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McIlroy wins record fourth Dubai Desert Classic title



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QREC set for the HH The Amir Sword Festival in February

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**GULF TIMES**

**SPORT**

PREVIEW

# Defending champs Qatar eye third consecutive win

THE GROUP A LEADERS TAKE ON CHINA AT THE KHALIFA INTERNATIONAL STADIUM TODAY

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Defending champions Qatar will be targeting their third successive win when they take on China today in their last Group A clash of the AFC Asian Cup.

Qatar, coached by Marquez Lopez, have posted wins over Lebanon (3-0) and Tajikistan (1-0) in the first two matches in Group A of the 24-team tournament.

With their win over Tajikistan at Al Bayt Stadium last week, Qatar secured a spot in the last 16.

Rivals China, ranked 79 on the FIFA computer, have played two goalless draws against Tajikistan and Lebanon.

“We’re going to enter this game fully aware that we should win, but we have to note that we should also do what’s convenient for us, so we will use the right players,” Qatar coach Lopez said yesterday at a pre-match news conference.

“We will make some changes, but our main purpose will be to win with the players who will play,” the Spaniard, who took over as coach a little over a month ago, added.

“That doesn’t mean we’re going to amend the formation or use less effective players. We have a roster of 26 players and they have a high level of performance,” he said without disclosing which of the players may sit out today at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium.

Lopez, who was managing Al Wakrah in the Qatar Stars League before his shock call-up to take over from Carlos Quieroz last month, said Qatar will use the same attacking game they employed against Lebanon and Tajikistan. Qatar’s key striker Akram Afif has so far found the net three times with Almoez Ali also making an impact in the first two matches.

Exuding confidence ahead of their crucial Asian Cup clash, China coach Aleksandar Jankovic called it a “privilege” to control their own destiny. With a win against hosts Qatar today, the Dragons will roar into the knockout rounds. History shows China



Qatar players line up before one of the two matches they have played at the AFC Asian Cup 2023. Qatar face China today.



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez listens to a question during a news conference in Doha yesterday. **Right:** China coach Aleksandar Jankovic answers a question at a separate press conference.



up to them. It’s very simple: it’s 11 v 11 on the field, 90 minutes, win the game to go through, don’t look around, don’t follow other results, don’t look at other groups, don’t look at the other game. It’s very, very simple,” he said.

Lopez said his side is thrilled to be competing on home soil in what is the biggest and most widely followed continental football tournament.

“We have great respect for the competition and for this Cup,” Lopez said. “A game in a championship such as the Asian Cup is a big motivation for any player, to go out and win and put in an excellent performance.”

“We know there will be 40,000 or 50,000 Qatari fans wanting to enjoy their team winning. It will not be a walk in the park.

“We will be there to compete and play respectfully against our rival and to give the best image to the fans of their team,” Lopez added.

SPOTLIGHT

## Fathy promises focused Qatar; Wang optimistic China will advance

Qatar midfielder Ahmed Fathy insists he and his teammates will not ease off in their meeting with China at Khalifa International Stadium today despite having secured their place in the last 16 of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 as Group A winners.

Fathy has played a leading role thus far, one of only six players Marquez Lopez has chosen to start both their matches against Lebanon and Tajikistan – having only featured in one game during Qatar’s title-winning run in 2019.

Wins over Lebanon and Tajikistan mean Lopez’s side are guaranteed to top the standings ahead of the knockout rounds, but Fathy stressed the defending champions want to go into the next phase of the competition maintaining their current momentum.

“After winning against Tajikistan we guaranteed our



qualification and we lead the group,” he said.

“However, after that game we vowed as players that we still have one game to play against China and we want to win.

“In such competitions, if you relax after qualifying it’s going to affect your performance, (it’s important) to continue the winning mentality in the next phase.

“Every player has put in a great performance mentally and it’s our goal to enter the knockout stage with nine points, with the best level possible.”

The Chinese have yet to win – or score – at Qatar 2023, registering goalless draws with Lebanon and Tajikistan, but Fathy remains wary of Aleksandar Jankovic’s team despite their struggles in front of



goal. “We know the China team is entering the game to qualify,” he said. “This is their main purpose and this is why we say it will be a difficult game, but we’ll be playing for the win regardless of who is playing against us.”

China know victory will take them into the next round while a draw could still be enough to secure one of the four berths avail-

able to the third-placed finishers, and defender Wang Shangyuan is relishing the opportunity to take on the tournament hosts.

“Now the scenario is quite clear,” said the Henan FC defender. “Qatar have already qualified from the group stage and we still have the chance in our hands.

“The players will keep following the tactics of the coach and we will

try to do our best against Qatar to win the points and go to the next stage. We respect Qatar’s performances in the last two games, but we’re all excited and we want to show our best performance tomorrow.”

After witnessing several unexpected outcomes in the group stage so far, Wang has been encouraged by the shrinking gap between the continent’s leading teams and the rest.

“I’ve watched almost all the games in the group stages and the distance between the traditionally strong teams and the relatively weak teams is smaller,” he said.

“This proves the football level in Asia has made progress but we have seen teams like Japan and Saudi Arabia still have a lot of things for us as teams to learn from. But there are no more relatively weak teams in Asia. Everybody has made progress.”

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GOLF

# Gutsy McIlroy wins fourth Dubai Desert Classic title

The world No 2 has now become the most successful player in the 35-year history of the championship

AFP  
Dubai

Rory McIlroy won a “really cool” record fourth Dubai Desert Classic title yesterday by one shot after storming back from a 10-shot deficit going into the weekend at the Emirates Golf Club.

McIlroy made two massive birdie putts towards the end of the front nine – a 31-footer on the par-4 eighth, followed by a 16-footer on the ninth – to move to 15-under par and lead by three shots.

At the same time his playing partner and overnight leader American Cameron Young struggled and made the turn at two-over with two bogeys.

On the back nine, McIlroy made a bogey on the par-5 13th and could not add another birdie, but that was enough for a winning total of 14-under par 274.

Poland’s Adrian Meronk once again showed his massive talent, and a last-hole birdie gave him a solo second place at 13-under par.

World No 25 Young, searching for his first win on elite tours, finished third at 12-under par.

With his fourth title at the Emirates Golf Club, the world No 2 McIlroy surpassed South Africa’s Ernie Els and became the most

successful player in the 35-year history of the championship.

“It’s really cool,” said McIlroy, who recorded his first win as a professional in the tournament in 2009.

“I didn’t think about that (fourth win) during the round. It was a really tricky day. It was hard to get it close and make a ton of birdies.

“The pivotal point for me came on the eighth and ninth holes. Making two threes there, that sort of set me up to try to control it on the way in.

He said after “that one blunder on 13” he “steadied the ship well over the last few holes.”

“It was one of those days where there wasn’t a ton of fireworks just because the course was so difficult, but I held on as best as I could and thankfully, no one around the top of the leaderboard made much of a run.”

Chile’s LIV Golf star Joaquin Niemann made the most of his limited starts on the European tour, finishing tied fourth at 10-under alongside Spain’s Pablo Larrazabal and Canada’s Aaron Cockerill.

The 34-year-old Northern Irishman said the win will set him up perfectly for the Masters in April, the one major championship that has eluded him so far.

“I think so. Look, Augusta is still a long way away in golfing terms.



Rory McIlroy of Northern Ireland poses with his caddy Harry Diamond (left) next to his trophy after winning the Hero Dubai Desert Classic on the Majlis Course at the Emirates Golf Club in Dubai yesterday. McIlroy won a record fourth Dubai Desert Classic title by one shot. (AFP)

A lot can change in the two-and-a-half months,” said McIlroy, who missed the cut at Augusta National in 2023.

“It’s always nice to get a win. It’s always nice to feel like you’re play-

ing well going into it. I’ve always said that I’ll take execution over preparation every single time because you just have to execute the golf shots, especially there.

“Last year at Augusta, I learnt a

lot about myself. I’ve told this story before about the first green on Friday, and Brooks (Koeppa) was on the eighth green and I saw the big leaderboard, and I was already 10 behind at that point.

“I was 10 behind after two days this week and ended up winning the golf tournament. I feel like I’ve taken that learning already and put it into practise a little bit already.”

The DP World Tour moves next to the northern emirates of the UAE for the Ras Al Khaimah Classic.

McIlroy will play the AT&T Pebble Beach ProAm on the PGA Tour in the first week of February.

**Leading fourth and final round scores at the European Tour’s Dubai Desert Classic at the Emirates Golf Club yesterday (GBR and IRL unless stated, Par 72):**

**274** - Rory McIlroy 71-70-63-70  
**275** - Adrian Meronk (POL) 68-66-70-71

**276** - Cameron Young (USA) 67-64-71-74

**278** - Pablo Larrazabal (ESP) 73-69-70-66, Joaquin Niemann (CHI) 69-72-67-70, Aaron Cockerill (CAN) 71-67-72-68

**279** - Nicolai Hoegaard (DEN) 68-69-73-69, Li Haotong (CHN) 67-71-69-72, Adam Scott (AUS) 69-71-70-69, Masahiro Kawamura (JPN) 75-63-72-69

**280** - Rasmus Hoegaard (DEN) 67-70-70-73, Callum Shinkwin 71-68-71-70, Michael Thorbjornsen (USA) 72-70-70-68

**282** - Tommy Fleetwood 69-70-73, Tom McKibbin 72-70-70-73

TENNIS / AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Djokovic and Sabalenka reach quarters

AFP  
Melbourne

Novak Djokovic was at his dominant best in a straight-sets demolition job to reach the Australian Open quarter-finals yesterday, with Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff in equally ruthless touch.

The Serbian superstar recaptured his top form to surge into the last 16 after dropping sets in his opening two matches while ill, and he stepped up another level against Adrian Mannarino.

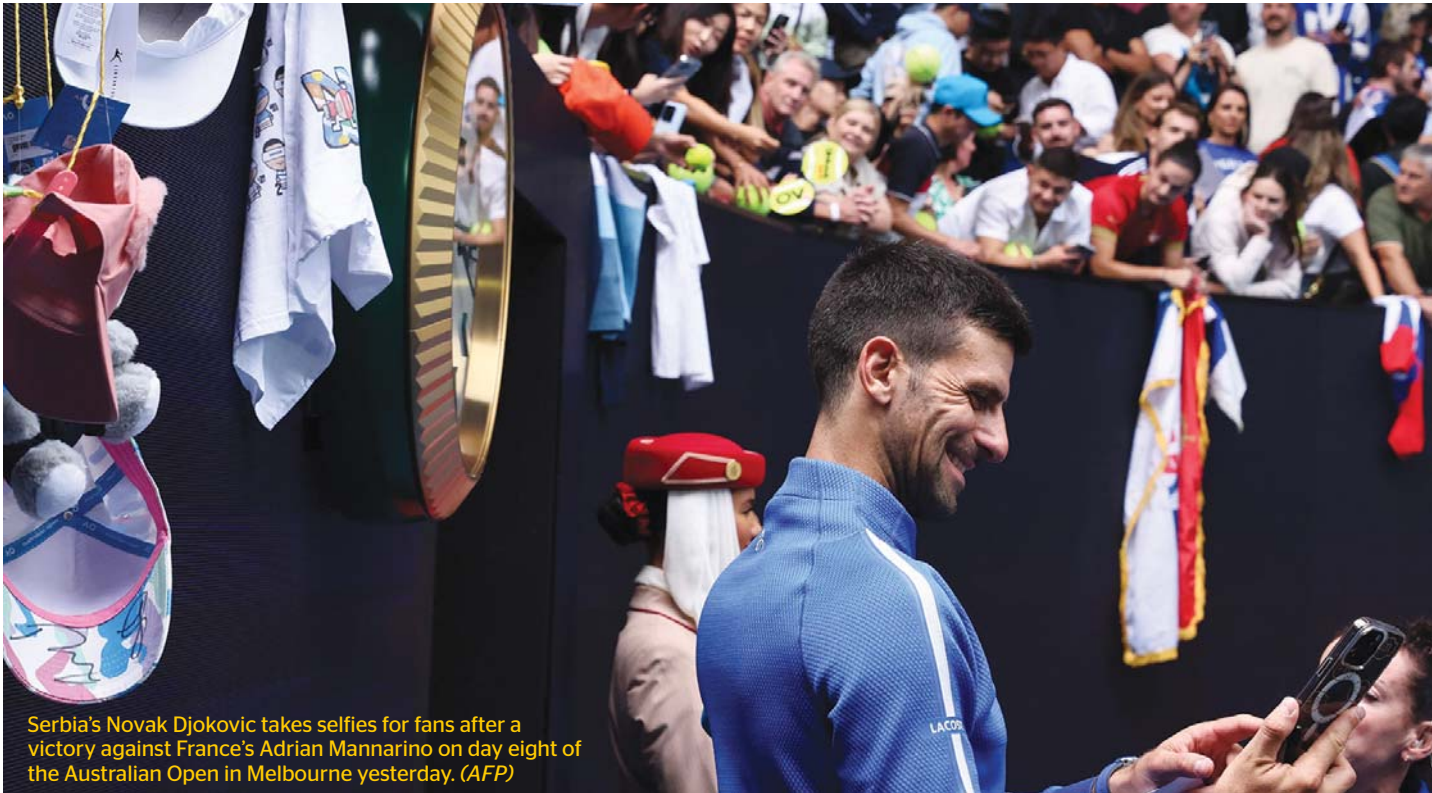
The French 20th seed, who at 35 is just a year younger than Djokovic, has been enjoying a late career resurgence. But he was taught a lesson by the world number one, who won the first 13 games in powering through to the last eight of a Grand Slam for the 58th time, equalling Roger Federer’s men’s record.

“I played great, from the first to the last point,” said the defending champion, who is red-hot favourite to collect an 11th Melbourne title and a record 25th Grand Slam crown after his 6-0, 6-0, 6-3 win yesterday. “It’s going in a positive direction, health-wise, tennis-wise so I’m really pleased with where I am at the moment.”

He will face 12th-seed Taylor Fritz next after the American beat last year’s runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas 7-6 (7/3), 5-7, 6-3, 6-3.

“The times I have played him I haven’t brought my best level and you need to be if you are going to complete with someone like Djokovic,” said Fritz of the Serb.

Djokovic almost always plays the night session on Rod Laver Arena, but was bumped to the afternoon



Serbia’s Novak Djokovic takes selfies for fans after a victory against France’s Adrian Mannarino on day eight of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

this time. That’s because home hope Alex de Minaur was in action, but he was unable to get past Russian fifth seed Andrey Rublev who won a draining 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-7 (4/7), 6-3, 6-0 epic.

It thrust him into a clash with in-form fourth seed Jannik Sinner, who blasted past last year’s semi-finalist Karen Khachanov 6-4, 7-5, 6-3 and is yet to drop a set.

Defending women’s champion Sabalenka has also been in imperious form and was in complete charge against unseeded Amanda



Belarus’ Aryna Sabalenka takes pictures of fans as she celebrates victory against USA’s Amanda Anisimova during their singles match at the Australian Open yesterday. (AFP)

Anisimova on Margaret Court Arena, sweeping past the American 6-3, 6-2.

Fourth seed Coco Gauff, attempting to become the first woman to back up a US Open title with a Grand Slam win in Australia since Naomi Osaka in 2020-2021, has been almost as impressive.

She swatted aside Poland’s unseeded Magdalena Frech 6-1, 6-2 in just 63 minutes on Rod Laver Arena, with the 85-year-tennis legend watching from the stands.

“It was an honour to play in

front of you, so thank you for coming to my match,” said 19-year-old Gauff, who had never progressed beyond the fourth round at Melbourne Park in four previous attempts.

“First Aussie quarter-final. Super happy to be in this position and be here.... It’s cool to get over that hump.”

She will now meet Ukraine’s Marta Kostyuk, who beat Russian qualifier Maria Timofeeva 6-2, 6-1.

With seven of the women’s top 10 seeds knocked out in the first week, including world number one Iga Swiatek, both Gauff and Sabalenka have a glorious chance to win their second major title.

They are on the same side of the draw and will not meet in the final, with a potential last-four clash looming instead.

Sabalenka has conceded just 11 games in four matches and is favoured to win another title to go with her breakthrough Grand Slam crown last year.

Should she go all the way, the 25-year-old will be the first woman to retain the title since compatriot Victoria Azarenka completed the feat in 2013.

“I’m getting stronger because I enjoy the atmosphere and I really want to stay here as long as I can, till the very last day,” she said yesterday.

Her next opponent will be ninth seed Barbora Krejickova after she ended the dream run of Russian 16-year-old Mirra Andreeva, who beat sixth seed Ons Jabeur on her way to the fourth round.

Andreeva pushed the Czech player to three sets, but ultimately could not find the killer blow.

## Pakistan snatch 42-run win over New Zealand in fifth T20

**Christchurch:** Pakistan’s spinners ran through New Zealand to pick up a consolation 42-run win in the fifth and final Twenty20 international yesterday and avoid a series clean sweep.

The tourists lost the five-match series 4-1 but it ended on a positive note as they dismissed the Black Caps for a paltry 92 in defence of 134-8.

Part-time offspinner Iftikhar Ahmed produced career-best figures of 3-24 as a weakened New Zealand batting lineup struggled against the turning ball and were skittled for their eighth-lowest T20 total.

Only opener Finn Allen (22) and Glenn Phillips (26) passed 20 as Pakistan claimed the last eight wickets for 39 runs in comfortably their best bowling display of the series. Left-arm spinner Mohamed Nawaz (2-18) was effective with



New Zealand’s players pose with the series trophy after the fifth T20 against Pakistan at Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. (AFP)

the new ball, removing Rachin Ravindra and Will Young cheaply, while Shaheen Shah Afridi had something to cheer at the end of his maiden series as captain, taking 2-20. New Zealand were

missing three of their first-choice batters: Kane Williamson (knee injury), Devon Conway (Covid-19) and Daryl Mitchell (rested). Earlier, it appeared the home side had done enough to push for a

clean sweep when they restricted Pakistan’s batters with another disciplined bowling display. Seamers Tim Southee, Matt Henry and Lockie Ferguson all claimed two scalps, along with spinner Ish Sodhi. Southee (2-19), the highest wicket-taker in T20 cricket, dismissed debutant Haseebullah Khan in the opening over and returned in the 13th over to remove the dangerous Fakhar Zaman, who had raced to 33 off 16 balls. Mohamed Rizwan scored 38 off 38.

### BRIEF SCORES

**Pakistan 134-8 in 20 overs** (M. Rizwan 38, F. Zaman 33; T. Southee 2-19, I. Sodhi 2-22) **v New Zealand 92 all out in 17.2 overs** (G. Phillips 26; I. Ahmed 3-24, M. Nawaz 2-18) **Result:** Pakistan win by 42 runs **Series:** New Zealand win best-of-five series 4-1 **Toss:** Pakistan

## England’s Brook pulls out of India tour

**London:** Middle-order batsman **Harry Brook** is to leave England’s tour of India and return home “with immediate effect for personal reasons”, the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said in a statement yesterday.

“The Brook family respectfully requests privacy during this time,” the ECB said. “In light of this, the ECB and the family kindly request the media and the public to respect their wish for privacy and refrain from intruding on their private space.”

The 24-year-old, who has made four centuries in his 12 Tests, was expected to be in the line-up for the first Test which starts in Hyderabad on Thursday.

Dan Lawrence, who played the last of his 11 Tests in 2022, has been named as Brook’s replacement.

The 26-year-old made a Test best 91 against the West Indies in Bridgetown in March 2022 but has not played since that tour. He has, however, been in Test squads under head coach Brendon McCullum, including for the 2023 Ashes.

Lawrence is expected to arrive in India today but England are now likely to play both wicketkeepers, Jonny Bairstow and Ben Foakes, in the first Test, rather than choosing between them.





SPOTLIGHT

# HH The Amir Sword Festival to see record prize money

A staggering \$10mn on offer for riders competing in Qatar's biggest horse racing festival

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

The Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC), chaired by Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohannadi, announced the conditions of the international races of the HH The Amir Sword Festival, to be held between February 15 and 17 at QREC Al Rayyan turf course.

Participation in these races is expected to be large and strong, especially with the unprecedented increase in prize money since with \$10mn on offer.

Such boost has maximised the standard of competition in all the races of the Festival and contributed to raising the performance standard of participating runners in both purebred Arabian and thoroughbred races.

"As the start of the HH The Amir Sword Festival is approaching and is due to take place within a few weeks, the pace of preparations for the prestigious event is accelerating within QREC in order to ensure the level of success, which is up to the value and prestige of the Festival, which has become one of the main highlights in the horse racing world at this time every year," said al-Mohannadi, the QREC Chairman.

"In addition, the QREC management makes sure to have all technical and organisational arrangements finalised in an optimal manner, reflecting the standing, which Qatar's horse racing has reached at the international level. In fact, the increased number of international runners in the Festival every year is a demonstration of the high confidence in the organisational level of the races, which will be staged over three days at Al Rayyan Racecourse.



H E Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohannadi, QREC Chairman

"Work is progressing in full swing in preparation for the HH The Amir Sword Festival," added al-Mohannadi. "The conditions of the international participation have been announced. QREC also has many strategic relationships with organisations, who, as our success partners, contribute to the sponsorship of the Festival. The closer the date of the start of the Festival approaches, more details will be revealed both in terms of sponsors and public events, which will be held at QREC on the sidelines of the Festival. Besides, the arrangements for the entries of all the races to be run throughout the days of the Festival have been completed. QREC applies the highest international standards applicable in major races conducted at the world's top racecourse and this matter attracts many international

connections to run their horses in the premier Festival at QREC."

Bader Mohamed al-Darwish, Acting CEO of QREC, shed light on the conditions of the international races of the Festival.

"As per the announced conditions, it has been decided for supplementary entries to close on Tuesday, 23 January while the declarations will close on Monday, 12 February," he said. "Participation in these races are by invitation from QREC only. The Handicapper will assign an International Rating to each horse that has been nominated or supplemented to the International races, including horses already based in Qatar. These ratings will form the basis for the selection procedure. The races are limited to 16 starters, except for the Dukhan Sprint, which is limited to 14 runners. QREC reserves the right, and has sole authority to decide on the number of runners in the race, after careful consideration of any entry's overall standing and potential to perform adequately in the race. Consequently, no entry, whether local or international, is guaranteed selection even if fewer than the maximum 16 starters are selected."

"The importance of the Festival, as our most prestigious event, makes us work on all details, given the high reputation, which the Festival currently enjoys around the world due to the top quality and class of the horses vying for the Festival's titles.

"Therefore, the participation of international horses is very positive and it increases the strength of the competition at Al Rayyan Racecourse. International horses will be subject to the requirements for temporary import to Qatar, including, bloods within 30 days of export along with the agreed exporting countries health certificate for Qatar."



Bader Mohamed al-Darwish, Acting CEO of QREC

porting countries health certificate for Qatar."

**International races of prestigious Festival**

The international races take centre stage in the Festival given the value of their titles and the class of their runners. They will be staged on the final day of the Festival, Saturday, 17 February and they are as follows as per their running order.

**Irish Thoroughbred Marketing Cup** (Gr2 QA) for four-year-olds and older over 1600m and the prize money is \$500,000.

**Qatar International Cup** (Gr1 PA) for four-year-olds and older Purebred Arabians over 1600m and the prize money is \$500,000.

**Dukhan Sprint** (Gr3 QA) for three-year-olds and older Thoroughbreds over 1200m and the prize money is \$400,000.

Al Rayyan Mile (Gr2 QA) for three-year-olds and older Thoroughbreds over 1600m and the prize money is \$400,000.

**HH The Amir Trophy** for four-year-olds and older Thoroughbreds over 2400m and the prize money is \$2,500,000.

The Festival's finale and most prestigious title, **HH The Amir Sword** (Gr1 PA) for four-year-olds and older Purebred Arabians over 2400m and the prize money is \$2,500,000. It is also the third and final leg of the Triple Crown.



## 2024 ARABIAN DRAG RACING LEAGUE

# Nine new champions crowned after 2nd round

By Sports Reporter  
Doha

Amidst thrilling competition and breath-taking struggles until the last moments, the second round of the 2024 Arabian Drag Racing League concluded with the gracious sponsorship of HE Sheikh Khalid bin Hamad al-Thani, Chairman of Qatar Racing Club (QRC). This round witnessed an increase in the number of participants, reaching over 110 racers, an increase of 15 racers compared to the opening round. This prompted the organising committee to begin the qualifying competitions last Wednesday, with champions from this sport present in Qatar and all Gulf Arab countries. Interestingly, none of the champions from the previous round could secure their second title in this round across all nine categories. This raised the level of challenge and competition for the championship.

In the strongest category of this year, the Index 4.0, the runner-up of the opening round, Jaber al-Maghribi, managed to clinch the title in this round. He defeated Msalam al-Qalaf in the final showdown, while Basil Abbas secured the third position, the same position he achieved in the previous round. Al-Maghribi also claimed another victory by winning the Super Street category, defeating Hussain Akbar in the final rematch of the previous round, where Akbar emerged victorious. The third podium went to Badr al-Sharshani, who achieved a double presence on



Prize winners pose for a group photograph at the end of the Second Round of the 2024 Arabian Drag Racing League held at Qatar Racing Club.

the podium by winning the Index 4.80 category, surpassing Nawaf al-Khaledi in the final race, while Adel Ali al-Luaim secured the third spot on the podium.

Moving on to the Index 4.50 category, the podium for this round featured three completely new faces. Ali Hussain al-Qalaf emerged as the champion, followed by Hussain Ashkanani in second place and Abdulaziz Saleh in third. The competitions in the Index 8.50 and Index 9.0 categories witnessed a return to the quarter-mile distance after it was reduced in the previous round for safety reasons. The final showdown of the first category saw the runner-up of the previous round, Hussain Ashkanani, competing against the third-place finisher, Raed al-Bakr.

Ashkanani secured the title, leaving the second position to al-Bakr, while Khaled Abdul Karim

Hamli claimed the third position. In the second category, 9.0, Mohamed Jawad reached the final for the second consecutive time, and after missing the title in the previous round, he succeeded in winning it this time by defeating Faisal Khalifa Ahmed.

The third position went to racer Abdullah Ali Abdullah. Badr bin Eidan managed to secure the title of the second round in the strongest categories of motorcycle racing, the Super Street Bike category, defeating the leader of the qualifying trials, Mshari al-Turki.

This victory was due to an issue that prevented the latter from participating in the final race, while Yaqoub al-Ali achieved his first podium in the championship by finishing in third place.

Bin Eidan returned once again to the podium, but this time in third

place in the Street Bike category, won by the runner-up of the previous round, Musa al-Balushi.

Saad Turki settled for the second position in this round.

As for the Index 8.5 category, its final match brought together Khalid al-Dosari and Fadi Abu Jamous, both absent from the previous round's competitions. In the end, al-Dosari claimed the title, leaving Abu Jamous in second place, while Fahad Mohamed Haji secured the third position.

In the closing of the competitions, Khalifa al-Khayarin, the director of the organizers at QRC, crowned the top three winners in each category amid a splendid celebration, thus concluding the events of the second round of ADRL and starting preparations immediately for the third round scheduled for the coming Thursday and Friday (25th and 26th)

## Nolan impresses in both races of Round 1



Nolan Macary put in a dominant performance winning both the races in the first round of the FIM Mini GP Qatar Championship at the Lusail Circuit karting track on Saturday. Macary, who started on pole, maintained his lead in the 15-lap race to grab maximum 50 points from two races. Mahmoud El Bana and Marton Belleli finished second and third respectively in both the races. Four rounds will be held in the championship.

## Al-Hammadi applauds Al Shaqab and QEF's strategic partnership

**Ahmed Yousef al-Hammadi,** Director of the Commercial Department at Al Shaqab, has applauded the co-operation between the Qatar Equestrian Federation (QEF) and Al Shaqab towards staging top and international level equestrian events including the annual Qatar Equestrian Tour - Longines Hathab.

Al-Hammadi added that the partnership between QEF and Al Shaqab is aimed at furthering Qatar equestrianism. He also praised the ongoing three-leg Doha International Tour 2024, saying it constitutes a cornerstone in achieving one of the most important strategic goals of the Qatar Equestrian Federation, which is to develop and raise the level of the riders' performance and enhance their experience competing alongside the world's best riders in showjumping. The second leg of Doha Tour



2024 concluded at Al Shaqab's Longines outdoor arena on Saturday. The third leg is scheduled for January 25-27. Al-Hammadi extended his thanks to all entities and institutions sponsoring Doha Tour and all other equestrian activities, which have had a great impact on the successes achieved. He said Al Shaqab's strategic partnership with QEF contributes to providing the work teams with high technical expertise in the field of organising sporting events.

## Team QMMF win 992 AM class at Abu Dhabi 6 Hours Challenge

Following their good show in the qualifying, Qatari drivers Abdullah al-Khelaifi, Ghanim al-Ali, Ibrahim al-Abdulghani, and German semi-professional racer Julian Henses of Team QMMF (Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation) by HRT from Qatar raised the bar further by clinching victory in the highly competitive Porsche 911 GT3 (992 AM) class at the Abu Dhabi 6 Hours Challenge at the Yas Marina Circuit in UAE yesterday. While Team QMMF by HRT's performance by itself is a big achievement, it gains more importance given that the Abu Dhabi 6 Hours Challenge is a significant event within the Middle East Endurance Championship's 2024 season.

Team QMMF by HRT successfully completed 136 laps within the time-frame. Their exceptional performance included a best lap time of 1:57.641 at the renowned racetrack. The exceptional performance of al-Khelaifi, al-Ali, al-Abdulghani, and Julian Henses was applauded by QMMF's Executive Director and Lusail International Circuit CEO Amro al-Hamad, who said that the big success has been achieved following their hard work over a period of time. He wished the team more success in the upcoming event and future endeavours. Team QMMF by HRT will next participate in the Hankook 24H Challenge at the Dubai Autodrome, scheduled for January 26-28.

Team QMMF by HRT will next participate in the Hankook 24H Challenge at the Dubai Autodrome, scheduled for January 26-28.





MATCH REPORTS

# Saudi Arabia beat nine-man Kyrgyzstan to reach last 16

THAILAND FRUSTRATE OMAN IN GOALLESS DRAW TO INCH TOWARDS ASIAN CUP LAST 16 SPOT

Roberto Mancini's Saudi Arabia reached the Asian Cup knockout rounds yesterday with a laboured 2-0 win over a Kyrgyzstan side who played almost half the game with nine men.

Ayaz Akmatov was sent off in the ninth minute for a studs-up challenge before Mohamed Kanno opened the scoring for the three-time champion Saudis in the 35th minute in Doha.

Kyrgyzstan's Kimi Merk also saw red for another bad tackle seven minutes into the second half.

But Saudi Arabia – ranked 56 in the world to Kyrgyzstan's 98 – managed only one more late goal from Faisal al-Ghamdi in a toothless attacking performance.

The win gave the Saudis, who came back to claim a last-gasp 2-1 victory over Oman in their opening game, six points from two matches.

They lead Group F two points ahead of Thailand, who drew 0-0 with Oman earlier in the day.

Saudi Arabia joined hosts and holders Qatar, Australia, Iran and Iraq in booking their places in the last 16.

Akmatov was initially only yellow-carded for driving his studs into Sami al-Naji's shin, but the referee flashed the red after a VAR check.

The Saudis could not immediately turn the numerical advantage into goals, with Feras al-Brikan missing two golden chances to give them the lead.

The frustration looked set to continue when Abdulrahman al-Malki hit the post, but Saud Abdulhamid collected the rebound and crossed the ball back into the box for Kanno to volley home.

Already facing an uphill struggle, Kyrgyzstan were reduced to nine men in the 52nd minute after another VAR red-card check.

Merk's hefty challenge on Hassan Tambakti was judged to be a sending-off offence.

But the Saudis again failed to capitalise, with Kanno shooting

harmlessly over the bar in the 68th minute before Saleh al-Shehri glanced a header wide 10 minutes later. Substitute Ghamdi finally added a second goal in the 84th minute, letting fly with a shot from the edge of the box that Kyrgyzstan goalkeeper Erzhan Tokotaev fumbled into the goal.

**Goalless draw between Thailand, Oman**

Thailand boosted their hopes of advancing to the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 knockout stage after battling to a goalless draw with Oman in their Group F tie yesterday.

The result took Thailand to four points with three-time champions Saudi Arabia their final group stage opponents while the draw means Oman's hopes hang in the balance with the West Asian side to play Kyrgyz Republic in their concluding tie.

Thailand defeated Kyrgyz Republic 2-0 in their opener while Oman suffered a 2-1 defeat to Saudi Arabia.

While Thailand showed slightly more initiative in the early minutes of the game, both teams began the match with a measured approach and avoided too many offensive forays.

The War Elephants had their first chance when a 15th minute corner kick from Teerathon Bunmathan was powerfully headed towards the Oman goal by defender Elias Dolah. However, the attempt was cleared to safety by midfielder Abdullah Fawaz after being initially punched away by goalkeeper Ibrahim al-Mukhaimi.

Oman began to find their footing, Issam al-Sabhi receiving Jameel al-Yahmadi's cross at an opportune position inside the box but had his left-footed shot to the centre of the goal blocked by Thai goalkeeper Siwarak Tedsungneon.

The West Asian side closed the half strongly but couldn't find a breakthrough as they took the stalemate into the break.

A more determined Thailand side took the field in the second



Saudi Arabia's Mohamed Kanno celebrates scoring their first goal with teammates against Kyrgyzstan during their AFC Asian Cup Group F clash at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, Al Rayyan, yesterday. (Reuters)

half and there was a window of opportunity opened when Suphanat Mueanta intercepted an overhead cross from Oman's Arshad al-Alawi and charged forward into the Oman box but was met by the steely figure of defender Ahmed al-Khamisi.

Almost immediately after, Oman skipper Harib al-Saadi tore through the Thai defence but despite warding off as many as four white shirts, had his attempt blocked by the Thai custodian.

The Branko Ivankovic-led Oman came to life as the clock hit the 70th minute and began to pile pressure on the Thai defence line, most notably with Khalid al-Baikri's free-kick finding al-Sabhi inside the six yard box but his attempt to poke the ball into the Thai net was deftly parried away by the goalkeeper.

AFP/the-afc.com



PREVIEW

## Coach Segrt confident of 3 points against Lebanon

Head coach Petar Segrt is confident of three points when Tajikistan face Lebanon in their final AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Group A tie at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium today.

Both teams secured draws against China and a win for either side will boost their chances of advancing into the Round of 16.

Segrt, who has overseen Tajikistan since 2022, expects his team to come out fighting against Lebanon.

"Tomorrow is a very important match for both teams," said Segrt. "Ahead of the tournament, we were realistic with our expectations, knowing that Qatar is the best team in the group. But this is the final match in the group and although Lebanon will be tough opponents, we are equally confident of getting the three points."

"The Lebanon match is our ticket into the next round and the players are really motivated to get the first win. We are relaxed and know how important this is for our country and we want to continue making history by reaching the knockout stage."

"We lost some players ahead of the tournament and now despite losing (Amadoni) Kamolov (suspended) we still have other players who can step in and fill the role."

"I believe in my team, and we'll give our best. I hope we can get chances against Lebanon and score the first goal and continue our journey in this tournament. We must accept that we are playing against much stronger teams. Sometimes in life, when you fall down, you must get up. We must try, go in with our positive ap-



Tajikistan head coach Petar Segrt addresses a news conference in Doha yesterday. Tajikistan take on Lebanon in a Group A clash of the AFC Asian Cup 2023 today.



Lebanon head coach Miodrag Radulavic

proach. That is my inspiration."

Having missed their chance to secure a win against China PR, head coach Miodrag Radulavic believes his players will shine against Tajikistan.

after the game," said Radulavic.

"Tajikistan are very organised, but I believe in my players, and we are ready to put in one more good performance and achieve a positive result."

"We created chances against China, hitting the crossbar twice. Sometimes we need a bit of luck, but I'm satisfied with my team's performance. I hope my defenders will be at their best and I also hope that we can score goals, which will surely be crucial."

"This competition has shown that there are small differences between the teams. We should follow our game plan, be well-organised in defence, and be efficient in attack. It's important that we create chances. Hopefully, tomorrow is our day."

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PREMIER LEAGUE

## Jota, Nunez sparkle to send Liverpool five points clear

**AFP**  
Bournemouth

Liverpool shrugged off the absence of Mohamed Salah to move five points clear at the top of the Premier League as Diogo Jota and Darwin Nunez struck twice in a 4-0 win at Bournemouth yesterday.

The Reds' title credentials will be tested while their star man is away with Egypt at the Africa Cup of Nations.

But Jota and Nunez stood up to be counted to secure a vital win at one of the form sides in the Premier League.

Bournemouth had lost just once in their previous nine games to climb comfortably clear of the relegation zone.

However, the Cherries were held at arm's length in the first half before Jurgen Klopp's men turned on the style after the break.

The visitors were restricted to pot shots in a first period devoid of clear chances.

Alexis Mac Allister and Nunez tested Neto from long range.

But the game turned on one moment of quality from Liverpool to break the deadlock on 49 minutes.

Jota's first time pass put Nunez in the clear and the Uruguayan showed the poise he has often lacked in his Liverpool career to date to slot into the far corner.

Substitute Cody Gakpo then teed up Jota to fire in at the near post 20 minutes from time to end the game as a contest.

Jota was more fortunate for his second as the Portuguese fluffed his initial effort from Conor Bradley's cross only for the ball to sit up for a second attempt which he drilled low and hard across Neto.

Nunez had scored just once in his previous 16 Liverpool appearances since scoring the winner against Bournemouth in the League Cup in early November.

The confidence he gained from finding the net earlier in the half showed as he slid in perfectly to meet Joe Gomez's cross and round off a fine afternoon for Liverpool in stoppage time.

Manchester City have a game in hand on their title rivals to be able to shave Liverpool's advantage at the top down to two points.

But after a season in the doldrums saw Klopp's men slip to fifth last year, there is little doubt that they are once again the biggest threat to City's crown as champions.



Liverpool's Diogo Jota celebrates scoring their third goal with Ryan Gravenberch, Cody Gakpo and Darwin Nunez. (AFP)