

“The welcome was awesome”



Man United
v
Al Hilal
21 Jan 2008

Sir Alex Ferguson echoed United legend Paddy Crerand's comments when asked how the team had been received by the 65,000 crowd at the King Fahd stadium. "The noise level was just incredible" he said "they certainly seem to love their football..".

Sir Alex was talking at a reception in Riyadh a few days after Manchester's most famous export had gone down to a 3-2 defeat by Al Hilal.

Al-Hilal has the reputation of being the most widely supported club in Saudi Arabia. The team has achieved the largest number of cups among Saudi teams with 45 official cups since its founding in 1957. The club's most famous player is the longtime star of the Saudi Arabian national football team, Sami Al-Jaber, and it was to play in his testimonial game that Sir Alex had brought his squad to Riyadh.

Sami Al-Jaber, speaking at the pre-game press conference, thanked the Manchester United team for attending his farewell. He said that he was happy to be sitting next to big names like Ferguson and Giggs, and "I thank God for the success during my career at Al-Hilal," he said.

Questioned by visiting UK press at the conference, both Sir Alex and Club Chief Executive David Gill defended the decision to accept the invitation from Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad bin Abdulaziz

Al-Saud to play against Al Hilal even though it had raised a lot of eyebrows in England, with the fixture coming in the middle of a busy fixture period. Gill was keen to extol the positives, pointing out that the most recent time the club travelled abroad in January, to Dubai in 2004, they went on to win the Cup.

Comments by Sir Alex were widely reported across the globe with many of the football focussed websites quoting Sir Alex when he dismissed fears that the physique of the Arab footballer is not suitable for success in foreign leagues.

He said: "I have always felt that the physique of the Slavic players and Italian footballers is much more developed than British players. The physique of African footballers is fantastic as well.

"But I don't see that as a problem. The main challenge for the Arab footballer now is the one that faced the Koreans and the Japanese a few years ago. It is such a global game now. It is in your hands and the football people in Saudi Arabia must take the challenge on.

"I have 20 different nationalities in my squad at Manchester United and the door is open to any footballer in the world, no matter where they come from, if they have the talent to play for the club."

