



Hong Kong goalkeeper Li Jian (C) leaps above Bangladesh midfielder Zahid Hossain (number 9) during their second leg Olympic pre-qualifier in Hong Kong on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Natore, Sirajganj make it easy

SPORTS REPORTER

North-Bengal sides Sirajganj and Natore cruised into the final round of the 3rd JFA Cup with crushing wins yesterday.

Miraj slammed a hattrick at the Sirajganj Stadium to set the homer side's 6-0 defeat of Naogaon in the zonal final. Nazim struck twice and Plabon added the other to extend the woes of the visitors.

At Natore, the hosts came back from a goal down to thrash Panchagarh 5-1 in the final. Mahbub Rana put the tourists ahead but Natore bounced back with a treble from Sumon in the first half. Sohel netted twice after the break to seal the comfortable victory.

The two teams join Dhaka, Khulna, Kishoreganj, Chuadanga and BKSP in the eight-team finals.

The remaining finalists would be decided after today's last zone final in Comilla where the hosts play Chittagong.

Italian trio track Pato

INTERNET, undated

Juventus, Inter and Milan are ready to battle it out on the transfer market for Alexandre Pato of Porto Alegre.

The 17-year-old is seen by many as the new Kaka and he's admitted that a Serie A switch is a desire of his.

"I know that Milan, Juventus and Inter are following me," said the South American starlet.

"I feel that I am ready to undertake a European adventure and therefore the interest of these important clubs flatters me.

"I always follow Italian football on television and my dream is to play in Italy.

"I would like to become the new Ronaldo -- perhaps I will follow the career of the many Brazilian players who have won so much with Milan..."

Pato is contracted to Internacional until 2009 and is currently valued at 10 million pounds, with reports suggesting that a 7-million-pound offer from Milan has already been rejected.

Juventus are understood to be in

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Bangladesh exit brightly

Football

SPORTS REPORTER

Zahid Hassan Emily's 43rd minute goal ensured Bangladesh bow out of the men's Olympic football preliminaries with distinction after a 1-0 away win over Hong Kong yesterday.

The Abahani striker, who got the ball after a right-flank move towards the end of the first half was cleared by Hong Kong defenders, kept cool in a goalmouth scramble and neatly stabbed a grounder through a forest of legs to beat goalkeeper Li Jian at then Hong Kong Stadium.

"It was a brilliant finish because Emily was in a difficult situation with little space. He utilised a half chance to give us a deserved win," coach Abu Yusuf told The Daily Star from Hong Kong last night over phone.

Having lost 3-0 at home on

February 7, Yusuf's boys made the trip with no high hopes as they were staring at elimination unless a 4-0 victory in the return leg.

The victory, which put an end to the Under-23 national team's 10-match run without a win in three years, must be a morale boost for the game in decline.

Bangladesh, whose last victory at this level came against Afghanistan in the 9th SA Games in Islamabad, Pakistan in 2004, drew with India and lost to Pakistan in the same tournament.

They fired blank in two more under-23 competitions last year, in the 10th SA Games in Colombo and the Asian Games in Doha, to remain without a win for nine matches.

Bangladesh, completely outplayed in their home match, bounced back and were more attacking but received four yellow cards on the night.

They created ample scoring chances with Emily and his partner

Ujjal both coming close. Emily shot just wide while Ujjal's effort was parried by goalkeeper Jian who made another good save later, informed manager Amirul Islam Babu.

"Unlike our last match, the players were following instructions. So they played a good game, just what I wanted," said Yusuf.

"May be after the home defeat, they realised the situation and showed confidence and patience to stick to the plan," added the former nation footballer, who made only one change in the starting line up from the first leg game. "There were one or two who played exceptionally but I am happy because of the total team work."

Mamun got a first-team place, replacing fellow midfielder Sharif. The team will return home tomorrow night.

SQUAD: Himel, Aurup, Zahirul, Ariful, Waly, Zahid Hossain, Maruf (Sharif) Mamun, Zahid Parvez, Ujjal (Robin) and Emily.

Wenger rubbishes Bolton jinx

Football

AFP, London

Arsenal may have lost on their last three visits to Bolton's Reebok Stadium, but manager Arsene Wenger is adamant that Sam Allardyce's squad do not have some kind of psychological hold over his squad.

Bolton's success against Arsenal has led many to question whether Arsenal's cosmopolitan collection of players have sufficient resolve to make their technical ability count against direct, well-organised and, at times, physical opponents.

But Wenger, speaking ahead of Wednesday's FA Cup 4th round replay at the Reebok, insists there is no one reason for his side's lack of success there.

"If you look at recent results then, yes, Bolton have become a difficult team for us. But I don't experience it like that," the Arsenal boss said.

"They took advantage of our weak points every time, but overall I never look at any opponents as ever being a team we cannot be successful against. I just think if you do the right things then you win. You must give them credit, because in two results this season they beat us 3-1 up there and drew 1-1 at the Emirates.

"We had a very strong second half, and they were under a lot of pressure when we drew at home. That is what we want to do tonight. But they have changed -- they are a lot more technical now."

Arsenal went into the replay on an unbeaten match run and Wenger was determined to sustain the momentum.

"We are just on a good run in 2007 and we want to keep that going," the Frenchman said.

"We don't really choose what kind of competition we are in. We just know that if we win we have another game on Saturday. So let's have another game on Saturday."

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Italy top world rankings

INTERNET, undated

Italy have jumped over Brazil to lead the FIFA World Rankings for the first time since November 1993.

The Azzurri have brought the Selecao's 55-month run as leaders to an end after the South American nation lost 2-0 to Portugal last week.

The World Cup winners were scheduled to play a friendly with Romania seven days ago, but the match was cancelled after rioting fans in Catania killed a policeman following a Serie A match.

There are no other changes in the top five with Argentina, France and Germany all trailing Brazil in second. Spain have returned to the top 10 for the first time since October last year.

FIFA TOP 10

Pos	Team	Pts
1.	Italy	1562
2.	Brazil	1540
3.	Argentina	1535
4.	France	1496
5.	Germany	1359
6.	England	1330
7.	Netherlands	1312
8.	Portugal	1262
9.	Czech Rep.	1193
10.	Spain	1161

Massimino closed

AFP, Rome

Catania's Massimino stadium, scene of the fan riot earlier this month in which a policeman was killed, will be closed for the rest of the Serie A season, the Italian football league's disciplinary council said on Wednesday.

The closure, which will end on June 30, means the Sicilian club will have to play their remaining home matches at a neutral stadium.

Catania were also fined 50,000 euros.

Police officer Filippo Raciti was killed on February 2 after Catania fans went on the rampage before, during and after the derby match against Palermo.

The violence prompted the Italian government to introduce strict security measures in an attempt to combat football hooliganism.

Catania, who came up from Serie B last season, were forced to play two home matches behind closed doors earlier this season following crowd violence.

The loss of home advantage is a major blow to Catania's chances of claiming a place in Europe next season.

The club, who have lost just two of their 11 home matches this season, are currently tied for fifth place with Lazio.

Thuram fearful of France place

INTERNET, undated

France legend Lilian Thuram has spoken of his concern that the lack of games at Barcelona will make it impossible for him to compete at the European Championships in 2008 for his country.

"I have to consider that I am 35 years of age and that the Euros are very, very far away," Thuram told Canal Plus.

"Also, at this moment, I am not playing much in Barcelona. If that continues, I will not be in fit shape by the Euros."

Thuram, who is Les Bleus' most-capped player with 126 internationals under his belt, has played in only nine matches this season for the European and Spanish champions.

He signed from Juventus last summer after the club were relegated to Serie B because of the Calciopoli match-fixing scandal.

Argentina exporting hooliganism!

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina's notorious football hooligans are selling their trouble-making expertise abroad, principally to Colombia and Mexico, a report in the sports daily Ole said Wednesday.

Ole quoted a government source as saying members of Argentina's barras bravas -- a hardcore groups of fans -- had travelled to the two countries to meet supporters and organise conferences, charging for their advice in US dollars.

The subject matter included terrace chants, the use of weapons and methods for extorting money from club directors and players.

The report said a leading fan from Mexico's Pumas UNAM had twice visited Buenos Aires to obtain first hand experience of the methods used by the notorious Boca

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Anelka keeping options open

INTERNET, undated



Bolton striker Nicolas Anelka thinks he can play for a bigger club but can also see himself spending the rest of his career at the Reebok. Anelka explained why he joined the Trotters ahead of Champions League sides Lyon and Werder Bremen as he sees himself going places -- with or without the club.

"My priority was to play in the Premiership," Anelka told FourFourTwo France. "I had other offers from Lyon and Werder

Bremen. I refused them because I had a plan. Of course, I would have preferred to join a Champions League club.

"In France, I could only play for PSG, because I am from Paris, they are my club. I could have played for Lyon but I am a Parisian."

"I love (England). I am a private person that does not like to be disturbed."

Eyebrows were raised when Anelka joined a Bolton side who have succeeded by playing direct, pragmatic football, and it took him some time to truly get going but he feels that it is who has changed his game to suit Sam Allardyce's tactics and less

the other way round.

"I don't think that Bolton players have adapted to me, I think that we have all made efforts," he declared.

"The team plays better football than before. Nowadays, we can play kick-and-rush and also develop an attractive play -- that is a big change."

Anelka has before been accused of using mid-level clubs as a spring-board for more lucrative or attractive moves, but while he is keeping his options open he does see a long-term future at Bolton.

"For me, Bolton are like

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Cassano yearns for Italy

Football

INTERNET, undated

Antonio Cassano can't wait to make his return to Italian football, says Real Madrid sporting director Franco Baldini.

The former Roma striker was linked with a January move to Inter after falling out with boss Fabio Capello and he's made no secret of the fact that he believes his time in Spain has come to an end.

"Cassano has a wish, or I would rather say a thirst, to return to playing in Italy," declared the former Giallorossi official Baldini.

"However, before returning he

must recover his best condition in order to be able to play in the Spanish League -- otherwise I don't think he will succeed in his intention."

The Italian has been frozen out of the Real first team, but Fabio Cannavaro recently revealed that he's hoping that Capello will give Cassano another chance -- just as he did with David Beckham at the weekend.

"I believe he can still do well and convince Capello to change his mind," continued Baldini. "His problem is not his physical form, but his competitive spirit which is lacking."

Former Azzurri Coach Marcello Lippi has also urged the enigma to resolve his problems once and for all.

Eto'o blows hot and cold

AFP, Barcelona



Barcelona's Cameroon international Samuel Eto'o sought Wednesday to quell tensions raised by his public criticism of the Spanish club's Dutch manager Frank Rijkaard and his Brazilian teammate Ronaldinho.

An angry Eto'o hit out Tuesday at Rijkaard for saying he had refused to come on as a late substitute during Sunday's 2-0 victory at home to Racing Santander and teammate Ronaldinho for saying he should be more of a team player.

"To go into the press room and say that I didn't want to play is dishonest," Eto'o said, before adding: "That's being a really bad person."

He then took aim at Ronaldinho for suggesting after Sunday's match

that he should think more about the team.

"If a teammate says that you must think of the team, it's up to him to think of the team. Personally I always think first about the group and then money. That is what hurt me most," he said.

His comments were front page news on Wednesday in Spain's sports press.

Two dailies Mundo Deportivo and AS ran the headline "Eto'o blows Barcelona up with dynamite," while Marca said "Barcelona explodes."

Spanish media speculated that the rivalry between Eto'o and Ronaldinho could prompt one of the players to leave at the end of the season.

But during a training session on Wednesday there appeared to be no hard feelings between Eto'o and Ronaldinho as the two players were photographed exchanging a hug.

Earlier the three-time African

Player of the Year denied calling the Barcelona coach "a bad person" in comments made to Cadena Ser radio.

"It is a lie to say I called Rijkaard a bad person. Those who love controversy want to say that," he told the station's late night radio programme El Larguero.

"I didn't explode, I responded to what was being said about me," he added.

Eto'o, top scorer in La Liga in 2005-06, was sidelined for four months this season due to an injured right knee.

He explained that he refused to play Sunday even though he turned out the previous weekend in the 0-0 draw against Osasuna because he did not have time to warm up properly.

"For my knee to be operational I need to warm up for 15 minutes longer than the other players. But this doesn't interest people, the only thing that interests them is controversy," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

FRIENDS NO MORE: Barcelona striker Samuel Eto'o (back to camera) hugs teammate Ronaldinho in an attempt to defuse the tension evoked by his blatant attack on his teammate and the coach Frank Rijkaard during training at Nou Camp on Wednesday.