

Iraq's voyage ends

AFP,Salonika



Iraq's fairytale run in the Olympic football tournament ground to a shuddering halt in the shape of a 3-1 semi-final defeat to Paraguay.

The Iraqis, who overcame the ravages of war to qualify for the Olympics, had ripped up the form-book to reach the last four with victories over Portugal and Australia along the way.

But their dreams of a place in the final against mighty Argentina on Sunday were snuffed out by Paraguay, who cruised to victory and advanced thanks to goals from Jose Cardozo (2) and Fredy Bareiro.

Iraq scored a late consolation through Razzaq Farhan but the result

was never in doubt.

Paraguay had dominated in the first half, subduing the less experienced Iraqis to control midfield thanks to tireless work from Edgar Barreto and Julio Cesar Enciso.

And up front the South Americans caused all manner of problems for the Iraqi defence, the lively Cardozo pulling his markers out of position with consummate ease and scoring twice in the first-half.

Cardozo opened the scoring on 17 minutes, latching on to a through ball and shrugging off the attentions of centre-half Haidar Jabar to drill a low shot past Iraq goalkeeper Nour Sabri.

Cardozo added his second just after the half-hour with a controversial effort that had Iraq's players protesting vainly.

Cardozo nudged the ball through a static Iraqi back four who had hesitated after seeing Fredy Bareiro standings yards behind them a clearly offside position.

But there was no flag as Bareiro was adjudged not to be interfering with play, allowing Cardozo to glide through and roll home his finish past the keeper to put Paraguay 2-0 up at half-time.

Paraguay controlled the second half easily although Iraq had chances to get themselves back in the game midway through the half.

Salih Sadir saw a curling shot drift over by inches and Mahdi Karim missed a free header from six yards out.

Paraguay made the Iraqis pay for their wastefulness and on 68 minutes made the game safe. Cardozo's shot was saved brilliantly by Sabri, who tipped onto the post.

The Iraq keeper could do nothing though to stop Bareiro hammering the rebound into the roof of the net for 3-0.

Razzaq's late goal -- thumped past Paraguay keeper Diego Barreto from an angle on 83 minutes -- was only a consolation effort.

Argentina too classy

AFP, Athens



Italy coach Claudio Gentile said his football team's poor preparation played a major part in their crushing 3-0 Olympic semi-final defeat to Argentina.

The former international hardman admitted the more experienced South Americans were technically superior, but insisted the scoreline might have been closer if he had been able to spend more time with his players.

"Of course they were better than us, but you have to remember that my team's last competitive match before coming to the Olympics was on June 8," said the man who guided the side to success at this year's under-21 European championships in Germany.

"Argentina, on the other hand, have played in the Copa America and that's

why we weren't as fit as them.

"It's a bitter disappointment, but we can take some consolation from our performances here and hold our heads high.

"We played the game in the right spirit, but we made far too many mistakes."

Gentile refused to pin the blame on defender Daniel Bonera, who was brutally exposed by Argentina's quick forwards.

"Anyone can have a bad day, we are not robots," he said.

Argentina coach Marcelo Bielsa ducked questions about whether he thought Italy looked ill-prepared.

"That is not for me to say," he said diplomatically.

The dangerous Carlos Tevez, who will surely be lured away from Boca Juniors by one of the top European clubs in the near future, opened the scoring in the 16th minute, cashing in on Matteo Ferrari's mistake by rifling home a volley after the ball dropped invitingly for him from 12 yards.

The 20-year-old striker, who scored a hat-trick in the 4-0 quarter-final win against Costa Rica, then turned provider for Luis Gonzalez and substitute Mariano Gonzalez in the second-half.

Tevez fed the overlapping Luis Gonzalez with a beautifully measured pass and his blistering right-footed shot arrowed into the top corner.

Argentina piled further misery on the Italians six minutes from time when Tevez, in acres of space, crossed low from the right to give Mariano Gonzalez, who had been on the pitch for less than 60 seconds, an easy tap-in.

While Gentile was left to lick his wounds and gear his players up for the bronze medal match, Argentina moved a step closer to their first Olympic gold medal for 52 years.

The South Americans have not won a gold medal in any event at the Olympics since the 1952 Helsinki Games.

Maradona weeps

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Former Argentina captain Diego Maradona broke down in tears during a television interview on Tuesday as he talked about his frustrations over his treatment for cocaine addiction.

After three months confined to a psychiatric clinic on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Maradona is fighting to obtain a judge's permission to leave Argentina and resume treatment in Cuba.

"I'm old enough and have enough decision-making power to know what to do with my life," the 43-year-old said in an interview with Canal 9.

As tears streamed down his face, Maradona said he felt like he was losing his battle with the judge.

Sporting a blue pin-striped suit and a healthy glow, Maradona spoke about his "illness", his preferred term for the cocaine addiction that led to heart problems and 10 days in intensive care last April.

Maradona said he first tried drugs in 1982, when his soccer career was flying. "Once you are in, you can't get out."

He said he preferred treatment in Cuba, where he has lived for most of the last four years, because he had less hassle from the media and could play golf on good courses.

Maradona, who weighs "90 kilos (198 pounds) and a bit", said he was trying to diet.

But he showed he still had a few of his old soccer skills as he balanced a ball on his forehead for the TV audience.



PHOTO: REUTERS

THE BALL STILL FEELS AT HOME ON HIS HEAD! Argentine legend Diego Maradona controls a ball on his head during a televised appearance in Buenos Aires on August 24.

USA dream Hamm's dream

AFP, Athens



Mia Hamm is aiming to bring the curtain down on the most successful career women's football has ever seen here Thursday by helping the United States strike Olympic gold.

Hamm, the most prolific goalscorer in women's football history with over 150 goals in more than 250 appearances, will hang up her boots after the US play Brazil in what promises to be a classic final.

The 32-year-old striker has been the most recognisable face of women's football for over a decade, emerging as the sport's first superstar after making her international debut as a 15-year-old way back in 1987.

She sparked the US team to Women's World Cup titles in the 1991

debut event and again in 1999 on home soil, and also inspired the US team to gold in the inaugural Olympic women's final in 1996.

Now Brazil are standing in the way of a golden send-off for Hamm, who was outstanding during a 2-1 semi-final victory over world champions Germany on Monday, a match rated by many as the best in the history of the sport.

But the win in extra-time has left the ageing legs of Hamm and other veterans scrambling to recover in time for the final.

"We have to concentrate on getting our bodies back, because we expended a lot of not only physical energy, but also emotional energy," said Hamm.

Hamm is one of several veterans in the US team whose international careers are drawing to a close.

Brandi Chastain, who famously took off her shirt and twirled it around her head after scoring the winning penalty in the 1999 World

Cup final, and Kristine Lilly have both been outstanding in the US run to the final.

While Hamm singled out several players for praise for their performance against Germany, she stressed that the strength of the team was a unity of purpose throughout the squad.

The substitutes bench had played a key role in lifting morale during the semi-final after the Germans had scrambled an injury-time equaliser which forced the match into extra-time.

"The players that were on the bench made just as much of an impact," Hamm said. "Germany ties the game and we came off the field and not one of their faces looked like we were beaten."

"They just were positive and telling us that we had to believe that in the next 30 minutes that we were going to play that we could get this done."

"And that's a huge lift, when you



PHOTO: AFP

FAIRYTALE CUT SHORT! A jubilant Paraguay team (L) celebrate beside some distraught Iraqi booters in Thessaloniki on August 24.

Ref denies goof up

AFP, Liverpool

The Spanish referee in Liverpool's Champions League qualifier has denied that he issued two yellow cards to Graz AK captain Rene Aufhauser then failed to send him off.

Watching reporters and Liverpool manager Rafael Benitez were convinced the official had brandished yellow cards at Aufhauser in the 68th and 78th minutes of Tuesday night's second leg at Anfield.

But in the official match report submitted to European football's governing body UEFA, the referee, Luis Medina Cantalejo, indicated that Aufhauser's team-mate Gernot Sick had received the first caution.

UEFA will only pursue the matter if their official referee observer at the match agrees that Medina Cantalejo appeared to have booked Aufhauser twice.

"At the moment, as far as we are concerned the bookings in the 68th and 78th minutes were for two different players," a UEFA spokeswoman told AFP.

"But as long as we have not received the report from our delegate at the match we cannot say if there is anything to add."

The referee observer has until Thursday evening to submit his report on the official's performance in the match.

If Medina Cantalejo is judged to have made a serious error he could find himself re-rated as a UEFA official and effectively stripped of the right to take charge of Champions League and UEFA Cup matches.

Medina Cantalejo was fortunate that his apparent error had no impact on the eventual result. Graz AK were leading 1-0 at the time of the controversial cautions and that was how the match finished, allowing Liverpool to win 2-1 on aggregate.

Benitez had no doubt that Aufhauser should have been dismissed, although he was relaxed about the referee's mistake in light of Liverpool's progress to the lucrative group stage of the competition.

"We have seen that, it is a small mistake," Benitez said with a smile after the match. "At the end we are qualified and I said it was okay."

The incident at Anfield follows referee Andy D'Urso's failure to send off Blackburn midfielder Barry Ferguson after yellow-carding him twice in an English Premiership match against Southampton on Saturday.

D'Urso has since been charged by the English Football Association with "less than proficiently applying the laws of the game" and been stripped of the right to take charge of Manchester United's match against Everton on Monday.

Big three through



REUTERS, London

Inter Milan and Monaco rattled up convincing wins but Liverpool lost at home as all three clubs reached the Champions League's lucrative group phase on Tuesday.

Inter, who drew 1-1 in Basel a fortnight ago, made no mistake at San Siro with a 4-1 win in the second leg of their third qualifying round tie, while last season's finalists Monaco crushed 10-man Nova Gorica 6-0 for a 9-0 aggregate win.

Liverpool suffered their first competitive defeat under new Spanish coach Rafael Benitez, going down 1-0 at Anfield to Graz AK but surviving the upset with a 2-1 aggregate win.

Shelbourne's dreams of becoming the first club to reach the group phase from the opening qualifying round were shattered by the Irish side's 3-0 defeat at Deportivo Coruna, while Anderlecht went through 3-1 on aggregate after trouncing 10-man Benfica 3-0.

Rosenborg Trondheim beat two floodlight failures to qualify with a thrilling 3-2 away victory after extra time over 10-man Maccabi Haifa, having won the home leg 2-1. The six clubs will be joined in Thursday's draw in Monaco by the 10 winners of Wednesday's ties and the 16 seeded teams.

Inter shrugged off their first leg

disappointment with a convincing display under new coach Roberto Mancini.

Brazil striker Adriano, who opened the scoring in Switzerland, found the net again in the second minute at San Siro, soon followed by another from Serbia and Montenegro midfielder Dejan Stankovic.

Midle Sterjovski pulled one back for Basel after the break but Adriano's second of the night settled Inter's nerves and Uruguay's Alvaro Recoba turned it into a walkover.

Monaco's new Uruguayan striker Ernesto Chevanton, who rounded off the scoring in Slovenia, was on target again as the Ligue 1 club made a bright start.

Midfielder Lucas Bernardi added a second, Gorica had defender Marko Suler dismissed and defender Hassan El Fakiri got Monaco's third before the break at the Stade Louis II.

Further goals from Sierra Leone's Mohamed Kallon, who had scored twice a fortnight ago, Pontus Farnrud and Togolese striker Emmanuel Adebayor completed the rout.

Liverpool had no such luck at Anfield, going behind in the 55th minute to a searing volley from Mario Tokic and then having to hang on for the closing minutes.

Graz were fortunate though not finish with 10 men after an apparent double booking for midfielder Rene Aufhauser by Spanish referee Luis Medina Cantalejo.

Shelbourne were in with a chance of a historic upset at Coruna until Victor scored the first of two goals on the night in the 59th minute.

Walter Pandiani added the third, two minutes from time, to make sure for last season's semi-finalists while the Irish had midfielder Alan Moore dismissed in stoppage time.

The place to be for thrills was Ramat Gan in Israel where Maccabi, who had lost the first leg 2-1 and had defender Najwan Graybe dismissed after 26 minutes, went 2-0 up before the break through Walid Badier and Gustavi Bokoli.

Unsettled by the two floodlight failures after the break, causing a 20-minute delay, they were still on course until the second minute of stoppage time when Rosenberg playmaker Harald Brattbakk scored from a free kick.

Extra time goals from Daniel Braathen and Orjan Berg put the Norwegians through.

Anderlecht's Ivory Coast striker Aruna Dindane scored a goal in each half as the Belgians overturned their first leg defeat.

Nenad Jestrovic of Serbia and Montenegro converted a penalty for the third goal, following a red card for hand ball by Benfica defender Argel.

Premiership Chelsea showing right signs



AFP, London

Jose Mourinho's Chelsea revolution finally seems to be gathering pace as his expensively-assembled side returned to the top of the Premiership table with a comfortable 2-0 victory over Crystal Palace at Selhurst Park.

The West Londoners secured their third successive league victory thanks to goals in either half from summer signings Didier Drogba and Tiago to leave Palace, newly promoted to the top flight of English football this season, rooted to the bottom of the table with only one point from three matches.

Mourinho had been accused of adopting a negative approach in his

first two games in charge, against Manchester United and Birmingham and, as if to answer those critics, the Portuguese coach made five changes to the side which scraped to victory at St Andrews on Saturday.

England international Joe Cole was rewarded for scoring the winning goal against Birmingham with a starting berth while Serbia and Montenegro star Mateja Kezman and Portugal's Euro 2004 hero Tiago were handed full debuts.

Chelsea were bristling with attacking intent, but it was Palace who made the brighter start. In the ninth minute, Wayne Routledge's teasing corner found Tony Popovic unmarked but the Australian could only send his header wide of the post.

However, as the match progressed,

so Chelsea began to exert their class. A deft interchange of passes between Frank Lampard, Kezman and Cole in the 21st minute ended with the former West Ham man firing in a low shot that drew a fine stop from Palace goalkeeper Julian Speroni.

With Palace struggling to retain possession and Cole buzzing menacingly just behind the front two, it seemed only a matter of time before Chelsea would break the deadlock.

However, the simplicity of the goal, when it did come, will have infuriated Palace manager Iain Dowie.

After 28 minutes, Celestine Babayaro found himself with space down the left and his pinpoint cross picked out Drogba, who rose above Popovic and headed nonchalantly into the bottom corner.

It was a timely strike by Drogba, who had failed to score since his 23 million pound move to Stamford Bridge from French giants Marseille and had been subjected to taunts of "what a waste of money" from the Palace fans in a near-capacity crowd.

However, it was Cole who provided the eye-catching performance. The 22-year-old was a constant threat and almost doubled Chelsea's lead 10 minutes before half-time when his vicious dipping volley from 25 yards forced Speroni to save.

Mourinho's side seemed set to consolidate their lead after the break but, although they dominated possession, they were shot-shy in front of goal. That reticence encouraged Palace who began to grow in confidence.

In the 50th minute striker Andy Johnson for once shook off the shackles of John Terry but his attempted lob drifted wide. Moments later, the former Birmingham player almost got his head to a Routledge cross which Chelsea keeper Petr Cech was grateful to gather.

But any hopes of a comeback were snuffed out when, after 70 minutes, Tiago turned Danny Granville and rifled in a ferocious shot which gave Speroni no chance

Spurs on 'free' Figo's trail

GUARDIAN, London

Tottenham hope to pull off the transfer coup of the summer by tying up the signing of Luis Figo before Friday.

Spurs have already persuaded Real Madrid to consent to a free transfer and to pay up to a third of the Portugal international's £6m annual wages. That development led to Tottenham's sporting director Frank Arnesen flying to the Spanish capital yesterday to hold talks with Figo and his representative Luis Vicente.

Arnesen holds a strong hand. With just a year left on his contract, Figo is looking for longer-term employment and is attracted by the Premiership. Though his representatives have sounded out Arsenal,



LUIS FIGO

Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United, none of the current big four was willing to pursue the offer.

With Spurs having begun the season with four points from matches against two of the top five from the last campaign, Arnesen - the man who brought Figo's team-mate Ronaldo to Europe while at PSV Eindhoven - will not find it hard to convince Figo of his club's ambition.

The 31-year-old former world and European player of the year is also aware that his contribution at the Bernabéu is likely to be restricted to coming off the bench.

Spurs, with their tradition of big-name signings such as Jürgen Klinsmann, would consider Figo an ideal addition and will divert a significant portion of their transfer resources - still relatively healthy after a £15m share issue earlier this year - into a contract for Figo that would run beyond his current 2005 cut-off.

Figo would also become the centre of attention at White Hart Lane, whereas his star is on the wane in Madrid. Despite the commercial benefits of signing a player of Figo's renown, Tottenham sources last night insisted the decision has been made exclusively on football considerations.

Flo retires

REUTERS, Oslo

Norway striker Tore Andre Flo has retired from international football, national coach Age Hareide said on Wednesday as he named his squad for next month's World Cup qualifying matches against Italy and Belarus.

The 31-year-old, who now plays for Italian Serie A side Siena after spells at Rangers and Chelsea, will be replaced by John Carew. The Besiktas striker was left out of the squad for the 2-2 friendly draw against Belgium earlier this month.



MIA HAMM