

The Greatest Ritual of Sports



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Sino triumph

SYDNEY, Sept 21: China's Zhang Jun and Gao Ling won the first badminton gold of the Sydney Olympics after a sensational final victory Thursday, reports AFP.

The seventh seeded Zhang and Gao duo beat the top-seeded Indonesians Tri Kusharyanto and Minarti Timur 1-15, 15-13, 15-11 in 1 hour 4 minutes.

To achieve the win the Chinese pair had to produce a comeback that eclipsed their semifinal 17-16 deciding game victory over Denmark's Michael Sogaard and Rikke Olsen.

In the final, they struggled to get into the match in the first game, which they lost in just 9 minutes.

When the Indonesians went ahead 8-5 and then 13-12 in the second game, the match appeared to be almost over for China's second string mixed doubles team.

But their resolve did not waver and in a fluctuating third game it was the Chinese duo's nerve that held.

"We are of course very happy," said Gao afterwards. "This is our first Olympics so we never thought of winning the gold medal."

"All we wanted to do was to perform at our best. But there was no pressure on us because of that so it made it easier to concentrate on just playing."

"Whatever I face, I seek to keep a smile on my face. But I never give up trying and that helped us in the final match because we just kept going."

Remarkably, the 22-year-old Zhang and 21-year-old Gao have only been paired together for just over one year. It was their first ever success over the Indonesian pair.



BALLERINA! China's Yang Yun in full bloom during her floor exercise routine in the final of the women's all-round gymnastics at the SuperDome yesterday.

No one is a favourite

FOOTBALL

BRISBANE, Sept 21: Huge attendances, thrilling matches and a glimpse of some precious young talent highlighted the opening round of the Olympic soccer tournament, which now pauses for breath before Saturday's quarter-finals, reports Reuters.

The original 16 teams have been reduced to eight, the most notable absentee being Australia who lost all three of their opening-round games to finish bottom of Group A.

Although their performance was a major disappointment to home fans, Australia's failure to make the last eight should have no negative impact on the remainder of a competition which has so far produced 77 goals in 24 matches and not one goalless draw.

While gold medal favourites Brazil and defending Olympic champions Nigeria successfully negotiated their way through the group stage, none of the other six quarter-finalists can be ruled out as potential medalists.

Saturday's matches see the United States play Japan in Adelaide, Brazil-Cameroun in Brisbane, Italy-Spain in Sydney and Chile-Nigeria in Melbourne. The competition is wide open and there is all to play for.

Of all the eight coaches whose teams are still in contention, the most relieved must be Brazil's Wanderley Luxemburgo. He is still under huge pressure to win Olympic gold for Brazil for the first time, but

at least he was saved the indignity of first-round elimination.

That was a real possibility when Brazil lined up to face Japan in their final Group D match in Brisbane on Wednesday. If the worst had happened and Brazil had failed to qualify, Luxembourg would either have quit or been fired as soon as he returned home.

But Alex's fifth-minute header sealed a 1-0 win in a superb match with Japan, whose 19-match winning streak finally ended.

Brazil had failed to impress in their opening two matches against Slovakia, which they won 3-1, and South Africa, which they lost 3-1, but they looked a far better team on Wednesday.

"We learned a lot from the defeat to South Africa, and we put a lot of things right in training," said Luxemburgo after beating Japan.

Brazil are delighted to be staying on the Gold Coast and playing their quarter-final in Brisbane against Cameroon, whose 1-1 draw with the Czech Republic on Tuesday guaranteed them second spot in Group C behind the United States.

The Americans, who have done better in soccer here than at any other Olympics since Melbourne in 1956, now face the impressive Japanese in

semifinal in Sydney and if we beat the Americans and Italy beat Spain in their game that's what will happen," he said, adding: "Unfortunately the dream ended before I knew the result."

Troussier believes most of the Japanese players here will be in the country's World Cup squad in two years' time, and says they are under immense pressure to do well.

"The gold medal is very important to Japan, and it will be the same pressure in the Asian Championships in Lebanon next month too."

Defending champions Nigeria, who failed to impress in the opening round, face a tough quarter-final against Chile in Melbourne with two key players - skipper Celestine Babayaro and defender Azubuike Oliseh - suspended.

Their 18-year-old forward Julius Aghahowa scored a breathtaking goal against Australia, however, and has a chance to build on his growing reputation this coming week.

Chile impressed in their opening three matches and with star player Ivan Zamorano expected to be fit for Saturday after missing Wednesday night's 1-0 defeat to South Korea, Chile have their eyes on a semifinals spot.

Although Honduras failed to make the quarter-finals, their 20-year-old striker David Sitao, who plays for Serie A side Cagliari, top-scored in the first round with four goals and looks set for a great future.

SYDNEY SIDELINES

ITALIANS GO ONE-TWO-THREE

Italian swimming gold medalists are rather like London buses — you wait for an eternity and then three come along at once.

Going into the Sydney Games Italy had never struck gold in the Olympic swimming pool.

But Domenico Fioravanti changed that by winning the 100m breaststroke. He then doubled up to top the podium in the 200m.

And on Thursday Massimiliano Rosolino got in on the act by taking the 200m individual medley gold medalist said.



JAPANESE JOY: The Japanese pair of Yukiko Tkahashi (L) and Mika Saiki are ecstatic after beating the Czech Republic in the second round of the women's beach volleyball at Bondi Beach yesterday.

-AFP photo

Race wide open

HOCKEY

SYDNEY, Sept 21: Asian giants India and Pakistan enjoyed mixed fortunes as a mad scrum began for the four semifinal spots in the Olympic men's hockey here on Thursday.

Eight-time champions India started to a 2-0 defeat at the hands of South Korea, who avenged the loss of the Asian Games crown at Bangkok two years ago.

Pakistan, allowing penalty corner specialist Sohail Abbas only two scoring chances, were forced to share points in a 1-1 draw with Germany.

Other gold medal contenders appeared to go into the defensive mode as the battle intensified, with hosts Australia held to a 2-2 draw by rejuvenated Spain.

The best match of the day was the rousing 5-5 draw between Argentina and Poland, sparked by Argentine striker Jorge Lombi's four goals, but it did little to shed light on the likely semifinalists.

With two rounds of matches to go, all six teams remained in contention for the two semifinal spots from Group B.

All the action in the Germany-Pakistan match took place in the first half as Oliver Domke's 19th minute goal was equalised by Abbas five minutes before the interval.

"There are no excuses, we played a horrible game," he said. "The early start and the weather was the same for both teams. We can't hide behind such excuses."

South Korean manager Kim Sang-Ryul, who had fretted at his team's performance in earlier matches, was relieved.

"We are still in the competition and that is important," he said.

"The team had no option but to win, otherwise they may as well have been packing their bags."

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