

## **Will Japan's gamble to change their coach on eve of World Cup pay off?**

Two months before the World Cup, the Japanese Football Association did the unthinkable and sacked their coach, replacing him with the man who oversaw the sacking. Pete Hall speaks to those in the know to assess the effect the decision will have at a crucial moment in Japanese footballing history.

There was not a whole lot more Vahid Halilhodzic could have done. Last August, the Bosnian coach led Japan to their sixth consecutive World Cup finals in his third year in charge, finishing top of a challenging AFC qualification group that also included Australia and Saudi Arabia.

Nonetheless, citing reasons of a breakdown in relationship between coach and player, and poor recent friendly results, the Japanese FA decided to sack Halilhodzic 10 weeks before the World Cup, and appoint the Technical Director, Japanese coach Akira Nishino, as the new boss.

The move has divided the country. Nishino has a reasonable record in Japan, winning the AFC Champions League in 2008, and has also coached at youth levels, but Halilhodzic was a popular figure among the press, and was applauded out of his final press conference. So why sack such a popular figure 10 weeks before the most important tournament in world football?

"This is a defining moment for Japanese football," Tom Byer, who played in Japan before setting up coaching schools across the country, tells Sky Sports. "After hiring and firing two foreign coaches that have come from mediocre coaching backgrounds, if this Japanese coach does really well, I can't see why they would go back to hiring these B or C-rank coaches. How long are the likes of Japan going to keep holding the hands of foreign influence? When do they start doing it themselves?"

"They hired the technical director who was a former team-mate of mine at Hitachi [Kashiwa, Japanese football club]. 63-years-old, he was a very successful coach, has won the league, won the Asian Cup. He has coached at Under-20 level, Under-23 at the Olympics where Japan defeated Brazil in 1996.

"As he was technical director at the JFA, it does feel a little like a banana republic, he sacked the coach and then appointed himself!"

"But he is the right guy. If they were going to go with a Japanese guy, this is the guy. He knows the players, he has coaching experience under his belt. He will be well respected by the Japanese players. The older players are happy because they can relate to him better. He is more than qualified.

"We have had 25 years of the J.League, and have some good young coaches. The guy coaching the Under-23s came off the back of back-to-back J1 League titles. He is the first generation of J.League players - there are others, it is time for a change in approach."

Japanese football has been developing at a rapid rate for the past quarter century, since the formation of the current domestic structure - the J.League - in 1992.

A lack of facilities and well-organised football had been severely detrimental to the national team previously, as they did not even come close to qualifying for a World Cup in their entire history.

"Fast forward to now, we have a J1, J2, and J3 - three layers of professional leagues with 54 professional clubs," Byer continues. "In just 25 years this is some change."

With the new Japanese footballing structure in place, these eager youngsters now had somewhere to channel their enthusiasm thanks to an increase in football schools and coaching, and Japan, all of a sudden, became World Cup regulars, having qualified for every World Cup since 1998.

Having got to the knockout stages in the 2002 World Cup, which they co-hosted, popularity soared yet further. Japan stuck with the model of appointing foreign coaches, though, and 2002 remains their joint-best finish at a World Cup. Now, they are trying something new.

"Look around in Asia and they do go for the A-rank coaches, the Guus Hiddinks etc," Byer adds. "Here in Japan, they don't do that, despite being the richest FA in Asia. It was time to try something different, and if they aren't going to pay, go for the Japanese guy. He has what it takes."

Not everyone is convinced, however, with Japan's performance in last week's friendly defeat to Ghana failing to silence the naysayers.

"I do not believe that removing Halilhodzic just two months before the start of the World Cup was the right thing to do, for footballing reasons but also for moral reasons," Reuters sports correspondent in Japan Jack Tarrant tells Sky Sports.

"I think the move was a political one, not necessarily in the best interests of the team's performance in Russia. Nishino has been brought in and it is a difficult role for him. I think Japan may struggle in Russia, unfortunately."

However, should Nishino prove successful and guide his side to the last 16, this really could be the start of a new era of Japanese football, with the Land of the Rising Sun very much in the spotlight.

Andres Iniesta's move to Japanese club Vissel Kobe will raise the profile of the domestic game exponentially, with Fernando Torres reportedly the next to join. Coupled with an impressive display in Russia, popularity will only spread yet further, and get more children interested in playing football, utilising the coaching programmes Byer helped implement, will only benefit the national team in the long run.

"It is a perfect time for Japanese football because they have been overshadowed with the spending from China," Byer adds. "The Chinese teams have been doing better in the Asian Champions League, too. The payroll for those clubs are five times what they are here in the J.League. It is going to put the focus back on Japanese football. Iniesta is such a massive coup."

Serbia sacked their coach after sealing qualification for Russia, while Saudi Arabia have had two coaches since they booked their spot.

But to replace your coach so close to the tournament itself is a bold move in the extreme, one that took Halilhodzic himself by surprise. The pressure is certainly on as a result. Japan have chosen to live by the sword, die by the sword. Now, the Blue Samurai have to deliver, with a nation on the verge of so much potential change expecting results to justify such a radical decision.