



Qatar forward Yussef Ahmed (L) scores his second goal against China during their Asian Cup clash in Doha on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hosts rebound

Football

AFP, Doha

Hosts Qatar defeated China thanks to a glorious brace from Yussef Ahmed and Uzbekistan saw off Kuwait at the Asian Cup on Wednesday to blow Group A wide open with one more round of games to go.

At a near-capacity Khalifa Stadium, Ahmed struck a wonder goal on 27 minutes to put his side in front, cleverly controlling a high ball before volleying it spectacularly into the top-left corner.

With an expectant nation watching, the 22-year-old doubled Qatar's lead on the stroke of half-time, dealing a demoralising blow to a young Chinese side that beat Kuwait 2-0 in their opening match.

Earlier, a 65th-minute thunderbolt from impressive captain Server Djeparov gave Uzbekistan a narrow 2-1 win over Kuwait.

It means all four teams are still in with a shout of the quarterfinals, but Uzbekistan are in pole position with six points from two games, followed by China and Qatar each on three and Kuwait on zero.

The group will go right down to the wire with the last round of games on Sunday, when the Uzbeks take on China and Qatar go up against Kuwait.

Several permutations are possible and it promises to be a nerve-jangling evening for all concerned.

Qatar coach Bruno Metsu, whose job would have been under threat if they had lost, said he was proud of the way his team bounced back from their opening loss.

"We wanted to show the real face of our team and the players have done that. They have shown their potential and I'm very proud of their performance," said the Frenchman.

Uzbekistan had taken the lead shortly before half-time when Azizbek Haydarov inadvertently diverted a Maksim Shatskikh free-kick past the Kuwait goalkeeper, with Bader AlMutwa levelling from the penalty spot.

RESULTS

Uzbekistan 2 (Haydarov 41, Djeparov 65) Kuwait 1 (Al Mutwa 49)
Qatar 2 (Ahmed 27, 45) China 0

IN brief

'Iran can end jinx'

AFP, Doha

Driven on by bitter disappointment at failing to qualify for the World Cup, Iran captain Javad Nekounam says his side can win the Asian Cup for the first time in 35 years and finally end the long "jinx".

"I am confident more than anybody else that we can win the Asian Cup. I believe we are able to break the jinx," said defensive midfielder Nekounam, who plies his trade for Spanish La Liga club Osasuna.

Nekounam said he had learnt plenty playing in one of Europe's top leagues.

"Playing in Osasuna has taught me a lot of lessons. I will give my all to deliver whatever I have learned from Spain over the past four years and I hope I will be able to help make Team Melli more successful," he said.

Zac likens Asian Cup to Champions League

AFP, Doha

Former AC Milan boss Alberto Zaccheroni, leading Japan at the Asian Cup, has vowed to keep his nerve in an event he likens to Europe's Champions League, a tournament that has never been kind to him.

"The Asian Cup is a short tournament. From my experience, I think it is similar to the Champions League," the Italian said ahead of Japan's crunch match against Syria following their 1-1 draw with Jordan.

"Every match is important in such a tournament so that our approach to the game should be strictly calm but never emotional," added the 57-year-old, nicknamed "Zac" at home.

Mancini returns to Brazil

AFP, Rome

Brazilian winger Mancini has returned to his homeland to rejoin his first club Atletico Mineiro after an unhappy two-and-a-half-year spell at Inter Milan.

The 30-year-old was one of then coach Jose Mourinho's first signings when he joined Inter in 2008.

The winger had impressed in a successful five-year spell at Roma.

But he never settled in Milan and was even loaned out to rivals AC Milan for half of last season.

And having barely featured this season either, Mancini has been sold to the club from Belo Horizonte.

Inter Milan in last eight

AFP, Rome

Leonardo continued his 100 per cent run as Inter Milan boss as African pair Samuel Eto'o and McDonald Mariga scored the goals that beat Genoa 3-2 in their Coppa Italia clash on Wednesday.

Cameroun captain Eto'o netted a first-half brace to put the holders in control at the San Siro before Houssine Kharja pulled a goal back from the penalty spot.

Kenya midfielder Mariga restored the hosts' two-goal advantage before Giuseppe Sculli's injury time consolation.

Earlier Fabrizio Miccoli scored a penalty as Palermo beat Chievo 1-0 to join Inter and Parma, 2-1 winners over Fiorentina in December, in the last eight.

The remaining last 16 matches will be played over

Ipswich stun Arsenal

Football

REUTERS, London

Ipswich Town, thrashed 7-0 in the FA Cup by Chelsea three days ago, produced a memorable display to shock Arsenal 1-0 in the first leg of their League Cup semifinal at Portman Road on Wednesday.

Their performance might not have matched their FA Cup upset win over the Gunners in the 1978 final but the Championship (second division) side, who sacked manager Roy Keane last week, can dream of a Wembley return thanks to a 78th-minute goal by Hungary striker Tamas Priskin.

Arsenal manager Arsene Wenger, without a trophy since 2005, decided this was too good an opportunity to miss and fielded just about his strongest available side.

Cesc Fabregas was, as ever, at the heart of most of Arsenal's probings but the Premier League title-chasers were guilty of their usual sin of over-elaboration and struggled to carve out clear chances.

Fabregas did set up Andrei Arshavin early in the second half but the Russian shot badly wide with just keeper Marton Fulop to beat.

At the other end Connor Wickham, a burly 17-year-old forward, gave Arsenal's defenders a tough time and must have had Wenger wondering if a muscular presence such as his could be the missing link that would complete his neat-passing jigsaw.

Fellow front man Priskin found the net with an overhead kick but the goal was ruled out for offside.

The longer the game went on the more Ipswich grew in confidence and, having lost in the semifinals twice in the 1980s, their fans began to wonder if this could be third time lucky.



Ipswich Town striker Tamas Priskin attempts an overhead kick during their League Cup semifinal against Arsenal at Portman Road on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP



STAR Cricket

Australia v England

Second Twenty20

Live at 2:35pm

ESPN

Sportscentre India

Sports News

Live at 8:30pm

STAR Sports

AFC Asian Cup

Australia v South Korea

Live from 7:30pm

Bahrain v India



Premier Division Cricket League

Gazi Tank v Orient

Venue: SBNSC

Old DOHS v BKSP

Venue: KSOAS

Cricket Coaching v Surjo Tarun

Venue: BKSP-2

Bangladesh League

Rajmatganj v Mohammedan

Time: 4:00pm

Venue: Birshreshtha Mostafa Kamal

Messi slams hattrick

Football

REUTERS, Madrid

Lionel Messi celebrated a second successive World Player of the Year award with a hattrick as Barcelona thrashed second division Real Betis 5-0 in a King's Cup quarterfinal first leg on Wednesday.

Earlier, two goals from Alvaro Negredo and a late strike from Alexis scrambled a 3-3 draw for holders Sevilla at Villarreal.

Messi paraded the FIFA Ballon d'Or trophy on the pitch at the Nou Camp before kickoff, flanked by team mates Andres Iniesta and Xavi who came in second and third respectively, and then took apart a valiant Betis.

The Argentine scored the first just before halftime, dinking the ball over the goalkeeper from an Iniesta pass, showed persistence to score the second in the 62nd, and claimed his hat-trick with a breakaway goal 11 minutes later.

He was given a standing ovation when he was substituted near the end, with the whole stadium chanting his name.

Pedro and Seydou Keita wrapped up the scoring to leave the second division leaders with a mountain to climb in the next week's

RESULTS

Villarreal 3 (Cani 24, Rossi 29, Marco Ruben 55) Sevilla 3 (Negredo 39, 60, Alexis 88)
Barcelona 5 (Messi 45, 62, 73,

second leg.

"This game will end much of the debate (about the Ballon d'Or). It is in good hands," Barca defender Dani Alves told Spanish television.

took their toll. At the Madrigal, Sevilla defender Alexis swept a low shot inside the far post in the 88th minute, after a clever steppover from Frederic Kanoute, to complete a comeback that had looked far from likely earlier on.

Villarreal have played some of the best football in La Liga this season and deservedly took a two-goal lead with a volley from



PHOTO: AFP

Barcelona star Lionel Messi celebrates one of his three goals against Real Betis during their Copa del Rey encounter at Nou Camp on Wednesday.

"Messi is the best and he proves it every day. The other two deserved it as well, but it's clear he is different to the rest."

Alves went on to praise the visitors who hit the crossbar at the end of the first half, when an adventurous game plan caused Barca a lot of problems until Messi's goals and tired legs

Cani and a deflected Giuseppe Rossi shot after a corner.

Negredo muscled his way past a defender to pull one back against the run of play in the 39th minute and, after Marco Ruben had nodded Villarreal 3-1 up early in the second half, he struck again with a back-post header on the hour mark.

Liverpool keep losing

AFP, Blackpool



Goals from Gary Taylor-Fletcher and DJ Campbell helped Blackpool to another sensational 2-1 victory over Liverpool at Bloomfield Road here on Wednesday.

Blackpool came from a goal down after Fernando Torres's early finish to prove their win by the same scoreline at Anfield in October was no fluke as they pulled off one of the most unexpected 'doubles' in the history of the Premier League -- their first over Liverpool for 47 years.

The Tangerines are now ninth in the table, four places above Liverpool -- something that would have been regarded as all but inconceivable at the start of the season.

This was Kenny Dalglish's first league game in charge of Liverpool for almost 19 years, having seen the Reds lose 1-0 to arch-rivals Manchester United in the FA Cup last weekend, after replacing Roy Hodgson on an interim basis until the end of the season. Dalglish is a unifying force at Anfield and is looking to salvage something from a season that has lurched from disaster to disaster.

Despite being without Steven Gerrard

and Joe Cole -- the former through suspension, the latter through injury -- Liverpool started as the better side and took the lead in the third minute through Torres.

Dalglish spoke before the encounter about how important it was to get Torres back to his best after scoring in just one of the Reds' previous eight encounters and the Spanish World Cup winner emphatically responded with a fine opener.

Good interplay between Dirk Kuyt and Martin Kelly allowed the right-back to slot the ball through to Torres who charged in on Richard Kingson's goal and thrashed the ball into the roof of the net.

It was the perfect start for Liverpool but their early optimism was then extinguished when Blackpool capitalised on some poor defending to equalise nine minutes later.

After 12 minutes, a Raul Meirele's misjudgement and a poor piece of defending from Daniel Agger gave Taylor-Fletcher the space to sneak through Liverpool's back line and comfortably slide the ball past Pepe Reina.

After the interval, Reina had to make two quickfire saves from Charlie Adam and David Vaughan as Blackpool went on the attack while Torres also fired over at the other end.