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Warner sparkles with the bat as Australia beat West Indies



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AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023™

PREVIEW

Qatar eye Asian Cup encore as Jordan target historic title

‘We are here with same courage and determination, aspiring only to win. That’s what matters most’

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Qatar will be relying on ‘courage and determination’ to win the AFC Asian Cup final for the second time today when they face giant-killers Jordan, coach Marquez Lopez said yesterday.

Defending champions Qatar are on a 13-match unbeaten streak after their stunning 3-2 win over Iran in the semi-finals on Wednesday. Jordan, coached by Hussein Ammouta, upset giants South Korea in their last-four clash on Tuesday to reach their first-ever Asian Cup final.

A packed house of 88,000 is expected to watch the final at Lusail Stadium where Argentina lifted the FIFA World Cup trophy a little over a year ago.

Qatar, who posted seven wins at the 2019 edition held in the UAE, have beaten Lebanon, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran before setting up a final date with surprise finalists Jordan.

Chief striker Akram Afif has delivered dream performances having netted five times in six matches including the goal of the tournament against Iran on Wednesday when he hoodwinked four markers to score with a boomerang shot from the edge of the box.

Fellow forward Almoez Ali has scored two goals at crunch moments while 2019 Asian Cup winning captain Hasan al-Haydos has been inspirational on the pitch with three goals.

Young goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham - who stopped three penalties in the shoot-out against Uzbekistan in the quarter-finals - is expected to brave Jordanian attacks today with similar gusto.

“We are here with the same courage and determination, aspiring only to win. That’s what matters most to us,” Lopez said at the pre-final news conference. “We are determined to compete fiercely and play our best to win the match. Second place will not be enough – we aim to be the best in Asia,” the 59-year-old added.

“I’m confident all my players are more than capable and deserving of playing in this tournament. I have always emphasised knowing each player’s strengths and how they can contribute. Every player has played a role in getting us to where we are now. This is a fundamental part of our philosophy,” Lopez said. “In the final, there will always be pressure, especially against a team that has performed well throughout the tournament. However, ultimately, competition drives us, and each of us aims to emerge victorious,” he added.

When reminded that Jordan savoured



Qatar’s coach Marquez Lopez (right) and his Jordan counterpart Hussein Ammouta greet each other yesterday, on the eve of the AFC Asian Cup final.



Jordan players train in Lusail yesterday. (AFP)



Qatar players warm-up during a training session at the Aspire.

three days of rest following their semi-final against South Korea on Tuesday, Lopez quickly admitted: “It was a short turnaround (for Qatar), with players having only two days to recover after the semi-final (against Iran). Rest and recovery were crucial, especially considering we’re facing a team we highly respect.”

Coach Lopez expressed his gratitude to his in-form trio of Afif, Almoez and al-

Haydos who has gone past Lionel Messi in the list of most international caps. The 33-year-old Qatari forward has played 184 games.

“Players are not machines; they run and play hard. It’s normal for their performance to fluctuate. Iran made a comeback and almost scored, but we also had chances to score. No player can maintain peak performance for the entire 90 minutes, but we were

giving our best to secure the win,” Lopez said.

The Spaniard was also quick to acknowledge that Jordan coach Ammouta - who formerly managed Al Sadd in Qatar Stars League from 2012-2105 - has inside knowledge on Qatari players.

“Ammouta is exceptional, having experience coaching in Qatar,” Lopez said.

Ammouta, who played for Qatar SC in 2003, yesterday said Jordan remain keen to

go for their first-ever title win. “We don’t need to explain how important the final match is, as both teams want to win a historical title. We prepare for the final as normal, without adding any more pressure on the players, and we hope to produce a performance that reflects our team level, and what we produced to reach the final. This match is very important, and may witness the first major title for Jordan football,” Ammouta said yesterday.

“I’m very satisfied with our achievement. It was a personal challenge for me to take Jordan to the final and I have achieved what I aimed for. We will have a full squad despite some minor injuries but the players will be ready,” he added.

When reminded about Jordan’s 2-1 win over Qatar in a pre-tournament friendly, Ammouta said: “Qatar are defending champions and playing at home, making them formidable opponents. It’s not easy to play against them. It’s not easy to achieve what they have done.”

He added: “We played a friendly match (before the tournament) and it was challenging to secure the win against Qatar. Despite anticipating difficulty, we are all united in aiming to cross the finish line successfully. We aim to exceed expectations.”



ASIAN CUP FINAL KEY STATS

Qatar vs Jordan

When: Saturday, February 10 at 6pm
Where: Lusail Stadium, Lusail
Capacity: 88,000
Referee: Ning Ma (China)

ODDS
Jordan win: 3/1
Qatar win: 6/5
Draw: 11/5

PREVIOUS MEETINGS
Jordan wins: 6
Qatar wins: 12
Draws: 5

ROAD TO FINAL
Jordan
Group E: Beat Malaysia 4-0
Drew with South Korea 2-2
Lost to Bahrain 1-0
Last 16: Beat Iraq 3-2
Quarter-final: Beat Tajikistan 1-0
Semi-final: Beat South Korea 2-0
Qatar
Group A: Beat Lebanon 3-0
Beat Tajikistan 1-0
Beat China 1-0
Last 16: Beat Palestine 2-1
Quarter-final: Beat Uzbekistan 3-2 on penalties (1-1 aet)

Semi-final: Beat Iran 3-2
ASIAN CUP RECORD
Jordan
Previous appearances: 2004, 2011, 2015, 2019
Best performance: Quarter-finals (2004, 2011)
FIFA world ranking: 87

Qatar
Previous appearances: 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2000, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019
Best performance: Winners (2019)
FIFA world ranking: 58

KEY STATS

- Jordan have reached the Asian Cup final for the first time.
- Qatar are defending champions and are playing in their second final.
- Qatar’s Akram Afif has scored five goals in the tournament so far. Only Iraq’s Aymen Hussein has scored more (six). Yazan al-Naimat and Musa al-Taamari (both Jordan) and Hassan al-Haydos (Qatar) have three goals each.
- Jordan goalkeeper Yazid Abu Layla has kept three clean sheets.
- Jordan beat Qatar 2-1 in a friendly match in Doha in January, before the Asian Cup kicked off.

TWENTY20

Warner, Zampa star as Australia beat West Indies

‘Pleasing to get the win on the board. I feel refreshed and a lot of energy’

AFP
Hobart, Australia

David Warner slammed 70 off 36 balls in his 100th Twenty20 international and Adam Zampa grabbed three wickets as Australia beat the West Indies by 11 runs in the opening clash of their three-match series yesterday.

The hosts crunched 213-7 after being sent in to bat on a windy and cold Hobart evening.

The visitors put up a valiant fight but they could only manage 202-8, with Zampa taking 3-26.

Warner, who became only the third man after New Zealand's Ross Taylor and India's Virat Kohli to play 100 internationals in each format, hit 12 fours and a six in his explosive knock to anchor the Australia innings.

“Pleasing to get the win on the board. I feel refreshed and a lot of energy,” said Warner.

“I said I want to play the Twenty20 World Cup and finish there and I'm excited and it's a good journey we've got going through the next six months.”

The West Indies hammered 16 off the opening over from Jason Behrendorff in a perfect start to the chase and put on 72 without loss in the six-over powerplay, just five shy of what Australia managed. But when Johnson Charles fell for 42 to Zampa and Brandon King for 53 to Marcus Stoinis after an 89-run stand, the wheels began coming off.

Stoinis accounted for Shai Hope (16) and Glenn Maxwell removed Rovman Powell (14).

It left the West Indies needing 72 from the final five overs, but when Zampa snared two more wickets in four balls it blunted the charge and the win proved out of reach.

“We struggled to get partnerships, but it was a good game of cricket,” said West Indies skipper Powell. “We just have to back ourselves a little bit more.”

Warner smacked five boundaries from his first 10 balls, including four in Jason Holder's opening over. The 37-year-old brought up his 25th T20 half-century off just 22 balls to send a clear message to selectors that he plans to be in contention for the World Cup later this year.

He was eventually out to a slower Alzarri Joseph delivery, gloving to Nicolas Pooran behind the stumps. With Travis Head and Steve Smith rested, Josh Inglis opened with Warner and was equally aggressive in thumping 39 off 25 balls until removed by Holder, offering Powell a simple catch at mid-off.

Mitchell Marsh was dealing with Covid in the lead-up but showed few ill effects in hitting a giant six off Andre Russell to help Australia



reach 110-1 at the halfway mark before being caught behind off Joseph for 16.

The run rate eased when Warner departed before Tim David took up the mantle with an explosive unbeaten 37 off 17 balls.

BRIEF SCORES: Australia 213-7 in 20 overs (D. Warner 70, J. Inglis 39, T. David 37 not out; A. Russell 3-42, A. Joseph 2-46) **bt WI 202-8 in 20 overs** (B. King 53, J. Charles 42, J. Holder 34 not out; A. Zampa 3-26, M. Stoinis 2-20) **by 11 runs.**

ANNOUNCEMENT

All-rounder Nesar recalled to Australia squad for NZ Tests

Reuters
Sydney

All-rounder Michael Nesar was recalled to the Australia squad for two Tests in New Zealand in the only notable change to the group from the home series against Pakistan and West Indies.

The World Test champions will face the Black Caps in the first Test in Wellington starting at the end of the month and Christchurch from March 8-12. Nesar, 33, joins Scott Boland as the reserve pace-bowling options for the Australians after Lance Morris and Jhye Richardson were ruled out by side strains.

“It's great to see Michael Nesar get another opportunity in the squad following his ever-consistent performances over a long period of time,” chief selector George Bailey said in a news release. “We expect this tour will be a tough challenge against a very strong side who have been so consistent at home for a long period of time.”

Nesar looks unlikely to win his third cap unless there is an injury to the first-choice pace trio of skipper Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, who played all five Tests against Pakistan and West Indies.

Australia swept Pakistan 3-0 over the New Year but tied the series against West Indies 1-1 after a stunning upset in the second test in Brisbane.

Matthew Renshaw retained his place as the back-up batter in the 14-man squad but all indications are that Steve Smith will retain his spot at the top of the order with Usman Khawaja - a partnership formed after the recent retirement of David Warner. Bailey suggested that Cameron Green, the numerical replacement for Warner in the team, was also secure in the batting order despite the all-rounder averaging 21 runs and taking only two wickets against West Indies.

“We think he's super talented. There's a skill set there that's unbelievable across all three formats,” Bailey told reporters.

“(We're) really confident that just continuing to expose him, he'll get better and better.

“But like any player I don't think it's going to be a straight line - there'll be fluctuations throughout, as there always is.”

Bailey also backed Marnus Labuschagne to be firing at the crease against New Zealand after a miserable return with the bat against the Caribbean side.

“I don't think he's on his lonesome of guys who'll be looking to step up their game and redeem themselves,” he said.

SQUAD: Pat Cummins (captain), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Cameron Green, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Usman Khawaja, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Mitchell Marsh, Michael Nesar, Matthew Renshaw, Steve Smith, Mitchell Starc.

ODI

Sri Lanka beat Afghanistan after Nissanka double ton

AFP
Kandy, Sri Lanka

Pathum Nissanka's record-breaking double century steered Sri Lanka to a comfortable 42-run win over Afghanistan yesterday in the opener of their three-match one-day international series at Pallekele.

Set a stiff target of 382, Afghanistan reached 339 for six as Mohamed Nabi and Azmatullah Omarzai scored centuries after their team were reduced to 55-5.

Nissanka's unbeaten 210 was Sri Lanka's first ODI double hundred, breaking the island nation's long-standing record highest score of 189 by Sanath Jayasuriya against India in 2000.

It was also the joint fifth-highest individual score in ODIs.

“We are absolutely thrilled with that performance,” Sri Lankan seamer Pramod Madushan told reporters.

“Great to be part of the dressing room in such an historic moment,” he said.

“It was tough out there but Pathum did well to soak up all the pressure and put us on top.”

Sri Lanka's 381-3 was also their biggest total at the ground and the team's fourth-highest overall.

The unstoppable Nissanka's knock included 20 fours and eight sixes from the 139 balls he faced in his first ODI since the World Cup.

Afghanistan stumbled early in their daunting chase, with the



Sri Lanka's Pathum Nissanka celebrates after scoring a double century during the first ODI against Afghanistan at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium in Kandy yesterday. (AFP)

tourists losing five wickets inside nine overs.

Madushan cut through the top order for match figures of 4-75.

Dushmantha Chameera took the other two wickets to fall but walked off the field halfway through his eighth over, appearing to be suffering from back pain.

Omarzai (149 not out) and Nabi (136) fought back aggressively with a 242-run stand for the sixth wicket, Afghanistan's second-highest for

TENNIS / QATAR TOTALENERGIES OPEN

Swiatek, Gauff lead Doha draw; Osaka and Garcia meet again

www.wtatennis.com
Doha

The draw is out for the first WTA 1000 of the season at the Qatar TotalEnergies Open, which begins tomorrow, Feb 11.

The draw is led by World No 1 and two-time defending champion Iga Swiatek along with No 3 and reigning US Open champion Coco Gauff.

The top eight seeds have opening-round byes.

Former No 1 Naomi Osaka also returns to Doha for the first time since 2018. She will face France's Caroline Garcia for the second time this season.

The marquee first-round encounter is a rematch of their matchup at the Australian Open. Garcia won 6-4, 7-6(2).

Swiatek returns to Doha bidding to become the first player to win a tournament in three consecutive years after Serena Williams won Miami from 2013-2015.

Doha will be her first tournament since her third-round loss to Linda Noskova at the Australian Open. After a first-round bye, Swiatek will face either Sorana Cirstea or Sloane Stephens.

Along with Swiatek, Ostapenko anchors the top quarter of the draw.

The Latvian comes into Doha as one of the hottest players on tour, having captured her second title of the season in Linz. She has made the final in singles or doubles all four tournaments she has played this year.

She will face either British wild card Emma Raducanu or Anhelina Kalinina.

No 10 seed Beatriz Haddad

Maia and Victoria Azarenka are also looming in Ostapenko's section. She could face either player in the Round of 16. Azarenka is the only player to have defeated Ostapenko this year.

Ostapenko triumphs in Linz to win her second title of the year

No 4 seed Ons Jabeur and No 7 seed Maria Sakkari anchor the second quarter. Jabeur will face either Lesia Tsurenko or Turkish wild card Zeynep Sonmez in the second round.

The winner of Garcia-Osaka could be waiting in the Round of 16.

Sakkari will face either Noskova or a qualifier in her opener. Barbora Krejickova, who is coming off back-to-back quarter-finals in Melbourne and Abu Dhabi, is also in Sakkari's section.

The Czech will open against Anastasia Potapova.

No.2 seed Gauff, No 3 Elena Rybakina, No 5 Zheng Qinwen and No 6 Marketa Vondrousova are the top seeds in the bottom half of the draw.

Gauff enters Doha coming off semifinal or better runs at her past six tournaments, including her latest at the Australian Open.

The 19-year-old American will face either Katerina Siniakova or Donna Vekic in the second round.

Rybakina, who is currently in the semifinals in Abu Dhabi, will face either Varvara Gracheva or Zhu Lin.

Zheng is playing in her first tournament since making the Australian Open final and making her Top 10 debut.

She will play either Poland's Magda Linette or a qualifier in the second round.



Iga Swiatek (right) of Poland and Marketa Vondrousova of Czech Republic during a promotional gig ahead of this week's Qatar TotalEnergies Open. **Picture:** www.wtatennis.com

GOLF

Barron takes two-shot lead with blistering back nine

‘I do prefer tricky conditions where you do have to be on your game to make sure you set up some good chances’

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Australia's Haydn Barron scored four birdies in his last five holes to take a two-shot lead into the third round of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at the Doha Golf Club (DGC) yesterday.

Yesterday, Barron added a flawless 67 to his opening 68 on the 7,532-yard layout to a halfway total of nine under par and joined the hunt for the title.

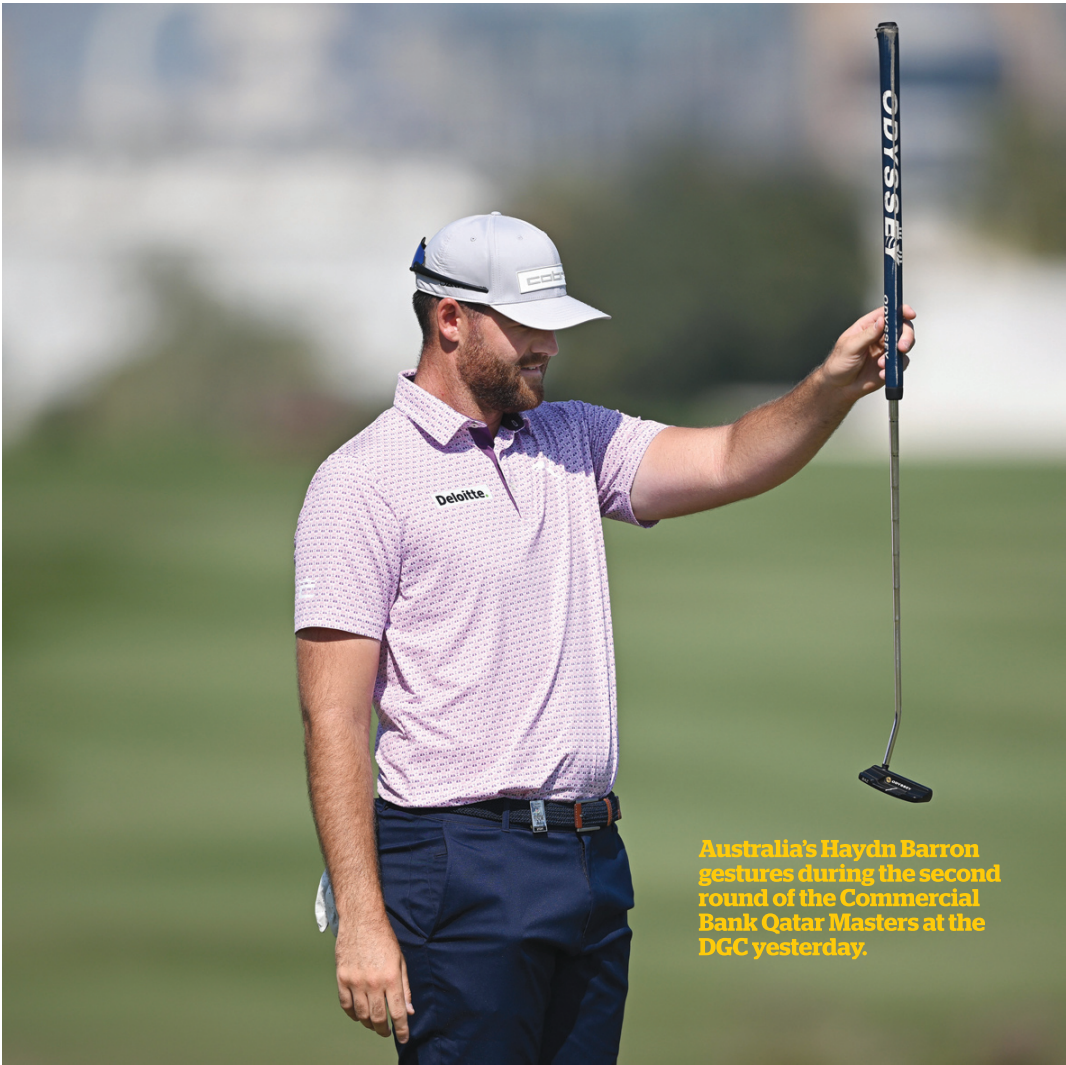
The Australian, who came through the European tour qualifying school in November, stood two strokes ahead of countryman Harrison Endycott and Rikuya Hoshino of Japan, with first-round leader Zander Lombard and Niklas Norgaard another stroke back.

“It was a good day. It got off to a bit of a slow start - nine pars in a row at the front - hitting really good shots and playing really well, just the putts were sliding by,” Barron said.

The Australian turned 28 on Thursday and celebrated by moving one behind first-round leaders Ashun Wu and Zander Lombard after an impressive four-under-par 68.

After starting with nine straight pars yesterday, Barron got on the birdie trail at the tenth, added another at the 14th before a birdie-birdie-birdie finish saw him come home in 31 to set the mark at nine under.

“Hit one through the green on ten and chipped one close for my first birdie and then felt a little bit of momentum and rolled a couple in coming home there. It's a beast of a golf course. You really got to strike it well, got to be in the fairway and sometimes just got to hit it into the middle of the greens and take your 60-70 footers if you are out of position,” said Barron, who arrived in Qatar on the back of a final round of 67 at last week's



Australia's Haydn Barron gestures during the second round of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at the DGC yesterday.

Bahrain Championship and maintained his momentum with a pair of low scores.

“So it's definitely a course which requires a bit of wit and some smarts, and luckily (caddie) Matty (Miller) has been good on the bag and we left ourselves some good numbers.”

Barron struggled to make an impact on the leaderboard, where the lead briefly inflated to seven under during the morning, before

he finally got in the red numbers on the back nine.

He had endured a brilliant par save at the sixth after several near-misses to card birdies on the front nine before he chipped to within four feet at the tenth to climb to five under.

Rasmus Hojgaard, the highest-ranked player in the field at No 68, was in a tie for sixth, four strokes behind Barron, after producing a tournament-low 66 that featured

an eagle and five birdies.

The Dane leads a ten-strong group at five under, which includes English pair James Morri-son and Sam Bairstow, French duo Clément Sordet and Ugo Coussaud, China's Wu, Northern Irishman Tom McKibbin, Japan's Keita Nakajima, Kiwi Daniel Hillier and South Korea's Sung Kang.

The four-time DP World Tour winner admitted the calmer morning conditions made scoring

easier than his first round but he was still happy to capitalise on the opportunities he created.

“Obviously the wind doesn't blow as much in the mornings so it is a little easier to control the flight but again I spoke to my putting coach yesterday and I said it is small margins,” he said.

“I couldn't find the pace yesterday and didn't hole any putts. Today I started to roll them early and it just makes a huge difference for the confidence out there. It wasn't a big difference from yesterday, just a little sharper.”

was firmly on his mind. “I am not here to make the cut,” he said after his second round 70 at Doha Golf Club.

“I am here to try to win golf tournaments and from being outside the cutline to be six back (vic-tory) is what I am thinking about.

“I think I have a low one on this golf course. I did a low one before and I think tomorrow my mental-ity has to be to close the gap.

“As I said, I am not here just to make cuts. Obviously making the weekend is great and to have the chance to climb the leaderboard

COMMERCIAL BANK QATAR MASTERS 2024

Højgaard registered a top-20 finish at this event last year when it was held in October but this time around the greens are playing firmer - something the 22-year-old is enjoying in the blustery con-ditions.

“I do prefer tricky conditions like this where you do have to be on your game to make sure you set up some good chances,” he added. “I like this set up.”

Pablo Larrazabal managed a back nine fightback as he turned fears over missing the halfway cut.

After a one-under-par 71 on Thursday, the Spaniard was facing an early flight out of Doha when he made three bogeys on the front nine in the second round.

Larrazabal is however a nine-time winner on the DP World Tour having claimed two titles last season and he demonstrated his champion mentality with five birdies on the way in, including three in a row from the 14th.

That meant he headed into the weekend six shots off the lead and a second title in the Middle East - a decade on from his victory at the Abu Dhabi Championship -

but we are here to try and push to win trophies.”

Larrazabal has made an encour-aging start to the 2024 Race to Dubai, registering top-20 finishes in his first two starts in Dubai last month.

The 40-year-old also boasts a good record in Qatar with three top 10s in his last six starts, strengthening his resolve he can emulate countrymen Jorge Camp-illo, Sergio Garcia and Alvaro Qui-ros by lifting the Mother of Pearl trophy.

LEADING 2ND-ROUND SCORES
(GBR & IRL unless stated/par 72)
135: Haydn Barron (AUS) 68-67
137: Harrison Endycott (AUS) 69-68, Rikuya Hoshino (JPN) 69-68
138: Zander Lombard (RSA) 67-71, Niklas Norgaard (DEN) 68-70
139: Ugo Coussaud (FRA) 71-68, Rasmus Hojgaard (DEN) 73-66, Clément Sordet (FRA) 68-71, Daniel Hillier (NZL) 69-70, Sam Bairstow 72-67, Keita Nakajima (JPN) 72-67, Wu Ashun (CHN) 67-72, James Morrison 70-69, Tom McKibbin 69-70, Kang Sung (KOR) 69-70.

WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Yani wins long-awaited 3m springboard title

By Sports Reporter
Doha

After two years of near misses, Chang Yani won her first women's 3m springboard diving world title at the World Aquatics Championships Doha 2024 yesterday. Yani's victory and mixed team artistic swimming title in-creased China's gold medal tally to 14.

Yani, who finished with silver in 2023 and bronze in 2022, topped teammate Chen Yiwen, giving the powerhouse Chinese team its eighth diving gold medal in Doha.

Chen was the two-time reign-ing world champion and led the semifinals, giving her the prime last spot in the final. But Chang turned in five stellar dives and led all the way to finish with 354.75

points, with Chen settling for the silver at 336.60. The bronze went to South Korea's Kim Suji at 311.25. Maddison Keeney of Australia and Sarah Bacon of the United States finished fourth and fifth, respectively.

Later, China completed a sen-sational clean sweep of the mixed team gold medals following a fabulous free routine in Doha.

China were in a class of their own as they captured the Mixed Team Free title in fantastic fashion, adding to their success in the mixed team acrobatic rou-tine and mixed team technical. It is their sixth artistic swimming gold medal in total in the Qatari capital, underlining their current dominance in the sport.

Japan and the United States of America both earned their sec-ond medals of the World Cham-pionships, sealing silver and bronze respectively.



Gold medalist China's Chang Yani poses on the women's 3m springboard diving podium during the 2024 World Aquatics Championships at Hamad Aquatics Centre in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Age is no barrier for 100 year-old Iranian diver Askar

DOHA: The World Aquatics Masters Championships will shortly bring together some of the best masters athletes from around the world including a 100 year-old diver from Iran, Taghi Askar. Seventy-three years since diving to a silver and bronze medals at the inaugural Asian Games in New Delhi, Iran's Taghi Askar will once again take to the spring-board, this time at the World Aquatics Masters Championships in Doha at the age of 100. The oldest competitor at the championships, Askar will perform a dive before tonight's Women's 3m Springboard final at the Hamad Aquatic Centre to mark the two-week countdown to the world's largest masters aquatics competition. Earlier this week Askar told World Aquatics that he had given away the sport as a forty-one-year-old but was returning to dive in Doha due to his love of the sport. “When I was competing at a national level the last champion-



Taghi Askar pose with the World Aquatics Technical Diving Committee in Doha. PICTURE: World Aquatics

ships I did was when I was 41 years old,” said Askar. “I achieved a gold medal at the national level, and after that, I said good-bye to the sport, but at least with a gold medal.”

Askar's international diving career commenced at the Asian Games in New Delhi at the very first staging of the competi-

tion which has grown from 489 athletes competing in six sports in 1951 to 11,935 athletes compet-ing across forty disciplines at the 2022 edition. Asked about his thoughts of the evolution of the sport, Askar is quick to note that he has the same love that he had all those years ago as a teenager. “The first time I attended the

Asian Games in New Delhi in 1951 the level of diving in Iran was very high and I achieved two medals,” said Askar. “But by the time the games were in Tehran in 1974 the Chinese swimmers had entered this beautiful sport and they started to improve by a lot - we just couldn't catch them as we stayed at the same level we started at.”

“For me, I have had a love of diving since I was a teenager until today. I have always loved diving. Nothing has changed between 1951 and now, except my perform-ance!” As to advice for those competing at the World Aquatics Masters Championships in two weeks, or for those considering joining the championships at Singapore 2025, Askar tells World Aquatics there are two key funda-mentals. “The only thing I want to tell you is about loving this sport and to keep yourself healthy. This can be a good motivation for you to attend these championships and different championships.”

SPOTLIGHT

Fifty One East leads the way in sponsoring Qatar Masters 2024

Doha: As the curtains rise on the 2024 edition of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, Fifty One East, Qatar's favourite department store, proudly embarks on another year of unwavering support. For an impres-sive 27 years, Fifty One East has maintained its esteemed role as the “Offi-cial Retailer” for the prestigious golfing event, taking place from February 8 to February 11 at the renowned Doha Golf Club.

The Commercial Bank Qatar Masters will be the fifth stop on the Inter-national Swing - and the last of five in the Middle East - before the Swing concludes in Africa, with the Magical Kenya Open, SDC Championship and Jonsson Workwear Open. It is crowned as a pinnacle in Qatar's sports calendar and remains a source of anticipation for golf enthusiasts and sports aficionados. Once again, the iconic Mother of Pearl Trophy, pre-sented by Fifty One East, will grace the challenging course as a symbol of excellence within the European Tour spectacle.

Reflecting on the enduring part-nership, Bader al-Darwish, Chairman and Managing Director of Fifty One East, expressed: “As we embark on the 27th year of our partnership with the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters, Fifty One East takes immense pride in con-tributing to the legacy of this premier golfing event. Our commitment goes beyond retail, resonating with the spirit of excellence that defines this tournament. We look forward to an-other year of fostering community engagement, showcasing local talent, and elevating the experience for golf fanatics and spectators alike.”

Commending the organizing committee's efforts, he added: “A special acknowledgment is due to the dedicated organizers whose tireless work has transformed this event into a benchmark of professionalism within Qatar's sporting landscape. As an industry leader, Fifty One East remains resolute in supporting our community's growth and prosperity.”

The enduring partnership between Fifty One East and the Qatar Mas-ters extends its influence further, uniting with Rolex, the tournament's “Official Timekeeper,” and Fnac Qatar, the “Official Technology Part-ner,” continuing their sponsorship. This year, Fnac Qatar returns to the Public Village and transforms it into a musical haven with the Fnac Mu-sic Lounge experience, featuring the latest instruments from the world-renowned brand, Yamaha. Visitors are invited to explore and experience the world of music as they try these instruments live at the lounge. Addi-tionally, an innovative interactive screen will allow them to make on-the-spot purchases from Fnac.qa while benefiting from exciting exclusive deals, bringing the joy of music directly to fans. With strategically located branches at Lagoona Mall, Doha Festival City, and Place Vendôme, Fnac Qatar stands as the ultimate destination, seamlessly merging culture, lei-sure, and technology within the captivating realm of the Public Village.

On the other hand, Toysaloon, Fifty One East's toy store, will carve out a special space in the Public Village, offering engaging children's ac-tivities, including colouring sessions, arts and crafts, trampolining, out-door games, and more. Fifty One East takes immense pride in its associa-tion with this esteemed sporting and social event in Qatar, consistently supporting initiatives that foster community engagement and showcase local talent. The enduring synergy between this world-class tournament and Fifty One East remains a testament to a perfect match.



COMMENT

Al-Haydos proud Qatar have defied expectations

Hasan al-Haydos is pleased Qatar have defied expectations and proved their critics by reaching the AFC Asian Cup final, with the defending champions to face Jordan at the Lusail Stadium today.

Indifferent form coming into the tournament had raised doubts about Qatar's ability to retain the title they won in emphatic fashion in UAE 2019 but al-Haydos and his teammates rediscovered their best at the right time. Marquez Lopez was parachuted in to replace Carlos Queiroz as coach just a month before the tournament, sparking criticism in some quarters. But the Spaniard's impact has been immediate, leading Qatar to their second consecutive final.

"A month before the tournament, no one expected that we'd reach the final and deliver this performance," said the 33-year-old captain. "However, working together with the coach and federation, the team is

able to reach this level because of the efforts and unity of everyone. I'm very proud to be part of this squad, of this generation of players and those who remained from the 2019 team. Maybe it isn't as exciting as it was in 2019 but Asian football is transforming and matches will continue to get more difficult."

Qatar are now one match away from joining Iran, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Japan as teams who have defended the AFC Asian Cup title and al-Haydos is definite to play a prominent role, having already contributed three goals.

"Being here and sitting here. I'm playing in the final, my team is playing in the final. Many thought we wouldn't reach the final but we the players, coach, technical team and association - we were well prepared and here we are. The final match will be a difficult one, hopefully we can emerge triumphant."



FOCUS

Ammouta masterminds Jordan's historic run

Tactical discipline instilled by Moroccan coach has been key to Nashama's success

By Sports Reporter
Doha

When Hussein Ammouta was appointed as Jordan coach midway through last year, no one expected the Moroccan to take Al Nashama to their maiden Asian Cup final. The early signs were not promising either. The West Asian side - who have before gone past the quarter-final of the continent's marquee tournament - had lost at home to Saudi Arabia in their World Cup qualification group, before only managing a draw against Tajikistan in November.

In the friendlies before Asian Cup Jordan were thrashed 6-1 by Japan, and even lost to Lebanon. However, they had beaten Qatar 2-1 and now the teams face each other in the Asian Cup final at the Lusail Stadium today.

Jordan finished third in their group and scraped through to the knockouts, but emerged stronger with each passing match at Qatar 2023 to knock out heavyweights Iraq and South Korea. That was a triumph for Ammouta, who was heavily criticised when they finished 2023 without a win in seven games, which included six losses.

Now Ammouta is one match away from leading Jordan to a maiden Asian Cup title and if he does, it will be the crowning glory for an individual who has spent the better part of his career - as a player and a coach - in Asia.

Mousa al-Tamari, following the stunning 2-0 win over South Korea in the semi-finals, paid tribute to Ammouta's ability



Jordan's coach Hussein Ammouta speaks to his players yesterday. (Reuters)

to galvanise his players. "I must credit our coach, who emphasised the importance of enjoying ourselves. He instilled a winning mentality in us. "The tactical discipline instilled by our head coach was crucial. He instilled confidence in us to not respect our opponents too much, while denying them space to attack," said al-Tamari.

But it was not just the South Korea match in which Jordan impressed in as they started their campaign with a resounding 4-0 win over Malaysia in Group E.

The southeast Asian side had no answer to Ammouta's tactics, and the same applied to South Korea when the two sides met in the group stage.

Jordan were seconds away from winning the tie, with an own goal helping Korea salvage a point. Their concluding group fixture ended in a 1-0 defeat to Bahrain but that came after a spot in the Round of 16 had already been sealed.

The knockout stage is where Jordan really served notice that they were the real deal, with Ammouta pushing his players all the way as they edged Iraq 3-2 while a controlled performance resulted in a 1-0 defeat of Tajikistan in the quarter-finals.

Against South Korea, Jordan produced yet another side to their game - going on the attack from the first blow of the whistle to leave Son Heung-min and his teammates gasping. Ammouta, again, showed his tactical acumen by admitting that the decision to go on the offensive was decided after carefully analysing Korea.

"We agreed to start strongly, capitalising on the fact that South Korea had conceded eight goals in five matches. It was crucial to utilise our attacking abilities and seize the initiative to attack. We knew that our opponents would strike back, hence the focus remained on aggressive defensive tactics. However, it was our proactive approach and emphasis on attacking play that made us the more effective team. We displayed the mindset of champions, showing resilience and determination in every aspect of the game," said the 54-year-old Moroccan.

Having steered Jordan into a first ever Asian Cup final, expectations have soared of them going all the way but irrespective of what happens today, Ammouta's place in Asian football history is assured.

Defensive discipline will take Jordan to title, al-Ajalin

Doha: Salem al-Ajalin is confident Jordan have the defensive strength to stop Qatar when the two sides meet in the AFC Asian Cup final at Lusail Stadium today.

No team managed to stop Qatar from scoring in their six matches en route to the final but the experienced Al Faisaly defender believes that Jordan will be the first.

"We work in systems from the goalkeeper to the attackers, we all work together, the defence starts from the offence," he said. "Yes, they have an excellent attack but we're confident with the defensive structure that we have. The final match is always based on details and from a neutral perspective, it can hopefully be an excellent one from both sides. We're proud to have reached the final. Hopefully we can produce a strong performance to make our Jordanian fans happy and proud of us."

Al-Ajalin made his international debut for Jordan in February 2010 but had to wait a long time before getting his second cap in December 2018 and now, at the age of 35, is a permanent fixture in Hussein Ammouta's team.

Having missed the 2-0 semi-final win over South Korea, al-Ajalin is determined to stamp his mark on the final, especially with the players' families watching from the stands and the whole of Jordan rooting for the team. "We have everything we need in order to be ready, to recover. We're not distracted by anything and are only focused on the match. It is very important to have your family around because such an achievement is an achievement for everyone and their presence in the stadium is sure to give us a lot of motivation," said.



China's Ning to referee final

Doha: Ma Ning from China will take charge of the AFC Asian Cup final today, which will be staged at Lusail Stadium.

Ma will become the first match official from China to oversee an Asian Cup final when he blows the whistle at 6pm to kick off the showdown between Jordan and Qatar.

This will be Ma's fourth assignment at Qatar 2023, having refereed the Group E fixture between South Korea and Bahrain, the round of 16 match between Qatar and Palestine, and the quarter-final between Iran and Japan. It will be his fifth Asian Cup match, after his debut at the 2019 edition.

Having started his refereeing journey in college, Ma became a national referee a few years after graduating in 2003 and began to officiate in the Chinese Super League in 2010 before becoming a FIFA referee in 2011.

He has refereed 37 matches at the AFC Champions League, having also officiated at the AFC Cup, AFC U23 Asian Cup and FIFA U17 World Cup Poland 2019.

The Liaoning native featured at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as a fourth official in six matches - marking the first appearance of China officials at a World Cup in 20 years. In the final, Ma will be well supported by assistant referees Zhou Fei and Zhang Cheng, both from China, while Uzbekistan duo Tantashev Ilgiz and Tsapenko Andrey are the fourth official and reserve assistant referee respectively. China's Fu Ming is the Video Assistant Referee and will be assisted by Japan's Iida Jumpei.

SPOTLIGHT

Six players to watch out in Asian Cup final today

QATAR
Akram Afif

Afif has been in exceptional form, scoring five goals and providing three assists. His pace, skill and vision have created havoc for opposing defences throughout the tournament. The 27-year-old played a paramount role in helping his team lift the trophy five years ago, registering a record 10 assists, and will surely be fired up for another standout performance.

Hasan al-Haydos

Al-Haydos has played the skipper's role to perfection with his technical prowess, exceptional vision and strong leadership qualities.

The 33-year-old can score too, as stunningly seen in the group stage match against China, with further goals against Palestine and Uzbekistan. Qatar will be counting on their veteran talisman to lead them to victory again.

Almoez Ali

Unlike 2019, Ali has not been firing in the goals at Qatar 2023 but there is no disputing the vital role he plays in the squad.

The forward's workrate is second to none, as he is equally adept in leading attacks and falling back to defend. More important, he scores when he has too - as seen in the semi-final win over Iran.



Jordan's Mousa al-Tamari during training. (Reuters)

JORDAN
Mousa al-Tamari

The only player in the Jordanian squad who plys his trade in Europe - with Montpellier SC in France - Mousa al-Tamari's performances in Qatar 2023 have shown just why his services are so coveted, scoring three goals - including a sublime solo effort against Korea Republic in the semi-finals - and one assist.

His direct play and dribbling speed make him a threat to any defence. The 26-year-old forward also works incredibly hard for his team, not only in pressing defenders

but also tracking back to help out his own defence.

Yazan al-Arab

Has been a colossal figure for Jordan in the heart of their defence, forming one half of a solid centre-back partnership with Abdallah Nasib that not only earned a clean sheet against South Korea, but also denied the Taegeuk Warriors any attempts on target in their semi-final clash.

Powerfully built and standing at 1.86m, al-Arab is a towering presence in both boxes. His pace on the ground is expected to be put to the test against the likes of Qatar's Almoez Ali and Akram Afif, which is likely to be one of the more fascinating battles on the pitch.

Yazan al-Naimat

With three goals to his name, Yazan al-Naimat has been a revelation in the tournament. Having scored in the Group E match against Korea Republic, the 24-year-old went up another level in the knockout stage - netting in the Round of 16 and semi-finals.

The Al Ahli SC player possess a knack of finding space between defenders and more often than not, times his run to perfection. If al-Naimat is allowed the space to operate, Qatar could well pay a heavy price.



Akram Afif has been in exceptional form at the Asian Cup Qatar, scoring five goals and providing three assists.