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In Divided Iraq, Soccer Fans Have Common Goal

Iraq is the most dangerous country in the world. There is a war there that has existed for several years. There is one thing that seems to stop the war for moments and joins all the community in peace, and that is the national soccer team. When the national team of soccer plays, the entire city stops its violence to watch the game. The last game was the quarterfinals of the Asian Games. Iraq scored first, but the Uzbeks answered with a goal. This score did not change, and they went into overtime. At the end of the overtime, Iraq scored the winning goal and the celebrations started. Other athletes have put Iraq on top, like the weightlifters Ali Harem, who won the bronze for 77kg, or Aljuaifri Mahammad, who won silver for 105kg.

In my opinion, it is great to see that sports can do this and give the Iraqis some happiness that they have not had for a long time. This article makes me feel that soccer is the best sport in the world because no matter what problems you are having, this sport can connect the world and everyone enjoys the excitement of soccer.

In Divided Iraq, Soccer Fans Have Common Goal

By DAN HARRIS and ELIZABETH STUART



BAGHDAD, Dec. 10, 2006 — In this city, which has become perhaps the most dangerous place on the planet, there is one thing that seems to quiet the chaos — the national soccer team.

The effect of a big game — like Saturday's match against Uzbekistan — is amazing. The fighting and the crime in Baghdad come almost to a complete halt.

[The city is transformed as its residents sit, transfixed, before television screens.] Shiites and Sunnis crowd into cafes and living rooms, all rooting for the same thing.

(At the ABC News bureau in Baghdad, work comes second during a game. You can forget about asking anything of the normally hard-working Iraqi staff.)

Saturday night's match was the quarterfinals of the Asian Games.

Iraq scored an early goal — but the Uzbeks soon answered with their own. The game went into overtime. Iraqis of all sectarian stripes were biting their nails.

{Four minutes into overtime, Iraq scored the winning goal} ← ^{ojo} important

Baghdadis, Shiite and Sunni alike, erupted.

That's when the celebratory gunfire started. From our offices, we were overwhelmed by the crackle of small arms. It lit up the sky. (If we weren't watching the game ourselves, it might have given us a real scare.)

One of our translators captured pictures of an Iraqi policeman handing his guns over to a fellow fan for firing. ↓ ! ☺

It hasn't been easy for Iraqi athletes to compete in any sport, and not because of old equipment or few places to train. Players, coaches and officials have been kidnapped and killed due to religious warfare.

As a result of the danger athletes in Iraq face, this is their first year participating in the Asian Games after a two decade's absence.

IOC
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The International Olympic Committee supports Iraq's return to sports competition.

Good
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The Iraqi soccer team rejoined international play in the 2004 Asian Cup, and made an impressive run at the 2004 Athens Olympics, making it all the way to the semifinals.

The soccer players aren't the only ones enjoying success. Wednesday, weightlifter Aljuaifri Mahammad won the silver in the 105 kg group, and Ali Harem won the bronze for 77 kg. These were the first medals won by Iraq in 20 years.

First 2 medals
in 20 years

Back in 1986, Iraq garnered medals in six events, including weightlifting, athletics and a 4x400 meter relay, according to the National Olympic Committee of Iraq. In fact, Iraq is the only Arab nation to have won the Asian Games football tournament, at the 1982 games in New Delhi.

But last night, against Uzbekistan, the gunfire that marked celebration was a stark reminder that this is still a country facing war. A jubilant announcer said, "This is a great victory for a wounded Iraq."

The win gave all Iraqis, who have had more than their share of distress and division, something to enjoy together.

On Monday, the Iraqi team will play in the semifinals against South Korea.