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SUPER SUSIE: Australia's Susie O'Neill is jubilant after clinching gold in the ladies' 200 metres freestyle yesterday. —AFP photo

Exciting escape act

HOCKEY

SYDNEY, Sept 19: Hosts Australia twice recovered from the brink to hold former champions India to a rousing 2-2 draw in the Olympic men's hockey here on Tuesday, reports AFP.

Unfancied Poland, however, created the biggest upset of the tournament with a 4-1 win over gold medal contenders Spain.

The Poles, returning to Olympic hockey after 20 years, rode on a two-goal burst early in the first half to stun the Atlanta silver-medalists in Group B.

In the day's other match, Jorge Lombi struck a penalty corner four minutes before the final whistle to help Argentina snatch a 2-2 draw against South Korea.

The results left both India and Australia at the top of Group B with four points each from two matches.

Poland were third with three points, one more than South Korea. Argentina and Spain were trailing behind with a solitary point.

The top two teams will qualify for the semifinals after the round-robin league.

Both India and Australia treated the capacity crowd at the 15,000-seater State Hockey



BASKING UNDER THE SUN: The US women's beach volleyball squad practicing at Bondi Beach on September 18. —AFP photo

Samba on tight rope

FOOTBALL

SYDNEY, Sept 19: Brazil will seek to banish the ghost of their shock 1-0 Olympic football defeat against Japan in 1996 when they take on the Asians in a crunch qualifying round showdown Wednesday, reports AFP.

Wanderley Luxemburgo's young side must win against the Japanese to be sure of having a chance of progressing to the knockout phase of the 16-team Sydney Olympics competition.

After suffering a shock 3-1 defeat against South Africa on Sunday, the South Americans' dreams of lifting their first Olympic football title are hanging by a thread.

They are level on three points with South Africa, who play pointless Slovakia on Wednesday, but only third in Group C overall. Japan top the table with six points.

Besieged coach Luxemburgo, who has come in for some fierce criticism in the Brazilian press with the national team having lost twice in their World Cup qualifying campaign, is certain his team can secure the vital win in Brisbane.

Luxemburgo, also fighting off allegations including financial misconduct by his former secretary Renata Alves, was adamant they could sink Japan.

"I am sure we can beat Japan and win the gold medal," he said.

But Brazil will be aware of the result between the two sides when they last met at an Olympics.

A Brazil team featuring the likes of Roberto Carlos, Rivaldo, Ze Elias and Ronaldo crashed 1-0 against Japan during the Atlanta Games in 1996.

Japan, the only Asian team to win a football medal at an Olympic Games, when they took bronze in 1968, only need a point from Wednesday's match to be certain of progressing to the next round.

They will look to AS Roma playmaker Hidetoshi Nakata to provide the inspiration, following the two-time Asian Footballer of the Year's displays against Slovakia and the South Africans.

Although Brazil will be favourites to defeat the Japanese, South Africa coach Ephraim Mashaba believes the off-colour football giants could be in for a rough ride.

"It won't be an easy game," Mashaba said.

"If I have to give some advice... Japan is a very strong and physical side and Brazil is in for a tough game."

Japan has won 17 games and scored 84 goals in the build-up to the Olympics, which it is using for part of its preparations for next month's Asian Cup in Lebanon.

The Japanese will be lifted by a large travelling army of their fans, otherwise known as the Ultra Nippon. Japan's Olympic Committee has booked more than 5,000 seats for its supporters.

Quickest Kuerten

TENNIS

SYDNEY, Sept 19: Brazil's Gustavo Kuerten won the fastest match of his professional career here on Tuesday as his Swedish rival Magnus Norman came within a whisker of being knocked out of the Olympic tennis tournament on the opening day, reports AFP.

Norman, the number three seed, had to battle back from a set down and produce an ace on match point against him before finally eliminating underdog Romanian Andrei Pavel 6-7, 6-3, 10-8.

His two hours 47 minutes on court was more than four times the 38 minutes Kuerten spent dispatching Christophe Pogon, a wildcard entry from Benin.

Australia's double US Open champion Pat Rafter and teammate Mark Philippoussis joined Kuerten and Norman in the second round, with both men insisting they had ended the feud that marred the Olympic hosts' preparations for the Games.

The first seeds to fall included former Australian Open finalist Amelie Mauresmo. The powerful Frenchwoman, who has been out since July with a back injury, paid the price for a

Draw day's order

HOCKEY

SYDNEY, Sept 19: Australia's hopes of becoming the first nation to retain the Olympic women's hockey title suffered a minor setback on Tuesday when they were held to a 1-1 draw by Spain here, reports AFP.

The Netherlands, the Champions' Trophy winners, also drew 2-2 with South Africa as the underdogs shared the spotlight at the State Hockey Centre.

The International Hockey Federation (FIH) added to the day's drama by slapping a one-match suspension on British women's coach Jon Royce for abusing a doping control official.

Royce, 39, hurled "crude and inappropriate" language at an unnamed female doping control escort after Britain's 1-0 loss to Argentina on Monday, a FIH statement said.

Royce will not be allowed to sit on the bench when the British girls take on South Korea in their next match on Wednesday.

The Hockeyroos, regarded as the greatest women's team ever, were stung by a second-minute goal by Spain's Sonia Ignacio-Simo following a penalty corner.

Alyson Annan drew level five minutes later, but the Spaniards defended stoutly for the rest of the match to earn a valuable point in group A.

The Australians, who struggled to defeat Britain 2-1 in their first match, failed to convert any of their 11 penalty corners.

The draw left Australia with four points, two behind unexpected leaders Argentina who won both their opening matches.

With Spain on two points, South Korea on one and Britain yet to open their account, the Australians may yet take one of the three places from the group in the medal pool round.

But coach Ric Charlesworth was fuming at the result.

"We paid the price for sleeping in the first half," he said.

"It's a real wake-up call. I have always maintained there are no easy games at the Olympics and we know how well the Spaniards fight."

Charlesworth, who ends his seven-year tenure with the women's team after the Games, was however confident nothing was lost yet.

"I have faith in my girls and I know they can deliver," he said.

"At the Atlanta Olympics, there was a big furore when we missed 12 penalty corners against Britain. Still we went on to win the gold medal."

The doughy fight by the Spanish women contrasted sharply with their male counterparts, who were thrashed 4-1 by rank outsiders Poland earlier in the day.

"This is a good result for us," Spanish women's coach Marcus Lammers said.

"It's always an advantage to win a point off the favourites. We may be accused of defending too much, but it served our purpose."

South Africa, meanwhile, fought back from the brink to force the Dutch women to share points in group B.

The South African women, looking for their first point after losing the opening match against Germany, appeared buried when the Dutch led 2-0 with just 18 minutes remaining.

Pietie Coetzee, however, grasped a penalty corner chance in the 52nd minute to reduce the margin, before Alison Dare banged home the equaliser nine minutes before the final whistle.

The Netherlands were left with just a solitary point from two matches, having lost to China in their opening match.

They must win their remaining matches against leaders Germany and New Zealand to ensure a berth in the medal pool round.



THE SMILE IS BACK: Marlene Ottey, the controversial Jamaican sprinter, getting up after a massage at Sydney's Olympic Park yesterday. Ottey's selection sparked a protest among the other Jamaican athletes who even threatened to boycott the relay event. However, they later backed off. —AFP photo

SYDNEY SIDELINES

SYDNEY, Sept 19 (AFP): France's outgoing -52kg Olympic judo champion Marie-Claire Restoux, not selected for the Sydney Olympics, did not shed any tears at the early exit in the 2000 Games of Laetitia Tignola, who was a controversial choice in her place.

Restoux was furious at the French selectors decision not to allow her to defend her title and lost no time in crowing at Tignola's demise.

"The Olympic Games is a wholly different competition," Restoux told AFP from Paris. "You don't send inexperienced competitors there who have never been to a World Championship or to the Games."

A-HOY THERE!

Great Britain may have had to settle for second place behind Australia in the team three-day event but one corner of England would be forgiven for raising a glass to their former colony.

Andrew Hoy, who has featured in the team that won gold for Australia in the 1992, 1996 and 2000 Games, lives in Gloucestershire.

Hoy, whose sporting idol is late Brazilian Grand Prix driver Ayrton Senna, carried Australia's flag at the Opening Ceremony of the Atlanta Games and his victory in Sydney means he becomes the second Australian after swim legend Dawn Fraser to win three consecutive Olympic golds in the same event.

Fraser was among the crowd to witness Hoy's achievement.

STREAKER ARRIVES

The women's football match between Australia and Brazil provided a new first for the Sydney Games.

In the closing stages of the match the first streaker of the 2000 Olympics made an appearance at the Sydney Football Ground.

He was quickly escorted away by police in the match lost 2-1 by the Matildas, ensuring elimination for the host nation.

THORPEDO VISIT

Triple Olympic gold medalist Ian Thorpe fulfilled the dreams of a lifetime for three children sponsored by Olympic Aid when he invited them to watch his 200m freestyle final Monday night in which he was runner-up.

The children, two Indigenous Sports Programme scholarship holders, and a young leukaemia sufferer, were delighted when the 17-year-old Australian swimming icon surprised them with a private visit, after he was presented with his silver medal.

"ONE WAY ONLY"

The Olympic Media Village at Lidcombe neighbours Rookwood Cemetery, which is claimed to be the biggest final resting place in the southern hemisphere.

The sprawling site is passed by busloads of scribes on their way to the Olympic Park at Homebush but a sign at the entrance to the Cemetery raised laughs among the assembled writers.

"One way only" read the board.

LABAT LEAVES

Argentinian tennis player Florencia Labat is quitting after the Sydney Olympics to start a family.

Labat's career ended in a downbeat manner with a 6-2, 6-4 defeat at the hands of Dutchwoman Miriam Oremans as the tennis tournament got underway.

"I think this is the moment to do it," 29-year-old Labat told this news agency.

"I want a normal life. With travel and practice it is very difficult to have it (a normal life) and from now on I am going to dedicate a lot more time to myself."



EVEN HE COULDN'T INSPIRE ENOUGH! A tiny tot holds an Australian flag during the hosts' second round preliminary handball match against Norway. Norway won 28-18. —AFP photo

Watch out for Perec

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 19: Reclusive French runner Marie-Jose Perec has no doubt about her ability to win another gold medal and is training hard in private ahead of her 400m showdown with Cathy Freeman, her coaches said, reports AFP.

While the reigning 200m and 400m Olympic champion has refused all interview requests and snubbed the French team, French athletics president Philippe Lamblin said he received a positive report from her East German coach Wolfgang Meier.

"I crossed her coach in the corridor of the hotel this morning and he said 'everything is fine, everything is going well,'" Lamblin said of the 32-year-old from Guadeloupe who was a no-show at the official French team media conference Tuesday.

French athletics coach Richard Descoux said Perec was in shape to defeat the hometown hero and defend the Olympic crown she first won in Barcelona eight years ago.

Meier trained 1980 Olympic champion Marita Koch, who set the world record of 47.60s at the 1985 World Cup in Canberra, and under his tutelage Perec has learned new techniques.

Descoux said Perec will be looking to have a strong semi-final so she draws a good lane and is confident for the final crunch.

Notoriously private, she is training away from her team mates and staying in a city hotel far from the athletes' village.

Lamblin said when he spoke to her before coming to Sydney she made it clear she wanted to prepare in isolation.

Lamblin added that the team would have preferred to have her train with them but "the main thing is that she prepares in the best way to achieve her dream of another gold medal around her neck."

Perec's unwillingness to share her thoughts with the world has angered the local press in Australia, which Perec has accused of trying to scupper her Olympic campaign.

