

Sports

Jota treble fires Wolves to leave Puel under fire

Third successive defeat for Leicester

LONDON: Diogo Jota's hat-trick piled pressure on Leicester manager Claude Puel as the Wolves midfielder's last-gasp strike secured a thrilling 4-3 win yesterday. Nuno Espirito Santo's side blew a two-goal lead and then wasted a 3-2 advantage, but still finished with all three points in one of the Premier League's games of the season at Molineux.

Jota was Wolves' hero with his winner deep into stoppage-time, capping a dramatic finale that left Puel holding his head in disbelief at the final whistle. This was a third successive defeat for Leicester, including an embarrassing FA Cup exit at minnows Newport, leaving Puel facing a fight to hold onto his job.

The Frenchman had already endured numerous reports that he was on borrowed time at the King Power Stadium amid reports of player and fan unrest. Wolves were quickly into their stride and took the lead in the fourth minute when Joao Moutinho's cross picked out Jota and the Portuguese midfielder guided a close-range volley past Leicester keeper Kasper Schmeichel.

Jamie Vardy almost snatched an equaliser when Wolves goalkeeper Rui Patrício got his feet in a tangle, gifting possession to the Leicester forward before scrambling back to save at the last moment.

Ryan Bennett doubled Wolves' lead in the 12th minute, the defender rising above Harry Maguire to meet Moutinho's corner with a bullet header for his first goal of the season. Leicester pulled a goal back two minutes after the break as Vardy found Demarai Gray, who skipped past a challenge and fired home with a blistering strike.

Harvey Barnes, on his first Premier League start for Leicester, played the crucial role in the 52nd minute equaliser when the young midfielder's shot deflected in off Wolves defender Conor Coady for an own goal.

Wolves regained the lead in the 64th minute when Ruben Neves's pass sent Jota clear on goal and he chested down before drilling a shot that Schmeichel could only push into the net. In the 87th minute, Wes Morgan charged onto James Maddison's free-kick and climbed above three Wolves defenders to thump a close-range header past Patrício.

But Jota had the last word in the third minute of stoppage-time as he raced onto Raul Jimenez's pass and slotted home with the Leicester defence completely out of position. Jota's winner sparked wild celebrations from Santo, who ran onto the pitch to join his jubilant players, earning a dismissal in the process. — AFP



WOLVERHAMPTON: Wolverhampton Wanderers' Portuguese midfielder Diogo Jota (C) vies with Leicester City's Northern Irish defender Jonny Evans (L) and Leicester City's Portuguese defender Ricardo Pereira (R) during the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Leicester City at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton, central England yesterday. — AFP

Jamie Vardy almost snatched an equaliser



Kyrgyz heartthrob Lux - the Asian Cup's reluctant sex symbol

ABU DHABI: Kyrgyzstan ace Vitalij Lux claims he would rather sit in his hotel room alone than be a sex symbol after his Asian Cup hat-trick sent female fans into a spin. The 29-year-old hunk with the James Dean film-star looks and a name that sounds like a designer shampoo, plundered a midweek treble against the Philippines to fire the White Falcons into the last 16 on their tournament debut.

"This is new for me," hat-trick hero Lux told AFP in an interview yesterday. "I can't believe it. I have a lot more Instagram followers suddenly." Lux admits he is footloose and fancy-free, but the Kyrgyz heartthrob insists he's finding it hard to come to terms with his new-found fame.

"I'm still single, I'm searching for the right one," he blushed. "But I'm a very shy person. I prefer to sit in my room and just work hard at training." Lux's Instagram followers jumped by some 6,000 overnight to just over 9,000 — after his sharp-shooting swept Kyrgyzstan into the next round.

"I'm proud that I have so many followers," said the blond bomber, whose feed shows pictures of him training or lounging bare-chested by the pool. "It's definitely an unusual situation for me but I feel proud the fans believe in me."

"I get goosebumps just thinking about the hat-trick," added Lux, who plays his club football in Germany with SSV Ulm. "It was a fantastic feeling—awesome, amazing."



DUBAI: Kyrgyzstan's forward Vitalij Lux (C) celebrates with his teammates after scoring a goal during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup group C match between Kyrgyzstan and Philippines at Maktoum Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Stadium in Dubai. — AFP

It's given me more self-belief. I feel stronger, bigger. I didn't expect it, it was just a perfect day."

'GIRLS LOVE HIM'

Lux still has some way to go to catch Cristiano Ronaldo's 152 million Instagram followers but a Kyrgyzstan official whispered conspiratorially: "girls love him back home." The player himself hastily turned the conversation to Kyrgyzstan's clash with Asian Cups hosts the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi tomorrow.

"It will be a tough game but they have the pressure, we don't," said Lux, who revealed that Kyrgyzstan president Sooronbai Jeenbekov had delivered a rousing pep talk over the phone before their last game.

"We can just play our football. We have nothing to lose." For Kyrgyzstan—hitherto better known for horseback wrestling, eagle hunting and dead goat polo—simply reaching the Asian Cup was an astonishing achievement, given the parlous state of football in the former Soviet state. —AFP

Ambitious Oman eye Iran upset in Asian Cup

ABU DHABI: Coach Pim Verbeek says Oman are by no means satisfied with reaching the last 16 of the Asian Cup for the first time and will be going all out to forge another historic breakthrough when they take on Iran today.

The Omanis will be rank outsiders when they face three-times champions Iran at the Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium in Abu Dhabi but the always upbeat Dutchman said there was no sense of mission accomplished in his squad.

"I agree that our first target was always to be in the final 16 but there was always a second target and that was to get into the next round," Verbeek told reporters yesterday.

"We do not sit in the hotel and say that we have achieved everything we wanted to achieve and let it go. This could be an historic game if we reach the last eight."

"This is not enough. We will do everything we can to get to the next round of this Asian Cup."

Oman lost to Uzbekistan and Japan in the group stage but beat Turkmenistan 3-1 in their final match to qualify for their knockout stage clash with Iran, the 29th best team in the world according to the FIFA rankings.

Asked about the gulf between Iran's standing and 82nd ranked Oman, Verbeek was dismissive. "I have no idea about the FIFA rankings," he scoffed. "I think in big tournaments, this doesn't matter. This is the start of the knockout stage. Everybody will be excited to play one of the best teams in Asia at the moment."

"These are fantastic games to play. We know that it will not be easy, we know the strength of the Iran team and the Iranian players. It is up to the team to play good football and, if necessary, fight to the last second."

"These are the games you want to play." Oman struggled to convert their chances in their group games and Verbeek said it was vital that they were clinical at one end and focused at the other on Sunday.

"My team are not as experienced in big leagues or competitions as other teams at the Asian Cup so we still have to learn that if you lose concentration for five seconds, that's a goal," he added.

"We will get chances, I'm not worried about that. Of course we have to play our best football (but) when we get those chances, we have to take them. "We'll try to score as many goals as possible, but let's start with one." — Reuters

Asian Cup last 16, game by game guide

AL-AIN: AFP Sport looks at the Asian Cup round of 16 games, which starts today:

JORDAN V VIETNAM

Jordan look a well-oiled machine under ex-Belgium assistant coach Vital Borkelmans, and after a tactically astute 1-0 upset of defending champions Australia, they became the first team to qualify for the knockout rounds. Southeast Asian champions Vietnam, by contrast, were the last team through and have probably met their match here.

THAILAND V CHINA

Injury doubts over star man Wu Lei lurk over Marcello Lippi's China, and they will be wary of an upset against a Thai team with no shortage of attacking threat. "Thai Messi" Chanathip Songkrasin is the

main danger that the Chinese will want to keep quiet in midfield.

IRAN V OMAN

Iran's position as Asia's top-ranked team doesn't lie and Carlos Queiroz's powerful, direct team should have a big say in the title. Oman are unlikely to pose a major problem.

JAPAN V SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's slip-up against political foes Qatar in their final group game set up the tastiest of the last 16 ties, against four-time winners Japan. A hard one to call—the Saudis, with near home advantage, bullied easy-beats North Korea and Lebanon, while Japan have quality but are yet to hit form.

AUSTRALIA V UZBEKISTAN

After their defeat to Jordan, defending champions Australia scored six in their next two games. Uzbekistan have quality in attack but the Socceroos are starting to click up front and they should have the edge.

UAE V KYRGYZSTAN

A soporific start by Alberto Zaccheroni's side has muted home hopes but as luck would have it, they are up against minnows Kyrgyzstan in the last 16. However, the debutants have been adventurous and inventive going forward and will ask serious questions of the Emiratis.

SOUTH KOREA V SAUDI ARABIA

The arrival of Tottenham Hotspur star Son Heung-min for their final group game transformed South Korea as they convincingly beat China. On that form, Bahrain will not get a look-in.

QATAR V IRAQ

Almoez Ali's seven goals have made him the revelation of the tournament and Felix Sanchez Bas's slick outfit look favourites against Iraq. However, the 2007 champions have tactical nous thanks to their coach Srecko Katanec, a seasoned campaigner who took Slovenia to the 2002 World Cup. This one could be close. — AFP

Australia women's coach sacked

MELBOURNE: Australia's women's football coach Alen Stajcic was sacked yesterday just months out from the World Cup amid concerns over "workplace" and "player welfare" issues.

The move comes despite guiding the Matildas to as high as fourth in the FIFA world rankings in one of their most successful eras since being appointed in 2014.

Football Federation Australia chief David Gallop said

he had lost faith in Stajcic. "The ultimate responsibility for driving change and leading a high-performance environment that puts the team in the best possible position to achieve what they are capable of, rests with the head coach," he said.

"We no longer have confidence that Alen is the right person to lead the team and staff."

The women's World Cup takes place in France in June and July, while Australia are due to play New Zealand, South Korea and Argentina on home soil in the Tournament of Nations from February 8.

Gallop cited two recently conducted confidential FFA surveys to evaluate the standard of the team envi-

ronment and culture. This included a "wellbeing audit" as well as a "gender equality culture survey".

He said the results, along with interviews with players and staff, had led FFA to determine that the team environment was "unsatisfactory" and change was needed. No specific details of the problems were given.

"FFA is committed to providing the best possible environment for the Matildas and this change is being made with that objective in mind," he said. "We will continue to review other aspects of the team set-up and monitor the Matildas environment in the coming weeks and months as we build for the FIFA Women's World Cup in France." — AFP



Matches on TV (Local Timings)

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE		
Huddersfield Town v Manchester City	16:30	beIN SPORTS HD 2
Fulham FC v Tottenham Hotspur	19:00	beIN SPORTS HD 2
SPANISH LEAGUE		
Real Betis v Girona	14:00	beIN SPORTS HD 3
Villarreal CF v Athletic de Bilbao	18:15	beIN SPORTS HD 3
Rayo Vallecano v Real Sociedad	20:30	beIN SPORTS HD 1
Levante v Real Valladolid	20:30	beIN SPORTS HD 3
FC Barcelona v CD Leganes	22:45	beIN SPORTS HD 3
ITALIAN CALCIO LEAGUE		
Frosinone Calcio v Atalanta	14:30	beIN SPORTS HD 4
ACF Fiorentina v UC Sampdoria	17:00	beIN SPORTS HD 1
spal v Bologna FC	17:00	beIN SPORTS HD 1
Cagliari Calcio v Empoli	20:00	beIN SPORTS HD 4
SSC Napoli v SS Lazio	22:30	beIN SPORTS HD 4
GERMAN BUNDESLIGA		
FC Nuremberg v Hertha Berlin	17:30	beIN SPORTS HD 5
Schalke 04 v VfL Wolfsburg	20:00	beIN SPORTS HD 5
FRENCH LEAGUE		
Caen v Olympique Marseille	19:00	beIN SPORTS HD 6
Saint Etienne v Olympique Lyonnais	23:00	beIN SPORTS HD 6
ASIAN NATIONS CUP 2019		
Jordan v Vietnam	14:00	beIN SPORTS
Thailand v China	17:00	beIN SPORTS
Iran v Oman	20:00	beIN SPORTS