

PREVIEW

RODGERS LOOKS TO CELTIC YOUNG GUNS FOR HELP

GLASGOW: Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers will return to his roots as he looks to his youth players to help his side through a busy month domestically and in Europe. The Scottish champions return to action today following the international break when they travel to take on Hamilton at New Douglas Park.

It is a measure of the success of Rodgers' side that a large number of his players were involved in the recent World Cup qualifiers with six of the Scotland starting XI in the wins against Lithuania and Malta being drawn from the Hoops squad.

However, with seven games in 22 days - including the first Old Firm clash of the season as well as tough Champions League fixtures against Paris Saint-Germain and Anderlecht - the Celtic boss will look to utilise his squad in order to keep his top stars fresh.

The Northern Irishman has already shown he isn't afraid of giving youth its chance in the first team. Last month against Kilmarnock Rodgers fielded a side with a starting line-up that had an average age of under 23 and included five graduates of Celtic's

youth academy.

Rodgers takes a keen interest in the youth set-up at Parkhead having started his career as a youth coach at Reading before joining Chelsea as youth manager. And Celtic's own head of youth football, Chris McCart, says it is Rodgers' background that ensures young players will always get a chance at the Glasgow giants.

"It definitely helps that he was a youth coach. He's got empathy with every academy coach whether they are doing seven a side football, or five a side and no matter what age group," McCart said of the Celtic boss.

"He started off as an under nine coach, worked his way through and educated himself in different areas away from football. He is putting a lot of work in and is now starting to select the ones he thinks are ready and is prepared to put them in at vital times.

"The manager has been clear in communicating his philosophy, and he wants a similar pattern running all the way from the academy to the first team.

"He wanted a connection and let the youth coaches know they could knock on his door. It's happened a lot and they feel comfortable with that."

Rodgers' counterpart at Rangers, Pedro Caixinha, will get back to his day job again after delivering a series of lectures at the University of Lisbon during the international break.

The 46-year-old was talking to students attending a special postgraduate course for football coaches devised by Professor Antonio Veloso and Manchester United manager Jose Mourinho.

The Rangers fans will be hoping the Portuguese manager is able to communicate his ideas to his own players after the Ibrox club's shaky start to the season. The Gers host Dundee on Saturday having taken just seven points from their opening four games.

Elsewhere, Craig Levein faces a tough task as he starts his second spell in charge of Hearts with a match against an Aberdeen side that are the only team left with a 100 per cent record in the top flight. — AFP



(FILES) This file photo taken on August 27, 2017 shows Arsenal's French manager Arsene Wenger (2nd L) looks on during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Arsenal at Anfield in Liverpool, north west England on August 27, 2017. Rocked by Arsenal's humiliating 4-0 defeat at Liverpool, Arsene Wenger faces a series of damaging transfer window defections that threaten to derail his side's already chaotic season. — AFP

SOCCER

ARSENAL'S WENGER BACKS SANCHEZ TO RETURN TO FORM

LONDON: Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger has voiced confidence that Alexis Sanchez will put his aborted transfer to Manchester City behind him "very quickly". Arsenal reportedly agreed a fee for Sanchez with City on transfer deadline day, only for the deal to collapse after Wenger was unable to complete a move for Monaco winger Thomas Lemar.

Sanchez looked miserable during Arsenal's 4-0 thrashing at Liverpool prior to the international break and then suffered successive defeats with Chile in World Cup qualifying. But Wenger said: "I have no doubt about Alexis's mind and mentality, that people question.

"He needs to come back to full fitness, which he was not (at) against Liverpool. It was his first game and he has suffered a negative experience with Chile. "But he is strong mentally and hopefully he will be back very quickly to his best."

Despite reports Arsenal had agreed to sell Sanchez to City, Wenger would not go into detail about what had happened on deadline day. "The transfer market is over. There was a lot going on on that front," the Frenchman told a press conference at Arsenal's London Colney training base on Thursday.

"It's very difficult for me to speak about that because the most important thing now is our next game." Asked if Sanchez's departure had been contingent on Lemar's arrival, Wenger replied: "That's what I read everywhere, yes.

"My view is that it is too difficult to speak about that because Lemar is now in Monaco and of course Sanchez is here. "I believe you have to keep a certain confidentiality about transfer negotiations. Many things happen at the last second." But the Arsenal manager dismissed suggestions the move for Lemar had failed to materialise because the France international did not want to come to the Emirates Stadium.

"He decided to stay in Monaco and you have to respect that," Wenger said. "The player has a three-year contract to go, so overall you have to respect that." Arsenal host Bournemouth on Saturday and Wenger would not say whether midfielder Jack Wilshere, who spent last season on loan at the south-coast club, would be in his squad.

But he gave a positive update on the fitness of long-term injury victim Santi Cazorla.

The Spanish midfielder has not played since sustaining an ankle injury against Bulgarian side Ludogorets in the Champions League last October. "Santi is having his first run today," Wenger said. "The flexibility of his ankle is good, his mobility is good and now it's time to get him back to full fitness without any setbacks.

"It's difficult to predict when he will be available again - not before Christmas. But I hope after Christmas he will be available." — AFP

CHINA DARE TO BELIEVE DESPITE WORLD CUP EXIT

BEIJING: Marcello Lippi is slowly beginning to make China believe they can become a footballing power, despite another failure to reach the World Cup finals. Since his appointment as head coach in October 2016 with China rock bottom of their Asian zone World Cup qualifying group, the Italian has presided over a resurgence that saw just one defeat in six matches, 1-0 away to runaway group winners Iran.

Back-to-back wins to finish the campaign, at home to Uzbekistan and a comeback 2-1 win when down to 10 men at 2022 hosts Qatar on Tuesday, have sent a wave of cautious optimism across fans and officials. It was not enough for the world's most populous nation to continue on the path to Russia next year as they fell just one point short of reaching the playoffs.

But it was enough to keep alive the dream of one day again reaching the finals and of fulfilling the ambition of China's President Xi Jinping to host the global showpiece. "Since Marcello Lippi has been leading the team, the changes have been huge," said Chinese Football Association president Cai Zhenhua of the man who led Italy to World Cup victory in 2006.

"The most noticeable is that the players are now able to express themselves on the pitch and that their confidence is growing. "The ability of the players to carry out the coach's plans and tactics has clearly improved."

LACK OF PASSION

Still many pundits contend that the national team's ambitions will continue to be hampered by mediocre coaching, poor funding choices and lack of passion at the grassroots.

Chinese Super League clubs splashing huge amounts of cash to import foreign strikers such as Oscar, Carlos Tevez and Alexandre Pato does not help. Angela Smith, head of international projects at English Premier League club Stoke City, who have opened academies in China, said while Chinese clubs are "buying strikers, they are not thinking about the development of the whole team".

"If you don't develop the whole team, you are just constantly going to be paying money out to other countries, and the game will never develop from the grassroots levels in clubs and academies," she said. China aspires to have 40,000 football schools by 2020, up from the current 13,000.

But all the academies in the world will not be enough if youngsters lack passion, according to Luiz Ferreira, the Portuguese director of youth training at Chinese Super League (CSL) club Tianjin Teda.

"During a training session, I asked my young players: 'How many of you watched the Champions League final?' It was just one out of three. They just don't care about it," he said.

He added that it would probably "need time" to develop a deep-seated love for the game as found in Europe and South America. The country is no longer hiding the desire to host the FIFA World Cup in 2030, for which Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay have just submitted a joint bid. — AFP