

The National

Two arenas are tuned to perfect pitch

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ABU DHABI // In the tense moments before kick-off for a Club World Cup match, the footballers sit in near darkness in their dressing room at Zayed Sports City.

Their faces are barely illuminated by individual rays of light shining from the wall behind their walnut-coloured benches.

That is how the architect Abdulla al Shamsi, one of the key figures involved in refurbishing the 45,000-seat stadium, envisages the pre-match scene in the fully renovated changing area.

Meanwhile, fans in the newly installed seats are waiting for the players to step out on to a freshly laid pitch. This is where the final will be played on December 19.

“One of the most stunning views is just turning those lights on and turn off all the other lights in the players’ dressing room, Mr al Shamsi said. “It really sets it up. It puts you on a stage in a sense, just from the setting.”

Starting from Wednesday, players will start marching on to the Club World Cup “stage” at the two stadiums playing host to the tournament Zayed Sports City and Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium.

The tournament features six continental champions, including Barcelona, kings of European football. Al Ahli, winners of the UAE Pro League, are the seventh team in the tournament.

Top footballers such as Barcelona’s Lionel Messi and Xavi are expected to appear this year.

The 42,000-capacity Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium, home to the Pro League team Al Jazira, has been the site of nearly continuous upgrades since its inception in 2002 as a 15,000-seat arena.

Both grounds needed renovations to satisfy Fifa, the international governing body for football that awarded the UAE the rights to the event for this year and again in 2010. Fifa has given both grounds its stamp of approval.

Thomas Gurtner, the tournament director for the Club World Cup, noted that certain elements, including the players’ dressing rooms at Zayed Sports City, are “on a top style which I would say is hardly seen, even in Europe”.

In addition to improved pitches and changing rooms at both stadiums, seats have been replaced, hi-tech media areas have been constructed, commentary boxes upgraded and royal boxes made over.

Local planners had said they wanted to go beyond the Fifa requirements.



Workers renovate the pitch at Zayed Sports City. The pitch was tested at the game between Manchester City and the UAE last month. **Delores Johnson / The National**

Mr al Shamsi said he and his colleagues from Mubadala Real Estate and Hospitality considered work on Zayed Sports City a “labour of love”. Also contributing to the project were Alexis Dijksterhuis, a senior manager in business development; and Florence Lee, assistant manager for commercial and contracts.

At both stadiums, the centrepiece of the refurbished grounds is the new turf, grown from a variety of seed called SeaDwarf Paspalum that requires up to 50 per cent less water than other types. “The process for these seeds to grow is they would actually spread out underneath the sand, emanate their roots under the whole field first,” Mr al Shamsi said. “Then suddenly the blades of grass would start to come up outside and when they did it would all come out in waves.”

The pitches received regular visits from an agronomist, as much as 110,000 litres of water a day during the summer months, regular trimming and a second seeding.

The Mohammed bin Zayed surface now is of the highest quality, according to the Brazilian Ricardo Oliveira, the Al Jazira striker who has trained on the pitch since the start of the Pro League season.

“The surface is even and the bounce is right,” said Oliveira, who has played for first-division clubs in Spain, Brazil and Italy.

“For us, as players, it makes a huge difference to play on a world-class pitch like this. This will be a tremendous benefit for the club.”

The quality of pitches at both the stadiums and the seven training grounds prepared for the clubs participating in the 11-day Fifa event will be just as important for UAE football when the foreign clubs have left, said Mohammed Khalfan al Rumaithi, the UAE Football Association president.

“These pitches are an important part of the legacy the Fifa Club World Cup will leave behind for the Emirates,” he said.

Through the years, the stadiums have hosted such large football events as the 1985 Asian Championship finals and the 1982, 1994 and 2007 Gulf Cup of Nations, won by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, respectively.

In 2003, the two stadiums played host to the Fifa World Youth Championship final, won 1-0 by Spain over Brazil. The UAE striker Ismail Matar, then 20, impressed the host fans on his way to being named top player of the tournament.

Fans at this championship will sit in recently installed seats, repositioned to offer better views, planners say.

At Zayed Sports City, Mr al Shamsi said the decision to install seats with a variety of colours helped create a sense of energy in the stadium even when it is empty.

He is most proud of the renovated royal box, which is larger and has removable glass panes after the Royal Family requested that they feel more a part of the crowd.

With its red-and-white carpets and leather seats to match the colours of the national team’s kit, the designers’ attention to detail and the stadium’s history are evident here.

The more contemporary sport seats have the dimensions of the handcrafted originals in which the nation’s founder, Sheikh Zayed, sat, Mr al Shamsi said.

“It was something we had to bring across for these royal chairs because we were going for this retrofit and renew,” he said. “The new had to have a dimension of the old.”

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