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Wednesday, January 24, 2024
Rajab 12, 1445 AH

GULF TIMES

SPORT

SPOTLIGHT

Palestine ‘fulfil promise’ after historic Asian Cup win

Dabbagh was the hero with his two goals carrying Palestine to knockout rounds for the first time

AFP
Doha

Palestine’s captain said his team had fulfilled “a promise to the Palestinian people” after reaching the Asian Cup knockout rounds for the first time yesterday. The 3-0 victory over Hong Kong was also their first win in the history of the competition and enough to squeeze into the last 16 as one of the four best third-placed teams.

Oday Dabbagh was the hero in Doha with two goals and at the final whistle Palestine’s players and staff celebrated on the pitch, hugging and waving flags.

The United Arab Emirates went through in second place in Group C despite losing 2-1 to group winners Iran. Palestine’s victory came against the backdrop of the Israel’s brutal bombing in the Palestinian territory of Gaza. Players and staff have lost loved ones in the conflict.

Captain Musab al-Battat said that his men had made good on “a promise we made to the Palestinian people”. “I would like to thank all those who supported us,” he said. “We managed to put a smile on the faces of those who follow us...inside or outside Palestine.”

A pre-match moment’s silence was overrun by shouts of “Free Palestine”. No side had played more Asian Cup matches without a win than Hong Kong (12 games) or Palestine (eight), but victory would offer either side a chance of making the last 16. In the 12th minute Palestine scored when al-Battat made an overlapping run from right-back and launched a cross into the box which Dabbagh headed into the net. Heading over to their fans to celebrate, the players raised their hands to make V-signs.

Hong Kong were dealt a blow when centre-back and match-day captain Vas Nunez sustained an arm injury and had to be replaced by Li Ngai-hoi. But the team ranked 150 in the world started creating chances as the half wore on, Philip Chan and Everton Camargo blazing over.

Throughout the game the 6,568 people inside the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium were almost entirely supporting Palestine, like at most grounds during the team’s campaign. But a dense and boisterous bloc of red-clad Hong Kong fans provided an unending beat of encouragement for the minnows from southern China.

Minutes into the second half Palestine doubled their lead, al-Battat again the provider from the right wing, this time Zeid Qunbar taking him up on a generous invitation to score. Palestine got a third after the hour, Tamer Seyam’s long-range effort



Palestine’s forward Oday Dabbagh (centre) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Hong Kong during the AFC Asian Cup Group C match at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)



Palestine’s Mohamed Saleh gets emotional after the victory. (Reuters)



Oday Dabbagh (left) looks on after heading the ball into the net. (AFP)



Palestine supporters at the Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

hitting the bar and falling to Dabbagh, who tapped in his second of the match.

They were given a scare during the eighth minute of added time when referee Shaun Evans awarded Hong Kong a penalty after a VAR review for a handball by al-Battat. But Everton’s spot-kick thudded against

the bar as Hong Kong headed home, beaten but proud.

Winning coach Makram Daboub said his team “knew this match was decisive... especially concerning the current circumstances that Palestine is going through”.

Looking ahead to the next round he said he was realistic about the challenge, but that his team was “very confident in our ability and everything is possible in the second round”.

Hong Kong coach Jorn Andersen rued his team’s inability to get a goal in the

game’s opening stages, which might have changed the complexion of the contest. “That’s the difference between us and the better teams before us, because they have the quality to make a goal out of nothing,” he said. “We can try and get better. We need it for the future.”

MATCH REPORT

UAE scrape into round of 16 despite defeat to Iran

A Mehdi Taremi double earned Iran a 2-1 win over the United Arab Emirates in Group C of the AFC Asian Cup at Education City Stadium yesterday.

Despite the defeat, the UAE join their opponents in the round of 16 as Group C runners-up, edging out Palestine on goal difference after the Palestinians beat Hong Kong 3-0 in the simultaneous kick-off at Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium.

There was joy for Palestine though as they confirmed a first ever knockout stage appearance as one of the best four third-placed teams. Taremi opened his Qatar 2023 account in the 25th minute, moving behind the Emirati defence to take advantage of an intelligent Sardar Azmoun pass before coolly slotting home.

Team Melli thought they had doubled their lead in the 33rd minute when Ehsan Hajsafi’s whipped delivery from the left was headed home by Ali Gholizadeh, but following a VAR check, the goal was ruled out for an offside.

Coach Amir Ghalenoei’s men started the second half the same way they finished

the first and were within a whisker of doubling their lead when Azmoun pounced on a poor clearance on the edge of the Emirati area and hit on the half-volley, but his effort passed just wide.

It was the UAE who had the best chance of the early proceedings of the second period when Yahya al-Ghassani was brought down inside the box by Hossein Kanaani. Al-Ghassani stepped up to take the resulting penalty, but his attempt was saved by an excellent diving save from Alireza Beiranvand. Iran’s star duo Azmoun and Taremi combined again to make it 2-0 in the 65th minute when the AS Roma forward cut inside and fed his teammate with a well-weighted pass and Taremi emphatically converted into the roof of the net to double Team Melli’s advantage.

UAE goalkeeper was called upon to make a flying reflex save in the 73rd minute to deny Ramin Rezaeian’s curled free-kick from the left side.

Another VAR call had a goal from substitute Mohamed Mohebi overturned after the Iranian forward was deemed to have fouled Khalid al-Hashemi inside the box in



Iran’s Mehdi Taremi scores against the United Arab Emirates at the Education City Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)

the build-up before he struck the rebound home after Alireza Jahanbakhsh’s initial shot hit the crossbar.

Al-Ghassani made up for his missed penalty kick with a decisive goal in added time of the second half as he broke free

down the left, cutting inside on his right foot and finding the far corner with his finish to half the deficit.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Djokovic, Sabalenka make semi-finals in title defence

Djokovic will meet Sinner, who swept past Rublev in the quarters

AFP
Melbourne

Top seed Novak Djokovic battled into an 11th Australian Open semi-final and a record-extending 48th at Grand Slams yesterday, but a rampant Aryna Sabalenka had a much easier ride.

The Serbian superstar came through a probing test on Rod Laver Arena against 12th-seeded American Taylor Fritz 7-6 (7/3), 4-6, 6-2, 6-3 to keep his bid for an unprecedented 25th major crown on track. He will meet in-form Italian fourth seed Jannik Sinner, who swept past Russian fifth seed Andrey Rublev 6-4, 7-6 (7/5), 6-3. Djokovic almost always gets the evening slot on centre court, but was bumped to the afternoon on a day on which temperatures soared to 32 degrees Celsius (90 degrees Fahrenheit) and the world number one admitted it was tough going. "Physically and emotionally very draining," he said after the three hour and 45 minute epic, adding that he "suffered a lot" in the first two sets.

"He was serving well, staying close to the line and kind of suffocating me from the back of the court," he said. "I think I upped my game probably midway through the third set all the way to the end."

Sinner has been clinical in Melbourne and is yet to drop a set. He also beat Djokovic at the Davis Cup late last year, but the omens are not good for him. The 36-year-old has won all 10 previous semi-finals he has played at the Australian Open, stretching back to his first title in 2008 and is on a 33-match unbeaten streak on the blue hardcourts.

"I'm lucky to face him at one of the biggest tournaments in the world," said Sinner. "It's going to be tough. The only thing I can control is that I am going to give 100 percent and I will fight for every ball."

In contrast to Djokovic's long slog, fellow defending champion Sabalenka was off court in just 71 minutes, crushing ninth seed Barbora Krejickova 6-2, 6-3 with minimum fuss. She will face fourth seed Coco Gauff next in a replay of last year's US Open final that the American teenager won in three sets.

On current form, Gauff will be the underdog after taking more than three hours to down unseeded Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk 7-6 (8/6), 6-7 (3/7), 6-2 in a scrappy affair. "I love it, I love it.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic plays a forehand return against USA's Taylor Fritz during their quarter-final match at the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

After the US Open, I really wanted that revenge, and, I mean, that's a great match," Sabalenka said of her semi-final.

Sabalenka had won all seven of her previous Grand Slam quarter-finals, and wasted little time laying down the law against Krejickova, the 2021 French Open champion. She broke three times in each set, with her booming groundstrokes unstoppable. "I played really great tennis, I just hope I can keep playing this way," said the 25-year-old.

Gauff admitted she was below par against Kostyuk, giving herself only a 'C' rating. "Hopefully got the bad match out of the way and I can play even better," she said. "Really proud of the fight I showed today," added the American, who had never progressed beyond the fourth round

at Melbourne Park in four previous attempts.

The low standard was not confined to Gauff, with the pair making a staggering 107 unforced errors between them - there were 16 service breaks. Kostyuk rued missing her chances, letting slip a 5-1 lead and squandering set points in the first set, but said she was proud of how she fought.

"Very proud of myself. I won for myself today, and I think it's the most important thing," said the 21-year-old, who has been vocal at the tournament about keeping people's focus on the conflict in her homeland. The victory extended Gauff's winning streak this year to 10 matches after she lifted the title at Auckland in the lead-up, and her unbeaten run at Grand Slams to 12 after her exploits at Flushing Meadows.

TENNIS

Nadal set to play at Qatar ExxonMobil Open after hip injury

The Qatar Tennis Federation (QTF) has confirmed that 22-time Grand Slam winner Rafael Nadal will headline this year's Qatar ExxonMobil Open, which will be held from February 19 to 24 at the Khalifa International Tennis & Squash Complex in Doha.

The Spanish superstar, who will be making a return to the courts after opting out of this year's Australian Open, won the tournament in 2014, where he defeated France's Gael Monfils to lift his maiden title in Qatar. The 14-time French Open champion was also a runner-up at the 2016 tournament.

After missing most of the 2023 season because of a hip injury, Nadal, 37, only got back on court this month in Brisbane, where he reached the quarter-finals. But a micro tear in a muscle during that quarter-final defeat by Jordan Thompson forced him to withdraw from the Australian Open. Nadal has said previously there was a "high percentage" that 2024 would be his farewell to the tour.

Aside from the former World No 1 Nadal, the tournament's defending champion and World No 3 Daniil Medvedev, World No. 5 Andrey Rublev, and two-time champion and three Grand Slam winner Andy Murray are some of the players to look out for at the recently upgraded ATP 500 tournament, which has grown to become one of the signature events

on the ATP Tour calendar.

Tariq Zainal, QTF Secretary-General, said, "We are thrilled to announce the return of the esteemed Rafael Nadal and other stars to Doha for this year's tournament. It is truly a privilege to have a player of Nadal's exceptional talent participate in such a prestigious event."

"Doha has always been synonymous with outstanding tennis, and it comes as no surprise that the tournament has consistently drawn renowned players since its inception in 1993. With each passing year, this event only grows in grandeur, and we eagerly anticipate the arrival of all the players and fans to partake in this remarkable tennis spectacle in February."

The ATP 500 tournament, with a total prize money of \$1,395,875, will feature 28 players in the singles, while 16 pairs will participate in the doubles event.

The Qatar ExxonMobil Open, one of two ATP Tour events held in the Middle East, has been selected by players as the ATP 250 Tournament of the Year on five occasions (2015, '17, '19, '21-'22).

Sales of tickets for the tournament are now open, and fans can purchase them online at www.qatartennis.org or at the Khalifa International Tennis and Squash Complex.

Tickets are also available at selected malls, including Villaggio Mall, City Centre and Place Vendome.



Rafael Nadal looks set to make a speedy return from injury after being named on the entry list for the Qatar Open.

CRICKET

India readies for 'tough' series as England sticks to 'Bazball'



India's Rohit Sharma (second left) and coach Rahul Dravid inspect the pitch during the practice session in Hyderabad yesterday. India take on England in the first Test from tomorrow. (Reuters)

AFP
Hyderabad

Speedster Mark Wood said yesterday England would deploy their attacking style of cricket in the upcoming five-match Test series, as India's coach Rahul Dravid said he was confident his team was ready. Dravid warned the visitors faced a "tough series" and conditions would be a "challenge".

The Three Lions open the series in Hyderabad tomorrow with their "Bazball" all-action style set to face its biggest challenge on pitches expected to assist the spinners. "I don't think we will be defensive," Wood said. "I think we'll still look to take the game on."

England were the last team to beat India on home turf when Alastair Cook's team won a four-match series 2-1 in 2012. "We have to soak up that pressure and create a bit of a theatre or drama on the field and then, when it's time, attack again," 34-year-old Durham fast bowler Wood said.

England coach and former New Zealand captain Brendon McCullum and skipper Ben Stokes have devised an attacking brand of play dubbed "Bazball", in reference to McCullum's nickname. "We know the challenges here. India very rarely loses at home," he added. "I think it's almost like a bit of a free hit for us - where we can come in here and give it a good go,

and try something different."

- But Dravid said he remains confident of his team's ability to counter England's all-action approach. "They've played really well," Dravid said. "It's certainly been exciting to watch them play and they've had success playing like that."

The batting great said that England faced no easy ride. "We know it's going to be a challenge for them in these conditions as well. These are conditions that we know very well," he said. "We've got a lot of experience in our attack. As a coach, I'm looking forward to how our boys respond, because I know that we'll be put under pressure and I'm really hopeful that we respond positively."

Dravid praised England and said he expects a "tough series and a good series". India's coach confirmed KL Rahul will not be the wicketkeeper, with the gloves going between KS Bharat and uncapped Dhruv Jurel.

The hosts have suffered a blow after star batsman Virat Kohli pulled out of the opening two matches due to personal reasons, but Wood said the host's line-up still includes a raft of "quality players".

While England received criticism from some quarters for training in Abu Dhabi and not India, Wood rubbished fears of being "undercooked". "I think we've prepped really well," he said. "It was also good to switch off there as well. We had a good team bonding session. So, we've come here fresh, mentally and physically, and ready to go."

Madrid to host Spanish F1 GP from 2026

Madrid: Madrid will replace Barcelona as the host of the Spanish Grand Prix from 2026 on a new circuit that will have both street and non-street sectors, Formula One organisers announced yesterday.

The new 5.47-kilometre (3.39 mile) circuit will be built in and around Madrid's IFEMA exhibition centre in the northeast of the Spanish capital and it will feature 20 corners, organisers said in a statement. It will have the capacity to host over 110,000 spectators a day initially, with plans to expand the capacity to 140,000 "making Madrid one of the largest venues on the F1 calendar", the statement added.

The deal, which runs until 2035, means the Madrid region will host the country's grand prix for the first time since 1981, when the Jarama circuit north of the capital held the event.

The event is forecast to create 8,200 jobs and boost Madrid's gross domestic product by over 450mn euros (\$489mn) per year.

Formula One - which is aiming to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2030 - said 90 percent of spectators would be able to travel to the race on public transport via metro, commuter trains and buses, which will make it "one of the calendar's most accessible races".

Barcelona has been home to F1

in Spain for over three decades, since replacing Jerez, which staged the Spanish Grand Prix from 1986-1990. Domenicali said talks were ongoing with Barcelona about the possibility of the city hosting a race in addition to Madrid.

Formula One has accommodated two races in Spain before - the country also hosted the European Grand Prix on a street circuit in Valencia from 2008-2012. The sport has a huge following in the country. Spaniards Carlos Sainz, who was born and raised in Madrid, and two-time world champion Fernando Alonso are two of Formula One's most popular drivers.

GOLF

Amateur Dunlap mulls future after stunning PGA Tour win

AFP
Los Angeles

Rising amateur star **Nick Dunlap** withdrew from this week's PGA Tour event at Torrey Pines in California on Monday, saying he needs time to mull his future following his breakthrough professional victory at the weekend.

Dunlap became the first amateur to win a PGA Tour event since 1991 on Sunday when he clinched the American Express tournament in La Quinta, California.

The 20-year-old University of Alabama student said after the win he was uncertain if he would continue his amateur career or immediately jump to the PGA Tour. In a statement on Monday, Dunlap said he was withdrawing from this week's PGA Tour event outside San Diego to reflect on his options.

"After a life-changing last 24 hours, I've decided to withdraw



from the Farmers Insurance Open," Dunlap said Monday. "I plan to return home to Alabama to be with family, friends and teammates. Thank you to Farmers Insurance and American Express for giving me these opportunities."

Asked on Sunday about the possibility of turning professional following his one-shot win at the American Express, Dunlap said he was undecided. "I don't know," Dunlap said. "I have to take a second to let what just happened sink

in a little bit. That's a decision that's not just about me. It affects a lot of people, and obviously I'm going to try to enjoy this. It's a conversation I need to have with a lot of people before I make that decision."

MOLINARI NAMED AS EUROPE'S FIRST VICE-CAPTAIN FOR 2025 RYDER CUP

Luke Donald has named Edoardo Molinari as his first vice-captain for Europe's 2025 defence of the Ryder Cup in Long Island, New York. Molinari's statistical analysis proved invaluable as the Italian golfer helped the European team regain the trophy with a five-point win over the United States in Rome last year.

Now the 42-year-old, a 2010 Ryder Cup winner as a player, is looking forward to working again with Europe skipper Donald as he bids to retain the trophy at the Bethpage Black course in the next edition of the biennial event.

MATCH REPORT

DISAPPOINTMENT

Khrbin strike seals Syria historic berth

‘We played the game with one aim in our mind and that is to win’



Syria's Omar Khrbin (left) celebrates after scoring against India during the AFC Asian Cup match at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor. (Reuters)

By Sports Reporter
Al Khor

Omar Khrbin came off the bench to strike the winning goal as Syria defeated India 1-0 yesterday to advance to the AFC Asian Cup Round of 16 as one of the four best third placed teams. Khrbin struck in the 75th minute at the Al Bayt Stadium as Syria finished third in Group B, with the West Asian side making it to the knockout stage for the first time in seventh attempts. Australia finished top on seven points after a 1-1 draw with Uzbekistan, who ended the group stage with five points, one ahead of Syria. “We are very happy with the qualification, very proud of my players, they made huge sacrifices to get this result,” Syria’s Argentine coach Cuper said. “We played the game with one aim in our mind – to win, and we managed to do that. We don’t want to stop here.”

India head coach Igor Stimac made three changes by starting midfielders Lallianzuala Chhangte and Deepak Tangri and reinforcing the defensive line with the experienced Subhash Bose, while Hector Cuper’s Syrian line-up remained unchanged. The Blue Tigers started on a promising note, with Mahesh Naorem receiving a cross from Manvir Singh inside the Syrian box but his attempt from a tight angle on the right was pushed away by goalkeeper Ahmad Madanieh. Syria were quick to respond, a powerful header from forward Pablo Sabbag forcing Indian goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu into making a diving save with the deflected ball, much to India’s relief, sent skywards by Aiham Ousou. As the match progressed, the Qasoun Eagles looked more and more dangerous, keeping the Indian defence busy with repeated charges from the likes of Sabbag, Ezequiel Ham and Mouaiad Alajaan only to falter in the final third or being denied by Indian custodian Gurpreet.

With a first goal of the tournament having eluded both sides in the opening 45 minutes, the pressure to find the back of the net was immense in the second half with Syria summoning the talismanic Khrbin off the bench. The 2017 AFC Player of the Year made his presence felt almost immediately but his attempt from inside the box was blocked by Bose. Moments later the Syrian custodian gifted India with the perfect opportunity to take the lead when failing to collect the ball, but an unmarked Chhangte failed to make good of the chance. Syria finally found their way in the 75th minute when Khrbin unleashed a right-footed shot to the centre of the box that eluded the outstretched hand of the Indian keeper, giving the Syrian his 22nd goal for the national team. With time quickly running out, India spent the remaining 10 minutes of the game pressing high but failed to bring back parity and ended their AFC Asian Cup campaign goalless.

Stimac bemoans lack of strikers after India suffer worst showing in 40 years

Reuters
Al Khor

India produced their worst Asian Cup performance in 40 years after losing all three of their group matches without scoring as head coach Igor Stimac bemoaned the lack of centre forwards who could step up for the national team in Qatar. India became the second team after China to finish the campaign without a goal as losses to Australia and Uzbekistan were followed by yesterday’s 1-0 loss to Syria that ended their faint hopes of moving to the knockout stage. “Overall in three games we proved that we can compete at this level,” Stimac told reporters. “Obviously everybody sees what are the missing points in India’s play. Scoring goals, which comes with having good goal-scorers with the team and people with confidence in front of the goal. The team produced enough chances to score enough goals. When we start having Indian players in the centre for-

ward position (in the domestic league) then we’re going to have many more goal-scorers for the national team.” India’s captain Sunil Chhetri has scored 93 international goals and is the third-highest active international goalscorer after Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi but even the 39-year-old veteran was unable to find the net and was left frustrated with some near misses. After narrowly missing out on the second round in 2019, India had high hopes in this tournament following wins over Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan and Lebanon last year. During their group matches this month in Qatar, they also enjoyed strong support from the Indian diaspora but the 1964 runner-ups ended up replicating their dismal, goalless, showing from the 1984 campaign. “We can take a good lesson from here...and say that in the next edition of AFC (Asian) Cup we are going to be much, much stronger definitely,” Stimac added.



India exited the Asian Cup without scoring a goal in three losses.

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

Audio descriptive commentary enhances experience for blind fans

Farraj al-Shammari, a 29-year-old blind Saudi football fan and sports journalist has made his way to Qatar to support the Green Falcons in their bid for a fourth AFC Asian Cup title. Al-Shammari is one of many blind and partially sighted fans that are making use of the audio descriptive commentary service at AFC Asian Cup Qatar. The specialised accessibility feature allows him to access a more detailed commentary of events on the pitch and in the stands in the Arabic language. “Attending football matches using audio descriptive commentary is a wonderful experience. I never imagined I would enjoy football in this way,” said al-Shammari. “In the past, blind fans would have to rely on the roar of the fans or the narration of a friend to know what’s going on. It was never a full experience. With this service, I can follow the action closely, both on and off the pitch.” Audio descriptive commentary was first introduced at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. It was the first time that the service was made available in the Arabic language. Building on this legacy, the service is available once again during the AFC Asian Cup Qatar. Specialised commentators were recruited from the community where they received extensive training from the Asian Cup Qatar Local Organising Committee (LOC) in co-ordination with Hamad Bin Khalifa University. Fans can access the service on their personal mobile devices and use their own headphones to listen to the commentary. The service can be accessed from anywhere in the stadium. Audio descriptive commentary provides fans with a detailed account of what is happening in the stadium, including where the ball is on the pitch, players’ facial expressions and what is happening in the stands. For Engineer Bodour al-Meer, LOC Executive Director of Sustainability, the inclusion of this service is a core pillar of the tournament’s commitment to providing an accessible experience to all fans: “We believe that everyone has

the right to enjoy football, regardless of their ability. Audio descriptive commentary builds on the legacy of Qatar 2022, where we were able to deliver a tournament that went above and beyond accessibility standards.” In addition to audio descriptive commentary, the AFC Asian Cup offers other accessibility features such as accessible entrances and seating for wheelchair users and fans with limited mobility as well as sensory rooms for fans with sensory access requirements, including autism. “Football is my favourite sport. It’s a beautiful game that brings people together. I was happy to be in the stands to support Saudi and take in the atmosphere and follow my team with tens of thousands of other fans. The work being done in Qatar in this space is to be commended,” added al-Shammari. Qatar is hosting the AFC Asian Cup for a record third time after successfully hosting it in 1988 and 2011. Twenty-four of the continent’s best teams will compete for the continent’s most prestigious football title.



Saudi fan Farraj al-Shammari is one of many blind and partially sighted fans that are making use of the audio descriptive commentary service at AFC Asian Cup Qatar.

Uzbekistan fight back to book spot

By Sports Reporter
Al Wakra

Azizbek Turgenbov’s late header cancelled out Martin Boyle’s first half penalty to ensure Uzbekistan earned a 1-1 draw with Australia at Al Janoub Stadium yesterday as the Socceroos confirmed their status as Group B winners at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar. Boyle converted a minute into injury time after a handball by Odiljon Xamrobov to put the Socceroos within sight of a third straight win, but substitute Turgenbov levelled in the 78th minute to seal second place in the standings for Srecko Katanec’s side. The result means Australian will next take on one of the third placed finishers in the Round of 16 while Uzbekistan are due to meet the runners-up in Group F when the knockout rounds begin on Sunday. Socceroos coach Graham Arnold made five changes to the team that started the 1-0 win over Syria while Katanec dropped Jaloliddin Masharipov and Igor Sergeev to the bench among four switches the Slovenian made to the Uzbekistan line-up that defeated India. Portsmouth striker Kusini Yengi was one of those brought into the Australia team and the 25-year-old headed into the net in the 11th minute, but his effort was quickly ruled out with Boyle in an offside position in the build-up. Abbosbek Fayzullaev threatened behind the Australian defence before his shot was blocked by Kye Rowles while Harry Souttar was forced to throw himself at full stretch to deny Otabek Shukurov a shooting opportunity eight minutes from the end of the first half. Yengi enlightened a tepid first half with a slaloming run that ended with McGree miscuing his shot badly wide, only for the VAR officials to alert referee Yusuke Araki to an incident inside the box that saw the ball hit Xamrobov’s arm as he sought to block Yengi’s run. The pitchside review led to Araki pointing to the spot and Boyle sent Utkir Yusupov the wrong way to put the Australians in front. Masharipov was introduced for Oston Urunov at the interval and he went close to levelling within six minutes of the restart, bending his free kick narrowly wide of Maty Ryan’s left post after Fayzullaev had been upended by Souttar. The Panserraikos winger was having a major influence on his team as the half wore



Uzbekistan players celebrate in front of their fans after Azizbek Turgenbov scored against Australia at the Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakra. (Reuters)

on and, with the clock ticking down, he unlocked the Australian defence, sending over an inviting cross from the left that fellow substitute Turgenbov rose above Behich to nod home. Australia coach Graham Arnold said he was “blending and gelling” a new team after they topped their group. Arnold has picked an inexperienced squad for the tournament and said his side were “getting better as we go”. “We have four players here who have had Asian Cup experience and in the squad of 26 we only had 12 players that were here in Qatar for the World Cup,” he said. “I’m blending and gelling a new squad together. It’s about us connecting as a group.” Arnold said his squad had “more depth” after making five changes to his starting line-up from the previous game against Syria. They were missing regular centre-

forward Mitchell Duke, who has a hamstring problem. But Arnold warned his players that they will have to improve in front of goal, having scored only four times in three matches. “I thought that we played some good combination football, some good attacking football, but it’s the last pass,” said Arnold. “That’s down to the individual. The individual has to be able to put them in the back of the net – I can’t do that.” Jaloliddin Masharipov, who made a huge impact after coming on as a half-time substitute, said Uzbekistan’s games against Australia were “always very important”. “We are very happy with this result because in the past we couldn’t score against them,” said Masharipov, whose cross set up Turgunboev’s goal. “We played for a successful result and tried to execute what the coach wanted us to do.”