



The UAE Football League season starts on 24th September – and in its second year of professional soccer promises to be interesting, with many new faces and even more new reasons to expect an improvement on standards.

The UFL was founded as long ago as 1973. But until only a year ago club football in the Emirates was mediocre and out of touch – and that’s the judgement of its governing body. Last year, however, the UFL turned professional; and with the arrival of Romy Gai, a former marketing manager from Italian giants Juventus, the domestic football scene might just have turned the corner.

The FIFA Club World Cup, which takes place in Abu Dhabi this December, should certainly help to raise the profile of the game here. UAE FA president Mohammed Khalfan al Rumaithi is planning to make good use of the exposure: “Football fans in the country, across nationalities, will be queuing up to get a glimpse of superstars like Lionel Messi, Thierry Henry and Xavi. I hope their interest is not just for that tournament”.

Romy Gai is also keen to attract expatriates, who comprise about 80 percent of the country’s population, by televising at least one match a week in English and also by providing English radio coverage. “We will start to open our arms. The quality of new players joining us this season is amazing, and that will also help attract new fans,” he says.

The system here of getting in two or three journeyman players on loan from Brazil or Spain, plus perhaps a star name looking for one final payday in the twilight years of his career, has also been criticised. But as the UAE flexes its financial muscle and the quality of imports improves, so hopefully must the style and attractiveness of the football. Those skilled and experienced players can also complement and nurture the young local talent.

Last season Al Jazira pushed Dubai-based Al Ahli all the way for the title, only losing out by a single point on the final day of the season.

The Emirate’s other clubs in the pro league, Al Ain and Al Wahda, also performed well, securing third and fourth spot respectively, and newly promoted Bani Yas will be eager for the big time. But following a summer of intense transfer activity, what can be expected from our local teams for the forthcoming season? We run the rule over their chances ...

Al Ain FC

Play at: Sheikh Khalifa International Stadium (15,000 capacity) and Tahnoun Bin Mohammed Stadium (15,000)

Coach: Winfried Schaefer (Germany)

Star men: José Sand (Argentina, forward)

Last season: Third

Prospects: As winner of last year's President's Cup, Al Ain kicks off the season with the Supercup final on 23rd September against reigning league champions Al Ahli. Schaefer has added real quality this summer in the form of AED 36 million Argentina goal machine José Sand along with the experienced Brazilian Emerson. He will be looking to improve on last season's performance where his team fell just short in the UFL (but still managed automatic qualification to the AFC Champions League). Trivia extra: Al Ain famously has the UFL's most luxurious changing rooms.

Opening fixtures:

24 Sep: Al Nasr (H) Tough opener against organised Dubai outfit

1 Oct: Al Ahli (A) Repeat of Supercup final against reigning champions, still hoping to tempt former Juventus great Pavel Nedved out of retirement. Could shape Ahli's season

18 Oct: Ajman (H) Expect a comfortable home victory against the unpredictable minnows

23 Oct: Al Jazira (A) Fiery local derby against the team that will likely be title challengers



Al Jazira Sporting Club

Play at: Mohammed Bin Zayed Stadium (42,000 capacity)

Coach: Abel Braga (Brazil)

Star man: Ricardo Oliveira (Brazil, forward)

Last season: Second

Prospects: Considered the nation's glamour team (club president Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan also owns Manchester City). Seen by many as the favourites for the title this season. Brazilian manager Braga will be looking for record signing Oliveira to score the goals that will bring the club its 10th league title.

Opening fixtures:

24 Sep: Al Shabab (H) Relatively easy opener against team in process of rebuilding

1 Oct: Al Dhafra (A) Routine away victory expected

18 Oct: Al Wahda (H) First real test of season in local derby with 'the people's club'

23 Oct: Al Ain (H) Derbies come thick and fast – this one is too close to call

Al Wahda

Pro League preview: Abu Dhabi soccer gears up for second season

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