

Flamengo bids farewell to 'miracle man' Joel Santana

Coach Joel Santana - the apparent substitute of Carlos Alberto Parreira at the helm of 2010 World Cup host South Africa - has left Brazilian club Flamengo with a deep sense of loss.

Santana, 59, has earned the appreciation of the Rio de Janeiro club. Since he took over July 30, he brought about the 'miracle' of pulling Flamengo out of the relegation zone of the Brazilian championship and commanded a comeback that allowed the team to end in third place and qualify for the prestigious Copa Libertadores.

In 2005, the 'fireman' Santana had achieved a similar feat, by saving Flamengo from relegation. Since then he has been one of the great idols of over 30 million fans that the club boasts, and only left because he received an attractive offer to coach Vegalta Sendai in Japan.

Now, he appears set to move to South Africa.

Although no official confirmation has been forthcoming from the South African Football Association, Santana confirmed late Monday in the Brazilian city of Teresopolis that he is leaving, and why.

'I received a very good invitation. I am going to play a World Cup and I am a professional; I am not a child. Anyone in my place would accept it. It is time to think about my family,' the coach told reporters.

The announcement of Santana's exit could hardly have come at a worse time for Flamengo, which was in top form lately. The club is getting ready to play the quarterfinals of the Copa Libertadores, and from Sunday it is set to play for the Rio de Janeiro Championship against one of its greatest rivals, Botafogo.

Although Santana promised that he would not leave for South Africa until after the local tournament final May 4, his exit plans already affected the mood of Flamengo players.

'Joel is like a father for me and I am sad that he is leaving. On the other hand, I am glad he gets to play a football World Cup. I understand he has to get on with his life. We are going to lose a great father, but we will try to win for him and to give our lives for him in the (Copa) Libertadores,' said midfielder Toro.

Right back Leonardo Moura expressed a similar feeling.

'I feel like I am losing someone at home. It is normal for the group to feel that loss, but we cannot allow the quality of our play to fall after he leaves,' the defender said.

Flamengo's vice president and football director Kleber Leite tried to mitigate the impact of the exit of the 'miracle man'.

First, he publicly confirmed that Santana is leaving.

'He told me he has already signed a pre-contract and made it clear that the situation has been completely defined, with no chance for further negotiation,' Leite said.

He also warned that he would allow no further comments on the matter until May 4, the day of the final of the Rio de Janeiro Championship at Maracana stadium, in Rio.

'While Joel is doing his job at the club we do not want to talk about that. We are playing the final of the Rio de Janeiro Championship against a very complicated rival, Botafogo, and that is why I want everyone to be concentrating in this clash and in the Copa Libertadores,' he stressed.

Leite said that as soon as Santana leaves he would announce the name of his replacement, the coach charged with leading the club to glory in the Copa Libertadores.

'I can promise that: when Joel says goodbye to us, we will already have a new coach. We are evaluating things and awaiting the end of provincial championships to define who we choose,' he added.

Leite admitted, moreover, that his own first choice to replace Santana was none other than Parreira, but that he declined.

'It would be a natural option, but Parreira told me that he will only make a decision about what to do with his life from Jan 1 next year. Until the last day of 2007, he will only think of his family,' the Flamengo official said.

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