

SPORTS

SOCCKER

Woeful campaign raises questions about the sport's future direction

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Scoreless, winless and almost hopeless. Team China's disappointing Asian Cup campaign has further burnished Chinese soccer's unwanted image as a perpetual underachiever, while the country's soccer revival project struggles on all fronts.

Forget about the World Cup dreams. Forget about the short-lived, cash-propelled continental club titles. It's time to wake up to the harsh, yet undeniable, reality — Chinese men's soccer simply doesn't have what it takes to even be competitive in Asia. Exposed by its frustrating group-stage performances at the Asian Cup in Qatar, again, the team was left with only a theoretical chance to stay in the tournament.

Following two 0-0 draws against Tajikistan and Lebanon last week, Team China was beaten 1-0 by host Qatar on Monday in its final Group A match, which has pushed it to the brink of elimination, finishing third in the table with only two points from three games.

As a two-time runner-up (1984, 2004) at the Asian Cup, Team China has failed to find the net in all matches for the first time at the tournament since its debut in 1976, having almost certainly finished the worst result in its history at the tournament, despite still being "mathematically alive".

Now, the team has to wait for results from other groups, hoping to squeeze into the round of 16 as one of four best third-placed sides.

With fans fuming at the team's conservative play against a host side that had already qualified for the



A dejected Zhang Linpeng and his Team China players take stock after losing their last Asian Cup group match to Qatar on Monday. XINHUA

last 16 and rested nine starters on Monday, China's head coach Aleksandar Jankovic justified the team's blunt performance.

"In the three games we played here, a lot of chances were missed in every game," Jankovic, who was appointed China's head coach in February 2023, said at the post-match news conference.

"We are disappointed, we expected more ... we deserved more, but football without goals is not football, and you can't expect big results if you don't score goals."

After a slow start in the first half, Qatar broke the deadlock in the 66th minute when Hassan Al-Haydos volleyed home a corner from Akram Afif in a spectacular fashion to draw thunderous cheers from the packed Khalifa International Stadium. Both players had just been subbed onto the pitch.

China fluffed its best chance in the 36th minute, when reserve forward

Wei Shihao's close-range shot was denied by Qatari goalkeeper Saad Al Sheeb. In injury time of the first half, left wing Lin Liangming and Wei unleashed two consecutive strikes, both of which went slightly off target.

"At this moment we are not lucky to score, but this is something very important for the future," said Jankovic. "I'm sure that the moment will come when all these balls will go in."

Wei, however, did not mince words about the team's performance.

"We just played terribly, no excuse at all," said Wei, who started on Monday for the first time in Qatar, replacing Team China's talisman Wu Lei.

"Everyone is improving (in Asia), while we are the only one that stays put."

Wu, who used to play in the Spanish La Liga with Espanyol, agreed, adding that it's time for an overhaul from the bottom up.

"We have a lot of catching up to do



Team China coach Aleksandar Jankovic's future is now in question after disappointing Asian Cup campaign. REUTERS

in every aspect of the game," he said. "The overall level of Asian soccer is rising, and the gap between strong nations and underdogs is closing."

"Teams we'd once expect to get easy wins against are now improving individually and collectively, leaving us behind."

Set up to fail

Team China's lackluster Asian Cup outing has drawn criticism for head coach Jankovic, prompting a petition from fans and commentators alike to fire the 51-year-old Serbian and replace him with a bigger name with greater prestige.

"I'm never focused on personal questions. I've been in China for almost six years, I've prepared one generation, the next generation for Chinese football also ... I'm focused on giving, not receiving, trying to do my best and not to have regrets," Jankovic, who coached China's under-23 team before taking over the senior side, responded when asked about his future.

Next up for Jankovic, should he stay, will be two 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifiers against Singapore away on March 21 and the return fixture at home five days later.

Will the same pattern of China missing out on the all-important

FIFA tournament and then firing the coach as a scapegoat repeat itself? Highly possible. Will it make a difference? probably not. Even Italy's World Cup-winning manager Marcello Lippi couldn't even turn Team China's fortunes around, failing to qualify the 2022 World Cup before being given the boot.

Stagnant talent development, incapable administration affected by corruption and a lack of competition in the domestic league are real issues that need to be addressed with patience and commitment, before international breakthroughs can be expected again, according to former players and pundits alike.

"One of the biggest problems is our declining youth training programs at all levels," said Sun Wen, a former women's legend and a vice-president of Chinese Football Association.

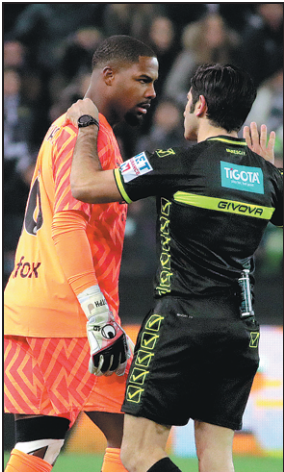
"It takes consistent efforts from talent scouting, to junior development and training of coaches. We shall keep working at the grassroots without asking for instant results. If our generation is not enough, the next generation might be," said Sun, who was named FIFA Female Player of the Century in 2000 together with Michelle Akers.

To strengthen the youth foundation, the new CFA leadership, led by president Song Kai, has also promised to tilt its revenue distribution toward youth training programs at all levels.

According to a CFA financial report released in October, 46.05 million yuan (\$6.29 million), less than 8 percent of its annual revenue, was spent on youth training and competitions in 2022, a drop of 60 million yuan from 2021.

To stimulate the competitive instincts of homegrown stars, the top-flight Chinese Super League should also reconsider its current limit on imported players to allow more foreigners to vie with local players for minutes in the domestic league, reckons Song.

Lifetime ban for Udinese fan who racially abused AC Milan keeper



Referee Fabio Maresca (right) speaks to Mike Maignan during the match between Udinese and AC Milan on Saturday. AP

MILAN — After identifying the fan who racially abused AC Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan, Serie A club Udinese has handed down a lifetime ban. It vowed to do the same for the other "evil people" amid calls for tougher sanctions from authorities, following another weekend when Italian soccer games were overshadowed by behavior in the stands.

Maignan walked off the field during Saturday's Serie A match at Udinese after being subjected to what he later said were monkey noises. The 28-year-old goalkeeper was joined by his teammates and the match was suspended for about five minutes before they returned, and Milan went on to win 3-2.

"In a joint effort with local police, and utilizing the Bluenergy Stadium security cameras, Udinese Calcio has identified the first individual responsible for discriminatory behavior towards AC Milan player Mike Maignan," Udinese said in a

statement on Monday.

"This person will face a lifetime ban from attending any Udinese Calcio matches. This ban is effective immediately. We believe that such strong measures are necessary to send a clear message that racism has no place in football or society."

A decision from the Italian sporting judge on Udinese's punishment is expected on Tuesday. Earlier this month, Lazio was sanctioned with a one-match partial stadium closure for racist chants directed at Romelu Lukaku.

Authorities can also issue orders — known as a Daspo — banning individuals from stadiums for a maximum of five years.

"We're working to go in search of those responsible, there can only be two or three people. There were no chants, in that they weren't perceived by either the referee or the prosecutor's office. There were one or two, maybe three, evil people, and

this is enough for it to be a very serious thing," Udinese general manager Franco Collavino said earlier on Monday, before the first supporter was identified.

"We have already started looking at the images from the stadium cameras, we also have to listen to the audio. A Daspo has a limited duration, but the club can decide to ban a fan from a stadium for a longer period of time. We will work to ban them from the stadium forever, for life."

Maignan received widespread support from the soccer world following the abuse and issued a statement on Sunday calling for authorities to take stronger action.

His stance was backed by Umberto Calciogno, the head of the players' association in Italy.

"Fighting this form of ignorance is very difficult, but today it's possible thanks to the federation's rules, as what happened on Saturday," Calciogno said. "There was great collab-

oration between Mike Maignan, the referee and the players.

"But, the rules also allow the public authorities to decide to definitively suspend the match ... Today it is necessary to punish such matters in a more severe manner."

There is already a three-step process in place where a match can be stopped twice before being abandoned, but FIFA President Gianni Infantino suggested over the weekend that any team whose fans racially abuse players should automatically forfeit the game.

"If the president of FIFA believes this idea can be transformed into a rule, he can do it, we will adapt to the guiding principles FIFA suggests," Italian soccer federation president Gabriele Gravina said. "Stopping a match is a strong message, but abandoning a soccer match with thousands of fans inside the stadium is a problem of public order, it's not up to us and we don't

want to replace those who have the task, the duty and the right to manage public order."

There have been numerous racist incidents in European soccer in recent years, with cases in Italy aimed at Kevin-Prince Boateng, Mario Balotelli and Lukaku, among others.

Calcagno said that half of the abuse soccer players are subjected to is of a racist nature, but Saturday's incident at Udinese was not the only noteworthy episode in Serie A over the weekend.

A potentially dangerous moment in Salerno was defused after Salernitana fans threw objects, including lighters and rocks, at Genoa players as they celebrated Mateo Retegui's equalizer. However, Genoa's Dutch midfielder Kevin Strootman decided to make light of it by taking a pre-packaged snack that hit him, and eating it in front of the baying fans.

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