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India not unbeatable at home, says skipper Rohit



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SPORT

MATCH REPORT

Japan primed for early face-off with heavyweights

Ueda scores a brace as four-times champions beat Indonesia to confirm place in the last 16



Indonesia's Justin Hubner puts the ball into his own net during the Asian Cup group stage match against Japan at the Al Thumama Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hajime Moriyasu warned his Japan team “have to be ready” to face the Asian Cup’s best sides after setting up a possible last-16 showdown with South Korea yesterday.

Ayase Ueda struck in each half to go with a late Indonesia own goal for a 3-1 win in Doha and send the pre-tournament favourites through as group runners-up behind Iraq. Japan will now face the winners of Group E – South Korea’s group.

Jurgen Klinsmann’s South Korea are currently second on goal difference behind Jordan and face Malaysia in their final group match today. Iran are lurking as pos-

sible quarter-final opponents and Moriyasu said his team would not back down from the challenge.

“We have to be ready to face them,” the coach said. “Iran and South Korea are top-level teams in Asia and both very strong. They both have their own style that is different from ours and we respect them. It is a step-up in quality as we move into the race for the title.”

Indonesia, who scored a late consolation goal through Sandy Walsh, finished third in Group D. They will have to wait until the first round concludes on Thursday to see if they go through as one of the four best third-placed teams. Japan were stunned 2-1 by Iraq in their previous game and Moriyasu made eight changes to his starting lineup.

“There were lots of issues that came out of the previous game and we worked to fix them in training,” he said. “We wanted to start the game with aggression and that is what led to our first goal.”

Japan were awarded a penalty in the sixth minute after a VAR check ruled that Indonesia defender Jordi Amat had dragged down Ueda in the box. The Feyenoord striker dusted himself down and dispatched the spot-kick past goalkeeper Ernando Ari. “Given the result of the previous game I felt I had to score,” said Ueda, who has now netted three goals at the tournament. “I’m always nervous whenever I take a penalty but I also enjoy it.”

The early goal allowed the Samurai Blue to control the game, dominating possession and pressing the Indonesians into



Japan's Ayase Ueda celebrates with teammates Seiya Maikuma after scoring yesterday.

mistakes deep in their own territory, with Takefusa Kubo dragging his effort wide midway through the half.

The Indonesians had a sight of goal when Marselinho was played into space on the half-hour mark but his attempt was steered out for a corner by Yuta Nakayama as he covered Suzuki’s near post.

Japan responded by further increasing the tempo, Kubo clipping the ball over the defence for Seiya Maikuma to cut back at full stretch to the lurking Nakamura, only for his shot to bounce to safety off the inside of the post with Ernando well beaten.

Japan kept up the pace in the second half and Ueda doubled their lead seven minutes after the restart. Ritsu Doan cut through the Indonesia defence down the wing and Ueda was on hand to tap home his low cross.

Ueda went looking for his hat-trick and his shot pressured Indonesia defender Justin Hubner into firing the ball into his own goal in the 88th minute. But Indonesia got an even later goal to give their fans something to cheer about, with Walsh volleying home from close range in the 91st minute.

Indonesia, who have never reached the Asian Cup knockout rounds before, finished the group stage with three points from their win over Vietnam. Their fate will be decided by today’s results and coach Shin Tae-yong said he wanted his players to be “as comfortable as possible” while watching the matches. “Rather than watching together, I think it’s better for them to relax and chill out without any stress,” he said. “I will let them watch it individually in peace.”

SPOTLIGHT

Iraq one step closer to emulating 2007 Asian Cup fairytale

AFP
Doha

Free-scoring Iraq hope to emulate their heroes of 2007 by going all the way at the Asian Cup after storming through the group stage with three wins from three.

Having sprung a shock by beating Japan, Iraq celebrated finishing top of Group D with a last-minute 3-2 win over 10-man Vietnam, who were already eliminated.

Aymen Hussein netted twice including the winner deep in stoppage time in a frantic match and is the leading scorer in Qatar with five goals. Japan finished second in the group after a 3-1 win over Indonesia, who look unlikely to progress as one of the best third-placed teams.

Iraq picked nine points in the group phase trumps the five they picked up at the same stage in 2007 on the way to their first and only continental title. They defeated three-time champions Saudi Arabia 1-0 in the final in Jakarta, the fairytale triumph sparking huge celebrations back in deeply fractured Iraq. The current crop of players remembers it well.



Iraq players celebrate in front of their fans after beating Vietnam in the Asian Cup at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)

“I was watching this game at the time with my family,” midfielder Osama Rashid said in Qatar when asked about the historic win. “We were very happy and went outside to celebrate with friends. Many people speak about these moments,” said Rashid, who scored in the 3-1 win over Indonesia in Doha.

The Spaniard Jesus Casas was named coach in late 2022 and Iraq promptly won the eight-team Gulf

Cup on home soil. Rashid said that meant the players “know the feeling of winning a cup and how they can make the Iraqi people happy”.

Upsetting the odds once again in Qatar would make “a lot of people – 40 million Iraqi people – very happy,” said Casas, a former assistant to Luis Enrique with Spain’s national team.

Having already topped the group, Iraq rested players for

match with Vietnam at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. Vietnam thought they had secured the lead in the 17th minute when Iraqi defender Zaid Tahseen’s attempt to clear Vo Minh Trong’s cross inadvertently resulted in the ball going into his own net but an intervention from VAR saw the scoreline being restored to 0-0.

However, the Golden Star Warriors broke the deadlock in the

40th minute when an unmarked Bui Hoang Viet Anh sent a perfect volley into the middle of the Iraqi net, from striker Khuat Van Khang’s free-kick. That would be Khuat’s last attacking involvement – he was sent off in first-half stoppage time for a second yellow card.

Determined to take advantage of the situation, Iraq began the second half with forwards Ali Jasim

and Aymen Hussein replacing Bashar Kasan and Ahmed Abas respectively.

The 2007 AFC Asian Cup champions were rewarded almost instantly as Jasim wasted no time in helping the Lions of Mesopotamia back into the game when his corner kick two minutes into the second half was headed into the Vietnamese goal by Solaka, earning the defender his first international goal.

Rejuvenated by the equaliser, Iraq continued to apply pressure and got their second in the 72nd minute when Hussein received a beautiful cross from Jasim and made no mistake in heading the ball past Vietnamese goalkeeper Filip Nguyen for his fourth goal of the campaign.

With less than 10 minutes left on the clock, Iraq had another golden opportunity to further their lead when Bui Hoang Viet Anh’s tackle gifted the West Asians a penalty but the talismanic Hussein saw his spot-kick being denied by the woodwork.

However, Vietnam restored parity through substitute Ngyuen Quang Hai in the first minute of stoppage time but a last minute penalty conceded by Vo Minh Trong saw Hussein score Iraq’s winner.

TENNIS

Zverev roars into Australian Open semis

Reuters
Melbourne

Alexander Zverev served up a huge shock at the Australian Open yesterday by stunning second seed Carlos Alcaraz to make the semi-finals after third seed Daniil Medvedev fought hard to avoid an upset at the hands of Hubert Hurkacz.

Ukrainian qualifier Dayana Yastremska and Chinese 12th seed Zheng Qinwen earlier progressed to the last four of a Grand Slam for the first time after contrasting victories from a wide open section of the women's draw.

Zverev was near-flawless on his delivery early in the clash on Rod Laver Arena and the sixth seed took advantage of mistakes from the racket of Alcaraz to lay the foundation for a 6-1 6-3 6-7(2) 6-4 victory.

Two years on from Rafa Nadal's "Miracle of Melbourne" when the Spaniard battled from two sets down to beat Medvedev in the final, his 20-year-old compatriot came to life by edging the third set but there would be no escape for Alcaraz.

Battling fatigue and an issue with his toes, German Zverev held

firm in the face of relentless pressure to secure the win and set up a Friday semi-final showdown with Medvedev, who has won 11 of their 18 previous meetings.

"I'm extremely happy to be back where I am and winning these kind of matches and giving myself the chance again," Zverev said. "Because last year, for the first part of the season, or actually throughout the year, I wasn't a slam contender. "I wasn't a contender to win tournaments like that. If I am now, I'm very happy about that."

Alcaraz was not pleased with his game on the day but left with his head held high.

"In general, I did a pretty good tournament," Alcaraz said. "I played great matches. Obviously quarter-final of a Grand Slam is good. It's not what I'm looking for, but it's not bad."

Third seed Medvedev, who lost back-to-back Melbourne Park finals in 2021 and 2022, pounced on the few chances offered up by Pole Hurkacz to get closer to returning to the title clash with a 7-6(4) 2-6 6-3 5-7 6-4 win.

He had looked on course to wrap up the match in four sets before ninth seed Hurkacz grew in belief and forced a decider, where Russian Medvedev broke for a 4-3 lead and soaked up the applause before



Germany's Alexander Zverev (left) embraces Spain's Carlos Alcaraz after their singles quarter-final on day 11 of the Australian Open in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

serving out to seal the win. "I knew how 'Hubi' can play and he played quite well. I felt like the games, almost all of them, probably except 2-0 in the first set, I had a small chance," Medvedev said.

"I managed to take it. Really happy and proud about that. Because with him you don't get many chances"

The former US Open champion has sometimes found it hard to get the Melbourne Park crowd on his side but has received great backing this year and will hope to ride that support when he plays Zverev.

Organisers were able to breathe easier yesterday as the day session finished on schedule. On Tuesday, epic matches that involved reign-

ing champion Novak Djokovic and US Open winner Coco Gauff meant the action spilled over into the evening.

Yastremska kept things on track with a swift 6-3 6-4 win over giant-killing Czech teenager Linda Noskova to become the first women's qualifier into the semis since the 1978 event.

The world number 93, who had already taken out Grand Slam champions Marketa Vondrousova and Victoria Azarenka during her stellar run, meets Zheng who came from behind to beat world number 75 Anna Kalinskaya.

"It's nice to make history," said Yastremska, who followed in the footsteps of Christine Dorey, the last qualifier to reach the Melbourne Park semi-finals 45 years ago.

"It's something new for me and for my generation because the last time it happened was a long time ago. I wasn't born yet."

Zheng overcame a slow start to outclass unseeded Russian Kalinskaya 6-7(4) 6-3 6-1 and join Yastremska in the semi-finals of a major for the first time and the Chinese player will also crack the top 10 when the rankings are updated on Monday.

The 21-year-old, who is looking to emulate her idol Li Na and win the Australian Open, expects a thorough test against a player who will be competing in her ninth match of the event.

"It doesn't matter if she comes from the qualifiers," Zheng said yesterday. "Right now the people who arrive at the semi-finals, they all have a super level in this tournament."

CRICKET

Captain Rohit not underestimating attacking England

INDIA HAVE NOT LOST A HOME TEST SERIES SINCE 2012

Agencies
Hyderabad

India have not lost a Test series at home since 2012-13 but captain Rohit Sharma does not want his teammates to start believing they are unbeatable in their own conditions.

Since Alastair Cook led a touring England to a 2-1 series victory more than a decade ago, India have gone on to win 16 consecutive test series at home.

Rohit's team would begin as favourites in the five-Test series against Ben Stokes's England but the home captain looked determined to prevent any complacency from creeping into their approach.

"No, no, not at all. At the end of the day, it's sport," Rohit said dismissing the suggestion in his pre-match press conference.

"By no means whatever records we have in the past decade or so gives us the guarantee that we are going to win the series.

"I won't say we are not beatable, we are.

"We want to think that if we don't step up or don't show up well, we are going to find ourselves in trouble.

"We don't want to be doing that."

Especially against an England team, who are out to redefine how Test cricket is played with an ultra-aggressive 'Bazball' approach championed by captain Stokes and coach Brendon "Baz" McCullum.

"England obviously is a very good team, they play their Test cricket really well and obviously the last team to beat us here in our conditions," Rohit said.

"For us it will be important that we stick to our strength and do the things that we know how to do."

England have named a spin-heavy attack with Mark Wood as the lone fast bowler for the series opener.

Ravichandran Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja would shoulder India's spin load but Rohit did not reveal who between Axar Patel and Kuldeep Yadav would be their third spinner.

The India captain also confirmed KL Rahul, primarily a batter who kept wicket in the 50-overs World Cup last year, would not be deployed behind the stumps.

On what is widely expected to be a turning track, India would rather prefer a specialist though



England's players are seen during a practice session at the Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad on the eve of their first Test against India. (AFP)



India's captain Rohit Sharma speaks during a press conference on the eve of the first Test against England. (AFP)

Rohit would not reveal whether it would be Srikanth Bharat, who has played five Tests, or the uncapped Dhruv Jurel.

England's Stokes 'devastated' at Bashir visa row

England skipper Ben Stokes said yesterday he was "devastated" visa issues had stopped teammate Shoaib Bashir from entering India for a five-Test series, as his counterpart said he hoped the matter would be "quickly" resolved.

Britain-born Bashir, a 20-year-old of Pakistani heritage, was unable to join the rest of the squad flying to India from a training camp in Abu Dhabi ahead of the

opener in Hyderabad following a delay in his visa application. "I'm pretty devastated that Bash has had to go through this," Stokes told reporters in Hyderabad.

"When I first found the news out in Abu Dhabi, I did say we shouldn't fly until Bash gets his visa, but that was a little bit tongue in cheek," the England captain said.

"I know it's a way bigger thing, doing that. That was probably just (my) emotions around the whole thing.

"There was never a chance that we were not going to travel around this, but Bash knows he's had our full support."

The Somerset off-spinner is back in London, but it is hoped he will be able to play in later matches in the series.

"A lot of people are jumping through hoops to try and get this through quicker," Stokes said.

"Hopefully we're going to see him here over the weekend."

India and neighbouring Pakistan are arch-rivals, both on and off the field.

A long-standing diplomatic stand-off between the two nuclear-armed nations has affected sporting ties, with India refusing to tour Pakistan or to play ICC events there.

Indian skipper Rohit said he felt for Bashir after the uncapped spinner was forced to return home.

"I feel for him honestly," Rohit said.

"Unfortunately I don't sit in the visa office to give you more details," he added.

"But I hope he can make it here quickly and enjoy our country and play some cricket as well."

The England and Wales Cricket Board later yesterday confirmed England spinner Bashir has received his visa for India and will join the touring team this weekend.

India are without star batsman Virat Kohli, who withdrew from the opening two Tests due to personal reasons.

Rampant Australia seek series sweep against timid West Indies

Melbourne: Australia took a little over two days to wrap up victory in the series opener in Adelaide and a similar fate could befall West Indies in the day-night second and final Test in Brisbane beginning today.

World Test Champions (WTC) Australia needed seven sessions to seal their 10-wicket romp against a depleted West Indies, who fielded three debutants in the match.

Australia quick Josh Hazlewood, who finished with a nine-wicket match haul, spearheaded the rout with West Indies failing to reach 200 in either innings and Kirk McKenzie the only batsman to make 50 runs or more.

Their task might be even tougher in Brisbane, where Australia beat South Africa inside two days in December 2022 on a minefield of a pitch at the Gabba.

Furthermore, Australia boast a perfect 11-0 record in day-night Tests and the tourists look ill-equipped to master the ever-swinging pink ball.

Australia will field an unchanged side with Travis Head, who hit a brilliant century in Adelaide, having recovered from Covid-19.

All-rounder Cameron Green and coach Andrew McDonald have since been diagnosed with the virus, but both are able to play full parts in the match while separated from the rest of the squad until they test negative.

"He's fine," vice-captain **Steve Smith** said of Green yesterday. "No physical drama at all - just tested positive. Him and Andrew McDonald are both fine."

Opener Usman Khawaja has also cleared his concussion tests after being hit on the helmet by Shamari Joseph and forced to retire hurt in the last few overs of the Adelaide

run chase. Raw paceman Joseph was the one shining light for West Indies in Adelaide, dazzling on his test debut with 5-94 and a solid batting cameo at number 11 in the first innings.

Smith, who will play his second Test in his new opening role having replaced the retired David Warner at the top of the order, said he had been impressed with the West Indies attack.

"They've got some good bowlers in there, and the pink ball, when it's sniffing around and swinging around, it might suit them nicely, like it does our bowlers," Smith added.

West Indies skipper Kraigg Brathwaite has asked his batsmen to draw inspiration from McKenzie's gritty half-century in Adelaide.

"It shows that he has the ability to score runs against world-class bowlers," Brathwaite said after the thrashing in Adelaide.

"And the other guys didn't get runs but from watching Kirk they know now that we could get it done."

Rain has been forecast for the weekend but West Indies will need a much-improved display to make the weather a serious factor.



QMMF opens window for marshal applications

DOHA: The Lusail International Circuit is set to host the Qatar 1812 KM - 2024 FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC), for the first time, from February 29 to March 2. To ensure the success of the world-class racing event, the Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) is calling for dedicated individuals to sign up as marshals.

This year, Lusail International Circuit will host the WEC season-opener - The Qatar 1812 KM - FIA World Endurance Championship 2024, under the banner of Lusail Speed Fest, for the very first time. At under 10 hours long, the race is named in honour of Qatar's National Day. Beginning on 29 February with free practice, qualifying sessions along with the Lusail Classic

race will take place on 1 March, followed by a thrilling race day finale on 2 March.

Now entering its 12th season, the FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) is the world's premier international sportscar championship with multiple cars racing simultaneously across two categories.

Requirements:

The minimum age to apply is 18 years old. Applicants are required to have a valid QID along with an active bank account and should be willing to provide an IBAN certificate. We are seeking team players who are proactive and with good communication skills and English proficiency can apply by e-mailing: qatar.marshall.club@qmmf.com.qa



Mali's forward (9) Ibrahim Sissoko (left) fights for the ball with Namibia's midfielder (11) Absalom Limbongi and defender (4) Riaan Hananamb during the Africa Cup of Nations Group E match at the Stade Laurent Pokou in San Pedro yesterday. The match ended in a goalless draw. Namibia qualified for last 16 for the first time. The Brave Warriors will advance as one of the four best third-placed teams and meet Angola on Saturday for a place in the quarter-finals. Also yesterday Tunisia limped out of the finals with a whimper after they were held to a 0-0 draw by South Africa in the sweltering heat of Korhogo, a result that sends their opponents into the last 16. (AFP)

PREVIEW

Klinsmann expects Son to put his stamp on Asian Cup Qatar

Koreans need a win against Malaysia to confirm a top-two finish



South Korea's captain and forward Son Heung-min practices free kick as teammates look on during a training session in Doha yesterday, ahead of their Asian Cup final group stage match against Malaysia.

Reuters
Doha

South Korea skipper Son Heung-min has struggled to make his mark at the Asian Cup as defensive opponents do their best to shut him down but the Tottenham Hotspur forward will find a way in the coming games, coach Juergen Klinsmann said yesterday.

Son is one of the most recognisable players at the tournament in Qatar with years of experience in the Premier League, but he has scored only one goal in two games – a penalty in a 2-2 draw with Jordan. “Son will always get special attention in this tournament because he plays in the Premier League, it’s a normal process,” Klinsmann told reporters.

“When he gets the ball there will be two or three players closing him down since they play with a defensive-minded approach. It’s similar for Lee Kang-in who plays for Paris St Germain. For them to find space and opportunities to score and assist, opponents will always try to minimise that wherever they can no matter who you play against. Sonny knows how to deal with that, he knows he can find space and we all hope he has more to put his stamp on the tournament.”

South Korea have not yet guaranteed a top-two finish, with the team on four points, and play Malaysia in their final group game today at the Al Janoub Stadium. Klinsmann said there was a lot of room for improvement as they look to regain their rhythm.

The Koreans salvaged a last gasp point against Jordan in their second game and it is a lesson that Klinsmann hopes his team have learned from with the two-time winners on four points and needing a win against Malaysia to confirm a top-two finish.

“It’s a very tight group,” said 1990 FIFA World Cup winner Klinsmann. “We’re ready for this difficult game against Malaysia, we have respect for the team. We watched and scouted them, so we’re looking forward to



South Korea coach Jurgen Klinsmann (top) poses for a pic during the AFC Asian Cup match between Japan and Indonesia at the Al Thumama Stadium in Doha. (Reuters)

a very exciting match. We got a lesson from Jordan, who were highly motivated and kept fighting. We talked about it. We expect the same motivation from Malaysia so there’s no way for us to approach this half-heartedly.”

“They made a huge improvement from game one to game two and were unlucky to

lose in the final minutes. Mr Kim (Pan-gon – Malaysia head coach) knows these players well having come through the system. But we have to do our job, play hard, keep the tempo high and hopefully get the three points.

“We don’t want to avoid anybody. We go game to game. We respect Malaysia, who played much better in their second game. Whoever comes after that, it’s not important today, first we have to win our game and play well.”

Malaysia, who are bottom of the group after two losses, have a South Korean coach in Kim Pan-gon. He is no stranger to the South Korean team having been a technical director of the Korean Football Association before making the switch to Malaysia and helping them qualify for the Asian Cup for the first time in four decades.

“Mr Kim knows these guys really well. He’s very well informed about us, that’s good for him,” Klinsmann said with a smile. “We have to approach the game the right way and respect his team.”

It will be a special game for Kim as he goes up against his country of birth but the Malaysia head coach intends to put the personal links aside and use the match as a gauge for the future. Malaysia will resume their Preliminary Joint Qualification – Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 in March with a double-header against Oman, which could pave the way for them to potentially face teams like South Korea in the future

“After two games, it’s decided that we can’t go to the Round of 16,” said the 54-year-old. “It’s tough because that was our target for this tournament. We’re facing a giant in our last game but it is a positive challenge for us as we have nothing to lose. Depending on the situation, perhaps we may get something. We can use this as a foundation for the future. We face World Cup qualification in March and June. If we succeed to go to the final stage, we may get to face such giants again. We want to use this opportunity to taste, feel and learn.”

WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Olympic and World Champions among ambassadors named for Doha 2024

The World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 has announced nine athlete ambassadors ahead of the flagship event being held in Qatar and the Middle East for the first time between February 2 and 18.

More than 2,600 of the world’s best aquatics athletes will head to Qatari capital Doha next week looking to secure World Championship glory, while a number of qualification spots for the 2024 Paris Olympics are also available.

Now, the Doha 2024 Organising Committee has announced a stellar line-up of ambassadors, including former World Champions, Olympic medallists and star athletes preparing to compete in the championships. The ambassadors come from nine different countries, three separate continents and represent four of the six disciplines taking place in Doha during the 17 days of exciting competition.

Nada Mohamed Wafa Arakji became the first Qatari women to compete at the Olympic Games when she swam at 2012 London Games and is the host country’s ambassador. Joining Nada is Yusra Mardini, originally from Syria before taking refugee status. Mardini was named as one of TIME magazine’s 100 most influential people in 2022 after competing for the Olympic Refugee Team at Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020.

Representing Africa will be Tunisia’s Ahmed Hafnaoui, who will gain plenty of support as he looks to defend the two gold medals he won at last year’s World Aquatics Championships in Fukuoka, Japan, two years after stunning the swimming world when he finished first in the men’s 400m freestyle at Tokyo 2020.

Three-time Olympic gold med-

allists Anthony Ervin (USA) and Ranomi Kromowidjojo (Netherlands) and Olympic champion Pernille Blume (Denmark) will also serve as ambassadors in Doha. These legends of the swimming pool have won more than 20 World Championships medals between them during their distinguished careers.

Water polo legend, two-time world champion and multiple World Player of the Year Filip Filipovic will be keeping a close eye on his former Serbia teammates, while Olympic medallist in Artistic Swimming Ona Carbonell Ballestero and 3m springboard diver turned professional high-diver Alain Kohl from Luxembourg will also be in Doha promoting the Championships.

Doha 2024 Director General Khaleel al-Jaber said: “We are delighted to be able to count on the support of nine distinguished ambassadors ahead of the World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 beginning next week.

“Doha 2024 promises to be a unique celebration of aquatics sports and a chance to welcome athletes and fans from across the world to Qatar, where they will be able to experience our state-of-the-art facilities, world-class hospitality and unique culture.

“Our ambassadors have all gained great followings during their careers and will be able to amplify the success of Doha 2024 through their work, ensuring that the world is connected to the Championships.”

To watch world’s best aquatics athletes in action in Qatar further details including ticket news can be found at <https://www.worldaquatics-doha2024.com/en/ticketing>



Oman eyes crucial victory against Kyrgyzstan to secure round of 16 spot

Doha: Branko Ivankovic is hopeful that an Oman win over Kyrgyzstan in Group F of the AFC Asian Cup today will be enough to take the West Asian side through to the round of 16. Oman scaled new heights in UAE 2019 when they reached the knockout stage of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time and head coach Ivankovic is not ready for the achievement to come to an abrupt end.

One point from their first two matches puts Oman in a precarious position but a win against Kyrgyzstan could well see them advance to the last 16 as one of the best four third-place finishers. “If we emerge victorious, we will secure either the second or third position depending on what happens in the Saudi Arabia-Thailand match,” said the Croat. “Our focus remains on winning and the players are committed to giving their best. We are hoping for a successful outcome.

“Each game is unique with its own set of circumstances, and tomorrow’s match is no exception. Our style of play remains consistent and we approach every game with the same determination, whether against Saudi Arabia, Thailand, or Kyrgyzstan.”

“Considering the continuity in our style of play, the emotional readiness of players like Mataz Saleh, Ibrahim al-Mukhaini, and Ahmed al-Khamisi, who featured in both previous games, is yet to be determined. If they are

emotionally ready, then we will play them. If not, we have to find the best solution.

“Qualifying for the next stage is of utmost importance to us. The competition in the Asian Cup is fierce, with all teams being strong and well-prepared and we remain focused on achieving that goal.”

The task faced by Kyrgyzstan is an even bigger one as they currently sit bottom of Group F without a single point but head coach Stefan Tarkovic is not willing to give up without a fight.

“Tomorrow’s game holds significant importance for us, providing an opportunity to showcase our capabilities in what is expected to be a tough match,” said Tarkovic.

“We are prepared to give our best on the field. Oman have consistently been a formidable opponent for us, and having faced them twice last year, we have thoroughly analysed their gameplay. They demonstrated strong performances in both matches. Oman boast numerous skilled players with excellent technique, playing compact football, presenting a considerable challenge for us.

“Despite the setbacks in the first two matches, we maintain a strong belief in our potential. Confidence is high, especially if we can secure a victory against Oman. Our goals and dreams remain intact, and we are determined to turn our fortunes around in tomorrow’s match.”

SPOTLIGHT

Jordan’s Ammouta wary of Bahrain

Hussein Ammouta has warned Jordan not to take Bahrain lightly when they meet in Group E of the AFC Asian Cup at the Khalifa International Stadium today. Jordan lead the standings ahead of South Korea on goal difference with Bahrain a point adrift, with top spot at stake in the decisive round of matches.

Having scored four unanswered goals against Malaysia before going on to hold two-time winners Korea Republic 2-2, the Moroccan tactician wants his players to be fully focused. “We hope that we can show our concentration and focus. It won’t be easy and we have to be at our highest level in all aspects to confirm what we have done previously,” said Ammouta. We want to confirm the performance that we have exhibited so far.

“However, we will not underestimate our opponents. There are four players who are on yellow cards and others have concerns physically, so maybe we will make some changes to the line-up if necessary.”

Jordan have scored more goals in the group stage so far compared to their previous best of five in the 2015



edition and Ammouta wants his team to finish top of the group. “There are no easy matches. We know Bahrain are a strong team and they always have good performances regionally and also in Asia. They have no option but to win. We have high respect for Bahrain so we will give our best efforts.

“There are always calculations on paths but we have no control over who we play. We can only prepare to win because we are professionals, then we will deal with what comes at the end of the match. We will feel better if we finish top of the group.”

Bahrain head coach Juan Antonio Pizzi is also confident of his team’s chances of another victory following their nail-biting win over Malaysia.

“We’re very optimistic about tomorrow’s match against Jordan, it’s an important match that could help us qualify for the next round. We’re focused on the recovery of the players after the Malaysia match and we’re confident of winning,” said Pizzi.

“It’s a decisive match. We have confidence in our team. Jordan have played two very good matches but I see them as a collective threat rather than an individual ones. We’re prepared to get the best result.”