

Paraguay keep Brazil in check

Iranian interests Hitzfeld

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich manager Ottmar Hitzfeld has confirmed that the German champions are interested in VfL Bochum's Iranian international Vahid Hashemian.

The 27-year-old striker, nicknamed the 'helicopter' due to his prowess in the air, has netted 12 goals in the league this season to help unfashionable Bochum to fifth in the Bundesliga. "There is no hiding the fact that he is a very good player who has scored a lot of goals," Hitzfeld said. "That is why he is an interesting option."

Hashemian has a contract with Bochum until June 2005 but has a reported get-out clause allowing him to leave for two million euros. "My agent has been talking to Bayern," revealed Hashemian.

The futures of Peruvian marksman Claudio Pizarro and Paraguayan Roque Santa Cruz, who have both had disappointing seasons, would be thrown into doubt if Hashemian joined Bayern.

A WC 2002 final rematch?

AFP, Berlin

Germany are in talks about hosting a friendly with world champions Brazil after the 2004 European championships.

Germany have pencilled in a home match for September 8 and German Football Federation (DFB) spokesman Harald Stenger confirmed that Brazil had been earmarked as opponents. Brazil defeated Germany 2-0 in the 2002 World Cup final in Japan.



REUTERS, Asuncion

World champions Brazil were held to a goalless draw by Paraguay in an uncompromising, foul-ridden World Cup qualifier on Wednesday.

Paraguay never let Brazil settle, keeping the visitors' feared trio of Kaka, Ronaldinho and Ronaldo under wraps with a combination of tough marking, determined defending and several slices of luck.

The draw enabled Argentina, 1-0 winners over Ecuador on Tuesday, to stay top of the South American 2006 World Cup qualifying zone table, a point ahead of Paraguay and two ahead of Brazil who are the first world champions to have to qualify.

Venezuela moved to fourth, level on points with Brazil, with a 3-0 win at Uruguay.

Brazil gave as good as they got with midfielder Gilberto Silva and defender Lucio both lucky to stay on the pitch after persistent fouling.

Ronaldo had a quiet game but was himself booked in the 16th minute after an ugly tangle with Paraguay's Delio Toledo, who was also shown the yellow card.

Paraguay stayed second in the South American qualifying group with ten points from five games while Brazil are a further point behind in third place.

"It's not a bad result," Paraguay striker Roque Santa Cruz said. "Brazil are always a very strong team and the main thing is to keep picking up points."

A floodlight failure interrupted the match for nearly half an hour only two minutes after the kickoff. Once play restarted, both teams struggled to create any clear-cut chances.

Both sides won several free kicks in dangerous positions but Francisco Arce's efforts for Paraguay and Ronaldinho's shots for Brazil were all wasted, the latter sending two balls straight into the defensive wall.

Paraguay were lucky not to concede a penalty when Carlos Gamarra appeared to trip Ronaldinho, although the Barcelona player made a meal of the incident.

Ronaldo had a rare chance early in the second half when he burst down the left but his low shot was well saved by Ricardo Tavaresi.

Almost immediately, Bayern Munich striker Santa Cruz had a similar effort saved by Dida at the other end.

Gamarra had another lucky escape when he appeared to bring down Ronaldo but the same player saved Paraguay when he deflected away a Roberto Carlos free kick when it was heading for the bottom corner.

Paraguay nearly snatched an injury time winner when defender Paulo da Silva had a free header from a corner but he failed to

make proper contact. By that stage, with the clock past midnight, both teams seemed happy with the draw.

"We didn't play with our usual style," Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira told reporters. "We tried too many direct balls instead of passing our way upfield. We needed to be more patient."

Kaka blamed lack of training time for his side's lacklustre display. Brazil arrived in Asuncion on Monday and had only one practice before the match at the Defensores of the Chaco stadium.

"You can't expect us to produce the same performances we do with our clubs," he said. "We had one day's training and even that was just half an hour."

"But we felt we could have won if we had created a few more chances."

Gilberto agreed that Brazil failed to produce their best. "We fell short. We should have passed the ball around," said the Arsenal player.

Parreira, however, said he was still happy with a point which kept his side third in the South American World Cup qualifying group.

"We won a point. And in a World Cup match, that will help us qualify," he said.

STANDINGS										
(Played-won-drawn-lost-goals-for-against-points)										
Argentina	5	3	2	0	10	3	11			
Paraguay	5	3	1	1	8	6	10			
Brazil	5	2	3	0	7	5	9			
Venezuela	5	3	0	2	6	6	9			
Chile	5	2	1	2	7	6	7			
Uruguay	5	2	1	2	11	11	7			
Peru	5	1	2	2	6	6	5			
Ecuador	5	1	1	3	3	4	4			
Colombia	5	1	1	3	4	8	4			
Bolivia	5	1	0	4	5	12	3			

6th Round (June 1/2)
 At Quito: Ecuador v Colombia
 At Maracaibo: Venezuela v Chile
 At Montevideo: Uruguay v Peru
 At Belo Horizonte: Brazil v Argentina
 At La Paz: Bolivia v Paraguay



BAD BOYS! The referee flashing the yellow card to Brazilian superstar Ronaldo Nazario (R) and Paraguay's Carlos Bonet at Asuncion early yesterday.

Home not too sweet for Sven

Football

AFP, Paris

England boss Sven Goran Eriksson rounded off a difficult week with 1-0 defeat to his native Sweden but his frustration was shared by France and Holland who produced a dull goalless draw in Rotterdam on a packed night of Euro 2004 warm-ups.

Eleven weeks before the tournament kicks off, Germany and Spain showed they are coming into form with victories but the event's host nation Portugal were beaten 2-1 by Italy in Braga.

The Czech Republic, tipped for success in Portugal, crashed to a surprise 2-1 defeat to the Republic of Ireland.

After committing himself to the England cause until at least the 2006 World Cup after press revelations that he was in talks with Premiership club Chelsea, Eriksson must have been hoping for a victory back on home soil in Gothenburg.

But a smart finish from Zlatan Ibrahimovic after 54 minutes was enough to dampen his homecoming.

Eriksson was at least encouraged by the lively debut of Spurs striker Jermain Defoe who forced his way into the Euro 2004 plans with a spirited performance.

"We played well in the first half and created good chances," said Eriksson.

"I can't feel positive after we lost the game but in these matches you are looking for answers to questions and tonight the answer was from Defoe."

England hit the woodwork twice in the first half and could have run out winners, despite the absence of more than half of their first-choice line-up.

"We should remember that England were missing some good players and I think they can be much stronger (in Euro 2004)," Swedish coach Lars Lagerback conceded.

Holland ended European champions France's 14-match winning streak but with stars such as Zinedine Zidane and Ruud Van Nistelrooy missing, both sides had a makeshift appearance.

In the best chance of the game, Olivier Dacourt supplied an out-standing pass to Sidney Govou but his powerful shot was tipped over the bar by Edwin Van der Sar.

Holland had their best opportunity in a goalmouth scramble which ended when Rafael Van der Vaart swung a leg at the ball and stabbed it wide.

French coach Jacques Santini admitted the timing of the match affected the result.

"Considering the lack of freshness of both teams and the way the match was played, a draw was a good result."

In Cologne, goals from Kevin Kuranyi, Dietmar Hamann and Michael Ballack clinched a much-needed win for Germany after their thrashing by France in their last

home match. "Getting three goals under our belt was the most important thing," said German coach Rudi Voller. "I am also pleased that we did not concede many chances."

Republic of Ireland striker Robbie Keane hit an injury time winner in Dublin to end the Czech Republic's 20-match unbeaten run.

Milan Baros had equalized Jan Hartle's opening strike, but some slack Czech defending allowed Keane to plunder a right-footed winner.

Fabrizio Miccoli's first international goal gave Italy victory over Portugal in a rain sodden stadium in Braga which is among the Euro 2004 venues.

Miccoli scored the winner direct from a left-wing corner 15 minutes

from time to snatch victory after Portuguese goalkeeper Ricardo let the Juventus striker's inswinging kick slip through his fingers.

Nuno Valente gave Portugal a fourth minute lead, only for Christian Vieri to head Italy level just before half-time.

Spain meanwhile needed strikes from Fernando Morientes and Raul to see off Denmark 2-0 in Gijon while Greece, who are in their Euro Group A, beat another qualifier, Switzerland, 1-0.

Surprise Euro qualifiers Latvia meanwhile defeated Slovenia thanks to a Maris Verpakovskis strike.



I'VE SCORED! An unidentified girl (R) is overjoyed after kissing Spain's goalkeeper Iker Casillas (L) at the end of the friendly match against Denmark at the Molinon stadium in Gijon, northern Spain on March 31.

Adidas stay with Real

AFP, Herzogenaurach, Germany

Adidas-Salomon, the German maker of sportswear and equipment, said Thursday it has extended its sponsorship of Spanish football club Real Madrid for four years until June 2012.

Financial terms were not disclosed.

"The new agreement is currently the longest-lasting of any sports team sponsorship held by Adidas and one of the most significant commercial partnerships between a sports organisation and a sponsor," Adidas said in a statement.

Some of the biggest names in world football play for Real Madrid, including England captain David Beckham, Brazilian star Ronaldo and French legend Zinedine Zidane.

ROK in shock



AFP, Seoul

South Korean football fans and news media expressed shock and anger Thursday after the national team was held to a goalless draw by tiny Maldives in the latest round of the 2006 World Cup qualifiers.

Republic of Korea, 2002 World Cup semi-finalists who stand 120 places above the Indian Ocean

islanders on FIFA's latest world rankings, were held to a 0-0 draw in Male in Group 7.

The Ilgan Sports newspaper said: "This is an unforgettable humiliation for South Korea."

The lackluster result heaped more pressure on Portuguese coach Humberto Coelho, who has already faces calls to quit following defeats to Oman and Vietnam in Asian Cup qualifiers last year.

"This is another nightmare for Coelho," Sports Seoul said in a banner headline.

It said South Korea, while looking down on their opponents, lost their concentration in the sultry weather of Male and wasted scoring chances in front of the goal.

"Coelho has run his course. He failed as a commander-in-chief," a fan wrote in an Internet football website.

"It's a shame on South Korea.

It is all the more embarrassing as South Korea were World Cup semi-finalists," another fan said.

South Korean players complained of what they believed were a biased referee and judges throughout the match.

"To stop attackers is defenders' job but at this game, the referee and judges played the roles of defense for the Maldives," said Seol Ki-Hyun, a South Korean striker.

Another striker, Lee Young-Pyo, said he had never played with such a biased referee and judges.

"When we had a good chance after driving the ball down the side, there was a referee's whistle for an off-side offense. When I thought we should be given a penalty kick, there was no whistle," he said.

FRIENDLY RESULTS

Results from international friendly matches on Wednesday:

Friendlies involving Euro 2004 finalists

At Celje, Slovenia
Slovenia 0 Latvia 1 (Verpakovskis 36)
At Rotterdam
Netherlands 0 France 0

At Gothenburg, Sweden
Sweden 1 (Ibrahimovic 54)
England 0

At Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Harte 52-pen, Keane 90) Czech Republic 1 (Baros 83)

At Heraklion, Greece
Greece 1 (Tsiartas 55) Switzerland 0

At Cologne, Germany
Germany 3 (Kuranyi 45, Hamann 54, Ballack 81) Belgium 0

At Zagreb
Croatia 2 (Sokota 2, Srna 76)
Turkey 2 (Biryol 73, Atan 78)
At Sofia
Bulgaria 2 (Berbatov 14, 66)

Russia 2 (Sychev 9, 31)
At Gijon, Spain
Spain 2 (Morientes 23, Raul 60)
Denmark 0

At Braga, Portugal
Portugal 1 (Nuno Valente 4) Italy 2 (Vieri 39, Miccoli 75)

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDLIES NOT INVOLVING EURO 2004 FINALISTS

At Tallinn
Estonia 0 Northern Ireland 1 (Healy 45)
At Valletta
Malta 1 (Mifsud 90) Finland 2 (Yeremenko 51, Litmanen 85)

At Chisinau
Moldova 2 (Dadu 43-pen, 85)
Azerbaijan 1 (Gurbanov 22)
At Belgrade
Serbia and Montenegro 0 Norway 1 (Andresen 76)

At Tirana
Albania 2 (Aliaj 42, Bushi 75)
Iceland 1 (Gudjonsson 63)
At Glasgow
Scotland 1 (McFadden 57)

Romania 2 (Chivu 37, Pancu 51)
At Luxembourg
Luxembourg 1 (Houss 87)
Bosnia 2 (Misimovic 61, Bolic 62)
At Bratislava
Slovakia 1 (Mintal 72) Austria 1 (Kollmann 90)

At Plock
Poland 0 USA 1 (Beasley 28)
At Skopje
Macedonia 1 (Stavrevski 25)
Ukraine 0

At Budapest
Hungary 1 (Kenesei 18) Wales 2 (Koumas 20, Earnshaw 81)
At Tunis
Tunisia 0 Ivory Coast 2 (Drogba 34, 65)

At Rabat
Morocco 3 (Nabil Baha 67, 74, Jawad Zaora 77) Angola 1 (Norberto Muluense 84) s

Biggies pass a torrid night



AFP, Hong Kong

South Korea were held to a shock draw while fellow heavyweights Japan and Saudi Arabia were given the fright of their lives as Asia's underdogs bared their teeth in the latest round of qualifiers for the 2006 World Cup on Wednesday.

The footballers from the tiny Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives pulled off the result of the night in Group 7, holding 2002 World Cup semi-finalists South Korea to a 0-0 draw in Male.

Asian champions Japan meanwhile were heading for a similarly surprising draw against Singapore in Group 3, before an 81st-minute goal from substitute Toshiya Fujita handed the visitors a 2-1 victory.

In Colombo, Saudi Arabia, who have qualified for the last three World Cups, needed a second half goal to see off Group 8 minnows Sri Lanka while the job of former Japan coach Philippe Troussier was placed in further doubt when Qatar slumped to a 1-0 defeat in Group 1 in Jordan.

In other matches, China squeezed past neighbours Hong Kong 1-0 in Group 4, while Iran romped past Laos 7-0 in Group 1.

But it was the Maldives who had most to celebrate after their 0-0 draw with South Korea, who stand 120 places above the islanders on FIFA's latest world rankings.

Though South Korea remain favourites to reach final round qualifying from Group 4, which they lead by one point from Lebanon and Vietnam, the result will heap more pressure on Portuguese coach Humberto Coelho.

Coelho had already come under pressure to quit following defeats to Oman and Vietnam in Asian Cup qualifiers last year.

Brazilian legend Zico watched his Japanese side put in a patchy display away to Singapore in stifling heat and humidity.

The win extended Japan's lead at the top of Group 3 but the team looked a shadow of the unit that performed so memorably to reach the second round as co-hosts of the 2002 World Cup.

Japan wasted chance after chance until Naohiro Takahara finally broke the run of misses in the 34th minute when his deflected drive from outside the box beat Singapore keeper Hassan Sunny.

The wasted opportunities looked set to haunt the visitors as they began to wilt in the 29-degree-Celsius (80-degree-Fahrenheit) heat and Singaporean striker Indra Sahdan Daud scored in the 63rd minute.

Zico's decision to bring on fresh legs paid dividends with substitute Fujita scoring nine minutes from time.

Fujita pounced on a loose ball in front of goal after Hassan was unable to clear a cross.

Japan have now won their first two qualifiers but the unconvincing nature of both victories - Japan snuck through with a 1-0 win against Oman last month - will ensure Zico's position as coach remains under scrutiny.

Saudi Arabia needed a 53rd-minute strike by forward Ibrahim Al-Shahrani to give them a 1-0 win

against Sri Lanka. The win puts the Saudis in second place in Group 8 behind Turkmenistan who beat Indonesia 3-1 in Ashgabat.

Palestine surprisingly lead Group 2 after a 1-1 draw with Iraq in a match played on neutral territory in Doha.

The Palestinians, who thrashed Taiwan 8-0 in their opening fixture, battled back when Roberto Beshe hit a 71st minute strike to cancel out Razzaq Farhan's 20th minute headed opener.

In Amman, Troussier's Qatar side lost 1-0 to Jordan in the Gulf side's second defeat in Group 1 following their 3-1 loss against Iran.

Muayyad Salim hit the only goal in the 70th minute to move Jordan into second place behind Iran on goal difference.

In Sanaa, Thailand's veteran star Kiatsuk "Zico" Senamuang kick-

started his country's campaign when he scored one goal and created the other two in a 3-0 Group 5 win in Yemen.

Man-of-the-match Kiatsuk set up Sarayoot Chaikumdee and Nirut Surasiang for the first two goals before he got himself on the score-sheet three minutes from time.

The Thais are now one point behind the UAE who drew 0-0 against North Korea in Pyongyang.

Results from the 2006 World Cup Asian Zone qualifying matches on Wednesday:



DON'T KILL ME! Iraq's Yunes Mahmud (L) is being choked by a furious goalkeeping coach Amer Abdul Wahab (4th R) after their match against Palestine in Doha on March 31. The reason for altercation is unknown.