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**SPORT**

MATCH REPORT

# Afif strike fires Qatar into last 16

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

By Sahan Bidappa  
Doha

Asian 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 yet 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 yesterday. (Reuters)



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

to replace Pedro Miguel and Al-mahdi 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 defender Vahdat 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 Dzhraboev made a remarkable goal-line clearance to thwart Ali's attempt on the rebound.

Qatar 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 Mo-hamed al-Bayati.

"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.

FOCUS

# China in danger after another 0-0 stalemate

AFP  
Doha

China'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.

Lower-ranked Lebanon 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 Maatouk 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

Reuters  
Melbourne

Novak 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 Krejčíková, 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 6-7 6-6(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."

The 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 of the day.



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-year-old Russian Andreeva was played under the closed roof on the main showcourt but the Tunisian sixth seed could hardly blame the condi-

tions 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."

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-

son on indoor courts and dominated the Dutch qualifier 6-2 6-2 6-2.

After the rain finally relented, the roof was back open for US Open champion Gauff's second-round 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 Machac and Chris Eubanks losing 6-4 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 48-year 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 heart-breaking 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

India 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 69 balls 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 no-ball.

Rohit's fifth hundred in T20 Internationals was studied 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 3-18)

**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 three-match series 3-0

FIRST TEST

# 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 yesterday. (AFP)

AFP  
Adelaide

Debutant Shamar Joseph 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 yesterday.

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 beligerent 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 have taken.

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 stump."

"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 1 innings

K. Brathwaite b Cummins	13
T. Chanderpaul c Green b Cummins	6
McKenzie c Carey b Hazlewood	50
A. Athanaze b Hazlewood	13
K. Hodge c Green b Hazlewood	12
J. Greaves c Labuschagne b Hazlewood	5
J. Da Silva c Head b Cummins	6
A. Joseph c Smith b Cummins	14
G. Motie c Lyon b Starc	1
K. Roach not out	17
S. Joseph lbw Lyon	36
<b>Extras (b12 lb1 w2)</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Total (62.1 overs)</b>	<b>188</b>
<b>Fall of wicket:</b> 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)	
<b>Bowling:</b> Starc 12-5-37-1 (1w), Hazlewood 15-6-44-4, Cummins 17-5-41-4, Lyon 12-1-2-36-1, Marsh 2-1-0-0, Green 4-1-12-0	
<b>Australia (1st innings)</b>	
S. Smith c Greaves b S. Joseph	12
U. Khawaja not out	30
M. Labuschagne c Motie b S. Joseph	10
C. Green not out	6
<b>Extras (nb1)</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total (2 wickets, 21 overs)</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Fall of wickets:</b> 1-25 (Smith), 2-45 (Labuschagne)	
<b>Bowling:</b> Roach 7-2-21-0, A. Joseph 7-0-19-0 (1nb), S. Joseph 6-1-18-2, Motie 1-0-1-0	

## Allen pummels Pakistan with record ton, NZ clinch T20 series

**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,



New Zealand's Finn Allen celebrates after scoring his century during the third T20I against Pakistan in Dunedin yesterday. (AFP)

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

his knock, which also included five fours. "I'm not so personal milestone-driven. I suppose it's 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

**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 series 3-0



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.



# India's Stimac wants attacking approach against Uzbekistan

**By Yash Mudgal**  
Doha

India is without three of its regulars – Ashique Kuruniyan, Anwar Ali and Jaaskon Singh – who were ruled out due to injury. Mid-fielder 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,



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.

"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.

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



"It is important we don't think too much about what we did, but about what we can reach," said

"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.

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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 LMGTE3 category, making him the first

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

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](https://tickets.lcsc.qa).