

## THE HISTORICAL ACHIEVEMENT OF UZBEKISTAN'S FOOTBALL: THE ROAD TO THE WORLD CUP

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There are no accidental turns in the history of sports. Every major victory is the product of years of accumulated mistakes, systemic changes, and decisions made with cold blood. The Uzbekistan national football team's qualification for the 2026 FIFA World Cup was the final result of escaping long-standing utopian views and transitioning to real, pragmatic football.

This process is not mere luck, but the triumph of precise calculation, a correctly chosen strategy, and discipline on the pitch. The wait of over 30 years, painful blows, and generational shifts finally united at a single point – the pillar of efficiency. Below, we will examine the fundamental factors, the chronology of falls, and recoveries that ensured this historical result through facts and systemic analysis.

- In 1994, the Uzbekistan Football Association was accepted as a full member of FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).
- In the exact same year, at the Asian Games held in Hiroshima, Japan, the national team led by Rustam Akramov and Birodar Abduraimov won gold medals.
- In the final, the Chinese national team was defeated with a score of 4:2.
- Players like Igor Shkvirin, Mirjalol Qosimov, and Azamat Abduraimov made their mark on the continent.

This initial major victory created a contradictory situation in Uzbekistan's football. On the one hand, this was a strong psychological step in the international arena, while on the other hand, it formed a dangerous illusion that "we are the strongest on the continent anyway". Built on the remnants of the Soviet football school, this team won a short-term tournament due to physical superiority. However, the independent infrastructure, children's

and youth football systems, and the institute of coaching training required for stable development were still lacking. This lack of system began to bear its bitter fruit in the following decades.

Football is a game of numbers and facts. Romance only fits after a victory. Uzbekistan's path in the World Cup qualifiers has mostly been remembered for tactical mistakes, giving in to emotions, and administrative incompetence.

- **September 3, 2005:** The national teams of Uzbekistan and Bahrain faced off in a playoff match in Tashkent. In the 39th minute of the game, while the score was 1:0, Japanese referee Toshimitsu Yoshida canceled the penalty scored by Server Jeparov. Instead of ordering a retake due to a rule violation (an Uzbek player entered the penalty area too early), he awarded a free-kick in favor of Bahrain. This was a gross refereeing error.

- **Analysis:** The Uzbekistan football leadership made an emotional decision and submitted an appeal to FIFA asking to resolve the match result 3:0 in favor of Uzbekistan. FIFA, based on the rules, canceled the match and scheduled a replay. In the replay, a 1:1 draw was recorded, and 0:0 away, causing Uzbekistan to painfully exit the tournament. This clearly demonstrated the consequences of making decisions without a cold-blooded analysis of the situation and a deep understanding of the rules.

- **2013:** The team managed by Mirjalol Qosimov collected the same number of points – 14 – as South Korea in the final stage of the qualifiers. In the final round, Uzbekistan defeated Qatar 5:1, but due to goal difference (+6 for Korea, +5 for Uzbekistan), they missed out on a direct ticket. In the playoffs, they lost to Jordan in a penalty shootout.

- **Analysis:** An analysis of this cycle shows that the team could not handle the pressure at the decisive moment. Particularly, the defeat against South Korea in Seoul, due to Akmal Shorahmedov's own goal, tactically showed that the team had problems building a defensive block. Instead of

maximizing the realization of favorable chances, Uzbekistan became dependent on the mathematics of the tournament table.

- **September 5, 2017:** The team led by Samvel Babayan hosted South Korea in Tashkent. A victory would have secured a direct ticket. The match ended in a 0:0 draw. Alexander Geynrikh's shot hit the goalpost.
  - **Analysis:** The main tragedy of the team during Samvel Babayan's era was playing based on strict and unchangeable templates, conservatism in personnel policy, and a lack of creativity. At a time when a result was demanded on the pitch, the team displayed overly cautious football built on fear. Although the potential of this generation was at its peak, tactical poverty left them empty-handed for the World Cup.

The internal mechanisms affecting results in Uzbekistan's football – the domestic championship and the activities of academies – remained in the shadows for a long time. Only the gradual changes that occurred in the last 5-7 years have begun to bear fruit.

The Uzbekistan Professional Football League (UzPFL) radically changed the formats of the Super League and Pro League. Club licensing requirements were strictly tightened. Starting from 2021, the VAR (Video Assistant Referee) system was fully implemented in the domestic championship. The academies of "Nasaf", "Bunyodkor", and Odil Ahmedov turned into a conveyor belt consistently producing young talents. **Analysis:** The changes in the Super League system were not just a change of name, but the establishment of quality control. Abandoning artificial pitches, demanding transparency in club budgets, and optimizing the legionnaire limit increased the competitiveness of the championship. Now players began to be raised in an environment that meets modern requirements not only physically but also technically and tactically. The principle that quality is more important than speed became the working ethos of academies.

Unlike previous generations, the core of the current national team consists of players forged in European clubs and adapted to playing under pressure there. They escaped the

artificial comfort of the local championship and chose a tough but professional environment.

- **Eldor Shomurodov:** The best scorer in the history of the Uzbekistan national team. His transfer from "Rostov" to the Italian Serie A ("Genoa", "Roma", "Cagliari") removed a psychological barrier for the youth. Shomurodov's coefficient of useful work on the pitch is evident not only in goals but also in off-the-ball movements, pulling center-backs towards him, and opening up spaces for the team.
- **Abduqodir Husanov:** Defender for the French club "Lens" (RC Lens). He is the first Uzbek center-back to start in the Champions League and play consistently in a top-five league. His playing style is cold-blooded, physically robust, and highly accurate in passing the ball forward with the first touch. His presence eliminated panic in the national team's defense.
- **Abbosbek Fayzullaev:** Player for Moscow's CSKA club and one of the best young players in Asia. Fayzullaev's speed of decision-making, ball control in tight spaces, and non-standard passes have become Uzbekistan's main weapon in the transition phase.

**Analysis:** The experience of legionnaires in the international arena brought mental stability to the national team, which had been lacking in previous years. The concept of strict European discipline has now become the DNA of the national team. Working solely on precise instructions and results, without unnecessary actions, is the main characteristic of the new era's legionnaires.