

Sports

Aston Villa aim to be latest Asian investment success

Cardiff have won automatic promotion again this term

MANCHESTER: Chinese-owned Aston Villa hope to join Malaysian-controlled Cardiff City and Chinese-backed Wolverhampton Wanderers in winning promotion to the Premier League as Asian investors reap the rewards of investments in English second-tier clubs.

Midlands club Villa face west London side Fulham, owned by Pakistani-American Shahid Khan, in Saturday's Championship promotion playoff final at Wembley in what has been dubbed the most lucrative match in world football.

Promotion to the top flight for either club will see an increase in revenue of at least 160 million pounds (\$214.35 million), rising to more than 280 million if they avoid relegation in their first season in the Premier League. For former European champions Villa it would mark a return on the investment made by Chinese entrepreneur Tony Xia, of the Recon Holding Group, who took over the club in 2016 following their relegation from the top flight. Xia paid a reported 76 million pounds to purchase the Birmingham-based outfit from American Randy Lerner and if Villa can win the playoff at Wembley they will be back in the elite after a two-year absence.

Cardiff's Malaysian owner Vincent Tan took control of the club in 2010 and they were promoted to the Premier League as second-tier champions in 2013 but the South Wales side lasted just one season in the top flight.

Cardiff have won automatic promotion again this term along with Championship title winners Wolves, owned by the Fosun Group, who are themselves back in the Premier League after a

six-year absence. Fosun paid a reported 46 million pounds to purchase west Midlands club Wolves from their previous, English, owner Steve Morgan in 2016. While getting to the Premier League involves additional investment in transfer fees and the wages of players and coaching staff, the rewards are huge. This year Southampton, owned by Chinese businessman Gao Jisheng, narrowly avoided relegation but finishing in 17th place was enough for them to pick up over 107 million pounds in annual shared television and other revenues from the Premier League.

However, it is not just a case of simply buying a Championship club, investing some money and getting to the promised land. The competition to get out of the second tier is intense with several big city clubs fighting to do the same.

Simon Chadwick, Professor of Sports Enterprise at Salford University, who has closely followed Asian investment in English football, believes this season's successes highlights the need for intelligent choices of club.

"Each of these clubs has history and heritage, whilst the organisational architecture of them is oriented around being in the Premier League. Investors need to combine stealth, strategy and support. Stealth is needed as promotion may not be immediate; strategy is required to ensure a club is moving in the right direction; and support, especially financially and specifically in the transfer market, is crucial," he said.

Chadwick notes that foreign investors have also been smart to choose executives and managers with knowledge and track records in Eng-



Aston Villa owner Tony Xia (L) has set his sights on the Champions League.

land, such as Steve Bruce at Villa and Neil Warnock at Cardiff. Rob Wilson of Sheffield Hallam University's Sport Industry Research Centre, says newly relegated teams have some advantages for investors, particularly the 'parachute' payments given to such clubs by the Premier League. "Relegation from the Premier League to the Championship can actually increase the interest in new ownership - the lower revenues on offer make the clubs better value and, with the promise of parachute payments and therefore a statistically sig-

nificant competitive advantage of being promoted, the possible returns are large," he said.

There certainly seems to be no let-up in interest in English clubs from Asian financiers. Wigan Athletic, relegated from the Premier League in 2013, fell into the third-tier but are back in the Championship and this week confirmed a proposed sale of their entire shareholding to International Entertainment Corporation of Hong Kong, subject to Hong Kong Stock Exchange and Football League approval. —Reuters

Halilhodzic launches lawsuit over Japan dismissal

TOKYO: Former Japan coach Vahid Halilhodzic launched a lawsuit against the country's football association and its president Kozo Tashima yesterday, saying he was fired illegally just two months before the World Cup. The Bosnian's lawyer Lionel Vincent filed the suit yesterday in a Tokyo district court, court officials confirmed. Vincent has suggested that Tashima, who personally flew to France to fire Halilhodzic in April, should resign over his handling of the dismissal.

Halilhodzic is suing Tashima directly because he believes the Japanese Football Association (JFA) president had acted illegally in dismissing him without consulting the association's board. The Tokyo District Court confirmed a civil suit was filed yesterday, with the plaintiff being Halilhodzic and defendants being the Japan Football Association and Tashima.

"We cannot comment as we have not seen the letter of complaint," a JFA spokeswoman said. "There are media reports that we have been sued for defamation. But we don't believe there are facts that constitute defamation. There are no problems in the process of terminating the contract with former coach Halilhodzic.

"The process of paying remuneration in full for the rest of the duration of his (originally contracted) term has already been completed, based on the contract. The deci-



Vahid Halilhodzic

sion was officially ratified by the JFA board last week but Vincent says this has come too late.

"We were quite shocked after president Tashima decided to terminate Vahid's contract," Vincent told Reuters. "We realised he took this decision without any prior approval of the board of the JFA, which is an infringement of the article of recuperation of the JFA. "It is quite stunning to see the president, the man in charge of the organisation, take such a decision without any respect for the rules. "If I was them I would seriously consider his resignation for this. It is amazing."

ONE YEN SOUGHT

The lawyer added that they had sought clarification on the decision by the JFA but were yet to receive an acceptable response. Halilhodzic is also demanding a personal apology from Tashima and a nominal fee of one Japanese yen (\$0.009) as compensation.

"For Vahid it was 'okay, we are talking about honour and honour has no price, you cannot buy it,'" Vincent added. "So he thought, well maybe it is worth one yen. Vahid thought that as the JFA is a public interest organisation, asking for a huge amount of money doesn't make sense because it is not why he is doing it.

"Vahid has said 'I want my honour back and so you need to apologise first and acknowledge that you did something wrong to me. It is not acceptable so apologise. "For my honour, one yen please. —Reuters

Belgian Court promises verdict on FIFA player rules

BRUSSELS: The legal action over player contracts pitting Belgian third-tier club Seraing against world football's governing body FIFA was heard yesterday in Brussels and the court could deliver a verdict in a month.

Seraing are challenging FIFA's ban on third party ownership (TPO) of players. The club also took aim at Financial Fair Play Rules and the authority of the Court of Arbitration in Sport.

Legal teams for FIFA and Seraing, who between them brought 18 lawyers, presented arguments for two hours yesterday before a civil court in Brussels. The court said it would consider the case again next Thursday and could render a decision in four weeks.

Football authorities worry that involvement of third party owners with clubs creates conflicts of interest and favours clubs who can afford to form continuing relationships with agents or player owners.

TPO's supporters claim it helps poorer clubs sign and develop young players and spreads the burden of transfer fees because they only buy part of the player's registration. Seraing brought their case when FIFA banned TPO four months after the club signed an agreement in January 2015 with investment fund Doyen Sports based on the potential returns from such contracts.

Seraing refused to accept FIFA's ban and has already been fined 150,000 euros (\$175,900, £131,720). Their legal action is supported by the Spanish and Portuguese leagues, who are also taking a case to the European Commission.

FIFA is backed by European governing body UEFA and global players union Fifpro. Former UEFA president Michel Platini, now banned from football following a graft probe, called TPO "a type of slavery". —AFP