

Simon flies out with Mariners riding high

A-LEAGUE

Sebastian Hassett

WITH the Central Coast Mariners on top of the world and raging favourites to claim their first A-League championship, Matt Simon seems to have picked an odd time to have cut the cord with his hometown club.

However, given the striker is set to turn 26 next month and has a contract that expires at the end of the season, the decision to take a lucrative three-year deal with ambitious Korean side Chunnam Dragons begins to make sense.

Remarkably, it will be the first time Simon has played his football away from the Central Coast region, having forged his junior career with Wyoming and East Gosford before signing with Central Coast Lightning as a 19-year old. Former Mariners boss Lawrie McKinna was so impressed he signed Simon for the region's A-League side and, while he failed to score in his first 23 matches, he has scored 33 goals in 87 games since, making him the club's all-time top scorer.

Simon turned down a move to Major League Soccer side Colorado Rapids in 2009, saying it was the wrong time to leave, but he believes he can adapt to the K-League, which is renowned for its physicality.

"It has always been a goal of mine to play overseas, and this is an opportunity for me to take the next step in my career," Simon said yesterday. "I've had a lot of great memories at the Mariners. I've loved playing for the club and I've loved playing for the fans."

Simon offered praise to McKinna for spotting him in the local leagues, and also thanked the coach, Graham Arnold, for making a significant contribution to his development.

"I'm forever grateful to Lawrie McKinna and the Mariners for giving me the chance to make it as a professional footballer," he said. "[Arnold] knows how each player ticks ... he's improved me not only as a player but mentally as well."

Speculation was already mounting that Simon, one of the highest-paid players at the club, was going to have to take a pay cut next season, especially with the likes of Bernie Ibini-Isei and Mathew Ryan eyeing significantly improved deals.

However, that difficult conversation has been averted, and the Mariners have pocketed a six-figure fee for granting Simon an early release. He will play in the club's next two home matches, against Gold Coast and Melbourne Victory.

"I think it's a great reward for a great bloke, a great club man and a fantastic footballer for the Mariners," Arnold said. "Matty was coming off contract and he's received a great offer from [South] Korea. It's a wonderful opportunity for him."

Arnold was disappointed to lose his free-scoring marksman but conceded it was part of operating in a salary-capped league.

"It's the A-League - these things happen where players leave mid-term," he said. "We've got a lot of depth, and it opens up a great opportunity for other players to step up to the mark."