

HIGUAIN FLED ITALY TO BE WITH SICK MOTHER?

Juventus striker Gonzalo Higuain has left the team's quarantine and returned home to Argentina, according to multiple reports in Italy on Thursday. The 32-year-old international had been in isolation along with the rest of Serie A leaders' squad following teammate Daniele Rugani's positive test a week ago, with France's Blaise Matuidi also catching the virus in recent days. Higuain had reportedly asked Juve for permission to visit his sick mother, and had a test confirming he was negative for COVID-19. The recommended quarantine period is two weeks. As flights to Argentina are all blocked, Higuain organised a transfer by private jet with his family first to France late on Wednesday, then Spain and from there fly to South America, Sky Sports Italia and Gazzetta Dello Sport reported. Germany's Sami Khedira and Bosnian Miralem Pjanic have also left Turin to join their families, Gazzetta reported.

— AFP



Despite growing concern over coronavirus, Japan and the International Olympic Committee are adamant to host the Summer Games in Tokyo in July, 2020. Here, three-time Olympic gold medalists Tadahiyo Nomura and Saori Yoshida pose for photos after lighting the Olympic Flame at Japan Air Self-Defence Force Matsushima Base in Miyagi prefecture on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Day's passionate plea

Jamie Day, the head coach of the national football team, is currently in England, spending time with his family as coronavirus has stopped sport in Bangladesh and around the world. However, the coach, concerned about the people of Bangladesh, yesterday issued a message jointly with Stuart Watkiss, the technical director of Bangladesh Football Federation, urging the people of Bangladesh to be aware of the risks from coronavirus, the need for social distancing and staying strong and united in these testing times. Following is the message in its entirety.

Dear people of Bangladesh, Stuart and I felt the need to message our supporters at this troublesome time.

The coming months are going to be very testing. As a nation we need to work together to get through this period. Please stay safe and healthy by following the guidelines for hygiene. Take sensible measures to stop the spread of this virus and help to protect other people who are vulnerable.

The people of Bangladesh unite in times of need by praying and working together. Now we need to unite in a different way, to protect each other, this means working together to keep apart at this vital time -- social distancing is the key right now.

This great nation are experts at self-discipline and it's time to put that into



practice for a different reason. I have every faith that you can do this

Football with our national team has paused but when it is ready to return I will be proud to lead our team again.

We wish you strength and love during this time and keep the people of Bangladesh in our prayers.

'Can't concentrate on training'

SPORTS REPORTER

With the outbreak of coronavirus putting a halt to sport worldwide and his parents attending to his grandfather at hospital, Bangladesh's top archer Ruman Sana has been struggling to concentrate in training, which is being held in quarantine at the Shaheed Ahsan Ullah Master Stadium in Tongi.

In line with instructions from the Youth and Sports Ministry, all sport is already postponed till March 31. Subsequently, all types of training camps in Bangladesh are also suspended while a number of international meets, including archery's Asia Cup, World Cup and Solidarity Championships were also postponed.

However, 26 archers continue to train as there has been no decision about the Tokyo Olympics, which is scheduled to begin on July 24 in Japan. Ruman became the second Bangladeshi athlete to ever secure direction qualification to the Olympics.

"In any sport, confidence levels won't be boosted until you take part in tournaments. Confidence will go up with the number of tournaments that you play. If you don't play any games, then you can't have any hope of producing good results," Ruman told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

"Actually, I can't give a hundred percent concentration in training if there are no games ahead of us. If there would have some



RUMAN SANA

competitions in the near future, then I would get a different spirit in training in order to do better in competitive tournaments."

However, the 24-year-old is aware of the reality and believes he will get more opportunities in future despite missing out on three big events.

"Life comes first. If we can stay well then we will get more opportunities to play and do better in the future. Sport is postponed in every part of world. In Bangladesh, all training camps of other disciplines have also been postponed but it is good news for us that archers are still training, thanks to the state minister for the youth and sports," said Sana, adding that he was worried for his family members in Khulna.

"My family members are safe and sound although my grandfather underwent an

operation in Khulna on Thursday. My family is attending to him at hospital. That's why I am a bit anxious about my family. My sister's father-in-law is a doctor and he is advising all of us about how to stay safe and I'm also telling them time and again to use sanitizer and soap," said Ruman, who is passing his leisure time by watching videos of archers from the world's other corners as well as watching movies.

"The practice session is going on as usual but we are working more on physical sessions. The training area is in quarantine and the federation has taken all measures by restricting others from entering the camp as well as restricting from going outside.

"After hectic training sessions, I would always go and hang out with friends at Diabari or Purbachal to refresh myself, but at the moment I can't go outside.

Even yesterday [Thursday] I sent some money to my family through an office staff although I always did it myself before. Now, I am passing time watching videos of archers from the world's different corners on Instagram and Facebook and learning many things from those videos. I am also watching Tamil Movies, which is I think can be educational for everyone. The important thing in the camp is that we stay in a safe-zone because the situation in Italy, China and other countries is worse than in Bangladesh. I pray to the Almighty to save us all," said Ruman, who believes Tokyo Olympics are likely to be deferred.

PK Banerjee no more

AGENCIES

Legendary Indian footballer PK Banerjee died on Friday at a hospital in Kolkata after battling a chest infection for a long time, family sources said. He was 83.

He was on ventilator support in the intensive care unit of Medica Superspecialty Hospital for more than two weeks. Banerjee, who was admitted in the hospital on March 2, breathed his last at 12:40 PM, according to a family member.

A two-time Olympian and the only surviving goal-scorer of India's 1962 Asian Games gold medal winning team, Banerjee is survived by two daughters -- Paula and Pixie.

The Asian Games gold medallist was suffering from sepsis and multi-organ failure due to pneumonia on a background of Parkinson's disease, dementia and heart ailments.

The All India Football Federation also sent out a statement. AIFF "condoles the death of former India Captain, Coach and Technical Director Pradip Kumar Banerjee, who was fondly referred to as PK Banerjee by his vast legion of fans."

As a mark of respect, the AIFF flag is kept half-mast at the AIFF Headquarters -- the Football House in Dwarka, New Delhi. He scored 65 international goals in 84 appearance for the national team and his contribution was recognised by FIFA when the game's governing body awarded him the Centennial Order of Merit in 2004.



1936 - 2020

Sk Russel's Kenyan coach in quarantine

SPORTS REPORTER

Sheikh Russel goalkeeping coach Abdul Iddi Salim has been in quarantine for the past four days after arriving in Dhaka on Tuesday.

Salim left for Kenya on March 13 after his team's match against Sheikh Jamal and returned to Dhaka on March 17, a day ahead of Sheikh Russel's next match according to the revised fixtures of the Bangladesh Premier League. That game was later postponed till March 31 following government instructions to curb the spread of coronavirus.

"We have kept Salim in quarantine at an apartment because we didn't want to take any risk with the health of other players, who have been in training camp at Bashundhara residential area," Saleh Jaman Selim, director of sport at Sheikh Russel, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Russel recently served show-cause notices to three foreign players -- Nigeria's Raphael Odoyin and Udoko Alison, and Uzbekistan's Azizov Alisher -- for their poor performances. In reply, the trio, promised to raise their game in the coming days, Selim informed, adding that the team were suffering from injuries sidelined five or six players so their performances had deteriorated.

S America wants WC qualifiers delayed

AFP, Asuncion

South American football's governing body CONMEBOL said on Thursday it will ask FIFA to delay the start of the region's qualification campaign for the 2022 World Cup due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The first two rounds of qualifying games due to begin later this month have already been postponed as all football leagues in South America have been shut down over the deadly virus.

CONMEBOL said in a statement it was taking "extreme precautions ... in line with the recommendations indicated by international authorities regarding public health."

The first two rounds were due to be played on March 26-27 and March 31 but FIFA previously granted a postponement.

Atalanta v Valencia 'triggered' pandemic?

AGENCIES

Atalanta and Valencia's Champions League game might have been a "trigger" for the coronavirus outbreak in Bergamo, claims an immunologist.

The 4-1 victory was played at the San Siro on February 19 and 40,000 fans travelled from Bergamo to Milan for the historic Round of 16 tie.

Lombardy is the region by far affected the most in Italy, with Bergamo one of the worst hit cities, as last night 60 coffins were taken by military trucks because the crematorium was overloaded.

There have been 533 deaths in Bergamo since the crisis began, 93 alone over the last 24 hours, whereas the crematorium can manage at most 25 per day when running constantly.

"It's probable that there were several major triggers and catalysts for the diffusion of the virus," immunologist

Francesco Le Foche told the Corriere dello Sport newspaper from the Umberto I hospital in Rome.

"The Atalanta-Valencia game could very well have been one of them. It was the apex of collective euphoria in a unique football season for this club.

"A month has passed since that match, so the timing is pertinent. The aggregation of thousands of people, centimetres from each other, engaging in manifestations of euphoria like hugging, shouting, all of that could've favoured viral reciprocation.

"I have to imagine many didn't want to miss that game if they had tickets, even if they felt a slight fever. With hindsight, it was madness to play with a crowd present, but at the time things weren't clear enough. It'd be unthinkable now."

Valencia have announced 35 per cent of their squad and staff tested positive for coronavirus, linking it to that trip to Milan.

However, so far Atalanta have not registered any cases of their own.



Italian immunologist Francesco Le Foche believes the Champions League last 16 first-leg tie between Atalanta and Valencia in Milan on February 19 could have been one of the factors behind the massive spread of coronavirus in those two countries.

PHOTO: AFP FILE

Dietmar Hopp: football villain or virus hero?

AFP, Berlin

Long despised by German fans as the face of big-money football, billionaire Dietmar Hopp is now being held up by some as a national hero in the coronavirus crisis.

Three weeks ago, the 79-year-old owner of the Hoffenheim club was the subject of nationwide protests in Germany's stadiums, with fans calling him a "son of a b***h" and holding up pictures of his face in crosshairs.

This week, Hopp raised hopes of a vaccine for the COVID-19 disease, suggesting a company he owns could develop one as soon as the autumn.

Ranked by Forbes as the eighth richest person in Germany, Hopp made his fortune with SAP, a software company he co-founded in 1972.

Decades later, he used his wealth to propel Hoffenheim, based near Sinheim in southwestern Germany, from amateur league anonymity to the top-flight Bundesliga and a place among Europe's elite in the Champions League.

That made him a hate figure for football fans across the country.

For Germany's "ultras", Hopp is a symbol for how wealthy investors hold too much power in football.

They see him as a threat to the culture and traditions of the German game, and more specifically to the 50+1 rule, which underpins the considerable influence of supporters in the way German clubs are run.

Hopp has also riled fans by taking legal action over insulting chants sung about him by away supporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Hoffenheim president Dietmar Hopp is a divisive figure in German football.

A decision by the German Football Association to ban Borussia Dortmund fans from Hoffenheim for two years prompted a flood of protests last month, with fans across the country accusing football authorities of pandering to Hopp's personal wishes.

Supporters of clubs such as Bayern Munich, Borussia Moenchengladbach and Union Berlin held up banners insulting Hopp and the DFB, leading in some cases to games being suspended.

Three weeks on, the Bundesliga has been suspended due to the coronavirus crisis, but Hopp remains firmly in the headlines. He is now being heralded as a hero in some quarters, after it emerged that one of his companies, biotech firm CureVac, is working on a vaccine for COVID-19.

CureVac's research was at the centre of a diplomatic row last weekend. According to a report in Welt

newspaper on Sunday, US President Donald Trump offered the company up to a billion dollars to secure exclusive rights to the vaccine research for the United States.

CureVac denied the report, while Hopp said such a deal "would not be an option". "It's obvious for me that it can't be the case that a German company develops a vaccine which is then used exclusively in the US."

The firm response earned him praise but football fans remain largely unmoved by Hopp's comments on the vaccine, which he says should be for "people across the world".

"It's very nice that a successful businessman is recognising his social responsibility and acting accordingly, but that has nothing to do with his involvement in football," said Sig Zelt, a spokesman for the organisation "Pro-Fans", on Wednesday.