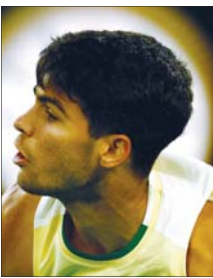


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Alcaraz cruises, qualifier Yastremska into quarters



FOOTBALL | Page 3

Mancini plays down Asian Cup hopes as Saudis labour into last 16

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SPOTLIGHT

# Asian Cup Qatar has exceeded expectations, says Organising Committee chairman

Minister of Sports and Youth says 1.2mn tickets have been sold for the continental football event

**QNA**  
Doha

**H**E Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, the Minister of Sports and Youth and Chairman of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Organising Committee, said that the public turnout and attendance for the continental showpiece matches has exceeded expectations, revealing that ticket sales exceeded 1.2mn while the attendance has so far reached 620,000.

The minister said this success is due to several factors, most notably the participation of a wide number of communities of the teams especially the Arab ones, as well as playing in the stadiums that hosted the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 matches which made people eager to attend.

HE Sheikh Hamad pointed out that all tickets for the Qatar and Palestine matches were completely sold out. He explained that they set similar high standards when organising the event that were present for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Most of the people who worked on the World Cup also took part in preparing the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 and no distinction was made at all between the two tournaments.

Regarding the Arab Cup, HE Sheikh Hamad said that the tournament is set to return after Qatar hosted the tournament in 2021. He said the Arab Cup will be organised again in co-operation between the International Association Football Federation (FIFA) and the Union of Arab Football Associations (UAEA).

Although he is not the one who can talk



HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, the Minister of Sports and Youth and Chairman of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Organising Committee, during an interaction with the local media yesterday.

about this tournament officially, he did confirm that they are looking to possibly announce the organisation of the Arab Cup again in the coming period.

The minister said that with all the successes achieved by Qatar in hosting many

global and continental tournaments, hosting the Olympic Games remains the biggest dream. Qatar has previously been nominated to host this major event in recent years and has the intention to apply again.

HE Sheikh Hamad sees that the Gulf region as a whole has proven that it has the capabilities to host the largest sporting events and praised Saudi Arabia, that is set to host the Asian Cup in 2027 and the World Cup in 2034.



**HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, the Minister of Sports and Youth and Chairman of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Organising Committee, also answered Faisal Abdulhameed al-Mudahka, Editor-in-Chief of the Gulf Times, saying: "Sports is the most important reason why people or countries know Qatar. Before the World Cup, many people did not know it in a real way. This is on the one hand, and on the other, it is more important to know Qatar's true face. I am sure that the fans who attended the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 discovered many facts that were corrected through what they saw on the ground. I believe that organising sports tournaments in particular is the most important way to achieve success for any country from a political and educational standpoint. Therefore, the most important way to communicate with the peoples are football and sports in general."**

PREVIEW

## Palestine eye historic win to keep last 16 hopes alive

**By Sports Reporter**  
Doha

**F**orward Tamer Seyam and his teammates "want to make a historic achievement for Palestine" when they face Hong Kong today at the Asian Cup, where a first win ever at the tournament could propel them into the next round.

No side has played more Asian Cup matches without a win than Hong Kong (12 games) or Palestine (eight), but one victory could be enough for either side to squeak into the last 16 in Qatar. Having weathered tough early fixtures against Iran and United Arab Emirates in Group C, both sides see an opportunity for a maiden win.

The tournament comes against the backdrop of the Israel's attack on Palestinian territory of Gaza, and Seyam said a victory would have special resonance for people back home. "Our match against Hong Kong won't be easy but we are well prepared and we want to make a historic achievement for Palestine," said the player, who scored in his side's 4-1 opening loss to Iran. "If we are able to qualify our names will go into history. We have big hopes of qualifying as third or second," he said.

"The match will be challenging but we hold high hopes of qualifying - either in second place or one of the best third placed sides. All the players are prepared and ready, in anticipation of a competitive game," said 31-year-old forward Seyam, who plays for Thailand club PT Prachuap. "Although we played exceptionally well against the UAE, we were unlucky not to score. However, we know that tomorrow's match won't be easy. We are well-prepared and poised to achieve a historic milestone and we have this opportunity to qualify



Palestine forward Tamer Seyam speaks at a press conference yesterday.

into the next round."

Coach Makram Daboub voiced qualified optimism that his side could come out on top against the team from southern China, who are yet to register a point in Qatar. "I trust the players, if we play with the same level as against UAE, we will be able to win," he said.

Palestine took one point from that match, a thrilling 1-1 draw with 10-man UAE. Daboub added that the team wanted to win for the "Palestinian people, who deserve to be happy. All the players are determined to win," he said. "Hopefully we will be able to score early and ensure the three points."

Despite their confidence-boosting performance against UAE, Daboub warned his team against underestimating Hong Kong. "Hong Kong have proven to be a formidable and advanced team, perform-



Palestine need to beat Hong Kong today at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium to progress into the round of 16 of the Asian Cup.

ing well against UAE and Iran. Winning is not just an option; it's a necessity for us. I have confidence in our players, and if we can replicate the second-half performance against UAE, we have a good chance of victory," said Daboub.

"Despite some unfortunate outcomes in previous matches, tomorrow's match is decisive, and I hope we meet the expectations. The players are determined to secure a win. They understand the difficulty of the upcoming game. Hong Kong have made significant improvements in their style, often dictating the pace of play with direct football. Finding solutions is crucial for us, and an early goal will alleviate pressure on the team. We aim to score early to secure the three points. Staying calm under pressure is key and we are ready to face whatever comes our way," Daboub added.

His opposite number Jorn Andersen said

Hong Kong were unfazed by facing an opponent with extra motivation beyond the football field, noting that his players too could make history for their team. "I'm not thinking about what Palestine is thinking," he said.

"I think if we have the possibility tomorrow to go to the final round, be one of the 16 best teams in Asia, all Hong Kong will be proud of us and all the players know that. They will give everything for Hong Kong."

Andersen wants Hong Kong, China to end their long wait for a win by defeating Palestine. "After the first two games, we believe we performed well and while we are satisfied with our play, we are disappointed to have earned zero points. Nevertheless, we still have a chance to advance to the final round, and securing a win is crucial. Having observed Palestine in their matches, we are optimistic about collect-

ing the three points," said the 60-year-old Andersen.

"In our discussions, we emphasised the importance of taking the initiative. In the previous two games, our focus was on defence, but now we aim to be more proactive, especially in front of goal.

"In analysing Palestine's strategy, they typically play a 4-4-2 formation and look for opportunities on the counter-attack. It is essential for us to pose a constant threat in the attacking third. Against Iran, we created three to four chances, and we are determined to improve our finishing in tomorrow's match.

"This is undeniably a high-pressure game, and everyone is aware that a victory is crucial for our continued participation in the tournament. While I don't want to put undue pressure on the team, it's a collective understanding that we have to win."



CRICKET

# Kohli opts out of first two England Tests

Agencies  
New Delhi

India's **Virat Kohli** will miss the first two Tests against England due to "personal reasons"; the country's cricket board said yesterday.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India will name a replacement soon with the opening Test of the five-match series starting on Thursday in Hyderabad.

"Virat has spoken to Captain Rohit Sharma, the team management and the selectors and has emphasised that while representing the country has always been his top priority, certain personal situations demand his presence and undivided attention," BCCI said in a statement.

"The BCCI respects his decision and the Board and team management has extended its support to the star batter and is confident in the abilities of the remaining squad members to step up and deliver commendable performances in the Test series."

The statement added: "The BCCI requests the media and fans to respect Virat Kohli's privacy during this time and refrain from speculating on the nature of his personal reasons."

Kohli, who amassed 765 runs in 11 ODI World Cup matches for runners-up India

last year, missed the white-ball leg of the South African tour in 2023 and the opening T20 match against Afghanistan at home recently. The 35-year-old remains the backbone of the Indian batting with 8,848 runs including 29 centuries and an average of over 49 in 113 Tests.

India named their squad for the first two Tests and pace bowler Mohamed Shami missed out as he recovers from an ankle injury.

The second Test starts February 2 in Visakhapatnam, followed by the third beginning February 15 in Rajkot.

India has remained unbeaten in a Test series at home since 2012 when Alastair Cook's touring England team beat them 2-1. Ben Stokes' England have landed in Hyderabad after holding a training camp in Abu Dhabi.

**England spinner Bashir yet to arrive in India after visa issue**

England arrived in India yesterday without Shoaib Bashir after a visa problem kept the uncapped spinner in Abu Dhabi.

The squad, who had been holding a training camp in the United Arab Emirates ahead of Thursday's start of the first Test in Hyderabad, were already a man down after batsman Harry Brook returned home for personal reasons.

And they were reduced to 14 men when

Somerset off-spinner Bashir, whose parents are of Pakistani heritage, was unable to join his teammates on the flight to India.

Pakistani media endured visa delays in the run-up to the recent World Cup in India but England coach Brendon McCullum was optimistic that Indian cricket authorities, and indeed the government, could aid Bashir's arrival following an approach by the England and Wales Cricket Board.

"Bash will join us hopefully tomorrow, he's got a couple of issues with his visa coming through," said McCullum.

"We're confident on the back of the help from the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) and the Indian government that it will sort itself out pretty quickly as well."

"Things take time, don't they? Everyone is doing what they can. It's a process we need to go through and we're pretty confident that we're close. We've also got a little bit of support out there for him so he's not on his own. We're hoping the news will come through today that his visa has been approved, then we'll get him to sink his teeth into this series."

Bashir, 20, was a surprise selection for the tour given he has taken a mere 10 first-class wickets at an expensive average of 67.

But the England management were impressed by his performances for the second-string Lions in the UAE and they

believe his high release point, allied to an ability to gain sharp turn, will make him effective on Indian pitches renowned for assisting spinners.

**Australia's Khawaja cleared to play second West Indies Test**

Australia opener Usman Khawaja will return to training today after being cleared to play the second Test against West Indies in Brisbane this week.

The 37-year-old batsman retired hurt last Friday in the final few overs of Australia's thumping 10-wicket victory in the first test after being struck on the helmet by a Shamar Joseph delivery.

"Usman Khawaja has been cleared to play the second Test match against the West Indies in Brisbane," the team said in a statement yesterday. "Khawaja was assessed again today and has no symptoms of delayed concussion. He will train at the Gabba tomorrow."

Australia faced the prospect of searching for a new opener for the second time in the series if Khawaja had been unfit to play in the day-night Test, which begins at the Gabba on Thursday.

Steve Smith moved up the order to replace David Warner when the veteran opener retired from the format in the wake of the 3-0 series sweep of Pakistan around the New Year.



TENNIS / AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Alcaraz advances as young qualifier Yastremska wins

Former US Open champion Daniil Medvedev beats Nuno Borges

Reuters  
Melbourne

Qualifier Dayana Yastremska and giant-killer Linda Noskova continued fairytale runs into the quarter-finals of the Australian Open yesterday but it was all familiar faces on the men's side as Carlos Alcaraz led a trio of top seeds through.

Alcaraz charged past Miomir Kecmanovic to reach the last eight at Melbourne Park for the first time but, with two Grand Slam titles to his name, the 20-year-old second seed is already well-acquainted with the business end of majors.

So too is former US Open champion Daniil Medvedev, a 6-3 7-6(4) 5-7 6-1 winner over Nuno Borges, and sixth seed Alexander Zverev, who won his fourth round contest against Cameron Norrie 7-5 3-6 6-3 4-6 7-6(3) in a super-tiebreak.

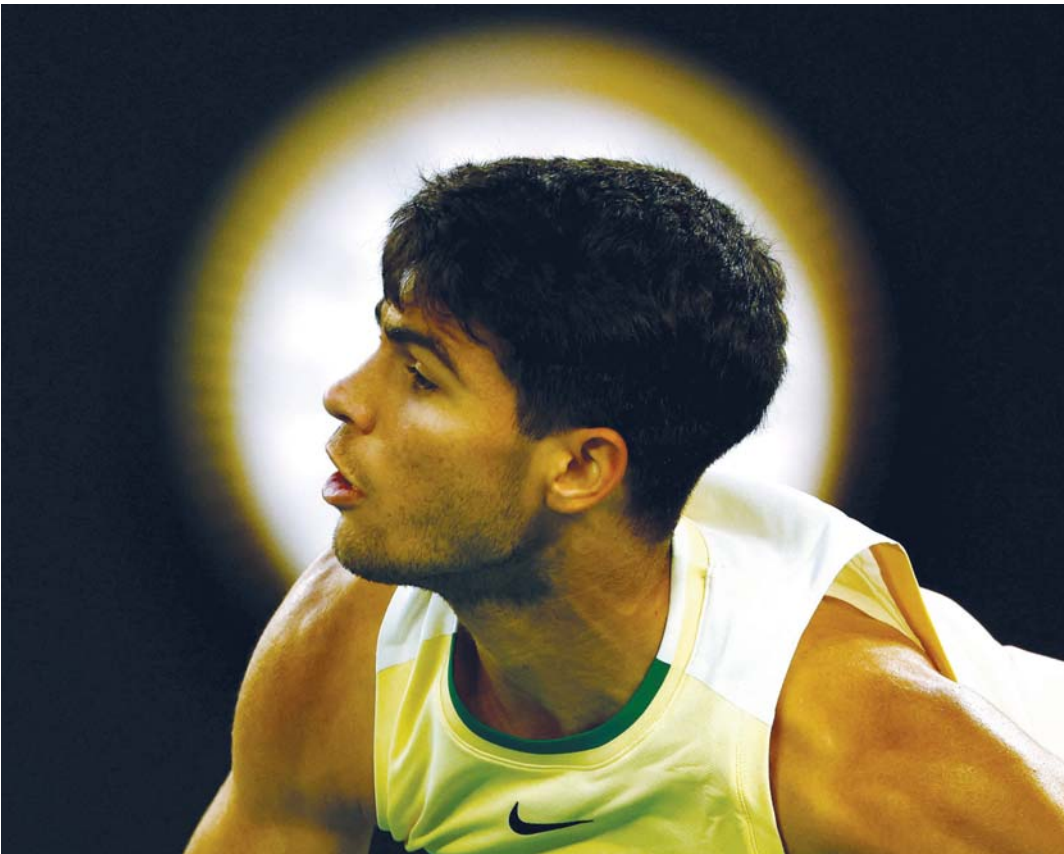
Alcaraz looked in brilliant form in the 6-4 6-4 6-0 win over Kecmanovic that took him another step closer to his dream final against another Serb, 10-times champion Novak Djokovic.

"I did everything almost perfectly," Alcaraz said.

"I'm feeling better and better every day. I'm feeling better and better every match. I'll try to take this as an advantage, the confidence that I have and the level that I'm playing."

While the men's seedings have held pretty much firm at Melbourne Park over the last nine days, there has been upset after upset in the top half of the women's draw to leave a field almost entirely denuded of seeds.

Yastremska played her part by ousting Wimbledon champion



Spain's Carlos Alcaraz in action during his fourth-round match against Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic at Melbourne Park yesterday. (AFP)

Marketa Vondrousova in the first round and added another former Grand Slam champion to the list of her victims with a 7-6(6) 6-4 victory over 18th seed Victoria Azarenka.

The world number 93 had to fight for her victory over the two-times Melbourne Park champion as she came from behind in both sets and smashed 38 winners on Rod Laver Arena.

"I thought that I had lost this match 25 times," the 23-year-old said. "In some moments I felt like I was too nervous and too emotional, but then I just relaxed and said, 'it's going to be like it's going to be.'"

Ukrainian hopes of a third woman in the quarter-finals to join Yastremska and Marta Kostyuk were dashed in only three games after 19th seed Elina Svitolina suffered a back spasm and was unable to continue.

Czech Noskova, who did the most damage to the top half of the draw by removing world number one Iga Swiatek in the third round, will face Yastremska in what is also her first major quarter-final.

Svitolina left the court in tears, the last of the clutch of mothers competing in singles this year to depart.

Russian Anna Kalinskaya, who had never been past the second round at a Grand Slam before last week, continued the eviction of the seeds when she beat Italian Jasmine Paolini 6-4 6-2.

China's number one Zheng Qinwen ensured at least one would survive into the last eight in the bottom half of the draw by clinically dispatching Oceane Dodin 6-0 6-3 in the final match of the day.

In the men's draw, the fairytale runs by lowly ranked players were ruthlessly halted.

Medvedev made a bit of a meal of closing out his match against Portuguese world number 69 Borges but stormed across the line to set up a clash with Pole Hubert Hurkacz.

"I'm ready," said the Russian yesterday.

"Hopefully I can show it on the tennis court. We can talk forever who is ready, who is favourite. You need to win."

Ninth seed Hurkacz brought an end to 122nd-ranked Frenchman Arthur Cazaux's hot run on his Melbourne Park debut, which included an upset of Holger Rune.

Hurkacz beat the swaggering wildcard at his own game by serving slightly bigger and slightly better in a 7-6(6) 7-6(3) 6-4 win on John Cain Arena.

Zverev's five-setter against British 19th seed Norrie was his second of a tournament which has seen a record 32 this year.

The German thought he would still have plenty in the tank tomorrow in the quarter-finals when he faces Alcaraz, who he lost to at the same stage of last year's US Open.

"I feel okay," he said.

"I'm not like the US Open where I was completely dead and where I feel like I'm physically exhausted."

"I'm tired, for sure ... but I'm not dead. I'm not in the same physical state I was in the US Open. I expect it to be very different, to be honest."

## American Dunlap is first amateur since 1991 to win PGA Tour event



Nick Dunlap of the US hugs his mother, Charlene, after winning The American Express at Pete Dye Stadium Course in La Quinta, California. (AFP)

**Los Angeles:** Reigning US Amateur champion Nick Dunlap became the first amateur since 1991 to win a PGA Tour title, winning a back-nine showdown to capture the American Express tournament.

Dunlap, a 20-year-old sophomore at the University of Alabama, sank the winning par putt from just inside six feet at the 18th hole to fire a two-under-par 70 at the Pete Dye Stadium Course - one of three courses used this week.

Despite his victory however, Dunlap will not take home any money from the win.

As an amateur, he is ineligible for the winner's prize of \$1.51mn, which goes to runner-up Christiaan Bezuidenhout, who finished on 260 after a closing 65.

Dunlap finished on 29-under 259 to set a 72-hole record low winning score, breaking the mark of 28-under set by Patrick Reed in 2014.

"I felt this script today was already written," Dunlap said. "I was going to give it everything I had whether I shoot 75 or 65 or 70."

Dunlap became the first amateur to win a US PGA Tour event since Phil Mickelson captured the 1991 Northern Telecom Open in Tucson, Arizona.

Dunlap also became the second-youngest PGA Tour winner in the past 90 years, trailing only Jordan Spieth's victory at 19 at the 2013 John Deere Classic.

The historic victory didn't come without tension-packed drama.

Dunlap sank a birdie putt at the par-5 16th to share the lead with 24th-ranked American Sam Burns, who found water

off the tee at the par-3 17th on the day's toughest hole while Dunlap was on the green 35 feet from the hole.

Dunlap made a routine par while Burns stumbled with a double bogey and the amateur led by two with the par-4 18th remaining.

But ahead of him on the 18th green, South Africa's Bezuidenhout birdied to pull within one. At 18, Dunlap's tee shot went way into the right rough and his approach stopped 75 feet from the hole down a slope.

Dunlap pitched his third to just inside six feet and then sank his par putt for the victory "Nothing like I have ever felt," Dunlap said. "It's so cool to be out here and experience this as an amateur."

"Whether I had made that or missed that, if you would have told me Wednesday night I would have a putt to win this golf tournament, I wouldn't believe you."

Sharing third on 261 were Taiwan's Kevin Yu, who matched his career-low PGA round with a 63, and Americans Xander Schauffele and Justin Thomas.

Despite missing out on the winner's check, Dunlap will become eligible to take PGA Tour membership at any time in the 2024 PGA campaign.

Then he would receive the benefits of any PGA Tour winner, which include membership through the 2026 season plus entries into the Masters and PGA Championship and any unplayed "signature" events.

Dunlap already has berths in this year's Masters, PGA and British Open from his US Amateur triumph if he is an amateur when the events tee off.



Christiaan Bezuidenhout of South Africa hits a tee shot on the 18th hole during the final round of The American Express. (AFP)

As an amateur, Nick Dunlap is ineligible to take home the winner's prize of \$1.51mn, which went to runner-up Christiaan Bezuidenhout



Ukraine's Dayana Yastremska signs autographs for fans after her victory against Belarus' Victoria Azarenka during their singles match on day nine of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)



SPOTLIGHT

# #AsianCup2023 smashes 1.5 billion engagement mark

Asia’s premier national team tournament in Qatar has the fans buzzing

The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 has engaged with more fans than ever before after just 10 days of competition with impressions on the Asian Football Confederation (AFC)’s digital channels exceeding the 1.5 billion mark – making it the first AFC competition to reach the breakthrough milestone.

Reinforcing the undeniable passion that exists for football on the Continent, the landmark achievement not only shatters but almost doubles the previous record of 836 million impressions set during the entirety of the 2019 edition in the United Arab Emirates.

Datuk Seri Windsor John, the AFC General Secretary said: “Football is ultimately the people’s game and the AFC, through its Vision, shares the firm belief that fans are the heartbeat of the beautiful game.

“We know that we must speak to our fans in a language they understand and on platforms they populate, and we are resolute towards

creating more innovative ways to not only strengthen our engagement but grow the fanbase of Asian football with each passing edition of our flagship men’s competition.”

Leading the way in engagement was the AFC Asian Cup Facebook platform, which registered 266 million impressions and 56.6 million video views, representing a staggering rise of 48% from the 2019 edition.

The Continent’s passionate fans also made their voices heard on the AFC Asian Cup Instagram and YouTube channels, with 259 million and 473 million impressions respectively, while X platform received a combined impressions of 95.5 million and Chinese platforms, Weibo and Douyin gathered a total of 281 million.

In recognising the sheer diversity of the Continent, the wide-ranging multi-platforms and localised-language approach has played a pivotal role in the exponential rise in engagement figures. For the first time

in AFC Asian Cup history, the AFC’s digital media coverage has been made available in 13 different languages across 11 platforms, namely Facebook, Instagram, X, Tiktok, Snapchat, Telegram, Threads, YouTube, Weibo, Douyin and Toutiao.

Additionally, in line with the latest digital trends, AFC’s first-ever app, the AFC LIVE App which is available in English and Arabic, has been downloaded by more than 100,000 users.

Through the AFC LIVE app, interactive initiatives which include Football Fantasy and Match Predictor have been launched to further galvanise the Asian football community.

At the same time, the AFC Asian Cup YouTube page achieved a significant milestone of acquiring over 1 million subscribers just four days after the start of the tournament. Similarly, the AFC Asian Cup Instagram page, which offers a geo-gated feature, is also on the verge of reaching the 1 million follower mark.

This is a testament to the immense popularity of the AFC Asian Cup™ and the growing interest in Asian football.

The latest figures unanimously place the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 as the most engaging ever edition in history.

In addition to breaking the attendance record for an opening match, the 18th edition is the most extensively covered showpiece with as many as 60 broadcasters showcasing the riveting action in over 160 territories and nations across the globe.

The 2023 AFC Asian Cup is the current 18th edition of the AFC Asian Cup, the quadrennial international football tournament organised by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). It involves 24 national teams after expansion in 2019, with Qatar the defending champions.

Video Assistant Referee (VAR) is being used for the entire tournament following its implementation from the quarter-final stage onwards in the 2019 edition. [www.the-afc.com](http://www.the-afc.com)



FOOTBALL

## Mancini plays down Cup hopes as Saudis struggle

AFP  
Doha

Roberto Mancini played down Saudi Arabia’s chances of winning the Asian Cup after they reached the knockout rounds with a laboured 2-0 victory over nine-man Kyrgyzstan on Sunday.

Kyrgyzstan had Ayzar Akmatov sent off in the ninth minute and Kimi Merk joined him seven minutes into the second half in Doha.

Mohamed Kanno opened the scoring for the Saudis in the 35th minute.

But the three-time champions - ranked 56 in the world to Kyrgyzstan’s 98 - managed only one more late goal from Faisal al-Ghamdi in a toothless attacking performance.

Mancini, who won the European Championship with his native Italy in 2021, said his team were lagging behind the favourites to win the title.

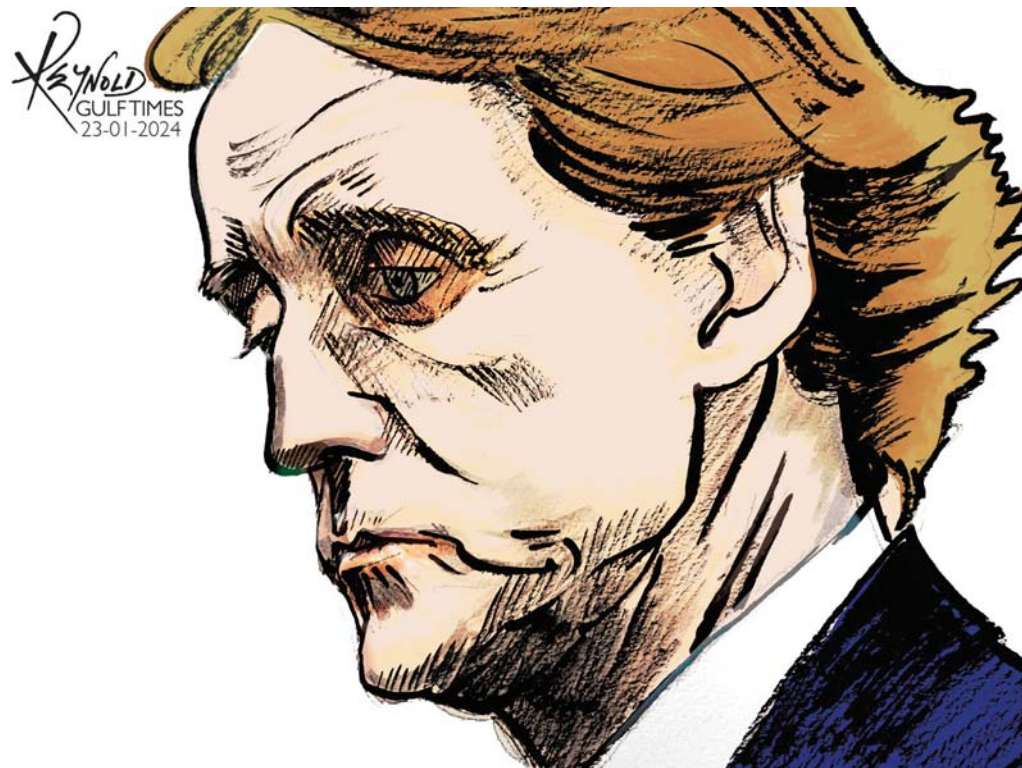
“The rankings say Japan, Korea, Iran, Australia - and we are too far,” he said.

“But you know in this tournament, when you play one game, everything can happen in one game.”

“Now we are in the next stage but we have to think about the third game because we want to win.”

The result 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.

“I think we were missing many chances to score but if we score two goals every game, I’m happy,” said Mancini.

“I hope that we can improve more for the next stage.”

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 Abdulelah 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.

“I think they were very dangerous fouls,” said Mancini. “I think the two red cards were correct.”

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.

Kyrgyzstan are still alive in the tournament heading into their final game against Oman on Thursday, the same day the Saudis play Thailand.

“We played against Saudi Arabia with two men less - it’s difficult,” said coach Stefan Tarkovic.

“From my side, after the second red card it was just a question of the score.”

AFCON

## Nigeria edge past Guinea-Bissau 1-0 to seal last-16 place



Nigeria's forward (15) Moses Simon (centre) celebrates with teammates after Guinea-Bissau's defender Opa Sangante (unseen) scored an own-goal during the Africa Cup of Nations 2024 Group A match at the Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium in Abidjan yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters  
Abidjan

Nigeria booked their passage into the last 16 of the Africa Cup of Nations after a first-half own goal from Guinea-Bissau’s Opa Sangante handed them a 1-0 victory yesterday, which was enough to earn them second place in Group A.

Moses Simon sent in a low cross from the left looking for Victor Osimhen but as Sangante attempted to clear ahead of the striker he could only steer the ball into the roof of his own net after 36 minutes.

Nigeria finish on seven points from three games, behind surprise package Equatorial Guinea on goal difference.

Hosts Ivory Coast face an anxious wait to see if they will advance as one of the best third-place finishers with three points and a minus three goal difference.

Earlier Ivory Coast slipped to the brink of a humiliating exit

from the Africa Cup of Nations as the hosts suffered a 4-0 thrashing by Equatorial Guinea in their final Group A game in Abidjan.

Meanwhile Algeria coach Djamel Belmadi has come to the defence of Riyad Mahrez following his star player’s disappointing performances so far at the Africa Cup of Nations, urging critics not to “kill him too soon”.

“I don’t want anyone to forget what Riyad is capable of,” Belmadi told reporters in the Ivorian city of Bouake ahead of today’s decisive final group game between Algeria and Mauritania.

Mahrez starred as Algeria won the Cup of Nations in Egypt in 2019 but has made little impression in their two matches so far at this edition in Ivory Coast, in draws against Angola and Burkina Faso.

“I agree, it’s a fact that these have not been his best matches with Algeria, but don’t kill him too soon,” said Belmadi, pointing out that last season Mahrez was a UEFA Champions League winner with Manchester City.

PREVIEW

## Preparation is going as normal, says UAE coach Bento ahead of Iran clash



UAE head coach Paulo Bento.

Head coach Paulo Bento highlighted intelligent play and humility as qualities his UAE side need if they are to get a result against Islamic Republic of Iran in their third match of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 today.

The UAE currently sit second in the group with four points to their name, but a defeat at Education City Stadium and other results going against them could see Bento’s men exit the competition in the group stage for the first time since 2011.

After a convincing 3-1 win over Hong Kong, China in their opening fixture, the UAE were held to a 1-1 draw against Palestine in a game they finished with 10 men after defender Khalifa al-Hammadi was

sent-off in the 37th minute. Bento also received a red card just before the final whistle, meaning he will be suspended for the Iran clash.

“Preparation for this match is going as normal,” said Bento.

“We are trying to recover as much as possible. The last game was difficult for us especially after minute 37 when we started playing with one player less. That was an important factor for sure.”

“We prepared our strategy for the next game against one of the strongest teams in Asia and the strongest in our group. It is a team that is composed of very good, experienced players, some of them play in high level competitions. They play together for a long time and they don’t change their way of playing too much.

“It is a team that is easy to see their strengths, but not easy for the opponent to counter them, so we need to make a very good game in many aspects. We should be clever in the way we play against Iran and compete very well and be humble to accept that in some moments we will not dominate the game, so we have to control it in a different way, and reach the best possible result in a different way.”

And while Iran were one of the first teams to book their place in the next round, head coach Amir Ghalenoei acknowledged some problems faced in their last game against Hong Kong, China, insisting his side will not take things easy against the UAE today.

“We are happy we were able to qualify to the next round,” said Gha-

lenoei. “Based on our analysis and statistics, we had more than 70% possession and completed more than 200 passes against Hong Kong. In this tournament, in only two matches were one of the teams unable to complete 100 passes, one was India vs Uzbekistan and the other one was Hong Kong against us.

“We did have some problems, our passing accuracy was not great, we gave an opportunity to the opponents and their chances came from mistakes of our players, but I want to say thanks to all my players for the effort they put in against Hong Kong. Tomorrow’s game will not be easy because we want to win and qualify to the second round as leaders. UAE are in a good condition under Paulo Bento.”

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Iran head coach Amir Ghalenoei



## Sheikh Joaan reviews preparations for World Aquatics Championships



HE Sheikh Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani, President of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Chairman of the Organising Committee for the World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024, visited Aspire Dome yesterday to review preparations for the upcoming global event, which will be held from February 2 to 18. During the visit, Sheikh Joaan inspected competition venues and related facilities at Aspire Dome that will be utilised for the World Championships. He also met with the directors of the local organising committees to discuss progress and final preparations for the event. Sheikh Joaan was accompanied on his visit by Jassim bin Rashid al-Bueinain, Secretary-General of the Qatar Olympic Committee and Vice-Chairman of the Local Organising Committee. The World Aquatics Championships, which will be held for the first time in the Middle East, will feature more than 2,600 athletes from 197 countries competing in six sports: swimming, diving, water polo, artistic swimming, open water swimming, and high diving.

### MATCH REPORT

# Qatar stay perfect as China's last 16 hopes in balance

Al-Haydos' wonder goal gives holders three wins out of three

Hassan al-Haydos' goal-of-the-tournament contender earned Qatar a 1-0 win over China in their final Group A clash of the AFC Asian Cup at Khalifa International Stadium yesterday as the hosts all-but eliminated Aleksandar Jankovic's side from the competition.

The Qatari captain came off the bench to smash a spectacular volley from 20 yards past the helpless Yan Junling in the 66th minute and maintain the much-changed defending champions' perfect start to the campaign and stretch their winning run to 10 matches.

Jankovic's side needed a win to be certain of advancing to the last 16 but, after failing to find the back of the net in their opening games against Tajikistan and Lebanon, the Chinese once again misfired in attack with their fate now out of their hands.

Qatar coach Marquez Lopez described Haydos's rocket as the 'best goal in the tournament' and the veteran skipper said he was proud of how the second string players stepped up.

"Twenty-six players have played in the three matches and given a spectacular performance. The three points were very important for our morale," al-Haydos said. "We have a game in the last 16, we have finished with full marks and now we will focus on the next round."

Qatar started with the tournament's joint-leading scorer Akram Afif on the bench alongside the 2019 Asian Cup Golden Boot winner Almoez Ali and al-Haydos as Lopez made 10 changes to the team that started the 1-0 win over Tajikistan. The Chinese, meanwhile, left Wu Lei on the sidelines with Wei Shihao making his first start alongside captain Wu Xi and Lin Liangming as Dai Wai-tsun and Xu Xin were also dropped to the bench.

While Boualem Khoukhi sent an early header wide of the Chinese goal, it was Jankovic's team who cut through the home defence in the seventh minute, narrowly failing to take the lead after Lin Liangming released Zhang Yunling and his cutback was thumped wide by Wei.

Zhang had an effort blocked by Khoukhi as China made their attacking intentions clear early in the game, although the Qataris pre-



Qatar and China players vie for the ball during the Asian Cup match at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

sented a threat at the other end despite their wholesale changes, with Abdulaziz Hatem's curling strike clearing the bar.

Wei almost opened the scoring nine minutes before halftime when his close range effort was brilliantly blocked by Saad al-Sheeb's left-hand save after the Wuhan Three Towns striker had seen Wu's scuffed shot land at his feet. Khalid Muneer's dipping attempt dropped over the crossbar while Chinese strike duo Zhang Yuning and Wei both steered headers off target in the final exchanges of the opening 45 minutes.

Muneer threatened again early in the second period but, with the game at risk of petering out, Lopes introduced Afif and al-Haydos from the bench and within moments the pair combined in spectacular fashion.

Afif's perfectly flighted corner found al-Haydos unmarked on the edge of the penalty



Qatar's Hassan al-Haydos scored a stunning long-range goal against China.

area and the veteran midfielder drove his first-time right-foot strike home at an unstoppable rate to secure Qatar's third win in a row.

### SPOTLIGHT

## Debutants Tajikistan stage stunning comeback to progress

AFP  
Doha

Debutants Tajikistan sealed a place in the knockout rounds of the Asian Cup yesterday with a battling 2-1 win over 10-man Lebanon that included three lovely goals and another two strikes ruled out by VAR. China's 1-0 loss to hosts Qatar meant Tajikistan went through in second place from Group A on a night of drama.

Before the third and final round of games, holders Qatar were the only team to have scored a goal in the group, and any of the other three had a shot at finishing behind them in second.

In a stadium festooned with their cedar-tree flags, Lebanon took control of the game early, launching repeated attacks but finding no more penetration than they had in their previous two games. Tajikistan were mostly restricted to shots from outside the box until the stroke of half time, when midfielder Mabatsheev Shervoni slalomed into the Lebanon area, his attempted cross taking a huge deflection off Lebanon's Robert Melki to loop over the wrong-footed goalkeeper and into the net.

But Tajik celebrations were cut short when the referee ruled the

goal out for the tightest of offsides. Their misery was compounded almost immediately after the restart when Bangkok United forward Bassel Jradi arched in a delicious strike from the edge of the area and inside the far post.

But Lebanon soon had a man sent off when a VAR check up-graded Kassem El Zein's yellow card – for a studs-up, over-the-ball tackle – to a red. With a man advantage, Tajikistan camped out in the opposition half, and as the 70th minute approached they once again thought they had scored.

But Alisher Dzhalilov's goal was scratched off, again for a cruelly slender offside. When their equaliser did finally arrive, there could be no doubt, Parvizdzhon Umarbaev topping Jradi's strike with a curling free kick to bring stunned silence to the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium.

As things stood the Tajiks were going through in second, but they continued to push for a winner. No sooner had the fourth official signalled a whopping 16 minutes of added time, than they got it, substitute Nuriddin Khamrokulov flicking a delicate backwards header over goalkeeper Mostafa Matar. Lebanon's Hilal El-Helwe had a chance to pull one back, at the death, but shot wide as they exited the tournament.



Tajikistan's forward Nuriddin Khamrokulov (right) is ecstatic after scoring the winner against Lebanon during the Asian Cup Group A match at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha. (AFP)

### PREVIEW

## Stimac looks for late show in must-win clash for India



India's coach Igor Stimac (left) and captain Sunil Chhetri at a press conference yesterday.

AFP  
Doha

Igor Stimac said his goal-shy India will try and wear down Syria in a must-win Asian Cup clash at the Al Bayt Stadium today. India face Syria in Qatar with the knockout rounds still a possibility for both teams despite neither yet winning a match or even scoring a goal after two games. Australia have sealed one of the spots out of Group B but with the top two and possibly even third place also qualifying, it is all to play for. Uzbekistan are second, ahead of Syria and India.

India were beaten 2-0 by Australia and 3-0 by Uzbekistan, but their Croatian coach sees a chance against a "physical" Syria who have relied so far

on a small core of players. "What is interesting about Syria is that they have a short bench, making only two or three changes and are obviously limited from the bench," said Stimac said. "We will try to exhaust them and take them to the last 30 minutes and see how fresh they are," added the coach, who has a full squad to choose from for the first time in Qatar.

If India are to pull off a win and sneak into the last 16, they will need veteran talisman Sunil Chhetri to start firing. The striker has 93 international goals, behind only Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo among active players.

"Come the Syria game I hope we can fix this problem," the 39-year-old told reporters of India's lack of goals. "And the next time I see you, I can say we did fix this problem."

Syria sit third in the group with one

point from a 0-0 stalemate with Uzbekistan and are hoping to make the knockouts for the first time. Their veteran Argentine coach Hector Cuper told his men to seize the moment. "Qualifying for the last 16 will be historic for the Syria national team and we hope to bring joy to the Syrian people through qualifying," he said.

But he warned his players against wilting under the pressure of expectations. "All the players and coaching team know the importance of this match and the pressure on the players," he said. "But when you are under more pressure it means you are trying to defend the image of your country. As a coaching team we don't want to put more pressure on them, we want lift the pressure actually. The players are optimistic and smiling, and want to do something for their country."