

# SNAPSHOTS



Neto plays an active role during training.



Neto bids goodbye to a team member.



Vicente de Paula Neto lunges for the ball on April 12, 2014.

PHOTOS BY WANG FEI, CHENG MIN AND LI GANG / XINHUA



The team congratulates Neto after he scores a goal on March 21, 2004.



Team members enjoy a barbecue.

## VETERAN OF THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Brazilian player Neto has been deeply involved in Chinese soccer for the past 15 years

By ZHANG LEI

He is Brazilian but he behaves like a local. In Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, he loves roasted buns, has completely adapted to the cold at the foot of the Tianshan Mountains, and loves boiled lemon tea. Vicente de Paula Neto has been associated with Chinese soccer for the past 15 years, and those who know him well affectionately call him "Old V".

His love affair with China began in 2004, when the winner of the Brazilian Sao Paulo District League Golden Boot was invited to Wuhan to join the Chinese professional league.

At that time there were very few foreign soccer players in China, and he was among a handful of Brazilians.

Over the years he has played with clubs in Wuhan, Xi'an and Shanghai, before moving to Urumqi in Xinjiang to join Chinese Huakai in 2014, the first professional soccer team in Xinjiang.

Then, in 2017, in an Asian League match against the Lijiang Flying Tigers, he hurt his Achilles tendon and decided to "hang up his boots".

In September that year, Neto, 38, became the assistant coach of the Xinjiang Tianshan Snow Leopards.

Speaking about his coaching role, he said: "I wanted to become a coach when I was a player.



Neto instructs a player during a training session.

At first, I thought it would be easy. But when I took up the job I found that it was not simple.

"I have to watch videos of the team repeatedly, make plans and accompany the players to train. It is very tiring."

As for the state of Chinese soccer, Neto said he has personally experienced the rapid development of the game in China. He added that in recent years many international coaches and players have come to China to play, and some have come from well-known teams.

In his view, the level of Chinese soccer is rising, the salaries of foreign players are attractive, and the clubs go out of their way to create a comfortable living environment for the foreign talent. These are all factors that attract players, he said.

Speaking about his own experience, Neto said: "My family has been in China. My wife likes it very much. And I can also buy Brazilian food through my mobile phone."

For now, more foreign players are coming to play in China. In the just concluded 2018 season, there were 23 Brazilian players in the Chinese Super League.

As for Neto's future, the Brazilian is leaving Xinjiang now that the season has ended. For his farewell, Neto and the team gathered at the training base for grilled kebabs and pilaf.

Looking ahead, he said: "I like to enjoy every day, and I have not thought about what to do in five or 10 years. But what is certain is that I will return to China next year."