



Saudi Arabia's Ahmed al-Dosari (L) and an Iraqi player chase after the ball during their World Cup qualifier.

PHOTO: AFP

Battle Asia reaches climax



AFP, Hong Kong

They weren't convincing, but they were effective.

Saudi Arabia and Iran did what they needed to and that was to ensure that wins over Iraq and Thailand respectively would send their Asian qualifying Group A for next year's World Cup right down the last day.

The Saudis, who have made it to the last two World Cup finals, defeated Iraq 2-1 in neutral Amman to reclaim top spot with 14 points with one game to play.

Iran beat Thailand 1-0 in Tehran earlier on Friday taking temporary charge of the top spot.

However, although they are two points adrift of the Saudis, Iran have a game in hand and could clinch overall control of the group by beating Iraq in Tehran next Friday.

If they pull it off, it will mean they would take a one point lead into the final day on October 19 when they travel to Bahrain while the Saudis entertain Thailand.

The Saudis got off to a flying start in the Jordanian capital on Friday night taking the lead after just thirty seconds courtesy of Abdullah Sheehan.

It followed a cool build-up following the kick-off as Mohamed al Shihob's pass was tucked away at close range by Sheehan who left goalkeeper Saad Nasser no chance.

However, Iraq, who went into the match with an outside hope of claiming the runners-up spot, equalised after 31 minutes when Abdulwahab Aboulhail headed home a right wing cross from Hawar al Mollah past Mohamed al Daeyea in the Saudi goal.

The Iraqis, forced to play in Amman because of the Saudis' refusal to travel to Baghdad, almost took the lead after 55 minutes when Qahtan Chatir hit the crossbar. Then Imad Mohamed saw his long range effort fly just over the crossbar.

But the Saudis grabbed the winner when Sheehan latched on to a through ball from Ibrahim Mater to score from close range in the 77th minute.

Earlier, Iran beat Thailand 1-0 in Tehran in a match which marked the 100th international appearance of Iranian striker Ali Daei.

Iran put on a feast of attacking football in front of 50,000 fans and to the sound of beating drums.

Despite having a host of

game which slowed in the second half.

Only the winners of the two Asian groups qualify automatically for next year's finals in South Korea and Japan. The runners-up in each group will play off on a home-and-away basis with the winner qualify-

Gulf teams vying for the play-off spot along with Uzbekistan.

STANDINGS
Tables, results and fixtures from Asia's World Cup 2002 qualifying groups after Friday's matches:
GROUP A (Played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points)



Thailand's Nirut Surasiang (L) and Iran's Ali Reza Nikbakt battle for possession in Tehran.

PHOTO: AFP

goalscoring chances, their single goal came from a superb shot from Ali-Vahedi Nikbakt in the 33rd minute.

The Iranians had five opportunities to add to their lead before half-time. Two shots, including a thundering 30-yard effort from Hertha Berlin player Daei, hit the crossbar.

The Thais, coached by former England international Peter Withe, had to rely on counter-attacks but they were unable to get back into the

ing to play the runners-up from European zone Group Two - either Portugal or the Republic of Ireland.

China have all but wrapped up Group B - they just need one point at home to Oman on Saturday night to confirm their first ever appearance in the World Cup finals.

Their task was made easier on Thursday night when the United Arab Emirates beat Qatar 2-1 in Doha to throw the race for the runners-up spot wide open with the two

Saudi	7	4	2	1	13	7	14
Iran	6	3	3	0	7	3	12
Iraq	7	2	1	4	8	8	7
Bahrain	6	1	3	2	4	7	6
Thailand	6	0	3	3	10	3	

GROUP B (Played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points)

China	5	4	1	0	9	1	13
UAE	7	3	1	3	8	9	10
Qatar	7	2	3	2	10	7	9
Uzbek	6	2	1	3	10	7	
Oman	5	0	2	3	1	11	2

MU wanted Van Gaal

INTERNET, London

Manchester United sounded out Louis van Gaal about becoming their next manager, according to the Dutch national team coach.

Van Gaal claims that the Old Trafford club contacted him last year about taking on the role when Sir Alex Ferguson steps down at the end of this season.

"I knew I was first on the list last year," the Netherlands coach told the Daily Telegraph.

"I don't have any contact with them now because I am coach of the national team, but I can imagine that a club like Manchester United are still interested in Louis van Gaal."

The Netherlands have failed to qualify for next year's World Cup under the guidance of 50-year-old Van Gaal, who formerly coached Barcelona and Ajax.

However, he did lead the Dutch club to victory in the 1995 Champions League.

Vialli not going to join Samp

INTERNET, London

Watford manager Gianluca Vialli has refused to take over his former club Sampdoria, The Sun reported.

A group of investors want him to head a 50 million pound rescue bid for the needy club, which have 4 points in 6 games and are currently 17th in the standings of Italian Serie B.

They want Vialli to invest cash to become the new president of the Italian team, where he became the Italian champion of 1990/91 season.

Commenting on the proposal Vialli said: "Nothing could be further from my mind than the thought of rejoining Sampdoria."

He played 223 games for Sampdoria, having scored 85 goals.

In 1996 Gianluca won the Champions League with "La Vecchia Signora". He made 72 appearances for Juventus FC (27 goals).

37-year-old Vialli moved to Premiership side Chelsea FC in July 1996. He scored 40 goals in his 77 matches for the Blues. After Ruud Gullit's shock departure in February 1998, Vialli was appointed as a Chelsea's player and a manager and became the club's most successful coach within 18 months. In his first five months in charge he guided Chelsea to success in both the European Cup Winners' Cup and the Worthington Cup and also won the European Super Cup.

The Italian specialist then moved to head English division one side Watford at the start of 2000-2001 season.

Watford have 11 points after 10 games and lay 17th in the standings.

Vieri back to training

AFP, Milan

Inter Milan's Italian international striker Christian Vieri was Friday back in light training at the club's Pinetina training camp after a month-long lay-off win an Achilles tendon injury.

Vieri trained apart from his teammates, concentrating only on jogging and other light exercises.

The striker sustained the injury in Italy's 0-0 draw with Lithuania in Kaunas on September 1.

Within China's grasp



AFP, Beijing

The champagne is being chilled, the party is ready to begin - China are just ninety minutes and a single point away from their first-ever World Cup.

The signs for Sunday evening's game against Oman could hardly be better for millions of football fanatics across the world's most populous nation, desperately waiting for the side to finally break their qualification jinx.

China's neat and well-organised team, expertly marshalled by super-experienced Yugoslav coach Bora Milutinovic, is virtually at full strength and will play in front of 50,000 lung-burstingly loud home fans in the northeastern football hotbed of Shenyang.

Their opponents have thus far picked up just two points and a single goal from five Asian Group B qualifying matches so far, and should be easy pickings for the table-topping Chinese.

Circumstances have conspired to make the task for Bora's men even easier than they expected, after previous closest rivals Qatar slumped to an unexpected 2-1 home loss to the United Arab Emirates on Thursday.

The Chinese, three points clear

at the head of the group, now need just one point from their last three matches to guarantee a berth at next year's finals in Japan and South Korea.

Although the clear expectation is they will finish the job on Sunday, the widely-travelled Milutinovic has insisted talk of celebration parties is premature.

"I don't want to talk about that," he told reporters. "We have to play the game first."

"Players will relax if there is less pressure and I hope that the media will not put too much pressure on the team and place everything on the game against Oman," he said.

If China succeed they will be the record-breaking fifth nation Milutinovic has guided to the World Cup Finals, after Mexico, Costa Rica, the United States and Nigeria.

"Playing at Shenyang will give us the advantage of climate and fan support, but the important thing is that the players must close the opposition down as they did against the Emirates and Uzbekistan."

"It is important to score first to gain the advantage and we will try and start the game at a furious pace."

Team selection has presented few headaches for the wily Serb, for whom number one goalkeeper Jiang Jin will return following an injury that ruled him out of China's previous game, against the UAE.

With midfielder Qi Hong out through suspension, he must how-

ever choose a central partner for Li Tie, with Ma Mingyu and Yu Genwei fighting for the spot.

The relatively trouble free build-up for Milutinovic is a far cry from August, just before China began their second stage of World Cup qualification.

Although the side had won all six preliminary qualifiers, the failure to notch up rugby-style scores against minnows such as the Maldives and poor performances in subsequent friendlies saw widespread calls in the Chinese media for the coach's dismissal.

The English-language China Daily newspaper even said there was "a strong possibility" local coach Shen Xiangfu had already been lined up to replace him.

Now such talk is long-forgotten, as is Milutinovic's widely-reported pledge to "jump off the Great Wall" if China failed to qualify, a statement he later denied, saying instead the Chinese people would throw him off.

Current talk is of what the Yugoslav will do after next year's World Cup - stay with China or seek yet another challenge.

It is a question Milutinovic has steadfastly refused to address.

"It is not right to compare my private life with the team's match," he told the Soccer Fan Weekly newspaper.

"I absolutely will not discuss my individual matters before all the matches are over."

Count on Bora



AFP, Beijing

National football federations have a habit of reaching for Bora Milutinovic's number when time gets tight and a success-starved public bays for victory.

Should the Serb's Chinese squad sneak at least a point against Oman in their home qualifying tie on Sunday, as universally expected, the globe's most populous nation will be going to the World Cup for the first time.

But for the silver-haired Milutinovic, next year's tournament

reached the second round, with Mexico even getting to the quarter finals.

Over the years Milutinovic has acquired the reputation of a miracle-working mercenary, travelling the globe according to demand but never failing to deliver the goods.

With China he has, as ever, combined guile with a measure of good fortune, avoiding regional footballing powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran in the draw and seeing Group B rivals fritter points away against each other.

Last week Qatar coach Paulo Campos became the latest trainer to accuse a side coached by the Serb of being "lucky".

However just two months ago

ability as "average".

But after storming away with Group B, Milutinovic is set for iconic status on a third continent.

Between training sessions on Thursday, the man known across China as "Milu" dismissed the pressure of expectation building from 50,000 fervent fans in the northeast footballing hotbed of Shenyang.

"What is pressure? That is the game. I do not care about pressure," he told AFP.

"But it is a big night for the players, for the country and for the people."

Milutinovic is known to be annoyed at the assumption that defeating Oman is a formality, especially Shenyang authorities' insistence on constructing a stage at the stadium for a post-match victory concert.

"There are no easy games, we cannot assume anything," he said.

The former Partizan Belgrade and AS Monaco player has over the years acquired a reputation for eccentricity, one based mainly on a hyperactive manner and imperfect grasp of a string of foreign languages.

In each of the stops during his global coaching odyssey, which began with seven years at the UNAM Pumas club in Mexico, Milutinovic has also managed to acquire critics among footballing authorities and the media.

But players have consistently respected his methods and appreciated the rewards they bring.

"In all my 12 years in the national squad the fighting spirit in the team has never been as good as it has been since Bora took over," Chinese captain Fan Zhixi told Football Asia magazine last year.

"This is the first time that the coach, management and the players have all been together, have all had the same approach. This is the strongest we have ever been."

Team USA nearly there



AP, undated

Three months ago, the United States was on the verge of advancing to the World Cup. Going into Sunday's qualifier against Jamaica, the Americans still haven't made it.

Three straight losses put the United States in pretty close to a must-win situation going into the game at Foxboro, Massachusetts.

"I would say that we were a bit complacent over the last two or three games," U.S. coach Bruce Arena said this week.

"Many players believed what they read in the papers, that we were basically in after having 13 points in 15 games," he added. "I think we stepped back a little bit. I think we lost our focus and may have lost sight of our roles on the team, and the coach did a lousy job."

After a 4-0-1 start in the final round, the Americans have lost three straight qualifiers for the first time in 29 years, dropping from first to fourth in the standings of the North and Central American and Caribbean region.

By beating Jamaica (2-4-2) and winning at Trinidad and Tobago (0-7-1) on November 11, the United States would be assured one of the

region's three berths in next year's tournament in Japan and South Korea. Without two wins, the Americans would need missteps by both Mexico (4-3-1) and Honduras (4-2-2).

"I think the most important thing now is we can learn from the three games that we lost," U.S. captain Claudio Reyna said. "The main thing is to just tidy up defensively as a whole team."

Reyna missed all three losses, the first because of a suspension and the others because of a groin injury that sidelined him from August 22 to last Sunday. Also back from injuries are forward Ante Razov and midfielder John O'Brien.

Not that the U.S. team is completely healthy, Brian McBride, Clint Mathis and Josh Wolff - three top offensive players - are still injured and aren't expected back this year. But Reyna appears to be the key factor, controlling the U.S. midfield and the flow of play. The Americans are 5-1-2 in qualifiers for next year's tournament when he's in the lineup, 2-3-1 when he's not.

"If Claudio is playing he'll be the main focus for us," Jamaica midfielder Andy Williams said. "If Clint and Josh weren't injured, our task would be much greater."

Despite all the tumult of late, the Americans remain confident they'll qualify by overtaking Mexico or Honduras, who play each other Nov. 11. If they don't, U.S. soccer won't

have another big game until 2004, when qualifying for the 2006 tournament begins.

"To be honest with you, we haven't developed a passion for the game yet in this country," Arena said. "In order to gain a passion, an improved passion, we need to continue to qualify for the World Cup. It would not be a crisis if we did not, but if we ultimately want to be a soccer-playing country that's on par with the many other great soccer-playing countries, we need to continue to make progress."

Perugia ponder Ince swoop

AFP, Perugia

Middlesbrough midfielder Paul Ince could be the answer to Perugia's midfield problems, ANSA news agency reported Friday.

Perugia have just sold Italian international Fabio Liverani to Lazio while the highly-rated Davide Baiocco is being linked to a move to either Juventus or Inter Milan when the Italian transfer market reopens in January.

Now the Italian first division side is tracking 33-year-old Ince as a replacement after Middlesbrough revealed last month that the former England captain would not be retained at the end of the season.



A picture of Iranian star striker Ali Daei who won his 100th cap against Thailand on October 5.

PHOTO: AFP



REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli FA chairman Gavri Levy has strongly protested to FIFA president Sepp Blatter over the decision to postpone Sunday's World Cup qualifier against Austria, which was due to be played in Tel Aviv.

In an unprecedentedly blunt response to FIFA's swift decision to call off the match following Thursday's crash of a Russian plane carrying Israeli nationals, Levy lashed out using undiplomatic language, saying the move was "arbitrary" and "misguided" among other choice words.

He criticised Blatter for what he called "a misguided decision (which) causes great moral and financial harm to Israeli football."

He added: "It is the first time ever that a game in Israel has been cancelled or postponed on such grounds."

FIFA said on Thursday that they decided to postpone the game just hours after the airliner came down in the Black Sea killing everyone on board and said the decision was taken by president Blatter and members of the Emergency Committee.

FIFA spokesman Keith Cooper said on Friday: "Of course we understand that Israel is disappointed after the decision earlier this week following a long period of uncertainty."

"But we are living in exceptional times and every move has to be carefully considered. It is going to need understanding on all sides in order to maintain fairness and objectivity."

Even before Thursday's crash, problems had surrounded Sunday's match with nine Austrian players pulling out of their national squad because of tension in the area following the attacks in America on September 11.

Levy criticised Austria's behaviour in the saga, saying it was "unacceptable that the whinnings of the Austrians and the pressure which they brought to bear" had led to the decision.

"What is the difference between a flight by the England national team to Greece and the Austrians' flight to Tel Aviv?" Levy asked.

The IFA chairman said Israel had a perfect safety record in hosting foreign soccer teams and pointed to the most recent case of the Romanian under-18 team, which played against Israel earlier this week in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv.

In remarks directed at the FIFA president he said: "The worst thing emanating from your letter is that you say that the decision (to postpone) was taken after consultations with us. "We were never asked and it was expressly against our wish. "It seems that only the Austrians were consulted," he claimed, and said the Israelis had been left "high and dry."

Levy added: "When we were

informed of the decision (by a FIFA official) we were presented with a fait accompli and we had no further say in the matter."

Levy said there was no need for the apparent knee-jerk reaction following the crash of the airliner.

The plane plunged into the Black Sea following a mid-air blast while en route from Tel Aviv to Novosibirsk with 78 people, most of them Israeli, on board.

"I reiterate that this apparent unilateral decision was taken following the air crash. We now know it was not a terrorist act, but that the plane was shot down accidentally by a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile," he said.

Ukraine's defence ministry has denied that any of its missiles could have struck the plane, but officials in Washington have said there was "every indication" the Ukrainians shot the plane down by accident.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Anatoly Kinakh was quoted on Friday by Interfax-Ukraine news agency as saying the theory that his country accidentally shot down the plane had a "right to exist".

However, asked to clarify the report, Kinakh's spokesman said: "The prime minister said there were several theories and they all have a right to exist and it's too early to draw any conclusions because an investigation is underway."