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CRICKET | Page 2

India won't change batting approach against England: Rathour



EQUESTRIAN | Page 3

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GULF TIMES

SPORT

MATCH REPORT

Mitoma returns as Japan ease into quarters

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

The sight of Kaoru Mitoma coming in as a substitute against Bahrain must have thrilled the Japan fans. The Brighton winger made a much-awaited Asian Cup appearance in Samurai Blue's 3-1 win at the Al Thumama Stadium yesterday, which sent the four-time champions cruising into quarter-finals against Iran on Saturday.

Goals from Ritsu Doan, Takefusa Kubo and Ayase Ueda was enough for Japan to ease past Bahrain, who were beneficiaries of an own goal from error-prone goalkeeper Zion Suzuki but lacked the bite to trouble their East Asian rivals.

Against Bahrain, Japan never seemed at risk of falling victim to an upset but it wasn't a standout performance that was expected of them. There was wobble midway through the second half that would have concerned Hajime Moriyasu but a 20-minute sparkling cameo by Mitoma must have brought relief to the coach.

Moriyasu took a gamble when he brought Mitoma to Qatar, but early signs suggest that he was right in trusting the 26-year-old - who had injured his ankle on December 21 playing for Brighton against Crystal Palace in the Premier League - to get fit for the knockout stages.

From his introduction in the 68th minute, Mitoma troubled Bahrain defenders with his guile and pace to show why he



Japan's Ayase Ueda scores against Bahrain during the AFC Asian Cup last 16 match at the Al Thumama Stadium. (Reuters)



Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma returned from injury as a second-half substitute against Bahrain yesterday.

is now one of the Premier League's most-exciting attackers. There was a moment of magic in the 84th minute when he skipped past two defenders and perfectly set up for Takuma Asano to make it 4-1, but the VfL Bochum forward slipped in the box with only goalkeeper Ebrahim Lutfalla to beat.

With Mitoma operating at left wing, Japan were constant threat in the box and is the man Moriyasu will hope can lift his team's performance and guide them to record fifth Asian title.

Captain Wataru Endo though warned

that Japan's rivals will 'exploit' their weaknesses, with Iran waiting for them in the quarter-finals at the Education City Stadium on Saturday.

Midfielder Endo, who has been impressive for Premier League leaders Liverpool this season, felt their quarter-final opponents might not be as forgiving as toothless Bahrain.

"In football, teams are analysing you and trying to find out where there are gaps that they can exploit," he said. "Teams have looked at us at the tournament so

far and it's not easy to defend against. It's important that we don't let our concentration drop for the full 90 minutes."

The pre-tournament favourites are yet to keep a clean sheet in four games in Qatar, with goalkeeper Suzuki looking vulnerable in all the matches. Against Bahrain, the 21-year-old misjudged a punch before getting tangled up with Ueda and fumbling the ball over the line.

Moriyasu, though, blamed the goal on a lack of communication. "It wasn't all perfect and next we will play Iran. They have

a lot of talent up front and we will have to play better than today," he said. "We have to reflect on the goal we conceded."

Bahrain bowed out of the tournament after winning Group E ahead of South Korea. Coach Juan Antonio Pizzi acknowledged that "Japan were better than us tactically and physically".

"Japan have had the same coach for five years and every substitute they brought on had the same level of quality," said Pizzi, who won the 2016 Copa America with Chile.

SPOTLIGHT

Iran beat Syria on penalties to reach last eight

Iran skipper Hajsafi scores the winning penalty



Syria's Fahd Youssef (left) and Iran's Mohamed Mohebi vie for the ball during the Asian Cup. (AFP)

AFP
Doha

Iran will meet pre-tournament favourites Japan in the Asian Cup quarter-finals after surviving extra time with 10 men before defeating Syria 5-3 on penalties yesterday.

Skipper Ehsan Hajsafi scored the winning penalty for Iran, who are ranked 70 places above Syria and were comfortably the better team for an hour of the last-16 game.

Goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand was the penalty hero, saving Syria's second spot-kick.

Iran played the last 30 minutes with 10 men after Porto striker Mehdi Taremi was sent off for a second yellow card with the game 1-1 at the end of normal time. Along with hosts and holders Qatar, Iran came into the game as the only team left in the competition with a 100 percent record. They were pursuing a first Asian Cup crown since 1976.

Taremi was a central figure, winning a first-half penalty and

putting it away to give Iran a deserved lead. Syria had barely been in the game but equalised just after the hour, also from the spot, before Taremi was sent off in second-half injury time.

The two teams could not be divided in extra time, even with Iran playing with a man fewer. Iran will meet Japan on Saturday after the pre-tournament favourites swept aside Bahrain 3-1 earlier in the day.

Coached by the wily Argentine Hector Cuper, Syria were in the knockout rounds for the first time at their seventh Asian Cup. Their plan was to sit deep and hit on the break at a raucous Abdullah Bin Khalifa Stadium. Midway through the first period, Iran danger man Mehdi Ghayedi had a go from outside the box, Syria goalkeeper Ahmad Madanieh palming it wide on the stretch.

Playing off the left, Ghayedi then fed Taremi in the box but he failed to make a proper connection. Moments later the 31-year-old Taremi was in the thick of it again when Syria defender Aiham Ousou shoved him in the back in

the penalty area, sending the forward sprawling over.

Taremi silenced the jeers of the Syrian supporters by stroking in the spot-kick on 34 minutes for his third goal of the tournament.

Syria, who advanced to the last 16 as one of the best four third-placed teams, had only one shot on target in the first half and the start of the second was more Iranian dominance.

Syria twice cleared off the line in quick succession and Madanieh also made two desperate saves. Cuper threw on Colombian-born Pablo Sabbag just before the hour and it paid off immediately, goalkeeper Beiranvand haring out of his goal and bringing the substitute down in the box.

The referee gave no penalty but changed his mind after VAR recommended he look at the pitchside monitor, and skipper Omar Khribin held his nerve for a 64th-minute equaliser. With the clock ticking beyond 90 minutes, Taremi - who had already been booked for diving in the box - received a second yellow for wiping out Alaa al-Dali.

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CRICKET

Indian batters will find a way, says Rathour

The hosts will bank on a traditional batting approach in second Test

AFP
Visakhapatnam

India will bank on a traditional approach to bounce back in their second home Test against England, the team's batting coach said yesterday, despite the tourists finding success with their attacking "Bazball" strategy.

England trumped the hosts to lead the five-match series 1-0, with the action shifting to Visakhapatnam starting tomorrow on a pitch expected to turn violently.

Ollie Pope's 196 turned the opening Test on its head, as the batsman frequently played the unorthodox reverse sweep to blunt the threat of the Indian spinners.

But batting coach Vikram Rathour said the hosts would rely on their own strengths to counter the opposition, instead of imitating Pope's style.

"It's not something that you can just try. You need to be prepared for that, you need to practice it," he said.

"If you add more shots to your game it's always beneficial, but we play a traditional way. Our strength or strong areas are going straight and using our feet," he added.

"We haven't lost a series in 12-13 years, that means we are putting up more runs than the other team... I am sure the batters will find a way."

Rohit Sharma's side suffered only their fourth home defeat in 47 Tests since 2013 in Hyderabad last week as England came from 190 runs behind after the first innings to snatch a stunning 28-run victory.



India coach Rahul Dravid (right) talks to a member of the backroom staff ahead of the second Test against England in Visakhapatnam. The second Test starts tomorrow. (@BCCI)

Debutant spinner Tom Hartley returned figures of 7-62 to bundle India out for 202 while chasing 231 in Hyderabad.

But it was England's brave new brand of cricket - dubbed "Bazball" after coach Brendon "Baz" McCullum - that allowed the tourists to strike back and win.

"A lot of our teams are playing more aggressively," opening batsman Zak Crawley told reporters.

"The mindset when I first came to England was to... take your time and build a long innings and I didn't think that came naturally to me and a few of the others," he added.

"A lot of us play a bit better under this regime."

McCullum and skipper Ben Stokes have led a huge turnaround for England's fortunes, with 14 wins in 19 Tests in less than two years since Joe Root quit captaincy.

FOCUS

'I'm averaging 60': Smith flat bats opener queries

Reuters
Melbourne

Australia Test opener Steve Smith has batted away criticism of his promotion to the top of the order, suggesting doubters take a look at the statistics.

Long settled at number four in Australia's Test setup, Smith replaced long-serving opener David Warner for the West Indies series, prompting some scepticism from pundits about his ability to handle the extra bounce and swing on offer from the new ball.

After scores of 12 and 11 not out in the first Test in Adelaide, and six in his first innings at the Gabba, Smith carried his bat with an unbeaten 91 in a losing cause in Brisbane.

"There was a lot of commentary around I'd failed in two or three innings or whatever it was," Smith told reporters in Melbourne yesterday.

"I had a not out and two low scores. And now I think I'm averaging 60 as an opener."

"I didn't really read too much into it. It was just another position. I've batted against a new ball numerous times coming in early."

Smith, who became the first Australian to carry his bat since Warner in 2011, was the only player to handle West Indies' newest pace sensation Shamar Joseph. The 24-year-old tore through



Australia's Steve Smith acknowledges his fifty against West Indies in the second Test at the Gabba, Brisbane, last week. (@CricketAus)

Australia with 7 for 68 to spearhead the tourists to an extraordinary first Test victory down under since 1997. Adding to the legend, Joseph, in his second Test, bowled

in the second innings with a painful toe injury that has forced him to head home to the Caribbean and miss the ILT20 with Warner's Dubai Capitals.

"I overheard a conversation, I think we were seven down just before lunch and I overheard him speaking to (West Indies captain) Kralgg (Brathwaite)... he's (Joseph) like, 'I'm bowling to the end, man,'" Smith said.

"He's a rare talent and I think it's great for cricket what he was able to do and see the West Indies competing like they did. He just kept coming in, and actually probably bowled faster at the end rather than the start."

Smith will be back down to number four for the opener of the one-day series against West Indies starting in Melbourne tomorrow, and will lead the hosts in Pat Cummins's absence.

With Warner also retired from the one-day format and Mitchell Marsh to miss out, Smith will lead a much-changed side from the outfit that won last year's World Cup in India. Wicketkeeper-batsman Josh Inglis will partner Travis Head at the top of the order, with all-rounder Cameron Green promoted to number three.

Western Australian paceman Lance Morris is poised to make his international debut while uncapped Queensland quick Xavier Bartlett may also feature.

Smith, 34, said his role would be to teach the new faces "the ropes". "I think it'll be a good series, and hopefully we can see some of these new players start off their international career as well," he added.

TENNIS

Pakistan to host India Davis Cup tie this weekend

AFP
Islamabad

Pakistan host arch-political foe India this weekend in their first Davis Cup tennis clash on home soil in six decades - one of the few encounters in any sport between the two nations in years.

The two sides meet in a Group 1 playoff fixture on the grass courts of the Pakistan Sports Complex in Islamabad, although it has yet to be decided if spectators will be allowed because of security concerns.

When India and Pakistan were forged out of violent partition 76 years ago, the split

also created one of sport's greatest rivalries - mostly in cricket, but also in hockey and other events.

But political differences over Kashmir mean sporting teams from each side rarely visit the other unless taking part in sanctioned multi-national events.

"Hopefully this tie will act as an example of a bridge between Pakistan and India, as I'll love to see the Indian cricket team play in our country in the near future," home player Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi told AFP.

India team manager Sunil Jayman said the team were looking forward to the tie.

"The whole team is extremely happy and excited to be in Pakistan," he told AFP.

India last played a Davis Cup match against Pakistan in 2019, winning 4-0 in neutral Kazakhstan. Pakistan last played on Indian soil in 2006, according to news outlet *India Today*.

Neither side is rated particularly high in the world tennis pecking order, but Pakistan's Qureshi said he expected a competitive clash.

"Three of their players are in the top 100 of the world doubles rankings while the singles players are also competitive - especially on the grass court," he said.

"We'll try our level best to compete and give our all on the court."

The two doubles and two singles matches take place on Saturday and Sunday, with Monday set aside as a reserve day in case of rain.

PREVIEW

Sri Lanka trial Test reset in Afghanistan series

AFP
Colombo

Sri Lanka hope to revive their flagging Test fortunes with new five-day captain Dhananjaya de Silva taking the helm for their one-off match against Afghanistan starting tomorrow in Colombo.

The island nation is dead last on the World Test Championship rankings and their last match in October at the same ground saw a humiliating innings and 222-run loss to Pakistan in their worst ever home defeat.

De Silva, a middle-order batsman and handy off-spinner, takes charge ahead of a full tour slate for the year including a three-Test series in England.

"Very excited about what is about to unfold with my cricket career. More so Sri Lankan Test cricket going forward," de Silva said.

Three uncapped players are among Sri Lanka's 16-member squad as part of a generational refresh heralded by the appointment of different captains for the Test, ODI and T20 sides earlier this month.

Fast bowler Kasun Rajitha, who missed the recent home series against Zimbabwe due to an injury, has made a comeback into the side.

Afghanistan are making a name

for themselves in white-ball cricket but have had less chance to impress in five-day matches since being granted Test status in 2017.

"We are committed to strengthening our red-ball cricket and building a formidable Test side as well," Afghanistan Cricket Board chair Mirwais Ashraf said in a statement this week.

The visitors landed in Colombo on Tuesday missing star leg-spinner Rashid Khan who is recovering from back surgery.

Qais Ahmad, who has featured in a single Test match, is his expected replacement.

Both teams will play three ODIs in Kandy and three T20 matches in Dambulla after the Test.

SQUADS
Sri Lanka: Dhananjaya de Silva (capt), Kusal Mendis, Dimuth Karunaratne, Nishan Madushka, Angelo Mathews, Dinesh Chandimal, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Ramesh Mendis, Asitha Fernando, Vishwa Fernando, Kasun Rajitha, Kamindu Mendis, Prabath Jayasuriya, Lahiru Udara, Chamika Gunasekara, Milan Rathnayake.
Afghanistan: Hashmatullah Shahidi (capt), Ibrahim Zadran, Abdul Malik, Noor Ali Zadran, Rahmat Shah, Bahir Shah, Nasir Jamal, Ikram Alikhil (wk), Mohamed Ishaq (wk), Qais Ahmad, Zia-ur-Rehman, Zahir Khan, Yamin Ahmadzai, Nijat Masood, Mohamed Saleem, Naveed Zadran.

MOTORSPORT

Formula One rejects Andretti's bid to join



AFP
Paris

Formula One announced yesterday it had blocked US outfit Andretti's bid to join the circuit, citing concerns over the team's level of competitiveness.

Andretti, headed up by 1978 world champion Mario and his son, former McLaren driver Michael, had applied to become Formula One's 11th team from 2025 or 2026.

"Our assessment process has established that the presence of an 11th team would not, in and of itself, provide value to the Championship," Formula One said in a statement.

"The most significant way in which a new entrant would bring value is by being competitive. We do not believe that the Applicant would be a competitive participant," it added.

Andretti Global is the parent company to Andretti Autosport and other Andretti ventures, with teams currently competing in seven series worldwide.

They are most prominent in the IndyCar Series, in which the team fields four cars.

Since Michael Andretti's involvement, the team has won the Indianapolis 500 five times (2005, 2007, 2014, 2016, 2017) and the overall championship four times

(2004, 2005, 2007, 2012). "While the Andretti name carries some recognition for F1 fans, our research indicates that F1 would bring value to the Andretti brand rather than the other way around," Formula One said.

"The addition of an 11th team would place an operational burden on race promoters, would subject some of them to significant costs, and would reduce the technical, operational and commercial spaces of the other competitors," it added.

Audi is scheduled to enter the series in 2026, while Porsche is also in talks with F1.

There are currently 10 teams in the FIA's premier series, which is seeking to build on its increased popularity in the United States.

The series added a second race in the United States in 2022 in Miami, which joined the race in Austin, Texas, with Las Vegas joining last year.

"We would look differently on an application for the entry of a team into the 2028 Championship with a GM (general Motors) power unit, either as a GM works team or as a GM customer team designing all allowable components in-house," Formula One said.

"In this case there would be additional factors to consider in respect of the value that the Applicant would bring to the Championship," it added.

Argentina MotoGP cancelled in face of economic cut-backs

Paris: The Argentina MotoGP, which was due to be held in early April at the Termas de Rio Honda circuit, has been cancelled, organisers Dorna announced yesterday.

The event, scheduled as the third race of the season after Qatar and Portugal, "will not be replaced in the calendar" they said in a statement.

"Due to the current circumstances in Argentina, the promoter of the event has informed us that it is currently unable to guarantee the quality of services required to organise the Grand Prix in 2024," Dorna said in the joint statement with the International Motorcycling Federation (FIM).

The cancellation had been on the cards since new president Javier Milei took office in December

vowing to slash spending and end decades of economic crisis in South America's third-largest economy, where annual inflation stands at over 200 percent.

Milei has warned that economic "shock" treatment is the only solution to the country's troubles.

The Argentine MotoGP, which benefited from substantial public funding, was due to celebrate its tenth anniversary on the calendar this season.

"MotoGP hopes to return to Termas de Rio Hondo in 2025," concluded the brief press release.

The calendar for 2024 will now comprise 21 races although there remains uncertainty over the Kazakhstan MotoGP which was cancelled in 2023 because the brand new Sokol circuit could not be completed in time.

ANNOUNCEMENT

Doha gets ready to host 11th edition of CHI Al Shaqab

The premier equestrian competition will showcase exceptional talent of riders from February 22-24

Al Shaqab, the world-renowned equestrian centre, announced the dates for the highly-anticipated 11th edition of the CHI Al Shaqab Presented by Longines.

Taking place from February 22-24, the premier equestrian competition promises to showcase the exceptional talent of local and international riders at the magnificent Longines Arena at Al Shaqab.

One of the main attractions this year is the introduction of the Concours de Saut International Children (CSICH) which will be a qualifier for children competing in the Group VII (Mena Region), the finals of which are set to take place later this year.

The event will also showcase Grand Prix Jumping and freestyle Dressage competitions, providing local and regional riders with the opportunity to participate and improve their skills. The competitions are categorised into Show Jumping (CSI1*, CSI3*, CSI5*), Dressage (CDI5*), and Para Dressage (CPEDI3*).

Over the last decade, CHI Al Shaqab has established itself as one of the most prestigious equestrian competitions on the global stage. As one of only five CHI

events worldwide, this remarkable gathering is also the first and only of its kind in the Middle East and Asia regions. It has captivated audiences worldwide and has become a much-anticipated event on the world's equestrian calendar. The fourth weekend of February will see some of the world's best riders and horses competing in the disciplines of Showjumping, Dressage and Para-Dressage.

"At Al Shaqab, we are proud to be at the forefront of promoting sports and wellness in Qatar and aligning our efforts with the country's 2030 vision for the future", said Khalifa al-Attia, President of the Organising Committee.

"Al Shaqab has actively engaged in youth development, nurturing local talent in equestrian sports, and aligning with the vision's emphasis on empowering the younger generation. Hosting CHI Al Shaqab for the past 10 years has enhanced Qatar's global connectivity by shining light on its commitment to sports excellence and related initiatives."

The globally renowned brand, Longines will continue its partnership with the event. Also coming on board for another year as sponsors and partners are ExxonMobil



A rider in action during last year's CHI Al Shaqab.

as the Main Sponsor, Q-Tickets as the Ticketing Partner, Equine Veterinary Medical Centre as Official Veterinary Partner, and Aspetar as Official Medical Partner. Joining as new Hospitality Partner this year is Rixos Gulf Hotels.

With its main outdoor and indoor arenas and a warm-up are-

nas, the architecturally stunning Longines Arena – named to reflect its partnership with the iconic Swiss watchmakers – offers seating capacity to accommodate a total of 10,000 spectators. It successfully continues to host many other local and international equestrian events around the year.

Speaking on the heritage and anticipation of the event, Event Director Mohamed al-Khayarin stated: "We are thrilled to organise and host the eleventh edition of CHI Al Shaqab. This event has become an iconic highlight in International equestrian calendars, and we are proud to bring together the

finest horses, riders, and equestrian enthusiasts from around the globe. Qatar's love for horses and everything equestrian runs deep within our veins and it's a privilege to share this passion with the world. We look forward to hosting our esteemed visitors from all fronts." In addition to the thrilling competitions, CHI Al Shaqab will feature a range of engaging activities for visitors of all ages.

From interactive exhibitions to master classes, attendees will have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the world of equestrianism and gain insight into the skills and techniques employed by the sport's finest athletes.

"We strive to create an unparalleled experience for athletes, spectators and equestrian professionals alike," further added al-Khayarin.

"Al Shaqab's unique blend of tradition and modernity truly sets us apart, and we are proud to contribute to the thriving sports tourism industry further solidifying Qatar as a premier global tourist and sporting destination."

Full details of the CHI Al Shaqab can be found at www.alshaqab.com and tickets are available through www.q-tickets.com, organisers said.

HORSE RACING

Talg'at Al Shahania wins Al Jumail Cup in fine style

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Talg'at Al Shahania registered a two-length victory to land the Al Jumail Cup as jockey Lukas Delozier continued his winning run at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

Delozier, who bagged a treble in the previous event at the venue, guided the Sheikhha Reem bint Mohamed bin Khalifa al-Thani-owned mare to win in the 1,400m Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate that wrapped up the seven-race 16th Al Uqda Meeting.

It was second win of the day for the jockey and trainer Rudy Nerbonne after Haman stormed to Purebred Arabian Handicap title.

Meanwhile, Kab Ghazal, ridden by Abdelkabar Benlarbi, secured second place in the feature overcoming a challenge from Loyah, which had Jefferson Smith in the saddle.

RESULTS

16th Al Uqda Meeting - Al Jumail Cup Day

1 - Al Jumail Cup, Local Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate
Talg'at Al Shahania, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas



Lukas Delozier guides Talg'at Al Shahania to Al Jumail Cup win at the Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday. Pic: Juhaim

Delozier
2 - Thoroughbred Handicap
Auditor, Alban de Mieulle, Alberto Sanna
3 - Purebred Arabian Handicap
Haman, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier
4 - Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate
Ilasad, Ahmed Kobeissi, Faleh Bughanaim

5 - Thoroughbred Handicap
Thunder Valley, Abdulla al-Mulla, Chloe Mignonneau
6 - Purebred Arabian Novice Plate
Ejaaby, Julian Smart, Muanis al-Siyabi
7 - Local Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Wadi Bu Thaila, Alban de Mieulle, A Sanna

Nasser al-Khelaifi chairs ECA meeting in Doha



The European Club Association (ECA) Executive Committee (ExCo) held its first meeting of 2024 in Doha under the chairmanship of Nasser al-Khelaifi. AFC President Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifa, QFA President Jassim Rashid al-Buenain, FIFA Secretary-General ad interim Mattias Grafstrom, and European Leagues President Pedro Proenca also attended the meeting. Under the mandate of the ECA Board, the role of the ExCo is to meet regularly to guide, advise and inform the Board on key matters relating to the organisation's strategic development and execution.

FOOTBALL

Morocco's coach Regragui takes responsibility for bitter AFCON exit

Reuters
Abidjan

Morocco coach **Walid Regragui** said he took full responsibility for the team's surprise Africa Cup of Nations exit after a last-16 loss to South Africa, lamenting their lack of cutting edge in Tuesday's 2-0 defeat.

The Atlas Lions, one of the pre-tournament favourites, became the latest high-profile team to bid farewell to the tournament as they spurned a few goal-scoring chances and were punished by South Africa at the Laurent Pokou Stadium in San Pedro. Evidence Makgopa scored



against the run of play in the 57th minute before Teboho Mokoena wrapped up the win in stoppage time, curling home a free kick awarded for a last-man foul that led to the dismissal of Morocco midfielder Sofyan Amrabat.

"We could have maybe settled the game in the first half but, at this level, you get immediately punished for any chance you waste," Regragui told *beIN Sports*.

Morocco had a golden chance to draw level with five minutes remaining when they were awarded a penalty for a handball but Achraf Hakimi blasted his effort against the crossbar.

"The penalty hurt us a lot, and surely we didn't do everything that is required but I take full responsibility," Regragui added.

Morocco were hoping to win their first Cup of Nations title since 1976, having made history at the 2022 World Cup after becoming the first African team to reach the semi-final.

Sport Safety Training Programme for European sport clubs and associations launched

Brussels: The International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS), jointly with the "International Training Centers for Authorities and Leaders" (CIFAL Centres) attached to UNITAR, the UN Training and Research Agency, and the European Multiclub Sport Association (EMCA), have launched a 200-hour online Sport Safety Training Programme to help provide safe

and secure sport environments at sport events in Europe. The launch of the programme, which took place in Brussels during General Assembly of EMCA, an umbrella organisation representing the interests of multisport clubs in Europe, comes within the framework of the memorandum of understanding signed in October 2023 between the ICSS and EMCA

to promote bilateral collaboration for continuous exchange of knowledge and the development of innovative sustainable initiatives. The training programme, internationally certified through The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), is comprised of 13 independent but interlinked courses, all available off the shell, which contain

elements to lead effective safety and security operations during the preparation and delivery of sports events and competitions, vis-à-vis new and emerging threats. The programme primarily intends to train officials in the fields of safety and security in sport clubs and associations in Europe. Upon successful completion of the training, participants will be issued a

certificate jointly released by the ICSS, UNITAR's CIFAL and EMCA. Christina Tsiligiri, EMCA President, said: "EMCA is at the forefront of initiatives that apply a safety net around sports. We work closely with ICSS and UNITAR's CIFAL Global Network to crack down on phenomena that pose a serious threat for sport activities such as crimes, violence, and racism."

Massimiliano Montanari, ICSS CEO, said: "Through this initiative with EMCA, we are very proud to bring the courses we developed jointly with UNITAR's CIFAL to clubs and associations across Europe. We trust this training programme will facilitate and support the development of safe and secure sport environments at sport events in Europe".

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

South Korea will be ready for quarters clash against Australia, says Klinsmann

Jurgen Klinsmann believes South Korea's penalty shoot-out win over Saudi Arabia will give his side a morale boost capable of overcoming any lingering fatigue ahead of their AFC Asian Cup Qatar quarter-final meeting with Australia tomorrow.

The Taeguk Warriors will have little more than two full days to recover for the clash with Graham Arnold's side after needing 120 minutes, plus injury time, and spot-kicks to see off Roberto Mancini's team at Education City Stadium on Tuesday.

"This win gives the team an enormous amount of energy, it gives the team even more spirit," said Klinsmann. "This is a group of players I enjoy so much working with because they badly want to do well for their country. We wanted to win the game badly before the penalty shoot-out. Anything can happen in a penalty shoot-out. Now we're waiting for these 53-and-a-half hours and we will recover, we have a good spirit and we're looking forward to Australia, which is a good team that just won 4-0."

Klinsmann's side were made to work for their victory by the three-times champions, with Abdullah Radif giving the 2027 AFC Asian Cup hosts the lead only seconds after being introduced at half-time.

It took the Koreans until the 99th minute to level when Cho Gue-sung headed in from close range to earn his side a justified reward after dominating late in the game and, while both teams had chances to win in extra-time, it was Jo Hyeon-woo who emerged as the hero.

The Ulsan Hyundai goalkeeper saved penalties from Sami al-Naji and Abdulrahman Ghareeb to leave Hwang Hee-chan to score the winning spot-kick and keep alive Korea's hopes of a first AFC Asian Cup title since 1960.

"We knew this would be a very difficult game against a very good Saudi Arabia team," said Klinsmann. "We are happy. We should have



scored a couple of goals more because we had many chances but Saudi Arabia also had more chances, all the way to the penalty shoot-out. We prepared for (penalties), we trained for it and Hyeon-woo made two saves which is wonderful. We expected this game tonight, we got this game against a very good team and now we're looking forward to the quarter-final."

Mancini was left frustrated by the defeat and apologised for walking down the tunnel before Hwang smashed his match-winning penalty into the top corner of the Saudi goal, but in-

sisted his side's elimination would not see him walk away from his post. "I want to say thank you to all my players for what they did," said the Italian. "They are improved a lot."

"In football you can lose, you can win. You play against a very strong team and my players did very well. We lose in a penalty shoot-out, and a penalty shoot-out is a lottery. Now we are a team. It's clear we need to improve more because we want to play at this level and if we want to win against these teams we have to work more."

Saudi football chief brands Mancini penalty walkout 'unacceptable'

AFP
Doha

The president of Saudi Arabian football said **Roberto Mancini's** disappearing act before the end of the penalty shootout in the team's Asian Cup exit was "completely unacceptable".

The Italian did not stick around to see South Korea's Hwang Hee-chan eliminate his Saudi side in the last 16 in Doha with the decisive spot-kick. Following a 1-1 draw, South Korea won 4-2 on penalties on Tuesday and will face Australia in the quarter-finals.

Mancini, 59, apologised afterwards for walking down the tunnel before their fate was sealed, saying: "I thought it was finished."

But Saudi Football Federation president Yasser al-Mishehal made clear his unhappiness in an interview with Saudi broadcaster SSC. "The coach's exit is completely unacceptable and we will discuss with him why this happened," he said. "He has the right to explain his point of view and then we will decide the appropriate action."

Mancini took Italy to European Championship glory in 2021 and was appointed Saudi coach in August last year on a deal until

2027, taking him beyond the next World Cup. It was reported that he was offered more than \$25 million to join the big-spending Saudis, who are set to host the World Cup in 2034.

Mancini's job does not appear to be at immediate risk, despite the defeat extending Saudi Arabia's wait for a fourth continental crown. They lost won it in 1996. "Technically we are satisfied with the performance presented in the Asian Cup," said Mishehal, adding: "I do not like to rush into anything."



FOOTBALL

Lusail Boulevard to host start of Qatar International Rally

Crews to tackle a floodlit super special stage at LCSC Karting Academy

By Sports Reporter
Lusail

Twenty-three crews and competitors from 17 nations will be flagged away from the ceremonial start of the Qatar International Rally at Lusail Boulevard from 7pm today evening.

The 2024 FIA Middle East Rally Championship (MERC) will see the region's finest drivers then heading to Jordan in May, Lebanon in September, Cyprus in October and on to the finale in Oman at the end of November. But the season's opener across the demanding deserts of northern Qatar has attracted two of the hottest prospects in the sport and one of the long-established front-runners in the FIA World Rally Championship.

Norwegian driver Mads Ostberg will be making his third successive appearance in Qatar, having pushed local hero Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah hard in 2022 and then finishing second to the Qatari last year. He and co-driver Patrik Barth of Sweden crew the first of three SRT Skoda Fabia RS Rally2s.

The other two will be in the hands of rising stars Pierre-Louis Loubet and Martins Sesks and their co-drivers Loris Pascaud and Renars Francis, the quartet all making their first appearance on a desert rally of any kind. Loubet is a former WRC2 champion and was a member of the M-Sport Ford World Rally Team. The Frenchman is the son of the former Lancia and Alfa Romeo factory driver and 1989 European Rally Champion Yves Loubet.

Sesks, 24, started out in motorsport at the age of five in a buggy in his native Latvia and graduated through the ranks of karting to compete in rallying in 2014. A former member of the ADAC Opel Rallye Junior Team, he became the first Latvian ever to win a round of the FIA Junior WRC in Estonia in 2020.

Their experience aside, al-Attiyah and his co-driver Giovanni Bernacchini start the three-day event as clear favourites for success in an Autotek Motorsport Volkswagen Polo GTI. Al-Attiyah will be chasing a staggering 18th career victory in Qatar since 2003 and maximum points in his bid to lay the foundations to a push for a 20th MERC title.

The Qatar Motor and Motorcycle Federation (QMMF) has supported the challenge of two other talented Qatari drivers. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari won the event back in 2012 in a Mini S2000 and the former WRC2 driver teams up with Ireland's James Fulton, who is making his second appearance in Qatar after finishing second with al-Ku-



Autotek technicians get Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah's car ready for the Qatar International rally.



wari in a Skoda in 2021.

Khalid al-Suwaidi, like al-Kuwari, makes only token rally appearances these days but has won two rounds of the MERC (Kuwait – 2012 and 2022) and he drives the second of the Sarrazin-supplied Volkswagens with British co-driver Ross Whittock making his Qatar debut as co-driver. Whittock is a regular competitor in the USA and Europe and won the 2019 European Rally Championship with Chris Ingram.

Oman's Abdullah al-Rawahi shared the regional title in a dead heat with al-Attiyah in 2023 and he and Jordanian co-driver Ata al-Hmoud will be hoping to go one better this year in their Autotek-run Skoda. Nasser Khalifa al-Atya and his co-driver Ziad

Chehab round off the Rally2 field in their Ford Fiesta.

Eleven drivers from Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Lebanon and India will compete for honours in the MERC2 category for production class machines. The Jordanian duo of Shaker Jweihan and Husam Salim, Kuwait's Jassim al-Muqahwi and Lebanese driver Ahmad Khaled top the field in four Mitsubishi Lancers, while Rashed al-Muhannadi flies the flag for the host nation in a Subaru WRX-STi.

Dubai-based Indian driver Saneem Payyaakkal teams up with Musa Sherif to make his first appearance in an FIA international rally after competing in UAE national events. Saneem, who hails from Thrissur,

wheels out a two-wheel drive Ford Fiesta. He made his rally debut in 2008 and has won three UAE rally titles in the front-wheel drive category with Sherif, who himself is a seven-time national INRC champion co-driver.

At the rear of the field, Qatari driver Khalid al-Muhannadi (Polaris), Stefano Marrini (Can-Am) and fellow Italian Filippo Epis (Yamaha) will battle it out for supremacy in the T4 category.

Today, following the official pre-event press conference on the start podium, the rally gets underway from a new location on Lusail Boulevard at 7pm.

Competitors will then tackle an exciting opening super special stage at the LCSC Karting Academy from 20.00hrs. 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.

ENTRY LIST

1. Nasser Saleh al-Attiyah (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (POL) Volkswagen Polo GTI; 2. Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA)/Loris Pascaud (FRA) Skoda Fabia RS; 3. Abdullah al-Rawahi (OMN)/Ata al-Hmoud (JOR) Skoda Fabia Evo; 4. Mads Ostberg (NOR)/Patrik Barth (SWE) Skoda Fabia RS; 5. Abdulaziz al-Kuwari (QAT)/James Fulton (IRL) Volkswagen Polo GTI; 6. Martins Sesks (LVA)/Renars Francis (LVA) Skoda Fabia RS; 7. Khalid al-Suwaidi (QAT)/Ross Whittock (GBR) Volkswagen Polo GTI; 8. Nasser Khalifa al-Atya (QAT)/Ziad Chehab (LEB) Ford Fiesta Mk II; 9. Shaker Jweihan (JOR)/Mustafa Juma (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 10. Jassim al-Muqahwi (KWT)/Thamer al-Mutairi (KWT) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 11. Husam Salim (JOR)/Nancy al-Majali (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 12. Ahmad Khaled (LEB)/Samer Sfeir (LEB) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 14. Issa Abu Jamous (JOR)/Saeer Abu Jamous (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 15. Rashid al-Muhannadi (QAT)/Taha al-Zadjali (OMN) Subaru WRX-STi; 16. Saneem Payyaakkal (ARE)/Musa Sherif (IND) Ford Fiesta Rally 4; 17. Zakariya al-Aamri (OMN)/Mohamed al-Mazroui (OMN) Subaru WRX-STi; 18. Shadi Shaban (JOR)/Samer Issa (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 19. Ihab al-Shurafa (JOR)/Yousef Juma (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX; 20. Mohamed al-Atteya (QAT)/Savvas Laos (CYP) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X; 21. Fabid Ahmer (IND)/Milen George (IND) Subaru WRX-STi; 22. Khalid al-Muhannadi (QAT)/Mohamed Innab (SAU) Polaris RZR Pro XP (T4); 23. Stefano Marrini (ITA)/Stefano Tiraboschi (ITA) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T4); 24. Filippo Epis (ITA)/Gabriele Zanni (ITA) Yamaha YXZ 1000R (T4)

Lusail Circuit gears up to host The Qatar 1812

Doha: Lusail International Circuit (LIC) will host the opening round of the FIA World Endurance Championship this spring, aptly named Qatar 1812 km, as part of the first ever Lusail Speed Festival. Two additional races – the Lusail Classic Endurance Race and the Qatar Touring Car Championship – will complete the line up on a packed weekend of high-octane action, which runs from February 29 to March 2.

The distance of the main race, 1812 km, is inspired by Qatar's National Day. The FIA World Endurance Championship season-opener will see multiple cars racing simultaneously across two categories (Hypercar and LMGT3) for under ten hours.

Now entering its 12th year, the WEC is the world's premier international sportscar championship featuring eight races across the globe in four continents (Italy, Belgium, France, Brazil, USA, Japan and Bahrain). Round four of the WEC is the famous 24 Hours of Le Mans.

Taking to the track will be a record breaking 19 Hypercars and 18 LMGT3 entries. Fourteen manufacturers including Aston Martin, BMW, Corvette, Ferrari, McLaren and Porsche make up the 2024 grid plus the world's best racing drivers.

Nine-time MotoGP world champion Valentino Rossi will also be delighting fans at LIC by swapping two wheels for four, having made a strong debut at the 24 Hours of Le Mans last season.

The Italian will drive the BMW M4 GT3 in the WEC's all-new LMGT3 category, making him the first MotoGP World Champion to compete in a full WEC season. Other big names include former Formula 1 World Champion Jenson Button who will drive a Porsche for Hertz Team JOTA.

LUSAIL SPEED FESTIVAL
Lusail Speed Festival, taking place at Lusail International Circuit, is bringing together two back-to-back weekends of world-class motorsport for the first time ever: Qatar 1812 KM and 2024 MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar across February 29 to March 2 and 8-10 March.

TICKETING INFORMATION
Tickets for the Lusail Speed Festival including access to Qatar 1812 km and MotoGP Grand Prix of Qatar cost QR200 and are on sale now. Tickets are available only as three-day packages (spectators will receive three Qatar 1812 km tickets and three MotoGP tickets, one for each event day).