

Dream start for Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran made sure their World Cup dream was kept on track Friday with a convincing 2-1 home win against top Asian rivals Japan, largely thanks to their trio of Bundesliga-based stars.

Iran dominated throughout the first half, and had the visitors on the defensive early through a series of strong chances from Mehdi Mahdavikia of SV Hamburg, Kaiserslautern's Fereydoun Zandi and Vahid Hashemian of Bayern Munich.

With only the top two teams in each group qualifying automatically for next year's tournament in Germany, Japan will now be under pressure to win their home game, against Bahrain, at the Saitama

stadium near Tokyo on March 30. Bahrain, who beat North Korea 2-1 earlier in the day, now top the group ahead of Iran on goal difference. Both teams are on four points, while Japan are in third with three and North Korea fourth on no points.

Iran were given plenty of vocal support for their second group match, with 100,000 supporters in the Azadi stadium hoping for goals after Iran's last qualifier, away to Bahrain, ended in a scrappy goalless draw last month.

Iran opened the scoring in the 24th minute after Hashemian picked up a free kick deep into the Japanese box and the Bayern Munich forward hit home past Japan's scrappy defence.

Japan - dogged by injury and a reported pre-match bust-up over tactics - only appeared to kick into gear in the second half.

Several chances for the awk-

ward visitors followed, and with Iran back under pressure, Takashi Fukunishi was eventually able to find a gap to level the scores from a cross into the Iranian box in the 65th minute.

However less than 10 minutes later Hashemian hit his second of the match, whisking into the Japanese box and getting his head behind a well-placed long cross from Ali Karimi on the right wing.

Hashemian and the other two of Iran's Bundesliga trio were also able to overshadow veteran striker and longtime national captain Ali Daei, who was substituted in the 42nd minute.

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PHOTO: AFP

HAPPINESS TURNS TO HORROR: Iranian fans wave their national flags during a World Cup qualifier against Japan at the Azadi Stadium in Tehran on March 25. The joy of watching the home side win 2-1 was later replaced with shock and dismay as five local fans were crushed to death while leaving the venue.

Giggs plans to play on

AFP, Cardiff

Wales skipper Ryan Giggs has vowed to continue in international football despite seeing seven players call time on their careers with the country following the departure of Mark Hughes as the national side's boss.

Manchester United winger Giggs, 31, will mark his 50th Wales appearance by captaining the side in their World Cup qualifier against Austria here at the Millennium Stadium on Saturday, in new manager John Toshack's first competitive game in charge.

"I'm fit, I enjoy playing for my country and I have no intention of quitting," Giggs said ahead of the match.

Toshack, in his previous role as a TV pundit, was a severe critic of Wales under Hughes, now in charge at Blackburn Rovers.

Several players were unhappy with Toshack's comments, midfielder Robbie Savage, now playing at Rovers, the most outspoken in his condemnation of the former Real Madrid coach's remarks.

Savage announced his international retirement after Toshack left him out of the squad for the double-header with Austria (the teams meet again in Vienna in four days' time).

And there were fears among fans that Giggs, who played alongside former Wales striker Hughes at Old Trafford, would follow suit especially

as he had discussed his international future with United boss Sir Alex Ferguson.

But Giggs said: "I am very proud to reach 50 caps and I hope there will be many more. I have no thoughts of retiring. Long-term the captaincy is up to John, but I am more than happy to continue doing it."

"If I stay fit for the next three



RYAN GIGGS

four years I do not see any reason -- and if I am still happy and playing international football -- to think about retiring.

He said: "It is an honour to play for your country. I want to get as many caps as I can."

Wales haven't reached a major final since the 1958 World Cup and Giggs added he wanted to be around for a few more attempts yet and that would take him near to the end of Toshack's five-year

contract, when the former Liverpool and Wales striker would be 61 - he celebrated his 56th birthday this week.

Cardiff-born Giggs said: "My goal is still obvious - to qualify for a major tournament. It is what every player wants. I will keep trying. I have two, maybe three campaigns left in me and hopefully I can do it."

Giggs has often been criticised for not reproducing the form he has shown in the red shirt of United in the red of Wales.

But he explained: "It is completely different from club football. You can't get a run of form going because you don't see each other for four months at a time. When you do get together you must prepare in the right way and hope things go well."

"I do not think I have produced the sort of run of form I would have liked, but you can't get that form going. There are too many gaps. We are always the underdogs and you have to approach games in a different way to the way I do with United."

In the 14 years since Giggs made his international debut he has experienced both highs and lows.

He said: "My highlights were scoring on my full debut and captaining the side for the first time against Belgium. The low points are obviously the defeats by Romania and Russia that stopped us getting to major finals."

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