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Ready for the big draw

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European soccer clubs and players seek greener pastures in China



Italian coach Marcello Lippi (center) talks to his assistants during his first match managing Guangzhou Evergrande. Provided to China Daily

Expectations are running high that big-ticket names would soon make a beeline for soccer clubs in China, after former Italian World Cup-winning coach Marcello Lippi decided to be a part of the Chinese Super League (CSL).

Who's next is the question most posed by soccer aficionados. Many expect that it will be Didier Drogba, the Cote d'Ivoire international who has just helped English side Chelsea win this year's European Champions League Final.

Besides of the big crowds that these names automatically draw, fans are also hopeful that they will be a much-needed shot-in-the-arm for the sport in China. Many believe that soccer is still a long way from reaching the heights achieved by China on the economic front or in the international arena.

There is also the flip side to this whole phenomenon in the sense that China could prove to be a safe haven, considering that Europe, the bastion of soccer, is not exactly in the pink of health. Interest in the game is increasing in China, along with the number of rich people who have bulging investment pockets.

Earlier this month, defending CSL champions Guangzhou Evergrande started the soccer frenzy by roping in Lippi, who led Italy to a World Cup win in 2006. Club owner Xu Jiayin, a real estate baron, feels that the high-profile international coach will not only boost Guangzhou Evergrande's fortune, but also help it achieve an international reputation.

"We made the decision to sign Lippi a year ago, as we felt that it was in tune with our long-term strategic needs. We are looking to transform the club into an international-level one," Xu says.

Though neither Xu nor Lippi would disclose the exact remuneration, the 64-year-old Italian coach admitted that money was one of the big attractions for him to sign on the dotted line.

"I have turned down invitations from other European clubs and some from Qatar. The Guangzhou side's offer was more on the lines of what I would have made with any European club. So I thought why not take up the China offer," Lippi says.

The Milan-based La Gazzetta dello Sport reported that the Chinese club has offered Lippi in the region of 10 million euros for a single season.

The Italian coach is the biggest name to join Chinese soccer from Europe after Shanghai Shenhua signed French striker Nicolas Anelka from Chelsea at the beginning of this season.

Anelka's former Chelsea mate Drogba has also been linked to Shanghai, although his heroics in helping the London-based club win the FA Cup and UEFA Champions League could put a brake on his China plans.

Another reason why more soccer stars are heading toward China is the increased outlays being made by the clubs to acquire the services of foreign players, with a view to spruce up their international standings.

Paraguay international Lucas Barrios has agreed to a four-year transfer deal worth 8.5 million euros to play for Guangzhou Evergrande. The former Borussia Dortmund striker is expected to join the side next month.

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