

## Sports

# Saudi Arabia spoil Australia's homecoming in wet 0-0 draw

**SYDNEY:** Saudi Arabia dampened Australia's much-anticipated homecoming yesterday with a scoreless draw in a World Cup qualifying clash in Sydney - the Socceroos' first home game in more than two years. Defying a rowdy crowd of 23,314, the visitors spoil the party in a bad-tempered arm-wrestle played in teeming rain.

The Socceroos last played in front of their fans against Nepal in Canberra in October 2019 before being forced overseas when Australia's borders slammed shut because of the coronavirus. Saudi Arabia continue to set the pace in Group B with 13 points while Australia are clinging to second spot with 10.

"Unfortunately we couldn't get the three points to celebrate with the fans," Australia forward Mathew Leckie said. "They defended really well. It was just one of those games the ball didn't want to go in." With regional powerhouses Japan hot on their heels, both teams were desperate to move closer to a top-two finish and automatic qualification to next year's World Cup in Qatar.

The third-placed teams can still hope to make the cut via an inter-continental playoff. Having lost 2-1 to Japan last month in Saitama, a pumped-up Socceroos rattled an under-pres-

sure Saudi Arabia amid a cauldron-like atmosphere. But the visitors settled and almost pinched an early lead, only for Salman Al-Faraj's shot from inside the box to be brilliantly blocked by defender Harry Souttar.

Surviving that scare, Australia held sway once more but were let down by sloppiness in attack. Australia were aggressive in the second half in a desperate bid to break the deadlock. They had numerous opportunities but were continually thwarted by goalkeeper Mohammed Al-Yami.

Saudi Arabia appeared to be wilting and lost their composure with yellow cards to Abdulrahman Alami and Ali Hadi Albulayhi. But Australia's momentum came to a halt when Souttar, who is reportedly on the move to the English Premier League, was stretchered off with a knee injury.

Saudi Arabia looked the more likely to score towards the end and created several chances, but were unable to snatch a late victory. Even though they didn't break a 24-year drought against the Socceroos, Saudi Arabia kept their stranglehold on Group B. Saudi Arabia's road trip continues against Vietnam on Nov 16, while Australia play China in Sharjah on the same day. —AFP



SYDNEY: Saudi Arabia's Fhad Mosaed Almuwallad and Australia's Aziz Behich fight for the ball during the World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying football match at CommBank Stadium yesterday. — AFP

## DRC-born Tshiunza heads new wave of Wales locks

**CARDIFF:** Wales rugby will, one day in the foreseeable future, bid farewell to the iconic figure of Alun Wyn Jones, the talismanic lock and most-capped player in the sport's history. Head coach Wayne Pivac, however, is nurturing two towering youngsters in Ben Carter and Christ Tshiunza he claims have all the potential to match the longevity of the 36-year-old Jones.

Tshiunza, aged just 19, has been named on the bench for Sunday's Test match against Fiji, with Pivac marking down the Kinshasa-born second-row forward as "one for the future". "If you look at him and Ben Carter, look at what's coming up, (Rugby World Cups in) 2023, 2027, 2031, those boys at 19 or 20 years of age, there's no reason why - if they look after themselves and keep developing - that they can't be involved in three World Cups," Pivac said.

"You need that experience at the World Cup and when the Alun Wyn Joneses of the world move on, you've got to have the next wave coming through and that's what we're doing with these two young men." Tshiunza, who has four older sisters, left the Democratic Republic of Congo at the age of six, his parents settling in England before relocating to Wales in 2010.

The lock attended Whitchurch High School in Cardiff, an establishment that has produced some true Welsh sporting heroes in the shape of Wales and British and Irish Lions skipper Sam Warburton, footballer Gareth Bale and cyclist Geraint Thomas. "Sam and I are in close contact and text each other quite frequently. He's been in the background helping me out," said Tshiunza, who turned down a Cardiff contract to join English Premiership club Exeter while studying sports science at the city's university.

"Even before my first Premiership game we talked about matchday nerves, coming off the bench and what to do and what



Christ Tshiunza

not to do. He also texted me after my Wales call-up. "He has been a great help and even before I got to Exeter he came into school and gave me advice."

### Natural gifts

Tshiunza, standing 6ft 6in (1.98 m) tall and weighing 17st 6lb (112 kg), has said he thought his call-up to the Wales squad - which came on the same day that he was playing in a university match - was a prank. But it was no joke for Pivac, the New Zealander coach obviously relishing having access to a special player. "At the moment, it's natural gifts that he's got. We wanted to bring him into camp because every now and then a player like this comes along. The more time you can spend with them and further their development, the better it is for them," said Pivac. "We're looking at him as a player, in the future, who can hopefully cover two positions, in the second row and at six (blindsides flanker). We're really looking forward to seeing him out there. He'll be full of energy, he's very excited about the opportunity and he's one for the future. At 19, he's an athlete... he'll be one to watch in the future, there's no doubt about it, and we wanted to get him into the fold nice and early. It'll be a great learning experience for him." —AFP

## Barcelona and Arsenal rampant as Lyon edge Bayern

**PARIS:** Captain Alexia Putellas netted twice as Women's Champions League holders Barcelona kept up their perfect record in this season's competition by easing to a 4-0 win over German visitors Hoffenheim on Wednesday. The result ensured that the Catalans stay clear of Arsenal at the top of Group C, while seven-time Champions League winners Lyon are five points clear in Group D after coming from behind to beat closest rivals Bayern Munich 2-1. Jennifer Hermoso headed Barcelona into a fifth-minute lead against Hoffenheim and Putellas smashed in a left-foot free-kick from 20 metres to make it 2-0 before the midway point in the first half.

Putellas, the UEFA women's player of the year who is a leading contender to win the Ballon d'Or later this month, made it 3-0 just after the half-hour mark, her shot dribbling through the legs of goalkeeper Martina Tufekovic. Marta Torrejon headed in a Putellas cross to complete the rout in the 74th minute, shortly after the floodlights briefly went out at the Johan Cruyff Stadium.

Barcelona, whose coach Jonatan Giraldez is not yet 30, maintain their 100 percent record in Group C and have 12 wins out of 12 in all competitions this season, with 64 goals scored and just three conceded. Arsenal sit second in their section on six points after cruising to a 5-1 victory away to Danish champions Koge. The English WSL leaders saw Nikita Parris have an early penalty saved but they went ahead in the 27th minute when Australia's Steph Catley curled in a free-kick in front of the sizeable travelling support. —AFP