

## Sports

# 'Homesick' Chinese teams stuck in Qatar after Champions League exit

## Evergrande players desperate to return to China

**SHANGHAI:** Guangzhou Evergrande players say they are homesick and desperate to return to China after being stuck in Qatar following their elimination from the AFC Champions League. Fabio Cannavaro's side are among three Chinese Super League teams still in Qatar despite being knocked out of the premier Asian competition last Friday, with reports saying they are awaiting approval for a charter flight.

The others are Shanghai SIPG, who lost in the last 16 on Monday, and Shanghai Shenhua, who have been stewing for a week since their continental title bid ended. The Asian Football Confederation (AFC) suggested that the hold-up was likely due to coronavirus arrival rules in China, not because of any local difficulties.

This year's delayed Champions League is taking place behind closed doors in a secure "bubble" in Qatar because of the pandemic. Beforehand, global footballers union FIFPro accused the AFC of failing to consult players about moving the tournament to the nation hosting the 2022 World Cup. With their season over and Cannavaro seemingly on the brink of the sack, Evergrande's players have broken rank.

Midfielder Yan Dinghao wrote on the Twitter-like Weibo that he was on "the edge of collapse, really homesick".

Team-mate He Chao added: "When will we be able to return?" Forward Wei Shihao also wrote on Weibo: "I can only stay locked in my hotel room. I can't see my family. I want to go home." Yesterday's Shanghai Morning Post said CSL players were "exhausted physically and mentally" having already spent several months separated from family during the domestic season. All four Chinese teams - Beijing Guoan play in the quarter-finals later - "expressed their desire" not to go to Qatar in the first place, the newspaper said.

The Post said that the AFC subsidised meals and hotel accommodation while teams remained in the competition, but the clubs have to foot the bill once knocked out. The AFC told AFP that it was doing its utmost to help the teams, "who are currently awaiting the due process and protocols to be put in place by the Chinese authorities". "In the meantime, the AFC and LOC (local organizing committee) are also working to ensure all players and team officials are receiving the best possible support and care until the departure arrangements are finalized," it said. — AFP



**GUANGZHOU:** This file photo shows players of Guangzhou Evergrande lifting up their head coach Fabio Cannavaro in celebration after defeating Shanghai Shenhua to win the Chinese Super League (CSL) football championship. — AFP

## Hamilton and Russell in season-ending Abu Dhabi waiting game

**ABU DHABI:** Lewis Hamilton is back in training and set to return for Mercedes at this weekend's season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, but only if he is passed fit and returns negative tests for COVID-19. The seven-time world champion was absent from last week's action-filled Sakhir Grand Prix in Bahrain where his replacement and fellow-Briton George Russell shone, despite a bungled Mercedes pit-stop, on his way to ninth - his first points-scoring finish.

Hamilton, 35, is expected to be given until tomorrow morning at the very latest to prove his fitness, if needed, with the team continuing with Russell in his car. Russell was nominated on Wednesday to be the Mercedes representative at a pre-event news conference at the Yas Marina Circuit yesterday. Nothing is certain, however, ahead of a race in which the champion team - for an unprecedented seven successive years - seek some redemption following their embarrassing tyre gaffes last Sunday.

"We head into the final race looking for redemption after a disappointing race in Sakhir, where both George and Valtteri (Bottas) lost the opportunity to win," said team chief Toto Wolff. "The pit stop problem has uncovered an underlying problem with our intercom and we've put measures in place, both technically and in the way we operate, to make sure it doesn't happen again." The team's blunder happened when both drivers came in for new tyres and were sent out on the wrong ones - with Bottas having to continue on a set he was prepared to discard. — AFP

## US overpowers 6-0 El Salvador in friendly

**LOS ANGELES:** Chris Mueller made the most of his international debut and veteran Paul Arriola scored in his first start since suffering a torn Achilles tendon as the US routed El Salvador 6-0 in an international friendly on Wednesday. Mueller scored twice and Ayo Akinola, also in his first game, got a goal as the Americans closed out the pandemic-disrupted 2020 campaign with an impressive performance at Inter Miami Stadium in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Arriola was playing his first game with the national team since tearing his right Achilles in an MLS pre-season game in February. Brenden Aaronson got his first goal and goalkeeper Bill Hamid got the shutout in his first international start since 2018.

The US team decided to have fans into the stadium for the first time since the global pandemic struck, allowing 2,500 people into the building. The US has been the hardest hit country by the deadly virus with more than 3,000 deaths nationwide on Wednesday alone. Because of the pandemic the US played just four times this year, their



**FLORIDA:** Ivan Mancía #4 of El Salvador clears a header against the United States during the first half at Inter Miami CF Stadium on December 09, 2020 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. — AFP

fewest games since playing three in 1987. The United States is trying to rebuild its standing as one of the top teams in the Americas after failing to qualify for the 2018 World Cup. The Americans did the unthinkable, losing to Trinidad and Tobago and failing to reach the World Cup for the first time in over 30 years.

El Salvador, which has a population of about six million, has been to the World Cup just twice in their history in 1970 and 1982. The US got on the

board in the 17th minute when Arriola took a pass from Mueller and scored from 12 yards out. Mueller made it 2-0 just three minutes later with a 15-yard right-foot shot following a pass from Jackson Yueill. Sebastian Lletget got his fourth goal with an 18-yard chip in the 23rd and the rout was on. Mueller scored again in the 25th minute on a diving header off a pass from Akinola, who grew up in the Toronto area and is also eligible to play internationally for Canada. — AFP