

Iraq living in dreamland

AFP, Athens



Surprise packets Iraq secured a quarter-final spot in the Olympic football tournament with a free-flowing 2-0

victory over Costa Rica here on Sunday.

The Iraqis, back in Olympic football after a 16-year absence, remained unbeaten with second-half goals to Hawar Mulla Mohammed and substitute Mahdi Karim to lead Group D on six points.

Iraq, who opened their campaign with a thrilling 4-2 win over 10-man Portugal last Thursday, were again full value for their win and dominated the second half against the central Americans after a scoreless first half.

Portugal opened their account in Group D with their Manchester United star Cristiano Ronaldo scoring in a 2-1 win over Morocco in Heraklion.

Italy, who have not won an Olympic football medal since winning gold in 1936, took a big step towards the quarter-finals with a 3-2 victory over Japan in Group B in Volos.

The Italians, who drew 2-2 with Ghana on Thursday, scored twice in the opening eight minutes through Daniele De Rossi and Alberto Gilardino before Yuki Abe pulled one back for Japan in the 21st minute.

Gilardino made the game safe with his second goal to give Italy a 3-1 buffer at halftime and coasted through the second half with the Japanese getting a second goal through Daiki Takamatsu in injury time.

Ghana came back from a goal down to beat Paraguay 2-1 with two super goals by Kwabena Tiero and Stephan Appiah in the space of three

minutes late in the second half of their Group B match in Thessaloniki.

Iraq, who made the quarter-finals of the Asian Cup last month, thrilled their vociferous following with another sparkling display of attacking football, running the Costa Ricans ragged in the midfield and securing maximum points with two well-taken goals.

Hawar broke the deadlock in the 67th minute when he scored at the second attempt after a corner from Salih Sadir was headed back in to the goal square by Bassim Abbas.

Mahdi got the second when he met a lovely cross from Hawar from the left 18 minutes from time.

Italy took an early lead in their match thanks to slack Japanese defending leaving AS Roma midfielder de Rossi free to score after just three minutes.

The Italians extended their lead five minutes later when a long punt by Matteo Ferrari found Parma striker Gilardino, who pushed the ball through the legs of a hapless Abe before sidefooting home.

Italy looked to be coasting but Abe got one back for the Japanese midway through the half with a spectacular 25-metre free kick.

However, the Italians regained their two-goal buffer after 37 minutes when Gilardino was left alone by two defenders and headed home a Emiliano Moretti pass from the left wing.

The only goal of the second half came two minutes into injury time when Takamatsu headed home another of Abe's precision dead balls but it was too late for Japan to salvage a point.

Ronaldo opened the scoring for the Portuguese in the 40th minute and Costa the skipper doubled the lead in the 73rd minute before Morocco pulled one back through Bouabid Bouden five minutes from time.



PHOTO: AFP

IF YOU CAN'T CATCH HIM, JOIN HIM! A Greek police officer and a volunteer chase after an Iraqi fan who invaded the pitch while celebrating Iraq's 2-0 victory over Costa Rica in their Olympic Football Group D match at the Karaiskaki stadium in the Athens on August 15.

Premiership First strike Mourinho's



Football

AFP, London

Jose Mourinho believes Chelsea's win over Manchester United in their Premiership opener was proof of the spirit already instilled in his expensively-assembled squad.

The Portuguese manager had been irked by pre-match comments from Mikael Silvestre suggesting it would take time for Chelsea to develop the kind of squad camaraderie which has been one of foundations for Arsenal and Manchester United's domination of English football's biggest prizes in recent years.

"Mikael Silvestre said it would take us time to create a big spirit in the squad. He was wrong," Mourinho said after watching his side produce a gritty

rearguard action to secure a 1-0 victory courtesy of Eidur Gudjohnsen's 15th-minute strike.

"We have a fantastic spirit in the team. And when you have a squad of really top class players and they are mentally ready also, that is fantastic."

At this early stage, results may ultimately count for little but it will not have been lost on United fans that this was their first opening day defeat in nine years.

United's margin for further error in the six weeks it will be before Alex Ferguson can call upon anything resembling a full strength squad has been further reduced.

Mourinho correctly identified his side's defence, superbly marshalled by man-of-the-match John Terry, as the key to victory in his first competitive match in charge.

"In these big matches there is

always a lot of emotion and it is always the team that commits the fewer errors defensively that wins, and I think we did that. Once it was 1-0 I thought we could control the game."

Mourinho was gracious enough to accept that United might reasonably have come away with a point, a suggestion that brought a less than gracious reaction from Ferguson.

"I don't need anybody to tell me that, I think I can make my own judgement," the Scots snapped.

"I think we were a bit unlucky and maybe on another day things would have been different."

"But we're confident about the ability of the team. We thought that before the game and there's no reason to think any differently after the game."

Only three of Chelsea's seven summer arrivals made it into Mourinho's starting line-up, the goalkeeper Petr Cech, right-back Paulo Ferreira and Didier Drogba.

With Mateja Kezman and Ricardo Carvalho appearing as late substitutes, Chelsea had more than 70 million pounds of new talent on display. But it was United's makeshift line-up that delivered the better value for their supporters for most of the match, in terms of industry at least.

But all the effort in the world cannot compensate for a blunt cutting edge, which is what United will have to operate with until Ruud van Nistelrooy and Louis Sahar recover from their injury problems.

Chelsea will, in contrast, have taken heart from encouraging signs that Didier Drogba can make a more significant impact on the Premiership than the man he was bought to replace, Hernan Crespo.

It took only a quarter of an hour for the Ivory Coast striker to begin repaying some of the 24 million pounds it cost Roman Abramovich to lure him from Marseille.

Unchallenged on the edge of the area, Drogba was able to meet Geremi's cross from deep on the right with a textbook knockdown for Gudjohnsen, who deftly clipped the bouncing ball over Tim Howard with just enough pace to beat Roy Keane's desperate lunge.

It was a goal that belied what had gone before it and what followed but United could scarcely complain about the eventual outcome given their failure to transform good half-chances into shots on target.

The best of the opening period came on the half-hour mark, a neat lay-off from Giggs presenting Paul Scholes with a shooting opportunity just inside the area that he shanked wide.

Then, 10 minutes from the end, Alan Smith delivered a perfectly-judged cross to the back post for Giggs only for the winger to send his header a yard wide of Cech's right hand post.

Bundesliga Leverkusen draw

AFP, Berlin

Bayer Leverkusen twice came from behind to snatch a point in a 2-2 draw at VfL Bochum on Sunday.

With time slipping away Bochum looked set for a third successive win over Bayer - having won 1-0 at at the Ruhr Stadium and 3-1 at the BayArena last season - but Ukraine international Andrei Voronin saved the day with an 87th minute equaliser.

Bayer were full of confidence after a 5-0 midweek demolition of Banik Ostrava in their Champions League qualifier but fell behind as Czech marksman Vratislav Lokvenc put Bochum ahead on 29 minutes.

Bayer's draw means Werder Bremen are the only team to collect maximum points from the opening two fixtures.

In Sunday's other match SC Freiburg recorded a 1-0 win over VfL Wolfsburg at the Volkswagen Arena - although the hosts can feel hard done by.

Poor travellers Freiburg failed to win away from home in the whole of last season but stole all three points with French substitute Regis Dorn netting on 85 minutes.

Premiership Gunners fire four



Football

AFP, Liverpool

Arsenal launched their Premiership title defence in emphatic style as goals from Dennis Bergkamp, Jose Antonio Reyes, Freddie Ljungberg and Robert Pires sealed a comprehensive 4-1 victory against Everton at Goodison Park on Sunday.

Arsene Wenger's team continued where they left off last season as they destroyed the home side with a breath-taking performance that suggested it will take an immense effort from their rivals to prize the Premiership trophy away from Highbury this campaign.

The champions went into the game defending an unbeaten run in the Premiership stretching back to a 3-2 defeat against Leeds United at Highbury in May 2003, a sequence of 40 matches.

And despite the absence of influential duo Patrick Vieira and Sol Campbell due to injury, Wenger's men rarely looked like losing their unbeaten record against David Moyes's committed, but ultimately outclassed Everton.

Spanish midfielder Francesc Fabregas, who became Arsenal's young-

est-ever Premiership player at the age of 17 years and 103 days, almost created the opening goal for Ljungberg within five minutes of kick-off when his incisive pass found the Swede bursting into the penalty area. However, Ljungberg's shot was blocked and Everton survived the early scare.

The home side again escaped falling behind on 16 minutes when Bergkamp's free-kick from the left was hacked off the goal-line by full-back Gary Naysmith.

Everton, without the injured England striker Wayne Rooney, lacked punch upfront, although Scotland international James McFadden forced defender Kolo Toure into a crucial block on 22 minutes to divert his goal-bound strike.

Such was Arsenal's superiority, an opening goal seemed inevitable and it duly came when Bergkamp rounded off a three-man move to score on 23 minutes.

Reyes's run into the area was blocked off by defender Alan Stubbs, but the ball broke to Thierry Henry, who moved it out to Bergkamp, allowing the Dutchman to shoot past goalkeeper Nigel Martyn from 12 yards.

Everton attempted to haul themselves level before half-time, but Arsenal goalkeeper Jens Lehmann saved a 35-

yard Thomas Gravesen free-kick before seeing Kevin Kilbane head Gravesen's cross over the bar from six yards.

Moyes's team were soon punished for their failure to convert their chances when Reyes doubled Arsenal's lead with a close range header on 39 minutes. Ljungberg broke down the left before crossing to the Spaniard, who beat Martyn with ease six yards out.

Everton introduced summer signing Marcus Bent at half-time in an effort to force their way back into the game, but the pattern of play remained the same, with Arsenal dominating.

It was no surprise, therefore, when Wenger's team extended their lead through Ljungberg on 54 minutes. Again, Arsenal's slick passing sliced the Everton defence apart and Ljungberg tapped home from inside the six yard box after Henry had squared the ball across the face of goal.

Lee Carsley reduced the arrears for Everton on 63 minutes when he rounded Lehmann to score after being released by Gravesen, but Pires rounded off victory when he side-footed into the net on 82 minutes after Ashley Cole's shot had rebounded off the crossbar.

Carlos has high hopes

INTERNET SOURCE

Roberto Carlos has backed new Real Madrid signing Michael Owen to flourish at the Bernabeu even though he is battling for playing time with the likes of Ronaldo, Raul and Fernando Morientes.

The England striker passed a medical on Friday night to complete the deal, which will see £8million change hands and Antonio Nunez move in the opposite direction.

But as Owen embarks on his career in the Spanish capital, he faces stiff competition for a starting berth from Ronaldo, Morientes and club captain Raul.

All three appeared in Real's Champions League tie against Wisla Krakow last Wednesday, meaning none is likely to leave in the near future as they would be cup-tied for any other employer.

It has been suggested that Owen has been bought by Madrid for next season - after Ronaldo has potentially left the club - while other observers have suggested Madrid coach Jose Antonio Camacho could even use Owen as a wide player.

While the conventional wisdom may be that Owen is currently down the pecking order of striking talent at Madrid, Roberto Carlos does not see it that way.

"He is a very important player and he will be very important for Real Madrid this season," Roberto Carlos said.

"He is a world-class player who I think will be a very big player for us."

The Brazil defender is confident that Owen can not only claim a starting place in Madrid's team of super-stars, but score the goals to help the Spanish giants become successful again.

"He will score a lot of goals for Real Madrid this season. I think he can be a big, big player for Real," added the left-back.

"We will make a good start to the season. We need to because we are trying to win the Spanish league and the Champions League."

Saviola can leave

AFP, Puigcherda

Argentine international forward Javier Saviola has been told Sunday by Spanish giants Barcelona that he can leave the club if he wants to.

Barcelona vice-president Sandro Rossell said that Saviola, midfielder Hernandez Oscar Lopez and Turkish goalkeeper Rustu Recber would be allowed to go.

Saviola recently acquired Spanish nationality, thus boosting his chances of being picked up by a top European club who are limited to playing three non-EU players.

French side Monaco, last year's Champions League runners-up, are said to be interested in signing the exciting little forward who has fallen out of favour at Barcelona since the arrival of club president Joan Laporta.

It is believed the acrimony surrounding Saviola is because of a lucrative contract deal he signed under the club's former president Joan Gaspart.

Rossell meanwhile said that while Barcelona had ended recruitment for the season, they were still undecided on two departures, making allusion to Saviola and also to Turkish international Recber.

However Rossell said that if the players were to leave it would be on one-year loan deals "so they can come back to the club".

Lopez, who is tied to Barcelona until 2007, is reportedly on his way to Italian club Lazio. The deal could be finalised on Monday.

Ballack the new leader

AFP, Frankfurt

Bayern Munich midfielder Michael Ballack was named the new captain of the German national team Monday as coach Jurgen Klinsmann stripped goalkeeper Oliver Kahn of the armband.

Ballack, 27, will lead out the German team in Klinsmann's first match in charge against Austria in a friendly in Vienna on Wednesday.

"I wanted an outfield player who is close to the various parts of the pitch," explained Klinsmann.

Kahn took over the German captaincy in June 2001 from Oliver Bierhoff, now Klinsmann's assistant, and skippered Germany on 38 occasions.

However, Kahn, 35, endured a difficult season with Bayern in 2003/04 and questions had been asked about his ability to motivate the team.

Ballack was pivotal in Germany's march to the 2002 World Cup final and was one of the few German players to shine in a disappointing 2004 European championships in Portugal.



PHOTO: AFP

PERFECT! Chelsea's manager Jose Mourinho gives a thumbs up to his team during their Premiership opener against Manchester United at Stamford Bridge, London on August 15.

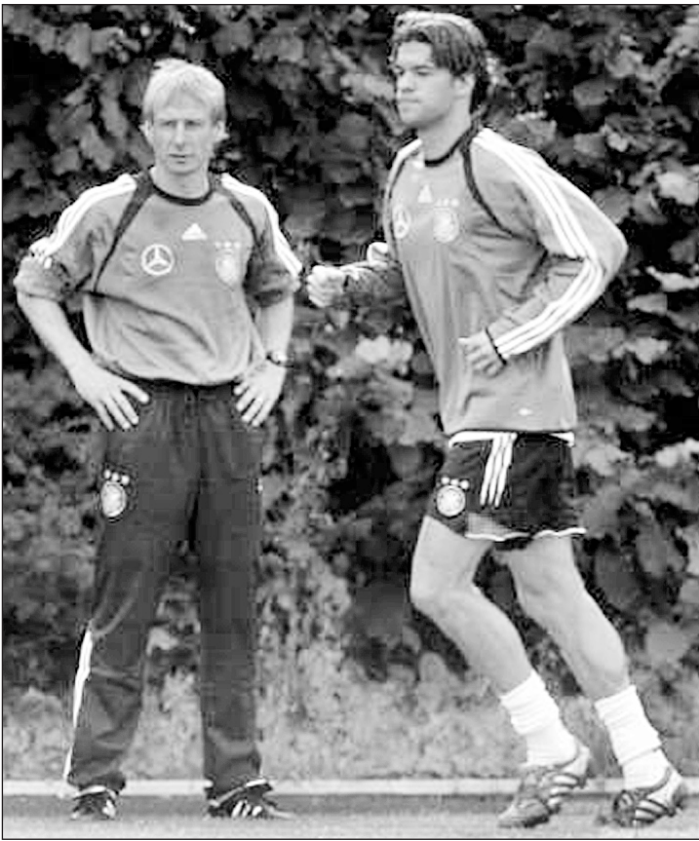


PHOTO: REUTERS

A NEW ORDER: Coach Juergen Klinsmann watches newly appointed German team captain Michael Ballack (R) during the first practice session under Klinsmann at Frankfurt on August 16.