

JDT dare to dream in debut campaign

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It will be a historic moment for Malaysian football when Johor Darul Ta'zim take to the field against reigning champions Kashima Antlers from Japan at Kashima Soccer Stadium today.

This is the first time that a Malaysian team will feature in the group stages of the AFC Champions League, matching what regional rivals Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam have done.

JDT, who qualified as champions of the 2018 Malaysia Super League, have been drawn in a tough Group E that also comprises China's Shandong Luneng and South Korea's Gyeongnam FC.

The Southern Tigers warmed up for today's showdown with a 4-2 away win over Selangor in the Super League at the weekend, and their new striker Diogo Luis Santo is in great form.

The 31-year-old Brazilian is the big name signing for JDT in the pre-season, after they prised him from Thai champions Buriram United in a record-breaking deal.

Getting on the scoresheet as well as supplying two assists in the match against Selangor, Diogo's form comes at the right time as his new team look to rely on his massive Champions League experience.

There's, however, injury concerns for team manager Luciano Figueroa as the trio of Mauricio dos Santos, Azrif Nasrullah and Gonzalo Cabrera were all taken off against Se-

FIXTURE

AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

GROUP E

TODAY

KASHIMAANTLERS v JDT

(Kashima Soccer Stadium, 8pm)

langor before full time.

Kashima will also have their injury problem with star forward and last season's AFC Champions League MVP Yuma Suzuki unavailable for two months after aggravating his right hamstring in late February.

The Japanese giants are also not in their best shape having failed to win their opening two matches of the 2019 J-League season.

They surprisingly lost at home 2-1 to newly promoted Oita Trinita and could only gain one point in a 1-1 draw against Kawasaki Frontale on March 1.

JDT, who have been dominant in the M-League, will have to accept that they are no longer the favourites against the Japanese side.

Figueroa's men have kept only one clean sheet in five Super League matches thus far, which is a worrying aspect considering the higher quality opponents that they are about to face.

Whatever the outcome, JDT making their debut in Asia's most elite club competition, will have a day to remember. **Ooi Kin Fai**