

TAN FLAYS 'RACIST' MEDIA, SAYS CARDIFF IN SAFE HANDS

LONDON: Controversial Cardiff City owner Vincent Tan has criticised "a little bit racist" British media for projecting him as a villain and ruled out the possibility of the Premier League club changing its team colours back to blue.

The 62-year-old Malaysian businessman helped finance the team into the top tier of English soccer for the first time in half a century this season before his leadership style came under increasingly scrutiny.

Tan, who once operated Malaysia's most profitable lottery and gambling business, changed the club colours from its traditional blue to red at the start of the 2012-13 season and sacked popular manager Malky Mackay last December to further irk the fans.

Criticism of his leadership approach has only grown but the Malaysian made it clear that he was not stepping down despite the side struggling down in 19th place and three points adrift of safety with a significantly inferior

or goal difference.

"Without me, Cardiff would have gone bust. Because of my investment, we got promoted," Tan said in an interview with BBC Sport yesterday. I am now more involved and under my leadership the club will be in good shape.

"Some of my family members really want me to leave. They think it's not worth it. They think no-one is grateful. But you have to be patient, accept the criticism and sometimes the insults."

No villain

Often seen wearing dark glasses and gloves at Cardiff games, Tan said he was not the villain he was made out to be.

"I wear sunglasses because of the glare of the spotlights," he said. "I wear gloves because it is very cold in the UK. Frankly, sometimes I think they are nuts making all these comments."

"The British press is unfair... maybe because we didn't tell our side of the story that well. When the

time is right, I will tell my story. Sometimes the British press is maybe a little bit racist."

Tan said Mackay had been lucky to land the job at Cardiff in July 2011 and felt he should have been more hands-on earlier.

"Earlier on I was generous enough to give our football management too much authority and they went berserk. They went and did bad business. That was a mistake."

"But now I'm involved, I know the value and I study. Every business I don't know, if I spend enough time - a couple of months - I will know a lot. I know quite a lot about football now. I know the value of players and we won't do stupid things."

Tan said he had abandoned plans to list Cardiff on the Singapore stock exchange and hoped new manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer would guide the team out of relegation zone despite winning just one of their last 11 league games. —Reuters

DROGBA LIFE STORY TOLD IN CARTOON FORM

PARIS: Didier Drogba walked at six months, left home at five and fell in love with the woman who was to become his wife at the tender age of 17.

Those are some of the landmark events covered in an account of the Ivorian footballer's extraordinary life about to be published in cartoon form in France.

Editions are also planned for Britain, where Drogba is still idolised by supporters of his former club Chelsea; Brazil, where he is due to play in the World Cup later this year, and Turkey, where he currently stars for Galatasaray.

Entitled "From Tito to Drogba", the album traces the 35-year-old's journey from modest roots in Abidjan to the summit of world football. The Tito in the title refers to his childhood nickname.

It was first published in 2012 in Ivory Coast, where Drogba is revered both as a lynchpin of the national team, the Elephants, and a symbol of national unity thanks to his detour into peacemaking diplomacy when the country was teetering on the brink of civil war in 2006.

Born on March 11, 1978, Drogba first moved to France at the age of five to live with his uncle, Michel Goba, a professional footballer, his parents calculating that it would give him a better chance in life.

He has often spoken of how difficult he found his childhood years, the long spells spent apart from his parents and the upheaval of moving around as his uncle regularly changed clubs. His parents finally joined him in France when he was 13 and the family settled in the Paris suburbs, where Drogba began what was to be an illustrious career at Levallois SC.

'Too perfect? He's like that'

"The book goes into a lot of detail," Drogba recently told sports daily L'Equipe. "It is a fun way to learn lots of things about me and to show young people that, if they do what I did, they can achieve their objectives."

"The most important thing is to show you can exceed your dreams. For me football has become my job, my way of making a living, and that in turn has allowed me to meet many famous people, to be a UNICEF ambassador."

The man responsible for the album is Gabin Bao, a 36-year-old Ivorian who has spent years on the project, finally convincing the player's advisors it was a good idea.

"I met him several times after we did the deal and he really liked the idea of sending a message to young Africans," Bao told AFP.

Bao's script for the book flirts with caricature at times in its emphasis on the role of hard work in Drogba's ascent.

"Some people say I've made him too perfect. But he is like that," Bao said. "He is very careful about his image because he has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders." Part of the proceeds from the book sales will go to the Didier Drogba Foundation, which finances health and education projects in Africa. —AFP



PARIS: A young man reads a comic book in Paris entitled "Didier Drogba". —AFP

DIEGO COSTA SET TO MAKE SPAIN DEBUT AGAINST ITALY

MADRID: Atletico Madrid striker Diego Costa could make his debut for Spain after being named in Vicente del Bosque's 22-man squad for the world champions' friendly at home to Italy on March 5.

Costa completed the nationalisation process that allowed him to switch allegiances from Brazil to Spain in time for La Roja's friendlies against Equatorial Guinea and South Africa last November, but was forced to miss both games due to injury.

He is now expected to make his bow on home soil at the Vicente Calderon after scoring 27 times in all competitions this season. "His is a singular case, he was born in Brazil but he has formed into a footballer in Spain and has shown in his club that he deserves to come into the squad, that is why we have called him up."

Gerard Pique is the only significant absentee through injury from the final match Spain will play before Del Bosque names his squad to defend the World Cup in Brazil later this year.

There was disappointment for David Villa, Fernando Torres and Juan Mata as all three were left out. However, Del Bosque insisted that there was still plenty of time for those left out of the squad to make their case for a World Cup berth between now and the end of the season.

"This is a list exclusively for the game against Italy. We have practically three months of the season in front of us which could ratify those in this list or include others." Bayern Munich's Thiago Alcantara is rewarded for his impressive form for the Bundesliga champions with a call-up to the senior squad for the first time this season.

Competitive clash

Torres' Chelsea teammate Cesar Azpilicueta is also included for the first time since the Confederations Cup ahead of Real Madrid's Alvaro Arbeloa. The match will be a rematch



FLORENCE: Fiorentina's David Pizarro, left, vies for the ball with Esbjerg's Martin Bergvold during an Europa League, round of 32, second leg match between Fiorentina and Esbjerg at the Artemio Franchi stadium in Florence, Italy, Thursday. —AP

of the 2012 European Championship final, which Spain won 4-0.

However, both sides played out a far more competitive clash in the semi-finals of last year's Confederations Cup semi-final with Spain only progressing on penalties after a 0-0 draw after 120 minutes.

And the former Real Madrid boss is expecting another stiff test as preparation for a demanding start to their World Cup campaign as they face against Holland and Chile in their first two games in Brazil.

"Italy is one of the best teams in the world. They have a base of Juventus players and we have had tough meetings with them."

"The Confederations Cup game was agonising and the final of the Euros was one of the best games we have played."

Spain squad

Goalkeepers: Iker Casillas (Real Madrid), Victor Valdes (Barcelona), Pepe Reina (Napoli/ITA)

Defenders: Sergio Ramos (Real Madrid), Jordi Alba (Barcelona), Xabi Martinez (Bayern Munich/GER), Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea/ENG), Juanfran Torres (Atletico Madrid), Raul Albiol (Napoli/ITA)

Midfielders: Xavi Hernandez, Sergio Busquets, Andres Iniesta, Cesc Fabregas (all Barcelona), Xabi Alonso (Real Madrid), David Silva (Manchester City/ENG), Thiago Alcantara (Bayern Munich/GER), Koke (Atletico Madrid), Santi Cazorla (Arsenal/ENG)

Forwards: Pedro Rodriguez (Barcelona), Jesus Navas, Alvaro Negredo (both Manchester City/ENG), Diego Costa (Atletico Madrid). —AFP