



It's too late to tempt Mourinho so O'Neill tops FA wish list to replace McClaren as Villa are ready to release him

By Matt Lawton

Martin O'Neill has emerged as the early favourite to become the next England coach after Aston Villa owner Randy Lerner said he would not stop the FA from recruiting his manager.

On a day when it emerged that Steve McClaren left his side baffled by the negative tactics he employed in the 2-1 defeat against Russia on Wednesday, Lerner took the unusual step of recommending Ulsterman O'Neill.

Lerner said: "I would not stand in his way. Obviously, the FA would be interested in Martin because of the way he has handled himself at Aston Villa.

"That speaks well of his first year and the first part of this season."

Jose Mourinho is probably the most attractive potential candidate.

But sources close to the former Chelsea manager have said that, while he would have considered coming to England's rescue earlier in the qualifying campaign and then taking them to Euro 2008, he has no interest in the job beyond next summer.

Club football is his only serious interest.

O'Neill had the private backing of FA chief executive Brian Barwick before the job was offered first to Luiz Felipe Scolari and then given to McClaren.

Barwick may now find there are others who consider the hugely-respected former Celtic manager a serious contender if England fail to qualify for the European Championship.

Barwick was with McClaren and Prince William yesterday on a visit to a Newcastle school to promote the FA's Hat-trick project.

And while he gave the coach his continued support, it was a limp defence of a man who is sure to be sacked if Russia follow Wednesday's victory in Moscow with two more wins and eliminate England.

He said: "Let's keep 'crisis' in perspective. Steve's job is to make sure he gets

his players ready for the Croatia game and the Austria friendly before it.

"Steve has our support, of course, and the reality of it is we do now need help from other teams.

"If Israel can take some type of result out of Russia, then we have got our job to do against Croatia."

But even as Barwick sought to shore up support for McClaren, more details of the coach's bizarre tactics emerged.

Players were astonished when

"That speaks well of his first year and the first part of this season." -Lerner

McClaren told his full-backs, Micah Richards and Joleon Lescott, that they were not allowed to advance into their opponents' half.

Not only that, he also told wingers Joe Cole and Shaun Wright-Phillips to approach the game in a more defensive manner.

According to Guus Hiddink, the tactics played into Russia's hands. Even if England do somehow qualify for next summer's tournament in Austria and Switzerland, there is now concern among the players that McClaren may not be the right man to coach the national team.

Hiddink was among those considered when the search was on for the man to succeed Sven Goran Eriksson following last year's World Cup and he could well be on the FA's next short-list.

That said, he insisted on Wednesday night that he would sign the new contract he had been offered by the Russian federation.

Other top-level managers are also looking for employment. Marcello Lippi, Fabio

Capello and Jurgen Klinsmann will feature in future discussions, as well as Portugal's Scolari.

In O'Neill's favour is the fact that he was among those interviewed last time and made it clear he wanted the job.

There are English managers to consider as well, of course, but for different reasons the FA may regard Sam Allardyce, Alan Curbishley, Steve Coppell, Steve Bruce and Gareth Southgate as less appealing.

Wenger wants to develop next generation of English talent

By Matt Barlow

After learning he was about to be cast in bronze, Arsene Wenger revealed his next trick will be to nurture a golden generation of English talent to complement his team of Arsenal imports.

Just hours after England's defeat in Russia plunged the nation into another fog of self-doubt, Wenger told Arsenal shareholders he has a crop of promising homegrown youngsters rising through his ranks.

It was a day for giving the audience what they wanted at the club's annual general meeting — and even news that Robin van Persie could be out for four weeks after injuring his knee did not spoil the mood.

Shareholders lapped it up as chairman Peter Hill-Wood unveiled a bust of Wenger, which will be bronzed and displayed at the Emirates Stadium alongside that of Herbert Chapman, the manager who turned the Gunners into a major force in the 1930s.

Hill-Wood also revealed the Arsenal board had extended their "lock down" on shares, a development which they insist makes them "bullet proof" in rela-

tion to the takeover threat from Russian billionaire Alisher Usmanov.

Board members yesterday signed an agreement not to sell their shares until April 2009 and then not to sell shares until 2012 without offering them first to fellow directors.

It was an announcement designed to end speculation about future ownership and stabilise the club at a time when the team are perched on top of the Premier League and finances look healthy.

Wenger's optimism about his homegrown talent simply fuelled the feelgood factor. "We are doing good work with the young players," said the manager.

"We have some good first years and the young generation — yes, an English generation — is very promising, very good.

"We hope in a few years to have a strong English base here, players to mix with the players from abroad. We want to bring through domestic players, especially after the result in Russia!"

English teenagers Kieran Gibbs, Henri Lansbury and Gavin Hoyte are among those who have impressed and Wenger emphasised

the importance of strengthening the squad with players entrenched in the Arsenal style.

The Frenchman said: "Every Premier League game is watched by a minimum of 500 million people and we have responsibility to show Arsenal can be a modern club, that we can create a culture with foreign players, local players and promote football across the world.

"We have developed a brand quite well. We are loved all over the world and that's a great sign. There is big competition on TV.

"The guy who lives in Thailand or Africa goes home and chooses whether to watch Real Madrid or Arsenal, Inter Milan or Manchester United.

"Everyone has choice so the quality of football you offer has become very important."

Wenger was visibly shocked and a little embarrassed to find a bust was being made to acknowledge the impact of his 11 years in charge.

"I am very touched, but it is too big an honour for me," he said, as the plaster cast was unveiled by his long-term partner Annie.

Hill-Wood said. "It is in

recognition of the truly fantastic job Arsene has done since joining us in 1996.

"He has guided us to seven major trophies and has revolutionised the club, not only through the stylish football his teams play but through his input into the Emirates Stadium and the training centre at London Colney."

Arsenal's managing director Keith Edelman laughed off suggestions the FA may launch a raid for their manager after England's defeat left Steve McClaren's future in doubt.

"Arsene has never broken a contract and he has always said to me being a national manager isn't something he wants to do," said Edelman, who expects the "lock down" on shares to have a positive impact on Wenger's team.

"This is an important day. The ownership has been an issue and this feeds down through the organisation and into the team. We wanted stability. This kills any talk of takeover."

Edelman also explained that American Stan Kroenke, who owns just over 10 per cent of the club, has been invited to join the "lock down" agreement.

