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Hojgaard in joint lead after round three of Qatar Masters at DGC



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Super striker Akram Afif says his teammates gave him belief

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Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos lifts the trophy with teammates after winning the AFC Asian Cup 2023 at Lusail Stadium yesterday. Qatar beat Jordan 3-1 in the final. (Reuters)

# Afif the hat-trick hero as Qatar defend Asian title

By Rizwan Rehmat  
Doha

Striker Akram Afif yesterday produced a performance for the ages with a hat-trick of goals as Qatar defended their AFC Asian Cup crown after a 3-1 demolition of Jordan in the final.

Playing in front of 86,492 fans at the iconic Lusail Stadium, Afif converted three penalty kicks across two halves to help Qatar become the Asian champions for the second time in a row.

With last night's heroic performance, Afif wrapped up the 24-team tournament with eight goals after exhibiting electric speed and match awareness in all the seven matches Qatar played.

Qatar yesterday became the fifth country to win back-to-back AFC Asian Cup titles after South Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Japan.

The 27-year-old forward was yesterday declared the Most Valuable Player for his artistry in a trying semi-final against Iran before the goal spree yesterday against Jordan.

Afif, with more than 100 caps for Qatar, also won the Highest Scorer trophy.

Qatar, who won the 2019 edition in the UAE five years ago, yesterday lagged behind in ball possession at 42 percent but demonstrated greater will to win after arriving with new coach Marquez Lopez just three weeks prior to the start of the tournament.

Qatar stopper Meshaal Barsham, who stopped three penalties against Uzbekistan in their quarter-final win, was named the Best Goalkeeper. Barsham made a series of saves yesterday.

Qatar also won the Fair Play Trophy.

Afif converted his first penalty in the 22nd minute before Jordan equalised through Yazan al-Naimat's smart finish in the 67th minute.

Six minutes later, following a VAR review, Afif got the chance to score his second of the night in the 73rd minute. In injury time, Afif scored his third when another VAR decision favoured Qatar.

After the final whistle, the Qatari players picked up Afif on their shoulders and then threw him in the air to celebrate their second successive Asian title glory.

"I would like to thank all Qataris. Congratulations to the coach and the fans. I can't really express what we feel but the coach worked really hard for us," Afif, who also scored from the penalty spot in the 2019 final against Japan, said yesterday.

"However, I want to tell the fans that there is more to come from us. I also would like to thank my teammates for having confidence in me to take the penalties. That gave me a lot of confidence for all three penalties. I think we deserved the win tonight," the Al



Qatar's Akram Afif celebrates with teammates after winning the AFC Asian Cup. (Reuters)



Akram Afif celebrates scoring a goal yesterday. (Reuters)

Sadd star added. Qatar coach Lopez said yesterday: "I congratulate the Qatari people and players. We're so happy after winning this difficult game, the tension was high. Maybe we didn't play beautiful football today but everyone remembers the winner. I'm so happy for Akram, he deserved to win all the awards."

Before the final kicked off, Iraq football legend and former AFC Asian Cup captain Younis Mahmoud unveiled the trophy.

Qatar took the lead in the final when Afif was tripped inside the Jordan box in the 22nd minute by Jordan's Abdallah Nasib. The referee pointed to the spot kick which was easily converted by Afif. Perhaps fa-

tigued from a draining semi-final against Iran, Afif yesterday started slowly, producing a weak shot in the 9th minute, his first attack on Jordan goal. Shortly afterwards, al-Naimat produced a bullet from the edge of the Qatar box but his shot was palmed away by 'keeper Barsham.

Jordan showed more intent with another attack when winger Musa al-Taamari slipped in a cross from the flank but his shot was collected in a slick manner by Barsham who beat Jordan's Ali Olwan tearing towards the ball.

Seconds later Olwan was booked for rough contact after Barsham had collected the ball.

After Afif's opening goal in the 22nd minute, Qatar maintained dominance with sharp moves in the first half. Soon after the half-hour mark, defender Lucas Mendes produced a snap-header off an Afif corner kick but the ball bounced in front of Jordan 'keeper Yazeed Abulaila and went over the crossbar.

In injury time, Qatar's Mohamed Waad blocked a shot by al-Tamari from close range. At the hour-mark, Nizar al-Rashdan produced a bullet from the edge of the box but Barsham pushed the ball away for a corner. Seconds later, defender Yazan al-Arab managed a bicycle kick but Barsham

remained alert to affect another save. In the 67th, Jordan equalised after al-Naimat received a long, loopy cross from the flank. He tapped the ball down, found space to aim with a crushing left-footed drive that sailed past Barsham.

Thereafter it was Qatar's night as Afif made the most of two VAR decisions to seal his team's spectacular win. Afif scored his second goal after Mahmoud al-Mardi's foul on Qatar's Ismaeel Mohamed.

Jordan conceded their third penalty after goalkeeper Abulaila was judged to have tripped Boualem Khoukhi after a VAR review.

**POINTS TO REMEMBER**

- Hosts and defending Qatar retained the Asian Cup with a 3-1 win yesterday against surprise package Jordan.
- Qatar's Akram Afif scored a hat-trick of penalties.
- It was a fitting final act to a month of football that began with 24 teams.
- 86,492 spectators arrived at Lusail Stadium to watch the final.
- Jordan were in their first Asian Cup final and contesting the biggest match in their history.
- In the 22nd minute, Afif held his nerve with a penalty for his sixth goal of the tournament.
- Jordan, ranked 89, equalised through Yazan al-Naimat.
- In the 73rd minute, Afif scored again from the penalty spot after the referee was advised by VAR.
- Afif completed his hat-trick in injury time, again after a VAR intervention.
- At the final whistle the triumphant Qatari substitutes raced from the bench and threw Afif in the air.
- The 27-year-old was named player of the tournament and was also top scorer.
- Qatar became the fifth team to lift back-to-back Asian titles.
- Qatar signed up Marquez Marquez as coach just a month before the Asian Cup.
- Jordan defeated Son Heung-min's South Korea 2-0 to reach the final.
- The event was originally scheduled to take place in China last year but postponed and moved because of Covid.
- Pre-tournament favourites Japan were dumped out in the quarter-finals by Iran.
- Tajikistan made the quarter-finals on their Asian Cup debut.
- Palestine also made a piece of history by reaching the knockout rounds for the first time.
- The next AFC Asian Cup will be held in Saudi Arabia in 2027.



GOLF

# Hojgaard in joint lead after third round of Qatar Masters

‘I WAS NEVER IN TOO MUCH TROUBLE BEFORE 15, BUT I HAD A PROPER ROUND AND ENJOYED IT TODAY’

Agencies  
Doha

Rasmus Hojgaard climbed into a three-way share of the lead with a five-under-par third round of 67 at the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters yesterday.

Denmark's Hojgaard is 10-under overall, alongside France's Ugo Coussaud and Japan's Rikuya Hoshino, and the trio have a one-shot lead over Ewen Ferguson, Tom McKibbin and Niklas Norgaard. Coussaud and Hojgaard began the day four shots off the lead, and the Dane continued the form he showed in the second round, where he shot the lowest score on Friday to put himself back in contention after a disappointing one-over par opening round.

Hojgaard had a flawless third round, hitting two birdies on the front nine and another three after the turn. "Most of the round was very solid today, I felt like I was pretty good out of the tee box, gave myself some good chances," Hojgaard said. "I managed to keep it bogey-free so that's a positive."

Coussaud made up for his two bogeys with seven birdies while Hoshino kept up his steady performance in Doha. He was two shots off the lead after both previous rounds, and a birdie on the 17th saw him card a three-under-par 69 to join the leaders.

Haydn Barron started the round with a two-shot lead, but a disastrous front nine, including a triple bogey before the turn, leaves the Australian three shots behind going into the final day after carding a two-over-par 74.

But 2022 Champion Ferguson seized the initiative to climb to nine under, only for Hoshino to quickly move to double figures.

A hat-trick of birdies around



Denmark's Rasmus Hojgaard and Japan's Rikuya Hoshino (right) in action during the third day of the Commercial Bank Qatar Masters at the Doha Golf Club yesterday.

the turn saw Coussaud hold a two-shot advantage at 11 under after 13 holes.

However, a bogey at the 15th halved his advantage, and Hojgaard and Hoshino ensured they

were alongside the Frenchman at the top with birdies at the penultimate hole for a three-way lead with 18 holes to play. It looked as though Australian Barron was continuing his momentum from



the opening two rounds when he climbed to ten under after the first hole. Hoshino was in close quarters with an opening birdie and he was in leading group when Barron bogeyed the third and fourth, de-

spite the Japanese dropping a shot at the latter hole as well.

That left the door open for Hojgaard, Ferguson and Waring to join them at the top of the leaderboard at seven under, but Hoshino

moved ahead with a gain at the seventh. However, Ferguson, who had to wait until the seventh to pick up his first shot of the day, went a terrific run of six birdies in eight holes to take the outright lead at nine under after 14 holes.

Coussaud joined him at that mark on the back of a hat-trick of birdies from the eighth, only for Hoshino to move into double figures after gains at the ninth and tenth. He immediately gave the shot back at the 11th, which saw Coussaud take full advantage following a brace of birdies at the 12th and 13th.

The Frenchman now held a two-shot lead, but he found trouble from the tee at the 15th to halve his deficit and Hojgaard wasted no time to reach double figures for the first time at the 17th hole.

The Dane drained a 13-foot putt to sit alongside Coussaud at the top, but Hoshino joined the pair when he sank a birdie at the penultimate hole for the third day in a row.

Hojgaard and Coussaud struggled off the final tee, but both managed to salvage par, while Hoshino slid a birdie putt by which would have given him a one-shot lead heading into the final round.

"I had a very good start, two birdies, but the putter was quite hot today and felt I hit very good tee-shots as well," Coussaud said.

"I was never in too much trouble before 15, but I had a proper round and enjoyed it today."

Ferguson carded the joint-lowest round of the tournament with a flawless six-under-par 66 to sit one adrift alongside Northern Irishman Tom McKibbin and Denmark's Niklas Norgaard.

English pair Waring and Sam Bairstow are at eight under, while Barron battled back to join first-round leader Ashun Wu and Jorge Campillo one stroke further back.

## WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS DOHA 2024

# Hao beats Olympic champ Yuan to 10m platform gold



Gold medalist China's Hao Yang (centre), silver medalist China's Yuan Cao (left) and bronze medalist Ukraine's Oleksii Sereda pose with their medals after the 10m platform diving event during the 2024 World Aquatics Championships at Hamad Aquatics Centre in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Agencies  
Doha

Yang Hao of China won his second gold at the World Aquatics Championships Doha 2024 at the Hamad Aquatics Centre yesterday.

After winning his third consecutive synchro world title with Lian Junjie on Thursday, Yang took the individual men's 10m platform title with a total score of 564.05 from his six dives as China claimed their ninth diving gold in the Qatari capital.

It was a first global individual triumph for Yang – who won two golds at the Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games – after he took world silver in 2019 and bronze the last two years.

Reigning Olympic champion Cao Yuan was second on 553.20 with 18-year-old Ukrainian Oleksii Sereda earning his first major individual medal in third, totalling

528.65. Cao was playing catch-up early on after only earning 7.5s and 8.0s for his high-difficulty opening dive.

With his second effort, Yao hit a handstand back triple somersault with pike to move up the leaderboard with one judge awarding him a perfect 10.

In round three, Cao made a superb back three-and-a-half somersault with pike to roar into medal contention. Yang went even better with the same dive in round four, receiving two 10s and achieving a 100-point plus score to move further clear.

Sereda and Mexico's Randal Willars were the only men able to keep pace with the two Chinese in the first half of the final, but they were soon battling for bronze.

Yang's comparatively low-difficulty fifth dive left him with a lead of just 2.55 over Cao going into the final round.

But he put gold beyond doubt with a stunning front four-and-a-

half somersaults with tuck, earning three 10s from the judges in a dive score of 107.30 – easily the best of the final.

Sereda all but secured bronze with his best dive of the competition, a back two-and-a-half somersault with two-and-a-half twists for 97.20.

At 4.1, Willars' final dive – a front four-and-a-half somersaults with pike – had the highest difficulty tariff of the final and near-perfect execution would have seen him overhaul Sereda. But the 21-year-old slightly over-rotated and had to settle for fourth place on 505.00.

Chinese divers won nine of the 10 disciplines they contested in diving in Doha, finishing the event with nine golds and four silvers. Australia were next with two golds, two silvers and a bronze.

Meanwhile, China finished a dominant first week at the World Aquatics Championships with more titles in artistic swimming to

top the medal table with 16 golds out of 29.

Cheng Wentao and Shi Haoyu retained their world title in the artistic mixed duet free event. Cheng and Shi had taken silver in the mixed duet technical event last weekend, and improved on that in Aspire Dome arena performing a routine on the theme of "Romeo and Juliet."

Their score of 224.1437 points was more than 15 points ahead of silver medallists Mireia Hernandez and Dennis Gonzalez of Spain. Bronze went to Mexico's Trinidad Meza and Diego Villalobos.

"Winning the gold medal at the World Championship on the Chinese New Year is indeed a great feeling," Cheng said.

Australia took the other gold on offer yesterday as diver Maddison Keeney paired with Domonic Bedgood to win the mixed 3-metre synchronised springboard – a rare event in which China did not compete.

## FOOTBALL

# Liverpool leapfrog City to reclaim top spot

AFP  
London

Liverpool returned to the Premier League summit with a hard-fought 3-1 win against relegation-threatened Burnley yesterday after champions Manchester City briefly replaced them at the top.

The Anfield side are hunting a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title in Jurgen Klopp's final season in charge but once again have relentless City snapping at their heels.

Liverpool were not at their fluent best against Vincent Kompany's men but did enough to get over the line on what Klopp called a "super difficult" day.

City, who had earlier beaten Everton 2-0, are two points behind Liverpool with a game in hand as they chase an unprecedented fourth consecutive English top-flight title.

The Reds were gifted the lead when Burnley goalkeeper James Trafford failed to claim the ball from a Trent Alexander-Arnold corner and Diogo Jota headed home his ninth Premier League goal of the season.

But they were pegged back just before half-time when Dara O'Shea powered a bullet header past Liverpool goalkeeper Caoimhin Kelleher, replacing Alisson Becker, who was missing with an illness.

Liverpool, playing in front of a record league crowd at Anfield of nearly 60,000 after a ground expansion, were a different proposition after the break and got their reward when Luis Diaz headed them back in front in the 52nd minute.

The visitors had several inviting chances to equalise before Darwin Nunez's header from Harvey Elliott's cross secured the vital win. "It's not only the three points," Klopp told the BBC. "You cannot have momentum guaranteed all the time."

"Nine days ago we played incredible against Chelsea then we

lost to Arsenal. It's always a different challenge. If it's not clicking straight away, fight through it.

"It was really tough today but the boys fought through and got three points."

Earlier, Erling Haaland scored his first goals since November as Manchester City topped the table for the first time since November.

Pep Guardiola's team laboured to break down the stubborn visitors at a nervous Etihad Stadium but Haaland struck twice late in the second half.

They are his first goals since returning from an absence of nearly two months due to a foot injury.

Guardiola's men have won their past 10 games in all competitions but the Spaniard might be a little concerned with the way they laboured against struggling Everton, who remain in the relegation zone.

"In the first half our body language was not good," said the City boss. "You cannot play good football if you are not positive. You do your best when you are positive. When you start to complain and are sad it does not work."

"We talked at half time and I told them, 'what do you expect, to come here and win 5-0? Come on. Life is tough and football is tough!'"

Brennan Johnson struck a dramatic winner in the sixth minute of stoppage time to fire Tottenham back into the top four with a dramatic 2-1 win against Brighton.

The teams looked set to share the spoils after Pape Sarr cancelled out Pascal Gross's early penalty in the 61st minute.

But South Korean star Son Heung-min, back from Asian Cup duty, teed up fellow substitute Johnson in the dying seconds to earn a vital victory.

"It's fair to say that we are still a work in progress but we had a world-class player in Son, who makes the most difficult ball look simple to set up Brennan," said Spurs boss Ange Postecoglou.



SNAPSHOTS FROM QATAR'S SECOND SUCCESSIVE ASIAN CUP TRIUMPH



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani congratulates Qatar forward Akram Afif after the home nation won the Asian Cup final against Jordan at the Lusail Stadium yesterday. Minister of Sports and Youth HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, Crown Prince of Jordan Prince Al Hussein bin Abdullah, FIFA president Gianni Infantino and Asian Football Confederation President Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim al-Khalifah are also seen during the awards ceremony.



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani watches the AFC Asian Cup final between Jordan and Qatar at the Lusail Stadium.



Qatar were also handed the Fair Play Award for their discipline at the AFC Asian Cup. Captain Hasan al-Haydos was first up on the podium to collect the award on behalf of the team.



Qatar's players rush towards Akram Afif to celebrate after the forward netted a hat-trick at the Lusail Stadium. **PICTURES:** Shaji Kayamkulam





SPOTLIGHT

# Feared Qatar striker Afif says teammates gave him belief

Qatar forward was named tournament's Most Valuable Player and also picked up the top scorer award



Qatar's forward Akram Afif (left) holds his Most Valuable Player Award trophy, while Meshaal Barsham poses with Best Goalkeeper trophy after the AFC Asian Cup final against Jordan at the Lusail Stadium yesterday. **PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam**

**AFP**  
Doha

**Q**atar's Asian Cup final hero Akram Afif said "the team and people were behind me" after he scored a hat-trick of penalties in yesterday's 3-1 win over Jordan to help his side retain their title.

The livewire forward was named player of the tournament and finished as top scorer on eight goals for the hosts and defending champions in Doha. Afif held his nerve to convert from the spot three times against Jordan in front of over 85,000 fans at Lusail Stadium, which staged the World Cup final 14 months ago. The 27-year-old said he "scored because of the confidence my teammates had in me".

"It's not about the technique or the angle, it's about feeling that the team and people are behind me," he said.

Afif celebrated his goals by producing a playing card with his picture on it before the image flipped to an "S". He later revealed that it was a tribute to his wife, who was attending a game at the stadium for the first time. "S" is the first letter of my wife's name, she's from Kuwait. Today's match was her first in the stadium," Afif said. "The cup will remain in Doha...We will tell our fans that the best is yet to come."

Afif plays for Qatari side Al Sadd and had stints at clubs in Belgium and Spain earlier in his career. He said he "would like to" have another crack at making it in Europe but admitted it was "difficult". "It's not an easy decision - there are so many factors at play," he said. "It's a question of fate. If it's meant to be, it's meant to be."

Afif helped Qatar banish the painful memory of their 2022 World Cup flop on home soil by retaining the Asian Cup. They lost all three of their World Cup games and crashed out in the group phase, the worst record of any host in the competition's history.

But it was a different story at the Asian



Qatar's Akram Afif scores from the penalty spot to complete his hat-trick.

Cup, where Qatar retained their title despite replacing coach Carlos Queiroz with Tintin Marquez a month before the tournament began. "The coach worked hard with us," said Afif. "You know the teams that we played against. This was not something easy."

Afif, who also played a prominent role in Qatar's triumphant campaign in 2019, opened his 2023 account by scoring twice in the 3-0 Group A win over Lebanon in the opening match. He then struck the winner in the 1-0 victory over Tajikistan, a result which confirmed Qatar's knockout stage spot with a match to spare. Afif was on target again in the Round of 16, scoring the winner as Qatar saw off a spirited challenge from Palestine.

He was on top of his game yet again in the semi-final against Iran, scoring Qatar's second with a thunderous effort as the hosts edged to a 3-2 victory. The final saw yet another wonder show from Afif, who scored thrice from the penalty spot - the only player to net at hat-trick at Qatar

2023 - to power the Maroons to their second AFC Asian Cup title.

In emulating teammate Almozee Ali in winning both the MVP and Top Scorer awards, Afif took his involvement to 22 AFC Asian Cup goals since the beginning of the last edition (9 goals and 13 assists), constituting 67 percent involvement in Qatar's goals in the two tournaments.

## QATAR'S BARSHAM NAMED BEST GOALKEEPER

Meanwhile, Qatar's Meshaal Barsham was named the Best Goalkeeper of the tournament after playing a pivotal role in his side lifting the coveted trophy. The custodian, who celebrates his 26th birthday on Wednesday, started six of Qatar's seven matches.

Barsham, who plays his club football with Al Sadd SC, was rock-solid throughout Qatar's campaign. He kept three clean sheets out of the seven matches Qatar played - having come on as substitute in the final group match against China.

PRaise

## Asian Cup Qatar our crowning moment, says AFC president

**A**sian Football Confederation (AFC) President Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim al-Khalifah congratulated Qatar on creating history as the West Asians became only the fifth team to defend their AFC Asian Cup crown after defeating Jordan 3-1 in a pulsating Final at the Lusail Stadium yesterday.

"In their first ever final, Jordan were worthy opponents, and both finalists were outstanding from start to finish, producing riveting moments that will live on long in our memories, and we must praise the Qatar Football Association and the Jordan Football Association for their dedication to elevate the beautiful game at all levels. I am certain that the performances of both teams will serve to inspire the future generation of players, not only in their respective nations, but also across our great Continent."

Sheikh Salman also reiterated his appreciation to the Qatar Football Association, the AFC Asian Cup Qatar Local Organising Committee, and Qatari authorities for a spectacular tournament that will take its place as the most successful men's flagship edition in history.

"From the FIFA World Cup venues, the world-class infrastructure, the seamless connectivity, the absorbing atmosphere all across the city of Doha, and unrivalled hospitality from the people of Qatar, the AFC Asian Cup Qatar was unlike anything we have ever experienced or witnessed in the tournament's proud history.

"On behalf of the Asian football family, I would like to convey a big heartfelt thank you to the Qatar Football Association, the Local Organising Committee and the Qatari authorities for their exceptional hosting capabilities and for delivering a tournament that will go down as the greatest ever Asian football masterpiece," added the AFC president.

"Qatar is undoubtedly one of the elite sporting destinations across the globe. Prior to the tournament, as hosts of the FIFA World Cup, expectations of Qatar were indeed high and understandably so, but I know I speak for everyone when I say Qatar have not just met those expectations, but far exceeded all our aspirations."

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The AFC president also paid tribute to the absorbing and vibrant atmosphere created by the passionate fans of Asian football. The world's largest football community turned up in droves to rally behind the continent's top 24 sides with more than 1.5mn supporters showcasing their fervour across the 51 matches, making the AFC Asian Cup Qatar the most-attended showpiece in history.

Not only did the 18th edition of the tournament surpass the previous 1.04mn attendance



Asian Football Confederation President Sheikh Salman bin Ibrahim al-Khalifah.

record, but it also saw the nine world-class stadiums achieve an average of 73% capacity - a 13% increase from the best-ever showing set in China in 2004. It was also the second attendance milestone to be broken after 82,490 fans set a new opening match record when Qatar defeated Lebanon at the Lusail Stadium.

At the same time, the preliminary digital engagement and broadcast figures have reaffirmed the AFC Asian Cup Qatar as the most appealing edition in history, with digital impressions crossing the 5.5bn mark and broadcast figures also poised to smash TV viewership records.

Sheikh Salman said: "The AFC Asian Cup Qatar has firmly cemented its place as the most engaging in history so from the bottom of my heart, I would like to put on record my sincere appreciation to all our fans as well as our dedicated volunteers for showcasing their enthusiasm and breathing life into the competition through their unprecedented support."



## HISTORIC PERFORMANCES BY ASIAN TEAMS

Turning his attention to the pulsating action, Sheikh Salman also lauded the remarkable progress of Asian teams on the pitch. Four sides - Palestine, Syria, Indonesia and Tajikistan - reached the knockout stage for the first time - the highest number since the tournament transitioned from its round-robin format in 1972 - with Jordan reaching their first-ever final and Tajikistan emerging as the first debutants since Australia in 2007 to reach the quarter-finals.

The AFC president added: "For several years now, we have placed great emphasis on the need to narrow the gap between the traditional powerhouses and the emerging teams. Across the 51 matches, the level of intensity and determination displayed by all our teams was evident for all to see. This was the driving force behind our decision to expand the tournament, to provide more Member Associations with the opportunity to compete at the highest level, and I firmly believe that the collective standards across Asian football are indeed strengthening.

"Analysts and experts have been highlighting the exciting unpredictability of Asian football, but our teams have simply reinforced what the AFC has known all along, that there are no straightforward matches at this level and the outcome is never a foregone conclusion, firmly underscoring the high standards of the top-tier game in Asia.

Sheikh Salman concluded: "Ultimately, the biggest victors were the entire Asian football family and our member associations, in particular, deserve our praise for their commitment to rise to the occasion and to produce the unrivalled moments that once again reinforced the rising standards of the Asian game. The AFC Asian Cup Qatar is undoubtedly our crowning moment."

FOCUS

## Expectation got to Jordan in final, says coach Ammouta



Jordan coach Hussein Ammouta (right) talks to midfielder Noor al-Rawabdeh during the AFC Asian Cup final against Qatar at the Lusail Stadium yesterday. *(Reuters)*

**AFP**  
Doha

**J**ordan coach Hussein Ammouta said his side caved in under the weight of expectation in their first Asian Cup final as they were beaten 3-1 by hosts Qatar yesterday.

The home side retained their crown thanks to a hat-trick of penalties from Akram Afif at Lusail Stadium. Qatar took the lead in the first half and were the better team in the opening period, before Jordan equalised through Yazan al-Naimat's smart finish.

But Qatar and Afif hit back with two more penalties to leave the underdogs Jordan heartbroken. "I talked before the game about the mental aspect," said the Moroccan Ammouta. "I told them to enjoy the game. It's a final but I told them to enjoy it."

He added: "There was a big focus on the players and I was scared that the environment would have an impact on them. People can have good intentions

but it can have an impact on them (the players). Their interactions with their families and on social media put pressure on them. It was clear. I am the coach but I can't take their iPads and phones."

Despite defeat on the day, Jordan put themselves on the footballing map as they reached their first semi-final in the history of the competition. There they defeated South Korea 2-0 to reach their debut final.

"We weren't focused in the first half and we made mistakes. There were easy opportunities to score but we didn't. The timing of the two penalties (in the second half) was harsh," Ammouta said. "But I want to congratulate the players. They've gained confidence and opened horizons for the future. Maybe we can win in future tournaments. We have done well but we need to create the conditions to maintain this level and keep improving. We need to keep improving the players' skills and also their physical condition."