

AL ITTIHAD

Squad size: 33
Average age: 27.4
Foreigners: 10 (29.4%)
National team players: 13
Stadium: King Abdullah Sports City



AL HILAL

Squad size: 32
Average age: 27.1
Foreigners: 8 (25%)
National team players: 20
Stadium: King Fahd International Stadium



AL AHLI

Squad size: 29
Average age: 25.6
Foreigners: 7 (24.1%)
National team players: 10
Stadium: King Abdullah Sports City



AL NASSR

Squad size: 31
Average age: 27.4
Foreigners: 10 (32.3%)
National team players: 18
Stadium: Al-Awwal Park



BIGGER, BETTER

New era of Saudi football kicks off

After an unprecedented summer transfer window that has seen some of the world's top players move to the Kingdom, the 2023-24 SPL season finally kicks off on Friday

John Duerden Riyadh

The 2023-24 ROHSN Saudi League season kicks off on Friday and to say it is eagerly awaited is an understatement.

Fans in Saudi Arabia have never had such talent in their own backyard, and there has never been such international attention.

Al-Ittihad are the defending champions and ones to beat in a league expanded from 16 to 18 teams. The Tigers are the only one of the "Big Four," taken over by the Public Investment Fund in June, to have the same coach in place. Nuno Santo impressed in his first season and now has added Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante, Fabinho and Jota to an already-strong squad.

There are a few clouds on the Jeddah horizon. As Al-Hilal found last season, going deep into the Asian Champions League, FIFA Club World Cup and King's Cup can impact league form. Having so many games should at least help keep all the players happy with rumors already that Abderazak Hamdallah, the SPL's top scorer last season, is unhappy at playing second fiddle to Benzema. There is also the major injury to defensive lynchpin Ahmed Hegazi but overall, Ittihad look formidable.

Al-Nassr finished second after half a season of Cristiano Ronaldo. Now they have a full campaign with the five-time Ballon D'Or winner.

Marcelo Brozovic and Sadio Mane have come in from Inter Milan and Bayern Munich respectively and are genuine top-class players. Then there is Seko Fofana and Alex Telles adding to the talent from last season such as Anderson Talisca, Abdulrahman Ghareeb and Sultan Al-Ghannam. Al-Nassr are stacked, especially in midfield and attack.

After a poor start to pre-season, the team looks to be coming together under coach Luis Castro. It remains to be seen if the boss - one of six Portuguese managers in the league - can deal with the pressure that is on the Yellows to win the league.

Riyadh rivals Al-Hilal know all about that and are desperate for title number 19 after third-place last time around. Going far on four fronts was too much for the squad that had not been refreshed due to past transfer window bans.

It's stale no longer. Kalidou Koulibaly has come in from Chelsea and the midfield has been seriously upgraded with Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Ruben Neves arriving from Lazio and Wolverhampton Wanderers respectively. Both were wanted by elite clubs in the big European leagues and are significant signings. Coach Jorge Jesus, appointed for a second spell, also has Brazilian forward Malcom from Zenit St.Petersburg.

Hilal are sure to be challenging as the club is a winning machine with a number of Saudi Arabian internationals such as Salem



Al-Dawsari, Yasser Al-Shahrani, Mohamed Kanno and Ali Al-Bulaihi and others to call on. Jesus may want a prolific goalscorer to replace Odion Ighalo. If he gets one then the Blues really will take some stopping.

Many eyes will be on Al-Ahli

who have come back up from their season in the second tier. The Jeddah club have signed goalkeeper Edouard Mendy from Chelsea and have sensationally added Liverpool legend Roberto Firmino and Riyad Mahrez from Manchester City, perhaps the most

talented of all the new arrivals.

Going from the second division to the title is a huge jump but with no continental commitments, they can give it their all and a good start could set them up for a great season and a return to the top four. Al-Shabab, fourth last season,

look to be the best of the rest but haven't been as busy in the transfer market as their rivals, though there is still time. Ettifaq will be looking to break into the top six on the back of hiring Steven Gerrard as head coach and bringing in Liverpool captain

Jordan Henderson.

Liverpool's worldwide fanbase will be keeping an eye on how they do but all football fans will be doing the same for the whole league.

This is going to be a Saudi Arabian season like no other.