

Mexico-Brazil final a pointer to the future?

QUAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM from London

 Deep inside the Wembley Stadium on Tuesday, following Mexico's comprehensive victory over Japan in the Olympic semifinals, a group of journalists were working while the TV beamed images from Old Trafford. Brazil had looked streaky at the start, as they cleared two South Korean attacks off the line but just as they scored their second goal through the prolific forward Leandro Damiao, the journalist lent over to his colleague and said something that could yet be prophetic.

"I have a bad feeling," he said, "that Mexico and Brazil could be a preview of the World Cup final of 2014."

On face value these words sound fantastical, but taking a moment to think about it, you will be forced to consider that it isn't really as wondrous as it sounds. Brazil may not be the world beating side of the late 90s or the early noughties but in this group have a core of players, led by the outstanding Neymar, who look like they will be challenging for honours in 2014. Plus, the World Cup is at home. There never really will be a better chance.

Mexico though, represents an altogether different challenge. The North Americans have long played the game with the flair of the South Americans, but while they are always an attractive side to watch, it seems they lack the strength required to progress beyond the last 16 in international competitions. In both of the last two World Cups, the Mexicans have promised much before bowing out at that stage to Argentina.

It was exactly the character that many say they lack that they showed yesterday at Wembley against another interesting side, Japan. Professional football only came to

Japan in the early 90s but already the East Asian nation are producing players of superb technical ability. Shiniji Kagawa and Shunsuke Nakamura are probably their best-known names but neither featured in this squad. Instead, it was left to other players, like the inventive forward Yuki Otsu, who plays his football for German Bundesliga side Borussia Monchengladbach.

On Tuesday, Otsu scored a stunning goal, hitting home on the half-volley from outside the box to give Japan the lead. It wasn't one they managed to hold on to though, as the Mexicans began to show the gritty qualities they have fostered over the past few years.

First, Marco Fabian headed in a corner to give Mexico a hardly deserved equaliser. Then it was left to Oribe Peralta, first to score with a stunning swerving effort before setting up the next with a nifty back-heel. It sounds simple but till that point, Japan had not conceded a single goal the whole tournament.

You can rest assured that Mexico's new-found grit will be tested to the full against Brazil in the final. But you sense there is a new found belief within the ranks of the Mexicans. The feeling is that with two Under-17 World Cups in the last seven years, a good performance in the U-20 World Cup last year (where they only bowed out to Brazil in the semifinals) and the Gold Cup victory that Mexico is now producing players that have the mettle required to win big international tournaments.

More importantly, the pressure will be off, completely. The Olympics have become an albatross around the neck for Brazil and despite clearly possessing a technically superior team on paper, the weight of expectations will definitely weigh on the Selecao. Don't count out Mexico exploiting that to sneak a surprise victory. And if not,



Brazil striker Leandro Damiao (up) celebrates with teammate Romulo after netting the third goal against South Korea during their Olympic Games men's football semifinal at Old Trafford on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP

China clean sweep table tennis

AFP, London

China completed a clean sweep of all four table tennis gold medals when they beat South Korea 3-0 in the men's team final on Wednesday.

Men's singles champion Zhang Jike and Ma Long, the world number two, set China on their way with a 2-0 lead before Zhang and Wang Hao, the Olympic silver medallist, took the doubles for a 3-0 winning advantage.

Kom crashes

AFP, London

India's five-time world champion M.C. Mary Kom apologised Wednesday after being knocked out of the Olympic Games flyweight semifinals, while teenager Clarissa Shields keeps the US flag flying.

"Magnificent Mary", 29, suffered an 11-6 defeat to Britain's Nicola Adams, the world silver medallist, who now faces China's world champion Ren Cancan in Thursday's flyweight final.

"My whole country was hoping for me to win a gold medal, and I am sorry I have not come back with that," said Kom, who had to move up a weight category to fight in London and finishes with bronze.

Kom is India's only boxing medal success of the Games after Vijender Singh failed in his bid to claim a second straight bronze on Monday when he lost his middleweight quarter-final.

Despite the defeat, Kom won the praise of Indian cricket superstar Sachin Tendulkar.

German great retires

AFP, London

German great Natascha Keller set up a goal with her very last touch Wednesday as she bowed out of women's international hockey with a world-record 425 caps.

Keller, 35, presented a clear scoring opportunity to Marie Mavrs, who gobbled up the chance in the last minute. The 2004 champions beat South Korea 4-1 in the Olympic classification match for seventh and eighth place.

Keller also had several scoring attempts but she was unable to add to her 204 international goals, clocked up during her 425 indoor and outdoor women's hockey appearances.

German captain Fanny Rinne, 32, who won gold alongside Keller at Athens 2004, got on the scoresheet with a low corner strike as she also played her last international.

Britain end long wait

AFP, London

Great Britain went through to the semifinals for the first time since 1988 when they were gold medal winners, with a 1-1 draw against Spain, who were runners-up four years ago.

In the semifinals, the Dutch will face Britain while Australia meet Germany.

Britain took a 32nd-minute lead against Spain through corner supremo Ashley Jackson who surprised by shooting low.

Spain levelled in the 55th-minute, also with a corner conversion through Pau Quemada.

At the final whistle, many of the Spanish players surrounded the South African umpire John Wright who had been officiating at the end they were attacking.

Spanish officials came on to shepherd their players away.

The Netherlands defeated South Korea 4-2 to top their Olympic Games hockey pool with a fifth successive win.

World champions Australia also advanced to the last four by hammering Pakistan 7-0 to move to the top of Pool A.

Netherlands, assured of a semifinal spot before Tuesday's game, spiked a late rally from Asia Cup holders South Korea to complete an all-win record in the preliminary round-robin league.

The Dutch emulated their women's team, which on Monday stormed into the semifinals by winning all five matches.

Netherlands finished with 15 points, while the defeat shattered South Korea's hopes of staying in contention. The Koreans finished on six points from five matches.



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PHOTO: AFP

Russia's Ilya Zakharov celebrates with his gold medal after winning the men's 3m springboard final at the London Olympics on Tuesday.

Liu set for surgery

AFP, London

Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang will go under the knife in London on Wednesday after a serious Achilles tendon tear put him out of the London Olympics, an official said.

The former 110m hurdles gold medallist, whose heart-breaking injury exit for the second Games in a row drew millions of messages of support from his home country, will return to China soon after the operation, he said.

"He will have an operation today," Chinese Olympic committee spokesman Zhang Haifeng told AFP.

"Both Chinese and local doctors examined him yesterday. He's almost broken his right tendon."

Liu clattered into the first hurdle in his heat on Tuesday and fell heavily. After being helped to his feet, he bravely hopped the length of the track and symbolically

Hoy's record 6th gold

AFP, London



Sir Chris Hoy crowned his Olympic career with a record sixth gold medal here Tuesday to become the most decorated British Olympian in history after powering to victory in the keirin.

Germany's Maximilian Levy finished second to take the silver with New Zealand's Simon Van Velthooven and Dutchman Teun Mulder sharing the bronze after a long wait for a photo finish decision.

Hoy won three Olympic gold medals in the sprint, keirin and team sprint four years ago to add to his kilometre time trial crown from Athens in 2004.

And despite being unable to defend his sprint title after being ousted by Jason Kenny for Britain's sole spot in the event, Hoy struck gold twice in his two London events of the team sprint and keirin.

The 36-year-old Scot's sixth gold means that on the count of gold medals alone, he overtakes Sir Steve Redgrave's tally of five gold medals, all of which were won in consecutive Games.

"I'm in shock, you try and compose yourself but it's surreal. I wanted to win gold in front of my home crowd. I saw everyone stepping up to the plate and thankfully it worked out for me too," said Hoy.

Asked if he would compete at the Rio

Games, Hoy said his preference would be to end his career at the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

"Not in an Olympic Games. I'm 99.9 percent sure that I won't be in Rio. Glasgow 2014, if I can keep going that would be the dream ending for me.

"This is the perfect end to my Olympic career. At Sydney (2000), I was just over the moon with a silver medal.

"If I'd have stopped then I would have been a happy boy, but to go on to Athens, Beijing and here, I can't put it into words," added Hoy, who was in tears at the medal ceremony.

Having coasted through the first and second rounds of the keirin earlier in the day, Hoy proved imperious once he got to the final.

After the motor-paced derny left the track with two and a half of the eight laps to go, Hoy was quick to counter a move on the outside by Malaysia's Azizulhasni Awang.

When Levy then pulled to the front, Hoy kept Levy in his sights before rounding the final bend with a lead over the five other finalists that they failed to haul back in a frantic drive for the line.

While Levy finished second to add silver to his bronze medal from the team sprint, it took several minutes for the judges to make a decision on the bronze.

Unable to, they decided Mulder and Van Velthooven should share the bronze.

Zakharov denies China

AFP, London



Russia's Ilya Zakharov ended China's hopes of a clean sweep of all eight diving gold medals at the London Olympics with a thrilling victory in the men's 3m springboard final on Tuesday.

Zakharov pumped his fist in the air as soon as he resurfaced upon scoring a competition high 104.50 points on his last dive to claim the gold medal from Chinese pair Qin Kai and defending champion He Chong.

The 21-year-old from Leningrad kept his nerve to deny Qin the gold with a superlative closing forward four and a half somersault that brought a huge roar in the Aquatics Centre and left Qin shattered and in tears.

Zakharov, who finished runner-up behind He at last year's Shanghai world championships, totalled 555.90 from his six dives to take the gold ahead of Qin (541.75) and He (524.15).

Chinese divers had won all five events leading up to the men's springboard final and were on their way to go one better than their seven out of eight at the Beijing Games four years ago.

But they were denied the perfecta again, this time by Zakharov's series of brilliant dives off the springboard.

It also ended a run of four Chinese victories in the Olympic springboard event going back to Atlanta 1996, while the last Russian to win was Vladimir Vasin with the former Soviet Union at Munich in 1972.

Qin only led Zahharov by 1.25 points into the last dive, and his 89.10 for a reverse two and a half somersault with one and a half twists proved not enough against the resilient Russian.

Zakharov, who took silver in the 3m synchronised springboard with Evgeny Kuznetsov behind China on Wednesday, separated the two Chinese divers as second to He among the top qualifiers after the morning semi-finals.

And he continued his blazing form in the final, handling the pressure of the closing round to give Russia the gold.

The Chinese pair had looked vulnerable throughout the semi-final and final as Zakharov and Mexican Yahel Castillo maintained the pressure with a string of precision dives until Castillo cracked on his final dive.

Qin looked the better gold medal bet than He, who struggled to reproduce his best form, and had worked his way from fourth after the second round to lead into the sixth round.

Yet he could not close out the victory, leaving Zakharov with the final crack at gold which he took with relish with the highest-scoring dive of the final, with two of seven



PHOTO: REUTERS

Sarah Attar made a small piece of history at the Olympic Stadium in London yesterday by becoming the first Saudi Arabian woman athlete to compete in Olympics track and field event. She took part in the women's 800m round 1 heat but failed to make any lasting impression.