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TENNIS | Page 2

Sinner relishing chance to ‘dance in pressure storm’



QATAR RALLY | Page 3

Al-Thefiri’s absence leaves MERC2 door wide open

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Tuesday, January 30, 2024  
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**SPORT**

MATCH REPORT

# Qatar reach quarters after win over gritty Palestine

It was Qatar’s 11th win on the trot following their seven in the historic title winning run in 2019 in UAE

By Rizwan Rehmat  
Doha

Defending champions Qatar yesterday rallied for a 2-1 win against Palestine after a first-half stutter to reach the quarter-finals at AFC Asian Cup 2023.

Playing at a packed Al Bayt Stadium, Qatar conceded a goal in the 37th minute when Oday Dabbagh found the net to put the Palestinians ahead.

Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos produced the equaliser in injury time following a corner kick. Qatar’s mercurial striker Akram Afif converted a penalty in the 49th minute – driving to the right of Palestinian goalkeeper Rami Hamadeh – as the home team took the lead in the feisty contest.

It was Qatar’s 11th win on the trot following their seven in the 2019 edition they won in the UAE. For Afif, the Al Sadd stalwart, it was his fourth goal of the tournament scored in front of 65,000 fans at tent-like Al Bayt Stadium.

Qatar enjoyed greater ball possession (60-40) while sentimental favourites Palestine fired 11 shots on the Qatari goal, two more than the home side coached by Marquez Lopez from Spain. Palestine landed five shots on target whereas Qatar had three.

In the quarter-finals, Al Anabbi will take on the winner from the clash between Uzbekistan and Thailand today. Qatar will return to Al Bayt Stadium in the quarter-final. For Palestine, ranked 99 in the world, it was a memorable event in which they scored six goals in four matches with three coming against Hong Kong last week. Prior to last night’s clash, Palestine had only scored just one goal across six AFC Asian Cup matches in 2015 and 2019.

“It was a game against Palestine and it was emotional. With all my respect I understand our fans (cheering for Palestine),” Lopez told reporters yesterday. “This is football, you can plan for something and it doesn’t always go to plan. Palestine’s players played very well, they were brave. The most important thing is we qualified (for the next round) and we have to retain our positivity for the future.”

Palestine coach Makram Daboub said after the match: “My players gave all that they have despite the difficult circumstances. I cannot ask them to do more than what they’ve done. I’m very proud of my champions. They have big ambition and they’re proud to represent the Palestinian people. The Palestinian people are very passionate. We wanted to make them happy but we’re sorry we couldn’t. We hope to be better in our next games and compensate for today’s loss.”

Following a cagey start, Qatar keeper Meshaal – younger sibling of global track and field star Mutaz Barshim – managed a diving stop on a long-range missile from Palestine’s Amid Mahajna in the 19th minute.



Qatar’s forward Akram Afif (left) celebrates with teammates after scoring a penalty during the AFC Asian Cup round of 16 match against Palestine at Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday. (AFP)



Palestine’s Oday Dabbagh celebrates after scoring against Qatar. (AFP)

A few minutes later, Barsham thwarted another Palestinian threat when Abu Warda, ghosting down the left, met Zeid Qunbar’s pass with a deft touch, but the resilient Qatari shot-stopper was equal to the task.

Frustrated by Barsham’s brilliant saves for Qatar, Palestine’s Dabbagh decided to take matters into his own hands. In a moment of pure magic, he embarked on a solo run, weaving past two befuddled Qatari defenders. With laser focus, he drilled a shot towards the bottom corner, finding the net with ease. His third AFC Asian Cup goal delighted the Palestinian fans just

eight minutes before halftime.

It was also the first goal conceded by Qatar in this tournament featuring Asia’s finest 24 teams.

In a heart-stopping finale to the first half, Afif and al-Haydos put together a magical move. Afif whipped a low delivery across the box, finding al-Haydos in trademark fashion. The Qatari captain’s first-time strike deflected off Musab al-Battat and nestled into the net, silencing the Palestinian cheers and restoring parity

just as the whistle blew.

Minutes into the second half, Afif slipped in a low cross to Al-moez Ali but Palestine defender Mohamed Saleh produced a rough sliding tackle on the Qatari resulting in a penalty. Afif calmly slotted home as Qatar took the lead 12 minutes after conceding the first goal.

Qatar skipper Hassan al-Haydos equalised with the last kick of the half when he latched onto Akram Afif’s low cross.

## AFC Asian Cup Qatar breaks all-time attendance record



The AFC Asian Cup Qatar has set a new total attendance record of 1.06mn after 63,753 fans packed the Al Bayt Stadium to witness defending champions Qatar beat Palestine in the round of 16 yesterday. The 18th edition of Asia’s crown jewel officially surpassed the previous spectatorship record of 1.04mn that was set nearly two decades ago when the showpiece was held in China in 2004.

For Jassim al-Jassim, CEO of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar Local Organising Committee (LOC), record breaking attendances are a testament to Qatar’s ability to host world class sporting events: “Once again, Qatar has reaffirmed its place as a global sporting capital. Our modern infrastructure and operational experience have enabled us to deliver yet another accessible and culturally engaging tournament to the highest standards.” He added: “We’re delighted to be setting records this early in the tournament. With 11 matches still to go, the best is yet to come, with many teams showcasing exceptional performances.”

After 40 matches, the Asian Cup Qatar, which very recently also eclipsed the historic 1.5mn mark in terms of digital engagement, currently ranks second in the average attendance charts with 26,672 fans turning out to demonstrate their support per match.

The latest milestone marks the second time that a spectator attendance benchmark has been achieved in Qatar after 82,490 fans set a new record for an opening match in AFC Asian Cup history.

Afif nearly put Qatar ahead late in the second half, bending a 20-yard free-kick over the wall and agonizingly grazing the crossbar to the relief of thousands of Palestine fans.

Yesterday’s clash saw fan turnout after 40 matches reach 1,068,587 spectators, a record tally that exceeded the number of ticket holders at the 2004 edition held in China.

SPOTLIGHT

# Jordan score twice in injury time to stun Iraq



Jordan’s Yazan al-Arab scores against Iraq during their Asian Cup match at the Khalifa International Stadium. **PICTURE:** Shaji Kayamkulam

AFP  
Doha

Jordan will meet Tajikistan in the Asian Cup quarter-finals after scoring twice in three minutes deep in stoppage time to stun Iraq 3-2 in a thriller yesterday.

Jordan had a man advantage after the 77th-minute dismissal of Aymen Hussein but looked down and out in injury time, only for Yazan al-Arab to prod in a 95th-minute leveller. If that was hard to believe, better was to come two minutes later for Jordan when Nizar al-Rashdan curled in from well outside the box to fire the under-

dogs into the last eight and spark wild celebrations.

Iraq’s heartbroken players were left flat-out on the turf, their dreams of repeating the country’s fairytale 2007 Asian Cup title somehow snatched from their grasp. There were chaotic scenes in Iraq’s post-match press conference when angry Iraqi reporters confronted the team’s Spanish coach Jesus Casas, before security stepped in to usher them away.

Jordan’s coach Hussein Ammouta agreed with Casas that the harsh dismissal of Hussein for a second yellow card, for over-celebrating what he thought was Iraq’s winner, changed the game. “The second half belonged to them, they scored two

goals and then had to continue with 10 players,” said the Moroccan.

Jordan, who held South Korea 2-2 in the group phase, next face a Tajikistan side who are one of the surprise packages of the competition on their Asian Cup debut.

Jordan are ranked 24 places lower than Iraq but they were the better side in the first half in front of a 36,000 crowd at a raucous Khalifa International Stadium. After going close on at least two occasions, Jordan deservedly took the lead in the first minute of injury time.

The Iraq defence sloppily presented Yazan al-Naimat with the ball and he raced towards goal before chipping over a flailing and overworked goalkeeper Jalal Has-

san. Iraq, who defeated pre-tournament favourites Japan 2-1 in the group stage, went on the attack after the break.

The pressure paid off in the 68th minute when defender Saad Natiq nodded down and in from a corner for the equaliser. Jordan went right up the other end and flashed an effort across goal, before unmarked striker Hussein controlled the ball in the box and lashed in to make it 2-1 in the 76th minute.

It was his sixth goal of the tournament but he was promptly given a second yellow card, having sat on the ground and mimicked what appeared to be eating. Then came Jordan’s quickfire double at the death to leave Iraq reeling.



TENNIS

# Sinner relishing the Grand Slam spotlight

AFP  
Melbourne

Composed **Jannik Sinner** is ready for what comes next after winning a maiden Grand Slam title at the Australian Open, saying he likes to “dance in the pressure storm”. Ever since bursting on the scene as a 17-year-old in 2019, the Italian has been touted as one of tennis’ future greats. It has been a five-year grind to reach the pinnacle with his come-from-behind five-set victory over Daniil Medvedev in Melbourne on Sunday, and the prodigious young talent is taking it in his stride. “I’m extremely happy that I am in this position now. I have a great team behind me who knows what I have to do,” he said of the extra spotlight that will now inevitably fall on him. He pointed to having Darren Cahill in his corner as a coach, with the Australian having been there and done that. Cahill guided Lleyton Hewitt to become the second youngest player ranked world number one before coaching Andre Agassi to become the oldest player to achieve the feat.

He has also worked with a host of other high-profile players including Andy Murray and Simona Halep, guiding the Romanian to the French Open title. “With Darren, he has a lot of experience. He has been through this already a number of times,” said Sinner. “So, you know, it’s all part of the process. Obviously having this trophy, it’s an amazing feeling. I feel grateful to have this here. “But I know that I have to work even harder, because the opponents,...will find the way to beat me and I have to be prepared. Let’s see what’s coming in the future.” A striking aspect of Sinner’s time in Melbourne was his calm and composed demeanour, even when he found himself in trouble. Against an ultra-aggressive Medvedev, he did not panic when he fell two sets behind, instead looking for chinks in the Russian’s armour and when a chance arose, he took it.

**A privilege**  
There is always pressure, but the pressure is something good. You have to take it in a good way. It’s a privilege, no?,” he said.

“So yes, I like to dance in the pressure storm. Personally, I like it, because that’s where most of the time I bring out my best tennis. I’m also quite relaxed in this occasion, because I always try to enjoy being on the court.”

The 22-year-old is the first Italian man to win a Slam since Adriano Panatta in



1976 and the youngest man to win the Australian Open since Novak Djokovic in 2008. It capped a highly successful six months for Sinner, who clinched his maiden ATP Masters crown in Toronto last August. He backed that up with titles in Beijing and Vienna before reaching the championship match on home soil at November’s ATP Finals and guiding Italy to Davis Cup success. For Sinner, it has been the result of long-term thinking by him and his team. “I think what I did not last year, but two years ago, getting to know my body better, getting to know my team better,” Sinner said. “This was a very important step for me,” he added. “Then last year we tried to have some more results. That made me believe that I can compete against the best players in the world. “But (here) I still have to process it, because beating Novak in the semis and then Daniil in the final, they are tough players to beat. “So it’s a great moment for me and my team, but we also know that we have to improve if we want to have another chance to hold a big trophy again.”

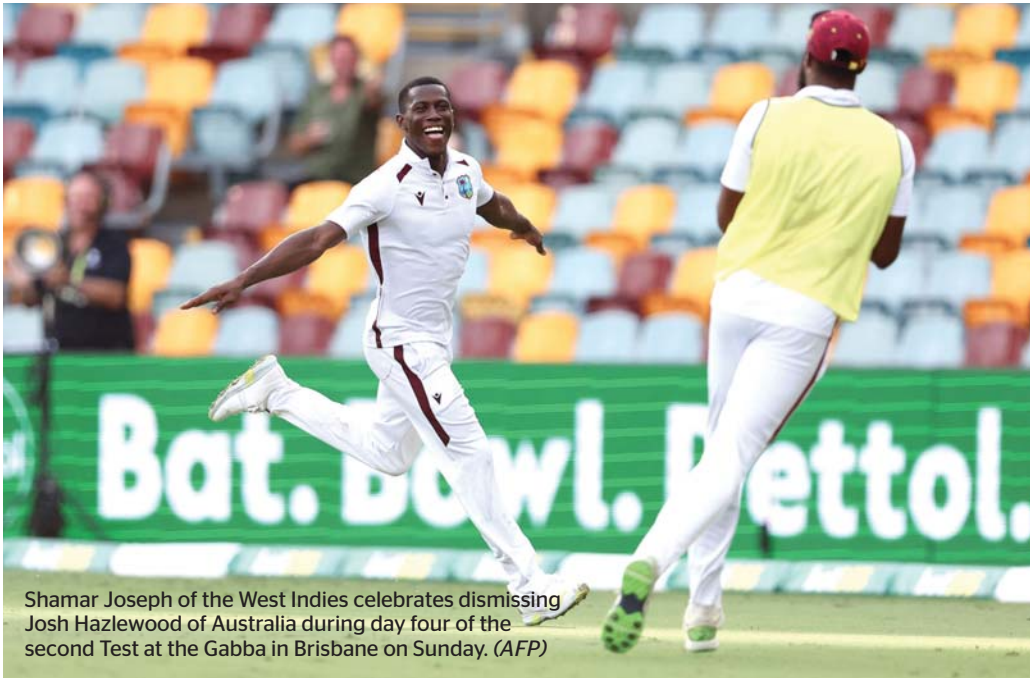
CRICKET

# Gabba, Hyderabad thrillers lift mood for the Test lovers

‘T20 is great but it will never ever bring out this emotion’

Reuters  
Hyderabad

Test cricket has been under pressure amid the growing popularity of lucrative T20 leagues around the world but the longest format could not have given itself a bigger boost with two thrilling finales to box office matches in Brisbane and Hyderabad on Sunday. With T20 franchises potentially becoming players’ primary employers, and most boards finding Test cricket financially not viable, the format’s future remains a concern for the purists. But they will have a spring in their step after West Indies stunned Australia in Brisbane and, hours later, England staged a stunning comeback against India in Hyderabad. With all-rounders Jason Holder and Kyle Mayers opting to play franchise cricket instead, West Indies picked seven uncapped players for the two-Test series Down Under where they had last won a test in 1997. World Test Championship winners Australia had prevailed in a little over two days in Adelaide and a series sweep at Brisbane looked a formality with the hosts a perfect 11-0 in day-night matches. West Indies speedster Shamar Joseph had other ideas. After taking a five-wicket haul in his debut Test in Adelaide the 24-year-old, bowling with a bruised toe, burst onto the scene as the game’s new star with his 7-68 in Brisbane to clinch a cliff-



hanger for his team. The drama and the joy moved West Indies stalwarts Brian Lara and Carl Hooper to tears. “Seeing @BrianLara in tears in the comm box tells you everything you need to know about test cricket and what it means,” former England captain Michael Vaughan wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. “T20 is great but it will never ever bring out this emotion,” he wrote in another post. Indian batting great Sachin Tendulkar said Joseph’s “remarkable spell” illustrated the “sheer grit and drama” that Test cricket could produce. “This is the for-

mat that truly challenges and showcases a player’s mettle,” he said. While it was a triumph for the underdog spirit in Brisbane, the outcome in Hyderabad was a victory for England’s fearless brand of cricket. India had lost just three Tests at home since 2013 and the home side looked set to open the five-match series with another win having taken a lead of 190, a figure which would usually have been decisive in such spin-friendly conditions. However, Ollie Pope produced arguably the best knock by a visiting batter in India with an incredible 196 to overturn the defi-

cit, while debutant spinner Tom Hartley claimed 7-63 to script one of England’s greatest away wins. India coach Rahul Dravid took some comfort from the fact his team had been involved in such a positive advertisement for test cricket. “If you look at the bigger picture, you don’t have 25,000 people coming in each of the four days of a Test match here,” he said. “The cricket was played at a lovely pace. Both teams played the game without taking a backward step and kept pushing hard. “It was a very good Test match to be part of.”

## Russian skater Valieva suspended for 4 years

**Lausanne:** Teenage Russian figure skater **Kamila Valieva** received a four-year ban from the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) yesterday for failing a doping test prior to the 2022 Winter Olympics. Valieva was found to have “committed an Anti-Doping Rule Violation (ADRV) under Clause 4.1 of the All-Russian Anti-Doping Rules of 24 June 2021,” said the three-member panel in sport’s highest court. “A period of four years ineligibility is imposed on Ms Valieva, starting on 25 December 2021. “All competitive results of Ms Valieva from 25 December 2021 are disqualified, with all the resulting consequences (including forfeiture of any titles, awards, medals, profits, prizes, and appearance money),” CAS added. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) welcomed the ban but took aim at those who had doped Valieva, who was just 15 at the time. “The doping of children is unforgivable,” WADA said in a statement, which also called for action under its code against doctors, coaches and other support personnel who are found to have provided performance-enhancing substances to minors. “WADA encourages governments to consider passing legislation - as some have done already - making the doping of minors a criminal offense,” it said. By contrast, the Kremlin slammed what it called a “politicised” decision. “Of course, we don’t agree with it...From my point of view, of course, it’s politicised,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian news agencies. Valieva’s positive test raised questions not just about her guilt but how she was treated as a minor, the way the test was conducted and the value of the drug involved for enhancing per-



formance. The case came to CAS following Valieva’s exoneration by Russia’s anti-doping agency (RUSADA). WADA and the International Skating Union (ISU) then appealed RUSADA’s ruling, as did RUSADA itself. Three CAS judges met in Lausanne in September to hear the case with Valieva and some of the experts and witnesses taking part via videoconference. In Beijing in February 2022, Valieva became the first female skater to land a quadruple jump in Olympic competition, helping Russia secure gold in the team event. The next day, she was told she had tested positive before the Games for trimetazidine, a drug used to treat angina but banned for athletes. With CAS’s ruling, the podium in the team event should now result in the United States being awarded gold, Japan silver and Canada bronze. Under the pressure of suspicion and attention, Valieva cracked in the individual event in Beijing, stumbling four times in the long programme and finishing in tears as she tumbled from first to fourth. At the end of the year, RUSADA ruled that Valieva bore “no fault or negligence” for the positive test.

FOCUS

## India’s Jadeja and Rahul out of the second Test

Reuters  
Hyderabad

India allrounder Ravindra Jadeja and wicketkeeper-batsman K L Rahul will miss the second Test match against England due to injuries, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) said yesterday. The BCCI has called up Sarfaraz Khan, Sourabh Kumar and Washington Sundar to replace them. “Jadeja sustained a hamstring injury during play on Day 4 of the first Test in Hyderabad while Rahul complained of a right quadriceps pain,” the BCCI said in a statement. Medium pacer Avesh Khan, who has previously represented India in limited-overs cricket, has also been named in the squad but has not been asked to immediately join the national team. “Avesh Khan will continue to travel with his Ranji Trophy team Madhya Pradesh and will join the test squad if required,” the BCCI added. The second Test is set to begin in Visakhapatnam on Friday. India trail the five-match series 1-0 after losing the first Test by 28 runs.

**ICC reprimands India’s Bumrah for contact with England’s Pope**  
India’s pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah was reprimanded by the International Cricket Council yesterday for “inappropriate physical contact” with England’s Ollie Pope during the home team’s 28-run Test defeat this weekend. The incident occurred during England’s second innings when Bumrah, after bowling and completing his follow-through, “deliberately stepped in Ollie Pope’s way as the batter went for a run, leading to inappropriate physical contact”, the ICC said in a statement. Pope’s match-winning 196 handed India only its fourth loss in their last 47 Tests at home since 2013 - but the hosts still remain favourites in the five-match series after losing the first Test. Bumrah had been reprimanded for breaching the ICC code and had “admitted the offence and accepted the sanction” with one demerit point added to his disciplinary record, cricket’s apex body said. The ICC code relates to “inappropriate physical contact” with a player, umpire, spectator or any other person during a match.

## INDIA GO BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD AFTER YOUNG POPE CRACKS SPIN CODE

**Hyderabad:** England vice-captain **Ollie Pope**’s batting masterclass in the opening Test in Hyderabad has jolted India into a rethink of their plans ahead of the second Test in Visakhapatnam this week. The hosts suffered only their fourth defeat in a home Test in the last decade after Pope smashed 196 in arguably the best knock by a touring batter in India. The right-hander played audacious scoops and numerous sweep shots - both traditional and reverse - to disrupt the rhythm of the Indian spinners and forcing the hosts to alter their field placements. Pope’s approach was a refreshingly change from that adopted by most touring batters, who often try just to hang around and hope for success. India head coach Rahul Dravid was amazed at how Pope nailed so many “high-risk shots” and acknowledged they would have to put a plan together for the batter before the second Test gets underway on Friday. “I haven’t seen a better exhibition of sweeping and reverse sweeping in these



conditions against that quality of bowling,” the former skipper said after their defeat. “Having said that, for us now it’s important that we respond and come up with some plans and some strategies and see how we can maybe make him play those shots from probably even more difficult lengths.” India’s spin trio of Ravichandran Ashwin,

Ravindra Jadeja and Axar Patel claimed a combined 14 of the 20 English wickets but Dravid felt they could have bowled better. “Credit to him (Pope), but we were a little bit off. “In the next Test match, if we get our execution right, I hope he makes a mistake.” Pope’s 21 fours included a no-look reverse ramp shot, the batter scooping the ball over wicketkeeper Srikar Bharat’s head to the boundary. The 26-year-old said playing reverse sweep in India was a safer and more profitable option than trying to defend the ball with the obvious risk of edging it to the slip. “The guys we are facing are very skilled bowlers,” Pope told reporters after their 28-run victory. “If you try to defend each ball, there’s probably more chance to get out than if you play a cross-batted shot. If we can keep nailing them (reverse sweeps), we get more bad balls. As batters, if we can hit their best ball for four with a reverse sweep, that is going to lead to more short balls and more half-volleys and open up the outfield.”



QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY

# Al-Thefiri's absence leaves MERC2 door wide open



Eleven crews are aiming for glory in the 'production class' category for Group NR4 cars such as the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX and X and the Subaru WRX-STi.

By Sports Reporter  
Lusail

Meshari al-Thefiri's decision not to tackle this weekend's Qatar International Rally has thrown the door wide open for several of his rivals to steal a march and take full advantage in a quest for the 2024 MERC2 title. Among the 23 teams set to take part in the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) laid on by the Qatar Motor & Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) are 11 crews aiming for glory in the 'production class' category for Group NR4 cars such as the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX and X and the Subaru WRX-STi.

The Kuwaiti and his Qatari co-driver Nasser al-Kuwari have dominated the category in recent seasons and secured the FIA MERC2 Drivers' and Co-drivers' titles together for five of the last six seasons.

In 2022, the category became a battle ground between two Jordanian crews and Isaa Abu Jamous and Emad Juma narrowly edged out Ihab al-Shurafa and Youssef Juma to claim the honours. That success aside, we go back as far as 2016 - when Lebanon's Rodolphe Asmar secured the title - to see when al-Thefiri wasn't the dominant force

in the category. This weekend, five Jordanian drivers, a Qatari, an Omani, a Kuwaiti, a Lebanese and an Indian driver will battle it out for MERC2 honours alongside co-drivers from Lebanon, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Cyprus and India.

In 2023, Shadi Shaban finished third in the MERC2 Drivers' Championship behind al-Thefiri and Youssef al-Dhafiri and the Jordanian teams up with fellow countryman Samer Issa to try and improve on his position this season in a Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution IX. His best result in 2023 was third in the category at his home event last May. Lebanon's Ahmad Khaled finished fourth in 2023 after three consistent finishes with co-driver Samer Sfeir and he returns to the production class again in 2024.

Abu Jamous, the 2022 champion, teams up with Saqer Abu Jamous and again faces a tussle with his rivals from two years ago, Al-Shurafa and Youssef Juma. Fellow countryman Shaker Jweihan finished fifth in last year's MERC2 championship and arrives in Doha with Lebanese co-driver Carlos Hanna. Husam Salim and Nancy al-Majali round off the entries from the Hashemite Kingdom.

Kuwait is represented by Jassim al-Muqahwi and Thamer al-Mutairi, Zakariya al-Aamri and Mohamed al-Mazroui rep-

resent Oman and the Indian duo of Fabid Ahmer and Milen Cherian will tackle the event for the first time in a Subaru.

Mohamed al-Attaya represents the host nation with experienced Cypriot co-driver Savvos Laos along with Rashid al-Muhan-nadi and Omani co-driver Taha al-Zadjali.

Competitors must register for the 2024 regional rally championship before the event begins to be eligible for points in each of the MERC categories. Last year, al-Thefiri romped to a second successive MERC2 win in Qatar and finished seventh overall behind six Rally2 and R5 cars. Al-Shurafa and Shadi Shaban picked up points for finishing third and fourth of the registered contenders.

Today, competitors carry out administration checks and reconnaissance registration in the QMMF offices at the Lusail Sports Arena before checking out the re-vised desert route.

The 2024 Qatar International Rally gets underway from Lusail Boulevard at 7pm on Thursday, February 1 evening, before competitors tackle an exciting opening super special stage at the LCSC Karting Academy from 8pm.

Two cars will start out on the 1.09km asphalt course at the same time and complete two passes and two laps against each other for a total stage distance of 4.36km.

FOOTBALL

# Arsenal's Arteta slams Barca talk as 'fake news'

Current Barcelona boss Xavi has announced he would step down in the summer

AFP  
London

Mikel Arteta has slammed reports he was ready to quit Arsenal to become Barcelona manager as "fake news". Reports in Spain on Sunday claimed Arteta had told colleagues he was going to leave the Emirates Stadium to return to Barcelona at the end of this season.

Current Barca boss Xavi announced on Saturday he would step down in the summer after a string of disappointing results, leading to Arteta being installed as one of the favourites to replace him. Having come through the fabled academy at Barcelona, Arteta has a long-standing connection to the Camp Nou.

But the 41-year-old yesterday insisted he is keen to stay put as he aims to lead Arsenal to their first Premier League title since 2004. "I am in the right place. I am with the right people," Arteta told reporters.

"I feel really good about it. And, as I said many times, I am invested in a beautiful journey with this football club, with these players, these staff, our people. There is still a lot to do here. We all share that ambition and you can feel it as well, that we want more, that we aren't satisfied and that the club wants to take another push and another level in everything we are doing. This is where we are. We need everyone on board to achieve it and I am certainly on board."

Dismissing the Barca reports as



completely fabricated, Arteta admitted he had been upset by the story as he prepares for today's Premier League trip to Nottingham Forest. "That's totally fake news. I don't know where it is coming from and it is totally untrue. I am really upset about it," he said.

"I could not believe it. I don't know where it is coming from and it has no source. I understand we are in this industry, but I don't think anyone deserves to hear news like that. I have always been really straight and always said the complete opposite; how

happy I am and how much I enjoy where I am now."

Arsenal welcome Premier League leaders Liverpool to the Emirates Stadium on Sunday for a crucial clash. It brings Arteta head-to-head with Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp for the last time in their current jobs after the German stunningly announced on Friday he will leave Anfield at the end of the season.

Klopp said he could never manage another club in England but, having served as an assistant under Pep Guardiola at Man-

chester City, Arteta did not rule out such a switch in the future.

Asked if he could see himself managing another Premier League team, he replied: "Today, no. But I don't know. I played for two great clubs in this country (Arsenal and Everton). I moved around in different things. I am extremely young and I don't know what's going to happen. I think he (Klopp) made this league much better. First of all the person. The character, the charisma, the ideas and his passion for the game is something special. I think he's had a big contribution for the growth of this league."

## BAYERN DENY TUCHEL TALKED ABOUT BARCELONA JOB

Bayern Munich were forced to deny yesterday that their coach Thomas Tuchel had talked about the Barcelona coaching job that Xavi Hernandez is vacating at the end of the season. At a Bayern fan club event later on Sunday, former Chelsea manager Tuchel said working "abroad will appeal to me again" at some point in his career.

Tuchel then talked in general about the Spanish La Liga and, according to some reports, he also spoke about the possibility of working at Barcelona. Bayern's CEO Jan-Christian Dreesen and sporting director Christoph Freund though issued an angry statement to insist that Tuchel "never spoke about Xavi Hernandez and his successor, as was falsely claimed afterwards"

Bayern added: "We will no longer accept such non-factual statements directed against our coach."

## PSG held as Brest fight back for draw in Ligue 1

Paris: Paris Saint-Germain blew a two-goal lead as in-form Brest staged an impressive comeback to hold the French champions to a 2-2 draw in Ligue 1 on Sunday.

Marco Asensio, making his first league start since September, volleyed PSG ahead at the Parc des Princes late in the first half before Randal Kolo Muani tapped in a second for the hosts before the break.

An own goal by Danilo on 55 minutes offered Brest a way back into the match and Mathias Pereira Lage put an end to the visitors' run of 14 successive defeats by PSG with a clever back-heel flick to equalise.

PSG had Bradley Barcola, who played a key part in both of his team's goals, sent off after he picked up two yellow cards in stoppage time.

"It's a great evening for us," said Brest coach Eric Roy.

"Being 2-0 down at the Parc des Princes can turn into a nightmare, but this team has always believed in itself. Lots of teams would have crumbled at half-time."

Luis Enrique's side saw their lead at the top shaved to six points following Nice's 1-0 victory over Metz on Saturday. Brest, now unbeaten in eight games, remain nine points adrift of the leaders. The two sides meet again in Paris in the last 16 of the French Cup on February 7. Brest have not beaten PSG in the last 27 meetings, a run stretching back to 1985.

Ghana's Andre Ayew scored twice on his return from the Africa Cup of Nations, popping up with a stoppage-time equaliser for Le Havre in a 3-3 draw at bottom side Lorient.

FOCUS

## Duhail to take part in Equality Cup in Qatar

Qatar Stars League champions Al Duhail will take part in the Equality Cup, which will be held from February 1-13 in Qatar. Russian club Zenit, who are the organisers of the tournament, Shanghai Shenhua of China and Brazilian giants Santos are the other teams taking part in the friendly. The Equality Cup matches will take place at Doha's Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium. According to the organisers, four teams will play each other once and if scores are level after normal time, the result will be decided by a penalty shootout. There will be no extra time.

Standings will be determined by the following points system: Three points for a win in normal

time; Two points for a win on penalties after a draw; One point for a loss on penalties after a draw and No points will awarded for a loss in normal time.

Entry to all Equality Cup games will be free of charge for fans. The tournament is organised in partnership with Aspire Zone Foundation.

### FIXTURES LIST (ALL TIMES 5PM UNLESS SPECIFIED)

**February 1:** Shanghai Shenhua v Al Duhail at 7:30pm  
**February 4:** Santos v Shanghai Shenhua  
**February 5:** Zenit v Al Duhail  
**February 8:** Zenit v Shanghai Shenhua  
**February 9:** Santos v Al Duhail  
**February 13:** Zenit v Santos



SPOTLIGHT

## Egypt's AFCON hopes dashed by DR Congo

AFP  
Abidjan

The injured Mohamed Salah will not get the chance to return to the Africa Cup of Nations after his Egypt side were knocked out of the competition on Sunday in a dramatic penalty shoot-out against the Democratic Republic of Congo, while Guinea progressed to the last eight.

Record-seven time champions Egypt lost 8-7 on penalties against the Congolese after their last-16 tie ended 1-1 at the end of extra time. Meschack Elia put DR Congo ahead in the Ivorian coastal city of San-Pedro in the 37th minute, only for Mostafa Mohamed to equalise for Egypt from the penalty spot in first-half stoppage time.

With no further scoring, Egypt held on for a shoot-out after having Mohamed Hamdy sent off for a second booking in the first half of extra time. They were involved in three shoot-outs in four knockout ties at the last Cup of Nations in Cameroon two years ago, when they lost the final on penalties to Senegal.

Mohamed missed the target with the Pharaohs' second kick, but Arthur Masuaku then squandered the Leopards' next attempt. Egypt goalkeeper Mohamed Abou Gabal, better known simply as Gabaski, then put Egypt's ninth penalty over, and Congolese 'keeper Lionel Mpasi made no mistake to take DR Congo through to the quarter-finals. It is a bitter pill for the Egyptians, who had come to Ivory Coast hoping to win a first Cup of Nations since 2010, a year before Salah made his senior international debut.

But they stumbled out of their group with three draws, and lost the Liverpool superstar to a hamstring injury in their second game against



DR Congo's Gedeon Kalulu (left) and Samuel Moutoussamy celebrate next to Egypt's players after winning the the Africa Cup of Nations round of 16 match in San Pedro yesterday. (AFP)

Ghana. He had gone back to his club to continue treatment, in the hope of being able to return for the latter stages of the competition, but now his dream of winning the title with his country remains on hold.

Sebastien Desabre's team will head to Abidjan for a quarter-final on Friday against Guinea, who beat Equatorial Guinea 1-0 earlier with a dramatic winner by Mohamed Bayo in the eighth minute of injury time.

The match at the Ebimpe Olympic Stadium was also heading for extra time when Bayo, of French side Le Havre, headed in a cross by Ibrahim Diakite to spark frenzied celebrations among the Guinea team and their large support in a crowd of 36,340.

### LATE PENALTY TAKES CAPE VERDE INTO QUARTERS

Cape Verde won an Africa Cup of Nations knockout tie for the first time in their history yesterday as a late Ryan Mendes penalty gave them a 1-0 victory over Mauritania in the last 16. The match at the Felix Houphouet Boigny Stadium in Abidjan was drifting towards extra time when Cape Verde won a spot-kick and captain Mendes converted with just two minutes of the 90 remaining to break Mauritania's resistance.

The Blue Sharks then held on through 10 added minutes to advance to a quarter-final on Saturday against either Morocco or South Africa, who meet in the last 16 today.



HORSE RACING

# Ooredoo to sponsor HH The Amir Shalfa Race

Ooredoo Qatar, the nation's leading telecommunications company, will sponsor Shalfa Race at the HH The Amir Sword Festival, set to take place on February 17 at the Al Rayyan Racecourse. The event, a highlight of the HH The Amir Sword Festival, reinforces Qatar's status as a premier destination for world-class equestrian sports.

The Shalfa Race, open to individual Qatar-owned Class 2 thoroughbreds aged four years and above, will see elite equine athletes compete over a challenging distance of 2000m. The winner will be awarded the coveted Shalfa (spear) trophy, a symbol of equestrian prowess and excellence. This year's total prize money is a remarkable \$400,000, underscoring the race's prestige and international importance.

Sheikh Ali bin Jabor bin Mohamed al-Thani, CEO of Ooredoo Qatar, commented: "Ooredoo Qatar is honoured to be the title sponsor of the HH The Amir Shalfa Race, a testament to our commitment to Qatar's rich equestrian heritage and our support for top-tier sporting events. This race not only celebrates the spirit of competition and excellence but also aligns with our values of fostering community engagement and showcasing our nation's cultural richness on the global stage. We eagerly anticipate an event that promises to captivate both local and global audiences."

Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohannadi, Chairman of the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club (QREC), said: "We are pleased with this sponsorship by Ooredoo as part of the joined desire to achieve more of the aspired successes and to contribute to bringing the HH The Amir Sword Festival to the highest level befitting the status it has reached in the horse racing world both in terms of organisation and the level of competition between the horses in the various races.

"This sponsorship comes as a natural development of the partnership between the two parties as Ooredoo has already supported several of QREC's activities. Ooredoo will be the sponsor of the HH The Amir Shalfa Race, which will see a good number of some classy horses capable of winning the title. Ooredoo's sponsorship of one of the main highlights of this global event will certainly contribute to enriching the Festival."

Last year, the race was won by 'King Pacha', owned by Khalifa bin Sheali al-Kuwari, trained by Gassim Ghazali, and ridden by Mickael Barzalona. This year, the race is set to be an equally thrilling showcase of the finest thoroughbreds and jockeys from around the world.

The Shalfa Race is a centrepiece of the HH The Amir Sword Festival, which will be held from February 15-17.



Sheikh Ali bin Jabor bin Mohamed al-Thani, CEO of Ooredoo Qatar and Issa bin Mohamed al-Mohannadi, Chairman of the Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club, pose with other officials after the press conference yesterday.

FOOTBALL

# Klinsmann keeping 'positive' for South Korea's Saudi clash

Manager and his players have faced fierce criticism back home

AFP  
Doha

Under-fire coach Jurgen Klinsmann said he "has to be positive" ahead of South Korea's Asian Cup showdown with Saudi Arabia today after stuttering into the last 16. The Koreans conceded six goals in the first round and drew with Jordan and 130th-ranked Malaysia to finish runners-up in their group. Klinsmann and his players have faced fierce criticism back home, with the German legend being mocked for telling reporters to book their hotels in Qatar until February 10 – the day of the final.

"A coach has to be positive, a coach has to believe in his team and make it happen," the 59-year-old Klinsmann, a World Cup winner as a player, said yesterday. "If the other team is better and beats you, then you can still go back to the hotel and cancel."

South Korea finished behind Bahrain in Group E after conceding a 105th-minute equaliser in a 3-3 draw with Malaysia. Klinsmann was pilloried for smiling on the bench after Malaysia scored but insisted it was "because I saw it (the goal) coming". "My smile was because I saw it coming. It was a game where we had nearly 85% possession, 20 corner kicks, many chances and did not score another goal," he explained. "Usually in football, this is what happens in the very last minute if you don't finish off the game, you get punished."

He was more interested in talking about Saudi Arabia and said he could see Roberto Mancini's "handwriting" on the team, five months after the Italian took over. The winner of the last-16 tie faces Australia in the quarter-finals.

Klinsmann said he does not fear Saudi but he has a lot of respect for Mancini's team. Saudi Arabia have also had the upper hand in the Asian Cup having never lost to South Korea in three encounters but Klinsmann predicted a "nail biter" and said the match could even go to penalties.

"I don't fear anybody. No fear but a lot of respect for every opponent," Klinsmann said. "Roberto is doing a fantastic job, it's a step-by-step process that he had to go through. It's obviously a new adventure for him and a new adventure for me being in Korea. We have a lot of respect for Saudi Arabia. I've played Mancini many times in my career...You can now see his handwriting on the team after 10 games. We have the belief that we can beat Saudi Arabia but it will be a lot of work. It will be a nail-biter. It might go into a penalty shoot-out."



South Korean players train in Doha yesterday.



South Korea's coach Jurgen Klinsmann (left) and Saudi Arabia's Roberto Mancini at a press conference.

Saudi Arabia won Group F but came from a goal down to beat Oman 2-1 with an injury-time winner in their opening game. They also struggled in front of goal in a 2-0 victory over a Kyrgyzstan side that played almost half the game with nine men. They rounded off their group with a 0-0 draw with Thailand.

Mancini shrugged off his team's lack of bite in front of goal and said they could profit from South Korea's defensive woes. "If they conceded six goals in the group stage it doesn't change their strength because they have very

good players and they score a lot of goals," he said. "We know that if we attack we can have a chance to score," he added.

Saudi Arabia have only conceded one goal so far at the tournament and Mancini said they had "improved a lot" since he took over in August. But he is wary of South Korea's attacking threat, led by skipper Son Heung-min, and urged his side to "play as a team".

"It is not only their attackers – all their team is very good," he said. "Most of their players play in Europe and have a lot of experience."

SPOTLIGHT

## Uzbekistan wary of motivated Thailand

Srecko Katanec has played down Uzbekistan's tag as favourites for their AFC Asian Cup round of 16 match against Thailand at Al Janoub Stadium today. Seeking to take Uzbekistan to a fifth quarter-final appearance, Katanec is wary of the threat that Thailand pose despite 45 places separating them in the FIFA World Ranking.

"You never know if it's better to play after 3-4 days or like this (with a week's break). We will see tomorrow at the final whistle," said the 60-year-old Slovenian. "The period between matches hasn't helped with the players who were missing before because the players who are injured are still out. We have a very difficult game because Thailand haven't conceded a goal yet. They are very organised with good press and good at transitioning. So maybe our draw isn't as good as people make it out to be. Tomorrow we will see tactics, we can start with one system then perhaps change the system along the way, in any case, we're ready."

A week of training and recovery since they last took to the pitch for a 1-1 draw with Australia has not yielded much improvement for the White Wolves in terms of the playing squad with forward Igor Sergeev still recovering from injury.

Conversely, Masatada Ishii is able to herald the return of captain Theerathon Bunmanthan, who was suspended for the Australia tie. Theerathon hit a century of international caps during the goalless draw with Oman and Ishii is pleased to be able to rely



Captain Theerathon Bunmanthan, with a century of international caps during the goalless draw with Oman, is back for Thailand's last 16 tie.

on the War Elephants inspirational leader again as they look to better their performance in UAE 2019 by reaching the last eight.

"Absolutely a plus for us to have him back in the squad, someone who is experienced at international level," said Ishii. "As one of the most important players in the team, he can have a galvanising impact on the team and he'll make us one team. As we qualified for the last 16 with five points, we met our objectives but now we want to continue competing in this tournament. Uzbekistan have a good defensive structure with lots of players who are organised, they like to work with deep spaces so we will try to come up with plans to counter all that." (the-afc.com)



Uzbekistan players train in Doha yesterday, on the eve of their Asian Cup round of 16 match against Thailand.

## AUSTRALIA'S ASIAN CUP CREDENTIALS FACE FIRST REAL TEST IN QUARTER-FINALS

**Doha:** Australia's Asian Cup title credentials and stingy defence will be properly put to the test for the first time in Qatar when they face Saudi Arabia or South Korea in the quarter-finals.

The Socceroos' next opponents will be confirmed today when Roberto Mancini's Saudi Arabia and Jurgen Klinsmann's South Korea meet in the last 16. Whoever wins, Australia will face a step-up from anything they have faced so far at the

tournament. The bedrock of their pursuit of a second Asian title – they won it on home soil in 2015 – has been a miserly defence that has conceded one goal in four matches. "Clean sheets win tournaments," coach Graham Arnold said after defeating Syria 1-0 in the group phase.

The Socceroos reached the quarter-finals on Sunday with a 4-0 victory over an Indonesia side ranked 121 places below them. Australia were deserved

and ultimately comfortable winners against the lowest-ranked team left at the tournament, but the one-sided scoreline flattered them.

Arnold took Australia to the last 16 of the Qatar 2022 World Cup before giving eventual champions Argentina and Lionel Messi a fright in a 2-1 defeat. The run to the knockout rounds – equalling their best performance at a World Cup – was hailed at home as a major success.

At the Asian Cup however they are expected to challenge for the title against far more moderate opposition, and preferably with more attacking verve than they have displayed so far. Prior to the Indonesia game, Australia had scored four times in three games. The combative Arnold agrees his team need to be better offensively, especially individually, but feels they have been unfairly characterised as overly defensive. "I think back in Australia

they'd rather see you lose 1-0 than keep a clean sheet," he said. Australia conjured up one shot on target in beating Syria and even though they hit four against Indonesia, the first was an own goal and they had four shots on target all game. Arnold might argue that shows a clinical edge. Harry Souttar, the towering central defender, got the fourth with a header and is arguably Australia's biggest goal threat, namely from set-pieces.