



Lorival Santos Interview

Lorival Santos has gone down in history as the first manager from outside of Asia to win the Iraqi Premier League title since the tournament was founded in 1974. He will forever be remembered as the man who led Al Shorta to their landmark tenth overall league title as the Harps finished one point ahead of Erbil in the 2013-14 season. Nearly three years on since the achievement, we caught up with the Brazilian to discuss his successful time as the club's coach.



Q. What made you interested in coming to Iraq and managing Al Shorta?

A. Challenge. The greater the difficulty, the greater the challenge. Great Brazilian coaches like Evaristo de Macedo and Zico had managed in Iraq before but were not able to win any tournaments. I wanted to win and that was my motivation to work in Iraq.

Q. Were you worried that Baghdad would be a dangerous place to live? Did the war and lack of safety have an effect on your management of the team?

A. Yes I was worried, but the whole experience was a challenge and I saw that as just another obstacle that I needed to overcome. There were no problems in terms of managing the team, and several people helped me including some press professionals such as journalists Hassan Ayal and Emad Abbas. I am very grateful to them.

Q. Al Shorta won the league title in the 2012-13 season, the season before your arrival. Did the fact that Al Shorta were defending champions put a lot of pressure on you?

A. Not at all - in fact it was one of the main reasons for my desire to work at the club. I had been a league champion during my time in Mexico and wanted to win my second league title a lot.

Q. What were your first impressions of the club and its fans when you joined? And did the language barrier provide any difficulties?

A. My first impressions were very positive as I was welcomed very respectfully by all, including by president Ayad Bunyan who gave me his full support. With regard to the language barrier, it was difficult at first. But I changed my methodology and brought in a translator called Ali Mahdi who helped a lot and everything became fine.



Q. Your first league match was a 1-0 win against Al Zawraa, who are one of Al Shorta's biggest rivals. How important was it to get off to a winning start?

A. It is always important to start winning. There were still some doubts at the time to do with our preparation; we had a camp in Istanbul but a lot of key players were missing from it so it was important to start winning to ease those doubts. I remember soon after the game, president Ayad Bunyan jumped on me and hugged me. I could tell how important the derby was to him and the club and his happiness made me happy too, especially as he trusted a lot in my work and even went to Brazil.

Q. Al Shorta had six competitors that season (Al-Zawraa, Al-Quwa Al-Jawiya, Al-Talaba, Baghdad, Erbil and Duhok), and you came out with seven wins and one draw against them which is a fantastic record. How proud were you of these results?

A. I was very happy. Journalist Hassan Ayal informed me at the time that I was the only coach in the history of Iraqi football to win seven games on the bounce against those sides. Winning the big games was one of the main reasons we became champions, and we only suffered two defeats in the league with the second being a game where we played with nine men for a long time.

Q. After losing in the first round of AFC Champions League qualifying, Al Shorta played in the AFC Cup but with only one win from six games, we were knocked out in the group stage. What went wrong in this tournament? Were the injuries to Mustafa Kareem and Cristiano a major factor?

A. Yes, with the absence of both of our strikers it was difficult to score, but what made it more difficult was our playmaker Nashat Akram (pictured standing left) leaving the club just before the AFC Cup started. Without Nashat, the team was not able to produce many chances and therefore we couldn't score many goals. We were playing well against Al Kuwait in the AFC Champions League qualifier with Nashat, but he had to go off injured and after that we struggled to build attacks consistently.



Q. Did the switch of stadiums during the middle of the season have a negative impact on the team?

A. Yes it did. Playing at Al Shorta Stadium with the support of our fantastic fans was very good. Playing at Al Shaab Stadium was more difficult as it was larger and the fans were much further from the field, but everyone's desire to be champions allowed us to overcome such obstacles.

Q. Towards the end of the season, Al Shorta started to lose a lot of points. From the last five matches, we had one win, three draws and a defeat. Did this make you worried that Al Shorta might not win the league, or were you still confident?

A. I did not question myself as I knew what I was doing and I knew it would be a matter of time before we got better. I did have to change our style of play because some players were not performing up to the required standard and we were aware that results needed to improve.

Q. In the end, on 18 June the Iraq Football Association decided to end the league early due to the increased unrest in the country and considered the standings on that date to be final, with Al Shorta topping the league. Where were you when you heard the news that Al Shorta had been declared champions? Would you have preferred for the season to go on longer?

A. I was at the stadium for training when I found out. The fans lifted me on their shoulders and celebrated. To become champions of the Iraqi Premier League was a fantastic feeling and I am very pleased with this achievement. But nobody wins alone; the support of the great president Ayad Bunyan and the great players such as Qusay Munir, Hussein Abdul Wahid, Nashat Akram, Mahdi Kareem, Hamdy Al-Massri and goalkeeper Mohammed Hameed among many others helped me a lot and I thank all of them. In terms of the league ending, although I was always determined to do my best in the job, I was happy with the decision for family reasons as I had become homesick and I missed my wife and children.



Q. How proud were you to become the first manager outside of Asia to win the Iraqi Premier League?

A. I was very proud and it is one of the best honours of my career. But I can't make it all about me as I could not have done it without the several people I mentioned before and to them I say thank you and congratulations.

Q. You had a lot of great matches as our manager. Do you have a favourite?

A. Yes I do, and it wasn't actually a match we won. It was against Al Qadsia of Kuwait in the AFC Cup. They were very experienced in the AFC Cup and were the best team in the tournament as well as the main provider for Kuwait's national team at the time, while we were

playing our first ever AFC Cup match. We drew 0-0 but our performance was fantastic and we truly deserved to win that game.

Q. There were some rumours at the time that your relationship with defender Paul Koulibaly was not good. Why did Koulibaly leave the club during the season?

A. Those rumours aren't true - we had a good relationship and he helped me. It turned out that at one particular period his problems got bigger than the club. I am very professional and nothing should be bigger than the club; I told Ayad Bunyan this and he agreed. I did not want to work with him anymore as the club is always in first place.

Q. You coached AFC Asian Cup winners such as Nashat Akram, Mahdi Kareem and Qusay Munir and also worked with some of Iraq's brightest youngsters in Amjad Kalaf and Sherko Kareem. Was there any player you enjoyed coaching the most?

A. Great players like to be coached by great coaches, and great coaches like to coach great players. I enjoyed working with all my players and we all had a good professional relationship.

Q. And how was your relationship with the club's president, Ayad Bunyan?

A. Our relationship was the best it could possibly be. He remains the best president I've ever worked with in my career. When he said farewell to me, I was very moved and I thanked him for his confidence in my work. We were champions.



Q. How has your career been since you left the club?

A. It's been good. In the 2015-16 season, I led my club to be state champion. The team was in last place when I arrived and I took them to the final game. It was my third state title, which I can add to my two national titles that I won in Mexico and, of course, in Iraq.

Q. Finally, what did you think about the quality of Iraqi football? What improvements do you think could be made to the league competition, and would you consider coaching in Iraq again in the future?

A. Iraqi football has very fast players and I was impressed by that. The tactical side of Iraqi football needs to be improved a bit, and to improve the league competition there needs to be much fewer postponements and breaks between games. As for returning to Iraqi football, it would be a pride and an honour to return as I was welcomed so well by the Iraqi people and I really enjoyed my time there.

A big thank you to Lorival Santos - forever an Al Shorta legend!



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