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AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023™

SPOTLIGHT

Qatar are determined to replicate 2019 title success

Defender Bassam al-Rawi believes the tournament at home will be a new challenge for the team

By Sports Reporter
Doha



Qatar defender Bassam al-Rawi (third right) with teammates during a training session in Doha yesterday. **PICTURES:** *Noushad Thekkayil*

Defender Bassam al-Rawi says Qatar are determined to replicate their success from the previous Asian Cup. In the last edition, the Al Annabi secured their maiden Asian Cup title by defeating Japan in the final.

Speaking about the upcoming tournament to be held in Qatar from tomorrow till February 10, al-Rawi said: "This tournament presents a new challenge for us as players. We are determined to give our best and bring joy to the Qatari fans, especially since it's being held in Qatar for the third time."

Qatar open the Asian Cup tomorrow when they face Lebanon at the 88,000-capacity Lusail Stadium, which staged the World Cup final. They also face China and Tajikistan in their other Group A matches.

Al-Rawi, whose free kicks played a big part in Qatar winning the title in the UAE in 2019 – believes the tournament at home will be a new challenge for the team.

The 26-year-old scored Qatar's first goal in UAE by curling the ball over the Lebanon wall in their opening group match and secured their place in the quarter-finals with another beauty against former champions Iraq.

"Our focus is on the first match, and we will take the tournament step by step. There are many strong teams competing for the title, and the task is not always easy due to the constant development of all Asian teams," he observed.

Acknowledging the support of the fans, the Rayyan star said: "We are eagerly awaiting the fans to support us. They always stand strongly with the team in all its matches and are a source of enthusiasm for all the players."

Meanwhile, midfielder Abdulaziz Hatem expressed optimism about the team's chances. Despite the formidable competition in the tournament, the 33-year-old is determined to play a significant role with the Qatar team.

He said that other teams view Qatar as a strong contender. "All teams will see the Qatar team as a champion and one of the candidates to compete strongly. Therefore, all our thoughts are focused on preserving this title, but we will play the tournament on the principle of step by step," he said.

Reflecting on the pressure the team faces as defending champions, Hatem stated: "Pressure is part of football, and it is normal for any team that holds the title to go through these moments."

He emphasised their positive approach to dealing with pressure, aiming to perform at the desired level. Hatem expressed hopes of facing Japan in the final, similar to the scenario in the last edition. He emphasised the significance of pleasing the Qatari fans, recognising their support as crucial for the team's performance.

Recalling the best moments in his career, Hatem highlighted the victory in the 2019 Asian Cup, particularly the goal he scored against South Korea during the quarter-finals. The Qatar team is aiming to make history in the Asian Cup, aspiring to become the fifth team to win the competition in two consecutive editions. South Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Japan have achieved this feat in the past.

Qatar go into the Asian Cup as hosts and holders but the shock axing of Carlos Queiroz as coach last month has thrown their title defence into serious question.

Prior to that, the talk was about how Qatar would right the wrongs of a disappointing early exit from their home World Cup just over a year ago. Qatar's three straight defeats was the worst performance of any World Cup host in history.

Former Real Madrid and Portugal coach Queiroz took over following the departure of Felix Sanchez, but in early December the Portuguese was sacked and replaced by Marquez Lopez.

Marquez is a familiar face to Qatari fans because he coached Al Wakrah in the domestic league.



President of Qatar Football Association Jassim Rashid al-Buenain and Talal al-Kaabi, Director of National Teams Committee, watch Qatar's training session.



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez.

FOCUS

'Asian Cup Qatar a tournament of firsts'

As the attention of world football descends upon Doha for a record third time in the history of the AFC Asian Cup, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) President **Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifah** has conveyed his best wishes to Asia's top 24 teams and applauded the spirit of innovation and resilience exemplified by the Asian football family.

Ahead of tomorrow's opener between defending champions Qatar and Lebanon at the iconic Lusail Stadium, Sheikh Salman said: "I know our teams, players and the hundreds of millions of passionate fans across the globe have been waiting eagerly and we are now in touching distance of hosting our best-ever men's showpiece in Asian football history.

"On behalf of the AFC, I would like to wish our teams, players and officials the very best of success and I am confident that we will witness inspiring performances that will showcase the immeasurable progress of Asian football."



Sheikh Salman took the opportunity to reflect on the exceptional journey undertaken since Qatar was named as the host in October 2022 and underlined his confidence in the immaculate capabilities of the Qatar Football Association and the Local Organising Committee.

The AFC President added: "We are all aware that this is the shortest ever runway that we have had to organise the pinnacle stage of Asian men's football. But in another remarkable display of Asian football unity, we have shown the world that we are ready to stage an exceptional tournament.

"And of course, so much of this has been made possible all thanks to our dear friends from the Qatar Football Association and the Local Organising Committee. Just over a year ago, Qatar hosted the greatest-ever edition of the FIFA World Cup and now the stage is set for the grandest ever AFC Asian Cup to date."

Sheikh Salman was also quick to acknowledge the breakthrough innovations set to be introduced at Asia's crown jewel with the AFC eAsian Cup scheduled to take place from February 1 to 5, and the use of the Semi-Automated Offside Technology (SAOT) and Video Assistant Referee (VAR) systems across all 51 matches for the first time.

He added: "From the moment Qatar was appointed as the host, we knew that this would be the first AFC Asian Cup to be held in FIFA World Cup venues. I am delighted to declare that the AFC Asian Cup Qatar will truly be a tournament of 'firsts'.

ASIAN CUP TICKET SALES EVOKES GOOD RESPONSE: AL-KUWARI

Doha: Ticket sales for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar is evoking a good response from the fans. As per the latest figures, 877,000, out of 1.5mn, tickets have been sold so far. "There is a great public demand to attend the tournament matches, which will be one of the major public tournaments," Director of Marketing and Communications at the Local Organising Committee (LOC) for the 2023 AFC Asian Cup **Hassan Rabia al-Kuwari** said.

"The first ticket sale for the matches was on October 10. It recorded large numbers of sales confirming that the Asian Cup Qatar will be one of the popular tournaments. During this stage, 150,000 tickets were sold. Of these, 80,000 tickets were sold within 24 hours. Within 48 hours, the batch was sold out," he said.

He explained that the focus has been on the group stage matches and that a percentage of tickets have been allocated to the next rounds of the tournament to provide the opportunity for fans of the qualified teams to attend the matches. He explained that the matches that witnessed the largest crowd demand to buy tickets were the opening and final matches and the matches of the Qatari and Saudi teams.



SPORT

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic must defy wrist injury, Alcaraz threat

'I think I have enough time to get myself in the right shape'

AFP
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic is once again red-hot favourite at the Australian Open as he chases an unprecedented 25th Grand Slam title, but a wrist problem and the emergence of Carlos Alcaraz puts his all-conquering reign under threat.

The 36-year-old from Serbia defeated Stefanos Tsitsipas in last year's final for a record-extending 10th Melbourne crown then added the French and US Open titles to his collection in 2023.

But he lost a pulsating Wimbledon final to Alcaraz, who is a different player to the one that last graced the Australian hard courts as an 18-year-old ranked outside the top 30.

The 20-year-old missed last year's event with a hamstring injury and arrives this time as a two-time major champion, world number two - behind Djokovic - and the brightest young star in tennis.

Rafael Nadal, Djokovic's long-time rival, on Sunday pulled out of the Australian Open with a muscle tear in a fresh blow to the veteran's hopes of returning to the top of the sport.

Nadal's fellow Spaniard Alcaraz opted to skip a warm-up tournament for the opening Grand Slam of the year, making his 2024 form a mystery.

But Djokovic dropped a set to the Czech Republic's Jiri Lehecka at the United Cup and then crashed to Australian Alex de Minaur 6-4, 6-4.

It snapped a 43-match win streak in Australia and Djokovic will begin his defence with an injury cloud hanging over him, needing treatment on his right wrist through both matches.

"I think I have enough time to get myself in the right shape for the Australian Open and that's what matters the most at this point," he said after losing to De Minaur.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. The Australian Open starts later this week. *(AFP)*

"It's all part of the build-up for the Australian Open.

" That's where I want to perform at my best."

Djokovic's United Cup troubles followed defeat to Jannik Sinner at the Davis Cup to end his 2023 season, with the burgeoning Italian world number four another young pretender out to dethrone him.

It will be a tall order.

Djokovic has not lost at the Australian Open since 2018 and has a 20-0 record in semi-finals and finals at Melbourne Park.

"When I'm fit, when I'm at the peak of my performance, I can win any Slam or any tournament, I know that, I'm not afraid to say that," said Djokovic.

"It's not a secret that I want to break more records and make more history in the game."

Rafa Nadal farewell?

Djokovic's haul of Grand Slam titles makes him the most successful player in the history of men's tennis, ahead of Nadal on 22.

If he wins again in Melbourne he will overtake the Australian Margaret Court, who won 24 majors in the women's game.

At least he no longer has to worry about Nadal, who has flown back to Spain for treatment.

The 37-year-old only made his comeback last week at the Brisbane International after being out of tennis since injuring his hip at the 2023 Australian Open.

Nadal's absence could spell the end of his career in Australia, after saying in Brisbane there was a "high percentage" that 2024 would be his farewell to the tour.

Medvedev threat

Russia's Daniil Medvedev, a Melbourne finalist in 2021 and 2022, will also be a contender. Like Alcaraz he chose not to play a warm-up event, but enjoyed a resurgent 2023 with 66 wins - more than any other player on tour - to earn five titles. The 27-year-old, who won the US Open in 2021 for his only Slam crown, said he had never been more motivated.

"At this stage of my life, at least right now - and I hope this can last for a long time - I have just the biggest motivation ever to just continue finding my limits," he said.

Last year's losing finalist Tsitsipas will also fancy his chances, while world number five Andrey Rublev will get his campaign under way on the back of winning the Hong Kong Open.

The Australian Open starts on Sunday, becoming a 15-day event for the first time to help spread out the early round action and prevent some late-night finishes.

CRICKET

Newland pitch gets 'unsatisfactory' rating

Reuters
Dubai

The pitch in Cape Town, where India beat South Africa inside five sessions of a test match last week, has incurred one demerit point after being rated "unsatisfactory", the International Cricket Council (ICC) said yesterday.

The Newlands contest lasted 642 balls with India registering a series-levelling victory in the shortest ever test in which there has been a winner, beating Australia's 656-ball victory over South Africa in 1932.

South Africa captain Dean Elgar, playing his farewell match, and India counterpart Rohit Sharma both felt the pitch was below-standard and many would feel the venue got away with a rather light punishment.

"The pitch in Newlands was very difficult to bat on," match referee Chris Broad said in an ICC statement. "The ball bounced quickly and sometimes alarmingly throughout the match, making it difficult to play shots.

"Several batters were hit on the gloves and many wickets also fell due to the awkward bounce."

South Africa, electing to bat, were bundled out for 55 in their first innings and spinners were not used at all by either of the sides. Hosts Cricket South Africa have 14 days to appeal against the sanction.

Under the ICC rules, "unsatisfactory" rating incur one demerit point, three points are slapped if a venue is found 'unfit' under the governing body's pitch and outfield monitoring process.

These points will remain active for a rolling five-year period.

If a venue accumulates six demerit points in that period, it is suspended from hosting any international cricket for 12 months.

Sri Lanka names T20 squad for Zimbabwe series

Sri Lanka's cricket board yesterday named a 16-member squad led by Wanindu Hasaranga for the three-match T20 series against visiting Zimbabwe.

Last week, Sri Lanka cricket said it would have different captains for the Test, one-day international and Twenty20 formats of the game. Both Test skipper Dhananjaya de Silva and ODI captain Kusal Mendis were also included in the T20 squad announced Tuesday.

The three T20 matches will start on January 14 and take place at two-day intervals.

The squad: Wanindu Hasaranga (captain), Charith Asalanka, Kusal Mendis, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Kusal Perera, Angelo Mathews, Dasun Shanaka, Dhananjaya de Silva, Kamindu Mendis, Pathum Nissanka, Maheesh Theekshana, Dushmantha Chameera, Dilshan Madushanka, Matheesha Pathirana, Nuwan Thushara and Akila Dananjaya.

Ostapenko rallies to beat Cirstea in Adelaide, Kenin wins in Hobart

Adelaide: Sixth seed **Jelena Ostapenko** came back from a sluggish start to beat Sorana Cirstea 2-6 6-2 6-4 in the first round of the Adelaide International yesterday.



Ostapenko, a quarter-finalist at last week's Brisbane International, needed nearly two hours to settle the match at the Australian Open tune-up event, enjoying a modicum of revenge after the Romanian beat her at Wimbledon last year.

Cirstea won four games in a row to race through the opening set but former French Open champion Ostapenko hit back in the second and fired back-to-back aces to force the decider. The Latvian then raced to a 5-2 lead but was broken serving for the match. She blew two match points at 5-3 but went on to seal victory with her sixth ace.

Laura Siegemund, who was part of the Germany team that won the United Cup title last week, upset world number 14 Liudmila Samsonova 6-7(1) 6-4 6-4.

Former Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin began her campaign at the Hobart International, another Melbourne Park warm-up event, with a 6-3 6-3 win against Greet Minnen of Belgium. Kenin, who saved all three break points she faced in the match, will meet Daria Saville for a spot in the quarter-finals.

New mum Osaka just wants to have fun on Grand Slam return

SYDNEY: Naomi Osaka says she has returned to tennis from maternity leave with a more positive outlook and all the signs are that she will soon be back at a level where she can take on and beat the best in the world.

It might be too early for a tilt at a fifth Grand Slam title at the Australian Open this month but, with a good draw, a run deep into the second week at Melbourne Park cannot be counted out.

The 26-year-old, who pulled out of last year's Australian Open with the announcement that she was pregnant with her daughter Shai, showed in Brisbane last week that she still has the weapons to overpower many players in the women's game.

"I think for me even stepping on the court is a personal win because a couple of weeks ago I was even doubting if I could play with everyone," she said after her second-round loss to Karolina Pliskova.

"These two matches that I've had kind of prove to me that I am doing okay, and the year is just going to get better for me...I know that if I keep training and if I keep putting in the work, then I'll eventually get to where I want to be."

Osaka bemoaned that she got to play only the two matches at the warm-up tournament after her loss in three sets to former world number one Pliskova, a tricky opponent who gave her trouble even when she was in her pomp.



"I feel like I'm pretty good where I am right now," Osaka said after the match.

"Even the last time I played her, I think I played better today. I feel like, honestly, I think I'm pretty good. I guess I'll see what happens in Melbourne."

Four Grand Slam titles in four seasons in her early 20s had Osaka marked out as a player who would be contending for the game's major prizes for many years to come.

Her Haitian-Japanese heritage, engaging personality and political activism made her a magnet for sponsors and she was soon among the world's wealthiest female athletes.

It emerged soon after her second Australian Open triumph in 2021, though, that her career had taken a huge toll on her mental health and she withdrew from the French Open after refusing to attend a press conference.

She took an indefinite break from the game after losing at the US Open that same year, explaining her angry reaction to the defeat by saying she felt anxious when things did not go her way.

Therapy and motherhood have, she has said, helped her on her mental health journey and she appeared to be having a lot more fun on court in Brisbane.

"I think I'm enjoying myself a lot more, and I also realise there's a lot of things that aren't in my control," she said.

"Other than that, I feel more aware that I'm playing the best players in the world. Both of us have an opportunity to win.

"I also just think I've trained so hard after giving birth that I need to enjoy these moments, and I also think in a way ...

"I know that the tennis lifespan isn't that long, so I should enjoy it while I can."

ANNOUNCEMENT

WTA, ATP to restrict number of evening matches at AO

Reuters
Melbourne

The WTA and ATP have jointly announced yesterday new scheduling regulations that restrict evening matches to two per court and per day, with a recommended start time of 1830 local time to curb matches from concluding in the early morning hours.

The Australian Open will switch to a Sunday start and be held over 15 days instead of 14 for the first time this year in a bid to avoid late finishes, organisers said in October. There will be no more than five matches per day per court, with three matches during the day session and two matches during the evening session, the organising bodies said.

"No matches (will) go on court after 11 pm, unless approved by the WTA/ATP supervisor in consultation with WTA/ATP management," the statement added.

The matches that do not commence by 2230 local time will be moved to an alternative court by no later than 2300 local time, with the night sessions to begin no later than 1930 local time. The WTA and ATP events will enforce new regulations from January as part of a one-year trial, with further review to follow.

A strategic review of tennis balls used on the tours is also underway, the organisers said, to deliver greater ball consistency within tournament swings for players.

"It is important that these initiatives are fully aligned between the two Tours and will allow for athletes to perform at their highest levels, providing for an improved athlete and fan experience," WTA Chairman and CEO Steve Simon said.

SPOTLIGHT

Jabeur's mission for Grand Slam success continues at the 2024 Australian Open

Reuters
Sydney

Ons Jabeur has already established herself as a trailblazer in the sport, but ahead of the season-opening Australian Open the Tunisian is determined to finally claim an elusive Grand Slam title and shrug off her heartbreaking Wimbledon failures.

The 29-year-old, nicknamed the "Minister of Happiness", stormed up the rankings in 2022 after runs to the final at Wimbledon and the US Open and set multiple milestones as an African and Arab woman.

She had to contend with a stop-start 2023 season in which she underwent minor surgery early in the year after struggling with breathing issues during a second-round exit at the Australian Open



and also dealt with a string of injuries.

Despite those issues, the world number six claimed a WTA 500 title in Charleston and reached the final at Wimbledon, her third Grand Slam final in 13 months, where she was handed a 6-4 6-4 loss by unseeded Czech Marketa Vondrousova. In a documentary titled 'Ons Jabeur: This Is Me', which was released on Jan 7, Jabeur revealed that the defeat had affected her personal life, forcing her to put her plans of having a child with her husband on hold.

"It was the toughest loss of my career because emotionally it destroyed me, not only winning Wimbledon, but the idea of having a baby just vanished with the trophy of Wimbledon...," Jabeur said.

"It scares me so much to go back and play a final, but I know I have to do this.

"I want to do bigger things than just a Grand Slam, but it will be a shame, a missing piece if I don't make that one. I have to (win a Slam), I have no choice, maybe it's my life's mission to do it."

However, if past results are anything to go by, Jabeur may have to wait a while for a shot at Grand Slam glory.

Melbourne Park has been her least successful Grand Slam hunting ground, with a quarter-final appearance in 2020 her best showing, and her inventive and skilful playing style has often been at odds with the blue hardcourts at the Australian Open. She has also opted to skip the warm-up tournaments for the year's first Grand Slam.

3rd Doha International Arabian Horse Show: Bashir Al Bashir and D Fala win gold





Bay stallion Bashir Al Bashir, owned by Abdullateef Basheer Reja al-Rasheedi and bred by Ajman Stud - HH Sheikh Ammar bin Humaid al-Nuaimi, claimed gold in the Senior Stallions Championship ahead of Tahan Ghaleb and Mansour Al Khor which won silver and bronze respectively on the fourth and concluding day of the 3rd Doha International Arabian Horse Show 2024 at Qatar Equestrian Federation's outdoor arena on Monday.
The Senior Mares Championship was won by D Fala. The 2016 Qatar-born grey mare is owned by Al Salem Stud and bred by Dubai Arabian Horse Stud and logged 304 points, ahead of silver winning Ashadiya (300) and bronze winner E.M. Queen Desert (297). In the Junior Colts' class, Bahi Al Jaham, owned by Qatar's Al Jaham Stud and bred by Ebrahim Yusuf ES al-Romaihi, emerged best with a total score of 270, ahead of Kassar Raghdan (219-silver) and Hamza Al Shahania (232-bronze). Chestnut filly Mzoon Al Diriyah, owned by Mesfer Mohammed MA al-Hajri, claimed gold in the Junior Fillies' Championship while J Shamasi won silver, and Sab'ah Al Shahania the bronze. The Yearling Colts' class championship was won by Saudi Arabia-born Qaysar RJ of Al Rajhiah Stud. Aesar Al Wajba took the silver while the bronze went to Zayed Al Jumail. Al Khashab Stud's MHS Sora was adjudged best in the Yearling Fillies' Championship while Aysha EV won silver and Nouf Al Jumail the bronze. The Doha International Arabian Horse Show is an ECAHO 'B' show and the championship winners qualify for upcoming A shows at Katara and Old Doha Port. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*

DAKAR RALLY

Loeb claims stage, al-Attiyah moves up to third overall

'I'M HAPPY TO BE HERE. IT WAS NOT EASY, BUT NOW I THINK STEP-BY-STEP WE CAN GET BACK TO THE TOP'

Reuters
Al-Hofuf, Saudi Arabia,

Sebastien Loeb took stage four of the Dakar Rally in Saudi Arabia yeterday as home favourite Yazeed Al Rajhi stretched his overall lead in the car category.

Nine-times world rally champion Loeb, racing a Prodrive Hunter for the Bahrain Raid Xtreme team, finished the 299-km stage from Al Salamiya to the oasis city of Al Hofuf one minute and eight seconds faster than Toyota's al-Rajhi.

Qatar's reigning champion Nasser al-Attiyah, who had held a comfortable lead at the penultimate checkpoint, was third fastest in another Prodrive Hunter and moved up to third overall from fifth.

"It was not easy. We just tried to manage the speed. It wasn't easy to navigate. We didn't want any punctures or anything because we needed to get the car to the bivouac to get everything ready for tomorrow and after tomorrow. I'm happy to be here. We are learning about our new car and we'll see, because it's not easy, the stage was really fast and a lot of problems have happened, but now I think step-by-step we can get back to the top," said the five-time champions al-Attiyah.

Al Rajhi now leads Audi's Spanish triple Dakar winner Carlos Sainz, fourth in yesterday's stage, by four minutes and 29 seconds.



Nasser Racing's Nasser al-Attiyah and co-driver Mathieu Baumel in action during the stage 4 of Dakar Rally from Al Salamiya to Al-Hofuf, Saudi Arabia, yesterday.

Loeb moved up to sixth overall from ninth, 23 minutes and 50 seconds off the lead, after the 49-year-old's 24th career Dakar stage win and first this year.

The Frenchman was also the fifth different stage winner, including the prologue, in as many days. "We did a clean stage. We were a bit in the dust for sure, because we started far back and we had to overtake a lot of cars," said Loeb. "At one point we missed a waypoint and had to go back for about 30 seconds, but for the rest we did a very good stage, so no problems."

Toyota's American driver Seth Quintero hit trouble early in the stage, stopping with mechanical issues after 81km and requiring assistance that dropped him hours behind.

In the motorcycle category, Chilean Jose Ignacio 'Nacho' Cornejo took over at the top after his second stage win of this year's event.

Botswana's overnight leader Ross Branch reached the finish with twisted handlebars on his Hero machine and losing nearly four-and-a-half minutes to Cornejo, who leads him by a minute and 15 seconds.

"I thought I'd try bent-style handlebars today. No, really it was a rough day for me, one of the days I'd rather forget. I crashed after 40 km just trying to look at the roadbook and I hit a rock," said Branch.

"Then I crashed again 20 km before the finish just going into the dunes. There was a bit of camel grass hidden in the sand and that threw me over the handlebars. But I'm OK, the bike is repairable."

American Ricky Brabec was third overall after finishing second in the stage.

SHOWJUMPING

Over 115 riders from 20 countries to feature in Doha Tour

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The Doha International Equestrian Tour Championship is all set for an exciting start from tomorrow with more than 115 riders representing 20 countries at Al Shaqab's Longines Outdoor Arena.

The Supreme Organising Committee yesterday announced complete readiness to host the prestigious international showjumping series, which carries a total prize purse of more than €2mn.

Returning to the Qatari capital after a gap of six years, the Doha International Equestrian Tour features three rounds and will see competitions in two-star, four-star and five-star categories.

After the first round, where riders will take part in two-star and four-star events, the second round comprising the same contests will take place from January 18 to 20. The third and final round from January 25 to 27 will witness the five-star and two-star competitions.

"The Doha Tour constitutes a cornerstone in achieving one of the most important strategic goals of the Qatar Equestrian Federation (QEF), which is to develop the riders and enhance their experience," said Chairman of Doha Tour's Supreme Organising Committee Sheikh Ahmad bin Nooh al-Thani, also the QEF's Secretary-General.

"The Doha Tour reflects our efforts, in cooperation with the relevant authorities, to promote sports tourism and confirm that Doha is the capital of sports, especially as it coincides with a number of international sports tournaments hosted by the country during the tournament period," he added.



Chairman of Doha Tour's Supreme Organising Committee Sheikh Ahmad bin Nooh al-Thani (fourth left) with other officials and representatives of sponsors after the press conference yesterday.

Regarding the importance of Al Shaqab's strategic partnership with the Qatar Equestrian Federation, Ahmed Yousef al-Hammadi, Director of the Commercial Department at Al Shaqab, stressed that this partnership would provide the work teams with high technical expertise in the field of organising sporting events, and would also provide riders with the opportunity to showcase one of the best equestrianism fields at the world class Longines Outdoor Arena of Al Shaqab, which has previously hosted a number of world championships during the recent period.

Vice-Chairman of the Supreme Organising Committee Ahmed Jaber al-Mulla said exciting action is on the cards in presence of top riders who will compete on a challenging course. "The course for the event has been designed by a number of international track designers, who had previously designed the tracks for many other international championships. It will be a great event with many showjumpers from different countries signed in for the competition," said al-Mulla.

On the sidelines of the event launch, a number of sponsorship agreements were signed with the sponsors, in the presence of representatives of the organising committee of the Doha Tour.

The Doha Tour is sponsored by the Doha Bank (official sponsor), Al Abdulghani Motors (official transportation partner), White Event Company (social media partner), and Gulf Crafts (promotion partner). A special area has been allocated at the venue for entertainment facilities and a variety of food and beverages stands for spectators during the entire event.

Liverpool's Alexander-Arnold hit by knee injury

Liverpool have suffered a blow after England defender Trent Alexander-Arnold was ruled out for several weeks with a knee injury suffered in last weekend's FA Cup win at Arsenal. Reds assistant manager Pep Lijnders confirmed Alexander-Arnold's injury when he spoke to the media on Tuesday ahead of Wednesday's League Cup semi-final first leg against Fulham.

Alexander-Arnold was able to finish Sunday's 2-0 third round victory over the Gunners, but the knee tear means he will spend an extended period on the sidelines.

The influential England right-back's absence is a significant setback for Premier League leaders Liverpool, who are also chasing silverware in the Europa League as well as the two domestic cups.

"First of all, some not-that-good news, Trent hyper-extended his knee during the last game," Lijnders said.

"So he has a little tear in the lateral ligament of his knee and he will need time to recover. He had a scan and he will be out for a few weeks, so let's see after that. "He will get some rest and then hopefully he can come back to where he was."

After Wednesday's League Cup tie, Alexander-Arnold will miss a Premier League clash with Bournemouth on January 21, then the second leg at Fulham three days later.

(AFP)

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SPOTLIGHT

Klinsmann stakes it all on Asian Cup glory with S Korea

South Korea's dismal Asian record is a mystery for a team that has appeared at the last 10 World Cups



AFP
Doha

It's all or bust at the Asian Cup for Jurgen Klinsmann, who has declared that anything but a first title since 1960 for South Korea will be a failure. It is a bold target for a coach who did not win any of his first five games in charge and has never hit the same giddy heights he scaled as a player.

South Korean fans were sceptical about the legendary German forward's appointment 11 months ago given his coaching record and he quickly came under fire following a poor start. The 59-year-old former coach of the United States also faced criticism from media and fans who said he spends more time at home in California than he does in South Korea.

Results have improved but Asian Cup failure over the next month in Qatar could spell the end of a patchy coaching career which had fallen off the map until he took the South Korea job.

His previous post was a 10-week stint at Hertha Berlin in 2019-2020.

Klinsmann nevertheless believes it is "right" that South Korean fans expect a team led by Son Heung-min to win the Asian Cup for the first time in more than 60 years. "We have to aim for the highest goal, and if we don't reach it, then it's the fault of the coach - no problem," he said.

Klinsmann has one of the strongest squads in the tournament, led once again by Tottenham Hotspur striker and skipper Son. Son has long been South Korea's focal point but several of his team-mates have come into form with their clubs at just the right time.

Fellow attacker Hwang Hee-chan has impressed for Wolves this season, scoring 10 goals in 20 Premier League matches. Attacking midfielder Lee Kang-in, who was out of favour under previous South Korean boss Paulo Bento, has played his way into the Paris Saint-Germain side and the 22-year-old could be one of the breakout stars of the Asian Cup.



South Korea's head coach Jurgen Klinsmann has one of the strongest squads in the tournament, led once again by Tottenham Hotspur striker Son Heung-min.

At the back, central defender Kim Min-jae is a regular for Bayern Munich after winning the Italian title with Napoli. South Korea reached the last 16 of the Qatar World Cup under Bento, before being beaten 4-1 by Brazil, but his side was functional rather than thrilling.

Klinsmann is a more attack-minded coach and has encouraged the younger players to "be more courageous, to express themselves and to grow faster".

"I think the best example is Kang-in," he said of the PSG player. "With Kang-in now, compared to six months ago, you have a completely different rhythm of the game with his qualities."

South Korea have won their last six games, scoring 20 goals with none conceded. But Klinsmann is still under fire from critics who accuse him of spending too much time abroad and ignoring the domestic K League. Klinsmann argues that he is "an international coach", and has resisted calls for him to change his approach.

South Korea's dismal Asian Cup record is a mystery for a team that has appeared at the last 10 World Cups. They lost to hosts Australia in the 2015 final and were bundled out by Qatar in the quarter-finals four years later.

They start their title charge in Qatar against Bahrain on Monday. Malaysia and Jordan are also in a group they should top with ease. Whoever they play after that, Klinsmann's message to his players will be the same - bring home the Asian Cup.

"I believe in this Korean team that they can make it happen because we have so much quality with so many good players doing really well," he said. "We are capable of winning this tournament. It takes a lot of work, it takes a lot of special moments, but it's absolutely doable."

FOCUS

Al-Ghamdi determined to propel Saudi Arabia

Midfielder **Faisal al-Ghamdi** is setting his sights on helping Saudi Arabia make a deep run into the AFC Asian Cup Qatar as the three-time champions look to claim the continental title for the first time since 1996.

Buoyed by their performance at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, when the Saudis secured a famous win over eventual champions Argentina in their opening game of the tournament, al-Ghamdi believes the Green Falcons can have a significant impact over the coming month.

"We want to make the nation proud and go as far as possible," says the 22-year-old Al Ittihad midfielder. "The 2022 FIFA World Cup showed that anything is possible and that we can compete with the very best. Confidence is growing heading into the competition. We've made a bright start to our 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign with wins against Pakistan and Jordan. The aim now is to carry this momentum forward into the tournament."

Much has changed for Saudi Arabia since goals from Saleh al-Shehri and Salem al-Dawsari took Saudi Arabia to victory at Lusail Stadium against Lionel Messi's side in their first game of the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Renard departed in March to take charge of his native France ahead of last year's FIFA Women's World Cup Australia & New Zealand 2023 with serial trophy winner Roberto Mancini taking over in his place

Results have been mixed, however, since the Italian arrived in August. Losses against Costa Rica and South Korea were followed by a draw with Nigeria and a defeat against Mali before back-to-back wins in the Preliminary Joint Qualification – Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 over Pakistan and Jordan.

Al-Ghamdi featured in central midfield for the first time under Mancini against the Nigerians and was also in the line-up in the 4-0 victory over Pakistan before making a late substitute appearance against Jordan as the Saudis made a perfect start to life in Group G.

Next up is the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, where Saudi Arabia have been drawn in Group F to face Thailand, Kyrgyz Republic and Oman as the country attempts to add a fourth crown to those won in 1984, 1988 and 1996.

"It will be tough, but we have some great players, excellent coaching staff, and a top-class manager in Roberto Mancini alongside incredible support wherever we play," al-Ghamdi says of the task at hand.

"The ingredients are there for us to be successful and have a good tournament. The manager has shown his trust in me by selecting me on a regular basis recently and I hope I can continue to be in his plans and we can push forward together as a team."



Al-Ghamdi's inclusion in Mancini's squad for the Asian Cup comes as a result of his impressive form since signing for Al Ittihad from Al Ettifaq over the summer, a move that has seen him join a club featuring a host of leading foreign and domestic stars.

Despite the array of talent at the club, al-Ghamdi has played 20 times in all competitions, including in four of his side's five AFC Champions League 2023/24 group games as the club secured their place in February's knockout rounds.

"I joined Al Ittihad from Al Ettifaq in the summer and for any young player here in Saudi Arabia, the opportunity to join one of the biggest clubs in Saudi is a dream," he says.

"I'll always be grateful for my time at Al Ettifaq. It was there where I took my first steps in professional football and took my game to new levels. When I heard of Al Ittihad's interest, it felt the right time to take the next step in my career. I'm loving my time here. We have some tremendous young talent alongside world-class international players like N'golo Kante, Fabinho, and Karim Benzema."

"Playing alongside them, training with them every day and learning from them, is really supporting our development – as individuals and a team. There's so much we can achieve together at Al Ittihad. We want to compete on all fronts – domestically and regionally. We know we have the ability to play in the FIFA Club World Cup again in the future and it's up to us to go and do that."

CONFIDENT

Resilient Malaysia pleases Kim

Head coach Kim Pan-gon described Malaysia's 2-2 draw with Syria in an international friendly match on Monday as a morale booster heading into the AFC Asian Cup Qatar.

Having taken the lead just before half-time, World No 130 Malaysia found themselves pegged back by Syria with the Southeast Asian side then salvaging a share of the spoils through Paulo Josue's effort 12 minutes from time at Al Arabi Sports Club.

"Good start and we competed against a team ranked 91," said Kim. "Very good performance in the first half. We changed a lot (of players) in the second half because we wanted to give everyone minutes. I'm happy that we came back to finish 2-2 and even had chances to win late on so the players should gain confidence and match fitness ahead of the Jordan game. We will assess everything to find the best 11 for the first game."

Johor Darul Ta'zim star Arif Aiman put Malaysia ahead six minutes before half-time but Syria roared back with two goals in four minutes through Pablo Sabbag (70th) and Ibrahim Hesar (74th). Despite having made wholesale changes in the second half, Malaysia managed to peg Syria back late on with Josue scoring with a crackling strike in the 78th minute. Returning to the AFC Asian Cup stage after 16 years, Malaysia will kick-off their Group E campaign against Jordan on January 16 with Bahrain (January 20) and South Korea (January 25) to follow.

The South Korean expects senior players like Brendan Gan, Paulo Josue, Endrick dos Santos, and Junior Eldstal to bring stability and maturity to the team. "In the last competition, we learned not to be overconfident. This preparation is important. We will be playing top teams, not weak teams, in the Asian Cup," said Pan Gon recently.

Hector Cuper's Syria are in Group B and will take on Uzbekistan in their opening match on Jan 14. They play Australia four days later and India on Jan 23.



Head coach Kim Pan-gon looks on as Malaysia players train in Doha yesterday.

Ishii challenges Thailand to rise to the occasion

Doha: Thailand head coach Masatada Ishii is unperturbed by the absence of Chanathip Songkrasin and Teerasil Dangda from the AFC Asian Cup , saying it is an opportunity for other players to shine.

Chanathip and Teerasil have been instrumental to Thailand in recent years, having played key roles in the War Elephants' run into the Round of 16 in the 2019 edition but injuries have ruled both out of the tournament in Qatar.

"It's sad not having Chanathip and Teerasil who are injured. I don't know if it will have any effect or not, but it's an opportunity for the 26 players to prove themselves," said Ishii to local media. "We have a warm-up game with the Thai national team U23 and will focus on conditioning fitness and tactics. Our goal (in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023) is to advance as far as possible."

With the key duo absent, Thailand's challenge will be led by the likes of Supachok Sarachat who currently play for J1 League sides Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo with the forwardline manned by Supahanat Mueanta, who only recently bagged his first goal in European top flight football, scoring for OH Leuven in the Belgian First Division.