

WC 2002 qualifier

Iran breeze into phase two

TABRIZ, Iran, Nov 28: Iran clinched their progress into the second phase of the Asia Zone qualifiers for the 2002 World Cup finals with a 2-0 win over Tajikistan here Tuesday, reports AFP.

The match was the clincher in Group Two as both sides had thumped Guam for a total of 35 goals and none against, while the fourth team Myanmar had declined to take part.

Both sides had goal chances in a tentative first half watched by a 25,000 crowd under cold but sunny conditions.

But in the second half Iran got well on top through the creativity of Ali Dai and Karim Bagheri.

Dai it was who opened the scoring in the 47th minute and seven minutes later Mehdi Hacheminassab struck to give the home side a lead they held on to for the rest of the match.

Iran got through to next year's Asia Zone 2nd round where the 10 group winners from the first stage will be divided into two groups of five.

The winners of these two groups qualify directly for the 2002 finals in South Korea and Japan, while the two runners-up play-off and then have a final decider against a European team to reach the finals.

Schillaci wants to help Palermo

ROME, Nov 29: Former Italian international striker Salvatore Totto Schillaci, who retired from top flight football last season, wants to return to competition, according to press reports in Sicily Monday, reports AFP.

The 36-year-old, Italy's wide-eyed goalscorer of the 1990 World Cup, has reportedly offered his services to Third Division side Palermo, who are currently on the look out for a striker.

Palermo sporting director Giorgio Perinetti is reported not to have turned down the offer and is leaving the final decision with team coach Giuliano Sotgiu.

Schillaci, who played for Juventus and Inter Milan before finishing his career in the Japanese J-League, has since his retirement been involved in the setting up of a school for young footballers in his native Sicily.

Schillaci was the 1990 World Cup tournament's top scorer with six goals. But his last in their 1-1 semi-final draw against Diego Maradona's Argentina failed to stop the hosts from losing on penalties and finishing third.

ROK after Hiddink

SEOUL, Nov 28: South Korea is in talks with a former national soccer coach from the Netherlands in a bid to help the Korean team advance to the round of 16 in the 2002 World Cup, the Korea Football Association (KFA), said today, reports Reuters.

South Korea, co-host of the 2002 World Cup along with Japan, was negotiating with Guus Hiddink, 54, former coach of the Netherlands, to replace Huh Jung-mun, said the chief of KFA's international department.

Nuh, who told local media he had quit voluntarily and his predecessors have been criticised for failing to lead South Korea into the round of 16 in international tournaments, including the 2000 Sydney Olympics and recent Asian cup matches.

South Korea won one preliminary match in Sydney.

"We have not reached any agreement with Hiddink yet," said the KFA chief. "Hiddink has just consented on the terms and conditions on the contract."

If the contract is signed, Hiddink would coach the Korean team for 18 months through June 30, 2002, the KFA official said.

The KFA declined to discuss Hiddink's salary other than to say it would be higher than that of local coaches and that it would include incentive bonuses for advancing the team to the round of 16 or higher.

The former Dutch coach led the Netherlands national soccer team to the semi-finals in the 1998 World Cup in France, beating South Korea 5-0 in preliminaries.

Numancia sack Herrera

SORIA, Spain, Nov 29: Spanish First Division side Numancia have fired their coach Francisco 'Paco' Herrera, the club confirmed Monday, reports AFP.

Herrera ends his second spell as the club's trainer, having previously led the side in the 1997-98 season.

But a series of poor results with the club currently lying 17th, just one point above the relegation zone, had led to calls for his sacking.



THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL: Iker Casillas (R), the Real Madrid goalkeeper finding it hard to come to terms with the defeat while Boca Juniors players celebrate at Tokyo yesterday. —AFP photo

Boca proves Latin supremacy

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after the 27-year-old Argentine international striker, popularly known as 'El loco' (The crazy one), was put clean through by defence-splitting passes.

The dazed Spaniards countered in the 12th minute when Brazil star Roberto Carlos

chested down a cross after a failed clearance by Hugo Ibarra and toe-poked a left-foot shot past Colombian international keeper Oscar Cordoba.

But Real coach Vicente del Bosque conceded his star-studded side spent the rest of the game chasing Boca's tails.

"Our start was catastrophic

with the first two goals," he complained. "We gave the game to Boca, and they knew how to keep it until the end."

Man-of-the-match Palermo declared: "This is one of the proudest victories of my life."

Real had got a boost when skipper Fernando Hierro shook off a foot injury incurred during last week's 2-0 European

Champions League win over English side Leeds to take his place in the starting line-up.

But his presence at the back did little to defuse the Buenos Aires side's threat on the break, with midfield fulcrum Roman Riquelme threading incisive balls through the flat-footed Real defence.

Boca nearly extended their lead just after the interval, but Real's 19-year-old keeper Iker Casillas clawed out Riquelme's dipping 25-yard free kick with a finger-tip save.

Real should have equalised immediately after when Roberto Carlos found Guti inside the box with a beautifully weighted pass. However, the Spanish international dragged his shot wide and no Real player was following up as the ball trundled past an empty Boca goal.

They did manage to put the ball in the Argentines' net in the 57th minute from Luis Figo's header, but the Portuguese maestro was yards offside. Raul was also ruled offside when he beat Cordoba minutes later.

They were easy decisions for Colombian referee Oscar Ruiz, who had little else of note to do during an entertaining and fast-paced encounter which lacked the bite that saw European champions boycott this fixture in the 1970s.

The first yellow card came only on the 69th minute when Boca defender Ibarra was booked after petulantly kicking the ball into the hoardings deep in his half.

The incident came shortly after Real's ineffective English winger McManaman had been taken off for forward Savio Bortolini, as the Real coach sought to up the Spaniards' faltering tempo.

Del Bosque followed up by replacing the anonymous French midfielder Claude Makelele with another member of his glittering strike force, Fernando Morientes, on the 77th minute.

But Boca's lead was not threatened and their travelling support of 2,000 drum-beating fans was in raptures as victory was clinched.

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Bertolotti out of danger

LECCO, Italy, Nov 28: Modena footballer Francesco Bertolotti, who is still in a coma over a week after a dressing-room assault by a rival player, was declared out of danger in a statement released by his hospital Tuesday, reports AFP.

The patient is showing signs of constant progress, he has been able to communicate though his elocution was not stable. He's no longer in danger but it's not yet possible to determine the eventual consequences of his injuries," confirmed the statement.

Bertolotti was punched by Como captain Massimiliano Ferrigno in a post match incident on November 19.

Ferrigno has been charged with grievous bodily harm and failing to assist a person in distress and has since been interviewed by two judges.

Celtic defender suffers relapse

GLASGOW, Nov 28: Celtic defender Alan Stubbs was back in hospital Monday after suffering a relapse in his bid to beat cancer, reports AFP.

The 29-year-old suffered a reaction Saturday to the chemotherapy treatment he is receiving for testicular cancer.

His agent, Paul Stretford, told the Press Association that Stubbs had suffered the setback, but denied reports that the player had collapsed or been at Ibrox on Sunday to see his team beaten 5-1 by Glasgow rivals Rangers.

Stubbs had a testicle removed last year and he returned to appear for the team this season.

But traces of cancer were discovered in his abdomen earlier in the month and he was forced to undergo painful chemotherapy treatment at the Beatson Oncology Unit at Glasgow's Western Infirmary.

At Sunday's Old Firm derby supporters from both sides waved banners urging him on to a swift recovery.

Clemente wants Gabri

BARCELONA, Spain, Nov 28: New Marseille coach Javier Clemente has asked his club to negotiate a loan deal for Barcelona midfielder Gabriel Garcia, Spanish daily Sport reported on Tuesday, reports AFP.

Garcia, known as "Gabri", was part of the Spanish Olympic side that won bronze in Sydney. He also attracted an unsuccessful eight million US dollar transfer bid from English club Arsenal in the close season.

The 21-year-old, who has rarely featured for Barcelona this season, confirmed that he had been contacted by Marseille and that he may be ready to take his chances in France.

"It's an interesting offer. I'd love to play for Barcelona more regularly but that looks difficult."

"I don't want to leave Barcelona but I do want the chance to play more and not lose the competitive rhythm," he told journalists in Barcelona.

Gabri is apparently just one of several players on Clemente's Christmas wish list as he eagerly awaits the opening of the transfer window on December 21.

Japan can win WC 2002!

TOKYO, Nov 28: Japan's French national coach Philippe Troussier said the recently-crowned Asian soccer champions can win the next World Cup on home soil in 2002, reports Reuters.

Speaking at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan on Monday, Troussier said home advantage could put Japan among the contenders.

Asked if he thought the Japanese were making enough progress to one day win the World Cup, Troussier replied: "If you look at every-day sports scores, history and the many uncertainties, then yes Japan has the possibility to win the World Cup."

In tennis, a player ranked 360th can beat the number one on the scale. Results aren't always what you expect to see," Troussier said.

Troussier said the World Cup was not a league championship based on consistency.

"It is a cup, with no favourites, no small teams or big teams," he said.

"There may be many scenarios, but by playing at home, with the public in their favour and all the preparations, this will help us."

"In theory we are the outsiders, but in reality, with all these things in our favour, Japan can win the next World Cup."

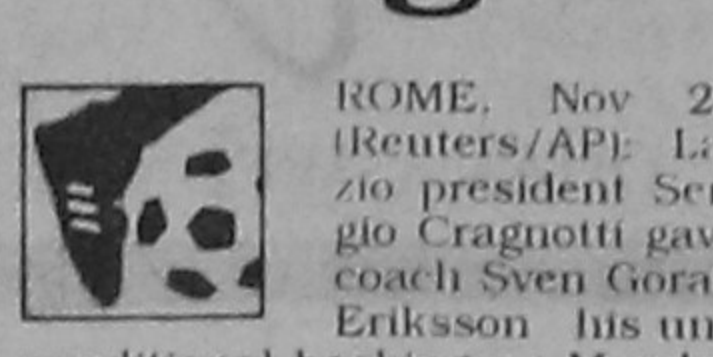
Troussier took over as head coach in September 1998 and has achieved some eye-catching results with the under-20 under-23 and senior teams to earn a new contract through to the 2002 World Cup.

Japan finished runners-up to Spain at the 1999 FIFA World Youth Championship in Nigeria, qualified for the Olympic Games quarter-finals in Sydney and then won the Asian Cup in Lebanon in October.

Troussier said the "hunger to learn and go forward" on the part of himself and his players had produced a strong working relationship.

Taylor apprehensive

Cragnotti all for Eriksson



ROME, Nov 28 (Reuters/AP): Lazio president Sergio Cragnotti gave coach Sven Goran Eriksson his unconditional backing on Monday and said the Swede would stay on until his contract expires at the end of June.

Cragnotti said Eriksson was not to blame for the Italian champions' slump in form and hit out at fans who have urged the coach to quit now rather than see out the season.

Eriksson has agreed to manage England from July. Lazio has barred him from taking time out from the Italian championship to coach England in World Cup qualifiers against Finland and Albania in March.

"Eriksson will stay here until the end of the season, whatever happens - I repeat - whatever happens," Cragnotti told a news conference at Lazio's training ground outside Rome.

He dismissed as "just talk" rumours that former Italy coach Dino Zoff or Eriksson's assistant Roberto Mancini were poised to take over.

A group of Lazio fans held up a banner during the club's 2-0 defeat at Parma on Sunday which read: "Eriksson quit".

Supporters staged a small protest outside the training ground on Monday afternoon.

But Cragnotti said the side's poor start to the season which has seen them slip to eighth in Serie A and lose to Anderlecht in the Champions League was not primarily the coach's fault.

"Some people say the coach counts for about 80 per cent but I'd say it's more like 15 per cent. Of course his choices have an impact but the rest is all down to the players and the club."

"How can you even think of writing or thinking something like that (the banner) after all the successes we've had thanks to the coach."

Lazio won the championship for the first time in 26 years under Eriksson, who has also guided them to two Italian Cup titles, the European Cup Winners' Cup and the final of the UEFA Cup in just over three seasons.

Meanwhile, Peter Taylor has indicated he may quit as caretaker England coach if manager-in waiting Eriksson is given a role in team selection for the friendly against Spain in February.

Taylor is concerned he will not be given a free hand for the Feb. 28 game with Spain at Villa Park in Birmingham. He is expected to meet with Football Association officials this week to discuss the situation.

If the FA asks Taylor to field a team selected by Eriksson, as a way of preparing for World Cup qualifiers against Finland and Albania in March, Taylor says he may leave.

"If I have the title of team manager for that game I would have to have the main input into the team," Taylor told The Express. "I will have to have a word about it if that is the plan."

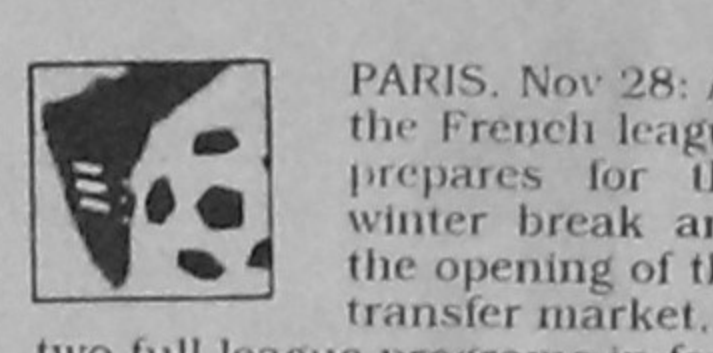
The FA said Monday it hopes to announce details "imminently" of who will be in charge for the match against Spain.

The FA wants Eriksson to have some input into the Spain game and also to be freed by Lazio, even on a part-time basis, to take charge for the Finland and Albania matches.

Taylor and Manchester United assistant manager Steve McClaren took charge of England in a caretaker capacity after Kevin Keegan resigned following the 1-0 World Cup qualifying defeat to Germany at Wembley.

Under Taylor and McLaren, England lost 1-0 to Italy in a friendly in Turin on Nov. 15.

No one's a favourite in France



PARIS, Nov 28: As the French league prepares for the winter break and the opening of the transfer market, two full league programs in four days will still fail to hint at an eventual champion as a mere 12 points separate top placed Bordeaux and strugglers Marseille in the relegation zone, reports AFP.

Last season's champions Monaco face a delicate trip to fourth placed Nantes who subjected them to the first of their seven league defeats from 17 matches with a 2-5 home drubbing in early August.

Monaco's veteran Italian striker Marco Simone summed up the first half of Monaco's season after the weekend's 4-3 defeat at Lens.

"For the moment it's a disaster we're eliminated from the Champions League and we've yet to impose ourselves in the league, that tells you everything," he said.

Tuesday sees two of the pre-season big-spenders Paris Saint Germain and Rennes square up after equally disappointing starts.

Rennes' Paul Le Guen is tipped to be the fifth coach to lose his job should they do down at Parc des Princes where he once wore the PSG shirt.

Le Guen's opposite number Philippe Bergeret is also under pressure as his side have taken just one point from the last 12 despite unprecedented recruitment during the close season.

Pick of the round should be Sedan's visit to Lyon which promises to be a tight match. Though Lyon won 0-3 at Strasbourg on Saturday, the form side from the Ardennes known as the "Wild Boars" will offer Lyon tougher opposition.

1998 champions and current leaders Bordeaux drew at second placed Sedan on Sunday to extend their unbeaten run to ten, host Corsican outfit Bastia on Wednesday.

Bastia have failed to score away from home in their last three matches and will struggle to beat in form Ullrich Rame in the Bordeaux goal who made three class saves early in the goalless draw at Sedan on Sunday.

"I can't explain the saves but I can tell you this isn't simply 11 players but a solid group," Rame told sports daily L'Equipe on Monday.

But shoe-string-budget Guingamp will go top on Tuesday

night should they continue their superb three-month run with a home victory over unpredictable Lens.

Bottom placed Toulouse will hope to continue their four match unbeaten run when they host Troyes on Wednesday while second bottom Strasbourg face a potentially more difficult task at Lille.

Strasbourg coach Claude Le Roy was relieved of his post on Sunday while his counterpart at newly promoted Lille, Valid Halilhodzic has lifted his side to fifth despite claiming in the pre-season that they were not ready for the top-flight.

Finally, Marseille host Saint Etienne both of whom now boast foreign coaches. St Etienne lost 2-0 to Nantes Sunday but have done well since Welshman John Toshack arrived a month ago.

Spanish Javier Clemente took firm hold of the reins at Marseille on Sunday saying: "I'm in command, I make the decisions and I lead. There'll be hard work and no circus."

But Clemente may have to wait until the opening of the transfer market before dragging Marseille from the relegation zone.

Tough days for coaches



PARIS, Nov 29: As the topsy-turvy French league reaches the halfway point, four clubs have so far taken the easy option of firing the coach rather than the players, after results failed to match expectations, reports AFP.

Three of the four clubs that parted company with their coaches, Toulouse, Strasbourg and Marseille, currently occupy the bottom three places in the league.

But two more fashionable clubs, last season's champions Monaco and their runners up and hotly tipped successors Paris Saint Germain, are also rumoured to be considering the "difficult decision".

Strasbourg sacked Claude Le Roy on Sunday, ten defeats from 17 starts having been judged meagre recompense for the 50 million dollar pre-season expenditure on players. And rightly so.

But what will happen to sixth placed Paris Saint Germain's Philippe Bergeret, who spent 65 million dollars on players this year, if his side continue their gentle slide down the league?

The whispering class say that he will be fired and replaced by former club captain Luis Fernandez who coached the side to the Cup Winners' Cup before moving on to a successful spell at Spain's Athletic Bilbao.

Monaco's Claude Puel could also pay the price for his president's recruitment policy. If Paris Saint Germain are proving the old adage that you can't buy success, Monaco are busy proving that you certainly can sell it.

The Champions sold four top players in the close season including their 'keeper Fabien Barthez to Manchester United and Striker David Trezeguet to Juventus. The replacements brought in were inferior and the results have followed suit.

Seven league defeats and elimination from the Champions League have possibly sounded both the death knell for Puel and the starting pistol for the club's remaining top players to look elsewhere for success.

Whatever reasons lurk behind the string of changes, those clubs that took the move seem to have been justified. Last season three of the four club's that fired their coaches did avoid the drop.

This season St Etienne have climbed out of the relegation zone since appointing Welshman John Toshack six weeks ago and new Toulouse coach Robert Nouzaret is sitting on a four match unbeaten run despite propping up the league.

Former Spain coach Javier Clemente looks like a good appointment for Marseille but has yet to oversee a match and Strasbourg are hoping to bring in Czech coach Ivan Hasek from Sparta Prague.

Search for transfer headway



BRUSSELS, Nov 28: Soccer experts and European officials will meet next week in a last-ditch bid to reach a compromise on future rules governing player transfers, reports Reuters.

Just days ahead of a European Union summit in Nice, where leaders are expected to agree on a special declaration on sport, officials from soccer's governing bodies and the European Commission, will resume their search for a new transfer system.

The Commission, which oversees the EU's Single Market, argues the current system breaks EU laws and abuses workers' rights to play their trade anywhere in Europe.

FIFA tabled proposals late last month to revamp the system but European Competition Commissioner Mario Monti said these were too vague.

Monti has threatened to declare the current system illegal unless FIFA comes up with a new system which respects EU law.

"Mr Monti wrote to FIFA two weeks ago to thank them for their proposals but to stress that some of them were still too vague," a Commission spokeswoman said on Monday.

She said an initial technical

meeting last week had been constructive and a follow-up session would be held next week.

Monti argues the existing set-up prevents footballers having the same rights to free movement enjoyed by other EU workers.

Soccer's leading figures say abolishing the current system would plunge football into chaos, squeezing small clubs and prompting a free-for-all as players move between clubs at will.

A FIFA/UEFA Task Force submitted its proposals on October 31 but these were not

backed by the FITro players union.

The proposals include a ban on the international transfer of minors, compensation for clubs which have trained young players, "respect for contracts", set periods during the year when transfers can take place, a system of arbitration and arrangements to smooth the transition to a new system.

Supporters of the world's richest club Manchester United MNU, L have added their voice to calls for the system to be revamped, writing to the Commission. EU officials said:

"We do not believe the current transfer system is fair, because it favours the rich clubs over the poorer ones," said a letter from the Independent Manchester United Supporters' Association.

They said less money had gone to the lower leagues since the English Premier League was launched and that fans were bearing the brunt of financing escalating transfer and wage costs.

The official said England's Football Supporters' Association had also written to Monti expressing similar sentiments.

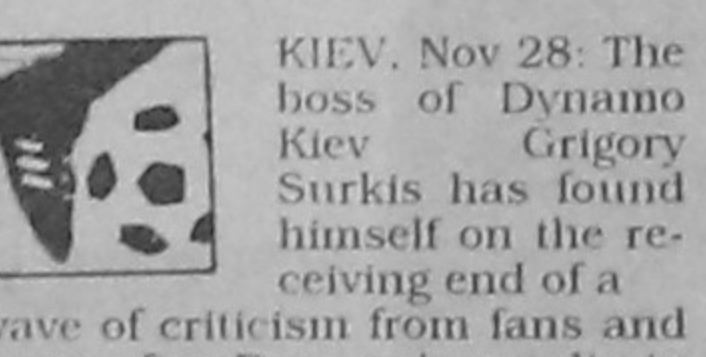
These people were not party to the Task Force but their views are very welcome," the commission spokeswoman said.

French replays set for December 13

PARIS, Nov 29: The French First Division match between Lille and Paris Saint Germain which was stopped in the 63rd minute last Saturday because of rain with the score standing 1-1 will be replayed on December 13, the National Football League (LNF) confirmed Monday, reports AFP.

Two other delayed First Division matches - Lyon v Toulouse and Bastia v Nantes - will also be played on the same day.

Kiev boss hears the music



KIEV, Nov 28: The boss of Dynamo Kiev, Grigory Surkis has found himself on the receiving end of a wave of criticism from fans and press after Dynamo's results in the Champions' League failed to match expectations, reports AFP.

Ukraine's top side, which reached the Champions' League semi-finals in 1999 and the quarter-finals in 1998 and again this year, failed to make the cut into the current tournament's second round stage.

Dynamo's early exit from the Champions' League has infuriated their fans, who were not only exasperated by a string of poor results, but also by the club's decision to sell star players Andrei Shevchenko, Sergei Rebrov and Oleg Luzhny, to western European teams.

Their replacements have been written off as inferior talents, while also failing to blend into Dynamo's overall playing style.

The club's biggest signing, Georgian international striker Georgiy Denatradze, top scorer in the Russian league's league a year ago, has been labelled the biggest disappointment after failing to produce the goods in Kiev this season.

The out-of-luck Denatradze, who cost Dynamo almost 20 million dollars, failed to enhance his reputation as a goal-scorer either in the Champions' or domestic league.

The team's sponsors are rumoured to have also voiced their disapproval of Surkis' transfer policy, suggesting that the Dynamo president could be sacked in the near future and replaced by head coach Valery Lobanovsky.

The whispering gallery alleges that Surkis wasted the huge transfer fees he earned for selling the Dynamo favourites to the giants of European football.

However, Lobanovsky recently told the press he did not see Dynamo's results this season as a disaster, adding that nobody should be sacked because the upheaval might hamper the team's bid for European cup glory next year.

MOMENT OF HIS LIFE: Boca Juniors captain Jorge Hernan Bermudez is ecstatic as he lifts the Intercontinental Cup. —AFP photo

Real Madrid: Casillas, Hierro, Roberto Carlos, Karanka, McManaman, Figo, Makelele, Helguera, Guti, Geremi, Raul.

Boca Juniors: Cordoba, Fernandez, Traverso, Ibarra, Matellan, Basualdo, Serna, Riquelme, Battaglia, Delgado, Palermo.

Referee: Oscar Ruiz Acosta (Col)

Assistant referees: Liu Tiejun (Chin), Noboru Ishiyama (Jpn)