Beat: Sports

From giving up football due to the Gulf War to winning an Iraqi government award

The story of Nather Al-Khatib

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USPA NEWS - Having once given up on football after becoming disillusioned with it during the second Gulf War, Nathar Al-Khatib has now been recognised for his contribution to sport by the government in his native Iraq.

Once a professional footballer in the Iraqi Premier League, the Cambridge-based coach packed in the game following the 2003 invasion of his country and went to work as an engineer, the field in which he had graduated, in Dubai.

But the itch never quite went away, and having moved to England a few years later, it wasn´t long before he was playing football again "" initially for Cambridge University Press in the Kershaw League.

From there he moved into coaching, taking up positions with Fulbourn Institute U11s and Cherry Hinton Lions U13s and with the senior side at Downham, before landing a role with Norwich City´s regional development programme.

For the past year, he has been working as an academy foundation phase coach at Cambridge United, while also finding the time for a spell as assistant manager at Huntingdon United, and was recently appointed reserve team manager at Potton United.

All of which hard work led to him last week being awarded a certificate of appreciation from the Iraqi Embassy in London "" 24 hours after landing his new coaching role with Potton.

"When I first became a professional footballer in Iraq, at 16 I was the youngest squad player at my club, Al-Sinaa,"? he said. "I then moved to Al-Kahraba and was playing alongside Iraqi internationals, so it was all going very well.

"But when the war came I just started to lose interest. My dad was killed during the war too, and it was only later I realised how much of an impact that had on me. I packed it in, moved to Dubai and went back to engineering.

"When I came to England my focus was on learning English and finding another engineering job, but after a while I found my heart was still beating for football. I went to some of the Cambridge United soccer schools to look at the coaching and thought I could be a better job.
"I contacted the local FA because I was struggling to find a club because I didn´t have the network. I was making lots of phone calls but nobody was giving me a chance. All it took was getting that opportunity, and I have never looked back.

"I´m glad I found my way back to the game. I´m very honoured to receive this award to recognise what I´ve been doing, and I´m excited to start a new chapter with Potton. I want to show what I am capable of once more, and I am looking forward to it."?

Before starting the new season with Potton, Al-Khatib will also next month be taking an advanced youth award course "" the highest level in the FA structure for youth coaching and the equivalent of an adult A Licence.

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