

Where a game means so much

BAGHDAD, Jan 27 (AFP): Football, the "oxygen" of the Iraqi people, has suffered but is surviving as a rare source of pleasure in a country impoverished by sanctions.

"Football is the beloved game of us, in every home, people talks football," said coach Ami Baba, a legend in the sport around the Arab world.

"I tell my players to go out and play well for the sake of the crowd. At least it'll make them happy for a few days," he said.

But since the UN embargo slapped on Iraq for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the game has been drained of much of its talent, with players and coaches alike going abroad in search of better pay.

Ami Baba said Iraqi football has also deteriorated because of the scarcity of exposure to matches from around the world on local TV screens.

"Sometimes our federation president, Uday, sends us videos of matches in England or Brazil, but it's not enough, you have to be able to live and breathe football. It changes everything," he said.

The 64-year-old coach, once the top scorer of Iraq's national team who was approached by British teams like Fulham and Celtic in the 1950s, was referring to President Saddam Hussein's son Uday, who presides over both Iraq's Football Association and Olympic Committee.

The national team's mascot, 'Khadduri', who is famous for his deafening cries from the stands, bemoaned the fact that "the level of football in Iraq has plunged, technically speaking."

Once a regional power in footballing terms, the team was eliminated from the qualifiers of the World Cup in France by lowly Kazakhstan last year.

Before the sanctions, which led to three years of total isolation for Iraqi sport, 'Khadduri' used to travel to every away match of the national team.

Because of his reputation for enthusing a crowd, he has recently been offered a contract just to support a club in Qatar but declined to desert for personal reasons.

"Football is like oxygen for the people, a chance to get away from their everyday troubles," said Mehdi Saleh, a taxi-driver who is likewise a football fanatic.

But Ami Baba said the supporters ask for too much of his players and forget that they too have been hit by the sanctions.

"The players often complain that they don't get enough to eat and their vitamin intake is low. They just can't handle the training," he said. "As for new training shoes or football boots, they're too expensive."

Ami Baba, an admirer of English football, admitted that his own skills have not kept up with the times. He last attended a training course abroad in 1989, at the London club Chelsea.

Iraq's "temple of football," Al-Shaab, has an official capacity of 40,000 but is crammed to the rafters with up to 50,000 supporters for big games. It was inaugurated in 1967 by Eusebio of Portugal.

Tickets start at a modest 150 dinars and can cost as much as 1,000 dinars, in a country where a teacher is paid a meagre 1,500 dinars (less than two dollars) and has to take on a second or third job to survive.

The professionals earn between 500,000 and 200,000 dinars a season.

"Having to live without Adidas or Puma team strips and making our own is all right. The worst thing is the lack of foreign experience, contact with the game abroad," said Walid Tabra, editor of the sports daily al-Baath Riyath.

"I used to write for a London magazine on world soccer, but since 1990 they're not interested in our results any more," he said.

At the end of this month, the top four clubs will start competing for the "mother of All Battles" Cup, named after the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait. "The streets of Baghdad will be deserted," predicted Ami Baba.

Wednesday 28th January (All programmes are in local time but subject to last minute change.)

BTV

3.00pm Opening announcement Al Quran, programme summary 3:10 Recitation from the Geeta 3:15 Patriotic Songs

3:20 Drama Serial Do Sainik (Rpt) 4:00 News in Bangla 4:10 Art-4:15 Geetibitan 5:15 Human Right Day Programme

6:00 Sirishi Sukh Ullasa 6:30 Bangladesh Biman Bahini 7:00 News in English 7:05 Programme on Health 7:25 Mukti-juddher Ronokoushal O Agragati 8:00 News in Bangla 8:30 Package Drama Sabuj Shathi 9:00 Package Drama Utitarakar 10:00 News in English 10:30 Juddha Dinar Gatha 11:30 News in Bangla 11:35 Tomorrow's programme summary 11:40 Close down

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