

A World Apart – Japan and China in different places

Feature by Kenneth Steel

Global Football Training looks back at coaching and player development in Japan and China and finds two countries a world apart.

China and Japan are old enemies with a long history of fighting it out on the battlefield, the political arena and stadia around the world. On the footballing front, however, one country is leaps and bounds ahead of the other as Japan has raced clear and left China behind.

“In most sports, China has unlimited resources and a seemingly-endless player base, thus allowing the country to gain total dominance and pick up gold medals at will at the Olympics. But this is not the case in Football,” says Kenn Schmidt, CEO of Global Football Training.

China in need of a wake-up call

Since qualifying for the World Cup in 2002, China has struggled to compete at the highest level, and the domestic game is relying on gigantic wages to lure ageing stars to this part of Asia. Such an approach can hardly be classed as a sustainable way to improve the domestic game and turn out a flow of talented youngsters.

Instead, something needs to be done at youth level, and a change in mind set is paramount if China is to progress and develop gifted players, who are able to take the domestic game to a new level.

“Global Football Training visited several academies in and around Shanghai, allowing us to get a genuine feel for football in the region. However, these experiences were somewhat disappointing and far from what we expected,” explains Kenn Schmidt and continues:

“The skill level was close to being abysmal, and considering the size of the country and its player base, China is far behind everyone else. Academies are run by former European players, and coaches have been brought in from leading clubs around the world. But youth players still seem to lack fundamental skills, especially in terms of technical abilities.”

Global Football Training did, however, get to experience the launch of exciting projects aimed at improving football in China. Only time will tell if these are able to create a buzz around football, as well as change the country's fortunes.

From bad to brilliant

A short flight separates China from Japan, but the two countries are a world apart in terms of footballing skills and passion for the game. Japan is everything China is not. The setup is well-structured; focus is on producing complete footballers with a solid technical skill level, and coaches are highly skilled.

A minor obstacle, however, is the language barrier as few Japanese players are able to speak English, and translators have to assist foreign managers and coaches during training and matches. The language barrier could also provide the explanation as to why so few Japanese players ply their trade in Europe.

Watching young female players train was also part of the schedule in Japan. And Global Football Training was impressed with the skill level on display as players down to the age of 12 were blessed with fantastic abilities.

Japan to progress on the world stage

Japan has been a constant feature at World Cups in recent times, but the team has yet to fulfil its potential and challenge for honours. According to Kenn Schmidt, Japan might be the first Asian country to progress to the last four and break the European and South American dominance since South Korea triumphed on home soil in 2002.

“With the current setup at clubs and JFA-run academies, as well as a strong focus on producing players with excellent skills, Japan might turn out to be a future powerhouse at international level. Players are gifted and possess strong technical abilities and have a thorough understanding of the game,” states Kenn Schmidt.

Global Football Training has had the opportunity to get a first-hand glance at coaching, player development and setups around the globe, and a few clubs and countries stand out.

“Due to the setup and a gifted player base, Japan could surprise a lot of people and end up in the top six at the next World Cup. This trip has revealed some hidden gems, and countries such as Japan, Uruguay and Mexico could join Germany as the footballing superpowers of tomorrow,” says Kenn Schmidt.

Also improving at club level

The national team is not the only footballing institution in the country to prosper from Japan’s rise to prominence and approach to player development. The domestic leagues are also feeling the impact as Japanese teams qualify for the knock-out stages of the AFC Champions League and take part in the FIFA Club World Cup on a regular basis.

“Japan has definitely been the surprise package on this world tour and seems to have created the perfect environment for young players to flourish,” states Kenn Schmidt and points out:

“I have only seen such positive signs in a few other countries, and it will be exciting to follow Japanese football in the future. The country is, without a doubt, on the right path and much will be expected from Japan in the future.”

More to come from Global Football Training

The world tour ended following visits to Japan and China, but more is to come from Global Football Training. Keep an eye out for our final article in this series.