

Sports

In the Stands / Shlomi Barzel

Israel's last, best hope for soccer glory is under 21

Junior team outshines big boys, but are fans watching?



Guy Assulin, left, of Barcelona, hugs Espanyol's Ben Sahar at Wednesday's 4-0 victory over Bulgaria.

The rows of empty seats at Ramat Gan Stadium during Wednesday's 4-0 romp over Bulgaria testify as well as anything to the low point at which the under-21 national squad finds itself.

The U-21 team is the last, best hope of national-level Israeli soccer – the senior team failed to deliver the goods in World Cup qualification, meekly limping out of contention last month. Still, fans seem reluctant to cast their lot in with the team, seemingly

having suffered heartbreak one too many times at the feet of the senior squad.

In recent years the U-21 has been the nation's most successful team – it advanced to the European Championships in 2007 and was knocked out of the round-robin stage the following year by the mighty Italians. It is blessed with one of the finest coaching and playing rosters Israel has ever fielded – coach Motti Ivanir lives and breathes publicity, and its lineup includes no shortage of

talented players, both home-grown and imported.

Somehow, still, the curse of fan indifference seems to follow the team no matter how successful it becomes.

The story is rather strange. How can one explain the fact that in the senior team's match against Luxembourg (meaningless after the previous week's disappointing 0-1 loss to Latvia) 5,000 fans turned up, but at the U-21's contest with Bulgaria this week the bleachers were al-

most bare? What explains the fact that the media is far more interested in the Egypt-Algeria World Cup playoff, while the emphatic victory of Israel's future stars was granted a mere few inches in the printed press?

The 'now or never' side

Perhaps these questions don't bother Ivanir and his young men much. But the U-21 squad must address this lack of interest among the sports-watching public if it wants to maintain a realistic chance of advancing into the round-robin stage leading up to the European Championships. We can only hope that if Ben Sahar and company build a legacy, they – the fans – will come.

If we may be realistic for a moment: For Sahar, Mohammad Ghadir, Guy Assulin and the rest, the U-21 side is essentially the last opportunity to register an athletic achievement for their country. The moment they reach the senior team – and this has been scientifically proven more than once over the years, to our great dismay – the odds of pushing into the big dance become infinitesimal.

We can continue calling it the under-21 team, but a more accurate appellation would be Israel's "now or never" squad. Maybe that sort of encouragement could help this team – as well as the local sports media and heartbroken soccer fans, unite for one just more go at our on-pitch hopes and dreams.



OH HENRY: Thierry Henry, second left, handing William Gallas (unseen) the controversial winner Wednesday against Ireland.

On the Couch / Jerrold Kessel

Devilish hands could turn us all off

France's captain should be chastised for grossly violating athletic ethics

Now we know all 32 nations that will be in South Africa next June for World Cup 2010.

Or do we? Hopefully not! Hopefully, normally pusillanimous FIFA, world soccer's governing body (which didn't even take action against Egypt for the fearsome harassment of the Algerian players before their critical match in Cairo last Saturday – happily rectified by what happened in Khartoum on Wednesday evening) will decide in an emergency session to scrap the result of the France vs. Ireland game in the Stade de France last night because of a gross violation of the sporting ethic.

France used to be a wonderful team. Sometimes they still are. But the 1998 World Cup champions and the 2006 runners-up shouldn't be confirmed as contestants next year quite yet.

The Irish feel robbed and unfairly treated. Actually, we all feel robbed.

Their players protested strongly when referee Martin Hansson awarded the William Gallas goal despite Thierry Henry's blatant extra-time handball that set up the equalizer which sent France through with a 2-1 aggregate from the two-legged playoff.

The Swedish official was never going to change his mind.

The dynamic Irish captain Robbie Keane said afterward, "We played so well we definitely deserved to win."

But soccer, sport generally, isn't about justice. It is, however, about fairness – about playing fair. At least, it should be.

The culprit, normally the most genial and admirable a player, confessed afterward that he had definitely handled, but that when, after the final whistle, he told Hansson just that the Swedish official rebuffed him curtly, telling him, "you're not the ref."

It will haunt Henry that he never spoke up immediately after the goal was given. He should be the first to be campaigning for a replay. And, the first to say about who ought to have a key say in controversial decisions, "it's the players, stupid!"

In the previous most infamous handballed goal – the "Hand of God" goal that put the home team ahead on the way to defeating England in the 1986 World Cup quarter-finals in Argentina, Diego Maradona not only committed a crime by sacrilegiously boasting of divine intervention in helping him dupe the ref, he squandered the chance to become more influential a moral voice in the contemporary world than Jesus.

Had a man of his reputation, a man so lauded for his playing skills, gone to the ref and said "you can't award that goal because I deliberately handled the ball," he would have set so high a standard for fair play that, thereafter, no player could cheat with impunity – or risk eternal damnation by the whole sporting world.

Sadly, a different standard predominates: Cheat by all means, just so long as you can get away with it. Even one of the devastated Irishmen, striker Kevin Doyle, said, "You do not blame the player if he can get away with it, it is nearly a natural reaction."

It was the on-pitch officials who drew the Irish ire: "We are angry. It is a bitter evening," said their coach Giovanni Trapattoni. "The referee should have asked Henry, I'm sure he would have admitted there was a handball."

Wrong again – the onus was on Henry, as it should be in all sports, for players to call against themselves, to own up if a deliberate or accidental unfair play on their part is ruled in their favor.

The officials are wrong too – like referee Hansson telling Henry it wasn't his business, "I make the decisions."

Recall another controversial penalty area decision a few years back, albeit not in such a highly-charged and high-flying, occasion: In a league match at Anfield, Liverpool striker Robbie Fowler was awarded a penalty against Arsenal after the ref had determined that he'd been tripped.

Fowler immediately went up to him and said, "no, that wasn't a foul, I fell

myself." Not wanting to be undermined, the ref awarded the penalty anyway, missing a grand opportunity to highlight player responsibility. (At least, Liverpool missed the subsequent spot kick.)

What FIFA has to do is not just to order the replay, but to establish a new strong moral code, where it's acknowledged that whenever they are in a position to do so, players are obliged to tell the official that they have committed an offense.

Extra eyes for the ref

Wednesday night's debacle may well also reignite the debate about goal-line technology. It's very much a time when FIFA is grappling with the merits of technology, or alternatively, of adding extra eyes in the form of two behind-the-goals extra assistant refs to help adjudicate in the case of goal-line and penalty area incidents.

Ironically, only a couple of hours earlier, the Eurosport commentators in Khartoum had remarked somewhat patronizingly that the electric Egypt vs. Algeria tie would have been the ideal moment for the ref to have been given extra support in the form of the two additional officials.

In fact, despite the massive and angry build-up, that game was itself played very fairly and was well handled by the Seychelles referee, Eddy Maillet. Where they could have done with the extra refs was in the Stade De France.

Still, that doesn't let either soccer's officialdom or the players themselves from moving to subscribe to a new code of fair play and conduct themselves accordingly. Otherwise, they might just come to find that more and more people are not going to bother any more for fear of watching games that are at a risk of being determined by crookedness.

"It's wonderful going to the finals in South Africa," said Henry, "but I wish it could have been another way."

It could. Over to you, Sepp Blatter.

Boxing

Ahead of title defense with 'Star of David,' champ rules out fight against Pacquiao

Haaretz Sports Staff and Agencies

WBA light-welterweight champion Amir Khan said yesterday it is unlikely that he will ever fight stable-mate and pound-for-pound king Manny Pacquiao. "I'm sure by the time I get to that level he will be calling it a day. We train in the same camp and I've got too much respect for Manny to fight him," Khan told the BBC.

The 22-year-old Bolton native of Pakistani descent will make the first defense of his title belt against Dmitriy Salita in Newcastle on December 5.

Salita, 27, is an Orthodox Jewish boxer based in Brooklyn with a 30-0-1 record, including 16 knockouts. The Ukraine-born fighter is known ringside as the "Star of David."

On Saturday, Pacquiao became a five-weight world champion after brutally defeating Miguel Cotto in Las Vegas in their WBO welterweight title fight.

The undercard of that fight featured Yuri Foreman – like Salita, an Eastern-European born Orthodox Jewish boxer now based in Brooklyn – being crowned WBA junior middleweight champion over Puerto Rico's Daniel Santos on points.

Foreman's performance raised the profile for Salita's upcoming fight, even if the Odessa native's stellar record is enough to speak for itself.

Khan joined Freddie Roach's 'Wild Card' gym in Los Angeles after his 60-second defeat by Breidis Prescott in September 2008. His partnership with Roach has seen him become a close training partner of Pacquiao.

Khan was ringside to see the Filipino's 12-round demolition of Cotto. Asked about Pacquiao's sublime performance, the Briton said: "Me and Manny train together, we

have the same trainer and everything. I totally respect him and what a great performance he produced at the weekend.

"He was amazing, I was there to watch the fight and it inspires you. When you see a great champion do that and think about the fact I was training with the guy for five weeks, to pick up even a little bit of experience from that is going to help me in my career," Khan said.



Khan, left, and Brooklyn-based boxer Dmitriy Salita posing last month in Gatehead, U.K.

Sports Shorts

After bitter loss, Egypt recalls envoy to Algeria

Egypt recalled its ambassador from Algiers for consultations yesterday, a day after the Egyptian soccer team lost to its long-time rival 2-0 in a World Cup qualifying playoff. Egypt has accused Algeria's fans of post-match thuggery in Sudan. Soccer's world governing body, FIFA, said it was investigating the incidents. "Disciplinary proceedings have been opened against the Egyptian Football Association," FIFA said in a statement. "According to the official reports received by FIFA, on November 12 there were incidents affecting the Algerian team on their way from the airport to the hotel." (Reuters)

Lakers' Gasol to return to action against Chicago

Los Angeles Lakers forward Pau Gasol is set to make his long-awaited return to the court today when the defending NBA champion hosts the Chicago Bulls. Having missed the team's first 11 games because of a hamstring ailment, the seven-foot Spaniard trained yesterday and declared himself fit for his first regular season game, the Lakers' Web site reported. "I think that I'll be able to go tomorrow," Gasol told the Los Angeles Times after practice yesterday. "It felt great today and I don't see any reason why it wouldn't feel the same way." (Haaretz Sports Staff and Agencies)

Baseball

Selig: Some clubs lost money this season

The Associated Press

Some teams lost money in 2009, baseball commissioner Bud Selig said yesterday after the final owners meeting of the year.

"There was no question about that," Selig said. "I don't think the concerns have been ameliorated at all. I think the concerns are still there, because all these people have their own economists."

Selig said final figures for this year are still being calculated and everyone is living in the most difficult economic times since the Great Depression. He declined to identify the teams.

"I think of all the heartache

that's in the world," Selig said. "We live in this environment. We don't live in a bubble. And so, I think the clubs in some areas have been hit a lot harder than others."

Major League Baseball's average attendance dropped 6.7 percent last season, from an average of 32,528 in 2008 to an average of 30,350. But total attendance of 73.4 million was baseball's fifth-highest.

"Given the economy, the fact that we drew 73.5 million people is a testament to this sport's popularity and everything that has been done is remarkable," Selig said.

With the free-agent market set to open Friday, teams and agents are uncertain

whether the economy will impact salaries.

"Revenues as a whole were flat at best and I think there's still a lot of people, and obviously we're still focused on our fans, that are still struggling," Angels owner Arturo Moreno said.

Pettitte, Tatis file for free agency on final day

Also yesterday, New York Yankees pitcher Andy Pettitte and the Mets' Fernando Tatis became the final players to file for free agency this year. Yesterday was the final day of the 15-day window following the World Series.

A total of 171 players filed for free agency. They can start negotiating financial terms with all teams starting Friday.

Pitcher John Lackey and outfielders Matt Holliday and Jason Bay head one of the weaker free-agent classes in recent years.

Scoreboard

SOCCER

World Cup playoff – Wednesday
Uruguay 1, Costa Rica 1
(Uruguay advances)
Friendly internationals
Honduras 1, Peru 2
(News Agencies)

Live on Television

- Fri. 22:00, Sport 5+: French Soccer, Marseille vs. Paris St.-Germain
- Sat. 03:00, ESPN: NBA Basketball, Orlando at Boston
- Sat. 03:30, 5+ Live: NBA Basketball, Sacramento at Dallas
- Sat. 14:45, Sport 2: English Soccer, Liverpool vs. Manchester City
- Sat. 19:30, Sport 2: English Soccer, Manchester United vs. Everton
- Sat. 17:10, Sport 1: Soccer, Maccabi Haifa vs. Ahi Nazareth
- Sat. 17:20, Sport 2: Soccer, Hapoel Tel Aviv vs. Hapoel Petah Tikva
- Sat. 19:30, Sport 1: Soccer, Beitar Jerusalem vs. Hapoel Acre
- Sat. 18:15, 5+ Live: Basketball, Elitzur Netanya vs. Hapoel Jerusalem
- Sat. 19:30, Fox Sports: NCAA Football, Oklahoma at Texas Tech
- Sat. 21:00, Sport 5: Spanish Soccer, Real Madrid vs. Racing Santander
- Sat. 23:00, Sport 5: Spanish Soccer, Atletico Bilbao vs. Barcelona
- Sat. 23:00, Fox Sports: NCAA Football, LSU at Old Miss
- Sun. 01:30, Fox Sports: NCAA Football, Oregon at Arizona
- Sun. 04:00, Sport 5: NBA Basketball, Denver at Chicago