

Portsmouth fail to pay players again - raising fresh fears about basement club's finances



Grant

Portsmouth were unable to pay all their players on time again last month as the club's financial embarrassment deepened.

It is the third time players at Fratton Park, whose monthly wage bill amounts to around £2million, have been made to wait for their money since the club was taken over in the summer.

Pompey issued a statement last night claiming the problem would be solved within days but this latest cash-flow crisis will do nothing to lift morale or persuade the authorities to end their transfer embargo before the market opens for business next month.

Portsmouth were banned by the Premier League from signing any new players because they had fallen behind with transfer instalments to other clubs.

Another series of payments are due at the end of January running to more

than £5m, including a loan fee to Tottenham for Jamie O'Hara and a payment for Younes Kaboul, which Spurs agreed to delay.

Watford are due another tranche from the transfers of Tommy Smith and Mike Williamson, while Chelsea are still owed a sell-on fee for Glen Johnson after the fullback's move from Portsmouth to Liverpool for £18m in June.

The money owed to Chelsea for Johnson was one of the outstanding payments from August which prompted the Premier League to impose the transfer embargo in mid-October.

At the time, Pompey claimed the matter would be sorted out swiftly and that the financial problems stemmed from the complicated transfer of power for Alexandre Gaydamak to Sulaiman al Fahim and then on to a consortium led by Ali al Faraj.

Almost two months on, there is little sign of improvement. The club are bottom of the Barclays Premier League

and the missing November salaries will eat away at morale as newly-installed manager Avram Grant prepares his team for a crucially important home game against Burnley tomorrow.

A statement from the club said: 'A proportion of the wages will be paid tomorrow with the club's new owners working towards paying the remainder over the next few days! Even if the club were to fulfill this promise, it does not bode well. The Premier League cannot lift the transfer ban unless they believe Pompey can cope with another expensive round of payments in January.'

Players' union chief executive Gordon Taylor said: 'It is bad enough when you see clubs like Darlington, Chester and Crystal Palace struggling to survive but you don't expect to see it in the Premier League.'

Portsmouth have lurched on from month to month since the summer with Al Faraj, who has yet to show his face at Fratton Park, scrambling around

to secure loans to meet day-to-day running costs.

The late transfer payments due in August to Watford for Smith and to Arsenal for Lassana Diarra were eventually paid because the Premier League redirected a portion of central funding to these clubs instead of paying it into Pompey's account.

Despite their precarious financial position, Grant insisted yesterday that the club must strengthen the squad in January if they are to pull away from the relegation zone.

The Israeli said: 'I think it is essential we have money to spend in January. The owners are doing their best to help the team but we need to wait and see. The people who were here before did a good job under difficult circumstances but now is the time to improve the team.'

However, with their relatively modest monthly wage bill causing regular problems it is hard to see how the ban can be lifted to allow Portsmouth to run up more debts.

England manager Fabio Capello sees World Cup as 'hardest test' of his career

Sub-standard pitches at England's preferred training base at Rustenburg are clouding their World Cup preparations. But the normally austere Fabio Capello was otherwise enraptured as he awaited today's group stage draw. "It's starting, yes. For me it's the first time I've breathed this atmosphere of the World Cup, the sensation," he said. "I can taste it. The airport, the people, the Fifa World Cup, Bafana Bafana, it's exciting, yes."

In the north of the country, though, complications loom as the Football Association exerts pressure on the Royal Bafokeng resort to repair their newly-laid pitches. Capello wants the surfaces at the training ground to reflect the pitches for England's World Cup games.

"The hotel is really good. The facilities are really, really good, but the problem is the pitches," said Capello, who spent four hours at the facility on Wednesday. "The pitches are not great. But we have time. We found a solution for Wembley, we will find a solution with this. I will go back in February when we have a Fifa meeting here and check it. It's possible we'll decide before. We have another option."

A spokesperson for the Bafokeng Sports Campus said: "The building of the hotel is nearing completion - large sections are ready - it is corresponding to the project plans and going to schedule. Moreover

the fields are looking good, the roots of the grass are settled, so that's all ready. We have no concerns about the current state of readiness or whether we'll have everything ready in time, and the reports we've had from Fifa have been very positive."

Today England, one of the eight seeds in Pot One, will learn their three first-round opponents. "It will be a great test, the hardest test of me as a manager, yes," said Capello, who warned that England need more experience of African opposition.

"I think about the Africans. I saw the Ivory Coast and they are a very strong team - I saw them play against Germany. I think this will be one of the most important World Cups for the African teams and I believe one of these countries will get to the last four. A player like Didier Drogba is important. He's one example. A player who plays a lot of games will not be fresh and some players make the difference."

Capello warmed to this theme, not least because England have yet to face opposition from the host continent during his 21 games in charge. Algeria, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria are all potential group-stage rivals. "African football, it's really fast," Capello said. "The spirit of the team is to go forward. Sometimes you have some problems when you have to defend, but all the players are re-

ally good technically, and it's not easy to play against."

The England coach was more animated than at any time in his two years in charge. "I've worked for this. It's my job. Yes - all my life," he said. "I want to reach the final. I have big confidence in my team, always. We've played against the best teams in the world. I know the value of the opponents, I know the value of my team. It's my first World Cup. I hope it's not the last."

"We will wait for the draw to decide on friendlies. My idea is to play against one African team. We played Europeans and South Americans but we've missed Africans." Capello also backed Rio Ferdinand to return from injury. "An Italian example - [Alessandro] Nesta was injured for one year, now he's the best, and people are saying please come back into the national team. I cannot say if [Ferdinand] will be fit or not but I hope."

Italy's coach, Marcello Lippi, said: "I met Fabio in the hotel when I arrived and we sat down and had a beer together. We agreed that we deserved to be here and that the only shame was that the third great Italian coach, Giovanni [Trapattoni, the Republic of Ireland manager], is not in South Africa. Both of us would like to meet again, just before the final on 11 July."



Capello