

DANE AT VANGUARD OF CHINA'S WORLD CUP QUEST

SHANGHAI: It is the World Cup final and China beat one of the traditional heavyweights showcasing a brand of fast, attacking football that their opponents cannot live with. That, along with hosting the World Cup, is the dream of Chinese President Xi Jinping — and a Dane at a leading Chinese club is doing his part to try to make it happen.

Mads Davidsen does not necessarily think China will win the World Cup but he has no doubt that the world's most populous country can finally become a competitive force and reach the World Cup knockout stages in about 15 years.

The 34-year-old Davidsen is well-placed to judge: he is technical director at Shanghai SIPG and as part of his wide-ranging remit the Chinese Super League (CSL) club brought in the likes of Brazilian international Oscar for 60 million euros from Chelsea, and lured Andre Villas-Boas as coach.

Foreign players and coaches have

attracted unprecedented interest from the CSL, but China's national team remain an embarrassment — 77th in the FIFA rankings and with only one World Cup appearance in 2002, when they failed to get a point or even score.

Davidsen, involved in top-level Chinese football since 2013 when he worked under former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson at Guangzhou R&F, pinpoints coaching as the crux of China's problem.

And Davidsen, who holds a UEFA Pro licence coaching badge and oversees football development at SIPG right down to the club's five-year-olds, told AFP that focusing on famous imports misses the overarching picture.

THE BIG PLAN

"It's all part of the big plan. Chinese football said, 'How can we improve the league fast? OK, get in good foreign players who can promote the

good foreign coaches who will lift the current local players and then we are rolling. That's what's happened the last three years.

"Everything in this plan is about improving the national team. I work for Shanghai SIPG, but where is SIPG in this project? Of course to promote our club and business, but also to help the president improve the national team."

Contrary to the perceptions of some, Davidsen said Chinese players have good basic technique — better even than Europeans in some cases.

They also have the right attitude and work-rate, he said, and respect for authority in China means they adhere to instructions from coaches.

And Chinese have another, innate quality. "I've never had more fast players. And where's football going? It's getting faster so it's crucial to have pace, it's a huge advantage," said Davidsen, whose role includes overseeing SIPG's develop-

ment of 10,000 players aged five to 13 at academies across China.

So why has China failed to develop even one world-class footballer? "It all comes down to the coaches and the environment around them," said Davidsen, who played in Denmark's third tier and by 29 was on the staff at leading Danish club Brøndby, before moving to China in 2012.

"The main development area is that the coaches here are on too low a level. A key point: the Chinese coaches must travel more, see more of football round the world to understand the demands of the modern game."

PATIENCE NEEDED

Xi — whose government is throwing money at football — and China's success-starved fans will have to be patient.

"I have seen five or six-year-olds who can do things they cannot do in Europe because technically they train repeti-

tion, so many hours of repetition," said Davidsen. "In China they accept a lot of training because they have a different mindset and tough mentality."

Ages eight to 13 are "the crucial years, when it is an open window physically, technically and tactically", he said, adding that while the current crop of Chinese players have improved markedly in recent years, it is just the beginning.

SIPG appreciate his is a long-term project, he said, but many clubs in China are more focused on immediate success.

"You have to wait for a kid who is seven, it's going to take 15 years," Davidsen said. "I'm not saying we're going to have to wait 15 years — along the way there will be decent progression, which we have already seen — but you have to wait 15 years until you see a real effect from the programmes."

"It's still new for most Chinese clubs to work strategically and build for long-term success." —AFP



CHEMNITZ: In this Aug. 12, 2017 file photo Munich's Franck Ribery and referee Bibiana Steinhaus walk on the pitch during the German Soccer Cup first-round soccer match between Chemnitz FC and FC Bayern Munich in Chemnitz, Germany. Carving her way in a man's world, Bibiana Steinhaus is striking a blow for equality as the Bundesliga's first female referee this season. — AP

GERMAN FEMALE REF READY TO WHISTLE IN BUNDESLIGA

BERLIN: Germany's Bibiana Steinhaus insists she is no feminist trailblazer as she prepares to become the first female ref in Europe's top leagues having already tamed Bayern Munich's stars.

The 38-year-old is on the official list of Bundesliga referees for the 2017/18 season, which starts tomorrow, meaning she will become the first female ref in the top flight of Germany, England, Spain, France or Italy. Steinhaus' first Bundesliga match has yet to be announced, but she oversaw Bayern Munich's 5-0 win at minnows Chemnitz last Saturday in the first-round of the German Cup and proved she can handle star players. She gave Bayern's Franck Ribery a playful punch on the arm after the French winger cheekily untied her boot laces before a free-kick. "She's strong, she has a lot of power," said Ribery. "It was funny, she played along and was in good spirits."

"You can have fun with referees, but it's also important that there's mutual respect."

Steinhaus says her promotion to the Bundesliga is a "great incentive" and reward for her hard work, but shuns her role as a trailblazer. "I never planned, and still don't today, to break new grounds of emancipation," she said at a referee's training camp in July. "I am only doing what I love."

Steinhaus has taken charge of around 80 German second division matches since 2011, refereeing the women's final at the London Olympic Games tournament and this year's women's Champions League

final. She has already acted as the fourth official in Germany's top tier and shrugged off Pep Guardiola's attempt to put his arm around her shoulders when the then-Bayern coach remonstrated with her on the touchlines in 2014.

Unfortunately, the 1.81m Steinhaus has already experienced direct sexism on the pitch. During a second division match in 2015, she sent off Hoffenheim's Germany international Kerem Demirbay, then playing for Fortuna Dusseldorf, who told her women had no place in football.

The remark led to him receiving a five-match ban by the German FA. Steinhaus, who works with a fitness coach, acknowledges that refereeing in the Bundesliga will challenge her both on and off the pitch. "I like to say that the Bundesliga is another step up, I have worked intensively and the speed is different," said Steinhaus.

"Certainly, as a female referee, I will be under special scrutiny from the start of the season, especially from the media. 'I don't seek public attention and my colleagues know me well enough to know that.' Steinhaus is a policewoman and in a relationship with English former top ref Howard Webb. She can expect to have her decisions scrutinised by fans in football-mad Germany. Claudia Neumann, Germany's first female commentator, experienced a sexist backlash on social media when she took the microphone for state broadcaster ZDF during last year's European championships.—AFP

SOCCER

JESE LOANED OUT BY PSG, LOOKS TO RELAUNCH CAREER AT STOKE

LONDON: Spanish forward Jese will attempt to relaunch his stuttering career in England after leaving Paris Saint-Germain to become the latest Champions League winner at Stoke today. The 24-year-old Jese joined Stoke on a season-long loan after failing to settle at PSG following his move from Real Madrid for a reported 25 million euros (\$29 million) in August 2016. He spent the second half of last season on loan at Spanish team Las Palmas.

Also, Swansea playmaker Gylfi Sigurdsson is close to sealing a drawn-out transfer to Everton after completing a medical examination. Everton is reportedly paying 45 million pounds (\$58 million) for the Iceland international, who would be a fourth attacking player to arrive at Goodison Park this summer after Wayne Rooney, Sandro Ramirez and Davy Klaassen.

Stoke, a team from central England that is a perennial mid-table finisher in the Premier League, has become a haven for former high-profile players or one-time prodigies whose careers have stalled.

Since 2014, forwards Bojan Krkic and Ibrahim Afellay have joined from Barcelona while ex-Bayern Munich winger Xherdan Shaqiri has arrived from Inter Milan. They all have Champions League winners' medals, as does ex-Manchester United midfielder Darren Fletcher, who was an offseason signing from West Bromwich Albion.

Most were back-ups for their clubs in their Champions League-winning campaigns, with Jese an unused substitute for Real in its victory over Atletico Madrid in the 2016 final. "Jese was a man in demand when PSG made it clear they would allow him to leave on loan and we're delighted he has chosen to join us," Stoke chief executive Tony Scholes said. "He hasn't had the happiest of periods in his career in Paris, but he's still only a young man and is hungry to make a



PARIS: In this Aug. 21, 2016 file photo, PSG's Jese Rodriguez reacts before the French League One soccer match between PSG and Metz at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. Paris Saint-Germain said yesterday it is loaning Spanish forward Jese Rodriguez to Stoke City for this season, without the option to buy him. — AP

big impression in the Premier League."

Jese will play out wide and is viewed as a replacement for Marko Arnautovic, who left Stoke this offseason to join West Ham. Stoke also sold Spanish striker Joselu to Newcastle for an undisclosed fee yesterday. Stoke announced the arrival of Jese in a tweet that included audio clips from pundits in the British media saying the club lacked ambition and would struggle in the Premier League this season.

The team managed by Mark Hughes lost 1-0 at Everton in its opening league game of the season on Saturday. Jese was a highly rated youngster at Real Madrid and made his La Liga

debut under coach Jose Mourinho in 2012. He mostly played for Real's reserve team and sustained a serious knee injury in March 2014, ruling him out for nine months.

He signed a five-year deal with PSG last summer but started only one league game, with another eight appearances as substitute.

Although technically skilled, Jese has not played so far this season and does not figure in coach Unai Emery's plans — although the deal with Stoke does not include an option to buy him. At Las Palmas, Jese scored three goals in 13 games. Jese is Stoke's sixth signing of the summer transfer window.—AP



EDGBASTON: West Indies cricket players perform drills during the nets session at Edgbaston cricket ground in Birmingham, England, yesterday. The West Indies will play the England in the first day-night cricket Test match to be held in England at Edgbaston today. — AP

LAW URGES WINDIES TO 'REWRITE HISTORY' AGAINST ENGLAND

BIRMINGHAM: West Indies coach Stuart Law hopes his side can "rewrite history" during a Test series in England. The first of a three-match campaign gets underway at Edgbaston today with the inaugural day/night Test ever staged in England. Much of the pre-match build-up has focused on how Joe Root's men will cope with their first tasted of pink ball international cricket.

Also, given this is England's last Test series before they tour Australia, there has been much speculation as to what the composition of this side could mean in terms of their Ashes defence 'Down Under'. That England, fresh from a 3-1 home success against South Africa, will win their series against the West Indies is almost taken as read, something unthinkable when the men from the Caribbean were dominating Test cricket in the 1970s and 1980s.

Yet a sign of how far the West Indies have slipped from those heights is that they have gone 17 matches without a Test win in England, losing 14 and drawing the other three.

Although an end now appears in sight to a

bitter dispute between players and officials, the West Indies have still arrived in England without several star names for a series that is, to the dismay of traditionalists, taking place at the same time as the lucrative Caribbean Premier League Twenty20 competition.

Yet the West Indies did draw their last Test series against England in the Caribbean two years ago — despite being labelled a "mediocre" side by England and Wales Cricket Board chairman Colin Graves. Jason Holder, the captain for that series, is still the West Indies skipper and Law is confident the all-rounder remains the right man for the job. "He takes it with a pinch of salt, the things said about him and this team and uses it to drive him and them forward," Law told reporters at Edgbaston on Tuesday.

"It is a lot of responsibility, and he does it with fantastic integrity," added former batsman Law, who made just one Test appearance for Australia such was their top-order strength in the 1990s.

Law knows English cricket well from his successful playing stints with county sides Essex

and Lancashire. England may have overwhelmed South Africa but doubts about their top-order batting remain.

The Edgbaston Test will see Mark Stoneman become Alastair Cook's 12th England opening partner in the five years since Andrew Strauss retired. Meanwhile Tom Westley and Dawid Malan have yet to nail down their places at numbers three and five respectively. West Indies' pace attack, which includes Shannon Gabriel and 20-year-old Alzarri Joseph, could pose problems for an England top order often overly-reliant on Cook and Root.

"You always look at a little crack you can find," said Law. "With a couple of new guys to the fore in Test cricket, that's an opportunity for our bowlers," he added. "There's been a lot said about this (West Indies) cricket team, and that is motivation for them," Law explained. "We're looking forward — let's rewrite that history." But the West Indies, for all that Shai Hope and Roston Chase scored centuries in a warm-up match against Derbyshire last week, have their own top-order concerns.—AFP

BONUCCI IN LINE FOR MILAN DEBUT IN EUROPA LEAGUE

PARIS: AC Milan's headline signing in a summer spending spree, Italy defender Leonardo Bonucci is in line to make his debut for the club in the Europa League today. A little over two months after playing for Juventus against Real Madrid in the Champions League final, Bonucci looks ready to feature for his new club against modest Macedonians Shkendija in their play-off first leg.

The 30-year-old has been made captain by coach Vincenzo Montella after his shock 40 million-euro (\$46 million) transfer to the Chinese-owned club.

"I chose Bonucci because he is very charismatic and has international experience. He embodies the role of captain perfectly," said Montella ahead of the game.

"Leo said he wants to win the Champions League in four years? If he does well we can make it happen even sooner."

A spending spree that has seen the likes of Portugal striker Andre Silva, Switzerland full-back Ricardo Rodriguez and Turkey midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu arrive at the San Siro has raised optimism among supporters ahead of the start of the new Serie A season. Seven-time European champions Milan are appearing in continental competition for the first time since 2013/14 and almost 66,000 fans attended the home leg of their third qualifying round win over Universitatea Craiova of Romania.

Today's game comes just three days before Milan go to Crotona for their Serie A opener but Montella wants no slip-ups

against a side from an Albanian-majority region of Macedonia.

"They have played more competitive games than us. They made it through three qualifying rounds and they have beaten the reigning champions in their domestic league," warned Montella.

Everton are the one Premier League side in action in the play-offs and they host Croatians Hajduk Split at Goodison Park in the first leg. The Toffees come into the game boosted by the news that Iceland star Gylfi Sigurdsson has passed a medical ahead of a £45 million (\$58m, 49.4m euros) move from Swansea City.

He will not make his debut yet, while coach Ronald Koeman has admitted Everton do not have a huge amount of options for the game with Spanish striker Sandro Ramirez a doubt.

They also have a trip to Manchester City to come on Monday but Koeman said: "Playing in different competitions isn't a problem at this stage of the season. Of course, we have a difficult 10 days coming up and it's tough but we will go game by game. "We won't reserve people for Monday — Europe is important to us and we want to be in the competition."

Other stand-out ties in the play-off round include Athletic Bilbao going to Athens to take on Panathinaikos, Marseille facing Domzale in Slovenia and last season's runners-up Ajax hosting Rosenborg in a clash between two teams who lost in the Champions League third qualifying round.—AFP