

FOOTBALL

Observers: Infantino remains in the driving seat

GIANNI Infantino could survive weeks of criticism and secure re-election as Fifa president in the absence of a heavy hitter to challenge him, observers have told AFP.

The 56-year-old Swiss has lost the support of many associations in his bid to be re-elected to a fourth and final term since he launched and then hastily shelved his plan to allow private investment into the World Cup.

Infantino, though, does crucially retain his core support in Africa and South America.

His Fifa Forward Enterprise (FFE) plan, which came to light in July just after the hugely successful World Cup, would have created a commercial subsidiary to run FIFA's biggest events, such as the World Cup.

However, with two of his fiercest critics, Aleksander Ceferin and reportedly Victor Montagliani opting to run for re-election as heads of European governing body Uefa and North American grouping Concacaf respectively, the opposition to Infantino is desperately seeking a viable candidate to challenge him in the election next March.

Candidates have to declare by November 18.

Terrence Burns, who was marketing strategist for two successful World Cup hosting bids, said Infantino was always in the box seat.

"He holds all the cards and always has," he said. "Any prospective challenger at this point feels either performative or strategic to cut deals."

Former International Olympic Committee (IOC) marketing chief Michael Payne said "everyone is surprised" that no serious candidate has come forward to challenge Infantino.

"If he is re-elected, which is looking increasingly likely, it will redefine the term Houdini," Payne said.

Long-time Infantino critic Lise Klaveness, the head of the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF), has impressed many but has ruled out running.

However, even if Klaveness changed her mind she would face a huge challenge in becoming the first woman to run world football and emulate Kirsty Coventry, who last year became the first woman elected as IOC president.

"People within the IOC administration were working towards the goal of Coventry being elected, as (her predecessor) Thomas Bach's wish was for her to be president," a source close to the world of football governance, who asked not to be identified, said.

"Lise faces exactly the opposite. Fifa staff would be working to stop her being elected."

Infantino, though, is not safe yet as the opposition have mounted legal challenges in the US and filed official complaints with Fifa committees.

Klaveness and the Norwegian federation have highlighted three issues, with the common thread being Infantino's friendship with US President Donald Trump.

The venture capital firm of Josh Kushner, the brother of Trump's son-in-law Jared, was to be the major investor in FFE.

However, the same source warned "there is no certainty that the complaints will be looked into. Even if they were to consider them they would take their time."

"The fear in the Infantino camp is the Norwegians could take them to CAS (Court of Arbitration for Sport) if dissatisfied with the decision."

Burns, though, believes the greatest risk to Infantino comes from the legal challenges launched by Uefa in the US courts to gain access to the papers pertaining to FFE. Fifa are strongly contesting the case.

"This point is a fly in the ointment," Burns said.

"If the FFE was just a case of misguided process and communications strategy, why hide its specifics?"

"That lack of transparency is a rock in Infantino's shoe that will not fade away."

Payne believes the lack of support for Infantino from leading football nations such as Spain, France and England could be damaging.

"Running a global sports federation requires unity - Fifa will be on the brink of civil war, and this is totally new territory for a sports governing body," he said.

Burns though thinks the opposition will reluctantly make peace with Infantino. | AFP

FOOTBALL

Maradona family divided over sentences at death trial

DIEGO Maradona's family on Wednesday called for his medical team to be given stiff prison terms over what two of his daughters called his "murder".

Seven medical professionals have been on trial since April over Maradona's death on November 25, 2020, while convalescing after surgery for a brain clot.

The star of the 1986 World Cup died aged 60 of heart failure and acute pulmonary edema, two weeks after going under the knife.

His medical team is accused of providing grossly inadequate care in the lead-up to his death at a private home rented for his convalescence.

They deny the charges.

Maradona's family are divided on the severity of the punishment they believe his carers should face.

A lawyer for two of his daughters, Dalma and Gianinna, on Wednesday accused his carers of "murder" and asked that six of the seven accused be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison.

"They killed a mythological hero," lawyer Fernando Burlando said, accus-

ing the defendants of "brutal indifference" to the icon's fate.

Counsel for the champion's three sisters Rita, Claudia and Ana, sought terms of up to 10 years for five of the seven defendants.

Their lawyer, Pablo Jurado, called for medical coordinator Nancy Forlini to receive the harshest punishment.

On Tuesday, a lawyer for Maradona's youngest son, 13-year-old Diego Fernando Maradona, had called for the player's personal physician, Leopoldo Luque, and Forlini to be each given 16-year sentences.

State prosecutors kicked off the closing arguments last week with a call for guilty findings against six of the seven accused, and for prison sentences ranging from four to 12 years.

They added that Luque should receive the stiffest punishment.

The closing arguments are set to continue until the end of October.

The court in the Buenos Aires suburb of San Isidro, near where Maradona died, is then expected to reserve its judgment to a later date. | AFP

CRICKET

Du Plessis questions CSA decision to host Australia Test at Kingsmead

ZAAHIER ADAMS

FORMER Proteas captain Faf du Plessis has questioned Cricket South Africa's (CSA) decision to host the opening Test against Australia at Kingsmead, citing both South Africa's record at the venue and concerns over crowd attendance.

Du Plessis is the only Proteas captain to lead South Africa to away and home Test series triumphs over Australia in 2016 and 2018, respectively, since the country's return to international cricket in 1991.

The 2018 series was particularly combustible, dominated by the infamous Sandpapergate scandal in Cape Town, while Du Plessis himself had previously been at the centre of the "Mintgate" controversy when he was charged for using a sweet to shine the ball during the Hobart Test two years earlier.

Speaking on his ESPNcricinfo podcast following the Proteas' 214-run defeat, Du Plessis said it was difficult to understand why the home nation would start a major series at a ground where the tourists have enjoyed sustained success.

The defeat extended the Proteas' poor recent record at Kingsmead, where they have now lost eight of their last 12 Tests. Australia have also won four consecutive Tests at the Durban venue, dating back to 2009.

"For me, there's a big question mark that I would like to ask the powers of South Africa, whoever makes those decisions," Du Plessis said.

"When you have a record as poor as you have at Kingsmead, Durban, and when Australia have such a good record — I think they've won their last four consecutive Test matches at Durban against us — and you start your first Test there, where you say to the opposition, 'Let's start at a place where



FORMER Proteas captain Faf du Plessis has raised concerns over Cricket South Africa's decision to play Australia at Kingsmead. | AFP

you are most comfortable in'.

"If I compare it to the other venues in South Africa — Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Pretoria, Wanderers — at all of those venues, South Africa, the Proteas, have a superior record. So, there's my first question that I would ask."

While Du Plessis' argument has merit to the point of the Proteas being successful at the venues he mentions against other nations, the record against Australia all over the country post-isolation leaves plenty to be desired.

The Highveld has been kind to the Aussies, with the tourists having won five out of seven Tests for a 71 percent success rate in matches played at the Wanderers, and having an equal 50%

share in just two Tests at Centurion.

Even the Newlands citadel is in favour of the visitors, with the Baggy Greens having triumphed in four of the seven Tests under Table Mountain's watch. It is only at St George's Park in Gqeberha — the venue for this week-end's second Test — that the Proteas have reigned supreme in two of the three Tests played there.

Du Plessis believes, however, it goes beyond just the Proteas' unfavourable record at Kingsmead, and extends to the fact that the Durban venue has traditionally struggled to attract spectators for Test match cricket, hence the Boxing Day Test being moved to Centurion over the past few years.

"Secondly, from a crowd perspective, Durban is also the worst viewing numbers ground in South Africa," he said.

"So all this hype, all this amazing talk before the first Test, South Africa against Australia, iconic series, 2018 is the last time they were here..."

"Now they come back, no crowd, and you look at the TV and you go, 'No, that's not good, man. I don't want to see that. I want to see a full crowd watching this big series.'"

CSA were approached for comment on the scheduling of the Australia series on the opening day of the Kingsmead Test, but had not responded at the time of publication.

FOOTBALL

Abafana Bes'thende coach wants improved finishing

SPORTS REPORTER

GOLDEN Arrows are preparing to host newly-promoted Milford tomorrow (3.30pm) for a Kwa-Zulu-Natal derby in a truncated Betway Premiership programme.

There are only four matches on the go because this weekend also features Caf inter-club fixtures.

Arrows and others are returning from the recent Fifa break, which means the chosen starting line-up should be in good condition from the extra work done in training.

Arrows coach Pitso Dladla has said that the extended break gave them an opportunity to address shortcomings in their performances.

They have worked on making better use of goalscoring opportunities in particular.

He wants improving finishing to climax their good build-up play.

But his men face a Milford team who have bagged strong results since being promoted to the top flight.

Milford are sitting in a pretty fifth spot with 12 points from eight matches and have a chance to move into fourth position this weekend.

But they have conceded seven goals to date, which seems to give room to Arrows to trouble their defence.

Arrows lie three places lower than Milford with eight points from seven outings.

This is not a bad position for the modest outfit from the south of Durban, but coach Dladla knows his men can go higher by working very hard on their finishing.

They have scored just three goals to date and conceded the same number, so there is definitely room for improvement in this regard.

Milford, by contrast, have scored nine goals.

Their coach is Xanti Pupuma, a doctor and club owner.

Meanwhile, the other promoted team, Kruger United are away to Chippa United tomorrow (3.30pm) and looking to move away from the nether region of the standings.

Kruger have collected just four points from seven games, which is half of Chippa's tally from the same outings.

Chippa sit ninth and Kruger 13th, but both clubs have bagged just one win to date.

This weekend also features Sekhukhune Utd at home to Marumo Gallants and Polokwane City away to Siwelele.

MATCHES Tomorrow: Chippa United v Kruger United (3.30pm); Golden Arrows v Milford (3.30pm); Sekhukhune Utd v Marumo Gallants (6pm). **Sunday:** Siwelele v Polokwane City (3.30pm).

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