

Chinese medal hopes get the boot

HOST SOCCER TEAM HAS SLIM CHANCE

By TANG ZHE
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GUANGZHOU — A poorly-prepared Chinese Under-23 team will have to overachieve if it wants to attain the “reasonable” target of a quarterfinal berth at the Asian Games.

It was dealt a huge blow at the start of its campaign on Monday night when it lost 3-0 to perennial rival Japan in its opening Group A match. However, a 2-1 victory over Kyrgyzstan on Wednesday kept alive its hopes of advancing.

“We have some gaps in strength with Japan, but we will try our best in the next two group matches,” said Sun Wei, who became the head coach of the China Under-23 team in June.

It was the most lopsided defeat for China against Japan in the age group and also the team's first opening loss at an Asiad since 1974, when China was beaten by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) 2-0.

China, which has only managed to make the World Cup final once — the 2002 event in Japan and the Republic of Korea — has never won an Asian Games title.

It had its best performance at the 1994 Hiroshima Asian Games, where it secured the silver medal.

It suffered through the agony of losing its quarterfinal match against Iran on penalty kicks at the 2006 Doha Asian Games.

Increasing doubt has been cast on this team reaching the quarterfinals of its home tournament and Sun was given little support in the team's buildup to the Asian Games.

He had hoped to assemble a squad to prepare for the event in mid-October, but the Chinese Super League clubs insisted on calling back players for the last three rounds, which determined the relegated teams and qualifiers for the AFC (Asian Football Confederation) Champions League.

Though all the players returned to the camp on Nov 1, they were

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MEN

2006	last eight
2002	last eight
1998	Bronze
1994	Silver
1990	second round
1986	second round
1982	second round
1978	Bronze
1974	fell at group stage

WOMEN

2006	Bronze
2002	Silver
1998	Gold
1994	Gold
1990	Gold

tired due to the just-ended domestic league and they also had only six days to play together.

Adding to their misery is a lack of support from home fans, according to a survey on leading portal sports.sina.com.cn after the side's opening match at the games.

Seventy-two percent of the 50,000 respondents said they were numb about China's loss to Japan while 74 percent believe China will not get out of Group A.

On the women's side, 35-year-old Li Xiaopeng, the team's amiable head coach, may also find it hard to keep smiling.

“Our goal will never change,” said Li, declaring his team would snatch a medal at the Guangzhou Asian Games during a meeting of the Chinese Football Association (CFA) in August.

However, injuries and mediocre performances in warm-up matches have not inspired much confidence.

The national team recorded two draws and two losses during its overseas training stints in the United States and Canada from late September to October. But the head coach said he was satisfied with the results while admitting China has fallen behind the elite international teams.



Zhang Tuan of China and Shoma Kamata of Japan fight for the ball during their Asian Games Group A match on Monday. Japan won 3-0.

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