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GULF TIMES

SPORT

**FIFA ARAB CUP
QATAR 2025**

FOCUS

Saudi Arabia beat Oman 2-1, Egypt-Kuwait in feisty draw

Firas al-Buraikan and Saleh al-Shehri score the goals for Saudi Arabia at Education City Stadium

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Saleh al-Shehri produced a deft deflection in the second half to power Saudi Arabia to a feisty 2-1 win over neighbouring Oman on day two of the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025.

Al-Shehri, who charged into the Oman box, sent the ball home on a cross from the flank (77) as Saudi Arabia - coached by Hervé Renard - sealed a fighting win at the Education City Stadium.

Earlier Firas al-Buraikan gave Saudi the lead in the 55th minute but that was cancelled by a superb snap-header by Oman's Ghanim al-Habashi in the 70th minute. Al-Shehri's late effort sealed the deal in Saudi's favour.

Oman - coached by Carlos Queiroz of Portugal - played an attacking game for most of the match. Oman will now play Morocco on Friday at Education City Stadium while Saudi Arabia take on Comoros at Al Bayt Stadium the same day.

DRAMATIC DRAW

Kuwait held Egypt to a dramatic 1-1 stalemate in their FIFA Arab Cup 2025 Group A clash at Lusail Stadium yesterday.

While Egypt controlled the



Saudi Arabia's Firas al-Buraikan celebrates scoring a goal during their FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 Group B match against Oman at Education City Stadium in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)



Egypt's Marwan Hamdy clashes with Kuwait's Mohammed al-Sharifi during their FIFA Arab Cup Group C match at Lusail Stadium in Lusail yesterday. (Reuters)

tempo for large stretches of the match, they were left chasing the game after a second-half header from Fahed al-Hajeri gave the West Asian side a shock lead (64).

The encounter remained tense until the final minutes, when a red card shifted the balance, forcing both sides to settle for a point in

their tournament opener. Egypt wasted numerous opportunities to seize control early, with Kuwait goalkeeper Suod Alhoushan producing a string of saves to deny Mohamed Elneny and Ghanam Mohamed.

The Pharaohs' frustrations mounted when Amro Elsoulia

missed a penalty in the first half - after Abdulwahab Alawadhi's foul on Eslam Eissa - and Mohamed Sherif fired wide shortly after the break.

Against the run of play, Kuwait capitalised in the 64th minute when al-Hajeri connected with Mohammad Daham's corner to

power a header into the top corner, leaving the Egyptian squad stunned.

The match reached a chaotic conclusion in the 83rd minute when hero-turned-villain Al-houshan was sent off for a second bookable offence after fouling Marwan Hamdy in the box. Mo-

hamed Afsha converted the resulting penalty against substitute goalkeeper Sulaiman Abdulgha-four to level the score.

Kuwait missed a late chance to seal the win prior to the red card, and they will now look to regroup against Jordan on Saturday, while Egypt prepare to face the UAE.

SPOTLIGHT

Morocco hit the ground running, crush Comoros

QNA
Doha

Morocco began its campaign in the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 with a 3-1 victory over Comoros yesterday at Khalifa International Stadium in the first round of Group B, which also includes Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Morocco's goals were scored by Soufiane Bouftini in the 5th minute, Tarik Tissoudali in the 11th minute, and Karim El Berkauoui in the 45+4 minute. The only goal for Comoros goal came when Moroccan player Mohamed Boulaksout accidentally scored an own goal in the 56th minute.

Morocco imposed clear dominance at the start of the match with high pressing and managed to open the scoring after a corner taken by Oussama Tannane, which Soufiane Bouftini met with a powerful header into the net in the 5th minute.

Morocco continued its offensive pressure, extending the lead with a second goal, also from a corner executed by Oussama Tannane into the box, which Tarik Tissoudali converted with a shot to the goalkeeper's right in the 11th minute.

Comoros attempted to respond after going down, nearly reducing the deficit with a shot from the edge of the box, but it went over the crossbar in the 24th minute of the Group B clash. Morocco relied on wing-based attacking play and managed to add a third goal after a cross from Hamza El Moussaoui into the box, which



Morocco's Soufiane Bouftini celebrates scoring their first goal with teammates during their FIFA Arab Cup Group B match against Comoros at Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

Karim El Berkauoui smartly headed into the net in the 45+4 minute. Morocco ended the first half with a score of 3-0.

In the second half, Comoros were much improved as they searched for a comeback, and Ibrahim Joudja almost scored after a cross that he struck powerfully, but the Moroccan defence blocked it in the 53rd minute.

Comoros succeeded in scoring its first goal when Amir Zaid penetrated the defence and sent in a cross that Moroccan defender Boulaksout mistakenly turned into his own net in the 56th minute. The match remained open and Morocco's Amine

Zouhrouh missed a great chance to widen the gap when he was one-on-one with the goalkeeper after a cross from Abderrazak Hamdallah, but his shot went over the bar in the 83rd minute.

MOROCCO COACH THRILLED WITH 3-1 WIN

Morocco coach Tarik Sektioui said yesterday: "I am happy with the victory, which we know is of great importance in the opening match at any tournament.

He added: "I thank the players for the efforts they made in a match that was never easy against the Comoros national team. They fight really hard. I have to say the

tournament journey is still long and difficult." The 48-year-old said the points in the bag mattered to the Moroccan team.

"The three points are very important. We know there are no easy matches and there are no big or small teams. This thing has been amplified with the performances from Palestinian and Syrian teams," Sektioui said.

"The Comoros team wanted to dominate in the second half, while we tried to keep a clean sheet and rely on counter-attacks to score more goals.

"We had scoring opportunities, and the referee denied us a clear goal, we thought," he added.

PREVIEW

Iraq eye winning start, Bahrain coach wary of tough clash

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The road to the 2026 World Cup takes a critical detour through Doha this week as Iraq head coach Graham Arnold challenges his squad to treat the FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2025 as a dress rehearsal for the global stage.

The Lions of Mesopotamia are set to open their Group D campaign today against Bahrain at Stadium 974. For Arnold, the Australian tactician at the helm of the Iraqi squad, the tournament represents more than just regional silverware; it is the final proving ground before the intercontinental playoffs for the 2026 World Cup. Speaking at the pre-match press conference, Arnold emphasised the high stakes, urging his players to produce an 'ideal kick-start' to the tournament.

"This championship constitutes a pivotal opportunity for the players to showcase their capabilities," Arnold said yesterday. He challenged his squad to demonstrate their 'entire finesse,' noting that the tournament's 'dazzling' organisation and intensity mirror the grandiose atmosphere of a World Cup proper.

For Arnold, this is a chance to evaluate the depth of his roster, particularly players previously called up during the qualifiers. The message from the manager is clear: the shirt is yours to earn.

Iraq's captain and goalkeeper, Jalal Hassan, echoed his manager's sentiments, confirming that spirits are high within the dressing room. "The morals are up," Hassan



said yesterday. "We are committed to mesmerising the Iraqi fans in this tournament," Hassan added.

On the other side of the pitch, Bahrain head coach Dragan Talajic is under no illusions about the task at hand. Talajic described Iraq as a 'powerful squad' and predicted a challenging 90 minutes at Stadium 974.

However, the Bahraini boss remains ambitious. Highlighting the expertise his team gained during recent World Cup qualifiers, Talajic insisted his side is not just here to participate, but to compete for the title "We have tremendous hope to snag the title and reach the final," Talajic said, framing the tournament as a vital step in their own World Cup preparations."

YESTERDAY'S RESULTS

Morocco 3 Comoros 1
Egypt 1 Kuwait 1
Saudi Arabia 2 Oman 1

TODAY'S MATCHES

3:00pm - Algeria vs Sudan
at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium
5:30pm - Iraq vs Bahrain
at Stadium 974
8:00pm - Jordan vs UAE
at Al Bayt Stadium

CHRISTCHURCH TEST

West Indies pacers put New Zealand on the ropes

AFP
Christchurch

New Zealand reached 231-9 at stumps on a rain-shortened day one of the first Test against the West Indies yesterday after Justin Greaves triggered a middle-order collapse with the wicket of Kane Williamson.

New Zealand tumbled from 94-1 to 148-6 on a bowler-friendly wicket after Williamson was dismissed for 52, his 38th Test half-century.

Michael Bracewell and Nathan Smith arrested the slide with a 52-run stand for the seventh wicket. Smith eventually fell for 23 and Bracewell for 47.

After Matt Henry went for eight, Zak Foulkes and Jacob Duffy were both on four when bad light stopped play after 70 overs of a truncated day.

Bracewell rated the day “pretty even” given the nature of the wicket.

“It ebbed and flowed throughout the day and I think we’d be pretty happy with where we got to at the end of the day,” he said.

“It was a little bit ‘old school’ West Indies.

“You grow up hearing about the fast bowlers of the West Indies and it was certainly that today. It was an exciting challenge.”

Bracewell and Smith’s partnership was the second face-saving stand for New Zealand after Williamson and Tom Latham put on 93 following the dismissal of Devon Conway on the third ball of the Test. The green wicket and heavy cloud cover ensured West Indies skipper Roston Chase gave his pace attack first use of the new ball when he won the toss and it revived memories of Calypso quicks from a previous era.

But after the immediate success of Kemar Roach, who removed Conway, the West Indies were made to wait 29 overs before again tasting success.

In the first session, extended by a 90-minute rain break, Williamson and Latham cautiously inched New Zealand to 17-1 in the 10.3 overs available before a second shower brought lunch.

When play resumed, the New Zealand pair batted with more freedom until Williamson celebrated his first Test innings in a

year by passing the half-century mark. On 52, a lapse in his normal diligence saw a full delivery from Greaves edged to Alick Athanaze at second slip to ignite the collapse.

In his next over, Greaves removed Latham for a patient 24 off 85 deliveries and Rachin Ravindra was then bowled for three by Jayden Seales.

In the space of 21 deliveries the West Indies took three wickets for nine runs as New Zealand slumped from 94-1 to 103-4.

Will Young and Tom Blundell added 17 for the fifth wicket before Young, on 14, gave Johann Layne his maiden Test wicket.

Blundell progressed to 29 before he went early in the final session as debutant Ojay Shields claimed his first Test wicket.

Shields, who earlier believed he had the prized wicket of Williamson for 33 only for a no ball to be declared, also removed Bracewell to finish with 2-34. Greaves took 2-35 and Roach has 2-47.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 231 for 9 (Williamson 52, Bracewell 47, Shields 2-34, Greaves 2-35) **vs West Indies**



West Indies' Justin Greaves (third from left) celebrates the wicket of New Zealand's Kane Williamson with teammates during day one of the first Test at Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. (AFP)

ASHES

Weight of history against England in pink-ball Test

Khawaja out of Gabba Test with injury, England's Jacks replaces Wood

AFP
Brisbane

England head into tomorrow's day-night second Ashes Test against pink-ball masters Australia needing a rare victory at Brisbane's Gabba to get back into the five-match series.

Travis Head's whirlwind century as a makeshift opener carried Australia to an eight-wicket victory inside two days in Perth as they went 1-0 up.

The hosts are again without captain Pat Cummins and fellow quick Josh Hazlewood, leaving swing king Mitchell Starc, who is expected to be a force in humid Brisbane under lights, to carry the attack.

England, who capitulated in four frantic hours in Perth from a winning position, cannot afford to slip 2-0 down with three matches to play if they are to have realistic hopes of regaining the urn.

They will be without their own pace spearhead, Mark Wood, who is nursing a knee injury.

He was replaced by off-spinner Will Jacks, who will bolster the batting, in an otherwise unchanged team named yesterday.

All-rounder Jacks has played in two previous Tests and claimed a five-wicket haul on debut against Pakistan in 2022.

He has mainly been used by England in white-ball cricket.

“Everyone knows what a brilliant cricketer he is,” England batsman and Jacks’ Surrey teammate Ollie Pope told reporters.

“The way he’s grown over the last few years, we’ve seen his white-ball game really go forward. It’s a great opportunity for his red-ball, too.

“He’s obviously got that style of spin bowling where he can get some bounce and turn off the pitch, then everyone has seen the skills he’s got in the white-ball format.

“He can take on a really good attack.”

Captain Ben Stokes says England have moved on from Perth and are not scarred by past results but they face a formidable weight of history in Brisbane, where they have been holding extra training sessions this week.

England have not won a Test in Australia since their 2010-11 tour, losing 14 and drawing two.

Moreover, they have not triumphed at the Gabba for 39 years and have lost all three previous day-nighters against the hosts.

DAY-NIGHT SPECIALISTS
Australia thrive under lights, win-



England's Will Jacks (right) bowls on during a training session at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday, ahead of the second Ashes Test. (AFP)



Australia's Usman Khawaja reacts as he stretches during a training session in Brisbane yesterday.

ning 13 of the 14 pink-ball Tests they have played worldwide, but England will take encouragement from the sole defeat coming at the Gabba against the West Indies a year ago.

“On an evening it does seem to do a little bit more, especially

if you have a slightly newer ball,” said England fast bowler Brydon Carse after a night session in the nets yesterday.

Steve Smith captains Australia, who must decide how to fill the opening slot vacated by Usman Khawaja who was ruled out yesterday after failing to recover from back spasms suffered in Perth.

“Khawaja will remain with the team to continue his rehabilitation. He has not been replaced in the squad,” said Cricket Australia.

Khawaja batted for 30 minutes in the practice nets yesterday evening but the left-hander appeared to be in discomfort.

Head is likely to again move up alongside Jake Weatherald, with seaming all-rounder Beau Webster coming into the side at number six with Cameron Green moving up to five.

Paceman Scott Boland had sympathy for Khawaja.

“It’s hard because he’s put in a lot of work since the last game just trying to get his body right but he hasn’t come up, unfortunately,” Boland told reporters.

“I thought he looked pretty good in the nets, but he must have thought in himself that he wasn’t ready to go.”

Marnus Labuschagne filled in as

an opener for Khawaja in the first innings at Perth.

“It’s just game-by-game, and you work out what’s your best team and how does it best work for the game,” said Labuschagne.

Australia also have the option of bringing in Josh Inglis to open, leaving Head at number five where he would not have to face a new pink ball under lights.

Head, who stunned England with a match-winning 123 from 83 balls, said he would be ready to move up again, adding that fixed batting orders were “slightly overrated”.

“The traditionalists will say that’s how it’s got to be,” Head said. “It’s ever evolving and we’ll see where we get to. I feel I can play in any role.”

SQUADS

Australia: Steve Smith (capt), Scott Boland, Alex Carey, Brendan Doggett, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Marnus Labuschagne, Nathan Lyon, Michael Neser, Mitchell Starc, Jake Weatherald, Beau Webster
England: Ben Duckett, Zak Crawley, Ollie Pope, Joe Root, Harry Brook, Ben Stokes (captain), Jamie Smith, Will Jacks, Gus Atkinson, Brydon Carse, Jofra Archer.

LOSS

Former England batter Smith dies aged 62

AFP
London

Former England Test player **Robin Smith** has died aged 62, hailed by cricket chiefs as a “batter ahead of his time”.

The South Africa-born Smith, who played 62 Tests between 1988 and 1996, died on Monday in Australia, where he lived. Smith’s family announced their “profound sense of sadness and loss” in a statement released by Hampshire, his former English county club.

“Robin died unexpectedly at his South Perth apartment on Monday, 1st December. The cause of his death is at present unknown,” they said.

Smith had only recently met with the second-string England Lions squad in Perth ahead of the first Ashes Test at the invitation of coach Andrew Flintoff.

Smith scored 4,236 Test runs for England, including nine centuries, at an average of 43.67, and 2,419 runs in 71 one-day internationals. “Robin Smith was a player who stood toe to toe with some of the quickest bowlers in the world, meeting spells of hostile fast bowling with a defiant smile and an incredible resilience,” said England and Wales Cricket Board chairman Richard Thompson.

“He did so in a way that gave England fans enormous pride, and no shortage of entertainment. He was a batter ahead of his time, which was typified in that unforgettable unbeaten 167 from 163 balls in a one-day international against Australia at Edgbaston in 1993.”

Former England wicket-keeper Jack Russell, who played Test cricket alongside Smith, paid tribute on social media by saying: “Robin Smith, one of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet. Would do anything for you, hard as nails.

“What a player. Played quick bowling as well as anyone. Had the hardest square-cut in the business along side G (Gordon) Greenidge (the celebrated West Indies opener and a Hampshire



teammate of Smith). #RIP my Friend, rest easy now!”

‘CHARISMATIC, POPULAR’
Nicknamed “The Judge”, with his hair likened to a judge’s wig, Smith grew up in apartheid-era South Africa, when the country was banned from international cricket.

The son of an English father, Smith followed older brother Chris into both the Hampshire and England teams.

He was renowned for his fearless batting against the world’s fastest bowlers, including Curtly Ambrose, Courtney Walsh and Waqar Younis. But he struggled with mental health and alcohol-related problems in retirement. “Robin rose to fame as one of England’s most charismatic and popular players,” Smith’s family said. “A brave and dashing batsman, he excelled both for Hampshire and his adopted country, collecting legions of admirers and friends along the way.”

They added: “Since his retirement from the game in 2004 his battles with alcohol and mental health have been well documented but these should not form the basis of speculation about the cause of death which will be determined at post-mortem investigation.”

Hampshire chairman Rod Bransgrove hailed Smith as “one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of all-time Hampshire cricket heroes”.

“He was a batsman of awesome power and control and amongst the most courageous players this club has ever seen – especially against bowling of real pace,” he added.

Sri Lanka to play T20 series against Pakistan

Sri Lanka will host a three-match T20 series against Pakistan in January, the cricket board announced yesterday. Sri Lanka Cricket said all three matches will take place at Dambulla, starting on January 7. The second match will be held two days later, with the final on January 11. Sri Lanka is currently grappling with the aftermath of Cyclone Ditwah, which caused widespread flooding and mudslides that killed 410 people and affected over 1.5 million more. Pakistan’s last T20 tour of Sri Lanka was 10 years ago, when they played two matches – both won by the visitors – at the Premadasa Stadium in Colombo.

AUSTRALIA'S MAXWELL TO SKIP 2026 IPL

Australia all-rounder Glenn Maxwell yesterday ruled himself out of this month’s Indian Premier League auction to all but end a 13-year journey in the lucrative T20 tournament. The 37-year-old joined Punjab Kings for \$467,000 ahead of the previous edition but disappointed with 48 runs and four wickets in seven matches, before a finger injury. The auction for the 2026 edition is scheduled for December 16 in Abu Dhabi.

“After many unforgettable seasons in the IPL I’ve decided not to put my name into the auction this year,” Maxwell wrote on social media. “It’s a big call and one I make with a lot of gratitude for everything this league has given me.” An attacking batsman and handy spinner, Maxwell scored 2,819 runs at an average of 23.88 and took 41 wickets in 141 IPL matches since 2012. Maxwell won the IPL in 2013 with Mumbai Indians.

SPOTLIGHT

Hadjar to partner Verstappen in 2026 as Lindblad arrives in F1

Reuters
Abu Dhabi

Isack Hadjar will replace Yuki Tsunoda in the hot seat as Max Verstappen's Red Bull teammate next season with Arvid Lindblad joining Liam Lawson at Racing Bulls, the Formula One teams announced.

Frenchman Hadjar, 21, has made a big impression in his debut season with sister team Racing Bulls including taking his first podium with third place in the Dutch Grand Prix at the end of August.

British-born Lindblad, who also has Swedish nationality and Indian heritage through his mother, moves up from Formula Two to partner New Zealander Lawson and will be the sole rookie on the 2026 grid.

Tsunoda's departure leaves Formula One without a Japanese driver on the starting grid. Red Bull said he will remain within the 'family' as test and reserve driver for the first season of a new engine era.

Tsunoda will also serve as Racing Bulls reserve when compatriot Ayu Iwasa, this year's Japanese Super Formula champion, is not available. "We believe Isack can thrive alongside Max and produce the magic on track," said Red Bull principal Laurent Mekies.

The role of teammate to four-times world champion Verstappen, who could yet add a fifth title in a row at Sunday's

season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix, has been something of a poisoned chalice for a string of hopefuls. Verstappen, the absolute number one driver, will start 2026 with his fourth different teammate since the last race of 2024.

No teammate has come close to the Dutch driver's relentless form since Mexican Sergio Perez took four podiums in the first five races last season and then suffered a dramatic loss of pace before departing.

Before him Alex Albon, now at Williams, and Pierre Gasly, who moved to Renault-owned Alpine, also struggled to keep up.

Lawson started this season as the incumbent but was replaced by Tsunoda after two races without scoring. The Japanese has been completely eclipsed by Verstappen, with the champion winning seven races and scoring 396 points while Tsunoda's tally stands at a mere 33.

"After all the hard work I have put in since joining the junior team, it's such a great reward," said Hadjar. "I've had many ups and downs throughout my career, and they kept believing and pushing me. I feel ready to go... and I am happy and proud they feel the same. It's an awesome move, to work with the best and learn from Max is something I can't wait for."

Lindblad will take his place as the 20th Red Bull junior driver to reach Formula One and he recognised the challenge ahead. "I know there's a lot to learn, but I'm ready to work closely with the team and rise to it. I can't wait to get started, it's going to be an



This is how Formula grid will line up in 2026, with Cadillac entering as the 11th team.

exciting year," he said. Team boss Alan Permane said Lawson, 23, and Lindblad, 18, would be a strong and

dynamic pairing. "He (Lawson) has excelled when conditions have been at their hardest and we look forward to building

on this in 2026, while Arvid's rapid progression marks him as one of the standout young talents in the sport," he said.

GOLF

Woods can chip, putt; no timeline for competitive return

The 15-time major champion underwent disc replacement surgery

AFF
Miami

Tiger Woods has said that recovery from his latest back surgery has not gone as quickly as he wanted, stating it was too soon to set a target date for a return to action. The 15-time major champion, who will turn 50 later this month, underwent disc replacement surgery in October, the latest in a series of operations and injuries that have kept him sidelined since the 2024 British Open.

Speaking at his Hero World Challenge tournament in the Bahamas yesterday, the former world number one revealed that he had recently been cleared to try chipping and putting, but had no idea of when he may return to competitive action.

"It's not as fast as I'd like it to be," Woods replied when asked about the pace of his recovery from what was the seventh operation on his back. "It was a good thing to do, something I needed to have happen and it just takes time and dedication to the rehab process."

Asked if he had an idea of his likely tournament schedule in 2026, Woods said he was still "a ways" from determining a timetable for his return. "I'm just looking forward to just let me get back to playing again, let me do that and then I'll kind of figure out what the schedule is going to be," Woods said.

"I'm a ways away from that part of it and that type of decision, that type of commitment level. Unfortunately, I've been through this rehab process before, it's just step by step. Once I get a feel for practising, exploding, playing, the recovery process, then I can assess where I'm going to play and how much I'll play."

Woods suffered severe leg injuries in a 2021 car crash but returned at the 2022 Masters and finished 47th. The veteran superstar had a back operation in September 2024 and was rehabilitating from that setback when he announced in March that he had suffered a ruptured Achilles tendon.

Woods said while he had started chipping and putting, he was bracing for a lengthy rehabilitation from surgery. "I just got cleared last week to chip and putt so it's good," he said. "It's been slow. Not able to do much on a disc



Tiger Woods, who will turn 50 later this month, has had a series of operations and injuries that have kept him sidelined since the 2024 British Open. (AFP)

replacement to let it set. Can't really do much. Now we got the OK to start cranking up a little bit in the gym, started strengthening and started doing a little bit more of the rotational component that I haven't been able to do. Just letting the disc kind of set."

Asked if he was targeting a possible return at the Genesis Invitational in Los Angeles in February, Woods added: "As I said, I don't know... a disc replacement takes time. It's longer - it's

not as long as a fusion, thank God, but it's going to take time."

Woods was adamant though that he remains determined to return to the golf course. "I'd like to come back to just playing golf again," he said. "I haven't played golf in a long time. It's been a tough year. I've had a lot of things happen on and off the golf course that's been tough. And so my passion to just play, I haven't done that in a long time. Just play."

PREMIER LEAGUE

Salah unhappy after being dropped, says Liverpool's Slot

AFF
Liverpool

Coach Arne Slot admitted that Mohamed Salah was unhappy about being omitted from Liverpool's team for their vital 2-0 win against West Ham, but praised his attitude.

The Egypt forward was an unused substitute at the London Stadium on Sunday as Liverpool boss Slot made changes following a terrible run of nine defeats in 12 games in all competitions. Misfiring Salah, 33, has scored just four Premier League goals this season - in stark contrast to his haul of 29 last season, a tally that won him the Golden Boot.

Slot told reporters that during his reign as manager at Anfield, Salah had been a "superhuman being" but that he had not been at his best in recent weeks. "As with all players around the world, there are also phases in your time at the club that you are human," he said. "But he's scored so many goals for us and I'm sure he will in the future."

Slot, whose eighth-placed team host high-flying Sunderland today, said he was not surprised by Salah's reaction to being left out, praising his professionalism. "That's a normal reaction from a player that's good enough to play for us," he said. "And I say it mildly, because he's been so outstanding for this club for so many years, and will be for us in the future. So, yeah, of course a player isn't happy when they're not playing. He wasn't the only one who wasn't happy that he wasn't starting, I can tell you."

The Dutchman said that Salah had been supportive of his teammates. "You cannot be a player that's available every three days and play on that high standard if you go with your emotions," he said. "But Mo is so disciplined, knows what to do to stay fit, and no matter if he plays well, doesn't play well, if he plays or if he doesn't play, he will always be that top professional."

Slot said that Salah was scheduled to leave for the Africa Cup of Nations on December 15. "As al-



ways in these situations, there's a player involved, there's the nation involved - Egypt in this situation - and the club. And there are always talks about what is best for all three of us," he said.

DEEPER ARSENAL SQUAD HELPING WITH 'WORST' INJURIES, SAYS ARTETA

Mikel Arteta said Arsenal's deeper squad was helping the Premier League leaders cope with their "worst" run of injuries as he prepares for today's match against Brentford.

Gabriel Jesus, Viktor Gyokeres, Noni Madueke, Gabriel Martinelli and Martin Odegaard have recently returned from injury but Gabriel Magalhaes and Kai Havertz face weeks more on the sidelines.

Winger Leandro Trossard and defender William Saliba are doubts to face Brentford but Arsenal manager Arteta said he expected them back "within days".

Arsenal were also badly hampered by injuries last season, with their lack of forward options blamed for an inability to challenge Liverpool for the Premier League title. "This season has been the worst in some areas, especially in the front line, and now what's happening with the back line," Arteta said. "But we learn and we were able to put together a squad that is much more reliable and has more options. We learned from the past as well that we have to use players in different positions and they have to be able to fulfil different roles if we want to compete at this level."

Sport court allows Russian, Belarusian skiers to qualify for Olympics

Lausanne: The Court of Arbitration for Sport opened the way for Russian and Belarusian skiers to compete in the 2026 Winter Olympics by overturning a ban imposed by the international skiing body.

CAS, the world's top sports court, said in a statement that "Russian and Belarusian athletes who meet the International Olympic Committee AIN (Individual Neutral Athletes) eligibility criteria should be allowed to participate" in qualification events organised by the International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS).

Russia welcomed the ruling and pointed to other decisions that could allow Russian bobsleigh and luge athletes to take part in the Winter Games in Milan-Cortina next year. Sports minister Mikhail Degtyarev noted: "It is important that this is the third court decision in favour of Russia in winter

Olympic sports".

FIS had announced in October that it was banning athletes from Russia and Belarus from competing in its qualification events for the Olympics.

Competitors in skiing and snowboarding from the two countries have been banned from FIS events since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but they had hoped to participate under a neutral banner in the Milan-Cortina Games, which run from February 6-22.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) had announced in September that athletes from Russia and Belarus would be allowed to compete at the Olympics under a neutral banner if they meet strict conditions.

Those include competing under a neutral flag, taking part only in individual

events and undergoing checks to prove that they did not actively support the war in Ukraine or have any links with the army.

The same conditions applied to the 2024 Paris Summer Olympics at which 15 Russians and 17 Belarusians competed, winning a combined five medals.

The IOC has also barred them from taking part in the opening ceremony or having their achievements recognised in the official medals table.

The news is a boost for Russia's cross-country skiers.

During the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, Russia won almost a third of all cross-country skiing medals - including four out of 12 gold medals. FIS's move to ban Russians and Belarusians followed in the footsteps of similar attempts by the governing bodies of biathlon and luge,

although authorities from the sport of ice skating decided to give athletes from the two nations the chance to qualify.

But in the ruling, CAS upheld two appeals - one each by the Russian and Belarusian skiing federations - on the grounds that the FIS statutes "protect individuals from discrimination and require the FIS to be politically neutral".

The ruling also frees up Russian and Belarusian athletes to try to qualify for the Paralympics. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) in September lifted its partial suspension on Russian and Belarusian athletes, meaning that they would be able to compete at the Milan-Cortina Paralympic Games from March 6-15 under their own flags.

However, the IPC said that no athletes from either country were likely to qualify.

Sporting powerhouse Russia has been deprived of its colours in the Olympic arena since 2016, initially due to the state-orchestrated doping scandal and later over the invasion of Ukraine.

Its ally Belarus was sanctioned in 2022 for providing its territory to facilitate Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Russia has been effectively shut out from international sporting competitions, including football, since it invaded Ukraine but some sports governing bodies have recently relaxed their constraints.

Last week, Russia's judo federation hailed "a historic decision" by the sport's global governing body the IJF to allow their judoka to compete under their national flag, a move which Ukraine's judo federation described as being contrary to "peace, justice, and responsibility".

FIFA ARAB CUP

Algeria to begin title defence against resilient Sudan

Bougherra has retained the core of the Algeria squad that featured in African Nations Championship

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Defending champions Algeria face Sudan in the FIFA Arab Cup at Ahmed Bin Ali Stadium today in a tough Group D that also includes Iraq and Bahrain, making it one of the most difficult groups in the tournament. Both sides will be targeting a crucial opening victory that could significantly shape the qualification race.

Algeria arrive in Qatar as reigning champions under coach Madjid Bougherra, who has retained the core of the squad that featured in the African Nations Championship (CHAN). The team has been strengthened by several new additions, which gives Bougherra's lineup added depth as they seek to defend the title they won in 2021.

Central to Algeria's campaign is Al Gharafa playmaker Yacine Brahimi, whose creativity and sharp movement in the final third make him one of the standout figures of the competition. The squad also includes influential names such as Amir Sayoud, Sofiane Bendebka and veteran striker Islam Slimani.

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, Bougherra highlighted his side's strong preparation and stressed the importance of making a confident start. He acknowledged Sudan's quality, saying: "Tomorrow's match will be difficult because Sudan possess strong technical and physical qualities." He noted that both teams already know each other well, having met recently at the CHAN.

Bougherra also pointed to the competitiveness of the Arab Cup, citing Syria's victory over Tunisia and Palestine's win against Qatar on Monday as examples of the narrow margins between teams. He urged his players to remain fully focused, adding that the match "requires fighting spirit and composure in key moments."

Sudan enter the group stage with momentum after defeating Lebanon 2-1 last week in the playoffs to secure qualification. Their squad features a balanced mix of domestic players and professionals from African and Arab leagues, including Bakheet Khamis, Mohamed Abdelrahman, Abu Aqla Abdullah and goalkeeper Munjid al-Nil. Under Ghanaian coach Kwesi Appiah, Sudan rely on defensive organisation and quick counter-attacks in an effort to



Algeria coach Madjid Bougherra keeps a close eye on his players as they train ahead of their Arab Cup opener against Sudan.

unsettle the Algerian back line.

Appiah said he expects a disciplined and competitive performance from his players. "We are aiming for a strong start against one of the strongest teams in the tournament," he said. "Such matches are a real test of our ambitions." Sudan also take confidence from their most recent meeting with Algeria, a penalty shoot-out victory in August during the CHAN.

JORDAN, UAE SET FOR EVENLY MATCHED CLASH

At Al Bayt Stadium, Jordan and the UAE will open their Group C campaigns in a closely watched encounter between two

teams that have made notable strides in recent years. The group also includes Egypt and Kuwait.

Jordan, ranked 66th in the world, enter their tenth Arab Cup appearance with renewed ambition following a historic run to the AFC Asian Cup final in 2023 and their first-ever qualification for the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Coach Jamal Sellami leads a squad featuring key players such as striker Yazan al-Naimat, goalkeeper Yazeed Abu Laila, Mahmoud Mardi and Ali Alwan. However, the team will be without several important names due to club commitments, including France-based winger Musa al-Taamari

and defender Yazan al-Arab.

Speaking at the pre-match press conference, Sellami expressed belief in his squad's ability to compete at the highest level despite the absences. "We came to Doha with great ambition, seeking to reach the later stages and contend for the title," he said. "Our focus is solely on the first match, which will not be easy against a UAE side that performed strongly in the World Cup qualifiers."

He added that confidence remains high following Jordan's World Cup qualification. "Despite missing six key players, we have great trust in the rest of the group to deliver a high-level performance," he said.



Under Ghanaian coach Kwesi Appiah, Sudan rely on defensive organisation and quick counter-attacks in an effort to unsettle the Algerian back line.

The UAE, led by experienced Romanian coach Cosmin Olariu, are making their third appearance in the Arab Cup and hope to challenge for a podium finish for the first time. The team reached the quarter-finals in 2021 and impressed in parts during the recent World Cup qualifying campaign, though they exited after a narrow playoff defeat to Iraq. Olariu praised Jordan's rise in recent years and acknowledged the challenge his side faces. "Jordan have been performing at an amazing level, reaching the Asian Cup final and qualifying for the World Cup," he said. "But we are ready for this challenge."

He added that the UAE have put their elimination behind them.

"We performed very well against Iraq and were the better side in both matches, but luck was not on our side. Our confidence has not been shaken."

The UAE will rely on key performers such as goalkeeper Khalid Eisa, Ali Saleh, Yahya al-Ghassani and Caio Lucas as they look to start their campaign strongly.

FOCUS

Debutants, heat and distance shape mood ahead of 2026 World Cup draw

Reuters
Paris

Debutants will take centre stage at tomorrow's 2026 World Cup draw along with concerns over heat, player welfare and the practical challenge of staging football's biggest tournament across three countries during the peak of a North American summer.

For the first time in the tournament's history, 48 teams will be divided into 12 groups of four at a ceremony in Washington, DC, producing a 104-match schedule across 16 host cities in the US, Canada and Mexico.

Football's world governing body FIFA has framed the expansion as a watershed moment for inclusivity, opening the door for nations that had never qualified before - Cape Verde, Uzbekistan, Jordan and Curacao, which, with a population of 150,000, is by far the smallest nation to take part.

Others, such as Haiti, return after long waits while Italy still need a playoff to try to avoid the embarrassment of missing out on their third World Cup in a row.

The scale of the tournament is heightening scrutiny over conditions for players and supporters, particularly in venues where summer temperatures regularly climb into the high 30s Celsius (mid-90s Fahrenheit).

US host cities, notably in the Midwest, the Southeast and parts of the Southwest, are expected to experience extreme heat and high humidity during June and July, with thunderstorms potentially wreaking havoc with the schedule.

This year's Club World Cup in the US served as a dress rehearsal and scorching heat was a major concern.

Medical experts and players' unions have raised fears of heat stress, dehydration and reduced recovery times, especially in a format where sides may need to play up to eight matches to lift the trophy - one more than in the 32-team events of the past.

FIFA has highlighted the use of indoor or retractable-roof stadiums, including venues in Dallas, Houston, Atlanta and Vancouver, as a key mitigation measure, allowing organisers to control temperatures for a portion of the match programme.

POT 1	POT 2	POT 3	POT 4
Canada	Croatia	Norway	Jordan
Mexico	Morocco	Panama	Cabo Verde
USA	Colombia	Egypt	Ghana
Spain	Uruguay	Algeria	Curacao
Argentina	Switzerland	Scotland	Haiti
France	Japan	Paraguay	New Zealand
England	Senegal	Tunisia	European Play-Off A (UEFA/CAF/CONCACAF)
Brazil	Iran	Cote d'Ivoire	European Play-Off B (UEFA/CAF/CONCACAF)
Portugal	Korea Republic	Uzbekistan	European Play-Off C (UEFA/CAF/CONCACAF)
Netherlands	Ecuador	Qatar	European Play-Off D (UEFA/CAF/CONCACAF)
Belgium	Austria	Saudi Arabia	FIFA Play-Off 1 (FIFA/CONCACAF)
Germany	Australia	South Africa	FIFA Play-Off 2 (FIFA/CONCACAF)

Qatar is in pot 3 for the 2026 World Cup draw and will draw one opponent from each of the remaining three pots.

EUROPEAN AUDIENCES

However, many fixtures will still be held in open-air stadiums where cooling systems are not an option and where adjusting kick-offs may be the only immediate protection. Those kickoff times are not straightforward. Broadcasters are seeking prime-time slots for European and Asian audiences, which could push matches into afternoon hours locally, when the heat is most intense. Balancing commercial demands with player safety has become one of the central logistical puzzles of the tournament. Venue assignments and start times will only be revealed the day after Friday's draw, when FIFA unveils the updated match schedule.

The ceremony will place teams into four seeding pots based on world rankings and continental rules. The three hosts are seeded into separate groups alongside top-ranked nations such as defending champions Argentina, Spain, France and England. Provided they win their groups, those teams cannot meet until the later knock-out rounds.

POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY

The draw also comes against the backdrop

of renewed political uncertainty in the US following the return of Donald Trump to the White House, raising questions over security co-ordination, immigration protocols and visa processing for teams, officials and travelling supporters.

FIFA has sought to reassure participating nations that operational planning across the three host countries remains unaffected, though the tournament's scale relies heavily on smooth cross-border logistics and consistent entry procedures.

Iran has said it will boycott the draw ceremony in protest at the limited allocation of visas for the Iranian delegation.

FIFA, which said on Monday the 42 teams who had qualified so far would attend, has not responded to requests for comment from Reuters. For the many debutants and smaller nations appearing in the finals thanks to the tournament's expansion, heat management may be as big a competitive factor as tactical preparation.

For heavyweights chasing the trophy, the draw will determine not only their opponents but also the intensity of the physical road ahead.

Some venues offer climate-controlled

environments but in other places squads will be exposed to daytime heat stress and longer flights between matches, variables that could shape squad selection and rotation strategies.

The final will be staged at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey in July, capping a tournament FIFA president Gianni Infantino has billed as "the most inclusive World Cup ever". Yet inclusivity comes at the cost of scale and scale brings complexity.

As the draw is made in Washington, coaches will be searching less for big-name adversaries than for manageable logistics.

Controlling exposure to the heat may prove as decisive as avoiding the tournament's biggest footballing powers, especially for the teams simply trying to survive the opening rounds in conditions few have faced before.

The new format has also diluted one of the traditional sources of tension in World Cup draws, with the proliferation of groups and protected seeds making the emergence of a true "Group of Death" very unlikely, and reducing the sense of immediate jeopardy that has typically surrounded the ceremony.

Mbappe more than his goals: Real Madrid coach Alonso

Madrid: Real Madrid coach Xabi Alonso said French superstar Kylian Mbappe was vital to the team for more than just his prolific goalscoring. The striker slammed home four against Olympiacos in the Champions League last week and has 23 goals in 19 games across all competitions this season.

Mbappe has called on Madrid to be united in recent weeks as the Spanish giants struggle for consistency under Alonso.

"He's been very good individually, helping the team a lot," Alonso said ahead of today's trip to face Athletic Bilbao in La Liga. "It's not just about goals for Kylian, which in the end is the most important thing, but he does other hugely fundamental things like leadership, influence, helping his teammates, and that's so important day to day."

Madrid are a point behind champions Barcelona after a third consecutive top flight draw on Sunday, at Catalan minnows Girona. Spanish media have speculated Alonso's future as Madrid coach is at stake if the team do not improve.

The Basque coach admitted he has spoken recently to Real Madrid president Florentino Perez about turning the team's form around. "The conversations are very positive, in a good tone, wanting to improve the results and that's what we've spoken about," said Alonso, who conceded Madrid have been erratic this season.

"I think we've lacked consistency in our game, and we want to play better in the next one," continued the coach. "We've lost a bit of quality in our play, we've lost a little bit of energy."

Madrid will be without French left-back Ferland Mendy for the visit to Bilbao. Mendy was "diagnosed with a hamstring injury", said Madrid in a statement yesterday, less than a week after returning from a thigh problem.