



FIFPRO ASIA/OCEANIA

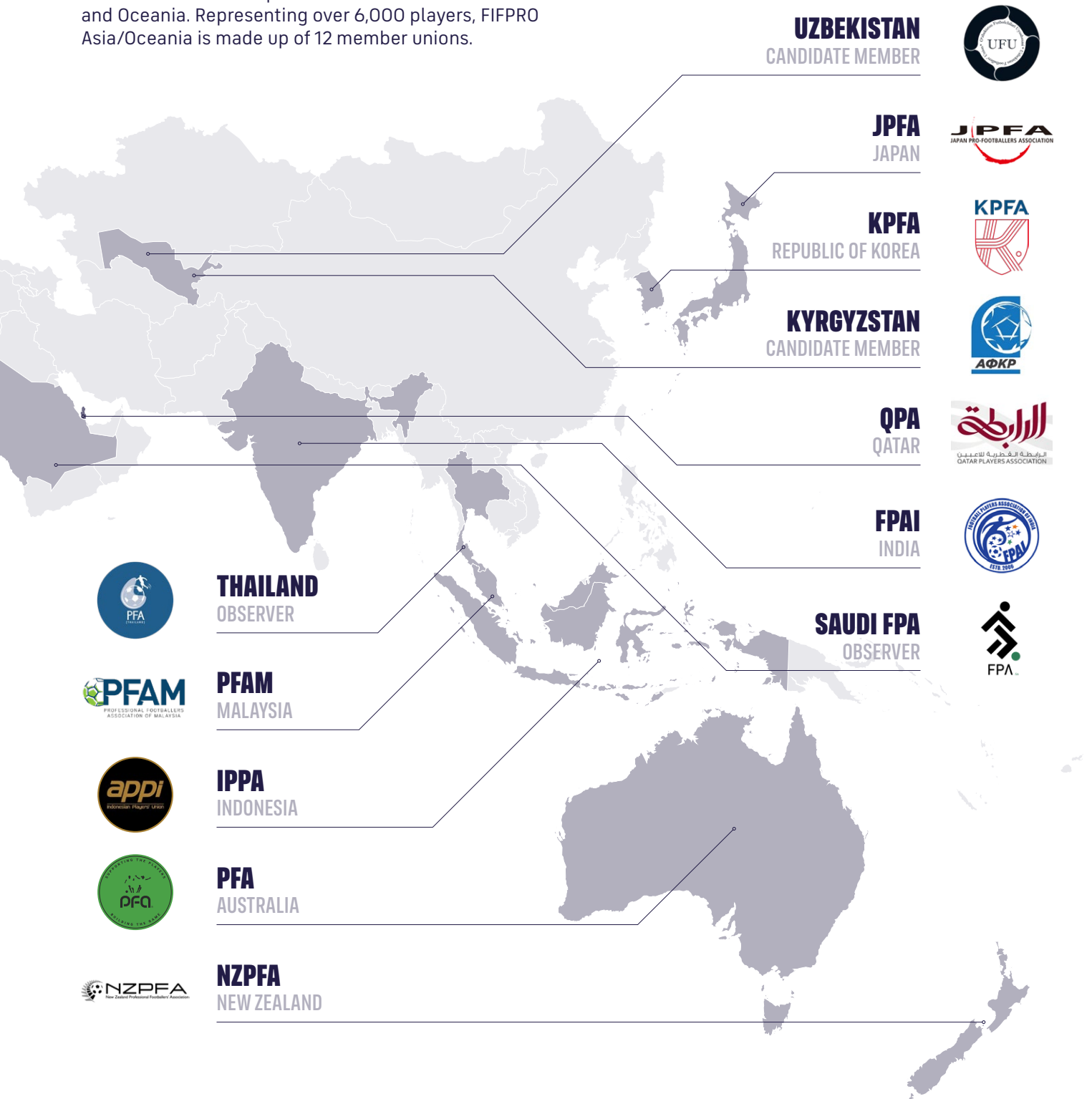
SNAP REPORT:
**LESSONS FROM THE AFC
WOMEN'S CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP**

Power to the players.



FIFPRO ASIA/OCEANIA: WHO WE ARE

FIFPRO Asia/Oceania is the exclusive collective international voice of professional footballers of Asia and Oceania. Representing over 6,000 players, FIFPRO Asia/Oceania is made up of 12 member unions.





BACKGROUND

The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) will run the inaugural AFC Women's Champions League (AWCL) in 2024-25.

Twenty-two clubs from 22 different AFC Member Associations (MAs) will compete in this first edition of Asia's elite women's club competition, running from August 2024 to May 2025.

Between 2019 and 2023-24, the AFC organised four iterations of the AFC Women's Club Championship (AWCC).

This was a smaller tournament, starting with four clubs and growing to eight for the 2023-24 edition. Clubs were chosen on an invitational basis rather than by the formal qualification process that will govern the AWCL.

The AFC has stated that the 2023-24 AWCC would act as a 'pilot' for the AWCL. However, it is unclear what lessons the AFC has taken from this trial in developing the AWCL format or regulations.

In fact, some of the AWCC's players' and clubs' experiences raise concerns about the AFC's ability to organise a successful elite women's club competition.

This snap report publishes those experiences with the aim of improving standards for female players across the continent.



2024-25
AFC WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS LEAGUE



22
COMPETING CLUBS



22
AFC MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS



PLAYER SURVEY

FIFPRO conducted a survey of players who participated in the 2023-24 AWCC in late November and early December 2023. Therefore, the results cover the group stage and not the final.

Eighty-eight players completed the survey, with representation from all eight clubs.



Sydney FC
Australia



Urawa Red Diamonds
Japan



Hyundai Steel Red Angels
Republic of Korea



Hualien
Taiwan



Bangkok WFC
Thailand



FC Nasaf
Uzbekistan



Gokulam Kerala FC
India



Bam Khatoon
Iran



PLAYER PROFILE

FIFPRO surveyed 88 players from the eight clubs that participated in the 2023-24 AWCC. The competing clubs were from Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Uzbekistan, India, and Iran.

Only 62% of these players considered themselves 'Professional', while 32% were 'Semi-Professional' and 6% were 'Amateur'.

These descriptors are somewhat subjective, but the survey laid bare the lived experience of female players in Asian clubs:

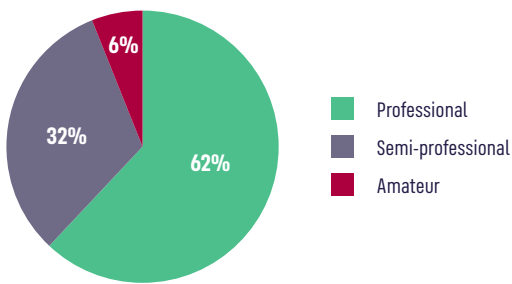
- **One quarter (25%) said that football was not their primary source of income**

- **Less than half (42%) earned over \$10,000 from football annually**
- **Less than a third (32%) dedicated at least 20 hours per week to football**
- **Less than a third (30%) said they received additional salary or bonuses for participating in the AWCC**

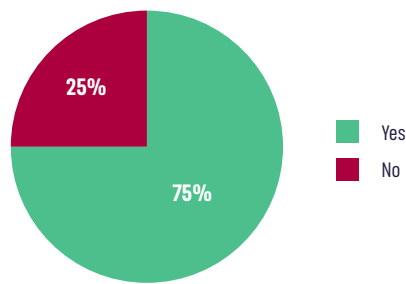
This is the picture from the 2023-24 AWCC, which invited eight of the best clubs from among the most-developed women's leagues in Asia. The 2024-25 AWCL will feature 22 clubs from 22 leagues, so the average rates of professionalism will likely be lower.



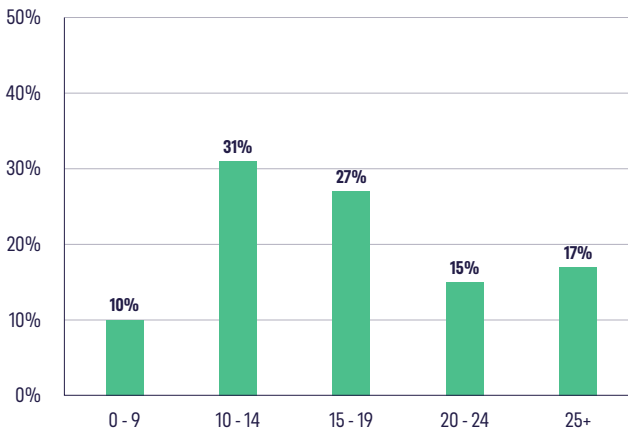
Professional status



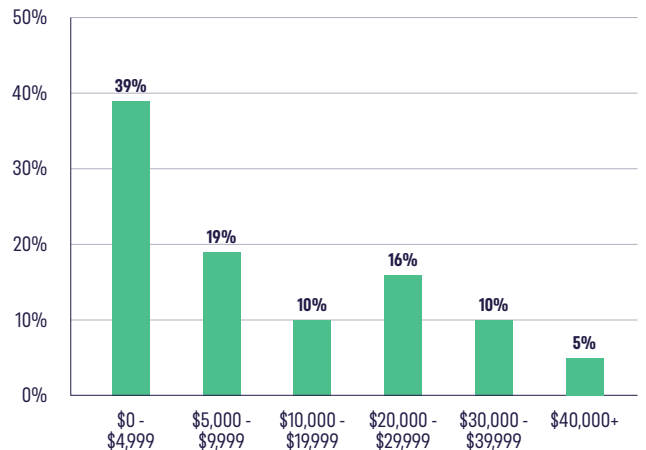
Football is primary source of income?



Hours per week dedicated to football



Football income



Players who are not full-time professionals have to balance football with other work, study, or family responsibilities. Only 9% of players said that the AWCC did not disrupt their domestic football or other life commitments.

For the 16% of players who said the competition disrupted their non-football employment, it might have meant they actually lost out financially to participate in the tournament.

When AFC competitions disrupt domestic league schedules, as the AWCC did for half (51%) of players, the rearranged domestic fixtures increase existing

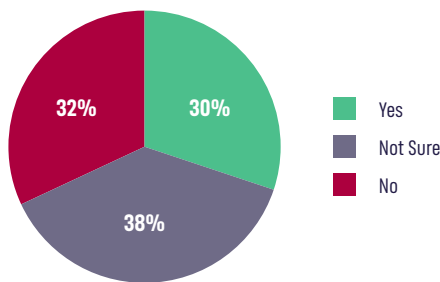
challenges for female players in juggling their various commitments.

This does not mean Asian women players should be denied the opportunity to participate in continental competition; 85% of 2023-24 AWCC players said they would play in it again. Players want to test themselves at the highest level and will make sacrifices to do so.

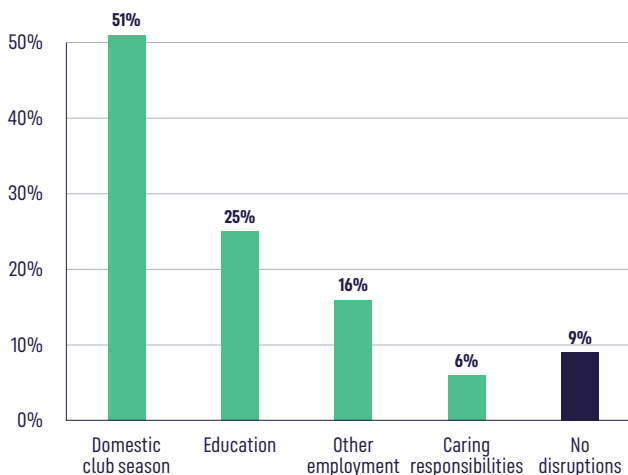
However, competition organisers need to understand the profile of the athletes participating and implement conditions that alleviate their challenges and maximise the quality of the product.



Additional salary or bonuses for AWCC 2023-24



Did AWCC disrupt...



"Would have been nice to be compensated something for the tournament as it took us away from our other jobs!"

- AWCC 2023-24 player



WORKING CONDITIONS

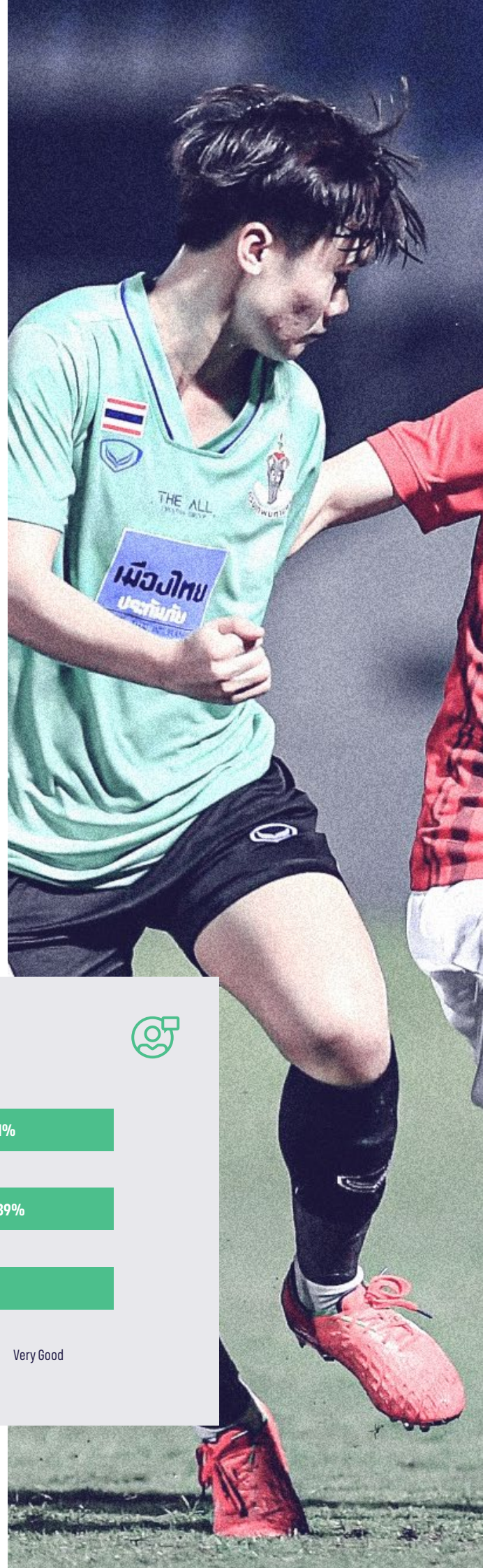
Every player said the standard of accommodation was somewhat good (46%) or very good (54%).

However, a quarter said the local transport was somewhat poor (20%) or very poor (7%), and 17% said the high-performance facilities were poor.

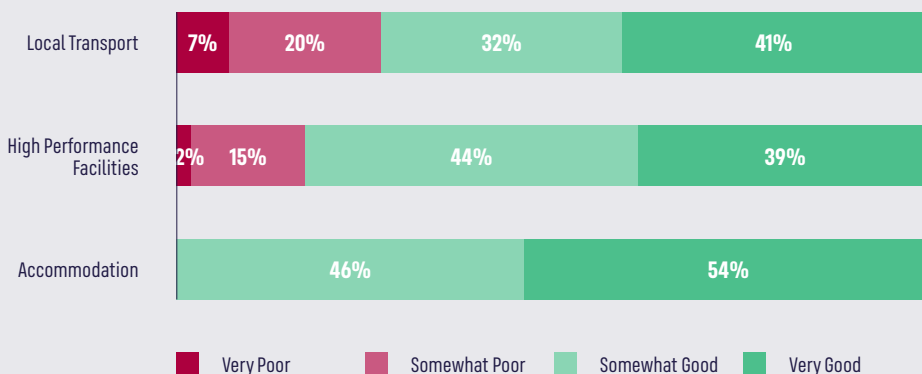
Several players involved in Group B in Tashkent mentioned that the accommodation was too far away from the playing arena.

Those who described the facilities and transport as poor were most likely to be from Incheon Hyundai Steel Red Angels (Republic of Korea) or Urawa Red Diamonds (Japan), while those who rated them as very good were more likely to be from FC Nasaf (Uzbekistan), Bangkok WFC (Thailand), and Hualien (Taiwan).

These different perceptions likely indicate the difference in expectations between the top women's leagues of Asia and less developed domestic competitions.



Standard of facilities and transport



■ Very Poor
 ■ Somewhat Poor
 ■ Somewhat Good
 ■ Very Good



CENTRALISED GROUP FORMAT

The 2023-24 AWCC consisted of two groups of four, followed by a single-leg final between the winners of each group.

Groups A and B were conducted in a 'centralised' format, held in Thailand and Uzbekistan, respectively. Each group featured a round-robin schedule where each team played three matches in the space of seven days.

This format provides a template for the AWCL, which will feature seven centralised groups in seven different countries for the preliminary and group stages. It will also use a centralised bracket for the semi-finals and final. Only the quarterfinals will be played on the home grounds of participating clubs; these will be played as a single leg at the home of the highest-ranked qualifier.

The centralised format has pros and cons. The lack of 'home' games denies clubs and players an opportunity to play in front of their own fans and denies fans an opportunity to connect with this tournament.

This was evident in the 2023-24 AWCC, where attendances in Chonburi and Tashkent ranged from 50 to 500 per match.

On the plus side, squeezing several matches into a short window in one location reduces operational costs (such as flights) per match played.



SCHEDULING

The AWCC 2023-24 group matches were played in November 2023 on Monday the 6th, Thursday the 9th, and Sunday the 12th.

Sydney FC was one of the clubs for which this clashed directly with league fixtures. It had to reschedule two domestic league matches to midweeks in January, forcing the club to play six fixtures in 24 days.

More than half of A-League Women players work a second job outside football, so these midweek fixtures for Sydney FC (and their opponents) would have been disruptive to accommodate and potentially caused players to suffer a financial loss from their secondary occupation.

The AWCC directly followed an international window featuring crucial AFC Olympic Qualifiers involving all eight nations from which the AWCC clubs were drawn.

Like the AWCC groups, the international window featured three matches in seven days in a centralised location, with the third match on Wednesday, November 1st.

A Republic of Korea international from Incheon Hyundai Steel Red Angels would have had to play three matches in short succession in Xiamen, China, and then play another three matches back-to-back in Uzbekistan, with only five days

Six matches and cross-continent travel in 18 days

26 OCT	Olympic Qualifier
27 OCT	
28 OCT	
29 OCT	Olympic Qualifier
30 OCT	
31 OCT	
1 NOV	Olympic Qualifier
2 NOV	Recovery/Travel
3 NOV	Travel
4 NOV	Travel
5 NOV	
6 NOV	AWCC Fixture 1
7 NOV	
8 NOV	
9 NOV	AWCC Fixture 2
10 NOV	
11 NOV	
12 NOV	AWCC Fixture 3

between the two sets of three fixtures. FIFPRO understands that such players only joined their club team-mates the day before the first AWCC match.

A Japanese international who played for Urawa Red Diamonds had to fulfil the same schedule, only they had to travel from Uzbekistan for the qualifiers and then on to Thailand for the AWCC. FIFPRO understands that Japanese players suffered from food poisoning in Uzbekistan, compounding the challenge of this schedule.

The survey results reflected this lack of appropriate consideration for player welfare.

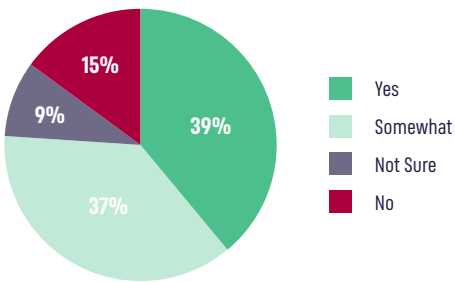
Only 39% of players felt physically prepared for the tournament. Another 37% felt 'somewhat' physically prepared, and 15% were not prepared. Nine percent were unsure.

On a scale of 1-5, where 5 was 'excessive strain', a quarter of players (23%) rated the condensed group format as at least a 4.

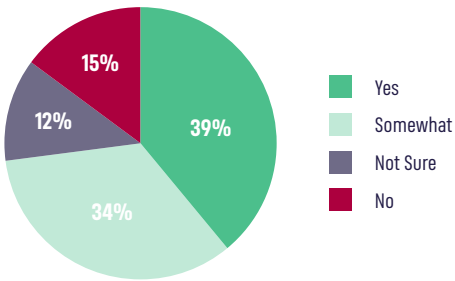
Similarly, only 39% of players felt mentally prepared, and 19% of players felt the tournament caused them high-to-excessive mental strain.



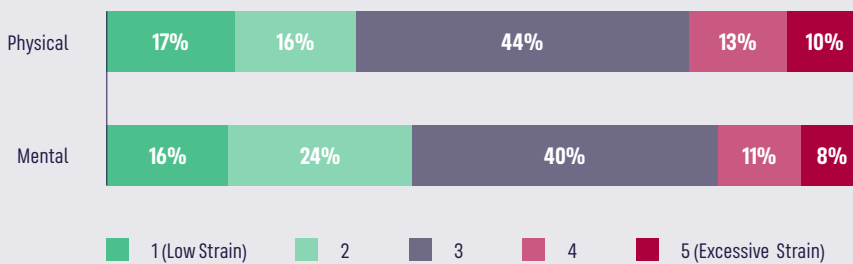
Did you feel *physically* prepared?



Did you feel *mentally* prepared?



Strain from tournament (1-5 scale)



CLUB FINANCES

For the AWCC 2023-24, clubs were required to cover their own costs for travel to the centralised host city.¹ Accommodation was provided by the AFC and/or the host association.

Clubs did not receive any travel subsidy, performance bonus, or prize money. The player survey indicated that teams travelled in economy class.

In FIFPRO Asia/Oceania's study of the men's AFC Champions League, an Australian club revealed that it cost approximately \$45,000 to fly its team and staff to Japan for a fixture.²

Even though clubs were losing money to participate in the AWCC, 30% of players said they received additional remuneration for playing in the competition.

The AFC has released its competition regulations for the 2024-25 AWCL.³ It will provide minimum financial contributions to clubs for reaching the following stages (amounts do not accumulate):

AWCL 2024-25 prize money

Preliminary Stage ('away' team travel subsidy)	\$50,000
Group stage*	\$100,000
Quarter-finals	\$180,000
Semi-finals	\$300,000
Runner-up**	\$800,000
Champion**	\$1,300,000

*Clubs also receive \$20,000 per win in the Group Stage, for a maximum additional \$60,000

**The AFC requires \$25,000 and \$50,000 of the runner-up and champion's prize money, respectively, to be directed to its AFC Dream Asia Foundation

- <https://assets.the-afc.com/downloads/tournament-regulations/AFC-Women's-Club-Championship-2023-Invitational-Tournament-Competition-Regulations.pdf>
- <https://fifpro.org/media/wizhphjr/fifpro-asia-acl-report-2024.pdf>
- <https://assets.the-afc.com/downloads/tournament-regulations/AFC-Women%27s-Champions-League-2024-25-Competition-Regulations.pdf>





The quarter-finals are the only stage that will not be held in a centralised location. For that stage, all costs fall to clubs. The away club must cover its own travel and accommodation.

The home club must cover costs for:

- All ground transport and a liaison officer for the away team
- Five-star accommodation, vehicles, international buffet style meals, laundry, and SIM cards for the AFC delegation
- Provision of a 'clean' stadium (free of advertising and brand names)

In the study of the men's Champions League cited above, Melbourne City FC estimated the cost of making its stadium 'clean' at \$50,000 per match.

These regulatory impositions on home clubs are replicated from the men's AFC Champions League Elite. These regulations are not fit for purpose for a women's football landscape that still features semi-professional conditions and clubs with scarce resources compared to the men's game.

For example, it is bad optics, at least, that AFC's delegation and match officials should be afforded five-star accommodation and all-expenses-paid perks when the majority of players earn less than \$10,000 from football each year.

Additionally, the AFC's competition regulations grant it a wide variety of punitive powers. For example, if a player does not attend a pre-match press conference, she "shall be fined at least \$2,500". The survey shows that many players at this level have other commitments away from football and might not earn much more than this sum for a whole season.

FINAL CONTROVERSY

When the AFC launched the 2023-24 edition of the AWCC, it announced that the winners of the two groups would meet in a “grand finale” to determine the overall champion.⁴

The competition regulations stated that “the AFC may decide to introduce a Final and/or Knockout Stage for the Participating Clubs”.⁵

Incheon Hyundai Steel Red Angels and Urawa Red Diamonds were the two clubs which won their groups. In March 2024, the AFC decided that it would not host a final, after all.

Urawa and Japan’s WE League issued statements expressing their disappointment with the decision and the means of notification.^{6,7} Over the coming weeks, the clubs, the Japanese league, and Japan’s FA met with AFC to contest the decision and offer solutions.

Ultimately, it was agreed that Urawa would host the match in their home stadium in Saitama. Urawa won 2-1 in front of 5,271 supporters.

FIFPRO staff on the ground reported that there was a noticeable absence of AFC senior executives, sponsors, or strong promotion of the match. No prize money was awarded.

Taken together, the episode gave a sense that the AFC was treating the AWCC as an operational trial rather than a serious competition.

To make matters worse, it did not set this expectation for participants from the outset. Clubs and players incurred significant costs to participate in the groups and then were unexpectedly denied the opportunity to compete for prestige.

The AFC acted unilaterally and communicated without transparency. This culture must change if these continental competitions are to succeed for all stakeholders.

4 <https://www.the-afc.com/en/club/afc-womens-club-championship/news/draw-sets-stage-for-thrilling-action.html>

5 <https://assets.the-afc.com/downloads/tournament-regulations/AFC-Women's-Club-Championship-2023-Invitational-Tournament-Competition-Regulations.pdf>

6 https://www.urawa-reds.co.jp/redsladies/ladies_news/afc-womens-club-championship-2023-invitational-tournament-決勝について/

7 <https://weleague.jp/news/1306/>





RECOMMENDATIONS



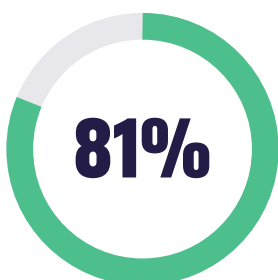
COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO DECISION-MAKING

The issues of concern arising from the AWCC 2023-24, such as the scheduling challenges and the confusion around the final, could have been prevented through improved communication between the AFC, clubs, and players.

Collaboration between participants, rather than top-down decision making, is a precondition for best practice competition design. This will ensure that the competition delivers maximum benefit to all stakeholders, in turn improving the value of the product.

Four in five surveyed players (81%) that participated in the AWCC said that players should have more say in AFC decisions, such as the structure, scheduling, and financial elements. Only one player said players should not have more say and the rest (18%) were not sure.

Greater consultation would identify areas where the competition regulations imported from the elite men's competitions are not appropriate or realistic to impose on a still-developing women's football landscape. In addition, it would ensure the players' collective expertise and experiences are unlocked for the benefit of all stakeholders.



of players who participated in the AWCC said that players should have more say in AFC decisions



HIGHER MINIMUM STANDARDS

The AWCL should protect players from substandard conditions while also using its leverage to drive professionalism across the continent.

The competition regulations say little about the minimum conditions for players. They mandate that accommodation for the AFC delegation must be five-star with international buffet-style meals but put no such floor under the standard of accommodation, travel, meals, or high performance facilities for players.

The AFC requires that participating clubs' domestic leagues must have one full-time dedicated staff and a documented plan for women's club licensing requirement for the 2027-28 season at the latest.

UEFA's Minimum Standards Framework for Women's National Teams (2023) provides a useful reference for the AFC, even though it was designed for national teams.⁸ UEFA outlines acceptable standards and conditions for its MAs and provides funding to those who meet them. The framework covers support staff, travel, accommodation, equipment, facilities, medical services, consultation with players, promotion, player welfare, financial transparency, and governance.

8 <https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/0285-1916153cbee3-041d37de11f7-1000/10.03.02.mswntf.final.en.pdf>



INCREASED VISIBILITY

The 2023-24 AWCC group matches were played in front of small crowds. One player told FIFPRO that it felt more like a glorified training exercise than a serious tournament.

The centralised group format has the benefit of reducing costs, but in pursuing that model, the AFC must do more to promote the tournament in the host countries to drive interest and increase attendances.

It is self-evident that the commercial opportunity of the women's game is growing rapidly. As such, those who have the responsibility of ensuring this opportunity is maximised must commit the necessary resources to make it highly visible. In passing on their commercial rights to the AFC, or any competition organiser, the players' expectation is that the value of these rights are maximised for the benefit of all stakeholders.





FIFPRO
ASIA/OCEANIA

FUTURE

RESPECT

PARTNERSHIP

PROFESSIONALISM

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND FAIR PLAY

Power to the players.

