



Iraqi national football team players pose for fans as they wait for a flight to Jakarta at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) yesterday. The Iraqi booters have achieved stardom overnight after they made it to the final of the Asian Cup beating South Korea 4-3 in penalty shoot-out on Wednesday.

Iraq seek a fairytale ending

AGENCIES, undated



Iraq's beleaguered soccer team are pinning their hopes on a fairytale ending to their Asian Cup story after logistical blunders and slapdash preparations plunged their campaign into disarray even before a ball had been kicked. Against all odds, the unfancied Iraqis beat twice-champions South Korea 4-3 in a dramatic penalty shootout on Wednesday to reach their first Asian Cup final, bringing some rare cheer to the war-scarred Iraqi people.

The team's Brazilian coach Jorvan Vieira, who has worked with 26 clubs and five national teams, says his short-term job with Iraq has been the toughest of his career.

"Everything has gone wrong – hotels, food, equipment, players, training, logistics. You cannot imagine what we have been through," Vieira said.

"Because of this, no one expected us to be where we are. What we have done has totally shocked people."

Vieira had only two months to prepare the squad in the safety of neighbouring Jordan, but when stubborn Baghdad clubs refused to release players, his first training sessions were attended by only six people.

On the eve of national team

games, players would pull out of the squad to return to their club sides, Vieira said, and he was far from popular with local coaches, who saw him as a foreign intruder on their turf.

Some of his players have been exposed to the grim reality of life in Iraq and are tormented by death threats and kidnappings and the loss of loved ones to car bombings and brutal murders.

The 54-year-old also inherited a squad split by sectarian infighting between Shi'ites and minority Sunnis.

"I had problems with the group, there was no kind of unity, the relationship between the players was bad," he said. "I had to find a solution to this, and got them to like each other and not bring their personal or political differences here."

"We could not have them at war with each other," he added.

Iraq's 1-1 draw with hosts Thailand in the opening match of the Asian Cup came somewhat as a miracle given their haphazard run-up to the competition.

They arrived in Bangkok with old kit and without training equipment, and were joined on the eve of their first match by jetlagged, match-weary players, who were detained for eight hours by Thai immigration officials after more than a day of travelling. Bangkok's notorious traffic snarls disrupted training sessions, which often took place late at night in the pouring rain, and

their unfamiliarity with the fiery Thai cuisine saw them order Middle-Eastern takeaways every night or dine in the city's predominantly Arab districts.

After beating Vietnam in the quarterfinals, Iraq arrived in Kuala Lumpur to find only seven rooms were available for their 30 players, who spent much of the day waiting in the hotel lobby.

To make matters worse, they discovered their rooms were being occupied by the Iranian national team, who had already been knocked out of the tournament.

Vieira is hoping Iraq's nightmare story will have a happy ending, though, when they meet three-times winners Saudi Arabia in Sunday's all-Middle East final in Jakarta.

"This has all made us closer as a team and stronger as players and as men," Vieira said. "The players have problems in their lives, they are not normal footballers."

"We are all chasing this victory, it would be something very special for the players and the people."

Saudi Arabia coach Helios dos Anjos was also ecstatic about his team's win over Japan and said that luck has had nothing to do with their charge into the Asian Cup final.

Dos Anjos has had to fend off persistent criticism back home in Riyadh that his team have rode their luck through the tournament rather than stamping their mark on it.

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Italian Cup revamped

AFP, Rome

The Italian Cup has been revamped for the forthcoming season in an attempt to increase its diminishing popularity, the Italian Football League (Lega-Calcio) announced on Wednesday.

The competition, which will start on August 15, will consist of the 42 clubs in Italy's top two divisions (20 Serie A clubs and 22 Serie B clubs).

Unlike last season, third division clubs have not been invited to play.

The first three rounds will be one match knockout ties rather than two-legged matches.

The competition will begin with 24 clubs, the 22 Serie B clubs plus Genoa and Napoli who both won promotion from the second division last season.

Ten Serie A clubs, including newly-promoted Juventus, will join the competition in the third round

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Hitzfeld not going berserk

Football

AFP, Munich

Bayern Munich coach Ottmar Hitzfeld insisted on Thursday he is refusing to get carried away despite his "dream team" reaching Saturday's German League Cup final in Leipzig.

Having spent a reported 69 million euros assembling a team of superstars over the summer, Bayern's bosses have already been rewarded with convincing cup wins over Werder Bremen and last season's German champions VfB Stuttgart.

Bayern now face Schalke 04 in Saturday's final, but for Hitzfeld, bigger prizes, like the UEFA Cup and the chance to be German champions for the 21st time, loom in the forthcoming season.

In particular, French midfielder

Franck Ribery – signed for 26 million euros from Marseille – has been in stunning early form with three goals in two games and is forging a strong partnership with German star Bastian Schweinsteiger.

But despite Bayern's 4-1 win over Bremen last Saturday, and their 2-0 win at Stuttgart on Wednesday, Hitzfeld is keeping his feet on the ground ahead of Bayern's opening Bundesliga match against Hansa Rostock on August 11.

"We wanted to get a win in Stuttgart, that was for us an important victory," said the 58-year-old, who has won the Champions League trophy with both Borussia Dortmund and Bayern.

"We wanted to reach the final in Leipzig, and we wanted to set our marker down, but we can't get carried away with just two wins."

Having scored twice against Bremen, then netted the opening

goal against Stuttgart, before setting up the second, Ribery is already looking like a star performer in Bayern's midfield.

"He is an attraction worth watching, for us as well as the whole Bundesliga," said Hitzfeld.

"Franck scores goals and is always looking to create something special."

"That shows the class of a player he is."

Hitzfeld admitted he was impressed with the form of 19-year-old striker Sandro Wagner who was promoted from Bayern's reserve team during the summer and scored the second goal in Stuttgart.

Wagner replaced Miroslav Klose, the top scorer at last year's World Cup, who dropped out of the Stuttgart game with a muscle strain, and Wagner took his chance with an impressive performance.

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Worst signing of the century

INTERNET, undated

England defender Jonathan Woodgate was voted the worst signing of the 21st century by readers of www.marca.com, the Web site for Spain's biggest selling sports daily.

The 27-year-old was the runaway winner polling 37.11 percent of the votes cast on their Web page, the newspaper said.

Real Madrid signed "Woody" from Newcastle United for around 25 million dollars in August 2004 but because of a thigh injury he did not make his debut until September 2005.

His first official game turned into a nightmare when he scored an own goal and was sent off in the league match against Athletic Bilbao at the Bernabeu.

Woodgate was put out on loan to Premier League Middlesbrough in August 2006 and the move became permanent for a fee of \$14 million earlier this year.

He made only 14 competitive appearances for Real Madrid.



PHOTO: AFP

Young students, dressed-up as huge syringes, made up with card-boards, denounce doping prior to the start of the 17th stage of the Tour de France cycling race between Pau and Castelsarrasin on Thursday.

RASMUSSEN BOOTTED

Le Tour de Farce

AP, Pau



Shaken to its core and its future in doubt, the Tour de France was beginning its final swing toward the finish in Paris – stripped of its race leader, uncertainly sent home under a cloud of doping suspicion.

Sunday's victory ride through the heart of Paris likely will be unforgettable – for all the wrong reasons.

Michael Rasmussen had seemed certain to win. Now, the winner's yellow jersey will rest on someone else's shoulders. The last four days of racing will decide who.

But will anyone care?

Some French newspapers declared the Tour dead Thursday and said it should be stopped after the bombshell announcement late Wednesday night that Rasmussen's team was sending the Dane home for life.

Team spokesman Jacob Bergsma said Rasmussen's withdrawal was ordered by their sponsor, Rabobank. It was linked to

"incorrect" information that Rasmussen gave to the team's sports director over his whereabouts last month. Rasmussen missed random drug tests on May 8 and June 28, saying he was in Mexico. But a former rider, Davide Cassani, said he had seen Rasmussen in Italy mid-June.

The remaining members of the team will still take the start on Thursday, Bergsma said.

Rasmussen had been the leader since Tuesday.

"My career is ruined," he told Dutch newspaper Algemeen Dagblad.

"I have no idea what I should do or where I will go," the newspaper quoted him as saying. "This is an enormous blow for me, and also for all the guys from the Rabo team. They're devastated."

Only hours before he was removed from the Tour, Rasmussen spoke to The AP -- after a doping control following his win in Wednesday's stage 16 -- and said he was being victimized.

"Of course I'm clean," Rasmussen said. "Like I said, I've been tested 17 times now in less than two weeks. Both the Peloton and the public, they're just taking their frustration out on me now. I mean, all I can say is that by now I had my test number 17 on this Tour and all of those have come back."

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Buffon wants to play till 40

INTERNET, undated

Juventus' keeper Gigi Buffon has set himself the ambitious target of playing until the age of 40 so he can lift the 2018 World Cup.

The 28-year-old custodian models himself on his idol Azzurri legend Dino Zoff who is the oldest man ever to win football's greatest prize.

Zoff led Italy to glory in the 1982 World Cup at the age of 40 and Buffon has revealed to FIFA magazine that he wants to do the same.

"I always admired Zoff's loyalty to Juve and the national side," he stated. "In recent times Italy have been in a World Cup final every 12 years."

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Crouch assured of Reds role

Football

AFP, Hong Kong

Liverpool striker Peter Crouch on Thursday said he was confident of playing a key role this season despite intense new competition for places.

The lofty England man said he has been assured he is in the thoughts of coach Rafael Benitez, who has strengthened his front line with record signing Fernando Torres, Ryan Babel and Andriy Voronin.

"It was the same last year. When new strikers come in people automatically think where does this

leave the strikers already at the club," Crouch said ahead of the Asia Trophy final here.

"But the manager's spoken to me and said I'm in his plans. We've got four strikers but hopefully I will play some part."

"It's going to be difficult to get in the team when you play you have to do your best to impress."

Benitez said he hoped to see more goals this season from Liverpool, who have been criticised for being too defensive.

"Our looks fantastic and it's an exciting time for the club. The new owners have invested in the team and the new stadium and a lot of squad members at the moment are hoping to get a chance to play there."

"If we want to change the game I

can use another style of striker so I think it will be good for the team."

Crouch also praised Liverpool's new Stanley Park stadium, which has been submitted for official approval and is due to open in 2010.

"For a club like Liverpool to progress they have got to get a bigger stadium to compete with the likes of Manchester United, who have developed their stadium," Crouch said.

"We will have more options up front," he said. "Depending on the game we can play more crosses with Crouch or down the line with Voronin."

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