

WORLD CUP HERO MILUTINOVIC URGES QATAR TO 'SEIZE' CHANCE

DOHA: For a country which craves World Cup experience, it is fitting that one of the tournament's greatest ever coaches, Bora Milutinovic, now calls Qatar home.

The "Miracle Worker" is the man who was a penalty shootout away from taking Mexico to the semi-finals in 1986, saw his Costa Rica team beat Scotland and Sweden in 1990 and watched his USA side progress to the knockout stage in 1994, helping kindle fresh interest in football in the States.

Alongside Brazilian Carlos Alberto Perreira he is the only person to have coached five different sides at World Cup finals. He guided Nigeria at the 1998 finals and China in 2002.

A cult hero, Milutinovic's name is almost as much part of World Cup folklore as Franz Beckenbauer, Mario Kempes, Johan Cruyff and Zinedine Zidane.

Although he has no official coaching

role in Qatar, Milutinovic is regularly seen at matches in Doha and travels to see games across Asia.

Who then better to ask if Qatar can realise a nation's - and World Cup 2022 organisers - dream and reach the finals for the first time in Russia in two years' time?

On Thursday, Qatar begin the Asian Football Confederation's third round of qualifiers, having powered through the second round, topping their group winning seven games out of eight.

Now they are playing with the AFC big boys and have been drawn in Group A, which contains Iran, South Korea, China, Uzbekistan and Syria.

Qatar are 80th in the FIFA world rankings. Their seeding suggests Qatar should finish fifth, form means a chance of finishing third and forcing themselves into a play-off for Russia, and hope equates to securing one of the top two spots in the

group and automatic passage to the World Cup finals. "I think in this group there are two favourites, South Korea and Iran," says Milutinovic. But, he adds, if they falter, Qatar is the team best placed to take advantage. "Qatar in qualification, they were the best team. They only lost once."

Qatar has a new coach, a new team and they have the players who can adapt.

"The minimum should be third; Qatar needs to seize the minimum." One concern he has though is the schedule. The first game is in Tehran, away to the group favourites and in front of its formidable crowd.

"Iran has an advantage-the stadium. It is the most difficult stadium in Asia," he says wistfully, because of the atmosphere. A home game against Uzbekistan follows five days later, then in October Qatar find themselves away to the second seeded team in the group and World Cup

perennials, South Korea.

A poor start could crush Qatar's dream of avoiding becoming the first side since Italy in 1934 to host a World Cup without ever before playing in a finals. A good start though and Qatar will have the backing of the public. Milutinovic says Qatar should learn from Iceland's example during the Euros and make sure the team and the supporters make "a connection" for the home matches.

ROD STEWART, HUGO SANCHEZ

The Serb is engaging company. An invitation for a quick chat about Qatar's World Cup dreams quickly turns into several coffees, tea, lunch and lots of talk.

Ground covered includes Rod Stewart, the 1991 Soviet coup, Eric Wynalda, England's last disastrous World Cup campaign, a deadly explosion at a Northern Irish checkpoint, Germany's 1974 World

Cup winners versus the 2014 team, his footballing brothers, wearing a bullet proof vest in Baghdad, Hugo Sanchez and Tom Jones.

Milutinovic scribbles furiously on napkins, drawing penalty areas and showing positions he would like his players to take up. He speaks a mixture of English, Spanish and French. He interrupts himself to take calls from Serbia, bumps into a Chinese family and speaks Mandarin.

He turns 72 on September 7, but has the energy of a man half his age and would clearly relish a return to international football. Asked if he would have taken the recent England or Belgium vacancies, he says: "I would have gone like this," pointing to his t-shirt and shorts.

And despite talking for four hours, he says he has happily given little away. "I've done my job. I spoke a lot but said nothing," Milutinovic says with a smile. — AFP



MONCHENGLADBACH: Germany's midfielder Bastian Schweinsteiger reacts during the ceremony marking his last match for his country prior to the football friendly match between Germany and Finland in Monchengladbach, western Germany yesterday. — AFP

GERMANY SWANSONG SCHWEINI CLINGS TO MAN UTD DREAM

BERLIN: Bastian Schweinsteiger will wear the Germany jersey one last time, insisting he has not given up on his dream of playing for Manchester United despite Jose Mourinho's snub. "My absolute dream is still to play for Manchester United," Schweinsteiger said on the eve of Germany's friendly against Finland in Monchengladbach, which serves as his farewell on his 121st - and final-Germany appearance.

"I have no personal problems with Jose Mourinho, he has explained his side of the situation to me. One thing is for sure: I'm not going to stop playing football and I still believe in my own ability."

"I could still help Man United if given a fair chance," he added at the German FA press conference in Duesseldorf. "We have to wait to see what happens in September and October and how things will develop."

United's coach Mourinho has echoed Schweinsteiger in insisting there is "no problem" between the pair, but the midfielder's plea for a "fair chance" with Manchester hung in the air in Duesseldorf.

The vastly experienced 32-year-old has captained Germany since Philipp Lahm stood down as die Mannschaft's skipper after the pair helped win the 2014 World Cup. His United contract expires in June 2018, leaving him facing the prospect of spending the next two years languishing in United's reserves, all the while reportedly being paid 160,000 (187,672 euros, \$209,338) per week.

Schweinsteiger joined United in 2015 after 17 years with Bayern Munich, which saw him win every major title available to the Bavarian giants.

OUTRAGE IN BAVARIA

His high-profile transfer to Old Trafford meant he linked up with ex-Bayern manager Louis van Gaal.

But a knee injury in January flared up again on Germany duty in March, so he played just a handful of minutes in the second half of the 2015/16 season.

Germany coach Joachim Loew allowed Schweinsteiger a late cameo off the bench in the opening 2-0 win over Ukraine at the European championships.

He scored with only his third touch of the ball, but was back on the bench for the remaining group stage games and the opening fixtures of the knock-out rounds.

Manuel Neuer captained Germany until

the semi-final defeat to hosts France, the only Euro 2016 game Schweinsteiger started. Following his celebrity wedding to tennis star Ana Ivanovic in July, new-arrival Mourinho made it clear Schweinsteiger's Old Trafford honeymoon was over. The German was one of nine players told to clear his first-team locker and train with the Under-23s.

But while others transferred out of Old Trafford, Schweinsteiger insisted on staying. Mourinho's snub of Schweinsteiger led to outrage in Bavaria. Bayern chairman Karl-Heinz Rummenigge said such treatment showed "a lack of respect for a worthy player", but Munich's new head coach Carlo Ancelotti said Schweinsteiger "was not part" of their plans.

'VERY DIFFICULT'

Last Friday, Mourinho effectively closed the door on Schweinsteiger playing for the seniors this season, saying it would be "very difficult" for the German, given competition for midfield places at United. "We have a decision completely made about Paul Pogba, Ander Herrera, Morgan Schneiderlin, Marouane Fellaini and Michael Carrick," said Mourinho. "We have five players for two positions. It's very difficult that an opportunity will arrive." With speculation rife that Schweinsteiger's Old Trafford exit was imminent, he took to Facebook last week to insist United will "be his last club in Europe."

Ex-Germany coach Rudi Voeller, who gave Schweinsteiger his international debut back in 2004, said the United midfielder still has "at least two years playing at the top" left in him.

And in Tuesday's press conference, Schweinsteiger admitted the North American MLS might be a future option, should things not improve in Manchester over the course of the season.

The Finland friendly is a chance for Schweinsteiger to show Mourinho what he can do, but is the first to admit that with no first-team football under his belt, he may struggle for fitness.

"I'm so happy that I was able to make it to 120 games for Germany," said Schweinsteiger. "I haven't played a game yet (this season), so I don't know how the lungs will hold up."

The transfer window closes at midnight yesterday. United's directors must be hoping an overseas offer emerges in the January window so their expensive asset does not spend the next two years with the reserves. — AFP

PREMIER LEAGUE RICHES FUEL TRANSFER SCRAMBLE

LONDON: International stars Mario Balotelli, Moussa Sissoko and Jack Wilshere were all reportedly poised for moves yesterday as the clock ticked down towards the European transfer deadline. Spending by English Premier League clubs has broken through the one billion pounds (1.17 billion euros, \$1.3 billion) barrier in one window for the first time, fuelling transfer activity across the continent. Balotelli, Liverpool's wayward Italian striker, was on the verge of joining French club Nice on a season-long loan, having spent last season on loan at former club AC Milan.

"If the situation works out, maybe late in the day it will be done," an official from Nice told French sports daily L'Equipe. "If we don't agree with Liverpool, he will leave again." Newcastle United midfielder Sissoko was given permission to leave France's Clairefontaine training base in order to complete a transfer. Newcastle, relegated from the Premier League last season, were reported to have rebuffed an initial 16 million pounds bid for Sissoko from Tottenham Hotspur.

Sissoko, 27, was France's stand-out player in the hosts' loss to Portugal in the Euro 2016 final and had expressed a desire to join Real Madrid. Arsenal midfielder Wilshere, 24, was reportedly mulling over loan offers from Bournemouth and Crystal Palace after slipping down the pecking order at the Emirates Stadium.

Arsenal spent around 50 million pounds on Tuesday to sign German defender Shkodran Mustafi from Valencia and Spanish striker Lucas Perez from Deportivo La Coruna.

Wilshere's England colleague Joe Hart, meanwhile, is due to complete a loan move to Italian side Torino after being frozen out by new Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola.

The blond-haired goalkeeper was pictured posing with a Torino shirt on Tuesday. City striker Wilfried Bony, who has also failed to win over Guardiola, was pictured at Stoke City's training ground.

Bony tweeted: "It's a new day and I look forward to a new exciting challenge." Samir Nasri, another City outcast, was thought to be close to joining Sevilla, while Eliaquim Mangala was reportedly due to sign for Valencia.

INTER SNARE 'GABIGOL'

Leicester City, England's fairytale champions



NYON: Newcastle United's coach Rafael Benitez looks on next to a picture of Argentinian forward Lionel Messi after a meeting of the Elite football Club Coaches Forum at the UEFA headquarters in Nyon, yesterday. — AP

last season, were reported to be closing in on deals for Sporting Lisbon pair Islam Slimani and Adrien Silva. Both deals would be expected to eclipse Leicester's 16.6 million pounds club-record move for Nigerian forward Ahmed Musa last month. Elsewhere, Inter Milan and Barcelona paid top dollar for Brazil's Olympic gold medal-winning striker Gabriel 'Gabigol' Barbosa and Valencia forward Paco Alcacer respectively.

Inter confirmed the signing of Barbosa on his 20th birthday late on Tuesday. "Gabigol is an Inter player," the Serie A giants said in a statement, announcing a five-year contract.

Inter did not release financial details, but the Gazzetta dello Sport website reported Inter had paid Santos 27.5 million euros for 'Gabigol', who has drawn comparisons with his countryman Neymar. Alcacer, who turned 23 on Tuesday, joined Barcelona from Valencia in a 30 million euros, five-year deal, the Catalan side announced. The Spain international, who scored

13 goals in 34 league appearances last season, will heighten competition in the Barcelona frontline already led by Neymar, Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez. Analysts predict European spending will easily be the highest yet when the two-month transfer window closes, between 1600 GMT for the Bundesliga and 2200 GMT for the Premier League. Flush from the proceeds of a new 5.14 billion pounds domestic television rights deal, English clubs have led the way.

Manchester United set a new world record with an 89 million pounds deal to bring French midfielder Paul Pogba back to the club from Juventus. Christian Heidel, sporting director for German club Schalke, said the Premier League has forced up prices everywhere. "If English managers are on the phone, then the sums are automatically higher," Heidel said on a talk show for Kicker magazine.

"If the negotiations are within Germany, then it is often difficult to exclude the higher sums from England." — AFP

SAMIR NASRI JOINS SEVILLA ON LOAN

MADRID: French midfielder Samir Nasri has joined La Liga side Sevilla from Manchester City on a season-long loan deal, both sides confirmed yesterday.

Nasri scored 27 goals and won two Premier League titles in five years in Manchester, but after an injury-plagued 2015/16 season, new City boss Pep Guardiola had criticised his condition when he returned to pre-season overweigh.

"The attacker arrives on loan from Manchester City until June 30 2017 without an option to buy," Sevilla said in a statement. "@ManCity it's been a pleasure thanks to everyone in the club and the fans for the 5 amazing years and wish you best of luck for the season," Nasri posted via his official Twitter account. After making a strong impression as a substitute for the last 15 minutes of City's 3-1 win over West Ham on Sunday, Guardiola even opened the door for Nasri to stay and fight for his place at the Etihad. "Samir arrived overweight but after seven days, 10 days, it was fantastic how he trained. His quality is on another level," said Guardiola. "It depends on him. If he wants to help us and stay to be part of something, it depends on him." However, Nasri faced stiff competition from the likes of David Silva, Kevin de Bruyne, Raheem Sterling and new signings Leroy Sane and Gabriel Jesus for a place in Guardiola's new-look side.

Instead, the 29-year-old has opted to try and relaunch his career in Spain with Europa League winners Sevilla also offering the lure of Champions League football.

Nasri becomes Sevilla's 11th signing of the window with the huge turnover sparked by coach Unai Emery's departure to Paris Saint-Germain with the notoriously attack-minded Argentine Jorge Sampaoli now in charge at the Sanchez Pizjuan. "This is the last piece that the coach asked from us," said Sevilla sporting director Monchi. "We have found the player we have been looking for practically since the market opened."

"A player who can play as a false winger and inside, a player with quality, capable of maintaining the ball and generating important possession in the opponent's half." Sevilla lost in both the Spanish and European Super Cups to Barcelona and Real Madrid respectively, but have started the La Liga season under Sampaoli brightly with four points from their opening two games. — AFP



GOLD COAST: This file photo taken on July 18, 2015 shows Samir Nasri of Manchester City controlling for the ball during the friendly football match between English Premier League side Manchester City and A-League side Melbourne City at Cbus Super Stadium on the Gold Coast on July 18, 2015. The French midfielder Samir Nasri, is now on loan for the season Sevilla FC have announced the two clubs yesterday. — AFP