



Iceland midfielder Gylfi Thor Sigurdsson (L) scores the all-important goal from a penalty during their Euro 2016 qualifier against Netherlands at the Amsterdam Arena on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Yawning gap exposed

AFP, Hong Kong

Record scorelines left fans cringing and coaches looking over their shoulders on Friday after an avalanche of goals cruelly exposed the gulf in class at Asia's World Cup qualifying.

No fewer than 76 goals were rattled in across the continent in Thursday's 15 games -- an average of 5.067 per match, one of the highest on record.

Malaysian supporters were aghast after their team crashed 10-0 against UAE, their worst ever defeat and eclipsing their previous low of 8-2 against New Zealand in 1967.

The New Straits Times newspaper pulled no punches, saying the defeat "can be considered the national team's biggest humiliation in history".

"Hey guys, if you are keen on learning how to count from 1 to 10 in Arabic, go and watch the highlights from the game of UAE vs Malaysia," wrote Amir Azmi on Twitter.

Malaysia at least fared better than tiny Bhutan, who shipped 15 unanswered goals against Qatar -- an average of about one every six minutes.

The result was Qatar's biggest ever win by a distance, almost twice the 8-0 victories they recorded over Afghanistan and Lebanon in the 1980s.

It was also a jolting reality check for Bhutan, who have climbed off the bottom of the world rankings and are competing in the second round of qualifying for the first time.

Several posts on Facebook questioned the appointment of Japanese head coach Norio Tsukitake, who was brought in after Chokey Nima had led the "Dragon Boys" into the second round.

But Bhutan and Malaysia were not the only teams with red faces as Laos lost 8-0 to South Korea, Kuwait pummeled Myanmar 9-0 and Saudi Arabia beat East Timor 7-0.

Iran smashed six without reply against Guam, Iraq beat Taiwan 5-1 and Australia thumped Bangladesh 5-0, with Japan's 3-0 win over Cambodia looking tepid by comparison.

One game without goals was Hong Kong's dogged 0-0 draw with China.

Heads could roll with Malaysian media casting doubt over the future of coach Dollah Salleh, who fielded three different goalkeepers during Malaysia's catastrophe in Abu Dhabi.

Robben out for a month

AFP, Berlin

Bayern Munich's Dutch striker Arjen Robben has been ruled out of action for a month on Friday after picking up a groin injury in the Netherlands' 1-0 Euro 2016 qualifying loss to Iceland.

Bayern club doctor Volker Braun revealed the player had suffered a serious muscular problem on in Amsterdam which means he will be unavailable for the Bundesliga champions for four weeks.

Robben, 31, was substituted after half an hour during the defeat which has thrown the Dutch European qualifying campaign into turmoil.

He will miss Sunday's make-or-break clash with Turkey.

Robben will also sit out Bayern's Bundesliga game on Saturday against Augsburg, and the Champions League group stages games against Olympiakos and Dinamo Zagreb.

Netherlands in danger

AFP, Paris

Iceland took a big step towards sealing their ticket to Euro 2016 with a 1-0 win in the Netherlands on Thursday which put the Dutch in danger of missing the finals in France.

A Gylfi Sigurdsson penalty on 51 minutes ensured that Iceland stay top of Group A with 18 points - eight ahead of World Cup bronze medallists the Netherlands - who are third with three games left.

The stuttering Dutch campaign had already cost Guus Hiddink his job and new coach Danny Blind had a baptism of fire in Amsterdam.

With their backs to the wall the Dutch desperately needed a win but were lucky not to be trailing after seven minutes with Jon Dadi Bodvarson missing on front of goal.

The Dutch lost captain Arjen Robben to an apparent groin injury after half and hour and he was replaced by Luciano Narsingh.

And things began to unravel for the hosts when defender Bruno Martins Indi was sent off on 33 minutes for appearing to grab striker Kolbeinn Sigthorsson by the neck.

RESULTS

Georgia 1 (Kazhishvili 38) Scotland 0
Czech Republic 2 (Skoda 74, 86) Kazakhstan 1 (Logvinenko 21)
 Netherlands 0 **Iceland 1** (Sigurdsson 51-pen)
 Turkey 1 (Selcuk Inan 77) Latvia 1 (Sabala 90+1)
Belgium 3 (Fellaini 23, De Bruyne 44, Hazard 78-pen) Bosnia and Herzegovina 1 (Dzeko 15)
 Cyprus 0 **Wales 1** (Bale 82)
Israel 4 (Zahavi 3, Bittoun 22, Hemed 26-pen, Dabbur 38) Andorra 0
 Bulgaria 0 **Norway 1** (Forren 57)
Italy 1 (Pelle 69) Malta 0

are fourth with nine points.

The Czech Republic travel to Latvia while Iceland will bid to seal their first Euro qualification at home against Kazakhstan.

In Group B, Gareth Bale put Wales within touching distance of a first major tournament appearance for 58 years as the Real Madrid's star's late goal clinched a 1-0 win over Cyprus.

Bale's bullet header settled a nervous encounter with just eight minutes remaining in Nicosia and a victory against Israel on Sunday will guarantee their place in next year's finals.

Wales, who last qualified for a major tournament at the 1958 World Cup, are top of their Group B with 17 points -- three points ahead of Belgium who won 3-1 at home against Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Israel -- third with 12 points after beating tiny Andorra 4-0 -- will be looking for a first ever Euro qualification against Wales.

In Group H, Italy took advantage of Croatia's goalless draw in Azerbaijan, to take top spot by beating Malta 1-0 thanks to Southampton striker Graziano Pelle's 69th minute goal.

The Azzurri host Bulgaria on Sunday in a match that could secure their ticket to next summer's finals in France.

Real set to stay richest

REUTER, Madrid

Real Madrid look certain to retain their status as the world's richest club by income after the La Liga club's revenue for the 2014-15 season jumped 9.4 percent to 660.6 million euros (\$733.33 million).

Real topped Deloitte's latest ranking of soccer's biggest earners for a 10th year in 2013-14 with income of 550 million euros, with English Premier League team Manchester United climbing into second place on 518 million, according to a report published in January.

Unlike Real's figures, the accounting firm's exclude player transfer fees, VAT and other sales-related taxes.

According to Real's financial results for last season, pre-tax profit rose 15.9 percent to 55.9 million euros, while net profit was 42 million, up 9.1 percent, they said on their website on Thursday.

Pelle does an Henry

AFP, Milan

After a 1-0 win took Italy to the brink of Euro 2016 qualification, Graziano Pelle could jokingly claim he would be as welcome in Malta as Thierry Henry would be in Ireland.

The Southampton striker settled the game in the 69th minute after his arm made contact with Antonio Candreva's sweeping cross and flew past goalkeeper Andrew Hogg and into the Malta net.

It may not have been as premeditated as the Henry handball that kept the ball in play for William Gallas to score against the Republic of Ireland in a crucial World Cup play-off in 2009, sealing France's trip to the finals in South Africa.

But the effect was essentially the same.

Italy went joint top of Group H, level on points (15) with Croatia, and could book their Euro 2016 ticket with a win against Bulgaria in Palermo on Sunday -- although they are not in the clear yet.

Norway, 1-0 winners in Bulgaria and only two points behind Croatia and Italy, are still in contention for one of the top two qualifying spots while Croatia were held to a scoreless draw by Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, Pelle, who enjoyed the bulk of Italy's scoring chances against a heavily-fortified Maltese backline, feigned ignorance over his goal.

"I don't quite know how the ball came off me, but it's my job to score goals," said the Italian, who also hit the winner in a 1-0 win away to Malta earlier in the campaign.

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DSC-WX200	18.2MP	DSC-WX30	16.2MP	DSC-TX20	16.2MP
DSC-QX10	18.2MP	DSC-WX50	16.2MP	DSC-WX350	18.2MP
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