

Sports

Salzburg's US coach Marsch looks forward to football returning

'Right now there is a lot of optimism and excitement'

PARIS: Having become the first American to coach a team in the Champions League and overseen the remarkable rise of Erling Braut Haaland, it was already an unforgettable season for Jesse Marsch before the coronavirus pandemic came along.

Now the coach of Austria's Red Bull Salzburg is preparing his team to return to action after a two-month shutdown. Salzburg have already been back training in small groups but are set to resume collective training on Friday before the Austrian Bundesliga picks up again in early June.

"We had to all get tests today again to make sure that nobody had the virus. This is the second time that we have had tests," Marsch told AFP on Wednesday in a phone interview. "We will still have to keep distances in the locker room, and we will wear masks in the building. Even on the bench we will have to keep distances of one metre between players and coaching staff."

Unlike in Germany, where the league resumes this weekend, teams in Austria have not been forced into quarantine training camps. Indeed, if Germany has coped well enough with the pandemic to be able to bring back football, Austria has arguably done even better.

With its population of almost nine million, it has registered only 624 deaths from under 16,000 cases and began easing its lockdown in mid-April. "If you were here and you saw how people have followed the rules, how they wear masks, how they respect each other's space, it would give you a lot of confidence that the virus is well contained," says Marsch, who was assistant coach at RB Leipzig in Germany before moving to Salzburg last year.

The 46-year-old Wisconsin native spent lockdown in Salzburg with his wife and two sons. Their 18-year-old daughter stayed in Leipzig to finish high school but returned to the family before the border between the countries closed.

Salzburg have not played since March 8. While in lockdown,

Marsch focused on "family, friends and football" and — like everyone it seems — "did a lot of Zoom calls".

Now the season is returning, and Salzburg's first game is set to be the Cup final against second-division Austria Lustenau in late May. Then it will be back to the league, as the Red Bull club try to catch leaders LASK Linz and claim a seventh straight title. They are currently three points behind. "Right now there is a lot of optimism and excitement," admits Marsch.

Salzburg have found the going tougher since losing Haaland and Japan's Takumi Minamino to Borussia Dortmund and Liverpool respectively. Both were outstanding in Salzburg's Champions League campaign as they impressed against Liverpool and Napoli. Haaland, the 19-year-old Norwegian, scored 28 goals in 22 games before joining Dortmund and netting nine in his first eight German Bundesliga appearances.

"He is a freak, he physically is gifted in ways that very few people are. There is very little that he can't do in terms of the requirements of the game at the highest level," Marsch says.

"You could see in every training session and every test game, he had moments that were like 'wow', and those 'wow' moments got to be more and more until sometimes it would be a 90-minute performance."

If losing Haaland and Minamino in the winter was a blow, Marsch points out that youth development is central to the strategy of a club who have also polished players like Sadio Mane and Naby Keita. Salzburg gave him an opportunity too, to make a name for himself as an American coach in Europe.

"This is an experiment for me to see if my way of thinking, my way of leadership, of relationships, can function in the most competitive world of our sport here in Europe, although I understand Austria is not the highest level in Europe." He still keeps a close eye on goings-on at home, though, and has been supportive of the US women's national team who recently had their



Jesse Marsch

case to be paid the same as their male counterparts thrown out by a federal judge. "I just felt like those women earned more than the respect of everybody to be treated like heroes and with full respect," he says. "After the lawsuit getting thrown out, yeah I have emotions for that too, because I would like to see them treated fairly." — AFP

Britain's athletes must respect distancing in training

LONDON: Britain's elite athletes must respect guidelines on social distancing and be made aware of the risks when they resume individual performance training after the coronavirus lockdown, guidance published on Wednesday said. The document set out the terms for athletes in a first step towards allowing the return of live sport in the country. The government has said elite sport in England cannot return until at least June 1 and will have to take place without spectators present. "Enabling athletes to get match-fit is an important milestone towards restarting competitive sport behind closed doors — but we have not given a green light yet," said Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden.

"We are clear that this can only happen on the advice of medical experts and when it is safe to do so."

Training, at official elite venues under carefully controlled medical conditions, will require athletes to keep two metres apart at all times from their team mates and anyone outside

their household. "Organised training should only be resumed where government guidelines on social distancing can be adhered to, considering any terms of dispensation allowed for elite sport," the guidance said. It added that sports should outline how there will be regular screening for COVID-19 symptoms before athletes enter training environments.

All athletes and support staff will be expected to undergo one-to-one check-ups and briefings before any organised training which will also highlight sport-specific risks and the measures to mitigate them. The guidance also covers measures such as the deep cleaning of facilities. Guidance on the second step, to include "a level of social clustering" subject to medical experts giving the go-ahead, will come later. "It is important to note that the publication of this guidance does not mean that all Olympic and Paralympic sports and athletes should return to training straight away," said UK Sport chief executive Sally Munday. "Indeed, we fully expect different sports will return to training at different times."

"Each sport will need to make a risk assessment against the guidance and determine what is best for both their athletes and staff." Munday said returning to training was a personal choice and recognised there might be concerns or circumstances that made it challenging. The guidance on the resumption of elite training is here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-phased-return-of-sport-and-recreation/elite-sport-return-to-training-guidance-step-one>. — Reuters

Babar named ODI captain, Amir loses Pakistan contract

LAHORE: Pakistan named Babar Azam as their new captain in one-day internationals, putting the elegant batsman in charge of both their limited-overs teams after a stellar year with the bat.

The top order batsman, who took over Twenty20 captaincy earlier this year, succeeds Sarfaraz Ahmed as Pakistan's white-ball leader while Azhar Ali also got an extension as skipper of the test side for the 2020-21 season. "I want to congratulate Azhar Ali and Babar Azam for getting captaincy extensions," chief selector and head coach Misbah-ul-Haq said in a statement issued by the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Wednesday.

"This is absolutely the right decision as they also require certainty and clarity on their future roles. "I am sure they will now start looking to the future and start planning so that they can build sides that can perform at the expected levels."

Babar has been a prolific scorer and currently ranks among the top five batsmen in all three formats. Professional cricket remains suspended because of the coronavirus pandemic but Pakistan are preparing for their tours of Ireland, England and South Africa as well as the Twenty20 World Cup in Australia in October-November.

Keeping the schedule in mind, PCB also handed out central contracts for the 2020-21 season, omitting the pace trio of Mohammad Amir, Wahab Riaz and Hasan Ali.—Reuters