

Cristaldo bullet to the rescue

REUTERS, Arequipa

A blistering drive by Ernesto Cristaldo helped Paraguay salvage a 1-1 draw against Chile in their Copa America Group C clash on Sunday.

Sebastian Gonzalez put Chile ahead on 72 minutes but Cristaldo's 35-yard thunderbolt seven minutes later rescued a well-deserved point in a finely-balanced game.

Neither team could afford to lose this match, since Chile had lost to Brazil in their opening game and Paraguay, although victorious against Costa Rica last Thursday, will face the world champions in their final game.

The two teams fought out a midfield battle in the first half, but later served up some good attacking football as both chased a positive result.

Chile's breakthrough came when substitute Mauricio Aros worked the ball down the left wing.

His low outswinging cross almost escaped Gonzalez but the striker, who plays with Mexican club Atante, managed to hook a half-volley into the goal from a tight angle.

Paraguay redoubled their efforts in attack, and Cristaldo's spectacular shot lifted the local crowd in the Andean city of Arequipa.

Paraguay are in second place in Group C with four points after beating Costa Rica 1-0 in their opening game.

Chile will need to beat Costa Rica on Wednesday to keep their Copa America hopes alive after losing 1-0 to Brazil last Thursday.

Brazil lead the group on a maximum six points after beating Costa Rica 4-1 in the other game on Sunday.

Perez without a fight

AFP, Madrid

Florentino Perez promised to bring back the glory days to Real Madrid after being reelected for a second term as president of the Spanish giants.

Perez swept to victory, receiving 91.35 percent or 21,377 of the votes with former president and his main rival Lorenzo Sanz a distant runner-up with just 5.08 (1,189 votes) percent of the 23,401 votes cast.

"Today Real Madrid has won. The voice of the club has been heard loud and clear. What's more the turnout was the highest ever," declared Perez.

Before the result was made public Perez had refused to rule out a bid for Everton's England star Wayne Rooney, saying "there was always room for the best players in the world" at Real.

Perez, who beat Sanz for the presidency in 2000, was the virtual unanimous choice despite the former former European champions finishing last season without their multi-million pound team managing to pick up any silverware.

And he said: "I know the challenge the voters have given me.

"With humility we will be continuing to build a passionate Real Madrid, respectful and loyal to its legendary history.

"There remains a lot to do but from today we start the work."

Perez, who just a few weeks ago was boozed by the Bernabeu fans, is the man responsible for luring some of the game's biggest names to Madrid - players like Luis Figo, Zinedine Zidane, Romaldo and David Beckham.

Businessman Arturo Baladasano came in third, scraping together just 259 votes (1.96 percent), the club's electoral commission announced.

Diego Jr misses Rovers trial

AFP, London

Plans to bring Diego Maradona's son to England for a trial with Blackburn were delayed Monday.

Diego Jr, the 17-year-old son of the Argentine great, is currently at Italian side Napoli, where his father starred in the 1980s.

An attacking midfielder, Diego Jr had been invited to spend a week with English Premiership side Rovers.

But he will not be arriving in the north-west town of Blackburn just yet because of an injury.

Rovers' chief executive John Williams said: "We had arranged for Diego Jr to come over and spend a week in training with us."

"However, he has picked up an injury playing with Napoli and the plans have been put on hold for the time being," Velappan said.

Gronkjaer now Birmingham's

AFF, London

Denmark winger Jesper Gronkjaer has joined Birmingham from Chelsea for 2.2 million pounds.

Gronkjaer, who joined Chelsea from Ajax in December 2000 for 7.8 million pounds, signed a two-year deal with a year option after turning down approaches from the Primera Liga's Sevilla.



PHOTO: AFP
EXCUSE ME! Chile's Milovan Mirosevic (L) catches the shorts of Paraguayan veteran Carlos Gamarra (4) during their match at the UNSA stadium in Arequipa on July 11.

A phoenix story



AFP, Bagdad

Iraq's long journey back to footballing respectability reaches its highest peak at the Asian Cup finals in China but as always it's been a controversial road trip.

The team suffered its most recent and deeply-felt burn just last week when German coach Bernd Stange quit after two years in charge claiming that the worsening security situation in the country made him fear for his life.

It was a real blow for the rehabilitated Iraqis since Stange had taken them to the finals with the barest of resources and with prospective opponents refusing to play in the besieged Iraqi capital.

Despite that, Iraq still managed to get to China as well as claim one of Asia's three qualifying spots for the Olympic Games.

The Iraqis will now be handled by former coach Adnan Hamid who is often called in to fill the breach.

He has opted to use the country's Under-23 team in China as part of the build-up to the Athens Games.

It was that side which secured passage to the Olympics with a thrilling and emotional 3-1 win

against bitter rivals Saudi Arabia in a final qualifier in Amman.

Ironically, the two have been drawn together in Group C in China in what will be a volatile clash played out against the political and military enmity which has destroyed relations between the two since the 1990 Gulf War.

"That was crazy joy for us," said defender Ahmed Alwan looking back on the win in Jordan.

"Despite all of the difficulties we faced, we still managed to qualify for

Despite their reliance on their Olympic squad, Iraq will be looking to Emad Mohammed, who plays his club football in Qatar, to find the net in a group which also features Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

He was only recently recalled to the squad after being excluded from Olympic and World Cup qualifiers for disciplinary reasons.

"The team's chances to progress from the first round is by no means difficult despite the current situation that accompanied this period of time," said Hamd.

"We will qualify for the second round."

The squad features three players over the age of 23 - midfielder Haidar Jabar, who has 30 caps and plays for Al Ittihad Aleppo in Syria, skipper Abdul Wahab Abu Al Hail of Iranian club Esteghlal Ahvaz, who has 65 caps, and striker Razzaq Farhan, the 30-year-old Qatar Club striker who has been capped 44 times and scored 19 goals.

Athens and I believe that we deserve our place in the Olympics."

Before his departure, the 56-year-old Stange, a former coach of fellow finalists Oman, said that the success of Iraq couldn't disguise the

"On the other hand, unsung players whose names have not been internationally known before made a very positive impact and have become famous."

"Expect a similar pattern of development in the Asian Cup, of young players proving their mettle," Velappan said.

Nakata and Fulham midfielder Junichi Inamoto, who suffered a broken leg in a friendly against England last month, head the list of stars ruled out by injury.

But several other absences have been self-inflicted by nations that have attached equal importance to the Olympics, playing players from their Asian Cup squads to bolster their Under-23 teams for Athens.

The Japanese, who face Iran, Thailand and Oman in the first round, have weakened their squad by insisting that Feyenoord's Shinji Ono and SV Hamburg's Naohiro Takahara play in Ukraine for the new season.

Meanwhile star striker Maksim Shatskikh, who plays for Dynamo Kiev, is reportedly reluctant to travel to China and has remained in Ukraine for the new season.

But Asian Football Confederation (AFC) general-secretary Velappan is adamant that the tournament, which kicks off in Beijing on Saturday, will not suffer because of the absences.

"AFC has noted that some key players in many teams competing in the Asian Cup China 2004 will not be able to make it to China for reasons of injury or participation in the Olympic Athens football tournament," Velappan said.

"We are not too concerned as it is a tremendous opportunity for other players to participate in the Asian Cup and in most cases this players play a more important role in the team than the established players," said Velappan.

Velappan said the recently concluded Euro 2004 tournament -- which saw underdogs Greece shred the form book to win -- was proof that stars did not make the tournament.

"Euro 2004 has shown that the team with the famous players did not succeed in making an impact in the tournament," Velappan said.

Parreira brought an untested squad to Peru, hoping to observe

Velappan not worried



AFP, Beijing

Asian football chief Peter Velappan has dismissed fears that the absence of several star players will take the shine off the continent's showpiece tournament, the Asian Cup.

Several of the leading contenders for the prestigious 16-team tournament -- Asia's equivalent of the European Championships or Copa America -- will head to China missing key players.

A string of stars, including Japan's two-time Asian footballer of the year, Hidefumi Nakata, are injured while some nations have rested players in order to include them in squads for August's Athens Olympics.

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Parreira brought an untested squad to Peru, hoping to observe

new players ahead of the World Cup qualifiers that resume in September.

Ronaldo, Ronaldinho Gaucho, Kaka and other stars were left out.

Young sensation Wagner Love made his debut with the national team, entering the match for Luis Fabiano's low shot from inside the penalty area in the 39th.

It was the first time Parreira could count on all his players in this Copa America.

Pinto started forwards Saborio and Alonso Solis instead of Ronald Gomez and Andy Herron, trying -- in vain -- to improve the team's offensive power.

Brazil has posted 14 goals against Costa Rica in three meetings, after a 5-0 rout in the 1997 Copa America, and 5-2 win at the 2002 World Cup.

In the next round on Wednesday, Chile faces Costa Rica in Tacna while Paraguay plays Brazil in Arequipa.

Brazil find the beat

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"Unlike Brazil, we just failed to finish off the scoring chances, especially in the first half."

Brazil's best early attempts in the first half were Adriano's booming left-footer from way outside the box in the 11th, and striker Luis Fabiano's low shot from inside the penalty area in the 39th.

It was the first time Parreira could count on all his players in this Copa America.

Midfielder Kleberson, who missed the opener because of a left thigh injury, returned to action. The Manchester United player, the only member of Brazil's 2002 World Cup champions in the squad, was substituted by Diego early in the second half.

Parreira brought an untested squad to Peru, hoping to observe

Thankful Adriano



REUTERS, Arequipa

Adriano was the only Brazilian player on form in a dismal first-half performance, but a moment of inspiration by midfielder Alex gave him his chance to make the breakthrough.

The Fenerbahce player delivered a raking cross-field pass that Adriano collected on the run to score impressively.

"Alex released me and I managed to score. I felt a sense of relief in the whole team and we dominated in the second half," Adriano agreed.

As Costa Rica's resistance crumbled, Adriano tormented goalkeeper Ricardo Gomez with incisive running that gave him two more goals from close range.

After the match, Adriano paid tribute to Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira who kept faith in him despite an apparent lack of form in training.

Playing in Peru without first-

choice players such as Ronaldo, Ronaldinho and Roberto Carlos, an unfamiliar-looking Brazil team has struggled to gel into an effective unit, but with two wins in two games, they have booked a quarter-final place.

"We have qualified, but the games are going to get more difficult now. We have to keep our feet on the ground and maintain our concentration," Adriano said.

Alex added that training was beginning to pay off after several players had complained about the effects of playing in high altitude in the Andean city of Arequipa.

"We have been training hard and playing games with short intervals between them. We feel that our bodies are strengthening and we are getting over the effects of the altitude, which has been our worst enemy," he said.

Brazil will play Paraguay in their final Group C game on Wednesday.

Domenech promises joy

Football

AFP, Paris

"I have always been a competitor and it is a great disappointment not to be chosen. I am, and I will remain, a supporter of the national team," Tigana said.

Santini,

who had coached Lyon

to their first

league title, picked up

the pieces after France's 2002

World Cup

debacle when they

became the first

world champions

to fail to score a goal.

France won every qualifying

match to reach Euro 2004

but were knocked out by surprise winners Greece in the quarter-finals.

Santini had taken over from

Roger Lemerre

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