

ASIAN QUALIFIERS

Giants take giant strides

AFP, Nicosia



Saudi Arabia, Iran, Japan and South Korea, the big four nations of Asian football, edged further towards automatic qualification for the 2006 World Cup finals following Friday's matches.

The other four nations in the bottom halves of Groups A and B, Kuwait, Uzbekistan, Bahrain and North Korea, look set to fight it out for a back door entry to Germany 2006 by earning the right to meet the fourth-placed CONCACAF team.

Saudi Arabia beat Kuwait 3-0 in Riyadh with two goals from Mohammed Al Shalhoob and another from Saad Al Harithi to take top spot in Group A from South Korea who drew 1-1 against Uzbekistan in Tashkent.

The Saudis now lead the table with eight points from four games, with South Korea on seven, Kuwait on four and Uzbekistan with two. With just two matches to go, the top two are clearly in the driving seat.

In Group B, Iran hung on to top spot with a 1-0 victory over North Korea in Tehran and Japan stayed second with a 1-0 victory over Bahrain in Manama.

Iran lead the group with 10 points from four matches, with Japan on nine, well above third-placed Bahrain who have just four and North Korea who are yet to earn a point.

South Korea, the 2006 World Cup semifinalists, had a tough match against Uzbekistan however. Uzbekistan and Dynamo Kiev striker Maxim Shatskikh put his side into the lead 63 minutes into the match, only for Ju-Young Park to level with just a minute remaining.

The hosts, who were in a must-win position to keep alive their chances of qualifying, began by testing their guests defence right from the kick-off.

But after 20 minutes South Korea regained the initiative and created several chances, but the hosts' defence, led by goalkeeper Yevgeny Safonov, played without any major mistakes and kept their net clean.

After the break the hosts upped the tempo and created more opportunities but missed them all before the 63rd minute, when Uzbekistan skipper Mirjalol Kasymov fed Shatskikh at the edge of the box with a long-range left-handed pass.

Shatskikh dribbled into the box and lobbed the ball into the net over the South Korean 'keeper Woon-

Jae Lee from close range.

The visitors poured in attack, pinning Uzbekistan back and trying to pull the scores level, but Uzbekistan defended stoutly, stifling South Korea's attacks.

However, in the last minute the Uzbek defence fell into panic and failed to keep out Park's close-range equaliser from a short cross.

Iran took a crucial step forward in their bid to qualify with a comfortable but decidedly dull 1-0 home win against North Korea.

Iran are now looking for a win against Bahrain on Wednesday in Croatia.

"The game is not over yet," Iran's Croatian coach Branko Ivankovich said.

"It is too soon for the big celebration. We have a difficult game ahead of us on Wednesday against Bahrain. Some of our players got two yellow cards meaning they will not be able to play."

Against North Korea, Iran were clearly the dominant side, but nevertheless found difficulty creating solid opportunities in the face of a gritty, physical defence.

After just a few chances in the opening 45 minutes, Iran finally found their opening deep into the first-half's extra time.

Star striker Ali Karimi -- who currently plays for Dubai club Al-Ahli but is set to join German champions Bayern Munich next season -- was brought down on the right of the North Korean box.

The free kick from the man nicknamed "Asia's Maradona" found the six yard box and eventually the head of Rahman Rezai, who managed to nod the ball just under the cross bar.

Japan moved closer to gaining automatic entry with a well-deserved win.

Mitsuo Ogasawara scored the decisive goal in the 34th minute following a well orchestrated move down the centre by Shunsuke Nakamura.

The Kashima Antlers midfielder neatly side-stepped Bahrain defender Abdulla Al Marzooqi a few yards outside the penalty area before unleashing a powerful right-footer which beat a diving Bahrain goalkeeper Ali Hassani.

The goal silenced a packed house wearing more than 20,000 red T-shirts distributed freely to their fans by the Bahrain Football Association before the match.

Raul linked with Liverpool move

INTERNET REPORT, Madrid

Spanish striker Raul has intimated he may be ready to leave Real Madrid and Liverpool is reported to be his likely destination.

Raul's place in the Real team has come under threat from former Liverpool striker Michael Owen.

The 27-year-old believes he has yet to peak, but has called on the Bernabeu club he joined in 1995 to tell him if he still has a future there.

"After 11 years here I want what is best for the club," Raul said.

"If at some time I have to sacrifice myself in order for the team to progress then I will do."

"If the club calls you up and says you have to go then as a player you have to be prepared to look for a way out that benefits everyone."

"If I listen to the polls in some papers, it looks as though I should leave now."

"I still feel useful to the club and believe I have not reached my peak, but I don't want to be in the way. All I want is for the club to be clear with me."

Owen joined Real from Liverpool last summer, while Raul's former strike partner Fernando Morientes made the switch to Anfield in a 6.3-million-pound deal in January.

Mum Figo's biggest fan

AFP, Lisbon

When Real Madrid midfielder Luis Figo makes his return to the national team later on Saturday during Portugal's World Cup qualifier against Slovakia, he will have the full support of a key fan -- his mum.

"I was really sorry when he left the team, I was saddened, but I understood because he was really tired. Now I am proud and happy that he is closer to me," Joana Figo told sports daily O Jogo.

Figo, 32, will become Portugal's most capped player when he runs out on to the pitch in Lisbon before a sellout crowd of 60,000 at the Stadium of Light against main Group 3 rivals Slovakia, with 111 appearances.

The FIFA World Player of the Year in 2001 announced in August last year that he was halting his international career because his commitments to the national team on top of his heavy schedule with the Spanish giants were hurting his fitness.

He announced his desire to return to the national squad last month after losing his regular place at Real Madrid in early April.

Portugal coach Luiz Felipe Scolari also named Figo in his squad for the World Cup qualifier against Estonia in Tallinn on Wednesday.

WORLD CUP

Shooters leave for Germany tomorrow

UNB, Dhaka

A four-member Bangladesh shooting team leaves for Germany on Monday to participate in the World Cup Shooting Championships to be held in Munich on June 6-13.

The team comprises three shooters and one official.

The shooters -- Suriya Akhter, Sharmin Akhter and Anwaruzzaman -- will represent Bangladesh in the meet while Shooting Federation vice-president Aleya Ferdousi will accompany as manager.

Bangladeshi shooters will take part in the men's and women's Air Rifles events likely to be held on June 11-12.

Greene aiming for immortality

AFP, Glasgow

Maurice Greene has vowed to break the world record again and go down in history as the world's greatest sprinter.

The former world 100 metres record-holder was speaking on his arrival for Sunday's international meeting between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Russia and the United States.

"I'd like to be thought of as that. Up to this point there's no man in this sport that has done the things I've done - I'm the greatest sprinter in my time," said Greene, who likes to be called the "Kansas Comet".

Greene, who has already run under 10 seconds more than 50 times in his career, also vowed to break that mark 60 times before he retires.

But the former Olympic and three-time world champion has been off that pace over the last couple of years and finished third in Athens last year when trying to defend his Olympic title.

"I want to get my world title back, break the world record again and run under 10 seconds for the 100m 60 times," he said.

Typically, Greene was more interested to talk about himself than anyone else and shrugged off questions about Mark Lewis-Francis' positive test for canabis.

PREVIEW: MEN'S SINGLES PREVIEW

Stage set for Nadal



AFP, Paris

Spain's Rafael Nadal faces unseeded Argentine Mariano Puerta in Sunday's French Open final admitting that the best player in the tournament will not even be on show in the Roland Garros title clash.

The 19-year-old is looking to follow in the footsteps of the legend-

reach his first ever Grand Slam final. "Federer for me is the best player," said Nadal.

"He is an amazing player. When he played well in the semifinal, he made it very difficult for me and only when I escaped his game did I manage to score points."

"But Federer always shows he's the best. Obviously he could win here."

The result meant that Federer will have to wait at least until next year to try and become just the sixth man to win all four Grand Slams.

court titles already this year.

If he wins, Nadal will become the first player since Wilander in 1982 to lift the Roland Garros crown on his debut; it would also make him the fourth youngest champion at the Grand Slam tournament considered the toughest to win.

Nadal also has the advantage of comfortably beating Puerta, the world number 37, on the only two occasions they have played in Acapulco earlier this year and in Umag, Croatia, in 2003. Both wins were also on clay.

"It will be difficult because he's been playing good tennis to get to the final," said Nadal.

"It will be complicated. I will have to play my best tennis and only like that will be able to win."

"I suppose since we are playing in our first Grand Slam final, we will both be nervous. But I have played a lot of finals this year including Barcelona, Monte Carlo and Rome as well as the Davis Cup final last year."

"I can't get more pressure than the Davis Cup."

Nadal will go into the final the fresher of the two men with Puerta having had to battle through two five-set matches in the quarterfinals and the semi-finals to see off Guillermo Canas and Nikolay Davydenko.

But the 26-year-old Puerta, like Nadal a left-hander, is fired up for the match by the sense of injustice he still feels at a nine-month drugs ban he served last year after testing positive for clenbuterol.

When he returned to the tour, he had to compete in far-flung Challenger events to get his ranking back up.

"When I came back I was prepared for very tough moments, prepared to be able to play anywhere. This is what I wanted," he said.

"I was ready to sacrifice a lot, to give a lot. If it meant going to play in Iran, I went."

"I kept quiet. I never complained about anything. I went in a very humble way and ready to overcome any obstacle, any barrier."

"In my mind I thought that I wanted to be in the Top 50 before I retired. Now in 11 months I can't believe what I have done."



PHOTO: AFP

Spaniard Rafael Nadal celebrates winning a point against Roger Federer of Switzerland in their French Open men's singles semifinal at Roland Garros on Friday.

ary Mats Wilander by winning the title here at his first attempt, but the muscular fourth seed believes that the showpiece is lacking a special ingredient -- Roger Federer.

Nadal celebrated his 19th birthday in style on Friday by knocking the world number one out in the semi-finals 6-3, 4-6, 6-4, 6-3 to

In the meantime, Nadal is seizing his opportunity to hammer home his credentials as the Swiss star's heir apparent.

Two years of injury misery prevented Nadal from making his debut at Roland Garros, but he goes into the title showdown as overwhelming favourite having clinched five clay-

Younis, Corey share spoils



AFP, Kingston

Younis Khan hit his ninth Test hundred, and Corey Collimore bowled his heart out, as neither Pakistan nor West Indies conceded an inch in their second and final Test on Friday.

Younis fashioned a resolute 106 to lead a Pakistan recovery, but Collimore gained bounce and movement from the hard, true Sabina Park pitch to snare four wickets that left Pakistan on 336 for six in their first innings when stumps were drawn on the opening day.

Fortune favoured Younis when slip fielder Devon Smith dropped him on 47 off Chris Gayle, but he quickly regained his composure, and proceeded to make the most of his reprieve.

Younis drove Reon King off the backfoot through wishid mid-off for a single to reach his milestone, but he was one of three wickets that Collimore carried away in a purposeful spell of seam bowling that provided him with figures of 22-4-55-4 at the end of the day.

Collimore led the West Indies fightback, after Younis added 87 for the third wicket with captain Inzamamul Haq, who scored 50,

and 117 for the fourth wicket with Asim Kamal, who made 51.

Collimore had Younis caught at gully driving off the backfoot, after the Pakistan vice-captain smote 14 boundaries from 120 balls in a shade over 4-1/4 hours.

Four overs later, Collimore bowled Kamal off the inside edge when the batsman essayed a backfoot drive. The left-hander hit seven fours from 122 balls in a little over 2-1/2 hours.

Collimore was not finished though. After beating Shahid Afridi several times outside the off-stump with perfectly pitched balls that moved away, the West Indies fast bowler celebrated when the batsman finally nibbled at another tempting delivery, and was caught behind for 33.

West Indies could have tightened their grip more, when Kamran Akmal was caught behind on 16 off Tino Best, who was crestfallen when umpire Darrell Hair belted for a no-ball that looked questionable on television replays.

Akmal, who is not out on 19, kept his composure and batted through close to 45 minutes to add 38, unbroken, for the seventh wicket with Abdul Razaqqa, who is 24 not out, to slow down the West Indies.

Younis in concert with Inzamam,

the two most senior Pakistani batsmen in the line-up, had spear-headed the recovery operation prior to the visitors taking lunch on 102 for two.

Pakistan, who chose to bat on a hard, true Sabina Park pitch under sunny skies, slid to 43 for two before Younis and Inzamam brought some stability to the innings.

Opening batsman Yasir Hameed was caught at first slip off Daren Powell for 13, and fellow opener Shoaib Malik was caught behind off Collimore in bizarre circumstances -- the batsman choosing to walk, despite a restrained appeal from the West Indies' fielders.

BRIEF SCORES

PAKISTAN: First innings 336 for 6 (Younis 106, Kamal 51, Inzamam 50, Afridi 33, Akmal 24 not out, Razaqqa 19 not out; Collimore 4-55, Powell 1-54, Gayle 1-85)

WEST INDIES: Gayle, Smith, Sarwan, Lara, Chanderpaul, Hinds, Browne, Powell, Best, King, Collimore.

Toss: Pakistan.
Umpires: David Shepherd and Darrell Hair.

Crespo to seal Milan deal

AFP, London

Chelsea striker Hernan Crespo will seal a move to Italian giants AC Milan next week, according to BBC Sport.

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon will meet AC Milan officials to discuss the permanent transfer of the on-loan striker.

AC Milan president Adriano Galliani said: "We will meet with Peter Kenyon on Wednesday to discuss Crespo."

"Our goal is to confirm the 11 starters from Istanbul for next season," added Galliani, referring to Milan's starting team in the Champions League final.

AC Milan will be keen to wrap up the signing of the 29-year-old with rumours that Chelsea could offer him, and his international teammate Juan Sebastian Veron, to Milan's bitter city rivals Inter as bait to try lure talented Brazilian striker Adriano to Stamford Bridge.

"I'm confident for the confirmation of Crespo because we have always had great relations with Chelsea," added Galliani.

Crespo scored twice in the Champions League final before Milan lost on penalties to Liverpool.

He joined Chelsea from Inter Milan for a fee of 16.8 million pounds (30.4 million dollars) in the summer of 2003 but after a disappointing first season he followed Veron out of the door in moving back to Italy on a season-long loan at the San Siro.

The AC Milan president also confirmed Kenyon has asked for permission to open talks with Kakhaber Kaladze with a view to signing the Georgian left-back.

Chelsea have been on the lookout for a new left-back since selling Celestine Babayaro to Newcastle in January and are keen to consider a part-exchange deal with Milan.

They are also in talks with Athletic Bilbao over a possible 12-million-pound (21.7-million-dollar) bid for their left-back Asier del Horno.

Youth volleyball final today

SPORTS REPORTER

Narail and Jessore are set to meet in the final of the City Bank National Youth Volleyball Championship at the Shaheed Suhrawardy Indoor Stadium in Mirpur today.

Narail moved into the final beating Dinajpur by straight sets while Jessore edged past Tangail 3-2 in the semifinals at the same venue yesterday.

Henin wraps up

FROM PAGE 12 row to drive into a 4-1 lead with two breaks of serve.

Pierce's big groundstrokes were proving to be no problem for the speedy Belgian and in return she was disconcerting Pierce with her trademark backhand and forehand drives.

The Belgian wrapped up the set in 24 minutes two games later with Pierce having won just a measly six points.

With rain threatening, Pierce tried to step up her attacks at the start of the second set but let slip a break point when she sent a relatively easy forehand wide.

She then missed an easy smash at the net to drop serve once again and go 2-0 down.

Henin-Hardene eased into a 3-0 lead before Pierce finally managed to win a second game, but it was another struggle on her own serve.

At 1-4 down and serving Pierce tried to unsettle her opponent by sending up a series of moon-balls, but the former world No. 1 was having none of it and she broke again to serve for the title.

An ace set up match point and a backhand from Pierce into the net finished it off in 1hr 02mins.

Vieira denies Cole text claim



AFP, London

Arsenal captain Patrick Vieira has denied sending teammate Ashley Cole a text message telling him to demand 80,000 pounds (145,000 dollars) a week to sign a new contract at the club.

The fall-out from the Cole tapping-up inquiry shows no signs of abating and now the controversial Frenchman has been dragged into the mire.

Cole was holding contract talks with Arsenal last season but was stalling on putting pen to paper when the meeting with Chelsea took place in January.

He was eventually hit with a 100,000 pounds (180,000 dollars) fine while Chelsea and their coach Jose Mourinho were also hit with record punishments after an independent commission found them all guilty of breaking Premier League rules.

A full decision was published by the commission on Friday and immediately sparked a series of

claims and counter-claims from the parties involved.

One of the most striking allegations came from Cole's agent Jonathan Barnett, who claimed Vieira had sent a text message to his client stating he should not "settle" for less than 80,000 pounds a week in his new contract negotiations with the Gunners.

However, Arsenal have issued a statement on behalf of Vieira which said: "I categorically deny sending any such text message. It simply is not true."

In January, Barnett was trying to renegotiate a new contract for his client and, after Arsenal vice-president David Dein said 55,000 pounds (100,000 dollars) a week was Arsenal's final offer, the agent produced the text message.

According to the commission: "He showed Dein a text message on Barnett's mobile phone purportedly from Patrick Vieira telling Cole not to accept less than 80,000 pounds."

"Barnett stated they could get 80-90,000 pounds (145-163,000 dollars) a week and that they could sell Ashley Cole for 20 million

pounds (36 million dollars).

"He then gestured to his phone saying 'Do you want me to make a phone call, this is take it or leave it time', from which Dein inferred (and, as we find, Barnett intended that he should infer) that there was another club that was seriously interested in signing Ashley Cole."

Chelsea chief executive Peter Kenyon claimed in the inquiry that Cole had said, during the meeting, that Arsenal was run by its French contingent and his relationship with Arsene Wenger was not as solid as it should be.

"He was concerned that the relationship with the manager was not good, that there was definitely a series of cliques and the team was primarily run by the French boys," Kenyon told the commission.

"He was also concerned that he did not feel that there was a team spirit and it was clear from the outset, obviously from being on England duty with some of our boys, that he felt there appeared to be a very good team spirit at Chelsea and that was why we were doing so well."

Aussies off to England



AFP, Brisbane

Skipper Ricky Ponting puts little store in one-day form ahead of the five-Test Ashes series with England but is looking to create some doubt among key England players in the lead-up one-day matches.

The Australian team left on Saturday for the three-month tour keen to stamp an early dominance over England, starting with the Twenty20 international at the Rose Bowl on June 13.

The Australians are bidding for their ninth Ashes series victory, a dominance that has occupied 16 years since retrieving the urn on the 1989 tour of England under the captaincy of Allan Border.

"It's important that we get off to a good start in the one-day series," Ponting said before the team's departure.

"I'm not a big believer in taking momentum from a one-day series into a Test series but if we can create some

doubts in a couple of individuals' minds then that'll be good for us.

"Those guys obviously haven't played much against Australia and I've heard different things that they think that could be a good thing for them."

"But the other thing is that they haven't been successful against the best side in the world either so they'll always have a few doubts in the back of their mind if they actually can compete against us."

England have a last-start decision over Australia, winning the dead fifth Sydney Test by 225 runs in January 2003 but only after the Aussies, under Steve Waugh, had the series wrapped up 4-0 in under 11 days' playing time.

In 306 Tests between cricket's two traditional great rivals, Australia has won 125 to England's 95, with 86 drawn.

But such is Australia's dominance that since regaining the Ashes on the 1989 tour, the Aussies have won 28 of the 43 Tests. England claimed seven.

The Australians will be seeking the insights of four members Shane Warne and Simon Katich, who have played alongside adopted boom

South African batsman Kevin Pietersen at Hampshire in county cricket.

"In terms of tactically preparing and certainly preparing against some players that we may not have come up against regularly then the input of Shane or Simon or Michael Hussey, who have been over there, is always good and any little bit of information we can get is always valuable," team coach John Buchanan said.

The Australians believe England will get little out of their lopsided two-Test series with outclassed Bangladesh ahead of the Ashes series.

"It's good for those guys to be playing some Test cricket at the moment but by the time we get there it's coming towards the end of their summer, which will be a good time for us to play as well," Ponting said.

"So they won't take a lot out of that and we won't take too much notice of what happens."

Australia's opening tour game is a one-dayer against Leicestershire at Grace Road on June 11.

AZLAN SHAH CUP

Australia face Korea in final



AFP, Kuala Lumpur