaf Academies) are on board at 2-star level, while Mongolia has been granted provisional membership. With seven others either in the evaluation process or, as is the case with India, awaiting formal ratification, 15 Member Associations have responded rapidly to the invitation to spearhead the project. The figures add up to good news for the future of football in Asia.

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

CATEGORIES

ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR



KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

2 - STAR



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

1 - STAR



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION

PROVISIONAL



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS TO BE EVALUATED

2 - STAR



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

1 - STAR



THE HONG KONG FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION LTD.



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE

PROVISIONAL



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

FINAL WORD

The pandemic may have caused serious disruptions in the global sporting calendar for 2020, but nothing can detract from achievements in the recent past. As the final word to this edition, Coaches Circle pays tribute to the technicians who led teams to success at AFC events – and to two members of the profession who enjoyed an award-winning 2019.

Chung Jung-yong was named AFC Coach of the Year after leading Korea Republic to the final of the FIFA U-20 World Cup.

And Japan's women's national team coach Asako Takakura was lauded with the AFC Women's Coach of the Year award for a remarkable seventh time.

These are the other names who have joined them on the coaching roll of honour after reaching the finals of AFC competitions:

15-28 September 2019

AFC U-16 WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP 2019

Japan v DPR Korea 2-1
Thailand

MICHIHISA KANO

HWANG YANG SONG

27 Oct - 9 Nov 2019

AFC U-19 WOMEN'S CHAMPIONSHIP 2019

Japan v DPR Korea 2-1
Thailand

FUTOSHI IKEDA

SUNG GWON SONG

January - December 2019

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE 2019

Al Hilal (Saudi Arabia) v Urawa Red Diamonds (Japan) 3-0 on aggregate

RAZVAN LUCESCU

TSUYOSHI OTSUKI

AFC CUP 2019

Al Ahed (Lebanon) v 4.25 SC (DPR Korea) 1-0
Final in Kuala Lumpur

BASSEM MARMAR

YUN SON

8-26 January 2020

AFC U23 CHAMPIONSHIP 2020

Korea Republic v Saudi Arabia 1-0
Thailand

KIM HAK-BUM

SAAD AL-SHEHRI

AFC TECHNICAL REPORTS



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