

Sudden coaching change shakes Japan preparations

By John Duerden
The Associated Press

Akira Nishino was given only two months to prepare Japan for the World Cup after the sudden dismissal of Vahid Halilhodzic.

The hastily appointed coach had the task of addressing the trust and communication issues swirling around the team.

While Halilhodzic secured qualification for Russia 2018 with a game to spare, Japan was not always convincing.

Halilhodzic, who led Algeria to the second round at the 2014 World Cup, tried to turn a Japanese team with a fluid passing tradition into a counterattacking unit. He also dropped the three leading players at times: Keisuke Honda, Shinji Kagawa, and Shinji Okazaki.

By the time Halilhodzic was dismissed in April, the Samurai Blue had won only three of their last 10 matches and the federation feared there would be a repeat of the 2014 World Cup when they collected only one point.

“Even if it only increases the chances of winning at the World Cup by one or two percent, we had to act,” Japanese federation president Kozo Tashima said.

Here’s a closer look at the Japan team:

Coach

Considered a safe pair of hands, the 63-year-old Nishino has the Japan job until the end of the World Cup.

In the previous decade, he led Gamba Osaka to success with a first domestic title in 2005 and won the Asian Champions League three years later on the back of an attractive and fluid passing game.

Nishino had been working on the Japan Football Association technical committee when he was handed his first coaching job since 2015.

In this coaching debut, Japan lost to Ghana 0-2 in Yokohama before departing for the World Cup.

Goalkeepers

Eiji Kawashima, who played at the 2010 and 2014 World Cups and is now 35, is likely to start in goal in Russia. He has spent recent years playing for clubs in Belgium, France, and Scotland.

Masaaki Higashiguchi and Kosuke Nakamura are the other goalkeepers named to the squad.

Defenders

Marseille defender Hiroki Sakai is one of Asia’s top right backs, while Yuto Nagatomo, who has been playing



SAMURAI BLUE. Japan’s Yuto Nagatomo, left, Keisuke Honda, center, and Hiroki Sakai, right, compete during a Japanese national team training session at the 2018 World Cup, in Kazan, Russia, on June 14, 2018. Japan opens the tournament against Colombia in Saransk on June 19, travels to Yekaterinburg to play Senegal on June 24, and then faces Poland in Volgograd on June 28. (AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko)

at Galatasaray, is set to start on the left.

Expect to see Maya Yoshida of Southampton in central defense, but the place alongside him is up for grabs.

Midfielders

Makoto Hasebe is the midfield general who offers authority and coolness after a decade in the Bundesliga at Wolfsburg, Nuremberg, and Eintracht Frankfurt.

The captain likes to sit in front of the back four, often alongside Hotaru Yamaguchi, to dictate play and build passing moves.

Forwards

Honda hasn’t scored for Japan in two years, but is still likely to lead the attack.

Kagawa has struggled for national form, but has a greater chance of playing under the new coach, while Okazaki, who won the Premier League title with

Leicester, may get the nod to make the starting lineup.

Group games

Japan won’t play any Group H games in Kazan, where it has its training base. After opening against Colombia in Saransk on June 19, the team travels to Yekaterinburg to play Senegal on June 24, and then faces Poland in Volgograd on June 28.

Squad

Goalkeepers: Eiji Kawashima (Metz), Masaaki Higashiguchi (Gamba Osaka), Kosuke Nakamura (Kashiwa Reysol)

Defenders: Yuto Nagatomo (Galatasaray), Tomoaki Makino (Urawa Reds), Wataru Endo (Urawa Reds), Maya Yoshida (Southampton), Hiroki Sakai (Marseille), Gotoku Sakai (Hamburg), Gen Shoji (Kashima Antlers), Naomichi Ueda (Kashima Antlers)

Midfielders: Makoto Hasebe (Eintracht Frankfurt), Keisuke Honda (Pachuca), Takashi Inui (Eibar), Shinji Kagawa (Borussia Dortmund), Hotaru Yamaguchi (Cerezo Osaka), Genki Haraguchi (Fortuna Dusseldorf), Takashi Usami (Fortuna Dusseldorf), Gaku Shibasaki (Getafe), Ryota Oshima (Kawasaki Frontale)

Forwards: Shinji Okazaki (Leicester), Yuya Osako (Werder Bremen), Yoshinori Muto (Mainz)

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Bill introduced to make doping in worldwide events a crime

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. lawmakers have introduced a bill that would make it a crime to use or distribute performance-enhancing drugs while competing in international sports events.

The bill in the house is named after Grigory Rodchenkov, the Russian lab director who blew the whistle on Russian cheating at the Sochi Olympics.

Penalties would include fines of up to \$250,000 for individuals and prison sentences of up to 10 years for those who make, distribute, or use banned substances at international events, such as the Olympics.

U.S. and foreign athletes would be subject to the law if competing in an event that includes four or more U.S. athletes and other athletes from three or more countries, even if the event is held outside the United States.

The bill cites the U.S. contribution to the World Anti-Doping Agency as justification for jurisdiction over events outside American borders.

The bill also would expand the timeframe for athletes and corporate sponsors who were cheated to file lawsuits seeking damages.

Other countries, including Germany, Italy, and Kenya, have similar laws. U.S. authorities have long been hamstrung by limited legal options to prosecute doping cheats.



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