



PHOTO: AFP

Argentina superstar Lionel Messi (2nd from L) hurdles the goalkeeper as he passes the ball during a training session in Ezeiza, Buenos Aires on Monday ahead of their Copa America tournament to be held from July 1 to July 24 in Argentina.

Jamaica, Guatemala advance Villa seek clarity

Football

AFP, Harrison

Jamaica finished the first round of the Gold Cup on top of Group B after a 1-0 victory over Honduras on Monday, with both teams advancing to the quarter-finals along with Guatemala.

Guatemala booked their berth with a 4-0 victory over Grenada, which was enough to put them through as one of the best two third-placed teams in group play.

Ryan Johnson got the goal for Jamaica -- with some help from Honduran keeper Noel Valladares.

Johnson's powerful shot hit the crossbar and then Valladares' back before landing in the net.

"It's one of the strangest goals, but it's a goal," said Johnson, who plays for the San Jose Earthquakes of Major League Soccer. "The best thing was getting the clean sheet. We haven't been scored on so far and I'm really happy about that."

"I dove for the ball and I could not

get it," Valladares said. "It hit me in the back and went in."

Johnson had a chance to double the score from the penalty spot in the 71st, but Valladares saved his attempt.

The victory gave Jamaica the maximum nine points from their three group matches.

In the quarter-finals of the regional championship for North and Central America and the Caribbean they'll face the second-place team from Group C, which will be decided when the group stage concludes on Tuesday.

Honduras finished second in Group B -- ahead of Guatemala on goal difference -- and will face Costa Rica, runners-up to Mexico in Group A.

Guatemala needed to win by three goals to be assured of advancing.

In the end they had one to spare after goals from Jose Del Aguila, Marco Pappa, Carlos Ruiz and Carlos Gallardo.

"More than anything, this was a psychological and mental game,"

Guatemala manager Ever Hugo Almeida said. "We had to score a specific number of goals. We needed three goals, but we had to take it goal by goal. We were able to manage the game and get the result we wanted."

Del Aguila opened the scoring in the 15th with a shot that bounced off the inside of the right post and past keeper Shemel Louison.

Pappa doubled the lead in the 21st minute with a hard-struck shot that Louison couldn't deflect.

In the 53rd minute, Ruiz volleyed in a rebound of Jairo Arreola's attempt off the crossbar and Gallardo completed the scoring five minutes later.

Guatemala finished group play with four points and a goal difference of plus-two, enough to edge El Salvador as one of the top two third-placed teams.

El Salvador, third in Group A, could yet advance, depending on the outcome of Tuesday's contests in Group C, when Panama take on Canada and the United States play Guadeloupe.

Football

AFP, Birmingham

Aston Villa have reportedly approached city rivals Birmingham to ask about the precise status of Alex McLeish.

The Scot resigned as manager of Birmingham, relegated from the Premier League last season, on Sunday and was immediately linked with a move to Villa, still in the top flight but without a boss after Gerard Houllier stepped down on health grounds.

Britain's Press Association reported Monday that Villa had sent an e-mail to Birmingham seeking clarification of McLeish's position.

Peter Pannu, the acting chairman of Birmingham, is furious over McLeish's move and said: "He is still on our contracted staff and Birmingham City FC does not grant him any right to speak to any outsiders until the matter is resolved."

"It's about time discipline is instilled into this game and I am not a person who gets pushed about."

England's League Managers Association, which has repeatedly slammed clubs for sacking bosses and not giving them enough time to

turn teams around, has been noticeably silent over McLeish's move and that of Mark Hughes, who earlier this month resigned as manager of Premier League Fulham.

But former Villa and England manager Graham Taylor criticised the way the club, owned by American businessman Randy Lerner, had sought a replacement for Houllier.

"It just doesn't appear to have been thought through and for the first time the ownership of the club is coming under severe criticism," Taylor told the BBC.

"When Gerard became ill it must have occurred to them that he may not come back, even if the signs were that he may have returned."

"This is not being disrespectful to Gerard in any way, but once he became unwell then you have to immediately start exploring what you might do if he does not come back."

"It doesn't appear to me and many others that this has been done. They seem to be going from name to name."

"Villa don't seem to have grasped that nettle at all. It is disappointing. I still live in the area and have a special feeling for them as you always do about clubs you have managed, but I have been surprised and disappointed at their handling of this."

Ash threatens Copa America

AP, Asuncion

The governing body of South American soccer says the arrival of teams playing in the Copa America could be delayed because of the ash spewing from Chile's erupting volcano that's disrupting flights across the southern hemisphere.

Flights were grounded Monday in Argentina, which is host to the continental championship. The tournament opens July 1 when Argentina faces Bolivia in La Plata and ends July 24.

Francisco Figueredo, the executive secretary of the South American governing body CONMEBOL, said if the ash did not disperse soon the body would consider having teams fly to Paraguay's capital Asuncion and then travel by land to venues in Argentina.

Beckham's new role

Football

AFP, London

David Beckham insisted Monday he was content to be a spectator at next year's London Olympics if there was no role for him in the controversial Great Britain football team at the Games.

"Football will be a massive part of the Olympics and it will be really exciting to see that," said the former Manchester United star, who now plays for the Los Angeles Galaxy.

"This is the first time I will have been to an Olympics and I'll probably be there with my children."

"Football has been a part of my life for many years and to be a part of that would be incredible."

"We'll see what role I'll play in the build-up or at the Olympics, but I'll be there as a fan."

"I want to watch athletes like (British heptathlete) Jessica Ennis and (British diver) Tom Daley, young athletes who are going to inspire so many young children around the world."

"For myself to be able to take my sons to an Olympics in our country makes me proud. Hopefully my daughter will be there as well," he added.

Victoria Beckham is due to give birth to the couple's first daughter next month.

Beckham was speaking at a sponsor's event to announce that Gabriella Roseje, an

18-year-old from Bermondsey in London, is the first successful nominee for the Olympic torch relay.

The former England captain, one of the world's best known sporting celebrities, helped secure the Games for London at a meeting of the International Olympic Committee in Singapore in 2007.

"When I was asked to be part of the Olympic bid, I was very sceptical at first because I'd never competed in the Olympics, I'm a football player," the 36-year-old midfielder explained.

"To be part of a team that was trying to bring the Olympics to my country, let alone somewhere where I grew up, was a great honour and very flattering."

"The moment when we got the Olympics was one of the most rewarding things of my career. It was so special."

"The Olympics means the world to everyone. It's such a great event to be part of," he added.

"I remember the rivalries between people like Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett (the British middle-distance greats who won gold at the 1980 Moscow Games in the 800 and 1,500 metres respectively)."

"There will be some exciting athletes coming to our country, coming to London which is where I grew up. It's a very exciting prospect."

The prospect of fielding a British football team at the Olympics has provoked strong reactions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.



DAVID BECKHAM

Busy time for Gunners

REUTERS, London



Arsenal Chief Executive Ivan Gazidis has promised a busy few months in the transfer market with the club keen to bolster their squad after what he said had been a profoundly disappointing season.

Gazidis said short-comings of the team, which finished fourth in the Premier League and a sixth successive season without a trophy, had to be acknowledged and rectified.

"It is going to be an active summer. I expect to be busy and Arsene expects to be busy," Gazidis told a meeting of the Arsenal Supporters Trust at the Emirates Stadium on Monday. "We are working hard during this close season - very hard."

Asked if the club had spoken to anybody so far in the transfer market, Gazidis replied: "Yes, many people."

However, he declined to elaborate on who and also refused to answer questions on the future of midfielders Cesc Fabregas and Samir Nasri who have been linked with moves to other clubs.

Arsenal had some successes last season, beating Barcelona, Manchester United and Chelsea at home, and spoke of winning a quadruple of trophies in February.

But then, in quick succession, Arsenal lost the League Cup final to Birmingham City, were knocked out of the Champions League by Barcelona and ended the season with a string of losses and draws to finish 12 points behind champions Manchester United.

Gazidis stressed that new signings had to be made within the club's resources, a policy that has angered some supporters who have looked enviously at rivals Chelsea and Manchester City that have relied on rich benefactors to bank-roll player transfers.

SPORTS POLL
WEEKLY QUESTION
Who do you think will challenge Mushfiqur Rahim?
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DAY'S EVENT
Bangladesh League
Muktijoddha v Farashganj
Time: 4:15
Venue: Bangabandhu National Stadium
Arambagh v Ctg Abahani
Time: 4:15

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