

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 Mahdavi and SV Hamburg, Kaiserslautern's Ferreydoun 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 awkward 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.

The unprecedented move signalled that Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic may be thinking the time has come for Daei to make way for younger players.

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 or



RYAN GIGGS

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

"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 finals 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 showed 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."

"But it is those experiences that spur you on even more and make you more determined to qualify for something big."



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 by shock and dismay as five local fans were crushed to death while leaving the venue.

Injury halts Roddick

AFP, Miami

Andy Roddick's defence of his Key Biscayne ATP Masters Series title crashed to a halt Friday as the American retired from his opening match against Spain's Fernando Verdasco with a right wrist sprain.

Verdasco, who extended Roddick to three sets in the Masters Series event last week at Indian Wells, California, led 7-6, 4-3 when Roddick called it quits.

"I caught something, jammed it the wrong way," Roddick said. "I knew it was uncomfortable right away. Sometimes you jar something and you hope it subsides or is tolerable."

"When it was still on my mind six, seven, eight games later, then I was worried."

The two had traded breaks in the seventh and eighth games of the opening set to send it to the decider.

Roddick had three set points in the tiebreaker, and when he finally gave it away with a double-fault, he threw his racquet in frustration.

"I knew something wasn't right," Roddick said. "I wasn't able to hit the shots I wanted to hit. I hit three doubles in the tiebreak. That's not characteristic."

Fifth-seeded Carlos Moya gave Spain another triumph over the United States as he saved three match points en route to a 4-6, 7-5, 7-6 victory over James Blake.

Moya, a former world number one, had to pull out all the stops as he served to save the match in the 10th game of the second set, when Blake had three match points.

Saudis sink S Koreans

AFP, Dammam



Saudi Arabia's convincing 2-0 victory over World Cup semifinalists South Korea here on Friday has put Gabriel Calderon's team well on course to qualify for the 2006 finals in Germany.

Saud Khariri put the Saudis ahead in the 29th minute before a Yasser Al Qahtani penalty in the 75rd minute decided the issue.

The Saudis lead Group A with four points from two matches, one point ahead of the much-fancied Koreans and with the top two going through automatically to the finals, Argentine coach Calderon has cause to be optimistic.

Earlier in the week, Calderon had been saying they were concentrating on winning second spot in the group behind the Koreans, who upstaged some mighty teams to reach the 2002 World Cup semifinals.

However Saudi Arabia can now contemplate possibly taking top spot on their way to what would be their fourth World Cup finals in a row.

The home side were convincing winners though Jo Bonfrere's South Koreans looked well organised, particularly in defence.

However the visitors were powerless from a ball pulled back from the bi-line for Khariri to slot home low from six yards past the diving right hand of Korean keeper Woon-Jae Lee.

The Koreans threatened briefly in the second half through Park and Europe-based midfielder Lee Chun-soo until Al Qahtani's late penalty confirmed the result and caused animated celebrations among the home fans at the Mohammed bin Fahd stadium.

earn their first points of the campaign.

Playing at home in their second final-round qualifier for Germany 2006, Kuwait did what they needed to against a favoured Uzbek side.

It took only seven minutes for the Kuwaitis to get on the board when Bashar Abdullah broke down the left and fired an unstoppable drive to the

top corner.

The 24-year-old then doubled the advantage in minute 62. Alexander Geynrikh managed to pull one away for the former Soviet Republic -- a power in the Central Asian region -- but it proved to be nothing more than mere consolation.



PHOTO: AFP

Saudi Arabia's Saud Khariri celebrates after opening the scoring against South Korea in a World Cup qualifier on March 25.

Tragedy in Tehran

AFP, Tehran

Five people were trampled to death and 40 injured in a crush of spectators after Friday evening's World Cup qualifier between Iran and Japan, and another person died of an apparent heart attack brought on by the nail-biting clash, press reports said Saturday.

The injured people have been admitted to three hospitals, IRNA quoted Tehran's Emergency Centre as saying. Also injured during the match was a Japanese woman, who suffered slight facial wounds from a firecracker.

The crush occurred immediately after the match, which Iran won 2-1, when an estimated 100,000 spectators flooded out of the packed downtown Azadi stadium.

Iranian media said those killed had attempted to use an unauthorised exit, and added that stadium management and national sporting officials have ordered an investigation.

The sixth death, reported by ISNA, was caused by a man who was overwhelmed by "too much excitement" -- probably a heart attack.

Official also reported that 86 buses were damaged in post-match crowd violence, although no arrests were reported.

N Koreans complain to FIFA

AFP, Seoul

North Korea will make an official complaint to FIFA over what their coach believed was unfair refereeing during a World Cup qualifier against Bahrain, a newspaper report said Saturday.

"The referee favored the opposing team too much," Yun Jong-Su, head coach of the North Korean team, was quoted as telling Chosun Shinbo, a pro-Pyongyang Korean language newspaper in Japan.

"We'll make an official complaint to FIFA," he said.

At a press conference after the match on Friday, an angry Yun said he was bitterly disappointed with the refereeing and was considering making an official complaint.

"The only thing I want to say is that in every competition, national or international, the refereeing should be fair," Yun said through an interpreter.

Gerrard rejects Chelsea rumours

BBC ONLINE, undated

Steven Gerrard has branded reports claiming he has already decided to leave Liverpool for Chelsea in the summer as "absolute rubbish".

He said: "I held a news conference last summer to say I was staying and the situation hasn't changed since then."

"The suggestion I've already made up my mind to leave and I've done a deal to join another club is absolute rubbish."

"I've not even been thinking about it. There's been a lot of rubbish written about me and it's getting ridiculous."

Despite turning down a move to Stamford Bridge last summer, rumours linking Gerrard to Chelsea have persisted and the Liverpool captain admitted he was becoming frustrated.

"Sometimes I feel I'm in a no-win situation," he told Liverpool's website.

"No doubt in Sunday's newspapers someone, somewhere will misinterpret this but if I say nothing, then you'll have some fans saying 'Gerrard hasn't denied it, so it must be true'."

"On the one hand I want to put the record straight and let the fans know they shouldn't believe everything they're hearing about me."

"On the other, I know everything I say is being interpreted to mean one thing or another."

Aussies saved by sub Elrich

AFP, Sydney

Substitute Ahmad Elrich scored with his first touch to give Australia a flattering 2-1 win over Iraq in a football international at the Sydney Olympic stadium on Saturday.

Right-winger Elrich, who came on with 18 minutes left, raced on to crossfield pass from Josip Skoko to beat Iraqi goalkeeper Sarmad Rasheed and put Australia in front for the only time in the match.

Up until that stage Iraq, already out of contention for next year's World Cup finals, had harried the Australian defence into error and could have been two-up before Elrich's winning strike.

"If we're honest we'd have to say we were a bit disappointing," Australian coach Frank Farina said.

"The boys looked flat, lethargic and tired and they were also under specific instructions not to get caught out with the long ball...it was an ugly win."

Sehwag show on Day 3

FROM PAGE 12

trapped leg-before while trying to sweep Kaneria to leave his home fans disappointed.

Tendulkar, seeking a world record 35th Test hundred, struggled for his first 10 runs as he survived a confident appeal for leg-before

against paceman Mohammad Sami.

Just when it looked that Tendulkar had settled down to play a long knock, he miscued a drive off leg-spinner Shahid Afridi to be caught by Younis at point.

He fell five short of surpassing compatriot Sunil Gavaskar's record of 10,122 runs.

Sami (2-80) tested the Indian batsmen and was rewarded for his hard work when he had Gambhir caught by Younis in the slips before accounting for Dinesh Karthik.

Pakistan are seeking a series-leveling victory here after losing the second Test by 195 runs. The first Test in Mohali was drawn.

SCOREBOARD

Scoreboard at stumps on the third day of the third and final Test between India and Pakistan at the Chinnaswamy Stadium on Saturday:

PAKISTAN: First innings 570 (Younis 267, Inzamam 184; Harbhajan 6-152)

INDIA: First innings (overnight 55-0)

Gambhir c Younis b Sami	24			
Sehwag c and b Kaneria	201			
Dravid lbw b Kaneria	22			
Tendulkar c Younis b Afridi	41			
Laxman not out	51			
Ganguly st Akmal b Kaneria	1			
Karthik c Kamal b Sami	10			
Pathan not out	0			
Extras: (b-5, lb-9, nb-15)	29			
Total: (For 6 wks in 100 overs) 379				
Fall of wickets: 1-98, 2-172, 3-257, 4-337, 5-343, 6-374				
To bat: Kumble, Harbhajan, Balaji				
Bowler	O	M	R	W
Sami	23	3	80	2
Razzaq	16	0	74	0
Kaneria	26	4	97	3
Arshad	25	3	84	0
Afridi	10	3	30	1

Proteas touch

FROM PAGE 12

Africa captain Graeme Smith told reporters.

"But there's not a lot we can do about the situation, and we're concentrating on making sure our own game is as it should be."

South Africa play four Tests and five one-day internationals on their third tour of West Indies.



Did U Know?

Pakistan's total is now the highest by any team at Chinnaswamy Stadium, surpassing India's 541 for six wickets declared against Sri Lanka in 1993-94.

CROSSWORD

By Eugene Sheffer

ACROSS

1 Stylish division

5 Sternward

8 Skewer

12 Frau's mate

13 Fresh neighbor

14 Mexican money

15 Largest of the seven

16 Turn right

17 Multitude

18 Dennis the Menace, e.g.

20 Unrepaired

22 Joke's first line, often

26 Squamous

29 Monterrey monarch

30 "There's — in 'team' "

31 Actress

32 1-Across, to Austin Powers

33 Shake-speare sobriquet

34 Torched

35 Spotted

DOWN

1 Burn somewhat

2 "For — jolly good ..."

3 Rainbow

4 Fireplace noise

5 — -Saxon

6 Retainer

7 Made slight

8 Juan Carlos'

9 Private kingdom

10 Doctrine

11 "— Story"

19 Whatever amount

21 Firmament

23 Dentist's concern

24 Heart of the matter

25 "Bye Bye Birdie"

26 Worms make it

27 Invent

28 Civil War battle site

32 Avail oneself profitably

33 Nut-and-honey

34 Carlos' pastry

35 Something you think to do at 39-Down

36 — fi

38 Muscle woe

39 Colorado resort

42 String instrument

43 Tend

44 Start over

45 Chart

46 Com-motion

48 Have bills

Solution time: 25 mins.

ACROSS

1 STYLISH

5 STERNWARD

8 SKEWER

12 FRAU'S

13 FRESH

14 MEXICAN

15 LARGEST

16 TURN

17 MULTITUDE

18 DENNIS

20 UNREPAIRED

22 JOKE'S

26 SQUAMOUS

29 MONTERREY

30 "THERE'S"

31 ACTRESS

32 1-ACROSS

33 SHAKESPEARE

34 TORCHED

35 SPOTTED

DOWN

1 BURN

2 "FOR"

3 RAINBOW

4 FIREPLACE

5 SAXON

6 RETAINER

7 MADE

8 JUAN

9 PRIVATE

10 DOCTRINE

11 "— STORY"

19 WHATEVER

21 FIRMAMENT

23 DENTIST'S

24 HEART

25 "BYE BYE"

26 WORMS

27 INVENT

28 CIVIL WAR

32 AVAIL

33 NUT-AND-HONEY

34 CARLOS'

35 SOMETHING

36 FI

38 MUSCLE

39 COLORADO

42 STRING

43 TEND

44 START

45 CHART

46 COMMOTION

48 HAVE

CRYPTOQUIP

BEILM'WOLMYCLLGBAV

ELWTMCYMWZOZ, YDOA

BWOSGLAILM'WOLA J

ZSJTOAVOWDMAY.

Yesterday's Cryptquip: I AM CERTAINLY THE MOST TANNED PERSON HERE TODAY. ALL OTHERS PALE IN COMPARISON.

Today's Cryptquip Clue: W equals R

The Cryptquip is a substitution cipher in which one letter stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Single letters, short words and words using an apostrophe give you clues to locating vowels. Solution is by trial and error.

Beckham misses it

REUTERS, Manchester

England captain David Beckham, who is considering his future with Real Madrid for family reasons, says he misses the competitive spirit of English football in La Liga.

Days after saying his children's hounding by paparazzi photographers had made him question his future in Spain, Beckham said he hankered for the physical side of English football.

"It's the competitive element of this fixture that excites me," Beckham wrote in his programme notes for Saturday's World Cup qualifier against Northern Ireland at Old Trafford.

"The tackles, the challenges, the will to go that extra yard are all very much part of the British game...for me as a player and a fan of football, they are aspects I love about the game too."

"If there is one thing I miss playing in Spain, it's that physical competitiveness. It's what I've been brought up on and I can't wait to be in the thick of it this afternoon."

"We have overcome the champions of Asia. We have lifted the biggest obstacle in front of the World Cup," he said of the game against Japan, which drew a crowd of 100,000 to Tehran's Azadi stadium.

Ivankovic said the Pyongyang fixture is set to be missed by veteran captain Ali Daei due to injury -- he was substituted in the first-half of the Japan game -- but the side appeared to have managed well without him and in the face of a fierce Japanese counter-attack.

Iran's press was predictably full

AFP, Tehran/Tokyo



Iran's 2-1 win over Japan in the Asian Group B World Cup qualifiers has given the Middle East side a boost in confidence and left their top Asian rivals wrangling over tactics.

Iran made sure their World Cup dream was kept on track Friday with a convincing home win, largely thanks to their trio of Bundesliga-based stars -- Vahid Hashemian of Bayern Munich, Mehdi Mahdavi of SV Hamburg and Kaiserslautern's Ferreydoun Zandi.

Iran now shares the lead of the group with Bahrain. Both teams are on four points, while Japan are in third with three and North Korea fourth on no points.

"We are going to North Korea to get the full three points," Iran's Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic said, underlining a confident sentiment before their trip to Pyongyang to face North Korea in a few days time.

"We have overcome the champions of Asia. We have lifted the biggest obstacle in front of the World Cup," he said of the game against Japan, which drew a crowd of 100,000 to Tehran's Azadi stadium.

Ivankovic said the Pyongyang fixture is set to be missed by veteran captain Ali Daei due to injury -- he was substituted in the first-half of the Japan game -- but the side appeared to have managed well without him and in the face of a fierce Japanese counter-attack.

Iran's press was predictably full

of praise for the national side, thanking them for a "new year gift" and a "memorable day" coinciding with the Persian new years holiday season.

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.

And this will be no walkover. Bahrain held Iran to a scrappy goalless draw last month and beat North Korea.

Japanese coach Zico was under fire for gambling too much on out-of-form Fiorentina midfielder Hidetoshi Nakata, and for having opted to switch from a 3-5-2 to a 4-4-2 to accommodate him.

"If we had played with the old style we would have played better," Asian Cup star Shunsuke Nakamura, who played alongside Nakata, told reporters after the match.

"It serves them right," cried the headline in the tabloid Nikkan Gendai, which had warned the Brazilian legend would face pressure to resign if the Asian champions lost their next qualifier against Bahrain at home on Wednesday.

But the shift from the formation which helped Japan retain the Asian Cup last August cost them dearly, although 28-year-old Nakata, twice the Asian footballer of the year, dazzled with a few brilliant passes.

"We were exploring our own kind of football. It was not our condition that mattered most,"

Reggina playmaker and Asian Cup star Shunsuke Nakamura, who played alongside Nakata, told Japanese reporters after the match.

"Returning to the old formation is the shortest cut to a solution," he added.

Nakata, once dreaded as an infallible figure, and fellow midfielder Takashi Fukunishi were embroiled in a rare bust-up over tactics while training ahead of the match at an altitude of 1,300 metres in Tehran.

SV Hamburg striker Naohiro Takahara said: "I could not grasp the timing for making a move. We were not clear about our combinations and moves. We have no choice but to re-adjust ourselves before the Bahrain match."

"First of all, it was a failure," the influential daily Asahi Shimbun said.

"There was disagreement between Nakata and others over defence tactics," the daily added, saying that Zico must rebuild solidarity with his players in the next four days before the Bahrain match.

"Far from top form, Nakata created some fine moments. But on the other hand, the timing of his passes was slow and he let the ball slip away a number of times," senior football critic Yoshiyuki Osumi wrote in the daily Tokyo Shimbun.

"But if Nakata has restored something through the fierce battle to carry on to battles ahead, we can be content with the lost match," he said.