The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Soccer Restart Jeopardized After Positive Coronavirus Tests

Entire FK Rostov squad put in quarantine 48 hours before first match.

By Thibault Marchand for AFP

June 18, 2020



The Russian Premier League is due to restart on June 19. **Igor Ivanko / Moskva News Agency**

The Russian Premier League is due to return this weekend after three months in cold storage, but the perils of trying to restart in the midst of a pandemic have been highlighted as the entire FK Rostov squad has been placed in quarantine after six players tested positive for coronavirus.

The announcement of the positive tests — and the subsequent obligatory 14-day quarantine — came Wednesday, just 48 hours before Rostov's first game back from the season suspension, away in Sochi.

The game itself is a crucial one for the club from the banks of the Don River in southern Russia, who despite financial difficulties are fourth in the table, just outside the Champions League qualifying berths with eight matches still to be played.

Yet at the start of June, Russian Premier League president Sergey Pryadkin warned ominously that clubs hit by a raft of COVID-19 infections and forced to quarantine their players would simply have to forfeit any affected matches. No postponements would be allowed with the league facing a race against time to complete the interrupted season.

The campaign is now scheduled to finish on July 22, leaving teams with little more than a couple of weeks to prepare for the start of the 2020-21 season, pencilled in for August 10.

Related article: Putin Wants Russia to Get Back to Normal. New Outbreaks Show It May Be Too Early.

Russia has the third-highest number of recorded coronavirus cases worldwide, with half a million positive tests and around 7,500 new cases appearing every day. It is one of the last European countries to restart its football season, suspended since mid-March when the pandemic took hold.

For Rostov, coached by the former Russian international midfielder Valeri Karpin, being forced to quarantine their entire squad for two weeks is a potential disaster.

As well as the trip to the Black Sea coast to play Sochi, Rostov are also supposed to host Arsenal Tula and near neighbors Krasnodar — rivals in the fight for Champions League qualification — in that time.

They are currently just three points behind second-placed Lokomotiv Moscow and Krasnodar in third, with the top three all earning a crack at Europe's elite club competition next season.

Opponents refuse to postpone game

Their qualifying hopes are therefore now in danger of going up in smoke, unless they can find a solution from within.

With the first-team squad out of the picture, Rostov could turn to their B team or to their youth side.

However, Russian media reports say that the youth team played a friendly against the first team the day before the positive tests, meaning they also face having to go into isolation, although that has not been confirmed by the club.

Perhaps there is some hope, with the Russian Football Union's general secretary, Alexander Alayev, opening the door to the possibility that the match against Sochi could be postponed until July 19, the date earmarked for the Russian Cup semi-finals.

"It is the only possible date," he said at a press conference, while also criticising Rostov's perceived lax handling of the situation.

He also said both clubs would have to agree to postpone the game, yet Sochi are battling to avoid relegation and have released a statement ruling out that possibility and insisting they would be waiting for Rostov at their stadium for the game on Friday evening.

Alayev also expressed hope that it would be possible for the Rostov players to come out of their quarantine period in time to play their next two games as scheduled.

In the meantime, any prospect of calling off the remainder of the season has been ruled out, with the league insisting restarting was "the right decision".

Several clubs were hit by virus cases in May, including Lokomotiv, but no new cases had been reported at clubs in the last two weeks, until the announcement by Rostov.

Zenit Saint-Petersburg are on course to win a second straight Russian title, sitting nine points clear at the top before their scheduled first game back, at CSKA Moscow on Saturday.

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