

Sports

Australia aims to halt Syria's World Cup charge in Sydney

Home fans will clamor for an Australian victory

SYDNEY: While local support will be firmly behind Australia's Socceroos, wider sentiment may spur the team from war-torn Syria to keep its World Cup dream alive when the teams meet today in a winner-takes-all qualifier.

The outcome of the match will decide which team progresses to an inter-continental playoff against the fourth-place team from CONCACAF - the North and Central American and Caribbean confederation - for a spot at the World Cup in Russia next year.

Syria kept its hopes alive with a late penalty which allowed it to snatch a 1-1 draw with Australia in its "home" leg of the two-leg playoff on neutral in Malaysia last week. But it now must overcome Australia's home advantage to continue to lift the spirits of fans in a country riven by war. Syria coach Aymin Al-Hakim said playing Australia in Sydney was just another of the obstacles his team has had to overcome in its astonishing qualifying campaign. "I say to our fans what we have achieved so far is not only an achievement, but a miracle," he said. "We will push with all our force to continue our journey on the path of achieving our dream."

His team has nothing to lose. Syria has never qualified for the World Cup, but now is potentially only three games from making it to soccer's grandest show.

Syria left back Mouaiad Al-Ajjan said his team would have to make the most of its chances in Sydney, particularly after a slow first half in Malacca, Malaysia last week and needing an 85th-minute penalty to equalize.

"We are content with the result," he said after the draw, "but we promise the fans we will up our game in

the second leg to bring them joy and qualify to the inter-confederation playoff." Australia has qualified for the last three World Cups and narrowly missed a direct spot again, finishing just out of the top two in its group on goal difference. That pushed the Socceroos into the difficult playoff route to Russia, a pathway they were more familiar with when Australia was part of the Oceania confederation.

Today's match will be played on the ground where Australia beat Uruguay in an intercontinental playoff to qualify for the 2006 World Cup and where it won the Asian Cup in 2015. Home fans will clamor for an Australian victory which will propel the Socceroos a step closer to Russia.

But there will be additional tension as defeat will spell not only the end of the Socceroos' World Cup ambitions but possibly coach Ange Postecoglou's tenure with the national team. Postecoglou acknowledged that possibility but said he wouldn't allow it to rule his approach to the match.

"I'd be a fool if I didn't live the way I preach," Postecoglou said. "I try to live every game like it's the last one. 'I won't be going into it with a different mindset because it's an absolute privilege and honor to coach your country.'" Postecoglou said he was looking for nothing less than a win today.

"For us the objective is clear," he said. "What we know is if we win tomorrow night we'll be through to the next round. Our objective is to play our football. We want to be aggressive, attacking, take it to the opposition and test them and that's what we'll do."

Postecoglou will likely recall Celtic midfielder Tom



SYDNEY: Syria's player Tamer Hag Mohd (C) shares a light moment with teammates during a training session in Sydney yesterday, on the eve of their 2018 World Cup football qualifying match against Australia. — AFP

Rogic for the match and has hinted he might start veteran Tim Cahill. Mark Milligan, who led the Australia lineup last week, said the players' confidence is "very strong." "Looking back on Thursday night ... our shortcomings in the last 30 minutes showed when we do

things right, we get the right results for it," he said. "If any doubt does creep in we're fortunate we can look at recent performances and we're right on track. 'We'll hold strong in what we believe and bring our best to the table.'" — AP

Germany win historic 10th WCup qualifier

BERLIN: Midfielder Leon Goretzka netted twice as Germany routed Azerbaijan 5-1 on Sunday to make history with a perfect World Cup qualifying record of 10 wins in as many games. The reigning world champions had already sealed their ticket to Russia last Thursday with a 3-1 win over Northern Ireland, and finished their qualifying campaign in Kaiserslautern with a 10th straight victory. This is the first time Germany have qualified for a World Cup finals with a perfect record.

Joachim Loew's side are only the second team to achieve the feat in a European qualifying campaign after Spain managed it on their way to winning the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

However, the comfortable win came at the cost of two centre-backs, as Bayern Munich's Niklas Sule and Arsenal's Shkodran Mustafi both limped off with first-half injuries. Schalke midfielder Goretzka gave Germany an early lead with a superb back-heeled goal before Azerbaijan striker Ramil Sheydaev stunned the hosts by equalising before half-time.

Second-half strikes from Hoffenheim striker Sandro Wagner and Chelsea defender Antonio Ruediger, before Goretzka added his second, saw Germany pull away.

Liverpool midfielder Emre Can added the fifth when he smashed home his first international goal with a powerful shot from outside the area. The World Cup holders lost Julian Draxler before kick-off as the Paris Saint-Germain midfielder dropped out with flu, after Real Madrid star Toni Kroos had already been ruled out with a rib injury. The hosts got off to a dream start when Goretzka showed great technique by turning the ball into the net on eight minutes. Then came Germany's injury blows. Sule limped off on 22 minutes to be replaced by Chelsea's Ruediger



KAISERSLAUTERN: Azerbaijan's Tamkin Khalizade, left, and Germany's Sandro Wagner go for a header during the 2018 World Cup qualifying Group C soccer match between Germany and Azerbaijan in Kaiserslautern, Germany, Sunday. — AP

before Mustafi went down in the build-up to the equaliser. The Germans should have doubled their lead with half an hour gone when Wagner hit the post.

Azerbaijan deservedly levelled on 34 minutes when Sheydaev sprinted clear of Mustafi—who pulled up with a leg injury.

Sheydaev then wrong-footed Ruediger and fired past Germany goalkeeper Bernd Leno to stun the hosts. It stayed 1-1 at the break, but Wagner put Germany back in the lead on 54 minutes thanks to Hawk-Eye.

Wagner's header was cleared in a scramble, but goal-line technology showed the ball had crossed the line for his fifth international goal in as many games. At 2-1 up, the floodgates opened when Ruediger hammered his header past Azerbaijani goalkeeper Kamran Agayev on 64 minutes. Goretzka grabbed Germany's fourth just two minutes later when he fired home Leroy Sane's pass after some good work by the Manchester City winger. The 23-year-old Can completed the scoring in style when he rifled a 30-yard strike into the roof of the net.—AFP

US and Pulisic poised to seal World Cup berth

MIAMI: United States coach Bruce Arena has challenged his team to finish the job and seal World Cup qualification against Trinidad & Tobago today after an emphatic rout of Panama which has transformed American fortunes.

Friday's exhilarating attacking display against Panama, where Borussia Dortmund star Christian Pulisic excelled in a 4-0 thrashing of Los Canaleros, has left Arena's side on the brink of a place in next year's finals in Russia. Heading into the final round of games, the US sit third in the standings with 12 points, two points clear of Panama and Honduras, their only rivals for the final automatic qualifying berth from CONCACAF. A win over Trinidad today would guarantee that the US extend a proud record of qualifying for every World Cup since 1990. And with a sizeable advantage in goal difference of plus five, compared to Panama (-2) and Honduras (-7), a draw at Trinidad's tiny 10,000-seater Ato Boldon Stadium in Couva will almost certainly be enough. Nevertheless, Arena has warned his team to be ready for a stern physical challenge against Trinidad, even though the Caribbean nation are already eliminated and have little



COUVA: US national soccer team player DeAndre Yedlin is carried by trainer Luis Ramirez through water around the practice field during training in Couva, Trinidad, yesterday. Team USA plays against Trinidad & Tobago today. — AP

but pride to play for.

"The game in Trinidad won't be easy but we are in a good position now," Arena said. "It will be challenging. We faced challenging conditions in Honduras and Panama so we will be ready. Trinidad are out but will be a handful. 'We are moving along well, our goal difference is better and now we need to finish it off.'"

History suggests the US should comfortably achieve qualification on Tuesday. In 25 meetings between the two sides since 1982, the US have won 18, drawn four and lost

only three occasions. The last of those defeats came nearly a decade ago, in a 2-1 loss in 2008.

More recently, Arena's side won 2-0 at home in June and also recorded a 4-0 win in an earlier round of qualifying in 2016.

The US will seek to extend that record of dominance with an attack spearheaded by Pulisic and Jozy Altidore, who scored twice against Panama. "The job's not done yet," said Altidore. "We need a result and we know it's going to be a tough place to play." — AFP

Moment of truth as Argentina seek World Cup berth

MONTEVIDEO: The once unfathomable prospect of a World Cup without Lionel Messi and Argentina could become reality today as South America's thrilling 2018 qualification battle reaches its climax. Two years after Argentina kicked off their troubled campaign with a 2-0 defeat at home to Ecuador, Jorge Sampaoli's side travel to Quito to face La Tri once more with their hopes hanging precariously. The two-time World Cup-winners head into the final round of games in sixth place overall, outside the top four positions which grant automatic qualification and trailing fifth-placed Peru, who occupy the playoff spot, on goal difference.

Yet with only two points separating third-placed Chile (26 points) with seventh-placed Paraguay (24), any number of permutations are possible. Argentina can simplify the equation for their fans, however, if they manage to take all three points.

A victory would guarantee they finish no worse than fifth place, putting them into a two-legged play-off against New Zealand they would be expected to win. But achieving victory in the thin air of Quito, which is 2,850 metres (9,350 feet) above sea level, may be easier said than done. The Argentinians have an abysmal record in away games against Ecuador, with their last victory in Quito coming in 2001.

Since then in World Cup qualifying games, they have been beaten twice, in 2005 and 2009, before scraping a 1-1 draw in 2013. Moreover, Argentina face their moment of truth after a series of uninspiring performances that has left the rest of the footballing world scratching its head at how a squad bristling with so much attacking talent has found scoring so difficult.

'HANGING ON'

Despite being able to call upon Messi, Sergio Aguero, Gonzalo Higuain, Paulo Dybala, Mauro Icardi and Angel Di Maria throughout the campaign, Argentina have only scored 16 times in 17 games. Last Thursday's 0-0 stalemate with Peru in Buenos Aires was Argentina's third consecutive draw. The Albiceleste have now scored only once in their past four qualifying games.

Sampaoli attempted to break that cycle last week with the surprise selection of Dario Benedetto in attack, a gamble that failed to pay off after the Boca Juniors striker missed a string of chances. It is unclear whether Sampaoli will persist with Benedetto again on Tuesday. While Messi and his team-mates attempt to adjust to the lung-busting challenge of playing at altitude, millions of compatriots will be holding their breath.

The sense of anxiety was reflected by La Nacion newspaper. "Argentina is not on the edge of the precipice - it is hanging on the cornice vertically," the paper commented. Elsewhere today, Chile could seal their qualification with victory over Brazil in Sao Paulo. Brazil have already qualified for the finals and are guaranteed top spot.—AFP