

North undone at last minute

AFP, Saitama



Japan snatched a dramatic last-gasp victory against North Korea with a goal in injury-time to begin their final qualifying round for the 2006 World Cup with a 2-1 victory here Wednesday.

North Korea, bidding to reach the World Cup finals for the first time since 1966, looked to have done enough for a draw when a second-half equaliser from Nam Song-Chol cancelled out Mitsuo Ogasawara's first-half strike.

But the North Koreans were left heartbroken after substitute striker Masashi Oguro capitalised on a blunder by the visitors' keeper Sim Sung-Chol to rifle in from close range one minute into stoppage time.

The goal settled a fiercely fought Group B contest that took place against a backdrop of simmering political tensions between Japan and North Korea over the Cold War kidnapping of Japanese citizens by the Stalinist state.

"Our goal in this game was to get off to a winning start at home and take three points. We made it," said relieved Japan coach Zico, praising his team's never-say-die approach.

"We showed our strong will to win until the very end. It resulted in the winning goal," he said.

Japan got off to a dream start after only four minutes when Brazilian-born Alessandro 'Alex' Santos was brought down by Korean skipper Ri Myong-Sam outside the penalty area.

Ogasawara, starting the game ahead of Reggina's Shunsuke Nakamura, curled in the ensuing free-kick to delight the home crowd.

Yet though stunned by the early setback, North Korea regathered and proved to be more

than a match for the Japanese for the remainder of the half, defending stoutly to thwart the home side.

Santos went close shortly before half-time along with Takayuki Suzuki, who headed wide.

North Korea created chances of their own after the break, Mun In-Guk forcing a fine reflex save from Japan keeper Yoshikatsu Kawaguchi on 50 minutes with a close-range header.

North Korea's tidy play got its reward on 61 minutes, Nam Song-Chol firing home an angled shot from the left-hand side of the penalty area after a neat passing move.

Zico sent on Germany's Hamburg striker Naohiro Takahara and Nakamura and they quickly began troubling the Koreans.

Takahara sent a header wide in the 75th minute but squandered a golden opportunity moments later.

But just as a draw seemed likely, North Korean keeper Sim flapped at a cross which was scrambled in by Oguro to secure a vital three points for Japan.

"It was our first game. I'm glad that I helped the team win today. We had tough opponents, so I was determined to hit a shot in case I play," said Oguro.

Meanwhile, Korean coach Yun Jong-Su said: "Of course we are disappointed when we lose a game. But this is not the end of the tournament. We are going to refresh ourself and prepare for our next match."

"We play a game looking for a win, I never thought of drawing 1-1. We tried to score a goal, because to attack is the best defence," added Yun.

Japan will travel to Iran for their next qualifier, while North Korea will play fast-improving Bahrain in Pyongyang on March 25.

Uzbeks hold Saudis

AFP, Tashkent



Hosts Uzbekistan came back from the dead with an injury time equaliser to draw 1-1 with Saudi Arabia in their opening Asian Zone qualifying Group A match here on Wednesday.

Comeback king Sami Al Jaber put the Saudis into the lead in the 77th minute, but Uzbeki midfielder Anvar Soliev saved the day for his team three minutes after the regulation 90 minutes had ended.

The visitors, looking to reach the World Cup finals for the fourth successive time, started the match cautiously, probing for weakness in the home defence, while not taking any unnecessary risks.

The three-time Asian champions looked in control but they failed to create any clear-cut goal chances as the Uzbeks, looking to qualify for their first World Cup finals since gaining independence from the old Soviet Union, defended well.

It was a different story when going forward for the home side as a catalogue of ill-advised moves and passes scarcely troubled the Gulf kings.

Nevertheless, Dynamo Kiev striker Maxim Shatskiikh had a clear opportunity in the 32nd minute but his powerful shot from just inside the box was parried away by Saudi goalkeeper Mabrouk Zaid.

The Saudis stepped up their attacks with a series of penetrating moves which kept Lokomotiv Moscow goalkeeper Alexei Polyakov on his toes as the sides reached the interval at 0-0.

After the interval the Uzbeks, spurred by a 45,000 home crowd, poured into attack, pinning the visitors back but to no avail as the Saudi defence held firm.

The Saudis then struck in the 77th minute when substitute Al Jaber, 10 minutes after coming on, beat Polyakov with a close-range overhead shot after a precise cross.

It was all the more remarkable in that Al Jaber was playing his first match back since retiring after the 2002 World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea.

The Uzbeks went all out for the equaliser and finally, three minutes into injury time the home crowd were sent into raptures as Soliev, who had also come on as a substitute, equalised from close range after a mazy dribble into the box.



A ROMP IN THE PARK! Brazilian players celebrate a goal during their Carlsberg Cup friendly match against Hong Kong in Hong Kong yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

A lesson in samba

Football

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Brazil began their year in sublime form as they crushed Hong Kong 7-1 in a friendly on Wednesday.

The world champions put on a breath-taking display to thrill a festive crowd celebrating the first day of the Chinese New Year at the Hong Kong Stadium.

Brazil hardly missed top striker Ronaldo, not released by Real Madrid for this warm-up game for next month's World Cup qualifier against Peru, against a side ranked 134th in the world.

Ricardo Oliveira scored twice and Lucio, Robinho, Ronaldinho and Roberto Carlos, with a stunning 25-metre shot, were also on target.

Substitute Alex converted a late penalty to complete the rout and leave Brazil coach Carlos Alberto Parreira a happy man.

"I'm very happy with the commitment shown by the players. Even though we are five-times world champions and our technical and skill levels were much higher than Hong Kong, you still have to go out

and show commitment. And we did this today," Parreira told reporters.

Brazil led 3-0 at halftime and despite the early substitutions of skipper Cafu, Ronaldinho, the 2004 World Footballer of the Year, and Roberto Carlos, they kept up the pressure until the end.

"We were training while we were playing," Parreira said. "It is very difficult to get the players together and this was a big opportunity for us to train and play as a team."

Hong Kong's consolation goal came four minutes from time when substitute Lee Se-ming scored late in the second half.

"The result highlighted the difference in class between the two sides and it was a true reflection of our position in the world," Hong Kong coach Lai Sun-cheung said.

Superstar Ronaldinho gave a dazzling performance for Brazil. The Barcelona star got on the scoresheet with a cheeky lob and produced some magical touches in a virtuoso performance for the world champions that delighted Hong Kong fans celebrating the Lunar New Year holiday.

Parreira was left purring with delight after Ronaldinho's sublime display.

"He's a wonderful player," said Parreira. "He can make special passes, special movements and special goals – everything he does is different, that's why he was voted the best player in the world and he showed it today."

Bayern Munich defender Lucio opened the scoring in the 21st minute, latching on to a Robinho cross to plant a downward header past Hong Kong goalkeeper Fan Chun-Yip.

Real Madrid star Roberto Carlos, who had earlier cleared the cross-bar with an audacious effort from the half-way line, made it 2-0 with a fierce left-footed shot before Oliveira's curler on the stroke of half-time.

Ronaldinho made it 4-0 just after the break, and then launched the move which ended up with the fifth, outrageously looking to the left flank while spraying a pass to the right. Oliveira applied the finish.

Santos striker Robinho scored with a close-range header and a left-footed penalty by second-half substitute Alex rounded off Brazil's scoring with 10 minutes to go.

The biggest cheer of the afternoon was reserved for Hong Kong's Sze-Ming, who nodded home a

consolation strike for the home side after a goalmouth scramble.

Brazil, using the match as preparation for next month's World Cup qualifiers with Uruguay and Peru, fielded a near full-strength side including Ronaldinho, Roberto Carlos and rising star Robinho, who mesmerised the crowd – and the home team – with their pace, power and close control.

It could have been worse for Hong Kong if not for the heroics of goalkeeper Fan, who saved at the feet of Ronaldinho and Oliveira as well as stopping a point-blank effort from the head of the Real Betis striker.

Chances were few for the home team, ranked 144th by FIFA, although Wong Chun-Yue had a shot blocked by Brazil 'keeper Julio Cesar in the opening minutes and Luk Koon-Pong fired over late on.

The match, which was criticised by FIFA president Sepp Blatter as a "money-making" exercise, was also dogged by lacklustre ticket sales with the 40,000-seat Hong Kong stadium only about two-thirds full.

Football

REUTERS, Dusseldorf

Disgraced German referee Robert Hoyzer said on Tuesday he was ashamed of himself for fixing matches for money and warned that the ongoing investigation would stir up a hornet's nest for many others.

"The German Football Association wasn't aware of the scope of it all," Hoyzer, the 25-year-old referee at the centre of the scandal, told ZDF television in an interview on Tuesday.

"They thought it would be limited to just one referee," he added in his first public appearance since the scandal erupted last month. "But they nailed the right one with me. It was like hitting a hornet's nest. I've got a lot of information."

Hoyzer, who has admitted fixing several matches last year and been in hiding at an undisclosed location since then, told ZDF's Johannes B. Kerner he had been seduced by money.

"I was pleased as punch -- the great amounts of money blinded me," said Hoyzer, who had dropped out of university before recently resuming his studies.

"As a ref I was only earning about 3,000 euros (\$3,828) per month -- suddenly it was tens of thousands. The gambling mafia spied on me on the internet and caught me at my weakest point."

Hoyzer, who is co-operating with prosecutors and Germany's Football Association, said he understood what people thought of him in Germany.

"I'm ashamed about the whole thing," Hoyzer said. "It's so incredibly embarrassing. It's so humiliating to be in front of everyone, not only those who are involved in soccer."

"I'm going to have to live with the fact that people are going to curse at me or threaten to beat me whenever they see me on the street."

The soccer scandal is Germany's worst in over 30 years and has damaged the standing of the country's soccer establishment just as preparations to stage the 2006 World Cup are building up.

A total of 25 people, including three other referees and 14 players are now under investigation.

Juergen Jansen, the only first division referee mentioned in connection with the case, and fellow ref Felix Zwayer have both denied any involvement.

Three of the 25 people currently under investigation, brothers identified only as Ante, Milan and Filip S., are in custody on suspicion of fraud as part of an organised gang. German media have claimed they are Croatian gamblers.

ZDF noted that the studio audience was screened as a safety precaution.

"I'm afraid of going to jail," Hoyzer said. "I know that the Croatians are dangerous. They tried to pressure me up to the very end to stay quiet."

Hoyzer said of the 67,000 euros (\$85,500) that he received that he returned 13,900 euros and lent 12,000. "I don't have any more," he said. "My accounts are all frozen."

South Korea freeze Kuwait

AFP, Seoul



South Korea made light of sub-zero temperatures to defeat Kuwait 2-0 in Group A of the final Asian qualifying round for the 2006 World Cup here on Wednesday.

Despite Arctic conditions, the South Koreans peppered the Kuwaiti goal with attacking bursts from the opening minutes of the game at the World Cup stadium in a high-tempo rhythm they maintained for most of the match.

But the 2002 World Cup semi-finalists' strikers were off target until experienced forward Lee Dong-Gook opened the scoring in the 23rd minute.

The second goal came from Lee Young-Pyo, who plays for PSV Eindhoven of the Netherlands, with 10 minutes of the game remaining. It was just reward for Korea's near-total dominance.

And it was a great start to the final round of World Cup qualifying for South Korea, who are grouped with Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan as well as Kuwait in Group A.

For Kuwait, the conditions were as much of a shock as the uncompromising South Korean style of attacking play. Match officials said it as minus-8 degrees centigrade during the game.

"I must say we got the most difficult tie in Group A at the very beginning," said Kuwait's Serbian coach Slobodan Pavkovic. "Korea is the best team in the group."

"At the same time I think that some of my players for the first time in their lives were playing in sub-zero temperatures. They never

played in such cold weather. So our passing game was not as good as usual," he said.

The Kuwaitis were lucky to get away with conceding only two goals. Several more chances fell to the Koreans including Seol Ki-Hyeon, now playing for English championship side Wolverhampton Wanderers, and PSV's Park Ji-Sung.

Coach Jo Bonfrere, who criticized the side recently for lack of moral fibre during their indifferent build-up to the World Cup final qualifying round, said he was pleased with the performance and praised the first goal by Lee, a spectacular shot into the roof of the net with his back to the goal.

"He didn't score in our last few games. He likes to score only very beautiful goals. I wish he wasn't so picky," said the coach.

South Korea travel to Saudi Arabia for their next match on March 25.

Police probe threats against Glazer

AFP, London

Manchester Police have launched an investigation into threats against Malcolm Glazer and the Manchester United board by a supporters group opposed to the American tycoon's attempts to take over the club.

The group, calling themselves the 'Manchester Education Committee', insist they have been monitoring the movements of the Glazer family and would "ensure a warm welcome" for any family member visiting England, "no matter how large the phalanx of bodyguards".

The MEC said they would regard the United board as collaborators if they recommend Glazer's bid to shareholders.

"Police are aware of comments made on the 'Red Issue' website," a police statement said.

"Appropriate measures will be put in place to deal with the comments and an investigation is under way."

The group have in the past claimed responsibility for vandalising the house and car of former United club solicitor Maurice Watkins, who indirectly sold one million pounds worth of shares to Glazer.

They also invaded the pitch during a United reserve match last year.

They are now planning to step up their activities after it was confirmed United had received a "detailed proposal" from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers owner.

Glazer made a new 800-million-pound (1.48-billion-dollar) bid to take over United on Monday.

He has built up a 28.1 percent stake in United but has been turned down three times already.

United supporters have played a significant part in seeing off attempts to take over the club.

They believe Glazer is not a football fan but simply wants to get control of one of the most famous and commercially successful clubs in the world and ultimately take it into private control.

British MPs for betting crackdown

Football

AFP, London

British lawmakers have called for tough new measures to crack down on corruption in sports-related betting.

A report by an all-party Parliamentary group says the growth of Internet betting exchanges, where it is possible to back horses, individuals or teams to lose, makes sport more vulnerable to fraud and match-fixing.

The group calls on the government to adopt a call from Lord Condon, the former top policeman who now heads the International Cricket Council's anti-corruption unit, to raise the maximum jail sentence for gambling cheats above the current two years. The inquiry took evidence from all the major sports including horse racing, football, cricket, boxing, both rugby codes and tennis.

The inquiry says: "Whilst we accept that the greater part of sports betting is neither corrupt nor unfair to

punters, the evidence convinces us that the growth of betting exchanges - because of the facility they provide to bet against a result - has increased the potential for corruption."

In his evidence to the inquiry, Condon, the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner, told Members of Parliament that the proposed maximum penalty of two years in prison for cheating was "derisory".

Condon said: "You could get a bigger sentence for failing to pay your hotel bill criminally than you could for corruption in major sports."

The inquiry came about after Ladbrokes chief executive Chris Bell claimed that "at least one race a day was being corrupted by the availability of laying horses to lose on betting exchanges".

A bookmaker claimed he knew of 20-30 cases of horses not being raced properly after being backed to lose on betting exchanges.

Among the evidence cited were the examples of former England and Surrey cricketer Ed Giddins who backed his county to lose, two St Helens rugby league players - Sean

PSG get ex-player as coach

AFP, Paris

Beleagured Paris St Germain have turned to former player Laurent Fournier after sacking coach Vahid Halilhodzic on Wednesday.

Fournier, 40, was named by chairman Francis Graille after he took charge of the PSG training session on Wednesday. He had been the reserve team coach.

"He is under contract to the end of the season and we envisage an option for a further two years. But to be honest we will assess the situation at the end of May," Graille said.

In 21 matches this season, the club, based in Falkirk, Scotland, has won just twice, clinched 12 points, finding the net 19 times while leaking 52 goals at the other end.

Last season, they finished bottom of the table winning just twice in 33 games - a return of eight points out of a possible total of 108. The previous campaign was equally discouraging. Bottom place again winning two games and the slightly better return of 13 points.

Formed in November, 1881 when the Bainsford Bluebonnets cricket team decided to form the Bainsford Britannia football team, East Stirling was adopted as their name in 1881.

Football

AFP, Paris

They've won just six games in three years, are lucky if 100 people turn up to watch their weekly trials while the players earn the princely sum of 20 pounds each.

Welcome to East Stirling FC - Britain's worst professional football team.

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The gutsy worst team

Their moment of glory came seven years later in 1888 when they reached the quarter-finals of the Scottish Cup only to lose to Celtic. Since then it has been largely downhill.

"We do our duty stoically," said Ian Ramsay, the head of the team's supporters' club when the team was heading for another season of oblivion in 2003/04.

"The season was quite painful. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. We are not competing. This cannot continue. A hundred people - that's what we are down to for home games."

"After two seasons of pure crap, I'm amazed we've still got 100 fans," Ramsay told The Scotsman newspaper.

Things weren't helped when the club slashed wages by 10 pounds a week from the already humble sum of 30 pounds.

Despite their woeful form, East Stirling, founded 124 years ago, survive partly because there is no system of automatic relegation from the Scottish third division.

But there are signs that the powers-that-be are becoming exhausted with the constant

humiliations and are pondering introducing enforced re-election for any team who finishes bottom of the third division for two successive seasons.

The Scottish Football League has even held talks with East Stirling over the team's poor showings but club chairman Alan Mackin said the team's miserable record was partly a result of running the club within its means.

"We are the only team in Scotland that has faced the facts and tried to live within our means," said Mackin. "We are the only team that's had the guts."

They needed guts in the last game of last season when they needed to beat Elgin City to avoid being labelled the worst ever team in the history of Scottish football.

That record still belongs to Dundee who won only once and drew two games in 1898/1899 after East Stirling won 2-1 buoyed by a 'good-luck' message from Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, a former boss at Firs Park.