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FURY SIGNS ROBBIE FOWLER!

NORTH Queensland Fury FC has pulled off one of Australian sport's greatest recruiting coups by signing former Liverpool superstar Robbie Fowler as the club's marquee player for the Hyundai A-League 2009-10 and 2010-11 seasons.

Fury FC chairman Don Matheson said Fowler's signing was a clean signal to other A-League clubs that North Queensland wants to taste success on the pitch in its debut season.

"We want to win games— that's what we're about," Matheson said.

"Robbie is a legitimate international super star of the game and there's no doubt he will give us every chance of winning. It's taken a lot of work to make this happen, but it was worth it to because I really believe having him playing for North Queensland Fury FC will change the way people think about the Hyundai A-League."

Fury FC coach Ian Ferguson said having the former international striker on board was a huge boost for the team. "I've admired him as a player for a long time and it's just fantastic to have him signed," Ferguson said.

"Robbie is more than just a goal scorer – although he certainly knows where the net is – he links up play and he knows how to position himself to get other players involved. I knew he was serious about our offer when he came to Townsville. There was a real commitment shown by flying out to meet personally with us and to see the facilities and the lifestyle we're able to offer him and his family."

Fowler is looking forward to taking a new path in his football career with North Queensland Fury FC in its historic entry into the Hyundai A-League. "I had nothing but good things to tell my family about the football side of things and the lifestyle opportunities North Queensland can offer us," Fowler said.

"From a football perspective everything Fury coach Ian Ferguson put on the table and showed me was first class and the enthusiasm and drive of everyone at the club is fantastic. It's a huge decision for my family, but it's also an opportunity to continue my football career in a truly wonderful part of the world."

Football Federation Australia (FFA) CEO, Ben Buckley, said that Fowler's signing was an indication of the growing reputation of the Hyundai A-League. "Robbie Fowler is one of the best known names in football with a wonderful record playing for both Liverpool and England. It's terrific to welcome him to the Hyundai A-League and particularly to one of our newest clubs.

Led by Robbie, the team North Queensland Fury is putting together will give next year's competition added excitement and impetus for North Queenslanders as well as Hyundai A-League fans across Australia."

TWELVE CANDIDATES FOR WORLD CUP!

Up to 12 bids from across four continents are expected to determine who will host the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

The list of potential bidders to have expressed their initial interest in staging one of the tournaments grew to a dozen on Monday when FIFA confirmed the late entry of Egypt and South Korea.

World soccer's governing body is due to publish the final list shortly. Barring any further late additions it should comprise five bids from Asia, four from Europe, two from the Americas and one from Africa.

South Korea and Japan, who jointly hosted the World Cup in 2002, will go up against each other this time round with Indonesia, Qatar and Australia completing the Asian quintet.

The 1966 World Cup hosts England face competition on their own continent from Russia and joint applicants Spain/Portugal and Netherlands/Belgium. Egypt, Mexico and 1994 hosts the United States complete the list.

There is confusion though over FIFA president Sepp Blatter's opposition to joint bids and the extent to which his views reflect official policy.

Blatter told reporters at a meeting of the South American Football Confederation last week that "as soon as there is a (sole) candidacy or three or four relevant candidacies, we are directly going to reject the double candidacies".

SPAIN PRESSURE

A spokesman told Reuters on Monday that FIFA would consider joint bids from countries who were not capable of hosting a World Cup on their own.

"Countries capable of staging the event alone should do so," added the spokesman in a clarification that will increase pressure on Spain to ditch its planned partnership with Portugal.

FIFA rules dictate World Cup finals can only be staged on continents that have not hosted either of the two preceding editions, meaning bidders will primarily have to concern themselves with seeing off their nearest geographical rivals.

If the European and Asian members of FIFA's executive committee fail to agree on the strongest candidate in their regions during the final vote in December 2010, the United States, Mexico or Egypt could benefit.

South American countries were unable to put themselves forward for either tournament due to Brazil's scheduled hosting of the 2014 version.

Following South Africa's staging of the 2010 World Cup, African nations were free

to apply for the 2022 event but Egypt look set to be the only ones to do so.

The bidding process has been further complicated by FIFA's decision to offer up two World Cups simultaneously.

FIFA is yet to reveal how the process will work or whether the 24-member executive committee will first choose the 2018 hosts before turning to 2022.

The ruling body will send full details of the bidding process to all applicants on Feb. 16.

Final bid dossiers have to be submitted by May 2010 with FIFA's executive committee casting its decisive votes seven months later.

OBAMA TO HELP U.S. CAUSE?

According to the U.S. Soccer Federation the election of President Barack Obama will help persuade FIFA to award the 2018 or 2022 World Cup to the United States.

"Given everything that, frankly, President Obama has said, everything he stands for, everything he's talked about in terms of reaching out to the world," U.S. Soccer Federation president Sunil Gulati said, "that trying to bring the global game to the United States and opening our borders up for a festival of 32 countries and hundreds of thousands of people from all corners of the world would be viewed in a very positive way."

The United States hosted the 1994 tournament at nine stadiums and set records for total attendance (3.58 million) and average (68,991). Major League Soccer launched in 1996, and Gulati said another tournament in the United States would "finish the job."

"Out of '94, we launched a professional league that isn't the Premier League or La Liga today, but I'd like to understand where those two leagues were 14 years in. We have a half-a-dozen brand new soccer-specific stadiums. We have television coverage in both languages," Gulati said. "It certainly raised the profile of game in the United States. But in my view, it's unfinished business because it's still not the same as it is in some other countries."

Gulati said 25-35 U.S. stadiums would be included in the bid and would be capable of hosting World Cup matches with little alteration, a contrast to the massive building and reconstruction at the last two World Cups and for South Africa next year and Brazil in 2014.

Time will tell....

HYUNDAI A-LEAGUE

The business end of the Hyundai A-League season kicks-off this weekend when the 2009 Hyundai A-League Finals Series gets underway courtesy of FOXTEL.

Central Coast Mariners meet Queensland Roar in the minor semi-final at Blue-tongue Stadium, Gosford, on Friday while Adelaide United host Melbourne Victory at Adelaide's Hindmarsh Stadium on Saturday.

"We're expecting six very exciting match-

es from these four teams," said Football Federation Australia (FFA) CEO, Ben Buckley.

"Between them, they have scored 141 goals games this season at more than 3.3 goals per game so I am sure all fans will be hoping for more of the same."

Buckley said that the Finals Series culminates with the Hyundai A-League 2009 Grand Final on Saturday 28 February and a substantial prize on offer.

"The champions gain entry in the 2010 Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Champions League along with premiers Melbourne Victory," Buckley said.

"Adelaide United showed in 2008 just how exciting the AFC Champions League is and it's a great incentive for players, clubs and their fans – along with the thrill of winning!"

Melbourne Victory coach, Ernie Merrick, agreed. "We're hoping to make it a perfect record in 2008/09 after already winning the Pre-Season Cup and the Premiers Plate. But the ultimate prize is the championship and we enjoy the pressure of the competition," Merrick said.

Queensland Roar coach, Frank Farina, believes form leading into the Finals Series is meaningless. "It counts for virtually nothing in the finals," Farina said. "It's whether you turn up in the next 3-4 weeks with your 'A' game that counts."

Lawrie McKinna, coach of Central Coast Mariners, agrees. "There's two games to get through and, if you do, there's a one-off. And then if you get through that, there's another one-off. You need to play the perfect match three to four times," added McKinna.

Aurelio Vidmar, Adelaide United coach, believes that any team could win the title. "It's going to be tough, it's going to be exciting. On the day I think anyone can win it."

Tickets for the Hyundai A-League Finals Series are available from Ticketek. The Finals Series is presented by FOXTEL, and all games will be broadcast live and exclusive on FOX SPORTS.

VERBEEK NAMES SQUAD

Qantas Socceroos Head Coach Pim Verbeek has selected 22 players in his squad for the upcoming 2010 FIFA World Cup Asian Qualifier Round 4 match against Japan in Yokohama on Wednesday 11 February 2009.

Midfielder Vincenzo Grella returns to the Qantas Socceroos having missed the past three 2010 FIFA World Cup Asian Qualifier Round 4 matches against Uzbekistan, Qatar and Bahrain due to injury.

Jade North also returns to the squad having recently transferred from the Newcastle Jets to Incheon United in the Korea Republic.

The Qantas Socceroos will go into the match sitting at the top of Group A of the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ Asian Qualifiers Round 4.