



By George Stavroulakis

A-LEAGUE PLAYERS DEMAND CONTRACT SOLUTION

FRUSTRATED A-LEAGUE PLAYERS ARE GROWING INCREASINGLY ANXIOUS ABOUT THEIR FUTURES WITH MORE THAN 100 CONTRACTS SET TO EXPIRE BY THE END OF THE WEEK.

A-League players are demanding certainty for their futures with more than 100 contracts set to expire at the end of the week.

Almost half of the contracted players in the competition are due to become free agents after May 31, leaving them without a job but also able to move to other clubs in Australia or overseas.

League stakeholders including FFA are attempting to broker a solution, most likely involving a short-term extension of deals until the 2019-20 season can be completed but time is running out.

Sydney FC captain Alex Wilkinson, president of Professional Footballers' Australia (PFA), said players were growing increasingly anxious the contract situation threatened to undermine attempts to resume the league.

"Without some certainty, we risk losing

them to the game as well as compromising a fair end to the season," Wilkinson told AAP, adding those players with contracts set to expire were "in limbo".

FFA is yet to confirm a date to either resume the competition or allow players to start training.

It's understood resolving the contract situation is the most-pressing priority for organisers at this stage.

The A-League was suspended in late March with just a handful of rounds remaining before finals.

An initial proposal, put forward by the governing body featuring dramatic pay cuts for players, is understood to have been rejected by clubs and the players' union.

Despite no set date being established, FFA chief executive James Johnson has indicated



he expects the A-League to be under way by August, depending on COVID-19 restrictions on travel and large gatherings being eased.

Wilkinson said players remained committed to completing the season but were concerned a lack of adequate training time before a condensed schedule was a recipe for injury.

A study by the Jena Institute of Sport in Germany, looking at Bundesliga players, has indicated a spike in injuries within that league since its return a fortnight ago from a COVID-19 suspension.

Wilkinson said the study's results suggested players needed as much time as possible to train before the A-League resumed.

"The players want to get back to work and finish what we started," he said.

"Across the league, the players have continued to maintain fitness for a return, but there is no substitute for team training.

"If we do not resume adequate team training in advance of a restart, players face an increased risk of injury."

ARNIE: WE'VE GOT THE DEPTH TO GET TO QATAR

SOCCEEROOS COACH GRAHAM ARNOLD IS CONFIDENT HE HAS THE SQUAD TO COPE WITH A LOOMING PACKED SCHEDULE DUE TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS.

The COVID-19 crisis means a busy time ahead for the Socceroos but coach Graham Arnold is confident he has created the squad depth to cope.

Australia face a condensed schedule to qualify for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar with international football unlikely to resume for months due to the global pandemic.

World governing body FIFA has even indicated international football may not return until 2021 to give club competitions across the world a chance to complete their fixtures.

With the Olyroos also set to play in a rescheduled Olympics next year and a possible guest nation appearance at the postponed Copa America, Arnold's men are looking at a bumper fixture list.

Arnold says growing depth in his national team options was his primary goal since taking over in 2018 as veterans Tim Cahill, Mile Jedinak and Mark Milligan reached the end of their international careers.

"I knew from what I saw that pretty much we as a country only had trust in 12 or 13 players," Arnold told AAP.

"You can't get through that. When players retire, you need more players to step up.

"For me it was about creating depth and the depth would be needed by 2021 for the third phase of our World Cup qualifiers and moving into Qatar."

From the first match of his reign against Kuwait in October 2018, Arnold handed debuts to 10 players

including Scottish-born duo Martin Boyle and Harry Souttar.

Defender Brad Smith and striker Adam Taggart have made successful returns to the Socceroos setup while youngsters such as Ajdin Hrustic and Brandon Borrello are now regular call-ups.

Arnold has also introduced uncapped English-based midfielder Kenneth Dougall to his most recent squad while Daniel Arzani is waiting in the wings following his injury woes in the past 12 months.

"When I sat down the first week or so in the job ... I probably only had 25 that I could really look at and believe that would do a good job for us," Arnold said.

"But now I've probably got a list of 45 and I have the belief in those 45 that no matter who we play against they'll do a great job."

Arnold is eager for the game domestically to restart and provide more opportunity for young talent.

He believes the pandemic is a perfect opportunity for the A-League to reset, and says he'd like to see more games in Australia's top flight to put the competition on a par with other major leagues.

"Is 26 rounds enough? I don't think so," he said.

"All around the world it's 30 to 36 rounds so I'm just saying the most important thing for me is kids getting minutes to play for their development.

"The crucial age for that development is between the age of 17 and 23. They need gametime, they need minutes, they need a lot of games."

