

Final whistle for Chelsea bidders as bankers kick out string of offers

A string of bidders for Chelsea Football Club including the former US ambassador to the UK have been eliminated from the £3bn auction of last season's Champions League winners as the hunt intensifies to find Roman Abramovich's successor as owner.

Sky News has learnt that a number of bidders including Woody Johnson, owner of the New York Jets American football team, have been notified that their bids for the London club had been unsuccessful.

Sources close to several bidders confirmed that they had been told on Thursday by Raine Group, the bank handling the process, that they were not being shortlisted.

Advertisement

The Guardian reported that one of the unsuccessful bidders was Saudi Media Group, with others understood to include Muhsin Barak, a Turkish businessman who had previously insisted that he had a 90% chance of buying Chelsea.

More from Business



P&O Ferries boss admits firm broke law over sackings – and reveals to MPs new workers earn £5.15 an hour



P&O Ferries: Impossible to imagine CEO isn't worried after mauling by MPs



Apollo lines up banks to finance £6bn takeover bid for Boots

The rejection of Mr Johnson's bid would, if confirmed, eliminate one of the apparent early frontrunners to acquire the Stamford Bridge side.

Uncertainty surrounded the fate of a number of other prominent bids on Thursday afternoon, including those of Centricus, a London-based asset manager which only disclosed its interest publicly four days ago, and Nick Candy, the London-based property developer who has recruited a number of prominent financiers to strengthen his offer.

Aethel Partners, another bidder which had announced its offer publicly, is also not expected to make it to the next phase of the process.

It was unclear whether Raine had formally decided on a final shortlist, but among the leading contenders to buy Chelsea are consortia led by Todd Boehly, the LA Dodgers part-owner, and Sir Martin Broughton, the former Liverpool and British Airways chairman.

A joint bid by the Ricketts family and Ken Griffin, the hedge fund billionaire, is also a serious contender, and people close to the consortium expressed optimism that they were overcoming issues raised by historical racist comments by one member of the Chicago Cubs-owning family.

The auction of Chelsea has been transformed into the most hotly contested – and potentially the richest – sale of a leading sports franchise in history, with hundreds of parties expressing an interest in buying a share of the club or controlling it outright.

Sky News revealed [earlier on Thursday that Stephen Pagliuca](#), a joint owner of the Boston Celtics basketball team and Atalanta, the Italian football club, had joined the ranks of those vying to own the Blues.

It emerged on Wednesday that Raine had asked bidders to give binding assurances about future spending on the club and its ground before it finalised the shortlist of contenders to succeed Roman Abramovich as its owner.

“They want guarantees about future capital funding for the club and stadium, and cash on the balance sheet, so that they can be certain they are picking the best future owner of Chelsea,” an insider said.

At least five existing owners of US basketball and baseball teams are among the bidders for Chelsea, with consortia involving the LA Dodgers part-owner Todd Boehly and the Philadelphia 76ers backer Josh Harris among the serious contenders to buy the club following Mr Abramovich’s sanctioning.

Mr Harris and his fellow sports investor Dave Blitzer have teamed up with Sir Martin and fellow Chelsea fan Lord Coe to lead a consortium that includes Vivek Ranadive, owner of the Sacramento Kings.

The cluster of American sports billionaires circling Chelsea underlines the extent to which the English Premier League has become a magnet for financiers from across the Atlantic during the last 20 years.

Arsenal, Liverpool and Manchester United have all been acquired by US-based businessmen during that period, and a significant number of other top-flight clubs also have American backing.

A frenzy of bidding among major global investors, billionaires and sports-owners has raised the prospect that Mr Abramovich's original £3bn asking price will be met.

Either three or four candidates are expected to be told by Raine in the coming hours that they will have a chance to strike a deal to buy Chelsea by the end of April.

Prior to being sanctioned, Mr Abramovich had said he intended to write off a £1.5bn loan to the club and hand the net proceeds from the sale to a new charity that he would set up to benefit the victims of the war in Ukraine.

The Premier League has disqualified Mr Abramovich from being a director of Chelsea, but has said the move would not affect players' ability to train or fulfil the club's fixtures.

This week, the government agreed to further amendments to a special licence which allows Chelsea to continue operating, enabling it to resume selling tickets for away matches, with the proceeds being held by the Premier League and earmarked for a Ukrainian war victims charity.

Chelsea can also now receive £30m from its parent company to ease cashflow constraints caused by the current crisis.

A rapid sale is seen as essential if Chelsea is to avert the uncertainty that would trigger the break-up of one of the top flight's most valuable playing squads.

The winners of last season's Champions League have been thrown into disarray by Russia's war on Ukraine, with Mr Abramovich initially proposing to place the club in the care of its foundation and then formally putting it up for sale.

Mr Abramovich had initially [slapped a £3bn price tag on the Stamford Bridge outfit](#), with the net proceeds being donated to a charitable foundation set up to benefit the victims of the war in Ukraine.

Whoever buys the club will require the government's consent in the form of a special licence as well as the approval of the Premier League under its fit and proper ownership test.