

# POWER AND STRENGTH

ISMAIL AHMED WAS EVER-PRESENT AS AL AIN REACHED THE SEMI-FINALS OF THE 2014 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE, AN ACHIEVEMENT THAT HELPED EARN THE TOWERING CENTRE-BACK SECOND PLACE IN THE VOTING FOR AFC PLAYER OF THE YEAR. AND HAVING SUCCESSFULLY CEMENTED HIS SPOT FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AHMED IS EAGERLY ANTICIPATING HIS FIRST TASTE OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP.

By: Daniel Pordes • Photo: World Sport Group

Nearly four inches taller than the next largest player at club side Al Ain, Ismail Ahmed, at 6'4", has been a giant of the United Arab Emirates top flight since his professional debut six years ago.

However, with 2014 proving to be a banner year for the 31-year-old defender, with continental recognition and acclaim of his talents coming at November's AFC Annual Awards, Ahmed can now convincingly justify that term figuratively as well as literally.

Runner-up in the voting for the AFC Player of the Year accolade, the Moroccan-born centre-back was the dependable rock in the Al Ain backline, starting all 12 games in their run to a first AFC Champions League semi-final appearance in nine years.

A classy and composed defender, Ahmed provided security for Al Ain's dynamic forward line as well as a threat inside the penalty area, scoring against Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad in the quarter-final first leg with a smartly taken volley.

Despite enjoying domestic success, inaugural AFC Champions League winners Al Ain had seen their last four continental tournaments end in consecutive group stage eliminations with their last appearance amongst Asia's final four coming in the 2005 edition.

And Ahmed had first-hand experience of three of those four curtailed campaigns turning out for Al Ain in the 2010, 2011, and 2013 tournaments.

"This year I worked hard, performed well, and learnt from previous lessons and was very happy to be nominated amongst the last three players for the AFC Player of the Year award," says Ahmed.

"Playing for Al Ain who are a big team,

motivated me to reach a high technical standard and individual skill.

"Whenever I am on the field, I gave all my power and my strength to play well for the fans, team-mates and directors of the team as I am really lucky to play for them."

The 2014 continental campaign, though, ended at the semi-final stages as Al Ain fell short of following up their 2003 success with Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal claiming 4-2 aggregate victory.

"For sure, being eliminated from the AFC Champions League at the semi-final stage and not being able to play in the final affected our team. It was really disappointing after playing so well in the group stage and the previous knockout rounds and then being eliminated at the semi-final," he says.

"Our fans were demanding strongly for us to win the ACL trophy, but unfortunately we did not perform well in the semi-final and we did not win.

"In football sometimes you make mistakes, but you still learn from the mistakes or at least try to eliminate the mistakes.

"We will learn from this and the Al Ain team will perform better and better to reflect the good image of the UAE's teams in the 2015 AFC Champions League."

Al Ain's exploits on the continent are, though, an indicator of the continued rise in Emirati football as a burgeoning Asian power.

An undefeated qualification campaign for the AFC Asian Cup Australia 2015 will bring the UAE its ninth appearance at the continental finals and, amongst those in the Gulf nation, there is real hope that the side can match or even top their best-ever finish in the AFC Asian Cup: a runners-up finish at the 1996 edition.

The run to the final heralded the end of what was then considered the golden generation of the UAE, with many of the

squad having represented the country when they qualified for the finals of the FIFA World Cup in Italy in 1990.

In 1992 the UAE reached the semi-finals, but otherwise the Emirates have a modest record at the AFC Asian Cup, first qualifying in 1980 and in all but 1992 and 1996, the team failed to progress beyond the group stage.

Tasked with the Australia campaign is coach Mahdi Ali, a central figure in the UAE's developmental sides before he took over the senior team mantle in August 2012.

Ali had led the UAE U-23 national team to the 2012 Olympic Games before then guiding his nation to only their second Gulf Cup title in 2013 and a third place finish in the most recent edition in late November.

And having broken into the squad at the tail end of 2013, Ahmed has enjoyed an extended run in the UAE side in 2014 including starts against Uzbekistan, Lithuania and Paraguay as well as the third place play-off against Oman at the Gulf Cup.

"In my opinion, this is a new golden generation of Emirati football. Not only is the league in the UAE strong, but the national team is strong too with the team developing slowly but surely," says Ahmed.

"And the upcoming generation could be even better than the current team. With academies installed at all the teams in the UAE top flight, I am expecting some new players coming forward over the next few years with the junior teams playing really well.

"That is for the future, our next challenge for the present, though, is the AFC Asian Cup in Australia and it will not be an easy task.

"The people in the UAE expect a lot from us and demand us to win trophies to match the great teams of the past.

"So we are going to Australia determined to represent our country well, make our fans and people happy and win the trophy."

