

## MORE THAN A GAME AS CHINA AND QATAR MEET IN 'SYMBOLIC' CLASH

**DOHA:** An Asian zone World Cup qualifier between the bottom two sides in Group A, who have won just one game in eight between them, may not seem a particularly noteworthy match.

But when China face Qatar in Kunming today, it will also be a clash between arguably the most ambitious and certainly in their region biggest spending nations who, in the long-term, could both play a central role in shaping the sport's future.

In the short-term both could deal an almost fatal blow to each other's already very slim chances of reaching Russia 2018. "It would be easy simply to dismiss the China Qatar game as a dead rubber or as a match between weaker nations on the periphery of world football," said Professor Simon Chadwick, a British-based Asian football expert. "However, these are two aspiring football nations, with major football ambitions. Both nations still hold out hope of making Russia 2018 and failure to do so would be an embarrassment and a setback in their desire to be considered as being among the world's leading football nations."

"The game therefore has huge symbolic meaning." It is the World Cup where both countries wish to make a mark on the global game. Both have invested heavily to fuel their ambitions. China, which aims to be a footballing superpower by 2050, has spent an estimated \$1 billion developing its domestic game, says Chadwick.

It harbours hopes of hosting its own World Cup and, one day, winning football's greatest prize. Qatar is in the middle of transforming itself by splurging \$200 billion-plus to host the 2022 tournament. The stadiums alone for that World Cup will cost some \$10 billion.

Both countries' ambition also represents a challenge to the established world football order, says China-based Cameron Wilson, founder of the Wild East Football website. "I think it is clear the balance of power is shifting away from Europe, albeit slowly, and it's no coincidence that money is a big part of that—neither Chinese nor Qatari football lacks serious financial backing," Wilson told AFP.

But with ambition comes pressure, and neither nation is responding too well at the moment. China have one point from their

four qualifying games. Their last home match—a 1-0 defeat by Syria in Xi'an—saw angry fans protest in the streets.

World Cup 2022 hosts Qatar are only slightly better off. They have clawed three points from four matches, following a 1-0 victory in Doha last month against Syria.

But only the top two teams from the group qualify automatically for Russia. Iran head the group with 10 points and Uzbekistan are second with nine. The third-placed team will have a play-off chance to get to Russia, the position currently held by South Korea with seven points.

### THE PRICE OF FAILURE

Emphasising how desperate China and Qatar are to qualify for the 2018 tournament, both have sacked their coaches during the current round of qualifying.

Notably, China have appointed World Cup winning-coach Marcello Lippi on a reputed \$20 million-a-year contract to revive hope in their almost moribund World Cup campaign.

Today's game will be his first big test in charge of "Team Dragon".

Qatar turned back to popular former coach Jorge Fossati after losing their first two matches in this round of qualifying, despite storming through the last stage. Lippi said he and the Chinese nation are hoping for a miracle. Fossati is insistent that whatever happens in Kunming will not be decisive. "We are very optimistic about the result of the game in China, but it is not a definitive game," he said before his team flew out.

Last week China played a behind closed doors friendly in preparation for today's match. In contrast, Qatar beat Russia 2-1 in Doha in a match broadcast live on television. "We wanted to help Marcello if he wanted to watch the game," joked Fossati. Defeat today and the costs could be high.

For Qatar, it could mean the end of any hope of qualifying for their first World Cup before they host in 2022, and showing a sceptical footballing world they deserve to host the tournament. China could pay a price off the pitch, says Chadwick, where continued football failure could unleash the "potential for political and socio-cultural fallout at home". — AFP



**BRUSSELS:** Belgium's Thomas Meunier scores against Estonia during the World Cup Group H qualifying soccer match between Belgium and Estonia, at the King Baudouin Stadium in Brussels on Sunday. — AP

## BELGIUM RAMPANT, PORTUGAL SURVIVE SCARE IN QUALIFIERS

**PARIS:** Belgium hammered Estonia 8-1 to go clear in Group H, while Cristiano Ronaldo scored twice as Portugal survived a scare before overcoming Latvia 4-1 in World Cup qualifying on Sunday.

There were braces from Romelu Lukaku and Dries Mertens as Belgium ran rampant with further goals from Thomas Meunier, Eden Hazard, Yannick Carrasco and an own goal to make it four wins from four.

In the same group Greece scored a 95th-minute equaliser through Giorgos Tzavellas after a free-kick had given Bosnia the lead as the ball rebounded back off the post and in off goalkeeper Orestis Karnezis. The point for Greece means they have 10 from four games in Group H, two behind the Belgians.

Gibraltar made a piece of history and were level for a while in Cyprus before going down agonisingly 3-1. But they had cause to celebrate a significant consolation with Lee Casciaro's 51st-minute equaliser—their first ever World Cup qualifier away goal.

Ronaldo scored twice and even missed a spot-kick as European champions Portugal recovered from a second-half wobble in Lisbon to remain three points adrift of Group B leaders

Switzerland. Ronaldo converted a first-half spot kick to open the scores but then missed a second one which hit the post.

Within a minute Latvia were level as substitute Arturs Zjuzins pounced on the loose ball following a goalmouth scramble to fire home on 67 minutes.

But headers from Willian and Bruno Alves and a spectacular scissor-kick from Ronaldo assured Portugal of the three points.

Earlier in Group B, the Faroe Islands were similarly plucky in soggy Lucerne, where Switzerland scored seven minutes from the end through Stephan Lichtsteiner to grind out a 2-0 victory and maintain their 100 percent record.

In the same group Hungary hammered Andorra 4-0 at home.

### DEPAY SPARES DUTCH BLUSHES

Out-of-favour Manchester United winger Memphis Depay came off the bench to score twice and save the Netherlands' blushes in Luxembourg.

Depay gave United manager Jose Mourinho a reminder of his worth just as the Dutch were sliding to an embarrassing draw.

The 3-1 victory over Luxembourg keeps the

misfiring Dutch in the hunt for a place at Russia 2018, but they will need to play better if they are to trump the twin threats of table-toppers France and Sweden in Group A.

Arjen Robben had a chance after a quarter of an hour for the Dutch, but should have done better than firing at Ralph Schon in the Luxembourg goal, as the Dutch tightened the screw. The home stopper was finally beaten on 36 minutes when Robben moved the ball onto his favourite left foot to slot home for a deserved Dutch lead.

But a minute before the break the minnows grabbed a leveller after Joshua Brenet felled Daniel da Mota in the box and Maxime Chanot punished the visitors from the penalty spot.

Robben, whose brilliant career has been blighted by injury, failed to make it out for the second half. Wesley Sneijder was also hooked at the break.

It was Depay, one of the replacements, who struck soon afterwards to break home hearts.

And the 22-year-old, strongly linked with a move away from Old Trafford to Everton, sealed the match with his second goal in the final minutes. Also in Group A Bulgaria edged Belarus 1-0 in Sofia. — AFP

### Standings

Group B		Thailand	3	0	0	3	1	6	0
Australia	3	2	1	0	5	2	7		
Saudi Arabia	3	2	1	0	5	3	7		
Japan	3	2	0	1	5	3	6		
UAE	3	2	0	1	5	3	6		
Iraq	3	0	0	3	2	6	0		

Note: Top two in each group qualify for the finals in Russia. Two third-placed teams play-off with winner to face CONCACAF play-off winner over two legs for place in finals. — AFP

## US WOMEN CLOSE YEAR WITH A 5-0 WIN OVER ROMANIA

**CARSON:** It was an eventful year for the US women's national team off the field, with Hope Solo's suspension after the Rio Olympics, lawsuits over the expiring collective bargaining agreement and Megan Rapinoe's protest during the national anthem dominating the headlines.

But in their final match of the year, the Americans offered a summary of how things played out on the field in equal parts fulfillment and disappointment, with Crystal Dunn, Christen Press, Morgan Brian and Samantha Mewis scoring to help the US beat Romania 5-0 on Sunday night. The US blistered Romania with 31 shots and did not allow a shot, but U.S. coach Jill Ellis was not happy with the team's wastefulness.

"I think we left a lot to be said," Ellis said. The same could be said of a year in which the Americans went 22-0-3 in regulation play, scoring 92 goals and conceding 10, but failed to defend their Olympic gold medal after losing to Sweden on penalty kicks in the quarterfinals. Still, the U.S. ended on a largely positive note.

"I think we all reacted well to it and 2017 is going to be an intense year," Dunn said. An own goal in the 20th minute opened the scoring for the US when Dunn's cross was chested into the net by Teodora Meluta. Dunn scored her 14th goal this year in the first minute of first-half stoppage time, sprinting past two defenders to take a pass from Press and put a shot between Roxana Oprea's legs.

Press made it 3-0 in the 55th minute, connecting with Tobin Heath on a give-and-go and scoring for the fourth consecutive game. Press had a hat trick Thursday night in San Jose in the Americans' 8-1 victory over Romania.

Brian scored on a penalty kick in the 88th minute and Samantha Mewis added a goal in the first minute of additional time. Rapinoe wasn't included on the US roster

### Live Matches on TV (Local Timings)

WORLD CUP 2018 - ASIA CUP 2019 QUALIFYING	
Japan v Saudi Arabia	13:35
South Korea v Uzbekistan	14:00
China v Qatar	14:35
Syria v Iran	15:00
Thailand v Australia	15:00
UAE v Iraq	18:20
WC2010 S. AMERICAN QUALIFYING	
Bolivia v Paraguay	23:00
Ecuador v Venezuela	0:00
Chile v Uruguay	2:30
Argentina v Colombia	2:30
Peru v Brazil	5:15

for the second consecutive match. Ellis is planning to hold camps for the national team and the Under-23s in January, operating on the assumption that they will be conducted under the current contractual structure. But Ellis did not know the status of negotiations between players and US Soccer.

"I don't get involved in that," Ellis said. "That's between them and lawyers and all that good stuff." — AP



Zain football team.

## ZAIN SUCCESSFULLY CONCLUDES EMPLOYEES FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading telecommunications company in Kuwait, successfully concluded its annual Employees Football Tournament at Mishref United football pitches.

The tournament, which is conducted annually for the company's employees, took place throughout three days with active participation.

The tournament is considered a main pillar of Zain's internal strategy towards the health of its employees. The Company remains committed to the wellbeing of its employees, and this is highlighted by the organization of this annual sporting event, which attracts a great deal of

attention from employees given football's status as the most popular sport in Kuwait.

Zain's football tournament was held throughout three days at Mishref United pitches, and witnessed the attendance of former Kuwait National Team Star and member of the National Football Union Saad Al Houti and Zain Kuwait's Corporate Communications and Relations Director Waleed Al Khashti, who awarded the first and second place winners.

The tournament was organized as part of Zain's Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, which looks to cater to the dif-

ferent talents and interests of its employees. The company continues to look for ways to positively impact the communities in which it operates, and to remain an inspiration to its staff.

Zain is keen to ensure employees take part in all of the company's social activities and programs, whether they be cultural, sporting, or entertainment events. The organization of this championship is part of Zain's belief in supporting the physical wellbeing and health-orientation of its employees, as well as the company's commitment to the development of the sports sector in Kuwait.



**CARSON:** Alex Morgan #13 of United States attacks against Maria Ficzay #6 of Romania during the second half of their international friendly soccer match at StubHub Center on Sunday in Carson, California. — AFP