



PHOTOS: AFP

(L) Iraq goalkeeper Noor Sabri is ecstatic at saving a crucial penalty as his elated teammates (R) rush to congratulate him after they managed to beat Asian powerhouse South Korea in the tie-breaker of Asian Cup semifinal at the Bukit Jalil Stadium in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Beckham watches Galaxy win

AFP, Los Angeles

England star David Beckham, struggling to recover from a left ankle injury, was left out of the Los Angeles Galaxy lineup here Tuesday in the US club's 2-1 Superliga victory over Mexico's Pachuca.

Beckham made his debut for the Galaxy here last Saturday, playing 12 minutes as a substitute in a 1-0 friendly loss to English side Chelsea.

The midfielder who signed a contract worth a potential 250 million dollars to leave Real Madrid is trying to boost football interest by Americans but he was only a spectator as he continues to have treatment upon his sore ankle.

Beckham missed Monday training, leading to his benching for the Pachuca match, the first in a

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More Germans going to soccer

AFP, Berlin

German domestic football is in rude health judging by Wednesday's news that Bundesliga season ticket sales have reached an all-time high, according to the owner of the German Football League (DFL).

Wolfgang Holzhauser says the Bundesliga will be watched by 377,161 season-ticket holders next season compared to the previous water-shed mark of 372,535 in 2005.

"The interest in football, within an increasingly broad population, continues to benefit from the effects of last year's World Cup," said Holzhauser.

Borussia Dortmund lead the way with an impressive 50,000 season-ticket holders for their Signal Iduna Park stadium, which has a capacity of 81,266.

The second highest number is at Schalke 04 (43,935) while German giants Bayern Munich have 37,000 season-ticket holders.

'Cycling risks Olympics axe'

AFP, Paris

Cycling risks being ejected from the Olympic Games because of the consistent spate of drug scandals surrounding it, a senior European IOC member told AFP on Wednesday.

Speaking under condition of anonymity the IOC member, in the wake of the revelation that Kazakh rider Alexandre Vinokourov had failed a test for blood doping -- possibly two according to a report -- said that the constant spate of scandals had placed it in serious danger of being voted out at the 2009 session of the IOC in Copenhagen.

"Cycling is now a serious point of concern among IOC members," he told AFP.

"There is scandal after scandal and it is in serious danger of exiting the Olympics."

He added that there were several sports -- seen to be clean in the eyes of IOC members -- who were

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For the people in pain

AFP, Kuala Lumpur



Iraq's goalkeeping hero Noor Sabri dedicated his team's fighting win here Wednesday to reach the Asian Cup final to his beleaguered compatriots in his war-ravaged homeland.

Noor made a crucial save to steer Iraq to a 4-3 win on penalties over South Korea to advance to their first tournament final, in Jakarta on Sunday.

The Iraqis, the inspirational story of the Asian Cup, will play off for the trophy against either defending champions Japan or former titleholders Saudi Arabia.

Noor illustrated the grim

sonal cost his teammates have endured to play at the Asian Cup and how they are playing their part in lifting spirits for those suffering in the Iraq conflict.

"You know the current situation in Iraq and the difficulties we are going through," man-of-the-match Noor told a post-match press conference.

"Four days before we came to Bangkok my wife's brother died and my teammate Hawar Mohammed lost his step-mother.

"We know we are struggling inside Iraq and we are struggling on the playing field because it is a very modest thing we can give to our people.

"We have to struggle, we have to show them that we are sharing all what we are achieving here."

The decisive breakthrough came in the shoot-out when Noor pushed Yeom Ki-hun's attempt past the post and then Kim Jung-woo's shot hit the post and bounced away.

Iraq are now just one match away from completing their greatest football achievement after they reached the semi-final of the 2004 Athens Olympics and the final of last year's Asian Games in Doha.

It is Iraq's first-ever Asian Cup final after getting as far as the 1976 semifinal against Kuwait, which went to extra time.

In emotional scenes at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium, Iraqi players rushed to their supporters to grab national flags as other players wept with joy when realisation hit that they had won.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi children take to the streets of Baghdad with national flags and posters of their beloved football heroes who beat the South Koreans in the semifinal of the Asian Cup yesterday.

RIDERS STAGE PROTEST

Vino scandal rocks tour

AP, Orthez



Dozens of Tour de France riders demonstrated their anger over repeated doping scandals by not starting the 16th stage at the scheduled time Wednesday.

The protest came a day after star rider Alexandre Vinokourov and his Astana team were sent home after he tested positive for a banned blood transfusion.

On Wednesday, the pack of riders split into two groups: those who took the start as normal -- including controversial race leader Michael Rasmussen -- and those who protested by hanging back for a few minutes.

Many of the riders involved in the symbolic protest were from French teams that have long complained that doping is ruining the sport. They simply let Rasmussen, star sprinter Tom Boonen and others ride away -- but caught up with them further down the road.

The Tour's Web site said German squad Gerolsteiner also took part in the protest. Some of the French teams involved included Credit Agricole, Cofidis, FDJeux, Bouygues Telecom and Agritubel.

"We're fed up," French rider Ludovic Turpin told Eurosport television.

Fans booed Rasmussen at the start. The Dane is under a cloud of suspicion because he skipped doping tests before the Tour began.

The protest contributed to a 13-minute delay to the scheduled start time of Wednesday's stage, the last in the Pyrenees. The race ends Sunday.

Tour organizers announced that 14 riders were subjected to blood tests early Wednesday. They were from French teams Cofidis and AG2R. The tests were all negative.

In all, 225 blood tests have been conducted so far at the three-week race. Of those, just one -- for Vinokourov -- was positive.

Without the Kazakh and his Astana team, the field was reduced to 151 riders on Wednesday. Astana's withdrawal also meant two of the top 10 riders were out -- Andreas Kloeber of Germany, who had been fifth, and Kazakh Andrey Kashechkin, who had been eighth.

Wednesday's 135.8-mile 16th stage from Orthez to Gourette-Col d'Aubisque featured four huge climbs, culminating with an uphill finish so tough it does not even have a rating.

Rasmussen was aiming to get through the stage without losing time to his main rivals, so he can embark on the last major hurdle -- a time trial on Saturday -- in a commanding position.

The Dane started Wednesday with a 2:23 lead over Discovery

team rider Alberto Contador of Spain.

Cadel Evans, an Australian on the Predictor-Lotto squad, trails Rasmussen by four minutes, in third place.

Vinokourov tested positive for a blood transfusion after he won last Saturday's time trial. On Monday, Vinokourov also won stage 15 -- a tough climb in the Pyrenees. Those performances marked a remarkable recovery from a crash that had ruined the first week of his race, leaving him with stitches in both knees.

Vinokourov told the French sports daily L'Equipe for Wednesday's edition that he had not cheated.

"It's a mistake. I never doped, that's not the way I see my profession," the newspaper quoted him as saying. "I think it's a mistake in part due to my crash. I have spoken to the team doctors who had a hypothesis that there was an enormous amount of blood in my thighs, which could have led to my positive test."

Vinokourov claimed to be the victim of a "provocation."

"It's been going on for months and today they're managing to demolish me," he said. "The setting up of our team made a lot of people jealous and now we're paying the price. It's a shame to leave the Tour this way, but I don't want to waste

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Gunshots ring through the Baghdad sky

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's dramatic penalty shoot-out victory in the semifinal of football's Asian Cup sparked a barrage of gunfire on Wednesday as Baghdadis celebrated with volley after volley of shots in the air.

The beleaguered Iraqi capital was rocked by the sound of assault rifle and machine-gun fire as security forces, militant groups, insurgents and residents put aside their differences and fired skywards.

Authorities had warned of falling bullets -- last week's quarter-final victory saw at least three people killed by stray rounds -- but the joy of the extra-time win overcame caution as gunmen poured onto the streets.

Iraq will now meet either Saudi Arabia or Japan in Sunday's final, after beating South Korea 4-3 in a penalty shootout in Kuala Lumpur.

Mirza outlasts Morigami

AFP, Stanford

India's Sania Mirza rallied to defeat Japan's Akiko Morigami 4-6, 7-5, 7-6 (7/5) here Tuesday and reach the second round of a 600,000-dollar WTA hardcourt tournament.

Mirza booked a date at the US Open tuneup event against French sixth seed Tatiana Golovin, who defeated Ukraine qualifier Viktoriya Kutuzova 6-2, 6-2.

Austrian eighth seed Sybille Bammer advanced with a 6-4, 6-2 triumph over Japan's Ai Sugiyama. Bammer booked a second-round date with American Melien Tu.

Russian qualifier Yaroslava

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SAUDIS STAMP ARAB DOMINANCE

Iraq shoot out Koreans

AFP, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi



Iraq stunned South Korea 4-3 on penalties to make the Asian Cup final for the first time where they will meet favourites Saudi Arabia who got the better of Japan in a thrilling 3-2 victory.

The epic of a match between Iraq and South Korea went to a shootout after both sides failed to score in over two hours' of sustained committed football.

It is Iraq's first-ever Asian Cup final after getting as far as the 1976 semi-final against Kuwait, while South Korea failed once again to make the decider of a major event.

The victory sparked a barrage of gunfire in the Iraqi capital, as security forces, militant groups, insurgents and residents put aside their differences and fired skywards.

Authorities had warned of falling bullets -- last week's quarter-final victory saw at least three people killed by stray rounds -- but the joy of the extra-time win overcame caution as gunmen poured onto the streets.

In emotional scenes at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium here, Iraqi players rushed to their supporters to grab national flags as other players wept with joy when the realisation hit that they had won.

"This victory is for the people of Iraq because they deserve it," said Iraq's Brazilian coach Jorvan Vieira. "It is also for the boys because they worked very, very hard."

"Korea are a good team and I thought we neutralised them well. We were better than Korea on the fitness side. It is a game that we will never forget."

The decisive breakthrough came in the shoot-out when goalkeeper Noor Sabri, the man-of-the-match, pushed Yeom Ki-hun's attempt past the post and then Kim Jung-woo's shot hit the upright and bounced away.

Iraq are now just one match away from completing their greatest football achievement after they reached the semifinal of the 2004 Athens Olympics and the final of last year's Asian Games in Doha.

It was desolation for the Koreans, who were backing up after their win on penalties over Iran in their quarterfinal last Sunday. They must now lift themselves for a third-place playoff in Palembang, Indonesia on Saturday.

"I am proud. We were not outplayed once in this tournament," said Korea's Dutch coach Pim Verbeek.

"We fought like hell. If people think that is not enough, then that's okay."

Iraq had the better scoring chance in an uninspiring first 45 minutes with midfielder Karrar Jassim just failing to get his head on to a cross from Haidar Abdul Amer after 28 minutes.

Skipper Younis Mahmoud had two chances, hitting the side-netting in the 16th minute and just sending his shot wide of the diving Lee Woon-jae late in the half.

The Koreans had several chances with goalkeeper Noor Sabri having little trouble defusing Yeom Ki-hun's tame downward header and punching clear a Lee Chun-soo free kick a few minutes before half-time.

But South Korea ramped up the pressure in the second half with winger Choi Sung-kuk's pass blocked by Ali Hussein Rehema with two team-mates in a scoring

position.

Noor punched away another attack away to safety as the Koreans kept up the pressure on Iraq's goal.

Again the Koreans pressed and defender Kim Jin-kyu's header off a corner just missed the target.

The Koreans peppered the Iraqi goal in the final minutes of regulation time but the game went into 30 minutes' extra-time.

Hawar Mohammed had a great chance to put Iraq ahead when Haidar's cross had the Korean defence in a dither and Hawar's shot hit the inside of the post and rolled along the goal-line for Kim Jin-kyu to hack it away.

But it ended in a deadlock that took it to penalties.

Iraq will now play either defending champions Japan or Saudi Arabia in Sunday's decider in Jakarta.

In the other semifinal played in Hanoi, Saudi Arabia made it their sixth Asian Cup final with a smash-and-grab 3-2 win over Japan.

The Saudis relied on their thrusting, rapier counter-attacks to mug the Japanese who dominated the ball without often threatening to turn possession into goals.

Livewire forward Malek Maaz netted a brace with strike partner Yasser Al Qahtani also scoring to set up a final against Iraq.

The first half hour contained nothing more than some gentle Japanese probing with Saudi Arabia content to sit back and hope for a moment of inspiration from their talented front pairing of Maaz and Al Qahtani.

The game got the goal it desperately needed on 35 minutes.

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PHOTO: AFP

India's tennis sensation Sania Mirza is about to make a return against Akiko Morigami of Japan during their first round match of the Bank of the West Classic tournament at Stanford University on Tuesday.