



COACHES CIRCLE

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



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THE BIG INTERVIEW WITH
JULEN LOPETEGUI



PAST SUCCESSES – FUTURE HOPES

Andy Roxburgh, AFC Technical Director

When the draw for the 23rd FIFA World Cup was held in Washington DC on Friday, December 5, 2025, anticipation and excitement for the final tournament in Canada, USA and Mexico was intensified. The occasion and the venue also triggered a recollection from the 1994 World Cup which was held in the USA. As a member of FIFA's Technical Team, I was in the RFK Stadium in Washington when Saeed Al Owairan of Saudi Arabia scored the only goal of the game against much-fancied Belgium. In the midday sun and with only five minutes gone, Al Owairan received the ball halfway inside his own half of the field. With impressive pace and close control, he left six Belgians in his wake and swept the ball with his right foot high into the far corner of the net. It was Saudi Arabia's debut appearance at the World Cup, yet they progressed to the knockout rounds, thanks to the contribution of this solo counter-attack goal by their gifted, elusive number 10.

Four years later in France 1998, I was based in Lyon and watched Japan make their first, tentative involvement in a World Cup. Although they didn't win a game, they played well and Masashi Nakayama scored their first goal in a final tournament, albeit in a 2-1 loss to Jamaica. However, the highlight in Lyon was Islamic Republic of Iran's impressive 2-1 victory over the USA, with Hamid Estili's brilliant header, just before half-time, sending them on their way. The atmosphere in the stadium that evening was intense, exciting and all-consuming.



For Asia, everything changed when Korea Republic and Japan co-hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2002. The former set a new benchmark for the Continent by reaching the final four, which included the defeat of Spain in the Quarter-final; while the latter qualified for the Round of 16 before being eliminated 1-0 by Turkey. Since that time, AFC's teams and players have starred on the global stage. Remember Tim Cahill's left-foot volley for Australia versus the Netherlands in 2014, or in Russia 2018, Son Heung-min's 96th minute finish for Korea Republic which sealed a 2-0 victory over Germany? And who can forget Japan's exploits in 2018 when they were leading Belgium in the Round of 16 by two goals to nil in Rostov, only to lose 3-2, with the Belgian winner coming in the 94th minute when Nacer Chadli finished off an incisive counter-attack.

The last FIFA World Cup, held in Qatar in 2022, was the second to be hosted on the Asian continent. Feeling very much at home in that environment, Saudi Arabia beat Argentina, the eventual winners, with Salem Al Dawsari's decisive goal proving to be one of the tournament's best. Meanwhile, Japan recorded victories over Spain and Germany; Korea Republic overcame Portugal; and Australia were victorious against Denmark and Tunisia. Optimism reigned, but the Round of 16 saw Asia's three remaining contenders bow out. The inspiring promise shown by Japan, Australia and Korea Republic dissipated into a heroic 'hard-luck story'.

Back in 1994, Asia had only two representatives in the final tournament of the FIFA World Cup. In 2026, we will have eight teams (maybe nine, if Graham Arnold's Iraq can successfully navigate the inter-continental play-offs), and some will have high hopes

of progressing deep into the knockout phase. It will be a thrill for Jordan and Uzbekistan to participate for the first time at this level. Their development work and their performances in Asia have shown that both deserve this opportunity to impress against the world's best teams.

Every nation that has qualified for the FIFA World Cup 2026 will be looking forward with anticipation and excitement. As football legend and World Cup winner Zinédine Zidane once said: 'Football is the only thing that can bring together an entire country'. Expectations will be high, sometimes excessive, and head coaches will be under pressure to deliver. Every move, every decision will be scrutinised, and challenges such as heat, altitude, time changes, travel, kick-off times and media demands will need to be dealt with if teams are to be at their best on the pitch. Of course, a touch of 1994 magic 'à la Saeed Al-Owairan' would be very helpful.



TOMORROW CAN BE BETTER THAN TODAY

He is one of two goalkeepers to have played for both Real Madrid and Barcelona. He moved to the Spanish capital at 18 from Real Sociedad in his native Basque country and, after a spell on loan to Castellón and three seasons at Logroñés, played under Johan Cruyff and Bobby Robson at Barça before rounding off a 317-appearance playing career between the posts at Rayo Vallecano. In the meantime, he had represented Spain at senior and Under-21 levels and had been a squad member at the 1994 FIFA World Cup. Turning to coaching, he made an impact with Spain's age-limit teams, winning European titles with the Under-19s in 2012 and the Under-21s in the following year. After a spell with FC Porto, he returned to Spain to succeed the legendary Vicente Del Bosque at the helm of the national team and qualified them for the 2018 FIFA World Cup with nine wins and a draw, only to be dismissed just before the final tournament in Russia kicked-off and immediately rejoin Real Madrid as head coach. After another European title with Sevilla, he took on a Wolverhampton Wanderers team that had won two of its 16 league matches and, amazingly, avoided relegation. Then, after a second spell in the English Premier League with West Ham United, he took over the Qatar national team and qualified them for the 2026 FIFA World Cup via a nerve-wracking play-off tie against the United Arab Emirates. During the FIFA U-17 World Cup in Qatar, Coaches Circle caught up with...



JULEN LOPETEGUI





FIRST OF ALL, CONGRATULATIONS ON QUALIFYING FOR THE FIFA WORLD CUP 2026. IT WILL BE QATAR'S SECOND APPEARANCE – THE FIRST AS HOSTS IN 2022. SO THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THE TEAM HAS ACTUALLY QUALIFIED – AND YOU HELPED THEM TO DO IT. DURING THE TIME YOU'VE SPENT IN QATAR, WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF ASIAN FOOTBALL?

Thank you for the kind words. I have been here for six months and, step by step, I have been changing my vision about Asian football. The first thing is that there is a big, big passion for football. A very big passion. And there is a very balanced level of strength among a lot of teams. There are 47 territories in the Asian

confederation and only eight can gain the honour of going to the World Cup. Well, eight and a half to be exact because Iraq has had to fight for another place. So the main thing to say is that it's very, very difficult because of the evenly-balanced strength among so many countries and the very few places available. Okay, fortunately, we have been able to achieve a dream that has never happened in the history of the country, and my impression about our football in Qatar is that it is improving a lot in our league. There are now a lot of players who want to stay here to play their football. And, step by step, this is helping local players to perform at a higher level. This is one thing that you can feel from the first moment you arrive here.

JAPAN HAVE MAYBE EXPRESSED ASIAN AMBITIONS BY SAYING THAT THEIR AIM IS TO WIN THE WORLD CUP BY 2050. AND PEOPLE LIKE ANGE POSTECOGLOU, WHO HAS WORKED THERE, HAVE SAID, "I THINK THEY'LL DO IT BEFORE THAT". DO YOU THINK THAT OBJECTIVE IS REALISTIC?

Yes, teams like Japan, Korea Republic and so on are really, really strong – and some other countries as well. But Japan in particular have a lot of players in the major leagues in Europe. If you check country by country, you can see that many, many players are performing in very good European teams. The consequence is that they are gaining the top-level experience that is key to progress and improvement. In the future, I think that we will see more and more Asian players going through this process. And this is positive.

YOU QUALIFIED FOR THE WORLD CUP WITH SPAIN IN 2018 BUT YOU NEVER HAD THE CHANCE TO LIVE THE EXPERIENCE IN RUSSIA. SO WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU PERSONALLY TO NOW GO WITH QATAR TO THE WORLD CUP FINALS?

When they called me about taking over the Qatar team, my first feeling was excitement about the chance to go to a World Cup, even knowing that we had very big difficulties and, it seemed, few possibilities. Because at that stage we had to win against IR Iran in my first match here, to have the possibility to go into the next round. Fortunately, we did. In my mind there was a strong ambition to go to Qatar and to face a big, big challenge. My staff and I, we love to face big challenges. Even if we get the impression that it's an 'impossible' challenge. When I went to Wolverhampton, they were right down at the bottom in the relegation zone. My first match in charge was on Boxing Day away to Everton, and we were five points adrift at the bottom. We won 2-1 and it turned out to be the second time in Premier League history that the team at the bottom at Christmas was able to get out of relegation. So if people ask me why I came to Qatar it's because we had the possibility to go to the World Cup in June and face up to a very, very difficult challenge. What happened in Russia...well, everybody knows what happened. The important thing to remember is that during two years with the Spanish national team we were undefeated and we played really good football. Now the focus is on the present. And the present is the national team of Qatar. Fortunately, we achieved a big dream by qualifying and now the future is Qatar in the World Cup. We can look forward to a really big challenge.

YOU WERE EXTREMELY SUCCESSFUL AS THE COACH OF SPAIN'S AGE-LIMIT TEAMS. BASED ON THAT EXPERIENCE, WHY DO YOU THINK ASIAN MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS SHOULD INVEST WHOLEHEARTEDLY IN ELITE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT?

I think that the first thing that you should invest in when working with children is to inspire a lot of passion about football. This is the first step. Teaching them that football is like life. There are times when you have to overcome a lot of difficulties. And that sometimes you can find help but, basically, it's about your personality, your inner strength, your spirit. If you want to be a football player, this is the basic first step. Then, in today's global world, you need to handle and exploit all the information that is available, including things like artificial intelligence. But, above all, you have to transmit the need to put in passion, hard work and humility. It's about managing the context that they have around them. Even when they are improving as players and taking steps very close to professional football, they have to be able to handle the context – family life and all those sorts of things. It's a similar scenario for coaches. You have a lot of information and things like good tactical analysis to help you develop players. And you have to make good use of everything you have available. If you don't invest in work during the elite years, you won't get the return. If you can't transmit that message, you are not helping them to take the next step. For me, behaviour is the key and they have to discover, as soon as possible, the realities of the sport.



HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A COACH? EVERYBODY IMMEDIATELY SAYS THAT YOU'RE INCREDIBLY PROFESSIONAL. IS THAT RIGHT?

That's one thing. But, basically, I love my work. And if I love my work, it doesn't feel like 'work'. I can't think of anything better than working with my staff. It's my passion. And if I spend 12 hours per day with my passion, it's because I love it and because my wife allows me to do it! She understands me and she accepts that it's sometimes not easy to combine with family time. But if you ask me to describe myself it would be basically as a person who always believes that tomorrow can be better than today. And always with my eyes and my mind open, trying to learn rather than teach. Each day you can learn something new. I love to know new things, to discuss whether we can do this or that. It's good for me and for my staff too.



WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE KEY INGREDIENTS OF WINNING AT THE TOP LEVEL? WHAT ARE THE MAIN THINGS TO MAKE THAT POSSIBLE?

It is always difficult to win and at the top level it is much more difficult. First of all, you need to have good players and know how to handle them and to help them to develop. This is your first step. And if these good players are to become top players, they have to work for the team. This is key. Sometimes you can have fantastic top players but playing only with their own ideas and not thinking about what is best for the team. I always say that one big player can win one match. But only one top team wins the championship, the finals and the titles. So if you want to win titles, you have to make sure that the best players all work for the team. Talent is not physical, technical and tactical. You have to understand that you need to work for the common idea. There are a lot of ways to show talent. The way you react when you are losing a match; the will to do your best in the next action. There are a lot of players who do their best when the team is winning and there are other players who show their character in the worst moments. This is talent.



THESE DAYS THERE'S A BIG SPANISH INFLUENCE IN FOOTBALL IN QATAR. WHAT DO YOU THINK SPANISH COACHES BRING TO THE GAME? ARE THERE ANY SPECIAL QUALITIES?

It's difficult to answer because no two Spanish coaches are the same! But it's not something peculiar to Qatar because now you see a lot of Spanish coaches in England and other countries. Maybe you can talk about a way of understanding the game. But I remember that it took some courage for coaches to step outside Spanish football. The first to make an impact was Rafa Benítez. I think all of us Spanish coaches have to be very grateful to Rafa because he went to England and won the Champions League. He showed the way and

since then a lot of us have followed his path. But not working in the same way. If you compare Rafa and Pep Guardiola, for example, it shows that each coach has his own way of working. Now you can see Spanish coaches working in various countries. But the same applies to the French or the Portuguese. Football is now global. On the other hand, we come from different environments. The leagues, the youth teams, the coach education...all of these create different environments. And the environment in Spain certainly encourages the development of good coaches. But the main thing is that in Spain children love to play football – the boys and now the girls as well. And, around them, there are a lot of people who want to be coaches. This means there are a lot of good academies – which is very important. Not just the big, big clubs but academies like Espanyol or Villarreal are doing top-quality development work. And the consequence is that, with so many Spanish players now in the leagues in England and other countries, young players are now getting opportunities to show their qualities early, to grow up more quickly and develop their qualities and skills in the Spanish League.

AS A FORMER ELITE GOALKEEPER WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF GOALKEEPERS TODAY? IT'S BECOME ANOTHER WORLD.

Yes, the role has changed a lot since my day. But there is one main rule that has changed football, not just for the keeper, but for the way the whole team plays. All over the world. The rule that you can't touch the ball with your hands when it is passed back. That changed football. It created the demand for keepers to be

equipped to play with their feet and it opened up a lot of offensive structures based on using the keeper as one player more when you are recycling or when you are building from your own box. I suffered with this rule, because it came in when I was 28 and, at that time, we didn't have goalkeeper coaches. We had never played with our feet – only with the hands. Now the goalkeeper uses the feet a lot, plays higher, manages more space, gives the team continuity when recycling play...but is still obliged to make saves!

YOU WERE BROUGHT UP IN THE BASQUE REGION OF SPAIN. A VERY SIMPLE QUESTION: HOW DID YOU LEARN TO PLAY FOOTBALL?

It seems a simple question, but my story is very curious, very strange. I played my first match as keeper when I was 15 years old. Because in my village, we didn't have a football pitch. We had to play in a 'frontón' – a court used for games of Basque pelota. My father was a sportsman – a really good weightlifter. But in my house, I was the odd one out because I dreamed about playing football. Yet I couldn't play. When I was 15, my parents paid for me to go to a private school and allowed me to go to San Sebastián – about 40 minutes from my village. I was asked if I wanted to play football and of course I said 'yes'. But they told me there was only one position available – goalkeeper. I had never played in goal but being a footballer was my dream. So I accepted. Three years later, Real Madrid signed me and paid big money to Real Sociedad – the club that had taken me on a year after I started playing at school. They saw that I had the right physique but I knew nothing about the technical or tactical sides of goalkeeping. It's a strange, almost unbelievable story.



COMING BACK TO THE PRESENT, WHAT ARE YOUR PRIORITIES IN PREPARING QATAR FOR THE WORLD CUP?

The first thing is the Arab Cup [the FIFA competition hosted by Qatar in December 2025] and the plan was to change many players because we have to take care about how many matches they play in the coming months and the risk of injuries. So we have taken the decision to open the door for the young players and check them over. If we can expand our pool of players to 35 or 40 that will give us more options, as we don't have a lot to choose from. About our planning and strategy, I would like players to have maximum time competing

with their teams. I don't want to spend three months in a camp. I prefer them to stay with their teams until the end of April, more or less. After that we have, I think, enough time to prepare. Sometimes you can be together for more time than you need – and that can create problems for the mind. The players have to care about family and children. If they are competing with their teams, it also allows me to choose players at the last moment. For me, this will be key. No one can live on what he did in October. I made it clear to the players that, even if we made history, nobody can live on what they did in the Asian Cup. The past is for the museum. If we want to be competitive, we have to put that to one side and look forward.

YOU'VE HAD A LOT OF SUCCESSES, BUT WHAT WOULD YOU PICK AS THE BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT OF YOUR CAREER SO FAR?

I have very good memories about when I started working in the national teams. We won European titles with the Under-19s and the Under-21s. And, after that, we had an incredible time at Sevilla, winning the Europa League and playing three times consecutively in the Champions League. After that, getting out of relegation at Wolverhampton was an incredible achievement for us. We were safe four matches before the end of the season even though the team had only 10 points when we arrived. I prefer not to choose one achievement. Maybe the most difficult one has been here because we arrived needing to beat IR Iran and we had to adapt very fast.



In today's global world, you need to handle and exploit all the information that is available, including things like artificial intelligence.



WHO HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST INFLUENCE IN YOUR COACHING CAREER?

I've had a lot of very good coaches. Each one different. Perhaps Luis Aragonés. And Vicente Del Bosque who was the assistant coach at Castellón when I started out. He was like a father figure. Afterwards, Johan Cruyff and Bobby Robson, who had José Mourinho as his second-in-command. Pep Guardiola was an influence and became one of my best friends. We are very close. I remember above all my last year as a player, when I started thinking that I would love to become a coach and started asking why we were doing this or why we were not doing that. Juande Ramos was my last coach and was important for me too. .



WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A YOUNG COACH WHO HAS JUST GOT HIS PRO LICENCE AND IS STARTING OUT?

Work a lot. And don't worry about having doubts. I don't understand coaches saying they don't have doubts. I do. Doubts are normal and allow you to wait until the last moment to take better decisions. It's not as if I know everything. No, no. I have to take decisions because it's my job. I'm always thinking that I can improve my decision. This is important. Having doubts doesn't mean that you show a lack of security. I like to think a lot about how I can put this or that into my team, how I can improve. It's also important to be self-critical – but not too much. I remember Antonio Conte saying that each defeat was like having someone in the family pass away. The next day, you have to show your players that you're still alive and still strong. This is an exercise that you have to do for yourself. Something that comes with experience – and you can't buy experience.



Doubts are normal and allow you to wait until the last moment to take better decisions.



AFC GRASSROOTS CONFERENCE

THE NEXT CHAPTER IN THE GRASSROOTS STORY



If proof were needed that grassroots football is a vast territory, the AFC Grassroots Conference provided it. The programme addressed an immense variety of topics, issues and challenges. More than 100 managers, leaders and specialists attended the three-day event in Kuala Lumpur which, as AFC Grassroots Panel member Cheri Stewart told the AFC website, “was an incredible platform for all the MAs to convene and see how far they’ve come. At every edition, we see new faces who bring fantastic new ideas to the table, and it gives us a chance to also understand challenges from different perspectives. It is heartening to see the amount of hard work being put into this ecosystem, and I already cannot wait for the next conference.”

It's only natural for Coaches Circle to focus on the coaching areas of the grassroots territory. But the boundaries are blurred. First reactions to discussions about player retention, for instance, might be that sustaining player participation beyond youth level is an issue alien to the coaching fraternity. But when surveys reveal that, prominent among the most common reasons for young players to drop out of the game, are the attitudes and behaviour of coaches; an excessive emphasis on results; or over-ambitious coaches who take the fun element out of the game, it provokes second thoughts. Coaches are deeply involved. So during the Conference many of the sessions not dealing specifically with on-the-pitch issues nevertheless provided food for thought among all those involved in various roles at the base of the footballing pyramid.

FIFA's Max De Vylder, for example, stepped on stage to present key excerpts from the vast project he has led: the compilation of a global report on amateur football, which has now been published and distributed

to all MAs. It makes fascinating reading – not least because it helps to compare progress in the AFC territories with those in other Confederations. Next on stage on the final morning was Professor Masao Nakayama, a member of the AFC Grassroots Panel, who has been leading research conducted by a team at Tsukuba University in Japan with a view to, as he put it, “providing an evidence-based understanding of grassroots football across Asia” and helping the AFC to design and deliver region-specific support to MAs for their youth football projects. AFC Consultant Robin Russell had previously underlined the importance of efficient data-gathering with a view to harnessing the ‘market potential’ of grassroots football over the next five years, including the use of Artificial Intelligence – a tool which, as he explains later in this publication, can also be a valuable item in the coach’s toolbox.



In terms of setting grassroots benchmarks, the session presented by UEFA Technical Advisor Frank Ludolph undoubtedly helped many participants to compile their wish-lists. Over a four-year period, he explained, UEFA is investing €55m in supporting grassroots football across a continent where there are 16.2m registered players with 7.6m playing football at schools; where there are 147,000 grassroots clubs and 1.3m certified grassroots coaches, including more than 300,000 holders of a C Licence and a million who have a Grassroots Leader Certificate after a 16-hour ‘taster’ course for parents and teachers. His presentation of the entire grassroots spectrum in Europe also highlighted the importance of promoting links between schools and clubs, alongside the major roles played by stakeholders such as local authorities, governments and commercial sponsors. The AFC, incidentally, is making progress along the same pathway, with the C Licence introduced into the AFC Coaching Convention, underpinned by a D Certificate for grassroots coaches and leaders.



Prize winners and Olympic gold medalists like Kaoru Mitoma and Shogo Taniguchi in their national team.



The Conference also promoted interaction via a series of breakout sessions where, as the AFC website reporter wrote, “participants engaged enthusiastically in a range of themes” – such as the main challenges foreseeable over the next decade; the life skills to be learned in grassroots environments (and how best to develop them); or what individual MAs can do to promote the grassroots game and make it accessible to as many young people as possible. The latter topic had been broached by AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh in his keynote presentation on the opening afternoon and debate was further fuelled when Max De Vylder mentioned that, in 121 of the world’s MAs, amateur footballers are obliged to pay for the privilege of playing the game – a scenario at odds with the view that

“football must be free for children to play” expressed by Jürgen Klopp when asked to comment on the ‘pay-to-play’ model prevalent in the USA. The codicil is that the FIFA statistic relates to amateur football in general – at all age-levels. The key question is about what can be done by Asian MAs to ensure free access for young children to take up the game.

Pointing the spotlight at the sections of the Conference expressly concerned with coaching, first mention has to go to the AFC Youth Coach of the Year awards presented during the opening session. The familiar figure of Trevor Morgan, interviewed in our previous edition after leading Australia to victory in the AFC U20 Asian Cup™, appeared on stage, along with Zohreh Jafari, winner of the female award in recognition of her pioneering development work in women’s football in the Islamic Republic of Iran over the last decade – especially her contributions to grassroots and youth football at the Mahdokht Nami Football School in the Isfahan region. “In the future,” she said, “I hope to contribute even more and establish an environment that helps players grow under better conditions.”



She exemplified a comment by Andy Roxburgh. “Being a grassroots coach or leader is hard work. But it is very rewarding.” He went on to remind the participants that “as a developer of players, the basic requirements are to know the game; to transmit your enthusiasm; to be a great organiser; to encourage everybody; to keep order; and to influence performances.” He also stressed that coaching techniques need to vary during the successive phases of development – especially during the age bracket of nine to 12 years old. “This foundation phase,” he said, “is a ‘golden age’ of learning, of mastering the ball, of basic understanding and of falling in love with the game.”

And so to the epicentre of the sport – the field of play. “All roads lead to the pitch,” said Roxburgh. “And that’s where the action must be dynamic, simple, exciting and rewarding.” Formats are fundamental – especially when the AFC / University of Tsukuba survey, like many others, have commented that young players frequently suffer from premature exposure to 11v11 football.

This was a core topic during a session led by Roxburgh and the AFC Head of Coach Education, Wim Koeversmans, on the premise that, while it is not the AFC’s desire to impose formats, guidelines can be helpful when MAs are developing their strategies. For players of 7-8 years old, there is a great deal to be said for a format of 4v4 – or 5v5 if goalkeepers are on the agenda. Using playing areas of approximately 40x20 metres, it means that 40 or 50 players can comfortably enjoy their football on a single full-size pitch. “4v4 may be the smallest and easiest form of football,” Koeversmans commented, “but none of the key ingredients are lost. The rules are simple, with no throw-ins or offside. The periods of play can be quite short – about 10 minutes each way, for example. The size of the pitch, the ball and the goals are appropriate for children of this age. And there can be a ‘game teacher’ on the sidelines rather than a referee on the pitch. So they are learning in their own world, without any adult pressure.”

Constant contact with the ball means that basic skills such as control, passing, dribbling, shooting and tackling can be developed in an atmosphere where elements of fair play and enjoyment can easily be encouraged. Having laid the foundations for learning to master the ball in 4v4 scenarios, players of nine or 10 years old can be encouraged to make purposeful use of the ball in the 6v6 format on a larger area or

7v7 with goalkeepers across the width of the pitch. The 9v9 game is the logical progression for players in the U11-U12 age bracket while the introduction to 11v11 at the age of 13 is the cue to develop specific tasks within a teamwork mindset. And, at this stage, competitive environments need to be carefully gauged to avoid those drop-outs due to 'excessive emphasis on results'.

As Andy Roxburgh had commented during his keynote presentation, the entire grassroots process is about "promoting health, habits, happiness and hope." And a statement by AFC President Shaikh Salman Bin Ebrahim

Al Khalifa provides a fitting final word for this brief review of an intensive and varied event. "Developing football at the grassroots level," he said, "is about encouraging maximum participation, instilling a love for the sport, and harnessing the power of football to create well-rounded individuals." And, in this, grassroots coaches and leaders have a major role to play.

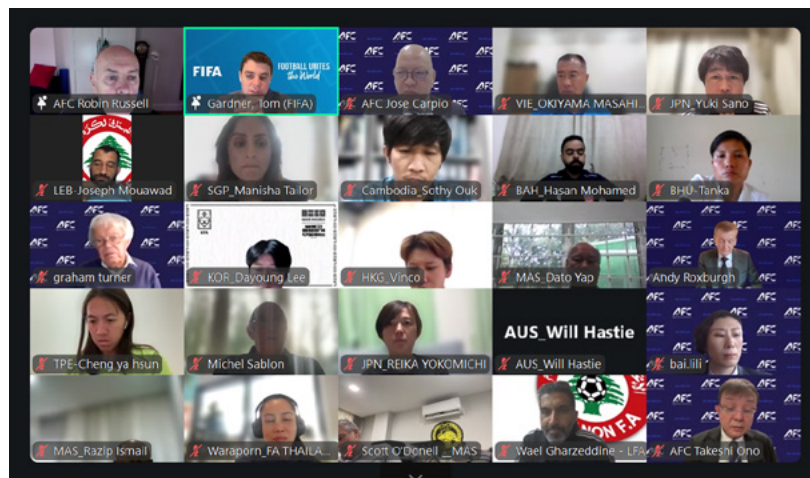


ONLINE SESSIONS

A BUZZING ONLINE COMMUNITY

As a prelude to kicking off 2026 with five months of hectic activity on the field of play at the eight final tournaments to be disputed between January and May, the last three months of 2025 were densely populated with online sessions dedicated to just about everything from FIFA World Cups to fitness coaching. First, and by no means least, was the Elite Club Coaches Forum which, in September, commemorated its 10th anniversary.

The 27 frontline coaches on the team sheet were joined by special guests Ange Postecoglou, Tom Gardner (leader of FIFA's Football Performance Insight team) and Roy Hodgson, whose track record in club and national team football would fill several pages. Inevitably, the first question to the former England manager was about the English Premier League and, more particularly, the qualities which make it a benchmarking competition in the global game. "Intensity is the first word that comes to mind," was his response. "I think the pace gets fiercer every year and it's increasingly difficult for players who are not athletically strong to survive. It's not just about running fast – it's a question of strength and power, even though it has become more similar to countries like France, Italy or Spain in terms of passing and technique."



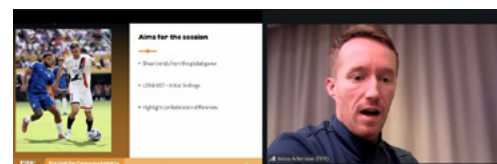
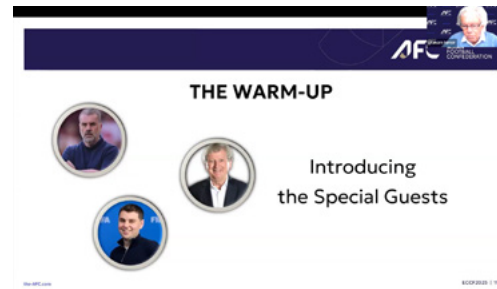
Recent seasons have highlighted that one of the challenges facing an increasing number of top coaches in AFC territories is the need to combine domestic leagues and cups with international competitions – and garner honourable results in both. Ange Postecoglou, looking back on the 2024/25 season when Tottenham Hotspur finished 17th in the Premier League but lifted the UEFA Europa League trophy, commented "It is challenging. The physicality in the Premier League is the highest it has ever been and it takes a lot out of you. So you need a strong, robust squad – and a lot of it is about how you manage your players and how you retain a really clear focus on every competition that you're in. And to have good turnarounds. Because if you've had a bad result in the league you don't want to carry that into the European competition – and vice versa. You need to plan in detail – especially when you're playing on a Thursday night, getting back in the early hours of Friday morning and having to prepare for a Sunday kick-off in the league. You're talking about 36 hours to

recover from the game and the trip, to have a training session and then perform again in a league where there aren't any easy games. I learned a lot, especially with all the injury issues, and realised the importance of having good support staff and an atmosphere in the club where everyone is fully committed. It is a massive challenge. That's why so many clubs in international competitions are bolstering up their squads to cope with it."



You can't win without tactical things, but emotion makes the difference

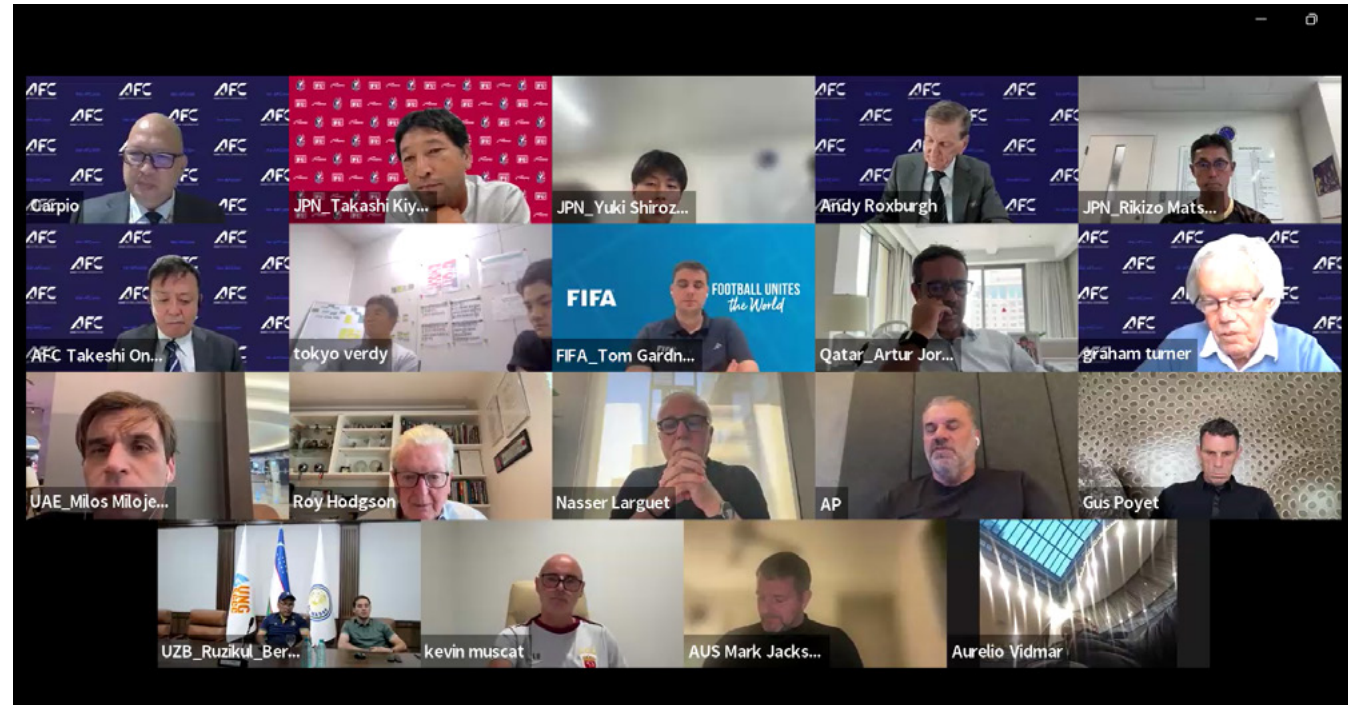
Jürgen Klopp



Of course, it's one thing to bolster a squad and another thing to keep them happy. "Yes, you've got a list of 25 players in Europe and in the Premier League," he added, "and most managers would prefer not to work with such a big squad, because there's always the risk of running into problems in the dressing-room where every player wants to contribute and to play matches. You can have difficulties on the training ground as well because, the greater the numbers, the less chance you have of working on the details. But the reality is that you need to manage big squads nowadays. It's maybe the lesser of two evils but it's almost impossible to navigate domestic and continental competitions with a small squad."

Gus Poyet, still at Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors at the time, agreed. "The draw also makes a big difference and you have to take a decision about whether you focus on the league because you don't feel you can succeed in the Champions League or whether you try to be fair to both competitions. You need to think about how you can cope with the squad that you have and take into account the travelling you have to do. It's understandable to think about giving lower priority to one of the competitions."

Mark Jackson, now in Thailand with Buriram United, recalled his experience in 2024/25 with Australia's Central Coast Mariners. "It was a unique experience for me and the football club," he said. "It was a privilege and we wanted to show our best in the competition. It didn't really work out that way because of the size of our squad and the kind of budgets we work with...it was highly challenging. But we had 16,17,18-year-olds in the squad and it opened their eyes to what high-level competition is all about. That was a positive experience




for us – and for me as a manager as well. It took its toll on the squad but it was a fantastic experience that gave growth to our young players."


Managing a large, sometimes star-studded squad was another topic raised during the Forum. "It's a question, in all walks of life, of the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes," Roy Hodgson commented. "It's about individuals and the concerns of the individual player. Equally important is that you treat the group as a group and focus on working towards a common goal: to succeed, to play well as a team. It's not a simple equation and it's one that needs a lot of thought."

"The first thing is that they're people," Ange Postecoglou agreed. "And they may have people around them saying things that are nice to the ears but not always the truth. I think the manager these days has to understand the person, the individual, where they come from, the background. You may be coaching young men from all over the world with different backgrounds, different beliefs, different value systems. So you can't treat them all the same."


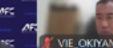
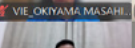


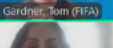
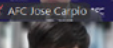
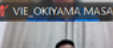
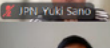


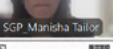
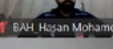
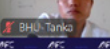





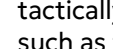
In the meantime, Tom Gardner had taken centre-stage to present interesting data from the FIFA Club World Cup – and this FIFA contribution was to be a common denominator in the final online sessions of 2025. During the session dedicated to Women's Football, he reviewed the first 24-team FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup in Morocco, where DPR Korea successfully renewed the title they had won in 2024. He highlighted their fast, direct attacking and the importance of the central striker's ability to hold the ball up under pressure; the line-breaking through passes which generated six goal attempts per game; and the average of 4.5 receptions behind the opposition's back line in comparison with Korea Republic's 1.8, China PR's 1.5 or Japan's 1.3 – the other AFC teams at the final tournament.




PREMIER COMPETITIONS



1. What is your view of the English Premier League?
2. How does it compare with other competitions you have participated in?




CHAMPION

Ange Postecoglou

After a 15-match campaign, you won the 2025 UEFA Europa League title.

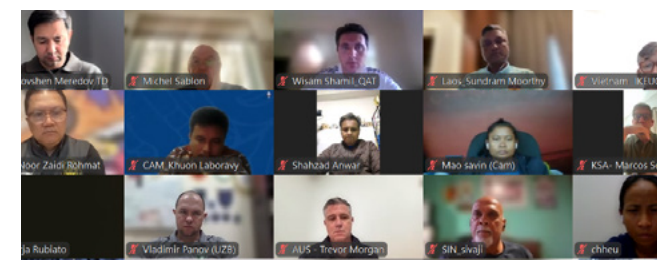
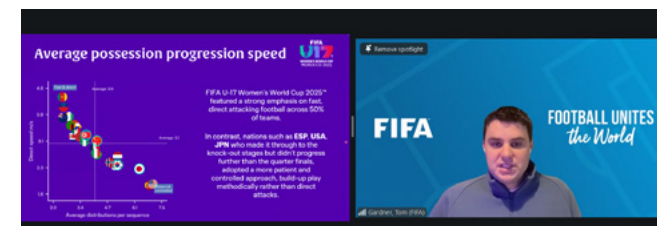
What were the reasons for your success and what advice would you give to coaching colleagues who are trying to win continental competitions?



Two days later, the men had the last word. At the FIFA U-20 World Cup in Chile, the quality of crossing emerged as an eye-catching trend. The tournament produced considerably fewer crosses than the previous edition in Argentina. But more were converted into goal attempts and 33% more resulted in goals. A similar trend emerged from the massive 48-team U-17 tournament brilliantly hosted by Qatar, where more crosses and cut-backs were delivered with intelligent criteria from the wide areas of the penalty box, rather than pumped in hopefully from the wings.

AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh also highlighted the renaissance of the long throw as an attacking weapon – even though a majority were delivered more hopefully than productively – and the fact that the tournament had also demonstrated the value of investing in youth academies. The prime example was provided in Qatar by silver-medallists Austria, a team based on players from the academies of two clubs (Salzburg and Rapid Vienna) who were well-organised, tactically mature and well-versed in facets of the game such as the art of collective high pressing.

Some of the other sessions are covered in more detail later in this publication. But, all in all, the sequence that rounded-off 2025 provided a wealth of hard data, input by experts and food for thought that will build a solid platform for assessments and comparisons as the AFC competitions provide a high-intensity start to 2026.



“

I am always questioning, always looking for new solutions, new ways to proceed

Rafael Benitez

”

PROJECT UPDATES

THE STATE OF THE GAME

Five years ago, a total of 15 MAs had been ratified by the AFC to deliver coaching diplomas at B Level. By the end of 2025, that number had shrunk to five. The obvious answer to questions about where they have gone is that they have climbed rungs on the AFC Coaching Convention ladder. Five years ago, only seven MAs had been endorsed at AFC Pro Level. That total has risen to 24 – in other words, the halfway milestone has been passed.

The same principle applies to the AFC Grassroots Charter. Five years ago, 25 of the 34 affiliated MAs (74%) had been endorsed at Bronze level and only three (just under 9%) at Gold standard. As we moved into 2026, the Bronze percentage had dropped to 48% while Gold membership had risen to 27% of the 44 MAs who had signed the charter. The exception is the AFC Elite Youth Project where the members five years ago numbered 17. Membership currently totals 28 with across-the-board increases in all three categories – notably at 3-Star level where the number has more than doubled.

The charts show the state of the game at the beginning of 2026 with, in bullet-point form, the main variations since our previous issue.

AFC COACHING CONVENTION



- ✓ Membership at Pro Licence level has increased from 21 MAs to 24
- ✓ Bahrain, Laos and Tajikistan are the MAs upgraded from A to Pro level
- ✓ Korea Republic and China PR have successfully renewed Pro Licence membership
- ✓ Renewals by Australia, Bangladesh, Qatar, Singapore and Uzbekistan are being evaluated
- ✓ Applications by Hong Kong, China and IR Iran to upgrade from A to Pro are also under evaluation
- ✓ Bids by Afghanistan and Timor-Leste to climb from B to A level have received AFC endorsement
- ✓ Renewal procedures at A level for the Philippines is currently under way
- ✓ Guam and Sri Lanka are due for evaluation at B level
- ✓ Informative consultations are under way with Pakistan and Yemen – the only two MAs yet to join





AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER



- ✓ Tajikistan successfully upgraded to Gold level, bringing the total to 12
- ✓ Korea Republic successfully renewed Gold level status
- ✓ Syria's application to upgrade to Silver level has received AFC endorsement
- ✓ Jordan's bid to upgrade from Silver to Gold is being assessed, along with requests by Bangladesh and Kuwait to move from Bronze to Silver
- ✓ Renewal procedures are ongoing, involving Australia, Qatar and Singapore (Gold), Chinese Taipei and Sri Lanka (Bronze)





AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME



- ✓ Cambodia has become the 13th 1-Star member, bringing the overall total to 28 MAs
- ✓ Myanmar's 1-Star membership has been renewed with endorsements for academies in Mandalay and Yangon
- ✓ Lebanon's 1-Star status has been ratified with endorsements for the Athletico Football Club, SAFA and Beirut Football Academies
- ✓ Applications by Malaysia and Jordan to upgrade to 3-Star level and Singapore to upgrade to 2-Star status are being assessed
- ✓ 3-Star renewal procedures involving Japan, Korea Republic and Qatar are also under way, while 1-Star renewals for Hong Kong, China and Bhutan are also in progress
- ✓ Applications by the Islamic Republic of Iran for 3-Star membership and by Laos for 1-Star status are being evaluated



AFC COACHING CONVENTION

CATEGORIES

PRO - Level



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF INDONESIA



ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



KFA KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KUWAIT FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



IRAQI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF TURKMENISTAN



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION



LAO FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

A - Level



CHINESE TAIPEI FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



FOOTBALL FEDERATION ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION



SYRIAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



MACAU FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FEDERAÇÃO FUTEBOL DE TIMOR-LESTE



PALESTINE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

B - Level



AFGHANISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



DPR KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



ALL NEPAL FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

AFC ELITE YOUTH SCHEME

CATEGORIES



ENDORSED MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

3 - STAR



FOOTBALL AUSTRALIA



JAPAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



KFA
KOREA FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



QATAR FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FA THAILAND
THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND



UAE FA
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



UZBEKISTAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



VFF
VIETNAM FOOTBALL FEDERATION

2 - STAR



CHINESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



INDIA
ALL INDIA FOOTBALL FEDERATION



JFA
JORDAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA



OMAN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



SAUDI ARABIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



TAJIKISTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION

1 - STAR



BAHRAIN FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



BANGLADESH FOOTBALL FEDERATION



BHUTAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



GUAM FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF HONG KONG, CHINA LIMITED



THE KYRGYZ FOOTBALL UNION



LEBANESE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF MALDIVES



MONGOLIAN FOOTBALL FEDERATION



MYANMAR FOOTBALL FEDERATION



FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION OF SINGAPORE



FOOTBALL FEDERATION OF CAMBODIA



PHILIPPINE FOOTBALL FEDERATION

AFC GRASSROOTS CHARTER

CATEGORIES



GOLD



SILVER



BRONZE



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

BEING CLEVER WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

I am not an expert. But I'm curious." AFC Consultant Robin Russell understated his expertise when he stepped on stage at the AFC Grassroots Conference for a session entitled 'Innovation in Grassroots Football'. And, as he pointed out, one of the major innovations in recent years has been the rapid advance of Artificial Intelligence. A show of hands revealed that a fair sprinkling of the participants at the Conference are already users. "We've been living with AI for quite some time," Russell reflects, "with GPS systems, predicted text and so on. If I started at a national association, the first thing I would do would be to conduct an audit with a view to finding out what are the biggest problems. And then to look at those problems and see if there is any way that AI could be useful in solving them."

"I wouldn't even think of saying that I know everything about AI," he added. "But the area I know most about would be how AI could support – but not replace – coach educators. First of all to reach out to those coaches who cannot get to existing courses because

of difficulties with access; not having enough money; or not having enough time. Or maybe there are simply not enough courses. For those coaches, it could be a great advantage. For coaches who do go on courses, the problem that many associations have is the question of providing ongoing further education. So it could be very helpful for grassroots coaches who really don't have the time or money to attend courses or in situations where they have attended courses but the association is not in a position to provide ongoing support."

Russell is already conducting pilot online induction courses involving participants from several continents. "The first thing," he says, "is not to be put off by the 'complexity'. Because creating your own tailor-made AI Assistant is incredibly simple. The harder bit comes later on, when you have to train it, ask questions and make absolutely sure that the answers are correct and in line with the protocol you've set up. You need to do a lot of checking so that you're confident about the veracity of the answers that you're getting."



When asked to elaborate on the practical uses of AI in coach education, he responded "well, coach education directors are persons who can be expected to possess a great deal of content. They've got PowerPoint presentations, pdf files, video materials and so on. So they would start with an AI Assistant using one of the many available tools – ChatGPT, DeepSeek or whatever – and he or she would load that content, test it, make sure that the Assistant is operating sensibly rather than 'hallucinating' and then encourage coaches to interrogate that information. In other words, it would be up to each Member Association to determine what content to inject into the system and to decide how much of their expertise could usefully be made available to coaches. It would be about questioning, prompting, getting feedback and demonstrations of good practice, but simply using a different medium."



Russell also believes that AI can be a valuable asset during on-site coach education courses. “I would say that there are three aspects of being a coach,” he said. “First of all, knowledge. What is the minimum that coaches need to know? In football, that would be the rules, the protocol, the safety aspects and so on. Secondly, understanding facets like the differences in coaching at various ages, genders and levels. And the third aspect would be skills. With regard to knowledge, you simply upload information; you prompt the coaches to request that information; and the AI Assistant will then develop a quiz for them and monitor the responses. The coach can then independently learn the knowledge he or she needs to acquire.

“Turning to understanding, there may well be lots of aspects that the coach will not understand but feel too embarrassed to ask the coach educator when working with a group. Asking the AI Assistant – or the Bot, as it is also called – will bypass this problem. So I regard it as a great opportunity for critical thinking and acquiring information without any of the barriers like shyness or embarrassment.



“Then the question of what coaching skills it can help with. Planning, obviously. If the coach educator has loaded information about the format of how sessions should be planned then the AI Assistant can help to judge the organisation of sessions against the template provided. A second example could be evaluation. If I evaluate my course coaching sessions on a regular basis and I’m honest about it, the Bot is able to give me some sort of profile of what my coaching is like.

“The third really interesting aspect is that the coach can conduct sessions with, say, a telephone in his or her pocket with the audio switched on. Then, after training, that audio file can be uploaded to the AI Assistant who can then be consulted about aspects like, for example, how much time I spent issuing instructions. Or how much time I spent asking questions. How often did I say an individual’s name at the end or what percentage were open questions to the whole group? This can usefully help a coach to assess his or her communication skills. These are just the first aspects that I’ve discovered and I’m sure a lot more will emerge.”



“There are lots of ways the coach educator can use AI,” he added. “The most obvious one is research. If you ask your AI Assistant a question, it will scrape all around the internet to come up with an answer. The important thing is then to insist that it gives you the references. Where did you get this information from? It can be very good when it comes to presentations and content. If a coach educator wants to develop a curriculum or generate material for a course it’s feasible to ask the Bot to create a brochure, presentations, diagrams or visuals. The key is to create your own individual Bot rather than rely on one of the providers’ generic AI Assistants, so that you can instruct it not to scrape around the entire internet but only refer to the specific information that you have uploaded. The best results are obtained in this way.”



Russell has also discovered that AI can help to break down language barriers. “I’ve found that really interesting. I’ve got an AI Assistant focused on coaching 8-12 year olds. The information I’ve uploaded is basically about small-sided games, using expertise from various sources. Recently, Masao [Professor Masao Nakayama from the University of Tsukuba in Japan, the JFA’s representative on the AFC Grassroots Panel and also one of the presenters at the Grassroots Conference] sent some questions to my Bot in Japanese. My Bot looked at the questions; consulted the information I had provided in English; and then sent answers back to him in Japanese. Unbelievable!”

Asked for another practical application, Russell said “Imagine you’re driving to an evening of grassroots coaching,” he said, “firstly with eight-year-olds, then with 12-year-olds. If your Bot operates with voice recognition, you can ask it to explain the key differences when it comes to coaching the two age groups – and get audio answers while you’re driving along.” It was our turn to say “unbelievable!”



“AI isn’t about replacing the sport — it’s about elevating how we understand, train, and enjoy the game.”

Chris Duffey



GOALKEEPING AND FITNESS

THE SPECIALISTS

ONLINE SESSIONS FOCUS ON GOALKEEPING AND FITNESS COACHING

The goalkeeper position is not an easy one. You can only speak about it if you're a goalkeeper yourself." The comment was made by Simon Mignolet, now back in his native Belgium with Club Brugge after nine years in England with Sunderland and Liverpool. His words appeared on screen at the outset of a two-part online Coach Education session in November. And, sure enough, the guest presenters were highly qualified to speak about Trends in Goalkeeping.

First to put the gloves on was Patrick 'Packie' Bonner, whose top-level career between the posts of Celtic and the Republic of Ireland spanned practically two decades. After seven years as Technical Director in the Republic, he is currently spending a good deal of his time as a specialised UEFA Technical Advisor. First of all, he produced statistical evidence to chart the evolution in goalkeeping. The pass completion rate among keepers in Europe's top five leagues has practically doubled over the last 15 years, he pointed out. All over the pitch – not just passes in the team's own half. In the UEFA Champions League, keepers are now being required

to contribute as many as 70 passes per game – more than some outfield players. What's more, much higher percentages of those passes need to be delivered while subjected to pressure by opponents. In the first 17 minutes of last season's final between PSG and Inter Milan, Bonner revealed, eight of the keepers' nine passes were played under pressure. All of these statistics, he emphasised, illustrate the nature of the training-ground work to be done by today's goalkeeping coaches – not least on the ability to pass the ball accurately with either foot, even when harassed by opponents.

He also highlighted "the key role of the goalkeeper as a support player during build-up play" – which signifies higher demands in terms of technical proficiency. Not only the first touch but also the off-ball movements to make the keeper available to receive, along with the ability to read the movements by team-mates and, when on the ball, competence in decision-making and risk assessment.

Bonner also signalled trends at set plays which issue an invitation for coaches to make decisions on goalkeeping strategy. At the most recent European Championship, he pointed out, there was a 15% decrease in the number of goal kicks taken by the keeper in comparison with the previous one – the main tendency being for a centre-back to pass the ball for the keeper to play out – sometimes to lure opponents forward and then bypass them. "It is up to coaches to assess the advantages and disadvantages," he commented. Staying with the subject of set plays, he examined strategies at corners where coaches hold different views on whether to offer close protection to the keeper or to leave enough space – usually with zonal or mixed marking – for greater vision and movement. Of course, the attacking team also has

a loud voice in this conversation. Analysis of the last two Euros, he added, revealed a clear trend towards punching corners clear from a packed area rather than catching them. The flip side is the statistic that keepers had a 90% success rate when coming to claim the ball compared with 80% when opting for the punch.

Bonner then passed the baton to FIFA's Senior Football & Goalkeeping Expert Pascal Zuberbühler who, after defending the goal on 446 occasions for clubs in Switzerland, Germany and England and pulling on the gloves 51 times for the Swiss national team, cut his teeth as a goalkeeping coach with the national team of the Philippines. Focusing on analysis of the recent FIFA Club World Cup, he said "Goalkeepers demonstrated fantastic capabilities to support the defensive line, make saves with the 'X-Block' technique and contribute to goalscoring opportunities".

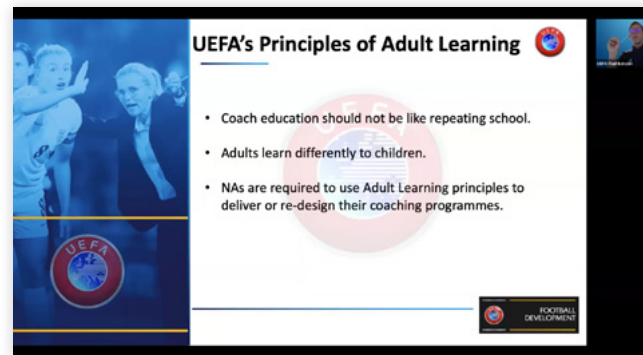


One of the aspects he highlighted was the importance of positional awareness when the modern keeper is required to cover large open places behind high defensive lines, citing FC Bayern Munich's Manuel Neuer, Manchester City's Ederson and Urawa Red Diamonds keeper Shusaku Nishikawa as stand-out examples during the tournament in the USA. When his team was in possession, Neuer sometimes took up positions nearer the halfway line than the goalposts and his overall average was 22.1m – more than 5m outside the penalty box. Chelsea's Robert Sánchez and Inter Milan's Yann Sommer also posted averages in excess of 20m, whereas a large group tended to position themselves 16-17m from the line – in other words, on the edge of the box. When the opposition had the ball and a through pass was on the cards, Sánchez maintained the highest position (16.2m) while Neuer was one of six keepers who registered averages of 15-16m.

'Zubi' also reported that the use of the X-Block (the FIFA definition when the keeper spreads arms and legs in 1v1 situations) had almost doubled at the club tournament in comparison with the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. In both tournaments, the success rate of the X-Block defence was considerably greater than when keepers went for other options. "The goalkeeper must demonstrate bravery and full commitment to execute it effectively," he said, "combining game scenario understanding with quick reactions." The challenge for the goalkeeping coach is therefore to replicate those conditions on the training ground.

A similar challenge is attached to the increase of almost 35% between the two tournaments of the number of moves involving the goalkeeper which resulted in goal attempts. "This reflects greater attention to assessing

the right moments and making the right decisions in terms of playing long or short," Zubi commented. The data presented by the two eminent goalkeepers provided food for thought among those involved in the development of young keepers, who are now required to play much more pro-active roles in both defence and attack than the net-guardians of yesteryear. A safe pair of hands is still a basic necessity. But, these days, many other qualities appear on the goalkeeper's job description.



Next topic: fitness coaching. "The mission is to educate and develop fitness coaches who can safely and effectively improve performances in the men's and women's game through a focus on player health, fitness and well-being." The statement was made by Paul Balsom, currently Performance Advisor to Tigres in Mexico on the back of pioneering work with clubs in England and Sweden's national team. He also captains UEFA's 12-strong Fitness Advisory Group which has drawn up the blueprint for the Fitness A (180 hours over eight months) and Fitness B (120 over four) licences that are being added to UEFA's coach education tree.

Interestingly, the entry requirements for the two courses necessitated careful thought. Acknowledging that demanding a university qualification would exclude many competent practitioners, the stipulation is for a good level of sports science knowledge and, more importantly, a core football coaching diploma. "This is about developing football fitness coaches," Balsom insisted, "and not fitness instructors." He stressed that fitness coaches need to understand the game and need to understand the physical demands of a game which has evolved in terms of greater intensity. "Styles of play can potentially have an impact on physical demands," he commented. "But we're talking about a game with more high-speed running, more accelerations and decelerations with short recovery periods between bouts of intensive exercise. We can expect higher peak demands during critical phases of play and a greater density of decisive actions per minute – pressing, transitions, recovery runs and so on. We have to prepare players to perform repeatedly during peak and near-peak intensity phases across matches that last 90+ minutes. Competition schedules and fixture congestion are increasing cumulative loading – elevated neuromuscular and metabolic loads due to sustained intensity and reduced rest."



"If there is one thing more than others that a successful footballer needs, it is energy."

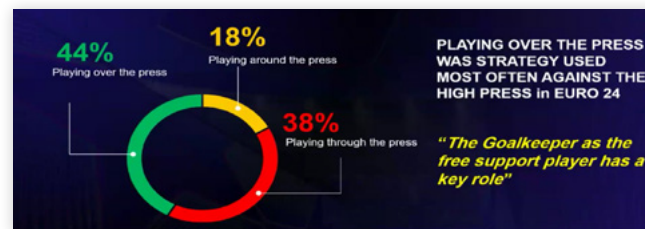
Michel Platini



He also underlined that today's fitness coach needs to be equipped to be pro-active in tackling what he calls 'the invisible opponent': factors such as travel and climate changes which can be especially relevant across AFC territories. "Chronology is an important part of travel plans," he said, "in terms of meal timings, light exposure and hydration protocols, for example."



Another important facet, he pointed out, is that fitness coaching in youth football requires a different approach. "Periodisation at academy and other development levels should prioritise longer-term adaptation rather than single-match preparation. There is a load tolerance mis-match in the transition gap between youth and senior football so the risk is that players can reach senior level with insufficient physical resilience to handle the demands." The aim of UEFA's A Licence course is to ensure that fitness coaches possess a clear understanding of the complex relationships between all the aspects of high performance and are equipped to apply this knowledge when working with youth and senior players in the men's and women's game.



The take-away message from the two online sessions was that goalkeeping coaches and fitness coaches should be highly specialised in their own areas but fully integrated into what Paul Balsom likes to call a 'multi-disciplinary team' in the dressing-room.



"The goalkeeper is very, very important, as much as a striker. Anyone who wants to win a title has to have a top goalkeeper."

Fabio Capello





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