



Hakeem Alaraibi on his way home to Melbourne

Melbourne-based footballer Hakeem Alaraibi has been freed by the Thai government and is on his way home to Australia

Alaraibi had been held in a Bangkok jail since November after Interpol wrongly flagged him for arrest and Australian authorities tipped off Thai officials.

Despite checking beforehand that it was safe for him to travel, he was arrested when he touched down in Bangkok while on his honeymoon. **The Pascoe Vale FC** footballer has been given political asylum in Australia as a refugee since fleeing Bahrain five years ago after he was jailed and tortured for protesting against the Bahrain government.

PM Scott Morrison tonight confirmed Hakeem has now be freed and will fly home immediately after an intervention by the Thai Attorney General.

He had been held awaiting an extradition hearing, with Alaraibi wanted by Bahrain to face outstanding vandalism charges.

However the former international player was actually live on TV playing for his country when the offences were said to have occurred.

Former Socceroo Craig Foster has been leading a tireless campaign to free the footballer but the Thai authorities have steadfastly refused to bend the law, despite Thailand and Australia admitting the Interpol notice for his arrest had been issued in error.

He appeared in court last week, led into the courthouse in shackles, and was remanded in custody for another 10 weeks until April 22.

A bitter war of words had broken out between Australia and Thailand over his fate and recriminations over who was responsible for his arrest.

But tonight Thai authorities finally relented after Bahrain dropped their extradition demands and allowed Hakeem to be released. He is expected to fly home to his wife in Melbourne tonight, according to the ABC.

The move comes just days after the two Australians who helped mount the Thai cave rescue, Australians of the Year Craig Challen and Richard Harris, sent a letter to the Thai government, pleading for mercy for Hakeem.

Blacktown City ready to rebuild

-By Nick Houghton

A changing of the guard at Blacktown City doesn't mean they should be written off according to head coach Mark Crittenden who insists his young side can be a surprise packet this season.



2019 will be one of Crittenden's greatest challenges in his time as Blacktown head coach as he attempts to rebuild the side after it was gutted in the offseason after a player exodus.

Zach Cairncross, Giorgio Speranza, Roberto Speranza, Mitch Mallia and Connor Evans have been regulars on the City team list for the past five seasons but they have all made the move to Marconi.

Their departures has left Blacktown without a big part of the playing group which guided the club to two NPL NSW Championships, an NPL NSW Premiership and an NPL Australia title between 2014 and 2018.

While the playing roster from last season may have been stripped of much of its experienced stars, Crittenden is confident his young squad can exceed expectations.

"It has been a big shakeup at the club but the way I look at it is now there is a great opportunity to give some quality youth players their chance," Crittenden said.

"There is no point in dwelling on the boys who have left. Obviously their priorities have changed and with our smaller budget at the club we were unable to stop the team being ripped apart.

"We still have a number of experienced boys who have stayed and I have full belief that we will still be a tough and competitive team no matter who we play this year." That experience is sure to be leaned on more and more this season with veteran stars Joey Gibbs, Matt Lewis and Blacktown's 2018 player of the year Grant Lynch sure to carry the load.

It wasn't all just departures this off-season for Blacktown with the club bringing in former Young Socceros forward James Demetriou and rising star Leroy Jennings. **Crittenden admitted** there is sure to be

teething issues this season but said fans should expect to see the same 'never say die attitude' which has been a hallmark of Blacktown under his tenure.

"It will be a younger team this year and with that comes a bit of naivety which I don't doubt will occur from time to time throughout the season," he said.

"In saying that the boys are working extremely hard to achieve the goals we have set for the year.

"I want to build this team up just like we did four or five seasons ago."

The much loved coach revealed the shakeup at the club has given him a chance for some personal development.

"The whole situation coming into this campaign has really changed my thought process and approach," he added.

"As a club we have been reasonably successful in recent years so it would be easy to just copy the formula.

"However, I don't want to be caught just sitting on my hands which has helped encourage me to change up the way I do things.

"This year is very much about change at the club. I feel really good about the direction we are headed and I think our performances on the field will be proof of that."

Blacktown open their season against Mt Druitt Rangers at Lily Homes Stadium on March 10.

Key player movements

Arrivals: James Demetriou (Sydney Olympic), Leroy Jennings (Sutherland Sharks)

Departures: Zach Cairncross (Marconi Stallions), Giorgio Speranza (Marconi Stallions), Roberto Speranza (Marconi Stallions), Mitch Mallia (Marconi Stallions), Connor Evans (Marconi Stallions)

A - LEAGUE 19 ROUND

DATE	HOME	AWAY	VENUE	Kick-Off (AEDT)
Friday, 15 February 2019	Newcastle Jets	Melbourne City FC	McDonald Jones Stadium	7:50PM
Saturday, 16 February 2019	Wellington Phoenix	Melbourne Victory	TBC	5:35PM
Saturday, 16 February 2019	Adelaide United	Western Sydney Wanderers FC	Coopers Stadium	7:50PM
Saturday, 16 February 2019	Perth Glory	Brisbane Roar FC	nib Stadium	10:00PM
Sunday, 17 February 2019	Sydney FC	Central Coast Mariners	Leichhardt Oval	5:00PM