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Bassong: It'll be mind over matter

● **BRING IT ON...** Sebastian Bassong is looking forward to Spurs' opening game against Manchester City.



By Ben Pearce

SEBASTIEN Bassong believes that mental toughness and a winning attitude will be all-important against Manchester City as tired international stars are thrown back into the heat of battle.

The Cameroon defender is one of 12 Spurs players who have answered the call of their countries this week, having travelled to face Poland with his international colleague Benoit Assou-Ekotto.

Giovani Dos Santos faces a long trip back from Mexico and Roman Pavlyuchenko has been with Russia in St Petersburg, while the Croatian trio of Luka Modric, Niko Kranjcar and Vedran Corluka have all been on duty in Slovakia.

Meanwhile, five other members of the Tottenham squad have been in action in the British Isles, just two and a half weeks after Spurs' World Cup contingent returned to training.

Spurs launch the new Premier League campaign against City at White Hart Lane in the early kick-off on Saturday, and Bassong admits that preparations have not been ideal.

FOOTBALL

However, the 24-year-old defender is urging Tottenham to show their character and get their campaign off to the perfect start.

"We might be suffering from a slight lack of fitness, but the first game's going to be in the head and we really want to win this game, no matter whether we're tired or not," said Bassong.

"Last season we started with another tough game against Liverpool, and this year it's the same. But we're going to have to play these games at some point so it's not a bad thing to play them now."

"Maybe Manchester City will be out for revenge for last year, I don't know. Their motivation is none of my business."

"But this season is going to be another tough season because there are lots and lots of teams who want to win the title or be in the top four."

Tottenham's clash with City will be closely followed by their first ever Champions League tie, as Harry Redknapp's side travel to Switzerland to face Young Boys in Berne.

Spurs will be favourites to secure a place in the group stages, but Bassong warns that any hint of complacency will be punished.

"Was I happy with the draw? No not happy," he said. "I expected to play a good team and we're going to play a good team. If they're there in this round it's not for nothing, so I think we have to be really careful and play our best."

"Lots of people might think that we're already through, but we have to be give our maximum on the pitch to go through, otherwise we'll be really disappointed."

"You know anything can happen in two games. Even if the team you're going to play is not as good as you, you can be disappointed, so if you are good professionals and if we are a good team we have to take this game really seriously."

"I think in the head it's a little bit of an advantage to play away first, so you can score an away goal. But, as players, we're just talking about the first game of the season against Man City, and then we're going to start to think about the Champions League."

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Wenger not worried by rule change

ARSENAL Wenger has criticised new Premier League squad rules – and vowed they will not affect Arsenal's title challenge, writes Jem Maidment.

The league now require every club's 25-man squad to contain at least eight 'homegrown' players.

To qualify, a player must be registered for at least three seasons at the club between the ages of 16 and 21, meaning the likes of £6m signing Theo Walcott and Spanish-born skipper Cesc Fabregas, are considered 'homegrown', along with approximately half the entire squad.

But the Arsenal manager (pictured above) remains an opponent of the new scheme, saying: "The rule will not affect us, but I feel that when you want to be the best league in the world the restriction is bad."

"The only focus for me in life has to be quality in a competitive world and not your passport or where you have been educated."

"What is most important is that if you are good enough you can play where you want. If you want to be the best league in the world you have to respect that."

Another 'homegrown' squad member, Poland international goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski, has thrown his hat into the ring to be named as the club's No1 – despite reported interest in Fulham's Mark Schwarzer and Liverpool's Pepe Reina.

The Pole, who failed to impress when called upon last season, said this week: "I hope it will be a breakthrough season for me."

"I have a double task – I want to be the No1 for Arsenal and that would help me realise my second target, to be No1 in the national team."

See pages 38-39 for more Spurs and Arsenal news

Alex has a point to make

FENCING

HIGHGATE fencer Alex Tofalides will plough a lone furrow at the inaugural Youth Olympics, but knows he has joined an elite group by simply travelling to Singapore.

The 17-year-old was the only male fencer selected as part of the 39-strong British team and, alongside Amy Radford, is one of only two in total to have flown to the Far East.

Tofalides is no stranger to foreign excursions after travelling to Greece in March for the European Cadet Championships and Azerbaijan a month later for the World Cadet Championships.

The University College School pupil finished eighth in Athens and 13th in Baku, but is anticipating his trip to the first ever Youth Olympics will eclipse them all.

"Everything is shaping up really well for Singapore. I've been training specifically for it for a while now so it feels great to be finally getting going," said Tofalides.

"Collecting all of my kit, especially all of my fencing kit, has really brought it all home that I'm actually going to be competing."

"It's finally sinking in and I don't know what to say about representing Great Britain – it is an absolutely incredible feeling."

"It is awesome to know that I am at the top of my discipline, part of a select group of fencers and



● **EASTERN PROMISE...** Alex Tofalides (left), alongside coach Maciej Wojtkowiak, is in Singapore for the Youth Olympics.

here with all the other elite athletes who are too.

"It's going to be a great experience. Obviously I want to do my best, but there's a lot more to learn in Singapore than just fencing."

Tofalides – a member of Salle Paul Fencing Club – will compete in the men's foil at the Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre on Tuesday.

"Obviously my focus at the moment is on these Youth Olympics but you can't help but have one eye on the 2012 Games," he added.

"I train with the British Olympic team for the foil and they are

training for 2012, so I'm going to give it everything I've got because competing at a home Olympics would just be incredible."

"Being a London lad and competing with all of my friends and family in front of me would just be unreal. And I hope I can really learn from the Youth Olympics and gain valuable experience."

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