

Break gives Jonny time for recovery

What next for European football?

SPORTS REPORTER

With the World Cup Qualifiers postponed till June due to the coronavirus pandemic, injured national midfielder Masuk Mia Jonny is hoping he would be fit in time to represent the country after recovering from an injury he sustained in September last year.

The Bashundhara Kings midfielder travelled with the national team to Tajikistan for a World Cup Qualifier against Afghanistan on September 10 but did not feature in the match after tearing his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), subsequently being ruled out of the qualifiers as well as domestic competitions.

Later he underwent a surgery on September 23, leaving himself with at least nine months out even though he now expects to be fit before that time.

The 22-year-old started doing gym from mid-January under Bashundhara Kings' physio Abu Sufian and Spanish trainer Javier Sanchez Flores. He is expected to start training with the ball in mid-April as he already starting jogging on Tuesday.

"It will be clear whether I will be fit or not after another month and then I will be able to say how long I would need to get match-fit. I think it may take another two months," Jonny told the Daily Star over phone from the club camp in Bashundhara residential area even though the club yesterday released all players for a week following postponement of Bangladesh Premier League.

"The players will get injured and we have to accept it as part of football. However, I feel bad for not being able to play for the national team and the club in the last six months. Now I'm hopeful of playing for the national team and club, which has given me tremendous support throughout the rehabilitation process," said Jonny.

Jonny's teammate centre-back Tapu Barman faced the same situation, but Tapu



returned to action in seven months and now he is representing his club and the national team. The return of Tapu is inspiring Jonny to make an early comeback.

"Tapu bhai started playing after seven months even though he initially needed nine to ten months to get fit for competitive matches. As teammates Tapu, (Atiqur Rahman) Fahad, Mustaq underwent same surgeries, they gave me valuable tips," Jonny said about his recovery process.

National team coach Jamie Day keeps regular communication with Jonny as the midfielder is a key member of his team and has played each game since the British coach took charge in May 2018.

"I don't know when the next international games will be, so it is difficult to say what his condition will be at that time," Day said yesterday. "Jonny has done well for me and the national team, so it will improve the squad when he is fit and provide competition for places."

Jonny believes the postponement of World Cup Qualifiers came as a blessing for him as he will now get more time to get fit.

"The postponement of the qualifiers gave me an opportunity to represent the country again as I am hopeful of getting fit within the next two months and play a few matches for the national team and my club," said Jonny.

AFP, London

UEFA's decision to postpone Euro 2020 for 12 months on Tuesday buys European club football some time to decide how to proceed, but extremely difficult decisions lie ahead on how, if and when to finish the season.

How long the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic continues will be the decisive factor.

Europe has become the epicentre of the pandemic, with France joining Italy and Spain in applying strict lockdown measures and European leaders also planning to ban all non-essential travel into the continent.

UEFA's crisis meeting on Tuesday agreed on a working group to look at solutions with the hope of still completing the season by June 30.

The end of June is when many players' contracts and loan deals expire.

"As the governing body of European football, UEFA led the process and made the biggest sacrifice. Moving Euro 2020 comes at a huge cost," said UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin.

More financial pain for UEFA and Europe's major clubs could be on the horizon if the Champions League cannot be completed.

This season's competition was cut off with only four of the last-16 ties completed and no date has been set for a return to action.

"The focus now will be to come up with solutions to conclude the 2019/20 club season in the most practical manner and, beyond that, ensure football, like society as a whole, returns as quickly as possible to its natural form and rhythm," said Andrea Agnelli, Juventus CEO and chairman of the European Club Association.

The Champions League and Europa League may therefore need to be streamlined to reach a conclusion. Ties from the quarterfinals on could be reduced to one-off games rather than two legs, while the semifinals and finals could come together like a "final four" format.

That would see both semifinals and final played over the course of a few days, with the Champions League final due to be in Istanbul and the Europa League final in Gdansk.

KEVIN DURANT TESTS POSITIVE

Brooklyn Nets forward Kevin Durant has tested positive for coronavirus, the Athletic reported on Tuesday, less than a week after the global outbreak prompted the suspension of the NBA season. "Everyone be careful, take care of yourself and quarantine. We're going to get through this," 10-time NBA All-Star Durant was quoted as saying. The Nets had said earlier on Tuesday that four of its players were isolated and under the care of team physicians after testing positive for coronavirus but did not identify the individuals. Three of the players were asymptomatic while one was showing symptoms of the rapidly-spreading virus days after the Utah Jazz reported that two of its players had tested positive for coronavirus.

-- REUTERS



"Without any prejudice, those are also options," said Ceferin. "We have different options, but really it's far too early to be concrete. Whatever we decide, nothing is sure because we don't know when this COVID-19 will stop and allow us to play."

With that in mind, UEFA's goal of finishing by June 30 is highly optimistic.

Domestic associations then face the difficult call of whether to let this season roll on until it can be completed at a later date, use the current standings to call the season to a halt or even declare the campaign null and void.

"The competitions have to be completed, if possible before June 30, but that date doesn't have to be an insurmountable wall," said Luis Rubiales, president of the Spanish football federation. "If there are games to be played after June 30, our opinion is that all teams can play all their games, so that league position is earned

on the pitch."

In England, a void season would deprive Liverpool of almost certainly ending a 30-year wait to win the title. This option appears unlikely and not only due to sporting integrity.

Not playing the remaining games risks penalty clauses in billions worth of broadcast contracts being activated, while season ticket holders could ask for their money back.

Ending the season with the current standings is also open to legal challenges from those clubs currently sitting in the relegation zone or that would miss out on lucrative European places.

A proposal has been made for Germany's Bundesliga to expand for one season from 18 to 22 teams with no relegation this year. Similarly, there is the option of the Premier League expanding to 22 teams with Leeds and West Brom promoted for being top two in the Championship and no relegation.

Dissent grows as IOC battles to keep Tokyo 2020 on track

REUTERS, ATHENS

The International Olympic Committee is facing its strongest headwinds in decades as it briefed national committees on Wednesday on the state of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics amid the coronavirus pandemic, with voices of dissent growing louder.

The IOC is committed to staging the Tokyo Games as planned from July 24, saying on Tuesday after a meeting with international sports federations that measures against the virus were delivering results.

The Olympic body has refused to publicly consider cancellation or postponement as possible options, even as other major events including soccer's Euro 2020 and Copa America and the French Open tennis grand slam announced postponements on Tuesday.

The virus has also wreaked havoc with Olympic qualification tournaments with athletes struggling to train, travel or compete and many pre-Games qualifiers cancelled or postponed.

Tokyo is set to host some 11,000 athletes and

53% have already earned their spot at the Games. The remaining 47% will clinch their place through modified qualifiers, or previous performances based on ranking.

Under the current exceptional circumstances, the IOC said, solutions needed to be found that were appropriate, though they might not be ideal for all athletes. "This is an exceptional situation which requires exceptional solutions," the IOC told Reuters in a statement on Wednesday.

"The IOC is committed to finding a solution with the least negative impact for the athletes, while protecting the integrity of the competition and the athletes' health. No solution will be ideal in this situation, and this is why we are counting on the responsibility and solidarity of the athletes."

IOC member Hayley Wickenheiser called the decision to proceed with the Games "insensitive and irresponsible" in the most vocal attack on the Olympic body since President Thomas Bach took over in 2013. Several athletes, including Olympic pole vault champion Katerina Stefanidi, said the IOC decision was putting athletes' health at risk.

Klopp is 'crazy, egocentric, but special'

AGENCIES

The varied character traits of Jurgen Klopp have been laid bare by a one-time colleague who described the Liverpool boss as "crazy" and "egocentric", but also "special".

Those are the words of former Borussia Dortmund physiotherapist Frank Zollner, who was at the club for 17 years.

Reflecting on his experiences with Klopp, Zollner recalled a man with a changing temperament.

"He's a special guy," Zollner said. "There were so many days when you'd think: 'Great guy!', but sometimes you'd think: 'What an egocentric!'. One time, Jakob Blaszczykowski told me he couldn't train because of an injury but would still come to the team meeting."

"Before the meeting, I went to Klopp with Kuba and told him what was going on. He then went pretty crazy, probably because he had only just learned about Kuba's injury at that moment."

AFC Cup suspended

REUTERS, Hong Kong



The Asian Football Confederation has postponed all matches in the AFC Cup tournament, the regional body announced on Wednesday, as the coronavirus pandemic continues to hit sporting events around the world.

"Following the imposition of further preventive measures and travel restrictions by several national governments due to the current COVID-19 pandemic," the body said in a statement, "the Asian Football Confederation has decided today to postpone all AFC Cup 2020 matches until further notice."

Games in the west of Asia had already been suspended prior to the announcement. The decision means matches due to be played in March and April in the confederation's other four zones around Asia -- south, central, south east and east -- have now also been postponed.

The AFC Cup is the continent's second-tier club competition and features teams from countries such as Jordan, Lebanon,

Singapore, Bangladesh and Tajikistan.

"The AFC will closely monitor the situation before deciding when to recommence the 2020 AFC Cup season," the statement said.

"The decision, which was also made in conjunction with the competing clubs and their respective member associations, is a precautionary measure to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all participating players and teams, match officials and spectators as well as designed to protect the integrity of the competition."

The coronavirus outbreak has had a major impact on football across Asia, with the start of the Chinese Super League and the K-League in South Korea suspended indefinitely while Japan's J-League was halted after the opening round of matches.

The Asian Champions League, the region's leading club competition, has also been severely affected, with the schedule of the group phase thrown into disarray since the tournament kicked off in early February.

CORONAVIRUS FALLOUT



Matuidi tests positive

Juventus's France World Cup winner Blaise Matuidi and Hellas Verona's Mattia Zaccagni have both tested positive for coronavirus, their Serie A clubs confirmed on Tuesday.

"Matuidi has undergone medical tests that have revealed his positivity to the Coronavirus-COVID-19," the Italian champions said in a statement.

Juve added 32-year-old Matuidi, who lifted the World Cup in 2018, is asymptomatic and currently "in voluntary home isolation".

The midfielder's club teammate Daniele Rugani was the first top-flight footballer to be diagnosed with coronavirus last Wednesday, sending the entire team into quarantine.

In total 13 Serie A players have officially been diagnosed with the illness including seven from Sampdoria and three at Fiorentina.

Italian midfielder Zaccagni, 24, had already been in self-isolation as a precautionary measure after Verona played Sampdoria on March 8.

"Zaccagni is doing well, in recent days, he has only had a few bouts of fever," the eighth-placed Serie A

club said.

"The player, as well as the whole team, will extend their voluntary isolation at home until March 25, while continuing to be monitored."

Matuidi had urged his fans to "take care" in a post on Instagram at the weekend.

"It's a complicated time. At the beginning, I didn't really realise how serious this disease was and the danger, how fast the contagion spread here in Italy," he said.

"In this difficult time for all of us, I just wanted to invite you to follow the official recommendations carefully and to take great care of yourself and your loved ones."

"A lot of encouragement and infinite thanks to all the medical and nursing staff. We are with you."

The virus has killed more than 2,500 people in Italy and infected over 31,000.

Chelsea make hotel available to NHS staff

Chelsea has made the Millennium Hotel at their Stamford Bridge stadium in London available to the National Health Service (NHS) to provide accommodation to staff as they fight the coronavirus pandemic, the Premier League club said on Wednesday.

Chelsea said owner Roman Abramovich would cover the costs of providing accommodation and the club has made all rooms available if required.

"Many of the medical staff will be working long shifts and may not be able to travel home or would otherwise have to make long commutes," Chelsea said in a statement.

"Local accommodation helps maintain the health and well-being of these crucial personnel at this critical time."

"NHS staff will be those working in hospitals in the North-West London region, but that may extend to hospitals in other districts."

The club said they would make the hotel available for a two-month period and then reconsider depending on the prevailing situation in May.

The Premier League has been suspended until April 4 due to the coronavirus pandemic which has led to an unprecedented shutdown of world sport.

The coronavirus has infected more than 198,300 people and more than 8,400 have died. The United Kingdom has 1,950 cases with 71 deaths.

Milner goes viral, snaps coronavirus gloom

Liverpool star James Milner has become a social media star in playing up to his no frills image by filming himself doing domestic chores whilst the Premier League is suspended due to the coronavirus outbreak.

The 34-year-old former England midfielder first posted images of himself sorting his tea bags one by one as a response to team-mate Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain posting a glamorous video of himself and his pop star girlfriend Perrie Edwards dancing on their stairs.

The players have been left to their own devices after team training was halted due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"Hey @Alex_OxChambo Barrels of laughs here in Milner household as well -- rationing the tea bags for the week #crazydays #somuchtogetonwith #notgotthemovestocompete," tweeted Milner on Monday.

After rationing his tea bags, the 61-times capped Milner took to his garden and filmed himself nose down to the lawn clipping the grass with a pair of scissors and a ruler to ensure each blade was the same height.

"Now the tea bags are sorted I've got time to level out this lawn," he tweeted. "Wonder if I can borrow Anfield's 'Keep off the Grass sign.'"

The Premier League is in abeyance since last Friday after both Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta and Chelsea winger

Callum Hudson-Odoi tested positive for coronavirus.

The English Premier League are due to meet on Thursday to consider their options with the postponement of Euro 2020 until next year at least giving them some leeway in resuming the domestic season.

Berlusconi, Agnelli donate 20m euros

Italy's former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and the country's multi-industry Agnelli dynasty have pledged 10 million euros (\$11 million) each to fight the coronavirus crisis.

"Silvio Berlusconi has decided to make available to the Lombardy region, through a donation, the sum of 10 million euros, necessary to make 400 beds available in intensive care," his Forza Italia party said on Twitter.

The 83-year-old Berlusconi was reported to have left Milan, the capital of Lombardy and epicentre of the country's virus outbreak, for Chateaufort-Grassein the south-east of France.

The Turin-based Agnelli family, whose business interests include the Fiat Chrysler group and football giants Juventus, matched the donation made by former AC Milan owner Berlusconi.

The group pledged 10 million euros to help support the Italian national health service in Turin and the Piedmont region.

Exor, the Agnelli family holding company, is also in the process of buying 150 artificial respirators for Italian hospitals, Juventus said in a statement.

The club have launched a fundraiser for health infrastructure in the north-western Italian region, which had raised more than 400,000 euros by Tuesday evening. Italy have been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic with over 2,500 killed and more than 31,000 infected.

Lombardy has reported 1,640 deaths, with neighbouring Piedmont also among the most affected regions.

-- AFP