

TRANSFER BAN 'ABSURD', CLAIMS ZIDANE AS COACH AND FATHER

MADRID: Coach Zinedine Zidane has slammed as "absurd" a one-year transfer ban imposed on Real Madrid by FIFA for irregularities in the signing of foreign players under 18. The Frenchman's own children are among those part of the case against the European champions.

FIFA dismissed Real and local rivals Atletico Madrid's appeals against a two transfer window ban on Thursday, meaning they won't be able to register any new players until January 2018 unless further appeals to the Court of Arbitration for Sport are successful.

Two of Zidane's four sons who play in the Madrid academy were among 39 players investigated by FIFA with the club eventually sanctioned for breaking the rules regarding the signing of foreign nation-

als under 18 in eight cases. "I don't understand it at all and it bothers me," Zidane said on Friday ahead of Madrid's clash with Osasuna.

"I can talk about my (sons) that have been born and lived their whole lives here. It is absurd that they can't play football. "What we are going to do now is wait and hope that this subject is fixed as quickly as possible."

Under international football rules, players under 18 cannot be transferred to another country, except in limited circumstances, and all transfers need the approval of a special FIFA committee.

However, Zidane's sons appear to meet that criteria as the former World Player of the Year's family has largely been based in the Spanish capital since he signed for Real as a player in 2001.

On the field, Zidane can continue his incredible first year as a senior coach as having lifted the Champions League in May, Real can match a club record of 15 consecutive La Liga wins at the Santiago Bernabeu on Saturday. Madrid will be massively boosted by the return of Cristiano Ronaldo for the first time since the Portuguese suffered knee ligation damage in the final of Euro 2016.

However, Zidane denied reports he had agreed to bed Ronaldo back into action gently in an attempt to prevent the 31-year-old suffering from knee problems towards the end of the season as he has in recent years. "He is happy, he is with us and there is no pact. It is his first game after 60 days so we need to give him time, but I am happy he is here and he will play tomorrow," added Zidane. —AFP

WENGER HOPES ARSENAL PLAY CATCH-UP IN TITLE RACE

LONDON: Arsenal's meeting with Southampton yesterday marks the start of important run of six games in 18 days as Arsene Wenger's side play catch-up in the Premier League.

The new league campaign is only three games old but Arsenal already lie five points behind Manchester City, Chelsea and Manchester United, who have all made perfect starts to the campaign.

And while Gunners boss Wenger is far too experienced to be overly concerned by the early league table, he knows the value of developing momentum in the title race before turning his attention to the club's opening Champions League game at Paris Saint Germain next week.

The visit of Southampton offers Arsenal the chance to get off the mark on home turf after they lost their opening league game at the Emirates Stadium against Liverpool.

And Wenger will have a much more comfortable afternoon if Chile forward Alexis Sanchez can live up to his claim he is now ready to be compared with Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

"I have reached a level where I can compete with great players," Sanchez said. "I do not feel inferior to anybody. I liken my qualities to Messi and Ronaldo. I have the same abilities as them." Wenger is able to call on Shkodran Mustafi and Lucas Perez, who both arrived shortly before the end of last month's transfer window.

But anything less than victory will turn the focus on Wenger's failure to once again bring in more world-class recruits, as well as the Frenchman's long-term future at the club, just days after Bournemouth boss Eddie Howe was linked as his successor.

Mustafi, the German defender signed from Valencia, is likely to come straight into the team, but Perez, a Spanish forward from Valencia, may start on the bench. Nacho Monreal, the Arsenal left-back, believes Mustafi will have no problem settling in.

TOUGH TO BEAT

"He will find it easy to adapt to the club," Monreal said. "He has already lived abroad, he speaks the language



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's Chilean manager Manuel Pellegrini waving to fans after the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Arsenal at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester. — AFP

and he knows Mesut Ozil.

"All those elements will lessen the impact of changing environments. Luckily for him, he will feel at home from the very first day. "Mustafi is a player I like. He is experienced and really tough to beat, which makes him very suitable for the Premier League's style."

"We really needed to bring a centre back to the club considering Per Mertesacker and Gabriel's injuries, as well as Calum Chambers' departure on loan.

"I hope he feels happy here from the very beginning so he can do for us what he does best."

Alex Iwobi is set to return after recovering from the hip injury he suffered against Liverpool, but Aaron Ramsey is expected to again miss out with a hamstring problem.

Claude Puel is still looking for his first

league win since taking charge at Southampton and is hoping it comes against Wenger-his former manager at Monaco.

"It's the first time that we can play one against one as I haven't met him in an international game or Champions League game so far," Puel said.

"It's the first time we can compete against each other and it's a pleasure of course because he was a very important person for me and he's a great manager.

"Arsene is an example for all the coaches because for so many years he's done really well in the Premier League, with Champions League secured every season.

"People don't sometimes realise how good his work with Arsenal has been, and I really think he's a good example for all the other trainers." — AFP

ONLY MATTER OF TIME TILL KANE FIRES: POCHETTINO

STOKE-ON-TRENT: Spurs manager Mauricio Pochettino insists that he is not concerned by the stuttering start to the new campaign by his side and star striker Harry Kane.

The Argentine believes it is only a matter of time-perhaps starting with the tricky away trip to Stoke today-that Kane, who scored 32 goals in all competitions last season, will get off the mark. Spurs have won one and drawn two of their three league matches and Kane has not scored in 10 games since netting for England in a friendly against Turkey before the European Championships.

Pochettino's belief stems from last term and Kane's failure to score in his first eight matches of the season.

"I would sign (up) for the same as last season, for Harry to start scoring late and then score 25," said Pochettino, who steered Spurs to a Champions League spot last season.

"He needs to be calm, it's always difficult after the Euros and then the expectation on him is massive.

"Every ball he touches we wait for him to score a goal and it's difficult when you need to be fit, to give your best. It's about patience, time and working hard.

"Last summer the expectations with the England under-21s were to win the tournament and he didn't score, so it was the same. But he is more mature and has more experience and he will start to score again."

The signing of Vincent Janssen from AZ Alkmaar has helped, says the Spurs boss. "Now we have different alternatives, Harry and Vincent Janssen or just Harry," he said. "Starting Saturday we have seven games in 20 days and a crazy schedule until Christmas. We will rotate the squad and every player will have the chance to show his quality."

Tottenham have reinforced the centre of their midfield by bringing in Moussa Sissoko from Newcastle United and Kenyan enforcer Victor Wanyama from Southampton, while Christian Eriksen ended speculation about his future by signing a new contract.

"We have a squad to compete in different competitions," Pochettino said, mindful of the extra games that come when taking on Europe. "It will be tough for us this season, but I am happy with my squad." The 44-year-old former Argentina international defender expects to have France goalkeeper Hugo Lloris available again after injury, but England defender Danny Rose will miss the Stoke clash and the Monaco game next week.

BONY TO MAKE DEBUT

Stoke, who have made a poor start in failing to win in three games, are expected to hand a first start to Wilfried Bony after the Ivory Coast forward completed a loan move from Manchester City on the final day of the summer transfer window. Fellow new arrivals Dutch defender Bruno Martins Indi, who has moved on loan from Porto, and goalkeeper Lee Grant, who will provide back-up for veteran Shay Given while Jack Butland recovers from his ankle operation, have pleased the Stoke management team.

"The first thing that struck me with the three guys we've brought in is that we've brought in good characters, people who take responsibility," said assistant manager Mark Bowen. — AFP