

# THE SOCCEROO WINGER ON-FIRE FOR SAUDI SURPRISE PACKET AL-WEHDA

Make no mistake, Soccerro Craig Goodwin's breakout success in Saudi Arabia is one of the unheralded stories of this coronavirus-interrupted season, with the skillful winger offering FTBL an insight into his life in Jeddah while starring in one of Asia's big leagues.



**Goodwin's rise** is, in some way, a validation of the current Australian football development system (though he feels the Aussie youth system from aged nine to 14 falls short). **The South** Australian has gone from NPL to A-League, to Europe and the Soccerros over the last 10 years. **Now, at 28**, he's one of the breakout stars with four goals and eight assists for surprise packet Al-Wehda, who sit third in the Saudi Pro League. **The Saudi** league's quality - they allow a staggering seven foreigners per side, many of them the highest of class - goes largely unnoticed by many Australian fans. **A pity** as it's at a level and overall quality which is comparable to the J-League and K-League. It's a view the Soccerros winger agrees with after his first season at one of the less-heralded clubs in Saudi. **"Playing away** to Al-Hilal, it's an amazing stadium. It's like Europe. Holds about 30,000. It's the best atmosphere I've played in since arriving in Saudi," he tells FTBL from Adelaide today. **"The crowd**, it's like Europe. **"They've got** the best Saudis and add to that the likes of former EPL striker Bafetimbi Gomis, Italian star Sebastian Giovinco, and Brazilian Eduardo. **"These players** are on a lot of money. They dictate the tempo and possession and you have to work extra hard to defend against them. **"They could** compete with big teams in Europe **"And across** the league, they have the resources to bring

in some amazing players. And with high-quality coaches, you get a mix of tactics and variety in how we play, in comparison to many Australian teams." **Goodwin and** Brazilian midfielder, 31-year-old Anselmo have been the prime movers for Al Wehda, cannily managed by Uruguayan coach "El Crespo" Jose Daniel Carreno. **"When I'm** making certain runs, Anselmo he has that high quality to be able to find me. **"I think** both of us contribute a lot to the team which has helped us get to third in the ladder. But it's a good squad all round." **The club** is ostensibly from Mecca but they live and train in the coastal city of Jeddah and play their home games at a stadium on the outskirts of Mecca, a city that has great meaning to the Muslim faith. **Training is** in the evenings so Goodwin and his fiancé Katelyn, a nurse, spend their days exploring the scenic coastal spots' cafes and restaurants of Jeddah. **His fiancé**, however, wears the traditional Muslim wear for women, an abaya, when she's in public. **And with** the new tourist visa, some family members have been able to visit the pair. **"In general**, it's not that much different from what we'd do in Australia. We often go for a walk along the water," Goodwin says of life outside training. **They arrived** back in Australia after six weeks of lockdown in Jeddah. **The couple** subsequently spent two weeks in quarantine in a small Melbourne hotel with just two 15 minute walks outside per day. **Goodwin and** his partner then returned home to Adelaide where they are currently in day five of self-isolation. **It's been** tough but with living in Saudi without their family

and friends, it's made the couple even stronger. **"It's been** a little draining," added the Soccerro, capped five times. **"But we** got through a lot of Netflix and got on each other's nerves sometimes!" **Meantime, he's** on a training program set by Soccerros head of S&C, Andrew Clark. **Goodwin is** due back in Saudi in August with the league set for a one-month pre-season before finishing off the competition (they've played 22 rounds) from September. **Leaving his** home state SA, working part-time at a Melbourne KFC while launching his NPL career with Oakleigh under current J-League assistant coach with Japanese champions Yokohama, Arthur Papas, Goodwin's career has been about staying focussed. **A prime** example is in recent months when Goodwin missed an open goal for his club. **It garnered** wide coverage ("My dad told me it made news in Adelaide" he notes). A week later, Goodwin smashed a brace. **The winger** didn't make the cut for Adelaide United's youth team for two years in a row. And was cut from the SA state team earlier as a junior. **"The setbacks** test your mental capacity," he says. **"But it** also shows how driven you are, they challenge who you are as you ask yourself, 'is this what you really want?'" **He adds:** "Footballers are human, we make mistakes," stressing that his much-publicized tap-in miss should've been put away. **However, he** provided an assist in the same game. **"Most strikers** around the world, the top players, they've all missed easy shots. **"That's how** it is with social media and media in general. Funnily though, when I scored the two goals a week later, there wasn't a peep. **"But it's** how you respond that matters."

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Τηλ.: (02) 9568 3766  
Fax: (02) 9569 9344

E-mail: kosmos@kosmos.com.au

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