

‘Good energy’ at Chelsea as Alonso kickstarts reign in Sydney

Former Leverkusen boss promises tactical flexibility ahead of competitive Chelsea debut

● **New manager faces task of restoring major honours**

● **Targets strong squad balance**

● **Promises flexible tactics**

AFP | Sydney

New manager Xabi Alonso said yesterday there was “good energy” at Chelsea as he bids to turn around the club’s fortunes, but was reluctant to say what a successful first season would look like.

The Spaniard officially began the job on July 1 and will take charge of his first competitive fixture in Sydney on Tuesday when they face Western Sydney Wanderers.

He faces a huge task to get



Chelsea's team Manager Xabi Alonso speaks during a press conference in Sydney

Chelsea back in the running for major honours after their disappointing 10th place finish last season and failure to make Europe.

They last won the Premier League a decade ago, under Ital-

ian manager Antonio Conte.

Alonso, who has made a series of pre-season signings headlined by Morgan Rogers from Aston Villa, said he liked what he had seen so far.

“We want to build a competi-

tive team. We are in that process. We have great quality, great talent,” he said.

“We need to know what it takes to compete in the Premier League, and we want to have a squad with the right balance between quality and mentality.

“But I think that we are starting the new season with good energy, that’s going to be important.”

The former Liverpool and Spain midfielder rose to prominence as one of Europe’s brightest coaches by guiding Bayer Leverkusen to an unbeaten German league and cup double in the 2023/24 season.

However, he lasted just seven months in the Real Madrid hot-seat. Appointed last year, he departed the Spanish giants in January.

Alonso is associated with a short passing game and implemented a 3-4-2-1 system at Leverkusen that proved so successful.

But he has also shown prag-



Alonso, who guided Bayer Leverkusen to an unbeaten league and cup double, signed a four-year contract after a short spell at Real Madrid

matism in his tactics, a trait he plans to bring to Chelsea.

“We will be flexible in our tactics, in our approaches, game plans,” he said, conscious of not trying to impose a completely different system from last season.

“It’s not that I’m changing everything. It’s about updating. It’s about developing something that they have done with new

concepts that each manager has.

“But the good thing is that many things that I like they have already done. So now it’s about changing or updating a few other things.”

Since Chelsea last won the Premier League, several managers have come and gone after failing to repeat the feat, and the pressure is on Alonso to snap the drought.

But he said it was too early to say what would be considered a successful season.

“I don’t want to talk too early about what’s our goal,” said the 44-year-old, who signed a four-year contract.

“We want to deserve to be as high as possible, and for that we need to work hard. We need to develop this team with new players, with new ideas, but sometimes it takes longer, sometimes it happens quicker.

“But so far, a good feeling, good energy. The players are working hard, and that’s what we want.”

De Zerbi wants ‘soul and passion’ from new-look Tottenham



Tottenham manager Roberto De Zerbi reacts during a match (file photo)

AFP | London

Tottenham manager Roberto De Zerbi urged his team yesterday to play with “soul and passion” as the London club rebuild after narrowly avoiding relegation from the Premier League.

Spurs have embarked on an aggressive summer of spending to boost their fortunes after avoiding the drop by coming 17th, but it was a nail-biting outcome that went down to the wire.

Big-money signings include midfielders Mateus Fernandes from West Ham and Sandro Tonali from Newcastle. De Zerbi also raided his old club Brighton for centre-back Jan Paul van Hecke.

Full-back Andy Robertson, centre-back Marcos Senesi and goalkeeper Martin Dubravka have all arrived on free transfers as the squad takes on a new look.

De Zerbi, in Sydney on a pre-season tour, said he ex-

pected more when the new campaign begins on August 22 and outlined that he wanted to “build a new team with the qualities, with big players, but with soul, with passion, with all the values we have”.

The Italian added: “Football now is not just on the pitch, it’s before, it’s in life. It’s how many hours during the day you think about your job.”

Spurs opened their pre-season tour with an entertaining 2-0 win over A-League champions Auckland FC in New Zealand on Sunday with goals from Dane Scarlett and Richarlison. They face Sydney FC on Wednesday then meet London rivals Chelsea in Sydney three days later.

De Zerbi started with a host of younger players in Auckland, before more of a first team feel in the final 30 minutes when the likes of Fernandes, Richarlison, Conor Gallagher and Ben Davies all got a run.

Infantino slams World Cup critics for ‘spreading hate’

AFP | Paris

FIFA president Gianni Infantino has hit back at World Cup critics, claiming they were “spreading hate and false rumours” and arguing the tournament delivered “only joy and happiness”.

In a long open letter published yesterday, Infantino urged detractors to “take a moment to reflect, meditate, pray” after a tournament marked by controversies ranging from ticket pricing to visa issues.

“Sorry that you were so consumed by hate and criticism that you missed it all,” Infantino wrote in a post shared on his Instagram account and FIFA’s official channels.

“To those behind their



Gianni Infantino

pens and papers, behind their screens, spreading hate and false rumours, I want to say that while you are sitting behind, we at FIFA are on the front lines organising, working hard, and

“To those behind their pens and papers, behind their screens, spreading hate and false rumours, I want to say that while you are sitting behind, we at FIFA are on the front lines organising, working hard, and delivering the best show in the world”

GIANNI INFANTINO

delivering the best show in the world.

“We experienced no violence, no incidents, 100% safety and security, only joy and happiness! The build-up to the World

Cup in Canada, Mexico and the United States was dominated by fears over sky-high prices, geopolitical tension, the shadow of conflict and the threat of brutal summer heat across the three host nations.

Iran’s participation against the backdrop of war with the United States, along with concerns over Haiti’s domestic crisis and the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, brought renewed scrutiny to visa and travel restrictions.

Somali referee Omar Artan became arguably the highest-profile casualty of President Donald Trump’s hardline immigration crackdown, when he was denied entry to the United States.

Pirlo bitter over debate that cost him Italy coaching job

AFP | Rome

Former Italy playmaker Andrea Pirlo, who was favoured for the national coaching post, expressed his bitterness yesterday over the debate which has led to him no longer being a candidate.

The 47-year-old had, to many Italian fans’ surprise, become the favourite to be tasked with reviving the national side’s fortunes after they failed for the third successive time to qualify for the World Cup.

He had benefitted from Spanish great Pep Guardiola declining an offer.

Despite the latest setback, Giovanni Malago, president of



Italy's Andrea Pirlo (2R) celebrates with teammates after winning the 2006 World Cup

the Italian Football Federation (FIGC), said later yesterday that the new coach would be named

“soon”.

Whilst Pirlo had a stellar playing career -- including being a

key member of the 2006 World Cup-winning side -- his coaching CV is short on success.

A contract with a Russian betting firm had only added fuel to misgivings, with several Italian politicians saying over the weekend that his appointment would be inappropriate.

“(I) learned yesterday evening that I am no longer a candidate to be coach of the national side,” Pirlo wrote in a post on Instagram, adding that he felt the need to “clarify certain points”.

According to Italian media, he was due to be named this week despite his only trophy success since turning to coaching in 2020 being a single Italian Cup.