



PHOTO: AFP

VFL Bochum hardman Christoph Dabrowski (R) rides the challenge of VfB Stuttgart midfielder Tomas Hitzlsperger during their DFB Pokal clash at Bochum on Tuesday.

**Miyamoto signs for Salzburg**

AFP, Osaka

Former Japan defender Tsuneyasu Miyamoto has agreed to play for Austrian first division outfit FC Salzburg, his current club, J-League's Gamba Osaka, said Wednesday.

The 29-year-old Miyamoto, known as "Batman" since he played with a mask on his fractured nose in the 2002 World Cup, joined Osaka in 1995 and has scored seven goals in 295 games in the J-League.

He captained the national team in the 2002 and 2006 World Cups and scored three goals in 71 international games.

Miyamoto was to sign a contract Wednesday. He is expected to join Salzburg on January 4.

"I wanted to play for overseas clubs. I want to improve my skills in completely different conditions," said Miyamoto.

"I'm ready to show 100 percent of what I've learned through experiences in Gamba Osaka and the national team. I'd like to play like a freshman."

Osaka failed to defend the J-League title this year, finishing runners-up, while FC Salzburg are top of the Austrian league with 44 points, 10 points ahead of SV Mattersburg.

**Japan expect tough road**

AFP, Tokyo

Japan expect a tough road to win the Asian Cup for a record fourth time after the defending champions were drawn against Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.

Qatar are the Asian Games gold medalists, while Vietnam is the co-host of next year's tournament.

Qatar are coached by Dzemaludin Musovic, who was an assistant coach when current Japan coach Ivica Osim piloted the former Yugoslavia to the 1990 World Cup quarter-finals.

"There are no easy groups. Host countries have an advantage at home. It would be a tough competition. We should not lose," said Tsuyoshi Ono, the Japan Football Association's technical director.

"It doesn't matter who's drawn with Japan. We must prepare for the Asian Cup thinking that we can't beat anybody easily."

Qatar have two wins and two draws against Japan, the United Arab Emirates has two wins, two defeats and six draws, and Vietnam won 3-2 when they played Japan in 1961.

Japan lost to the Emirates 1-0 when they played the last time in the Kirin Cup in May last year.

Qatar have midfielder Khalfan Ibrahim, who became the youngest player to win the Asian Football Confederation's Player of the Year this season, and Uruguay-born forward Sebastian Quintana, both 18.

Osim, who has called the Asian Cup "a stepping stone to the World Cup," plans to send scouts to January's Gulf Cup in which Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are to take part.

The Bosnian-born coach said the gaps among Asian countries were narrowing.

"New countries, including those from the former Soviet Union, are getting stronger and stronger," Osim said.

The top two teams from each group will advance to the knock-out round in the Asian Cup, to be co-hosted by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam in July.

**GERMAN CUP**

**Big guns cruise**

**Football**

AFP, Berlin

High-flying Bundesliga sides VfB Stuttgart and Hertha Berlin eased into the quarterfinals of the German cup with both sides winning by three clear goals against VfL Bochum and VfL Osnabruck respectively on Tuesday.

Stuttgart, fourth in the German table, made light work of dismissing fellow Bundesliga side Bochum with a 4-1 thrashing including two goals from German international Thomas Hitzlsperger.

"I am happy with the entire first half of the season and the boys have earned a two-week rest now," said Stuttgart coach Armin Veh.

Argentine midfielder Christian Gimenez, on loan from French side

Marseille, stole the show for Hertha scoring twice in ten minutes as his side crushed Osnabruck 3-0.

"We were convincing winners and I am delighted by the performance. Now we hope for a good quarterfinal draw," said Hertha boss Falko Gotz.

With Werder Bremen and Schalke 04, joint leaders in the Bundesliga, both already out of the competition Stuttgart and Hertha will now fancy their chances of going all the way.

Stuttgart have not won any silverware since lifting this trophy in 1997 while it is the first time Hertha have reached the quarterfinal stage in five years.

Last season's finalists Eintracht Frankfurt also reached the last eight defeating second division Cologne 3-1 in extra-time.

Japanese international Naohiro Takahara, seemingly reborn after a summer move from SV Hamburg, scored on 95 minutes to put Frankfurt ahead in extra-time before Sotirios Kyrgiakos clinched the victory.

FC Nuremberg were another Bundesliga side to progress but they needed penalty kicks to defeat minnows Unterhaching.

With the scores level at 0-0 following extra-time a bizarre penalty shootout ensued with misses galore as Nuremberg won 2-1.

Favorites and holders Bayern Munich have won this competition for the past two seasons and continue their treble bid against AlemanniaAachen on Wednesday.

Aachen were the last team to defeat Bayern in this competition way back in February 2004 with the loss acting as a catalyst for the departure of manager Ottmar Hitzfeld.

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**Bayern firm on Hargreaves**

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich have emphasised that their England international midfielder Owen Hargreaves will not be joining Manchester United or anyone else in the winter break, saying they need him to challenge for the Bundesliga and Champions League crowns.

The 25-year-old Hargreaves has used the press to try and pressure Bayern into letting him join Manchester United -- who have already had a 25 million euro bid snubbed -- but Bayern want the midfielder to help them achieve this season's aims.

"Nothing is going to happen in the winter break," general manager Uli Hoeness said on the club's homepage. "We are facing Real Madrid in the Champions League so we do not want to weaken our team. We are a football club not a bank."

"We have to look how we can strengthen the team. What use is an additional 30 million euros in the bank? We want to go far in the Champions League and catch Bremen and Schalke in the league - we need Owen Hargreaves to do that."

However Hoeness did admit that Hargreaves, contracted until June 2010, could be sold in the future if a replacement could be found for the right price.

"If at some point we think we have a replacement for Owen who costs less than perhaps we will think about it," Hoeness added.

Hargreaves has not played since September 16 when he broke his leg in Bayern's 2-1 defeat to Arminia Bielefeld.

**Injury woe for Dos Santos**

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich's Paraguayan international Julio dos Santos has suffered a setback with a serious leg injury sidelining him for ten weeks just after his loan move to VfL Wolfsburg was agreed.

The 23-year-old dos Santos agreed to move to Wolfsburg on loan until the end of the season on Tuesday afternoon before sustaining an injury to his right leg in Bayern's training session.

Dos Santos will now miss the first month of the season when the Bundesliga resumes after a six-week winter break.

The Paraguayan midfielder joined Bayern 11 months ago from Cerro Porteno in a two-million euro deal but has only played five league matches.

**Everton get Brazilian star**

AFP, London

Brazilian midfielder Anderson Silva de Franca has finally been cleared to play for Everton after obtaining a Spanish passport.

The Premier's club agreed to buy the player from Uruguayan side Nacional Montevideo at the start of last season but he was unable to obtain a work permit for Britain.

The 24-year-old subsequently went to Malaga on loan and has now been granted a Spanish passport, which means he is free to ply his trade anywhere in the European Union, including Britain.

Silva started his professional career in Chile with Santiago Wanderers before making his name in Europe at Spanish side Racing Santander.

**Referee admits Old Firm mistake**

AFP, Glasgow

Referee Kenny Clark on Tuesday admitted he made an incorrect decision in not awarding a penalty to Celtic during their weekend match at Rangers.

The official refused to give a penalty when Neil Lennon was fouled by Rangers full-back Steven Smith in the area.

Celtic were leading at the time through a Thomas Gravesen goal but were held to a 1-1 draw when Ibrahim Hemdani netted for Rangers with three minutes to go.

Lennon and Hoops boss Gordon Strachan were both fuming about the penalty incident after the game, which could have allowed them to win the match and extend their Scottish Premier League lead over Rangers to 19 points.

After watching the incident again on television, Clark admits he called it wrong.

Speaking on the Whistleblower section of the Scottish Football Association's website, he said: "I got the opportunity to watch the incident for the first time last evening (Monday) and, yes, it should have been a penalty kick."

"In penalty area situations a referee tries to take up the best position possible and, as play developed from the left, I moved with it and thought I was well-placed.

**It's been a Lyon year**

AFP, Paris



While the unstoppable Lyon continue to march through the French record books it was a disastrous year for two of France's other big guns during 2006.

Paris St Germain, as usual, flattered to deceive on the pitch but it is their recent troubles off it that have hit them hardest while Marseille remain a shadow of their once-all-conquering teams of the early 1990s.

In terms of crises, PSG's is the gravest. They finished a lowly ninth last season but saved their campaign with a cup victory and place in the UEFA Cup -- defeating Marseille in the final and denying them entry into Europe's second competition.

But this season has been nothing short of abysmal and with one match to go to the halfway point of the season, the capital giants sit two points and three places above the relegation zone.

But it has been an even more dismal story off the pitch. At the end of November a fan was shot dead by an off-duty police officer outside the Parc des Princes after a UEFA Cup match against Hapoel Tel Aviv.

The fan was part of an anti-semitic and racist chanting mob that attacked a Jewish fan of the Israeli side.

The officer came to his rescue and shot dead one of the hooligans.

That incident sparked a heated debate on football violence and racism in the country -- two themes often overlooked in a nation surrounded by more traditional sufferers of such ailments as the Netherlands, England and Germany.

For Marseille that Cup final defeat in early May and a subsequent defeat on the final day of the season saw them have to settle for a place in the much-derided Inter Toto Cup.

Things took a turn for the better in the off-season as the Mediterraneans kept the hungry vultures of Europe's top clubs away from their prize asset Frank Ribery.

That little victory seemed to pay off as Marseille started the season flying, keeping neck-and-neck with Lyon after six matches.

They also reached the UEFA Cup proper. But, typically, it has been downhill ever since. They won five of those first six games and just three of the next 12, while crashing out of the UEFA Cup at the first hurdle.

As for Lyon, they simply keep getting better and better. They won a record fifth title in a row in May, finishing 15 points clear of nearest challengers Bordeaux.

And if that was not enough, they have already set the best start ever to a season this campaign, hold a daunting 17-point lead and need only 11 wins from their last 20 matches to break the record of 26 wins in a season.

For the second successive year they also topped a Champions League group containing Real Madrid and last season reached the quarterfinals of Europe's premier competition for the third time in a row.

But for a late lapse at AC Milan in the second leg of the quarterfinals, they might even have gone all the way.

Conquering Europe is the only challenge to Lyon these days.

As Le Mans coach Frederic Hantz said after his side were downed 1-0 by the champions on December 2: "Football is a game played by eleven players and at the end Lyon win."

Lyon's penultimate game before Christmas was a 4-0 hammering of their nearest challengers Lens, despite having all four of their strikers -- John Carew, Sylvain Wiltord, Fred and Karim Benzema -- out injured and playing winger Florent Malouda as a makeshift sole striker.

"Before the start of the season I said Lyon would win the league by 20 points," said Lens president Gervais Martel after the game.

"They already have (a lead of) 17 and we're not even halfway. They're a veritable war machine!"

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**Bennie happy with justice**

**Football**

AFP, London

Bennie McCarthy has praised UEFA for ditching out a five-match ban to Wisla Krakow's Nikola Mijailovic, the Serbian defender who was found guilty of racially abusing him during a UEFA Cup match in October.

"I was pleased with the way the situation was handled," Blackburn's South African forward said.

"Every club and every league is against racism -- and football is trying hard to fight against it, but you still get people -- players, coaches or fans -- who will use offensive terms."

"Sport should unite people, not divide them, so I am glad an example was set."

McCarthy, speaking to FIFA's website, added: "Maybe the next person who is considering using a racist term during a match will think

twice."

Blackburn's South African striker Bennie McCarthy has admitted he has found life in the Premiership tougher than he had expected.

McCarthy, who joined Blackburn in a 2.5-million-pound summer transfer from FC Porto, admitted he was finding English football physically challenging, although his nine goals in a struggling side suggest he has not had that many problems adapting.

"It's so physically demanding and every game is like a cup final," he said. "I've played in Holland, I've played in Spain, I've played in Portugal, and not every game is so fast and so difficult."

"Even if you're playing against the bottom team in the league, it's as difficult as playing Manchester United, Arsenal or Chelsea. In Holland, Spain and Portugal only a few teams made you really work hard and concentrate for 90 minutes. Here you have to be in top form

in every game."

The 29-year-old also revealed that he had been drawn to Blackburn because of his admiration for manager Mark Hughes, a Manchester United star when the South African was growing up.

"He used to be a player," said McCarthy. "He was a hero who I always wanted to be like. I have so much respect for him -- and I love learning from him."

"It's a little bit strange actually because I have gone from being a big fan to standing next to him on the training pitch."

"In South Africa I used to watch a lot of English football -- everyone likes to see winning teams and I think that's why I adopted Manchester United. I used to know everything about them, but now I'm Blackburn through and through."

"I couldn't have come to a better club. It may be a smaller club than United, but it has a big heart. I'm feeling loved and very welcome."

**Asian Cup draw held**

**Football**

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Debutants Australia were pitted Tuesday alongside Asian Games runners-up Iraq while defending champions Japan were drawn with Asia's winners Qatar in next year's Asian Cup finals.

At a glitzy ceremony in Kuala Lumpur, 2003 beaten finalists China were lumped in the same group as Iran and Uzbekistan. They will also play co-hosts Malaysia.

South Korea are alongside fellow World Cup side Saudi Arabia, the semifinals at the last Asian Cup, Bahrain, and co-host Indonesia.

Australia, the most successful Asian team at the World Cup, are in the Asian Cup finals for the first time after abandoning Oceania in January this year, and will also face Oman and Thailand.

As well as Qatar, Asian powerhouse Japan face off against United Arab Emirates and Vietnam.

Australian coach Graham Arnold singled out Iraq as their toughest opponent.

"I'm very happy with our pool. We are going in as one of the top seeds and we have plenty to live up to," he said here.

"Thailand are the highest ranked

of the co-hosts, Oman are an unknown quantity but Iraq we are familiar with. Iraq are our toughest opponent. They are the one we fear and respect the most."

Arnold said he believed "75 to 90 percent" of his overseas-based stars, including Harry Kewell, Tim Cahill and Mark Viduka would play, adding glamour to the tournament.

"We are demanding that they be made available by their clubs because this is a very prestigious tournament," he said.

Australia were seeded along with Iran, Japan and South Korea. It means they will avoid each other until the knockout stages.

The tournament opens in Bangkok on July 7, with the semifinals played in Hanoi and Kuala Lumpur before Jakarta hosts the final on July 29.

There was last-minute drama when Saudi Arabia said it would not play in Thailand "for diplomatic reasons" that were not fully explained, although it is believed to stem from the killing of a Saudi diplomat in Thailand in 1990.

It meant the three-time champions could not be drawn in Thailand's group, or Vietnam's, as the winner of that group would play their quarterfinal in Bangkok.

Takeshi Ono, technical director at the Japan Football Association, said all groups were equally tough, high-

lighting the standard of football in Asia. "We are just happy to be in the last 16," he said.

"We realise there are no easy groups. Of course there is added pressure on us as the defending champions, but our philosophy is to take one game at a time and see how things develop."

South Korea, who have failed to win the Asian Cup since 1960, have a tricky draw against Saudi Arabia and Bahrain with only the top two teams from each group moving into the knockout stages.

But Korean officials were content with the way it panned out.

"It is very good for Korea, although we are wary of Saudi Arabia as our results against them have never been good," said Korea Football Association manager of international affairs Shin Man-ki.

"We have not won the Asian Cup since 1960 and our goal is to change that in 2007."

The draw is the culmination of 10 months of qualifying.

Organising the tournament in four different countries for the first time has been fraught with difficulties, with four organising committees, four media centres, as well as the extra costs.