

Calzona to coach Slovakia

AFP, Bratislava

The Slovak Football Association (SFZ) said Tuesday it had appointed Francesco Calzona as the new national team coach.

It will be the first stint as head coach for the Italian, who has worked as an assistant manager with Italian clubs including Napoli, Cagliari and Empoli.

At Napoli, Calzona coached Slovakia's long-time captain Marek Hamsik, currently playing for Trabzonspor in Turkey, who ended his international career in May.

The SFZ said it "has signed a contract with the 53-year-old Italian coach until December 31, 2023," adding the contract would automatically be prolonged to Euro 2024 if Slovakia makes it to the tournament.

Calzona, who will be officially introduced as the head coach on Friday, replaces Stefan Tarkovic, who was sacked over a string of poor results in June. Tarkovic led Slovakia to Euro 2020, but his team failed to make it past the group stage.

'Ballance welcome to play for Zimbabwe'

REUTERS, Townsville

Former England batsman Gary Ballance will be welcomed to play for Zimbabwe should he decide to return to the country of his birth, Zimbabwe coach Dave Houghton said on Tuesday.

Harare-born Ballance moved to England as a schoolboy and played 23 tests and 16 one-day internationals before falling out of favour.

The 32-year-old has not played for England since a 2017 Test at Nottingham.

Recently he apologised for using racist language against former Yorkshire teammate Azeem Rafiq.

Houghton said his wife and Ballance's father were cousins.

"I've known Gary since he was a kid and I speak to him reasonable regularly," the former captain told reporters ahead of the team's second one-day match against Australia on Wednesday.

"I don't think Gary would be against coming back to play for Zimbabwe but he's still got to sort out things in England," said Houghton, who regards Ballance highly and thinks the former England batter has still got quite a few years in him.

"I think he's probably got another eight to nine good years in him, so if he wants to come back we certainly won't turn him away," Houghton said.

Kyrgios all-business in win over friend

REUTERS, New York

Australian Nick Kyrgios overcame his despair at seeing dear friend Thanasi Kokkinakis on the other side of the net on Monday, outclassing his compatriot 6-3, 6-4, 7-6(4) in the first round of the U.S. Open.

The doubles partners won together at the Australian Open but landed on opposite sides at the year's final major, where an in-form Kyrgios kept his sublime year on track, never facing a break at Arthur Ashe Stadium in the battle of the "Special Ks".

"Probably one of the most uncomfortable matches I've played in my career," Kyrgios, 27, told reporters. "I feel like we both had a game plan. We know our games so well."

"From the get-go, I was trying to block out his body and just play the tennis ball. I was really trying not to look at him at all. I felt like that kind of helped me."

The Wimbledon runner-up bounced out of the first round last year but took care of business in just a little over two hours this time around, leaping into the air to smash an overhead volley to seal a largely routine first set after breaking Kokkinakis in the penultimate game.

Kyrgios broke Kokkinakis to love to open the second set, firing off 14 winners - twice as many as his opponent - in a relatively pristine display.

Not willing to go down without a fight,



US tennis star Serena Williams returns a shot against Danka Kovinic of Montenegro during a first round match of the Open at Flushing Meadows in New York on Monday. (Inset) Former US president Bill Clinton talks to a friend during the match, which was attended by a host of celebrities.

PHOTO:AFP

Age-verification process dents BFF's youth league prospects

SPORTS REPORTER

With only two weeks till the start of the BFF U-18 Football League on September 15, Bangladesh Premier league (BPL) clubs are having acute struggles in forming their squads as a majority of their players were ruled out after the age-verification process, meaning clubs had to hold back from starting training in full swing.

All teams in the top-flight BPL must have a youth team in line with club licensing requirements and although BPL first and second divisions, clubs are now in a quandary when it comes to assembling squads.

Many have also expressed concerns over the standards of the first ever youth football league of professional clubs. Precursors to the league were three U-18 tournaments in 2013, 2014 and 2018 but those were crucially missing the age-verification process.

Premier League holders Bashundhara Kings selected 40 players through trials, but only 10 passed the medical test, forcing setbacks. 8 of Swadhinata's 24 footballers were ruled out while Sheikh Jamal were yet to receive results for their 23 players.

Muktijoddha Sangsad are yet to take any initiative towards forming a squad despite the club manager writing to the club president in that regard. Meanwhile, Uttar Baridhara Club general secretary Jahangir Alam said that they wanted to start training from September 2 and begin the medical and age-related process from September 4. Saif SC, who sensationally withdrew from the Bangladesh Premier League, will not participate.

Club officials were left frustrated and lamenting the quality of teams they would have to send out.

"We had nothing to do with it. We selected players on the basis of their birth certificates, where their actual ages were not given," Bashundhara Kings technical director BA Jubair Nipu told The Daily Star.

Abahani coach Pranotosh Kumar said: "It is not possible to take all players for testing. We also have to check their quality, so we search for players and check their quality first. However, the 11 players that were selected have been in fitness training."

Mohammedan coach Alfaz Ahmed added: "To be honest, we are not getting quality players and no one can say how the squad will be. I doubt what these players can learn in such a short period of time."

Questioning the bar on players that play in the BPL and second-tier Bangladesh Championship League, Rahmatganj advisory coach Kamal Babu said: "How will new players emerge if professional players are not allowed to play the youth league?"

Abahani found themselves in a similar spot, with only 11 of the 44 players they selected from trials making the cut. Mohammedan managed 17 eligible players from their batch of 45.

Sheikh Jamal and Swadhinata KS banked on the Shamsul Huda Football Academy in Jashore and Kisholoy Football Academy in Rajshahi but they also faced



clubs have youth teams on paper, there is little more than that in reality.

As such, BPL clubs were assembling youth teams through trials or by hiring players from academies outside the capital, but the age-verification process -- which includes verifying birth certificates and medical tests -- hindered the progress the clubs thought they had made. Coupled with the ineligibility of players from the

'Spurs need two more transfer windows to be contenders'

REUTERS

Tottenham Hotspur need at least two more transfer windows before they can challenge for the Premier League title, manager Antonio Conte said before the north London club travel to West Ham United on Wednesday.

Spurs made a strong start to the season by winning three of their opening four games. They are third in the league standings, level on 10 points with champions Manchester City and two behind rivals Arsenal.

"If you compare to last season, we are more complete," Conte, who took charge at Spurs in November, told reporters on Monday.

"But to reach other teams at the top level, we need time, patience and transfer markets, at least two transfer markets to reach the same level."

Tottenham invested heavily in the close season to bring in Richarlison, Yves Bissouma and Djed Spence, while Ivan Perisic joined on a free transfer and Clement Lenglet arrived on loan from Barcelona.

Conte said he has spoken with the club's board about signing more players before the transfer window closes on Thursday but added: "If we do something or not, it's okay."



The Italian has made minimal changes to his starting line-up so far but Spurs face a quick turnaround for Wednesday's short trip across London, three days after their 2-0 away win over Nottingham Forest.

"Now when you have to go and play one game every three days, it's normal to make rotation, the players (have) to be intelligent to understand that they have to sometimes go on the bench, come in, alternate," Conte said.

"With the new players, we started to work with them in only one month and a half. And I think at the end my choices were good because we got four good results in the first four games."

"And this is the period that the club can understand if we are really, really complete in the squad or maybe we could do better."

Striker Harry Kane scored both goals in Sunday's win over Forest and Conte said while there was no update on his contract situation, he is keen to keep hold of the 29-year-old beyond 2024.

"For sure I would like him to sign a new contract," Conte said. "In this moment, for me it is very important to see him happy, totally involved with this season, this project and in what we are doing."

"Then it's a decision that the player and the club have to take."



Atletico Madrid forward Antoine Griezmann (R) celebrates with teammate Koke after scoring the decisive goal against Valencia in their LaLiga match at the Mestalla on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP