



UAE win FIFA Beach Soccer world Cup 2007 Dubai

The curtain came down on Asia's qualifying competition for the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup 2007 on Saturday, with three of the six participating teams securing a passage to November's global showpiece event in Rio de Janeiro.

Japan led the charge, booking a place at their third straight FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup with a breathtaking 8-6 semi-final win over Iran, who bounced back from this defeat by pulling off an unbelievable 6-0 victory against defending champions Bahrain in the all-important third place play-off.

However, while Japan and Iran were merely cementing their powerful status in this discipline, tournament hosts United Arab Emirates emerged from nowhere to take gold.

'Just scratching the surface'

Playing in front of a vociferous home crowd in Dubai, the Gulf side - playing under the guidance of Brazilian coach Marcelo Mendes - took the group stage by storm, trouncing India 6-2 in the tournament curtain-raiser before overcoming Japan 6-3 to win their section. They then continued their winning form in the semi-final clash against Bahrain, emerging with a convincing 5-2 victory to book their first-ever berth at the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup.

By dethroning Bahrain, the hosts set up a rematch with Japan in the final, one which they were determined to win. Playing with an obvious psychological edge, Mendes's charges dominated the first period and went into the break leading 3-1. Japan, however, weren't ready to give up on the title and showed admirable character to battle back to level the match at 3-3.

But just as the East Asians seemed to have clawed themselves back into contention, UAE captain Bakhit Saad rose to the occasion to score the goal that both won the match and sealed the title for his side. The Gulf outfit were duly crowned continental champions, with Bakhit named the tournament's Best Player and team-mate M. Hamza its Best Goalkeeper.

Mendes, meanwhile, was already looking forward to taking UAE to his home country, and suggested that there is more to come from his players on the shores of Rio. "I am excited by the way our players played, mostly because I know they are just scratching the

surface of their potential," said the Brazilian. "That means we can cause a lot of damage if we prepare appropriately for the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in November."

Fierce competition

With passion for beach soccer re-ignited across Asia by these qualifiers, it was certainly evident that progress had been made across the board. The narrowing of the gap between the contenders was evident from the start, with only one of the opening four games decided by a margin of greater than one goal.

As for the previous edition's winners, Bahrain, who went into the tournament as one of the favourites, lost three of their four games, including two defeats at the hands of a resilient Iran.

China, who lost the decisive third place play-off to Iran in last year's qualifier, returned to the continental stage with a stronger team than in the previous edition. Having lost narrowly to Bahrain 2-1 in the opener, they exacted revenge against Iran with a penalty shootout triumph.

With only two points from this victory, however, China could only pin hopes on Bahrain at least drawing against Iran in the second group match. The match ended with the Iranians prevailing over the already-qualified Bahrain with the necessary three points, leaving the Chinese to lick their wounds and retreat, determined to prove themselves next year.