

Suzuki silences Lions



AFP, Niigata

A double strike by Kashima Antlers' forward Takayuki Suzuki booked Japan a place in the semi-finals of the Confederations Cup and sent Cameroon crashing out of the World Cup warm-up tournament.

The hosts 2-0 win over the African champions in Niigata guaranteed that they will finish in the top two in group B while Cameroon have no chance of advancing after their second defeat.

Brazil and Canada, who drew 0-0 in Kashima in Saturday's other match, can both still reach the last four. Brazil will be the favourites however as a point from their last game against Japan on Monday will be sufficient for them to go through.

Even if they beat Japan and top the group, the Brazilians will have to travel to South Korea for their semi-final as Japan have been guaranteed the right to play their semi in front of their own fans.

Cameroon had arrived in Japan with a near full strength squad and

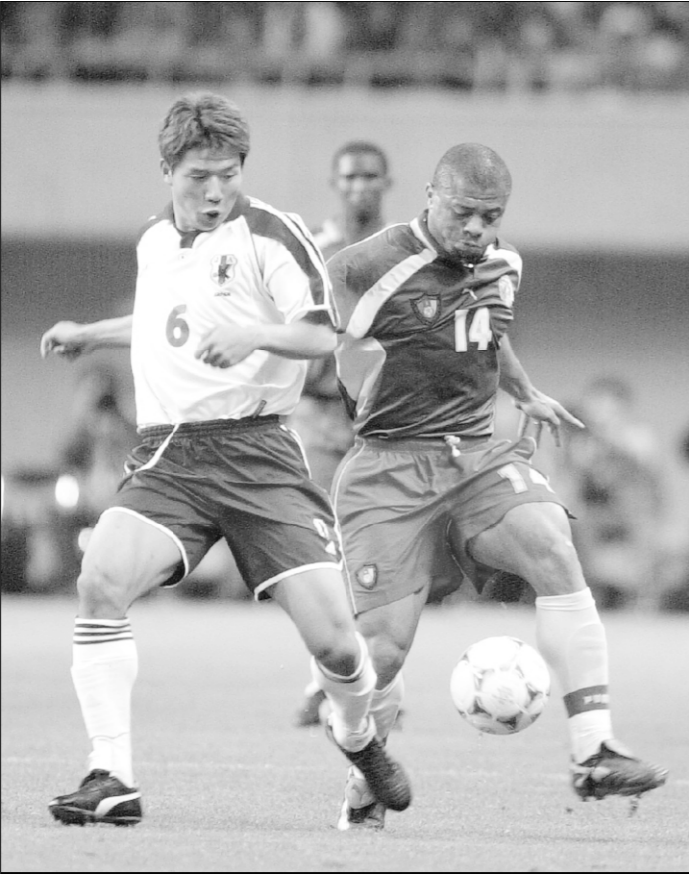


PHOTO: AFP

A Cameroon (R) player tries to go past a Japanese player

were seen as potential winners of the tournament.

But they have failed to produce anything like the form that won them the African Nations Cup last year. After losing to Brazil on Thursday, they were well beaten by a Japanese side that was on a high after a 3-0 opening win over Canada.

Suzuki put the hosts ahead with a well-taken shot after only eight minutes then made sure of the win midway through the second half with a header that Cameroon goalkeeper Boukar Alioum should have saved.

In Group A, the semifinalists will be decided on Sunday, when Australia take on South Korea and world champions France face Mexico. The Mexicans are the only team definitely out of the running.

STANDINGS

Confederations Cup standings after Saturday's matches in group B: (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, against, points):

Table with 6 columns: Country, P, W, D, L, GF, GA, Pts. Includes Group B (Japan, Brazil, Canada, Cameroon) and Group A (Australia, France, South Korea, Mexico).

Yokohama show Ardiles the door

REUTERS, Yokohama

Fomer Argentine World Cup winner Ossie Ardiles paid the price for Yokohama's poor start to the 2001 season on Friday when he was sacked after just 18 months in the job.

Yokohama officials confirmed that the 48-year-old Ardiles, who won a World Cup winner's medal at the 1978 finals on home soil, has been fired due to differences with the board over the signing of the overseas players.

Ardiles had an immediate impact on Yokohama after taking over in January 2000, leading the team to the J-League first-stage title.

But Yokohama sold midfielder Atsuhiko Miura and South Korean international Yoo Sang-chul in the pre-season and the club is now languishing fourth from bottom of the 16-team First Division after just three wins in 10 games.

Ardiles has also had spells in charge of J-League side Shimizu S-Pulse, Croatia Zagreb and Tottenham Hotspur.

Greek coach won't renew contract

AFP, Iraklion

Greece coach Vasilis Daniel told a press conference here on Friday he would stand down when his contract expires in December.

Daniel has been under pressure from the Greek media to resign because Greece have won only one of four matches in the qualifying competition for the 2002 World Cup.

Greece play Albania on Saturday here in Crete and next Wednesday face England in Athens, but the Greeks are bottom of Group 9 and virtually certain to miss out on qualification.

Daniel complained that the Greek football federation had failed to back to him after Greece lost 4-2 to Germany in their last World Cup qualifier in March.

He said he would have resigned after the match with Germany but for a clause in his contract which stipulated that he would have had to return all the money he had received as coach from the federation up to then.

Daniel said Greece was ready to win against Albania and England in a bid to challenge for second spot in its group.

England, who are lying second in the group five points behind Germany, desperately need to win in Athens on Wednesday.

Preview Lemerre plans shake-up



AFP, Ulsan

France coach Roger Lemerre said Saturday that he would ring the changes in a bid to avoid an early exit from the Confederations Cup and prevent any blows to his World Cup preparations.

Lemerre said that he had been forced into his controversial decision to make 11 changes on Friday in the 1-0 defeat against Australia to keep his key players fresh.

Five players made their international debut against Australia on Friday but Lemerre is likely to opt for a more experienced line-up against the Mexicans here on Sunday.

Mexico, the current holders, are resigned to catching an early flight home after their defeats against the competition's surprise package Australia and the much-improved Koreans.

South Korea still have a chance of progressing if they can beat Australia and the French fail to polish off a demoralised Mexican

team. Lemerre has described this competition as the ideal "launch pad" for the World Cup 2002 in South Korea and Japan.

He said that Friday's game had been a perfect opportunity to try out some of the less experienced squad members in preparation for the next World Cup and rest key players. But he told reporters Saturday that he would pick his strongest side against Mexico.

"I will rely up to the maximum on those who played the first match," he said.

It should mean a return to the starting line-up for Paris St Germain's gifted but temperamental centre-forward Nicolas Anelka, who scored in the 5-0 opening day victory over South Korea. Bastia striker Frederic Nee was among those winning their first cap against the Australians, but his combination with Arsenal's Sylvain Wiltord failed to ignite.

The French will also benefit from the return of the combative Patrick Vieira and captain Marcel Desailly with Lemerre warning that the Mexicans would be fired up to beat the world champions and restore some pride.

Chelsea defender Frank Leboeuf, who captained the French on Friday, is suspended after being sent off.

Mexican coach Enrique Meza

also indicated Saturday that he would make major changes to the line-up.

He said the only person who would definitely start was goalkeeper Oswaldo Sanchez while Jared Borgetti, who sustained a head injury against South Korea, was definitely ruled out.

The Koreans experienced Dutch coach Guus Hiddink was delighted by his team's performance as they deservedly secured a 2-1 victory over the Mexicans on Friday thanks to a last-minute header by the outstanding Yoo Sang Chul.

Hiddink had called for his team to toughen up after their defeat against France and his players responded, with Yoo playing the entire second half with a broken nose after a collision with Borgetti.

But they will still need to improve their finishing against Australia, the narrow margin of victory disguising their dominance of the Mexicans.

"They improved a lot since the first match. It was a lot better in two days," said Hiddink.

The Koreans should benefit from Australia's early progress into the next round, with the Socceroos' boss Frank Farina indicating that he will rest two or three players on Sunday when they take on Korea in Suwon, near Seoul.

Hiddink waits for next fight



AFP, Ulsan

Guus Hiddink punched the air in delight at the final whistle as his South Korea team

beat Mexico 2-1 in a thrilling Confederations Cup match.

A last-minute header from Sang-chul Yoo had given the Dutch coach and his team the victory their enterprising play had deserved on Friday night at Ulsan's Munsu stadium which will stage two first round matches and a quarter-final during next year's World Cup finals.

Hiddink knows that with exactly one year to go before those finals start, he has his work cut out to achieve Korea's prime objective in 2002. No-one expects them to win the World Cup, but what Hiddink

has been hired to deliver is a first-ever victory in the World Cup and a place in the second round.

Their five previous World Cup appearances have produced four draws and 10 defeats and as no host nation has ever gone out of the World Cup in the opening phase, the Koreans are looking to avoid such a dubious honour. The pressure is certainly on.

Hiddink was hired at the beginning of the year and comes with impressive credentials. He won the European Cup with PSV Eindhoven in 1988 and tamed the big egos that dominate Dutch soccer to lead the Netherlands to the verge of the World Cup final in 1998 when they were unlucky to lose to Brazil in the semifinals on penalties.

Coaching South Korea presents a different set of problems -- but one he is relishing. His immediate focus is Sunday night's match against Australia in Suwon and he goes into that match buoyed by Friday night's win over Mexico.

"Australia are proving they are becoming a good side," he said after the Socceroos 1-0 win over

World champions France in Taegu earlier on Friday.

"They are strong, physical and not likely to get past the first round in 2002. We should have scored more goals against a team at Mexico's level," it complained.

But that is water off a duck's back to a man like Hiddink who has also coached at Real Madrid and Valencia among others and has shown his mettle by coping with the internecine squabbles of the Netherlands' top players, who could win a world championship for arguing hands down.

"People can criticise me all they want, but the World Cup will be here soon enough and we will have the whole country behind us.

"It is great to be part of it as a coach, as a player and in the host country. The team is improving and we know what we have to do. It is up to me and them to achieve our objectives and with the right mental attitude I think we will."

"They in turn have criticised him and Saturday's Sports Seoul newspaper saw little in Friday's win to

encourage hopes ahead of 2002.

"Hiddink is famous as a coach, but we are still at a low level and not likely to get past the first round in 2002. We should have scored more goals against a team at Mexico's level," it complained.

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Iraqis delay draw



AFP, Bangkok

The announcement here Saturday of the dates and venues for the final Asian qualifying round for the 2002 World Cup was delayed for nearly three hours by the refusal of two teams drawn in the group with Iraq to play in Baghdad, officials said.

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia said they would not play on Iraqi soil, leading the organisers to leave two

teams play-off on a home and away basis with the winner of that match playing against a European team for a third place in the finals.

"The (Asian Football Confederation, AFC) asked all (nine) countries, 'If you are drawn together with Iraq, will you play in Baghdad?' Saudi Arabia and Bahrain refused," said a European football official.

"The AFC decided Iraq would play on neutral ground. So there would be no games in Baghdad except for Thailand and Iran."

The official said Iraq would face a disadvantage because it would not have the support of its home fans for

two games, and if they were paired with a European nation in another round, however unlikely, it could create further problems.

"Group B is very happy not to play Iran and Iraq, especially Iraq. One because of its strength -- Iran -- and one because of the political aspects," he said.

FIFA has allocated 400,000 dollars to each team to help cover the costs of hosting the matches.

Relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia were severed during the 1991 Gulf War when the kingdom fought alongside a US-led military coalition in evicting Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Geovanni signs for Barca

AFP, RIO DE JANEIRO

Promising Cruzeiro striker Geovanni Deiberson Mauricio has signed a five-year contract with Spanish giants Barcelona for a transfer fee of 18 million dollars, the club announced on Friday.

"I always wanted to play for a European club," he said.

It was the biggest deal in the 80-year history of Cruzeiro, who are based in the southeastern city of Minas Gerais. Player of the year, who has yet to officially agree to the deal, attended a meeting between representatives from the Catalan club and Boca Juniors president Mauricio Macri on Wednesday.

Wiltord's days numbered?



AFP, London

Arsenal's France international striker Sylvain Wiltord admitted Saturday that he could be on his way out of English Premiership side after clashing with club manager Arsenal Wenger.

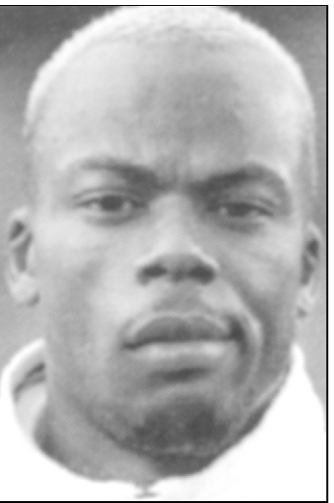
The 27-year-old slammed Wenger's squad rotation policy claiming that he had been promised a regular team place alongside France team-mate Thierry Henry when he signed for a club-record 13 million pounds (18 million dollars) from French side Bordeaux last summer, the Sun newspaper reported.

"He did not start me with Thierry like he told me he would," claimed Wiltord.

"It's clear he has to consider things I can't control, like tiredness, suspension and lack of form. But I know if I've been good or not and I don't hide behind all that."

"It's a question of principal not money. Work in training must be rewarded. I only recognise the logic of the pitch," said Wiltord.

Wiltord's future with the club was thrown into doubt when he went absent without permission before the final game of the season, a 3-2 defeat at Southampton. He turned up late for training on



SYLVAIN WILTORD

"I said that shouldn't prevent a player saying honestly how he felt rather than cheating the manager by slacking on the field or inventing an injury. I preferred to be honest and admit I wasn't feeling up to it. Arsene told me I couldn't pick my matches."

Wiltord, who has scored 15 times for the Gunners, admitted that he was unsure of what plans

the club's 51-year-old French manager had for him, but despite reports linking him with French side Paris Saint Germain he admitted that he would prefer to work things out at Highbury.

"I honestly don't know what the club wants to do with me. I sincerely hope we can make a new start. I am ready to go back for training on July 16 and am looking forward to a big season with the team. Great things can be done with the Gunners," he added.

Jestrovic bound for Anderlecht

AFP, Brussels

Yugoslav striker Nenad Jestrovic has signed a four-year deal with Belgian champions Anderlecht from first division rivals Mouscron, club general manager Michel Verschueren confirmed Saturday.

The 25-year-old Jestrovic finished third among top Belgian scorers this season with 20 goals, behind Anderlecht duo Tomasz Radzinski (23) and Jan Koller (22).

Jestrovic, currently suffering from a leg injury, will undergo medical tests at the end of the month. The deal is reported to be worth an estimated 2.3 million dollars.

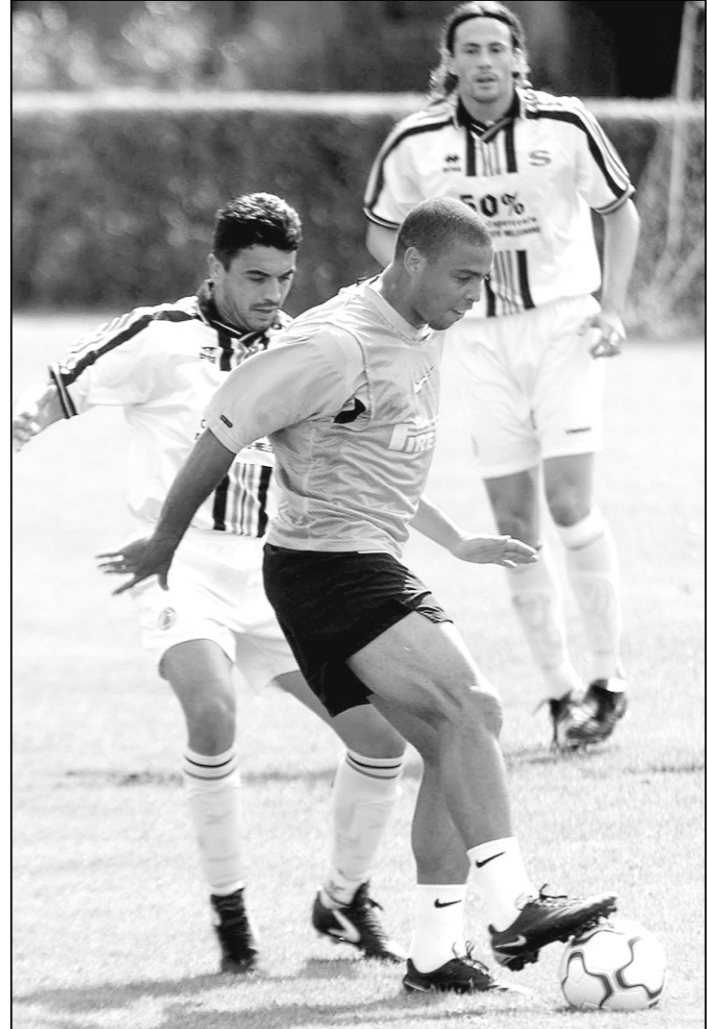


PHOTO: AFP

Brazilian superstar Ronaldo in action.

Wenger wants Nakata



AFP, Tokyo

Arsenal boss Arsene Wenger wants to sign Japanese superstar AS Roma supersub Hidetoshi Nakata as an attacking midfielder, a press report said Saturday.

"Nakata is undoubtedly a superb player. He stands out even in Europe," Wenger was quoted as saying by the Sankei Sports newspaper, adding that his Premiership club was in talks with Roma.

The 51-year-old Frenchman said there still remained a "big gap" between the transfer fee asked by Roma and that offered by the Gunners.

"At the moment, we are discussing within the team about our final offer," he told the sports daily.

Wenger, who took Nagoya Grampus from a second string J-League side to Emperor's Cup winners when he coached the club in 1995-1996, is in Japan as a commentator for a Japanese television network during the Confederations Cup.

According to Italian media, Arsenal offered 48 billion lire (22.5 million dollars) for Nakata, well below the 80 billion lire demanded by Roma.

In recent weeks, the 24-year-old Nakata has been creative in the final phase of Roma's campaign for their first Serie-A title in 18 years as a substitute for playmaker and hometown hero Francesco Totti.

Wenger said he was considering

using Nakata, if he ever joins the Gunners, as one of two attacking



HIDETOSHI NAKATA

midfielders in a regular 4-4-2 formation or a player behind Thierry Henry in a possible 4-5-1 line-up featuring the French striker as a sole forward.

"As a matter of course, I am

considering minor system changes," Wenger was quoted as saying.

Wenger, who has been linked with a move abroad when his contract ends in June 2002, also said he would "definitely remain in Europe" until 2004 despite the persistent wish of Japanese football chiefs to have him as national coach.

FIFA refuses to hear Couto, Davids appeals

AFP, Zurich

World football's governing body FIFA on Friday slammed the door on attempts to overturn a ban for doping imposed on Fernando Couto of Portugal and Edgar Davids of the Netherlands.

The players were banned from international football on Thursday after testing positive for the banned anabolic steroid nandrolone.

FIFA said on Friday their suspensions were not subject to appeals lodged by their respective national federations in a bid to clear the players for their countries' crucial 2002 World Cup qualifying matches on Saturday.

Ireland face Portugal and the Netherlands play Estonia in Group Two of the European qualifying round.