

Sports

China will limit their boys from Brazil, says top FA official

Ambitious China will turn into a team of Brazilians

SHANGHAI: China's football squad will be limited to "three or four" Brazil-born players, a senior official told AFP, as ex-Chelsea star Oscar expressed an interest in becoming the latest Brazilian to represent the world's most populous country.

Unless there is a radical policy change by FIFA, the Shanghai SIPG attacking midfielder will not be able to play for China because he has featured in competitive games for Brazil, including at the 2014 World Cup.

But it is indicative of a landmark shift in Chinese football that Oscar said: "I can think about (playing for China) because, as I said, it's difficult to go to the Brazilian national team now because I'm here."

Oscar, who moved from Chelsea for an Asian-record 60 million euros in January 2017, has seen Guangzhou Evergrande's Brazil-born forwards Elkeson and Aloisio called up by China in the past year as they seek to qualify for the next World Cup in 2022.

At least three more Brazilians, also attackers, have become naturalised or are close to doing so, according to media.

But Chinese Football Association secretary-general Liu Yi laughed off the notion that ambitious China will turn into a team of Brazilians in a quick fix to reach the World Cup in Qatar.

President Xi Jinping wants China to become a football superpower but the country has made the World Cup only once, in 2002, when they left without a point or a goal.

"We had a little bit of concern when we gave the passport to Elkeson or whoever," Liu said in a rare interview by a senior Chinese football official.

"But the good thing is that, dramatically, Chinese fans love to have a few (naturalised) players in the squad as long as they can make the Chinese team better and take us to the World Cup, hopefully

Qatar 2022. "I don't see any resistance, honestly, but we need to develop. It's not a long-term strategy or approach."

Liu, speaking before Oscar's comments came to light this week, added: "We're not going to have two-thirds of the squad from Brazil."

"We might have two or three, three or four probably, but that's it."

THWARTING THE VIRUS

The English-speaking Liu, 48, who took on the senior post in August last year, was talking from Suzhou, one of two cities hosting matches in this



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year's rejigged Chinese Super League.

The CSL kicked off on Saturday, five months late and behind closed doors because of the coronavirus pandemic.

As part of strict safety measures, eight teams are stationed at a single hotel in Suzhou, near Shanghai, and the other eight in Dalian. Players cannot see their families for two months.

Dalian has seen a small cluster of infections in recent days and China recorded 68 cases nationally on Tuesday, the highest daily figure since April, although still far lower than many countries.



GUANGZHOU: File photo taken on October 10, 2019 shows China's Li Ke (L) and Elkeson celebrating after winning the 2022 Football World Cup qualifier between China and Guam in Guangzhou. —AFP

Liu said that while the first round of matches went "better than expected" and the small resurgence of the virus has had no real impact, he is on guard. "We have another 13 rounds of the competition so this is just the start of the entire process," he cautioned.

Several football leagues in Europe and Asia returned from the virus before the CSL, but Liu said: "Our central government, and I think it's correct, they are more cautious about the lives."

"We were the first country and Wuhan was the first city to have an outbreak of the virus so we're more cautious about what we're doing, especially

sporting and cultural events.

"Yes, it was a bit longer than everybody thought, but it's worthwhile," he added.

"At the moment I can say that we are very safe, we're playing the competition in a very safe and comfortable environment."

Liu said that shelving the CSL for 2020 was never an option, even as the delay and pandemic dragged on, but the CFA will not be afraid to suspend play if a player or coach tests positive.

"We're definitely going to put a brake on the season, but it would be very unlikely that we'd cancel it," Liu said. — AFP

Rossi double helps LAFC get revenge

LOS ANGELES: Diego Rossi scored twice in a 4-1 rout of champions Seattle Sounders as Los Angeles FC secured a quarter-final place in the MLS is Back Tournament on Monday.

Rossi scored an early penalty and then snaked through the defence for a second eight minutes from time in the battle between the two Western Conference heavyweights. Latif Blessing in the 39th minute and Brian Rodriguez in the 89th also got on the scoresheet for LAFC at the tournament in Orlando, Florida.

It marked a measure of revenge for LAFC who lost to Seattle 3-1 in last year's Western Conference final. Seattle went on to beat Toronto for the MLS championship. LAFC were missing star striker Carlos Vela, who scored a league record 34 goals in 2019, but opted out of this competition for family health reasons.

Rossi was brought down by Xavier Arreaga in the 14th minute but got up to slot home the penalty. He embarrassed Arreaga again in the 82nd minute when he knocked through his legs before firing a low shot past goalkeeper Stefan Frei and could have had more goals if he had capitalized on numerous chances.

Sounders' elimination comes one day after New York City sent Toronto FC packing with a 3-1 win in a rematch of last year's Eastern Conference semi-final. Earlier, the San Jose Earthquakes continued their impressive tournament run by reaching the quarter-finals with a 5-2 defeat of Real Salt Lake.

The teams were locked 1-1 at half-time after Cristian Espinoza's 21st-minute opener for San Jose was pegged back a minute later by Douglas



REUNION, FLORIDA: Diego Rossi #9 of Los Angeles FC is fouled and gets a penalty during a round of 16 match of the MLS is Back Tournament between Seattle Sounders and Los Angeles FC at ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex on July 27, 2020 in Reunion, Florida. — AFP

Martinez. But Magnus Eriksson put San Jose in front with the first of two second-half penalties in the 49th minute. Vako made it 3-1 before Salt Lake's Damir Kreilach got one back in the 75th minute.

Chris Wondolowski in the 86th minute and Eriksson then sealed the victory for San Jose who will next face either Columbus or Minnesota United on Saturday.

"The team is growing game after game, showing a very positive attitude, their unity, their sacrifice,

but more than anything is how they play," San Jose coach Matias Almeyda said.

"The best thing for a coach is being able to get the max level out of each individual player because I know that will allow us to have growth." The "MLS is Back" tournament is being staged at a single location in Orlando, Florida after a four-month shutdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. The tournament champion will earn a place in the 2021 CONCACAF Champions League. — AFP

UEFA hits out at decision to hold Greek Cup final

ATHENS: UEFA official Herbert Huelbel on Monday expressed his dissatisfaction at the Greek football federation's decision to hold its national Cup final on August 30. The Champions League final is scheduled for August 23 in Lisbon, and Huelbel believes the date for the Greek Cup final is too late to decide which clubs qualify for next season's European competitions from the country.

"FIFA and UEFA strongly support and recommend the completion of all national competitions, including the Greek Cup, before the end of the current season and before August 3, the date announced by UEFA for the submission of final scores and the clubs that will represent Greece in the European inter-club competitions," Huelbel said in a statement.

The final between Olympiakos and AEK Athens was originally scheduled for July 26 but the former refused to play at a smaller stadium in Rizoupoli instead of the Athens Olympic Stadium.

However, Olympiakos wanted the match to be played this Sunday and were also angry at the new date. "The new decision not only ridicules Greek football but mainly alters the integrity of the top event as the transfer window starts on August 3 and so on August 30 the rosters of the teams will not be the same as those played during the season," Olympiakos said in a statement.

Olympiakos called on UEFA, FIFA and the Greek government "to not allow this shame". "We call on them to intervene now to change the decision of the 'uneducated advisers' who instead of promoting the good of Greek football, serve selfish interests. Apathy in the face of corruption creates complicity," Olympiakos said. Huelbel was appointed three years ago by FIFA as chairman of a monitoring committee to ensure oversight of the operations and processes of the Greek federation. — AFP

Klopp named LMA Manager of the Year

LONDON: Jurgen Klopp was voted the League Managers' Association Manager of the Year on Monday after ending Liverpool's 30-year wait to win the Premier League. Klopp led Liverpool to the Premier League title in the same season they were FIFA Club World champions.

The German's award was announced by former Manchester United boss Alex Ferguson, after whom the trophy is now named. "Jurgen, fantastic," Ferguson said on Sky Sports. "We speak about Leeds spending 16 years in the Championship, but Liverpool 30 years since winning that league, incredible."

"You thoroughly deserved it. The performance level of your team was outstanding. Your personality runs right throughout the whole club. It was a marvellous performance."

"I'll forgive you for waking me up at 3.30am to tell me you have won the league! Thank you, but anyway, you thoroughly deserved it. Well done." Former Borussia Dortmund boss Klopp said of Ferguson: "I know it's not 100 percent appropriate as a Liverpool manager but I admire him. I remember he was the first British manager I met.

"We had breakfast. I'm not sure how much he remembers but I remember because for me this moment was like meeting the Pope. It was absolutely great and from that first season we clicked."

"I didn't think at this moment I would have a trophy in my hands named after him." Chris Wilder, last year's winner of the award, settled for the runner-up spot this time after Sheffield United's impressive first season back in the Premier League.

Meanwhile, Klopp wants to retain a lean squad to ensure Liverpool remain competitive next season. The Reds boss used 24 players in the Premier League this term. Klopp gave chances to some of the club's academy players in the FA and League Cups to cope with fixture congestion.

But he believes keeping as small a core as possible keeps the players on their toes. "The solution cannot be to have a much bigger squad for the specific moment and then realise you cannot use all the players," Klopp said.

"These players can only play the football they play because they know they are needed. They are all human beings and nobody can be held back for a year and then on the last day of the year be told, 'Now we need you'."

"In between now and then there must be a lot of training and support and challenges stuff like this. The size of the squad is not that important to me, the quality of the squad is very much so." — AFP

Fulham in charge of play-off semi after Onomah's magic

LONDON: Fulham took control of their Championship play-off semi-final against Cardiff as Josh Onomah's superb strike inspired a 2-0 win in the first leg on Monday. Onomah's moment of magic early in the second half was followed by a fine free-kick from Neeskens Kebano as Scott Parker's side dominated in south Wales.

Fulham will be firm favourites to advance to the final at Wembley when Cardiff visit Craven Cottage in the second leg tomorrow. Fulham, who finished fourth after missing out on automatic promotion on the last day of the season, are now unbeaten in eight matches.

"I'm pleased with the result. We need to stay level and there is still a lot of football to be played," Parker said. "Overall we were outstanding. We had real control about us, caused them a lot of problems and Onomah's skill has come through." Relegated from the Premier League last season, Cardiff were 14th when Neil Harris replaced Neil Warnock as manager in November. They eventually finished fifth, but failed to recapture the form that carried them into the play-offs in a disjointed first-leg performance.

"We have to defend better for the first goal. We didn't lay a hand on him," Harris said. "There was no consistency in refereeing decisions, but it is a great free-kick from Kebano. I told the players I have been in play-off finals where I have been behind. The first goal at Craven Cottage will be key."

Swansea beat Brentford 1-0 in the other semi-final first leg, with the second leg at Griffin Park on Wednesday. Fulham were without the Championship's top scorer Aleksandar Mitrovic, who Parker rested due to a "slight" injury problem.

With Mitrovic sidelined, Fulham made a slow start as they chased promotion back to the Premier League after last year's relegation. Cardiff went close to taking an early lead when Leandro Bacuna's drive forced an awkward save from Marek Rodak, but Robert Glatzel was unable to turn in the rebound after a superb tackle by Michael Hector on the goalline.

Lee Tomlin and Junior Hoilett combined to set up Glatzel moments later, but his shot was straight at Rodak. Fulham eventually found their rhythm and Cardiff keeper Alex Smithies denied Onomah at the far post after the midfielder stretched to reach Kebano's cross.

Tom Cairney was inches away from breaking the deadlock in first half stoppage-time when the Fulham midfielder's curler clipped the outside of the post. Onomah had scored in Fulham's win over Cardiff on July 10 and he tormented them again as the 23-year-old put Parker's team ahead in the 49th minute.

Harrison Reed found the former Tottenham trainee and he turned Marlon Pack, then weaved past Sean Morrison and Curtis Nelson before stroking a low finish into the bottom corner. Democratic Republic of Congo winger Kebano capped Fulham's mature display in stoppage-time when he smashed his free-kick past Smithies from the edge of the area. — AFP