



CRICKET | Page 2

Rohit stars as India outlast Afghanistan in 2nd Super Over



Arnold urges

FOOTBALL | Page 3

Australia to use height against Syria





MATCH REPORT

Afif strike fires Qatar into last1

Defending champions beat newcomers Tajikistan 1-0 to reach knockout stages of the continental showpiece

By Sahan Bidappa

Cup newcomers Tajikistan put on a brave front but hosts Qatar became the first team to reach the knockout stages of the continental showpiece at the Al Bayt Stadium yesterday. And it was their star forward Akram Afif who once again delivered, netting a crucial strike in the 17th minute as Al Annabi kept their hopes of defending the title alive with a slender 1-0

win over Tajikistan. It was far from a convincing victory for Al Annabi, but coach Marquez Lopez will be pleased to have progressed to the last 16 as Group A toppers, with a game to spare against China. Considering the tumultuous build-up for Qatar, who sacked Carlos Queiroz early last month and replaced the Portuguese veteran with Marquez, this will come as a relief for the hosts.

Qatar faced embarrassment as they suffered defeats in all three matches during their home World Cup in 2022, making it the poorest showing by any host in the tournament's history. So, anything similar to that at the Asian crown Jewel would have been catastrophic. But the real test awaits them in the knockout stages, when they go up against Asian giants Japan, South Korea or Iran.

Qatar will hope Afif continues to fire like he has done so far in the last two matches. After scoring a brace against Lebanon last Friday, the Al Sadd forward slotted home when Almoez Ali won the ball and played a through pass to his teammate, whose burst of speed and accuracy was too much for goalkeeper Rustam Yatimov.

Afif hoped 'the best is still vet to come' as he spoke about his special partnership with strike partner Almoez Ali. "Almoez is one of my best friends and we understand each other very well," Afif said of his partnership with Ali, who scored a record nine goals as Qatar won the title for the first time in 2019.

"We have been playing together for a long time so we understand what each other is going to do just with a look. We hope the best is still yet to come."

Lopez made five changes to the Qatar starting XI, bringing in Tarek Salman and Bassam Al Rawi



Qatar's Akram Afif (also right) celebrates with Almoez Ali after scoring a goal against Tajikistan in their Asian Cup match at the Al Bayt Stadium vesterday. (Reuters)



Fans hold Qatar's flag during the AFC Asian Cup Group A match against Tajikistan yesterday. (AFP)

to replace Pedro Miguel and Almahdi Ali in defence. The Spaniard also overhauled his midfield as he relegated captain Hassan al-Haydos to bench, with Ismail Mohamed taking the armband while Moustafa Mashal and Jassem Gaber slotted in.

It all made up for a nervy start from the hosts as Tajikistan started aggressively, with Rustam Soirov forcing Qatar goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham into making an early save. Qatar, however, started making inroads with Ahmed Fathy's cross in the 17th minute finding Tarek Salman but the centre-back failed to get his header on target.

But Afif calmed the nerves in the hosts' camp 30 seconds later as he sped past Hanonov and dinked the ball above Yatimov for his third goal of the tournament.

In the 33rd minute, Qatar believed they had earned a penalty after an altercation between Ali and Manuchehr Safarov.

However, following a VAR check, Japanese referee Kimura Hiroyuki Kimura opted to award Tajikistan a free-kick instead. Shortly before halftime, Qatar had another scoring opportunity when Yatimov spilled Afif's shot. Despite the goalkeeper's error, defender Zoir Dzhuraboev made a remarkable goal-line clearance to thwart Ali's attempt on the rebound.

Oatar faced a moment of concern three minutes into the second half as Alisher Dzhalilov engaged in a foot race with Barsham. Although Dzhalilov reached the ball first, a heavy first touch cost him the chance with the goalmouth wide open. Just before the hour mark, Qatar missed two chances, with Ahmed al-Ganehi sending his shot over from just inside the box, and Ali being denied by Yatimov's imposing frame.

Tajikistan's time to equalise was running out fast before it took a further hit in the 81st minute as Amadoni Kamalov saw his yellow card upgraded to a red following a VAR review. The forward had kicked out at al-Ganehi, as the latter was brought down by Mohamed al-Bavati.

"I'm very pleased to qualify after two matches," said Qatar coach Marquez. "It was a difficult game but we always knew it would be. We played against a tough, strong team, but we didn't give them the chance to score. Every match is difficult and you are talking about the Asian Cup. The opposition started with high pressure but we were able to handle that. We had a problem with possession at the start but we controlled the match and achieved what we wanted to achieve."

While Qatar will look for their 10th consecutive Asian Cup win when they face China on Monday, Tajikistan will have to defeat Lebanon on the same day if they are to stand a chance of advancing.

Coach Petar Segrt said his team's final group game against Lebanon is "all or nothing". "Everybody makes compliments to me, you can give compliments to Tajikistan, but at the end, the result is important," he said.

China in danger after another 0-0 stalemate

Doha

hina's Asian Cup hopes are on a knife edge after they were held 0-0 for the second game in a row against Lebanon yesterday.

Lebanon Lower-ranked twice struck China's crossbar while the Chinese had an effort cleared off the line in an entertaining stalemate. Serbian coach Aleksandar Jankovic called it "a very tough game" and said they deserved more.

"At the end we did not win but we showed good mentality, excellent attitude and big fight.

"The road is still long and the target is the same - to play in the knockout stage."

Jankovic said China's fate was still in their own hands, even if the pressure is on to beat reigning champions Qatar.

"We depend only on ourselves and I always like to be in this kind of situation," he said.

Playing in mint green and fresh from a 0-0 draw with Tajikistan, China were on the back foot early against a team ranked 28 places below them.Lebanon were beaten 3-0 by Qatar in the opening game of the tournament but their height and strength caused a sluggish China problems.

In front of a crowd of 14,000 at the 44,000-capacity Al Thumama Stadium, a venue for the 2022 World Cup, the first chance came on 24 minutes.

Chinese goalkeeper Yan Junling parried the ball out wide and from the resulting Lebanon cross. Omar Bugiel - who plays for Wimbledon in England's fourth tier - headed over the bar.

The 30-year-old forward, who has bounced around lower- and non-league English football, had two more sniffs at goal as Lebanon turned the screw.

China finally came alive at the end of the half, forwards Wu Lei and Zhang Yuning denied three times in quick succession by goalkeeper Mostafa Matar.

Hassan Maatoukt struck China's bar in first-half injury time and after the break Hasan Srour also clipped the top of the goalframe. Midway through the second period China came within

inches of taking the lead when Matar made a mess of a tame effort, but Lebanon cleared off the line.

Lebanon coach Miodrag Radulovic called it "an important point" heading into their final group match against Tajikistan.

"We didn't score but I am satisfied because we are still in the tournament going into the last match," he said.

"Just finishing - if we improve this, we will win the game."

Lebanon's defender Nour Mansour (left) is marked by China's forward Zhang Yuning during the Asian Cup Group A match at the Al Thumama Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)



TENNIS / AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic, Sabalenka advance in Melbourne

Melbourne

ovak Djokovic fought off another feisty challenge to reach the third round of the Australian Open yesterday after women's champion Aryna Sabalenka made more serene progress and Ons Jabeur crashed out at the hands of a schoolgirl.

Top 10 seeds Coco Gauff, Barbora Krejcikova, Beatriz Haddad Maia, Jannik Sinner, Andrey Rublev and Stefanos Tsitsipas all got through their second-round contests in varying conditions as Melbourne lived up to its reputation for changeable weather.

Rain washed out more than three hours of play on the outer courts at the start of the day but the skies had long cleared by the time Djokovic took to the court where he has won 10 of his 24 Grand Slam titles.

As in his four-hour first round clash against qualifier Dino Prizmic, the 36-year-old Serbian looked in full pomp in the opening set against Australian Alexei Popyrin but lost the second.

The aggressive Popyrin, backed by a crowd in full voice, had set points in the third set but Djokovic saved them and, riled by an exchange with a fan in the crowd, ran



Serbia's Novak Djokovic (right) shakes hands with Australia's Alexei Popyrin after their singles match on day four of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. Right: Russia's Mirra Andreeva takes selfies after beating Tunisia's Ons Jabeur. (Reuters/AFP)

out a 6-3 4-6 7-6(4) 6-3 winner. "I haven't been playing my best but I'm still trying to find my form," Djokovic said.

"I think both my first and second round opponents were really, really great quality tennis players and I managed to find a way to win four. That's what counts in the end."

neighbouring Margaret Court Arena was also rocking in the evening session as locals backed Jordan Thompson as the gutsy Australian plotted an upset of Tsitsipas.

Thompson took the first set but the Greek seventh seed gritted his teeth and battled back to win 4-6

7-6(6) 6-2 7-6(4) after a thrilling match where the final 13-minute game and fourth-set tiebreak were alone worth the admission.

"The adrenaline and the rush I got out of this match tonight was insane, you live for these kinds of matches," said Tsitsipas, who lost to Djokovic in last year's final.

"The fact that I can go to sleep tonight and know I gave it all makes me extremely happy."

His compatriot, women's eighth seed Maria Sakkari, will probably sleep less well after she was bounced out 6-4 6-4 by Russian Elina Avanesyan in the final match

Sabalenka made short work of 16-year-old Brenda Fruhvirtova with a 6-3 6-2 in the early evening match on Rod Laver Arena - a second dominant victory over a qualifier for the Belarusian in her first Grand Slam title defence.

"It's not like these two matches give me confidence," Sabalenka said. "It's tennis. You have to be ready for anything. I'm trying to focus on myself and focus on bringing the best tennis I can."

Jabeur's match against 16-yearold Russian Andreeva was played under the closed roof on the main showcourt but the Tunisian sixth seed could hardly blame the conditions given the one-sided nature of her 6-0 6-2 defeat. "It was probably my best match," said Andreeva, who still has to find time for school work along with her training. "I'm super happy with the level that I showed today on the court."

SECURITY

Brazilian 10th seed Haddad Maia later had little trouble in her encounter with a talented teen, easing past a third 16-year-old, Russian Alina Korneeva, 6-1 6-2.

Sinner was delighted that the inclement weather forced the roof of Margaret Court Arena to be closed for his match against Jesper de Jong. The fourth seed hit a rich vein of form at the end of last sea-

FIRST TEST

ed the Dutch qualifier 6-26-26-2.

After the rain finally relented, the roof was back open for US Open champion Gauff's secondround clash with fellow American Caroline Dolehide.

Initially, it looked like the women's fourth seed would ease through but Dolehide dragged her into a real scrap and Gauff was forced to fight until her fourth match point to prevail 7-6(2) 6-2.

"It was a tough match. She plays big, pretty much, on every shot," said Gauff. "Not my best tennis, but a lot of improvement to look at for the next matches."

It was a mixed day for American men with Taylor Fritz, Ben Shelton and Sebastian Korda progressing but 17th seed Frances Tiafoe upset 6-4 6-4 7-6(5) by Czech Tomas Machae and Chris Eubanks losing 6-4 6-4 to fifth seed Rublev.

Alex de Minaur's form has some in Australia thinking he might just be able to end the country's 48year wait for a men's champion and the recent Davis Cup final loss to Italy was on the 10th seed's mind during his 6-3 6-0 6-3 win over Matteo Arnaldi.

"It's no secret that it was heartbreaking to lose the Davis Cup final at the end of last year," he said. "Today was a little bit of revenge for Australia."

CRICKET

Plucky India beat Afghanistan in Super Over thriller

Spinner Bishnoi delivers under pressure as hosts seal 3-0 win



India's players pose with the series trophy after winning the second Super Over of third and final T20I against Afghanistan at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters Bengaluru

ndia overcame Afghanistan in a second Super Over in a heart-stopping T20 International to complete a 3-0 series sweep on a night of high drama yesterday.

The home side had bagged the series with back-to-back wins in Mohali and Indore, rendering the result of the match at M Chinnaswamy Stadium academic.

But the final match of the three-match series provided the most drama as Afghanistan, replying to India's mammoth 212-4, racked up 212-6 resulting in deadlock.

In the first Super Over, Afghanistan managed 16-1, which India matched as the stalemate continued.

India scored 11-2 in the second Super Over before spinner Ravi Bishnoi sealed their victory in three deliveries, conceding just one run and taking two wickets.

"My heart rate was high, but we had a lot of fun," leg-spinner Bishnoi said.

"The moment we saw two right-handers come out, I was given the ball.

"The idea was to bowl back of length to begin with from a little behind the crease."

Earlier, India looked in trouble after they slumped to 22-4 inside five overs after electing to bat.

Skipper Rohit Sharma smashed an unbeaten 121 off 60 halls as he and Rinku Singh, who hammered 69 not out, rescued India with an unbroken fifth-wicket stand of 190 off just 95 balls.

Karim Janat bled 36 runs in the final over of the Indian innings conceding five sixes in that seven-ball over that included a

Rohit's fifth hundred in T20 Internationals was studded with eight sixes, while Rinku clobbered six sixes in his 39-ball blitz.

Rahmanullah Gurbaz (50), Ibrahim Zadran (50) and Mohammad Nabi (34) kept Afghanistan in the hunt but it was Gulbadin Naib's unbeaten 55, which helped them match India's total even though they eventually finished the series without a win.

BRIEF SCORES India 212-4 in 20 overs (R.

Sharma 121 not out, R. Singh 69 not out; F. Ahmad Malik 3-20) v Afghanistan 212-6 in 20 overs (G. Naib 55 not out, R. Gurbaz 50, I. Zadran 50, M. Nabi 34; W. Sundar

Super Over 1 Afghanistan 16-1 India 16-1 Super Over 2

India 11-1 Afghanistan 1-2 Toss: India Result: India won in second Super Over

Man of the match: R. Sharma Series: India won the threematch series 3-0

Debutant Joseph gives West Indies some hope



West Indies fast bowler Shamar Joseph (right) celebrates after taking the wicket of Australian Steve Smith during day one of the first Test in Adelaide vesterday. (AFP)

AFP Adelaide

> ebutant Shamar Ioser gave the West Indies some hope after taking two top-order wickets during Australia's reply to the visitors' first innings total of 188 in the opening Test in Adelaide yester-

> Australia were 59-2 at stumps, with Usman Khawaja not out 30 and Cameron Green on six.

> Australia were only 129 runs behind, but with key batsmen Steve Smith and Marnus Labuschagne back in the pavilion.

> Earlier, Australian captain Pat Cummins won the toss and sent the West Indies in to bat on a cool and overcast morning, a decision that proved fruitful when the visitors were reduced to 133-9.

But Joseph, playing only his sixth first class match, gave the score some respectability with a breezy 36 off only 41 balls.

The best was still to come for the 24-year-old, who came on as first change and had Smith caught at third slip with his first ball in Test cricket.

It was Smith's first outing at the top of the order since taking over from the now-retired David Warner, and may raise some concerns in the Aussie camp regarding the belligerent left-hander's long-term replacement.

Joseph was not done, following the Smith wicket with that of Labuschagne, caught on the hook by Gudakesh Motie at deep fine leg to leave Australia 45-2.

"I had a few conversations with the boys in the dressing room," Joseph said. "I told them I would get a wicket with my first ball, but I didn't know it would be Steve Smith. "I will remember this for the

rest of my life."

Things could have been even better for the Windies had wicketkeeper Josh Da Silva not dropped Khawaja on one, a catch he should

Earlier, Josh Hazlewood took 4-44, including his 250th Test wicket, and Cummins 4-41 as Australia ran through the West Indies batting line-up.

Hazlewood said the wicket had played a bit differently from how it usually did in Adelaide.

"The wicket was an interesting one, not much pace and bounce

and the odd one nipped around. I love playing here," he said.

"You don't have to bowl too quick, just hang around the off "Hopefully we bat the whole day

tomorrow."

Australia had gone into the Test making only one change from the team that crushed Pakistan 3-0 earlier in the summer, bringing in Cameron Green for the retired Warner.

It was a different story for the West Indies, who gave debuts to Joseph and all-rounders Kavem Hodge and Justin Greaves.

West Indies openers Kraigg Brathwaite and Tagenarine Chanderpaul began sedately, content to leave as many balls as possible.

Cummins brought himself on in the 10th over with immediate results, a fuller ball enticing Chanderpaul into an expansive drive, only to slice the ball to gully where Green used all his height to take a comfortable catch.

SCOREBOARD

West Indies I innings K. Brathwaite b Cummins 13 T. Chanderpaul c Green b Cummins McKenzie c Carev b Hazlewood 50 A. Athanaze b Hazlewood K. Hodge c Green b Hazlewood 12 J. Greaves c Labuschagne b Hazlewood J. Da Silva c Head b Cummins A. Joseph c Smith b Cummins G. Motie c Lyon b Starc K. Roach not out S. Joseph Ibw Lyon Extras (b12 lb1 w2) 15 188

Total (62.1 overs) Fall of wicket: 1-14 (Chanderpaul), 2-27 (Brathwaite), 3-52 (Athanaze), 4-98 (Hodge), 5-107 (McKenzie), 6-108 (Greaves), 7-132 (Da Silva), 8-133 (Motie), 9-133 (A. Joseph), 10-188 (S. Joseph)

Bowling: Starc 12-5-37-1 (1w), Hazlewood 15-6-44-4, Cummins 17-5-41-4, Lyon 12.1-2-36-1, Marsh 2-1-5-0, Green 4-1-12-0

Australia (1st innings) S. Smith c Greaves b S. Joseph U. Khawaja not out M. Labuschagne c Motie b S. Joseph

C. Green not out 6 Extras (nb1) Total (2 wickets, 21 overs) **59** Fall of wickets: 1-25 (Smith), 2-45

10

(Labuschagne) Bowling: Roach 7-2-21-0, A. Joseph 7-0-19-0 (1nb), S. Joseph 6-1-18-2, Motie 1-0-1-0

Wellington: Finn Allen blasted 137 off 62 balls, the highest score by a New Zealand batsman in a T20 International, to secure his team's series-clinching 45-run victory against Pakistan in the third match in Dunedin

yesterday.

The opener clobbered 16 sixes, the joint-most in an innings in men's T20 Internationals, to power New Zealand to an imposing 224-7 at the University Oval. Pakistan managed 179-7 in reply, including Babar Azam's (58) third fifty of the series, as New Zealand took an unassailable 3-0 lead in the five-match series. Allen toyed with the entire Pakistan attack but was particularly harsh on Haris Rauf, plundering 28 runs, including three sixes,



Allen pummels Pakistan with record ton, NZ clinch T20 series

in the fast bowler's second over, taking him out of the attack. The bowler was brought back in after New Zealand cruised to 109-1 at the halfway stage and Allen smacked three sixes in that over from Rauf, who bled 60 runs

for his two wickets. Babar kept

Pakistan in the hunt for a while but Tim Southee (2-29) led New Zealand's disciplined bowling to ensure they were never really threatened.

"It's good to see the hard work of the last few months come off." Player of the Match Allen said of just good to get across the line and put up a competitive score and take the series." This is Pakistan's first series under new T20 captain Shaheen Afridi ahead of this year's 20-overs World Cup in June. The last two matches of the series are scheduled in Christchurch tomorrow and Sunday.

BRIEF SCORES

series 3-0

New Zealand 224-7 in 20 overs (F. Allen 137, T. Seifert 31; H. Rauf 2-60) v Pakistan 179-7 (B. Azam 58, M. Nawaz 28) Result: NZ win by 45 runs Series: NZ lead the best-of-five







Arnold urges Aussie players to use height against Syria

Australia have one of the tallest players in the tournament in 6-foot-6 (1.98m) defender Harry Souttar

AFP/www.the-afc.com

ustralia must make the most of their aerial superiority at the Asian Cup, coach Graham Arnold says, starting against Syria in their second game today.

The Socceroos began their campaign in Qatar with a 2-0 win over India on Saturday but had to wait until the 50th minute before Jackson Irvine broke the deadlock.

Australia have one of the tallest players in the tournament in 6-foot-6 (1.98m) defender Harry Souttar and Arnold wants to capitalise on their height advantage.

"Our set-pieces were not great against India," the coach said yes-"We had a lot of corners and that

is probably one of our strengths. We just need to improve on those little things." Australia reached the last 16 at

the World Cup just over a year ago in Qatar before bowing out to a Lionel Messi-inspired Argentina. Arnold's physically impos-

ing side are among the contenders for the Asian Cup, and their clean sheet against India was their fourth in as many games.

Full-back Aziz Behich said Arnold had put the emphasis on "defending as a team".

"When we press or when we're in a block, we make sure we're very compact and make it difficult for the opposition," Behich said at a press conference.

"Especially since Arnie came in, we've improved on that a lot.



Australian defender Harry Souttar (fourth right) towers above his players celebrate a goal against India on Saturday at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

Behich has eyes on title; Syria's Ousou unfazed by pressure

The veteran Australian defender yesterday also said he has set his sights on repeating the Socceroos' 2015 heroics and claim the continental title for his country for a second time.

Behich played twice for Ange Postecoglou's side when the Australians won the title on home soil nine years ago and the 33-year-old hopes starting the current campaign with a win over India on Saturday will serve as a positive omen for further success.

"I was part of the team that lifted the trophy in 2015 and it's always been on my mind that I'd like to do it again," the Melbourne City left-back said yesterday.

"The way we've started with a win is always important. We started the last campaign with a loss (in 2019 against Jordan) and it made it difficult for us.

"We have to go game by game, we're putting (the India win) behind us and the full focus is on Syria. We go into every game to win and it's going to be no different tomorrow."

The Australians are appearing in their fifth AFC Asian Cup since joining the confederation in 2006, with the country reaching the final in 2011 before winning the title four years later.

Arnold is overseeing Australia's



Syrian national team pose before their match against Uzbekistan.



AFC Asian Cup involvement for a third time, having seen his team exit at the quarter-final stage in both 2007 and 2019, but Behich believes the former Sydney FC coach has given the current team a robust platform upon which they can build. "We work on defending as a team and I think when we press or are in a block we make sure we're compact and make it difficult for the opposition," he said.

"When you come into a tournament everything changes compared to a friendly game or club football. It's a one-off game, we've got to be switched on every minute

of the game. "Against India we did that very well. We know as a defence if we do our job we've got enough quality to punish teams."

Victory in their opening game lifted any early pressure off Arnold's team while the Syrians will go into the meeting at Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium hoping to show a marked improvement from their 0-0 draw against Uzbekistan.

And while that result has increased scrutiny on Hector Cuper's side, defender Aiham Ousou is unfazed by the attention.

"We live with the pressure, this is what we do every day," said the Sweden-born defender. "We are well prepared mentally and physically. I don't feel any pressure. We take it day by day and game by game. We're excited to be here to play these games. Tomorrow's game is very exciting, we play against - on paper - the top team in our group. It's a challenge and in football anything is possible.

"We have some tactics to work on but we have good players and have good coaches. We believe in having a good game and a good result and hope we can show it tomorrow as well."

Thousands flock to Falcon's Nest fan zone for Saudi Arabia's clash against Oman

Doha: A capacity crowd graced the Falcon's Nest fan zone in Doha yesterday as Saudi Arabia began their 2023 AFC Asian Cup campaign with hard fought 2-1 victory against

While the Green Falcons faced off Khalifa International Stadium, thousands of supporters watched all of the action from within the nextgeneration facility, launched by the Saudi Arabian Football Federation (SAFF) to provide supporters with exceptional experiences throughout the quadrennial show-

"We're thrilled that so many fans chose Falcon's Nest as their preferred destination to watch our men's national team in action - this is one of the main reasons why it's open throughout the tournament." said Yasser al-Misehal, President of the SAFF.

"They want to experience incredible atmospheres within the host nation and Falcon's Nest offers precisely

this. It's a home of football where brilliant matchday experiences are there for everyone to enjoy." Located within Doha's Katara - the Cultural Village, Falcon's Nest can accommodate up to 3.000 fans and will be broadcasting 2023 AFC Asian Cup matches from 4 onwards each day, up to the tournament's conclusion on February 10. Open to fans from all nations, this facility showcases Saudi Arabia's football history through a series of key features and activations. While watching group and knockout stage matches in the main screen area, visitors can journey to

the 'Falcon's Museum', a dynamic tribute to the rich history of Saudi Arabian football where legendary figures and the most memorable moments in Saudi football history are celebrated.

Another area already proving to be a firm fan favourite is the sports games and challenges area where a trio of skill-testing activations are available to challenge and refine dif-

ferent aspects of one's football abilities. These include 'Falcon Speed Strike' where fans can step up and work on the sheer velocity of their shot, 'Field of Vision' where fans can hone the speed and accuracy of passes, and 'Nest Chip Shot' where fans can master the art of chinning the ball with expert precision. Supporters can also visit the 'Realm of the Impossible', an interactive experience where visitors can step into the boots of football legends and replicate the most iconic goals in Saudi football history at major

tournaments. Additionally, Falcon's Nest is home to 'The Falcons Store' merchandise shop where visitors can purchase customized items including the national team's jersey.

Falcon's Nest is open daily from 4pm-12am with various food and beverage options also available. For more news and information, fans can visit the SAFF website and follow the Federation's social



HORSE RACING

Posuelo Py wins Al Kharrara Cup



The connections of Posuelo Py celebrate with the trophy after the six-year-old bay gelding won the Al Kharrara Cup. PICTURES: Juhaim



Jockey Szczepan Mazur guides Posuelo Py to Al Kharrara

By Sports Reporter

lhe Mohamed Khalifa T R al-Sowaidi-owned Posuelo Py continued his impressive campaign this season with a fourth victory in five starts. Al Rayyan Racecourse, under

a powerful ride from Szczepan Mazur, the AF AlBahar progeny sprinted away from the field in the 2,100m Handicap for Purebred Arabians to win by impressive five lengths and land the Al Kharrara Cup for trainer Hamad al-Jehani. Al Ghazali Stud's AIS Al Aredh came second, while Shgarde in the colours of Sharida bin Nasser bin Sharida al-Kaabi finished third. Bader al-Balushi-trained Little Helen, in the silks of Al Hedfa Stud, won the 1,200m contest for

Thoroughbred Handicap (60-80) for four-year-old+.

Posuelo Py won the Purebred Arabian Conditions (Class 2) (Far Bend) during the Al Hamla Cup at the Al Rayyan Racecourse on October 19, the second meeting of the season. The six-year-old bay gelding finished second in the Maid Al Arab Sprinter Championship - Purebred Arabian (Class 1 Gr3) International Race on Janu-

QREC Racing Manager, Abdulla Rashid al-Kubaisi, presented the trophies to the winners.

Morocco cruise to victory over Tanzania

San-Pédro, Ivory Coast: Shock 2022 World Cup semi-finalists Morocco cruised to a 3-0 win over 10-man Tanzania in San Pedro yesterday as they opened their Africa Cup of Nations Group F campaign. Captain Romain Saiss scored in the first half and, after Tanzania had Novatus Miroshi sent off, Azzedine Ounahi and Youssef En-Nesyri netted for the Atlas Lions.

Although an African powerhouse for decades, Morocco are seeking only a second Cup of Nations title 48 years after lifting the trophy in

Morocco sprang to international prominence two years ago in Qatar when they became the first African World Cup semi-finalists after eliminating Spain and Portugal in knockout matches.

The victory over group outsiders Tanzania in the southwest of the Ivory Coast was anticipated as Morocco are ranked 13th in the world, 108 places above the Taifa Stars.

Morocco began with seven of the team that started in the 2-0 World Cup semi-final loss to France in Qatar.

There were three La Liga players, two each from the Premier League and Ligue 1 and two with Saudi Pro League sides. Moroccans with Turkish and Egyptian clubs completed the line-up.

ryn Allarakhia from English fifth-tier outfit Wealdstone. The winger struggled and was replaced after 38 minutes.

This contrasted sharply with Tanzania, whose line-up included Tar-

As expected, Morocco established territorial and possession dominance from the kick-off in a stadium named after deceased Ivorian star Laurent Pokou.

- Ivorian star honoured -His five goals in a 1970 AFCON group match is a record for an individual scorer that still stands, and the official match balls for the 2024 tournament are also named after him. En-Nesyri, one of the seven survivors from the semi-final against France, had a half-chance after nine minutes, but did not connect cleanly with the ball and it flew wide.

Tanzania displayed intensity, both in movement and tackling, but it came as no surprise when they fell behind on the half-hour mark in 31C (87F) heat.



PREVIEW

India's Stimac wants attacking approach against Uzbekistan

'Boys are excited and happy for another opportunity today'



India's coach Igor Stimac talks to his players during a training session in Doha yesterday.

By Yash Mudgal

ndia coach Igor Stimac is looking to freshen up things for the high-pressure Asian Cup game against Uzbekistan at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today.

India chose a defensive midfield set-up in their loss to Australia, one of the favourites for the title. But the Croat yesterday said India will go with an attacking-mind set against Uzbekistan, who are ranked 68 in the world to Blue Tigers' 102.

"We are looking for more attacking-minded players because, after analysing the game against Australia, I felt we had many situations where we could, instead of just kicking the ball forward find three players in front of us on the flanks. I was not happy because there was no intention to do that in the second half," Stimac said yesterday

Uzbekistan began their Asian Cup with a goalless draw against Syria and will be eager for a win too. "Uzbekistan is a very good and competitive side. The recent results prove what kind of strength they have. They didn't win the opening game, which will have them under pressure," the 56-year-old coach, who was part of the Croatia side that reached the 1998 World Cup semi-finals, said.

"We can expect a high-pressing game from the very first minute. We need to find a way to handle that. But our boys are excited and happy for another opportunity ahead of us."

The race for the top three spots, however, remains wide open in Group B. The top two teams from each group, along with the four best third-placed teams from the six groups, will book a spot in the last 16, which leaves the doors for qualification wide open. India currently occupy the bottom spot in the group while Syria and Uzbekistan are second and third respectively.

India is without three of its regulars – Ashique Kuruniyan, Anwar Ali and Jeakson Singh – who were ruled out due to injury. Midfielder Sahal Abdul Samad has also failed to get match-fit in time. "Sahal is still not fit. That's one, and we do have a couple of players with certain problems after the first game. So, changes will be there. I will not name the players who are with the problems obviously,



Uzbekistan coach Srecko Katanec at a press conference yesterday.

but changes are coming," Stimac said.

India goalkeeper Amrinder Singh said: "It's a big game for us tomorrow, and we are looking forward to it. We have studied what Uzbekistan did in the game against Syria, prepared our own strategies, and are ready for the game."

The gloveman, who is always in competition for the number one shirt with Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, feels that they feed off the competition between each other to remain at the top level. "Of course, there can only be one spot, but Gurpreet and I share a healthy competition, which motivates both of us to keep improving," said Amrinder, who last featured in the World Cup Qualifier against Qatar.

There was a crowd of over 36,000 at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium for the India-Australia game on Saturday, most of them Indians. Stimac is hoping for an even bigger turnout of Blue Tigers fans against Uzbekistan. "We are expecting a huge number, an even bigger number now in this match," Stimac said.

The game against Australia kicked off at 2pm but it is a later start time of 5:30pm against Uzbekistan. "It's a much better kickoff time, much more convenient for fans to attend the match," he said.

Uzbekistan coach Srecko Katanec wants his side to not hold back. "Normally when you're playing a stronger team on paper, it is logical that the game will be tough for you," said Katanec, who guided Slovenia to the 2000 Euro-

pean Championship and 2002 World Cup.

"We will try to do something on the field but the game will be completely different. India are strong and aggressive and we have to find spaces and do our best. We have to be patient during the 90 minutes and we shall see how it goes. I'm taking it game by game and I know we have to win tomorrow to advance into the next stage and this is the main target for us. We must try our best to win the game, I'm confident we can achieve that," the 60-year-old, who represented both Yugoslavia and Slovenia in his playing days, said.

SPOTLIGHT

Palestine's al-Battat relishing must-win clash against UAE



Palestine players train in Doha yesterday, on the eve of their Asian Cup Group C match against United Arab Emirates.

alestine captain Musab al-Battat believes his side has what it takes to compete with the United Arab Emirates in what he has billed as a 'must-win' clash in Group C of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar today.

On their third consecutive AFC Asian Cup appearance, Palestine fell to a 4-1 defeat at the hands of Iran at the start of their campaign, but al-Battat insists the challenge at Al Janoub Stadium will be a more realistic one.

"We were not afraid of Iran. Yes, they are a strong team with quality players, but we are also a good team, and we have no fear," said al-Battat. "We are now fully focused on the UAE, which is also a team we respect, but in football, teams are at different levels which is natural, and the UAE is just a bit closer to our level than Iran was."

For the UAE, a 3-1 victory over Hong Kong, offered a positive start to the campaign as they hope to go as far as the semi-finals for the third consecutive time

UAE head coach Paulo Bento feels Palestine's physical and direct approach will pose a challenge to his team. In the absence of all-time top scorer Ali Mabkhout who was left on the bench on Sunday, youngsters Sultan Adil and Zayed Sultan as well as Yahya al-Ghassani assumed scoring duties.

"It is important we don't think too much about what we did, but about what we can reach," said Bento. "We are expecting a balanced game, a difficult game against a good opponent. Strong physically with some players who are strong in aerial duels like the centre-backs and the centre-forwards and winger as well."

"It is a team that plays in an offensive way, more often with a direct game with some similar process like our previous opponents, so we should be aware and focused to control their best moments and try to control the game based on our own features and characteristics to reach the victory, knowing that it will be very difficult to win against this team."

Midfielder Ali Salmin wants to seal a place in the next round with a second win on the trot. "We are fully focused on this game, our ambition is to win and reach the sixth point that will bring us closer to qualifying with a game to spare," said Salmin.

"I would like to thank the coaching staff for all their help in preparing us for this tournament, and also thanks for the fans who are supporting us in the stadium and behind the screens back home. The players are all united and this is very important in tournaments like this, whether we start or are on the bench, we have to all be together and this is what can take us forward and help us get the win. We want to be focused on the pitch and implement the strategy of the coach for the second game."



Head coach Paulo Bento oversees UAE's training session.

MOTORSPORT

Double the fun as tickets on sale now for Lusail Speed Festival

here is only one place to be for motorsports fans this spring, as Lusail Speed Festival unveils a breathtaking line up of two and four-wheel racing.

For the first time ever, the Qatar 1812 KM - FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) 2024 and 2024 MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar will offer back-to-back racing across February and March at the state-of-the-art 5.419km Lusail International Circuit.

Tickets to Lusail Speed Festival, which are on sale now, will give fans entry to both events, including access to the main grandstand and Lusail Hill general admission areas, for the incredible price of QR200.

QATAR 1812 KM - FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP 2024

This year, Lusail International Circuit will host the WEC season-opener - The Qatar 1812 KM - FIA World Endurance Championship 2024, under the banner of Lusail Speed Fest, for the very first time. At under 10 hours long, the race is named in honour of Oatar's National Day.

Beginning on February 29 with free practice, qualifying sessions along with

the Lusail Classic race will take place on March 1, followed by a thrilling race day

1TICKET 2 RACES

Now entering its twelfth season, the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) is the world's premier international sportscar championship with multiple cars racing simultaneously across two categories.

Featuring a record breaking 19 Hypercars and 18 LMGT3 entries, 14 manufacturers including Aston Martin, BMW, Corvette, Ferrari, McLaren and Porsche plus the world's best racing drivers, the WEC can promise the very best in high-octane action.

And that's not all: former nine-time MotoGP world champion Valentino Rossi will be delighting fans at LIC by swapping two wheels for four, having made a strong debut at Le Mans last season.

The Italian legend attended the official WEC rookie test in Bahrain last November, where he tested the Oreca 07 Gibson LMP2 car but for this season he will drive the BMW M4 GT3 in the WEC's all-new LMGT3 category, making him the first

MotoGPTM World Champion to compete in a full season of FIA Championship. As part of the high-octane WEC action, Lusail Speed Festival will also play host to round one of the Qatar Touring Car Championship, taking place on March 1.

With its carnival atmosphere, including a stunning fireworks display, the FIA World Endurance Championship promises something for all the family and the first 4,000 spectators to enter LIC will have paddock access across all three days. Friday will see a pitlane walk and autograph

session take place, where fans can get even closer to their driving heroes.

MOTOGP GRAND PRIX OF QATAR

Hot on the heels of the WEC is the nailbiting 2024 MotoGPTM Qatar Airways Grand Prix of Qatar as it returns to Lusail for its opening race under Lusail circuit's floodlights, the only race in the MotoGP calendar to be held at night.

Having wowed fans last November, the action packed "Sprint Race Saturday "will also make a welcome return this year ensuring an unforgettable weekend filled with thrilling high-speed action and entertainment for all.

Additionally, the 2024 Grand Prix of Qatar will also be supported by the first round of the Qatar Superstock 600 Championship on March 9.

Championship on March 9.

Adding to the excitement, the first 400 spectators to enter the venue on Sunday will have access to the Hero Walk giving fans the chance to see MotoGP icons in the flesh. Tickets for the Lusail Speed Festival including access to Qatar 1812 km 2024 FIA World Endurance Championship and 2024 MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar cost just QR200 and are on sale now at tickets.lcsc.qa.