



Iran's Mehdi Taremi (R) shoots the ball as he plays against China's Mei Fang (L)

Iran beat China

Australia get crucial win

Tehran
Iran's Mehdi Taremi dealt China's World Cup hopes a major blow yesterday, as Australia grabbed a crucial win over UAE to stay in the hunt for an automatic spot at Russia 2018.

Australia, however, can take nothing for granted as they lie in third spot with 13 points after Japan and Saudi Arabia also won to jointly go three points clear in Group B with 16.

Japan ended Thailand's campaign with a 4-0 victory in Saitama, and South Korea squeezed past Syria 1-0 to get back on track after last week's upset to China.

Saudi Arabia grabbed three points in Jeddah with Yahya

al-Shehri scoring the winner in the 53rd minute for a 1-0 victory over Iraq, who languish in fifth place with just four points.

Marcello Lippi's team had raised Chinese hopes with their 1-0 win over the Koreans, but Taremi's goal straight after half-time consigned them to defeat by the same scoreline.

While Iran, Asia's top-ranked team, maintain their four-point cushion from South Korea at the top of Group A, China are second from bottom with only three games to go. China are pumping huge resources into football in an effort to lift themselves among the sport's elite, starting with qualifying for only the second World Cup in their history.

But they may now have to win all of their remaining games against Syria, Uzbekistan and Qatar to reach next year's tournament in Russia.

In Sydney, Australia badly needed a win against UAE and

after a game featuring 42 fouls they ran out 2-0 victors thanks to goals from Jackson Irvine and Mathew Leckie. It allowed the Socceroos to keep pace with Japan and Saudi Arabia in Group B as they hunt for the top-two finish which will give them an automatic berth in Russia.

'Incredibly happy'

Japan had little trouble in their four-goal stroll in Saitama, which featured a 50th international strike for Leicester City forward Shinji Okazaki. Shinji Kagawa gave the hosts the lead in their Asian Group B qualifier with a sharp finish after eight minutes, before Okazaki thundered home a diving header to bring up his half-century in swashbuckling style.

Okazaki's landmark goal, on his 108th Japan appearance, came on 19 minutes in Saitama and effectively killed the contest.

Yuya Kubo and Maya Yoshida added further goals for the Blue Samurai after the break and Eiji

Kawashima saved a late penalty from Adisak Kraisor to deny Thailand a consolation.

Elsewhere, China-based Hong Jeong-Ho struck in the fourth minute as Uli Stielike's South Korea beat Syria 1-0 to remain second in Group A.

Qatar's already slim hopes of qualifying for the tournament also vanished as they went down to Uzbekistan 1-0 in Tashkent.

After their acrimonious 1-0 loss to Iran last week in Doha, Qatar were desperately looking for a miracle but a cracking 65th minute free-kick from Odil Akhmedov put paid to their hopes at the Bunyodkor Stadium.

Qatar continue to languish at the bottom of Group A with just four points after losing five of their seven games. The Uzbeks, who also have never qualified for the World Cup finals before, are in third spot with 12 points, just one point behind South Korea with three games left. (AFP)



Pliskova halts Baroni run

Miami

Czech second-seed Karolina Pliskova booked her place in the semi-finals of the Miami Open yesterday, ending the hopes of Croat veteran Marijana Lucic-Baroni with a 6-3,

6-4 win.

Lucic-Baroni has been enjoying a late career upturn in fortunes at the age of 35 and in January reached the semi-final of the

Australian Open - 18 years after her previous appearance in the last four of a slam in 1999 at Wimbledon.

In Miami she put out fifth-seed Agnieszka Radwanska in the previous round but the confident and in-form Pliskova proved to be a test too far.

The win was sweet revenge for Pliskova who had lost to the Croat in the quarterfinals of the Australian Open in January and now has the best win-loss record of the year (23-3).

The Czech has won two out of four tournaments this season, triumphing in Brisbane and Doha.

The 25-year-old's victory in the Doha final came against Caroline Wozniacki and the pair could face each other again in the Miami semi-final, should the Dane be able to beat Czech Lucie Safarova.

Football

Scores at the time of closing

International friendlies:



Russia	3	Belgium	3
Republic of Ireland	0	Iceland	1
Austria	1	Finland	1
Netherlands	1	Italy	2
Portugal	2	Sweden	3
France	0	Spain	2
Cameroon	1	Guinea	1
Egypt	3	Togo	0
Luxembourg	0	Cape Verde	2
Morocco	1	Tunisia	0
Mozambique	1	Lesotho	0
South Africa	0	Angola	0
Tanzania	2	Burundi	1

Africa Cup of Nations qualifying, preliminary round, second legs:

Mauritius	0	Comoros	2
South Sudan	0	Djibouti	2

Fourth round of 2018 World Cup

CONCACAF qualifying:			
Honduras	1	Costa Rica	0
Trinidad and Tobago	v	Mexico (1900).	
Panama	v	USA (2105).	

Asian zone World Cup qualifiers:



Group A:			
South Korea	1	Syria in Seoul	0
Iran	1	China in Tehran	0
Uzbekistan	1	Qatar in Tashkent	0
Group B:			
Australia	2	UAE in Sydney	0
Japan	4	Thailand in Saitama	0
Saudi Arabia	1	Iraq in Jeddah	0

English League One (1945):

AFC Wimbledon	3	Rochdale	1
Oxford	5	Bury	1
Port Vale	0	MK Dons	0
Sheff Utd	2	Millwall	0
League Two:			
Accrington	v	Cambridge (1945)	