

# Morocco recall gives Hakim Ziyech a shot at redemption



- After erratic displays at Chelsea and national team troubles, the former Ajax star could revive his career with a strong showing at Qatar 2022
- New coach Walid Regragui has recalled Ziyech for friendly games against Chile on Friday and Paraguay on Tuesday

DUBAI: When the Morocco squad reconvened this week for their upcoming friendlies against Chile and Paraguay, a much-missed figure joined them for the first time this year.



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For 29-year-old Hakim Ziyech, things have not exactly gone to plan over the past 18 months.

Life looked rosy on the bitterly cold London night of Feb. 13, 2020, when Chelsea agreed to pay Ajax \$40 million for the services of the gifted winger.

Fans of the Amsterdam club back then worried that Ziyech, a key player, would be difficult to replace when he made the move to Stamford Bridge in the summer.

But things quickly started to go wrong for the player, while his former club went from strength to strength.

Ziyech's first appearance for the Blues in a pre-season friendly against Brighton lasted until 10 minutes into the second half when he hobbled off injured.

It was a sign of things to come, with the injury keeping him out of opening three matches of the season.

Ziyech returned and scored against FC Krasnodar in the 81st minute of his Champions League debut for Chelsea on Oct. 28 the same year. Frank Lampard, still the Blues boss at the time, was thought to be an admirer of the Moroccan's finishing, dribbling, speed and tactical awareness.

But when Lampard was sacked the following January, Thomas Tuchel took over and Ziyech was soon a bit-player, often a substitute and on the periphery of the action when he did take part.

Nevertheless the season ended on high note with a Champions League medal, though Ziyech did not make it off the bench as Chelsea beat Manchester City 1-0 in Porto.

There were hopes that the following season would deliver more results from his time in London, but despite winning the European Super Cup and the FIFA Club World Cup — alongside FA Cup final and League Cup final defeats — the 2021-22 campaign would be another frustrating, inconsistent one for the Moroccan.

At the same time, Ziyech fell out with the now departed Morocco coach Vahid Halilhodzic, a development that seemed to have ended any chances of him making the World Cup squad.

He has started only one of eight matches for Chelsea so far this season.

During the summer transfer window, Chelsea opened the door for Ziyech to leave, with Milan expressing interest, before there was genuine desire from all sides for him to return to Ajax. But no move panned out.

A defining moment for many Chelsea fans who had already accused Ziyech of lacking desire and effort came in the Champions League match on Sept. 14 against Red Bull Salzburg.

Ziyech came on with 10 minutes left and played so poorly, missing a clear chance, that supporters turned on him in numbers on social media.

Angry Chelsea fans accused him of arrogance and ignorance, and not being serious about improving his performances.

In fairness to Ziyech, much of his troubles have stemmed from his long-term marginalization by Tuchel. For those who have followed his career closely since his Ajax days, the resulting loss of confidence contributed hugely to his poor performances and body language.

While it remains to be seen whether he will have a long-term future at Chelsea under new boss Graham Potter, things appear to be getting better for Ziyech with the Morocco national team.

New coach Walid Regragui has recalled him for friendly games against Chile on Friday and Paraguay on Tuesday during the last FIFA break before the World Cup in November.

After the disciplinary issues faced under Halilhodzic, he now has a clean slate to make amends to his teammates and fans after saying last year, during Chelsea's triumphant FIFA Club World Cup campaign in Abu Dhabi, that he would never represent his country again.

Ziyech will hope that the next two internationals will be provide the spark to reignite his career and lead to a starting spot for Morocco at the World Cup.

Tough matches against Belgium, Canada and Croatia await in Doha, but convincing performances could lead to an upturn in fortunes that will get his Chelsea career back on track, or prompt interest from Manchester United, Milan or even Ajax.

Ziyech has been offered an unexpected second chance. He must not waste it.

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