



Australian midfielder Tim Cahill (R) punches the corner flag in a trademark celebration as teammate Luke Wilkshire rushes to congratulate him during their World Cup qualifying match against Qatar at the MCG in Melbourne on Wednesday.

Aussies blow Qatar away

AFP, Melbourne



Australia blazed past Qatar 3-0 on Wednesday in a rip-roaring start for coach Pim Verbeek as they bid to qualify for the World Cup via Asia for the first time.

The Socceroos did the damage in the first half, steaming to the three-goal lead with the brittle Qataris seemingly incapable of stemming a constant flow of attacks.

Giant Karlsruhe striker Joshua Kennedy opened the scoring on 11 minutes and Everton midfielder Tim Cahill and Palermo attacker Mark Bresciano gave the Australians a comfortable buffer before they coasted through the second half.

"We played a fantastic first half. We did really well, we created chances, we scored great goals and we didn't give them a chance to play football," Verbeek said.

"It was exactly what the plans were before the game and I am very proud of what they did, especially in the first half, quality was very high and they began to get tired in the second half which we expected they would."

Roared on by 51,000 home fans, Australia could have won by more with only goalkeeper Mohammed Saqr preventing further damage in the first match of Asia's 'Group of Death,' also containing Iraq and China.

The result vindicated Dutchman Verbeek's decision to focus on overseas-based players with a core of the 2006 World Cup squad, with defender Craig Moore and John Aloisi the only representatives of the domestic league.

The Qataris, who arrived here over a week before the match, never recovered from their rocky start although they came close to scoring a couple of times in the second half as Australia tired from their long-haul flights from Europe.

But the Australians gave themselves a strong platform in their mission to qualify for the 2010 World Cup finals in South Africa.

The Socceroos began confidently and went ahead when a cross from Blackburn Rovers' Brett Emerton was rammed home by German-based striker Kennedy.

The 1.94-metre forward posed awkward aerial problems with Emerton and David Carney feeding him crosses from both wings before he came off with a foot injury in the second half.

The home team doubled their lead seven minutes later when Luke Wilkshire's corner was headed home by Cahill, who out-jumped Junior Amaral for his 13th international goal.

Australia were three-up in the 33rd minute when Bresciano sweetly volleyed home Celtic striker Scott McDonald's precision lay-off.

The Socceroos could have been leading by far more at half-time with goalkeeper Saqr saving goal-bound shots by Cahill and Kennedy

twice. Carney, who plays for Sheffield United in the English championship, looked assured at left-back and passed with authority, while Dutch-based pair Wilkshire and Jason Culina bossed the midfield.

Qatar coach Jorge Fossati made two changes at half-time, hauling off skipper Alshammari Sattam and Mahdi Saddiq to show his rage at the limp performance.

Substitute Alhamad Mesaad had Qatar's best chance in the 58th minute but he side-footed past the left upright with the goal begging, while Yahya Ali Hassan had a shot saved by Schwarzer on the hour.

In other matches, South Korea, semifinalists at the 2002 World Cup, left it close to halftime to get off the mark against Turkmenistan in Group Three, with defender Kwak Tae-hwi heading home a delicate cross from Fulham's Seol Ki-hyeon.

Seol scored the first of his two goals after the break before Manchester United's Park Ji-sung's curling effort from the corner of the box beat the keeper on 70 minutes.

Seol rounded off the win 13 minutes later, latching on to Lee Kwan-woo's pass to slide the ball into the net.

South Korean coach Huh Jong-moo said: "I'm happy with the performance tonight. Turkmenistan didn't play that badly. It's just that our team was better."

Twenty teams from Asia and the Middle East are vying for a maximum of five regional places at the 32-team 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Laporta backs stricken duo

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona president Joan Laporta has thrown his support behind coach Frank Rijkaard and insists the club are not looking to replace him with Jose Mourinho or any other manager.

In the same vein, Laporta also warned any team looking to sign Barca playmaker Ronaldinho that the Brazilian ace was not for sale.

Rijkaard has led Barca to two league titles, the Champions League and two Spanish Supercups since taking over at the Nou Camp in 2003, but a barren campaign in 2006/07 and a stuttering season this time around has led to speculation about the Dutchman's long-term future at the Catalan giants.

Former Chelsea boss Mourinho is one of the names that always crops whenever Rijkaard's position is called into question, but Barca chief Laporta is adamant they are not looking to change anything, with the Dutchman under contract until 2009.

"We are very happy with Rijkaard and I don't plan to bring in another coach. We know that everybody wants to come to Barcelona, but

Barca snap up Ezequiel

INTERNET, undated

Barcelona have agreed to buy Argentine defender Ezequiel Garay from Racing Santander for next season, sports daily Marca reported Wednesday. Marca said Barca have agreed to pay 14.25 million euros (21.02 million dollars) for the 21-year-old defender.

Garay has caught the eye in his two seasons at Santander with his defensive solidity, his intelligent positioning and his eye for goal.

Santander are one of the surprise packages of the Spanish season, together with newly-promoted Almeria.

They are sixth in La Liga - their highest ever placing at this stage of the season - and in the semifinals of the King's Cup for the first time in their modest history.

The purchase of Garay could be the prelude to Barca selling off veteran defenders Lilian Thuram, Gianluca Zambrotta and Sylvainho.

Spain condemn Hamilton attack

INTERNET, undated

Spain's motorsport federation has hit out at the "mindless idiots" who hurled racist abuse at Lewis Hamilton during Formula One testing at Barcelona at the weekend.

The 23-year-old Briton, who struck up a deep rivalry with Spain's racing hero Fernando Alonso during their time together at McLaren last year, was booed whenever he left the team's garage or motor-home by Alonso supporters.

Far worse though, were the monkey costumes a number wore, along with tee-shirts with the phrase "I am in Hamilton's family"

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Sleep stalled his move

Football

INTERNET, undated

Portsmouth chief executive Peter Storr has revealed Benjam Mwaruware's transfer to Manchester City failed to take place on transfer deadline day because the player fell asleep when he was supposed to be catching an aeroplane to the north-west.

The protracted deal, which City claimed had fallen through just after the January window closed at midnight last Thursday, was finally completed on Tuesday after the Zimbabwe international signed a two-and-a-half-year deal.

City will pay an initial £3.87million up front, with the remaining half of the £7.75million fee due to be paid in three instalments when the 29-year-old makes 25, 50 and 75 starts for Sven-Goran Eriksson's team.

Speaking about the reasons for the delay, Storr claimed the

whole drawn-out "fiasco" could have been avoided had Benjam not taken an untimely nap as he attempted to make his way to Manchester to complete the formalities of the switch.

"In his own inevitable, wonderful way - and we all love Benji so much - he falls asleep at the airport and misses two planes," Storr said in The Times.

"You couldn't write the script. The next plane at 7 o'clock got cancelled and the 8.30 was delayed. It just made the whole situation a fiasco."

Storr has also stressed he is entirely happy with the fitness of Benjam, and claims that was part of the reason why the club allowed City to pay for him in instalments.

City had expressed concerns about a knee injury Benjam had surgery on 18 months ago and tried to renegotiate the deal.

But after the Premier League confirmed the paperwork for the switch had been submitted before the midnight deadline last week,

the two clubs managed to thrash out a settlement and Storr is satisfied Pompey will eventually get all their money.

"We, of course, are confident of him playing the required number of games, otherwise we would not have agreed to the deal," he told his club's official website.

"City had expressed some concern over a knee operation 18 months ago but, as Benji has never shown any sign of trouble since the operation and rarely misses a match or training, we were happy to come to this arrangement."

"Fees from transfers are always spread over a period of time so this is nothing new and we could well be paid the full fee quicker this way than in other circumstances."

"The Premier League have thanked us for adopting this sensible solution and Manchester City are also grateful we have come to this agreement."

"Above all, Benji is no longer in limbo and everyone at Fratton Park wishes him continued success."

Sania brand still strong

REUTERS, New Delhi

Asia's top tennis player Sania Mirza will retain her strong brand value despite her decision to shun Indian tournaments in protest at being dragged into needless controversies, Indian advertisers say.

The 21-year-old Indian is skipping next month's Bangalore Open, rattled by a court case last month which alleged she showed disrespect to her national flag, an offence punishable by jail.

"Sania has become a brand not because she won a few matches in India or because of her ranking," Santosh Desai, CEO of India's Future Brand, told the Hindustan Times daily.

"It is because of her success worldwide, and if she continues to play well and make us buy into the idea of her international success, sponsors will continue to support her."

Mirza's popularity has rivaled cricketers in India since she became the first Indian woman to win a tour event in 2005 and the articulate player enjoys many commercial endorsements. She is ranked 29th in the world.

A very unusual offer

AFP, Accra

Ghana striker Junior Agogo has received an unusual offer from an 82-year-old fan in appreciation of his exploits at the African Nations Cup semifinal his granddaughter.

The proposal was made after the Nottingham Forest forward's late winner in the 2-1 success over Nigeria which put the hosts into Thursday's semifinal with Cameroon.

Agogo, who also scored the only goal to beat Namibia in the first round, was approached by the octogenarian fan at the team's hotel 24 hours after Sunday's quarterfinal win.

The man, who gave his name as Nana, told the Ghana star: "I came here last night with my very beautiful granddaughter to introduce her to you."

Hitzfeld confirms Swiss switch

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich boss Ottmar Hitzfeld has confirmed he will sign up as the next coach of the Swiss team in the next few weeks, according to the German giants' website on Tuesday.

With Kobi Kuhn set to quit his post as Swiss coach after this June's Euro 2008 tournament, Hitzfeld has confirmed he will be signing a contract with the Swiss imminently.

"I assume that I will sign up with the Swiss team in the next three weeks," Hitzfeld told Bayern Munich's website after the Swiss FA revealed at the weekend a deal was close.

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Pfister plots an upset

AFP, Accra



Cameroon coach Otto Pfister enjoys cult status in Africa, a content he has called home for a large chunk of his long life.

At 70 the irascible chairman is smoking

German's features are as well known to an African football fan as those of Michael Essien or Didier Drogba.

Pfister guided Ghana to the 1992 African Nations Cup final his mission here 16 years on is to wreck the hosts' dream of 'host and win' when the two sides meet in Thursday's semifinal.

"I will tactically paralyse the Black Stars in Thursday's match," the straight-talking septuagenarian promised, without elaborating on his masterplan to derail the hosts' charge to the title.

"I have a track record in this tournament and my primary objective is to beat Ghana," added Pfister, who shed his years after Monday's extra time win over Tunisia to join the team in a celebratory sing-song.

"You remember in 1992 I led the Black Stars to the final but I am working harder towards beating Ghana this time around."

Pfister, who like Ghana coach Claude Roy who won the 1988 title with Cameroon, has one Nations Cup trophy on his sideboard.

That came in 1978 when he coached the then Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) to win in Ghana.

The heavy smoker, whose first African assignment was with Rwanda in 1972, was at the helm of Togo's fraught 2006 World Cup campaign and he had to call on all his vast experience there to resolve a player strike over unpaid bonuses.

He quit as coach in exasperation at the Togo football federation's handling of the bonus-crisis in Germany, only to return three days later.

Off the pitch he can claim the honour of starting a whole new fashion trend in Africa known as

the 'Otto Pfister' after his penchant for wearing trousers on the hip rather than the waist.

He is prone to shooting from the hip as well, with his no-nonsense style leaving him unfazed about upsetting sensibilities when he feels something has to be said.

Last week he launched a tirade against the 2008 organising committee, where his list of grievances included lost luggage, hotel rooms not ready, and late lunches because

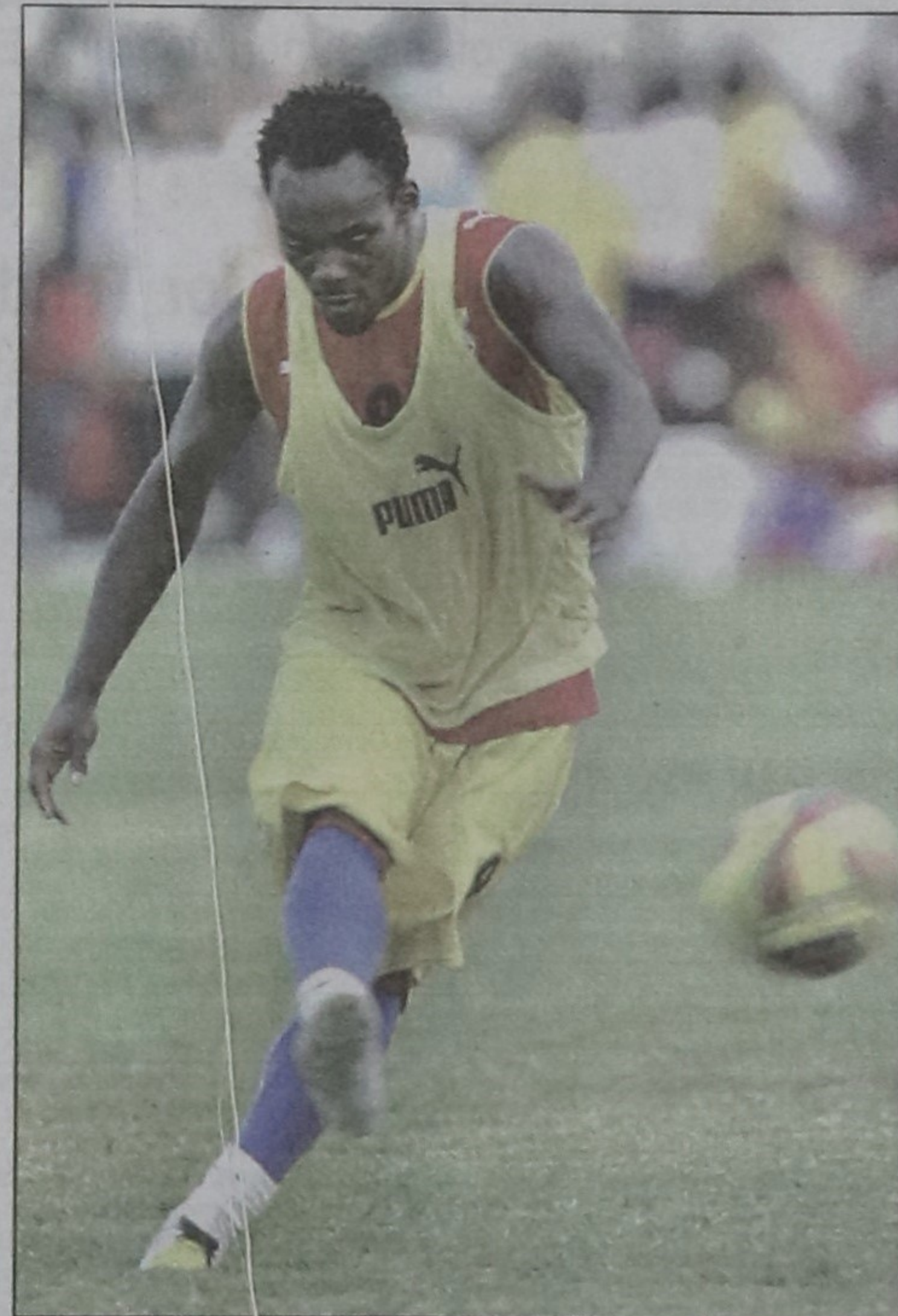
the hotel kitchen was locked.

"It's a total catastrophe," he fumed.

"Every day there's something. Remember, we've got several world stars in the squad - it's really hard trying to keep up the team's moral."

His place as part and parcel of the football scene here was acknowledged last week when he was accused by a leading health body of setting a bad example to

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Ghana midfielder Michael Essien kicks the ball during a training session in Accra on Tuesday. Ghana face Cameroon in the semifinal of the African Nations Cup today.

PHOTO: AFP

Milan face forward crisis

Football

INTERNET, undated

AC Milan may have to use a youth team striker to replace injured young star Alexandre Pato, it was reported Wednesday. La Gazzetta dello Sport reported that Alberto Paloschi, 18, was to begin training with the first team and could make his debut against Siena in the Serie A on Sunday.

Pato could be sidelined for at least two weeks with an ankle injury. With veterans Filippo Inzaghi and Ronaldo having just recovered from injury lay-offs and Alberto Gilardino suspended, Milan have problems up front as they strive to clinch a fourth place that secures a berth in the next Champions League.

Pato has begun treatment of the left ankle he sprained on the week-

end after scoring the winner, his fourth goal in six games, as the Devils won 1-0 at Fiorentina.

"We'd like to have Pato back for the (Champions League) match in London against Arsenal," vice president Adriano Galliani said.

Beside the home game with Siena, the 18-year-old striker is to miss a mid-week Serie A game with Livorno and an away game at Parma on February 16.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti should have him ready four days later as the seven-time European champions defend their title at Premier League leaders Arsenal in the first leg of the knock-out stage.

As the Champions League looms, Milan also worry about 2007 Golden Ball winner Riccardo Kaka, 25, who has been battling knee problems.

The striker's press agent Diogo Kotscho was quoted as saying that the Brazilian may miss the game

against Arsenal although no surgery is necessary.

International Gennaro Gattuso, a mainstay in Ancelotti's midfield package, is also on Milan's injured list with muscular problems, but looks to be in-form for the tie in London.

A pulled muscle, meanwhile, may have grounded Juventus goalgetter David Trezeguet, 30, for a crucial weekend game at Udinese.

Trezeguet, the Serie A top scorer on 15 goals from 21 games, reached the changing rooms limping after Tuesday's training session.

The third-placed Turin side could miss him Sunday in Udine, where international winger Mauro Camoranesi is available having recovered from a pulled muscle.

Star goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon and defender Giorgio Chiellini may remain sidelined as they recover from back pain and a bruised knee, respectively.



CRISTIANO RONALDO