

Start of regional league ushers in new era for women's football in Saudi Arabia



- **New 16-team competition across the Western, Central and Eastern regions will be launched by Saudi Arabian Football Federation on Monday**

Monday is set to be a landmark day for women's sports in Saudi Arabia. In particular, for women's football. This is the day that the Saudi Arabian Football Federation's new Regional Football League kicks off across the nation.

Sixteen teams will take part in the first phase, with games played mostly in the capital Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam.

The league is split, as its name suggests, into three regions: A six-team Central region, a six-team Western region, and a four-team Eastern region.

Matches will be played in a round-robin, home-and-away format, with the winner of each group declared champion of their region.

In addition, the top three teams in the Central and Western regions, as well as the top two from the Eastern region, will progress to the national championships.

There, the eight qualified teams will play in a knockout competition at the Kingdom Final Championship, which is due to be held early next year in Jeddah, with the winning team set to pocket \$133,000.

This is wonderful news for the progress of the women's game in the Kingdom, and we must also not forget the Saudi Sports For All Women's Football League, which was contested last year.

But it is not the prize money or the format of the new regional competition that has captured my fascination. I am more focused on the speed and efficiency with which the SAFF has implemented a plan first devised as recently as 2017. It is to be congratulated for making this milestone in Saudi women's football a reality.

To give an idea of the rate of progress, Brazil, despite already having nine regional women's football tournaments, only last April kicked off its first national championship — curiously with 16 teams, the same number that now start the Saudi championship.

Once the decision was put in place in accordance with the Kingdom's Vision 2030, the SAFF acted quickly and well.

In addition to the setting up of the new leagues, the federation has hired Monika Staab to lead the fledgling Saudi Arabian national women's team. The German coach previously spent time in Riyadh in December 2020, when she was invited to the Kingdom to lead a C-license coaching course for women.

Staab's career as a player saw her go to France and England before returning to Germany and to the women's Bundesliga. She then became a coach, working for the German football federation.

Her work has taken her to more than 80 countries over the past four decades, including Bahrain, Iran and Qatar.

Hiring Staab was no doubt a shrewd move by the SAFF, as she is not only a leading football coach but also has experience working in Muslim countries.



(AFP)

There have already been reports of how Staab marveled at the Saudi women's passion and love for the game after she visited clubs in Dammam, Riyadh and Jeddah. Many players had to drive for more than two hours to train and then two hours back home again. All these women are either working or studying and none of them are being paid to play. They just have a real passion for football.

There will now be opportunities that will allow young players to start their training early and provide more career options in football, both at club and international level.

There are reasons to be optimistic for the Kingdom's national women's team. Staab held the first training session with the squad on Nov. 2. After 700 players signed up for the trials, the coach eventually reduced the number to 30.

In February, the national team is slated to play its first international match, against the Maldives, and the long-term vision is to qualify for the FIFA Women's World Cup in 10 years' time.

The SAFF has also taken a significant step by hiring 12 top Asian female referees, not only to referee the women's football league matches, but also to train local girls who wish to go down that path.

At a time when more and more girls and women from all corners of the globe are discovering the joys of playing football, Saudi women will not be far behind.

Three years after women were first allowed into football stadiums, Saudi Arabia, through its football federation, has taken a major step forward with the creation of the Regional Football League. More importantly, it is creating the conditions for it to be a sustainable project in the future.

The achievement is nothing short of remarkable because, in order to fulfill this task at the national level, the SAFF did not have to implement extraordinary measures, such as recently done by some South American countries, to create regulations that forced their affiliated clubs to form professional women's teams on par with those for men.

When there was a will to advance the women's game, a way was found. Congratulations to the SAFF on a job well done.
