

HOME QUALIFIERS EXCITING MATILDAS STARS



THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHASE AN OLYMPIC QUALIFICATION SPOT IN FRONT OF HOME FANS IS BOTH UNEXPECTED AND EXCITING FOR MATILDAS' MIDFIELDER ELISE KELLOND-KNIGHT.

An unexpected detour through Sydney's western suburbs on the path to the Tokyo Olympics is exciting Matildas midfielder Elise Kellond-Knight.

While a fresh coronavirus scare has thrown the scheduling into disarray, the six fixtures in Group B of the final stage of Asian qualifiers for this year's Games are slated to kick off at Campbelltown and Bankwest Stadiums next week.

Concerns raised late on Wednesday that the virus is highly contagious before people show symptoms, means the visiting Chinese team will remain in quarantine in Brisbane until February 5 and miss their opening game against Thailand. **When and** where they make the fixture up is yet to be decided, with the FFA working with health authorities to determine the ramifications and ticket sales for the games placed on hold.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty, the Matildas are scheduled to take on Taiwan and Thailand at Campbelltown next Monday and Thursday, before facing China at Bankwest next Sunday evening.

The top two teams to emerge from the group face the top two teams from Group A - featuring South Korea, North Korea, Myanmar and Vietnam - in two-legged home and away playoffs for the two spots available at the Olympics.

The Sydney matches were initially arranged after China

withdrew as hosts last weekend due to the coronavirus outbreak there.

Speaking before the decision to place the Chinese team in isolation, Kellond-Knight said she was buzzing at the opportunity of playing competitive football on home soil for the first time in 109 appearances for the Matildas.

"It's extremely unexpected that it's occurred and worked out like this but I can say the whole playing group's really excited and looking forward to putting on three great performances," the 29-year-old said.

"I've played for the Matildas for a number of years - had over a hundred games - and I've never played a competitive game on my home soil. It's a fantastic opportunity and I think it feels even more special in that it's unexpected."

The arrival of captain Sam Kerr and Germany-based Emily Gielnik in Australia on Tuesday night means the full Matildas squad is now in camp ahead of the qualifiers.

Coach Ante Milicic said hosting the matches would give his team an advantage.

"We're happy that we're staying in Sydney and to play at home of course," he said.

"This outcome works well for us and the girls are obviously excited. This has now been put into place so it's up to us to

put on the performances we know we can deliver."

FFA chief executive James Johnson was hopeful of a big turnout for the three matchdays, with an eye on impressing FIFA officials assessing the dual bid by Australia and New Zealand to host the 2023 Women's World Cup.

"The first thing we need to do is deliver a great tournament. I'm very confident that we will," Johnson said.

ASIAN WOMEN'S OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS - GROUP B SCHEDULE (ALL TIMES AEDT)

Monday, February 3 at Campbelltown Stadium
China v Thailand 4.30pm*
Australia v Taiwan 7.30pm

Thursday, February 6 at Campbelltown Stadium
Taiwan v China 4.30pm
Thailand v Australia 7.30pm

Sunday, February 9 at Bankwest Stadium
Thailand v Taiwan 3.10pm
Australia v China 6.10pm

* **Will** now need to be rescheduled

FFA HALT MATILDAS TICKET SALES OVER VIRUS FEARS

FOOTBALL FEDERATION AUSTRALIA HAVE HALTED TICKET SALES FOR THE HASTILY RE-ARRANGED OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS DUE TO START NEXT WEEK AFTER FRESH ADVICE ON THE CORONAVIRUS.



Australia's Chief Medical Officer Professor Brendan Murphy warned the federation that the virus can be contagious before any symptoms are showing, throwing arrangements into fresh confusion.

The FFA only just finalised plans for the AFC Group B qualifiers to be moved from China's Wuhan - the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak - to instead be played in Sydney.

Earlier today they unveiled plans for the Matildas to play two games at Campbelltown Stadium and their final game at Bankwest Stadium as part of a three matchday, six match group tournament with China, Chinese Taipei and Thailand.

But this evening it was revealed the China team was in lockdown quarantine in their Brisbane hotel.

And with the virus contagious for 14 days, the future of the matches on February 3, 6 and 9 is in jeopardy.

Now the FFA have hit pause on ticket sales for the matches while a decision is made on what happens next.

"The updated advice follows a meeting of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee on Wednesday afternoon," said an FFA statement.

"This major new development confirmed that health experts believe the coronavirus is contagious before people show symptoms, and contacts of any confirmed

cases must now be isolated following exposure.

"The health and wellbeing of all players, staff and spectators is of paramount importance to both FFA and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC).

"FFA is working with the Australian Government and AFC to explore the ramifications of this advice and how it may affect the staging of the Women's Olympic Football Tournament Qualifiers."

It added: "As a result of these developments, which came to light following today's match schedule announcements, FFA will not be going on sale tomorrow with tickets for the tournament.

"FFA will provide a further update as soon as possible."