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FOOTBALL

Qatar's last eight hopes hang by a thread after late Syria stunner

Qatar must beat Tunisia in their last group game on Sunday to have any chance of progressing

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Hosts Qatar were left clinging to their FIFA Arab Cup hopes after a stunning 90th-minute equaliser from Syria's Omar Khribin sealed a dramatic 1-1 draw at the Khalifa International Stadium last night, a result that leaves Julen Lopetegui's side needing victory in their final Group A match against Tunisia, and possibly help elsewhere, to reach the knockout stages.

The draw came on a night of high drama, with Palestine also striking late to earn a 2-2 comeback against Tunisia and move to the brink of the last eight. The back-to-back thrillers leave Group A delicately poised.

With only a match left to play in the group stage, Qatar's fate is no longer in their own hands. Palestine and Syria lead the group and both need only a draw in their final matches to qualify. Qatar must beat Tunisia in their last group game to have any chance of progressing.

Even with victory, Qatar may still need: Syria to lose to Palestine, or a favourable swing in goal difference if Syria draw and Qatar win big. A draw or defeat for Qatar will eliminate the hosts. It leaves Lopetegui under mounting pressure, as Qatar attempt to avoid a second straight early exit from their home tournament.

Syria again showcased their grit on the big stage, with Khribin's spectacular long-range rocket earning them a point and silencing the capacity crowd inside Khalifa International Stadium.

Qatar had produced their strongest spell of the tournament after the break. Ahmed

al-Aaedn rose high to head in Edmilson Junior's cross in the 77th minute, giving the hosts hope of igniting their campaign after an opening loss to Palestine.

But Syria, who had threatened through Khribin earlier, including a chipped effort heroically cleared off the line by Mohammed Waad, refused to wilt. Deep into the 90th minute, Khribin unleashed a fierce strike into the top corner, a goal worthy of any stage, leaving Lopetegui's men devastated.

Earlier, Palestine rescued a vital late point to keep their historic knockout push on track at the Lusail Stadium. Goals from Hamed Hamdan and a composed 85th-minute finish by Zaid Qunbar, who was named player of the match, earned them a deserved 2-2 draw after Tunisia had led through Amor Layouni and Firas Chaouat.

Roared on by a 45,000-strong crowd, Tunisia responded to their opening defeat against Syria with an assertive first hour. A deflected corner allowed Layouni to tap home the opener before Chaouat doubled the lead soon after the break, sweeping in after Mohamed Ali Ben Romdhane powered through midfield.

But Palestine rallied superbly. Hamdan's rasping volley dragged them back into the contest, and Qunbar's late strike, drilled through two defenders, sent their bench into wild celebrations as they edged closer to their first-ever Arab Cup knockout appearance.

Yesterday's results

Qatar 1-1 Syria
Palestine 2-2 Tunisia

Today's matches

Oman vs Morocco at Education City Stadium
Comoros vs Saudi at Al Bayt Stadium



Syria's Omar Maher Khribin (left) celebrates after scoring a stunning goal against Qatar at Khalifa International Stadium. (Reuters)



Palestine players and support staff celebrate after their draw against Tunisia at the Lusail Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)

SPOTLIGHT

Coach Abu Jazar hails Palestine's fighting spirit in draw against Tunisia

By Sports Reproter
Doha

Palestine coach Ihab Abu Jazar praised his team's resilience and refusal to give up after they fought back from two goals down to draw 2-2 with Tunisia at Lusail Stadium in their second Group A match at the FIFA Arab Cup in Doha.

Abu Jazar said the comeback – secured through sheer determination and character – reflected the spirit of a team playing for an entire nation. He stressed that qualification for the quarter-finals is not yet guaranteed, but the last-gasp equaliser brought immense joy to Palestinians everywhere.

"The players' determination and refusal to give up was the main reason for the draw," Abu Jazar said at the post-match press conference. "This joy is the joy of a people. The national team has become the ambassador of Palestine, the only smile for our people who suffer daily."

Despite conceding twice due to defensive mistakes, the coach expressed satis-

faction with the team's performance over the full 90 minutes. He highlighted the strong display as one shared between "two countries that love each other."

Abu Jazar added that messages pouring in from across Palestine – especially after the earlier win over Qatar – place a heavy responsibility on the squad to continue bringing moments of happiness to their people. "Every match we play is a message through which we convey the Palestinian cause to the world," he said, noting that the final round remains open to all scenarios.

He also credited the presence of several professionals from the Egyptian league, along with those playing in Qatar, for strengthening the team's competitiveness and composure against Tunisia.

Zaid al-Qanbar, who was named player of the match after scoring the equaliser, said he was delighted to deliver at a decisive moment. He revealed that criticism after the Qatar match motivated him to raise his level and prove he deserved his place in the squad. "The joy in the stadium and among Palestinians everywhere means a lot," al-Qanbar said. "I will keep giving everything to help the team in the

remaining matches."

Meanwhile, Tunisia coach Sami Trabelsi said the 2-2 draw "felt like a defeat," particularly as both Palestinian goals came from set pieces and defensive lapses. Trabelsi explained that leading the national team at the Arab Cup was a responsibility he was obliged to fulfil, especially after Tunisia abandoned its initial plan to field an under-23 side. He rejected suggestions that taking charge for the tournament involved any risk, insisting he never viewed participation through the lens of possible repercussions.

"We took a two-goal lead and performed much better than in the first match, so this draw feels like a loss," he said. "I take full responsibility. The mistakes were naive and cost us dearly."

Facing Qatar next, Trabelsi said Tunisia still retain "a glimmer of hope" of reaching the second round, though he acknowledged the challenge ahead. Fatigue, he noted, affected many of his players in the second half. "We will fight for our chances in the last match and try to deliver a performance worthy of the national team," he affirmed.



Palestine's coach Ihab Abu Jazar celebrates with his players Ikram Rami Hamadeh and Khaled al-Nabris after their draw against Tunisia at the Lusail Stadium. (Reuters)

BRISBANE TEST

Root's first ton in Australia guides England to 325-9

Starc becomes most prolific left-arm quick in Test history



England's Joe Root celebrates after reaching his century on day one of the second Ashes Test at The Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Brisbane

Joe Root finally scored his maiden Test century in Australia on his fourth Ashes tour to guide England from a precarious 5-2 to 325-9 at stumps after a pulsating first day of the second Ashes Test in Brisbane yesterday.

Mitchell Starc became the most successful left-arm fast bowler in history as he claimed 6-71, but the opening sessions of the day-night contest were dominated by Root, who scored a masterful 135 not out.

Number 11 Jofra Archer thrilled the travelling army of fans as he smashed a career-best unbeaten 32 off 26 balls with two sixes to provide some late fireworks.

His unbroken 10th-wicket partnership of 61 with Root was a record for England at the Gabba.

The world's top-ranked batsman, Root had failed to reach triple figures on three previous Ashes tours. But the man who is second on the all-time run-scoring list behind only Sachin Tendulkar silenced the critics who said he couldn't be considered a true batting great until he had made a century in Australia.

"Unbelievable day for Joe. He has had that coming for a long time. I'm chuffed for him," said Zak Crawley, who made 76 and

shared a 117-run stand for the third wicket with Root.

"He's the best player I've ever played with or against. A champion bloke."

Coming to the crease in the third over at 5-2 with Starc swinging the new pink ball, he embarked on an epic knock, bringing up his century with a leg glance to the fine leg boundary off Scott Boland.

Starc's six wickets moved him to 418 in Tests, surpassing Pakistan great Wasim Akram's 414 as the most prolific left-arm paceman in Test history.

Starc again was the destroyer at the top of the order, removing Ben Duckett in his first over and Ollie Pope in his second to reduce a shell-shocked England to 5-2.

But unlike in the first Test defeat in Perth, England showed some grit with the partnership between Root and Crawley moving the score onto 122.

Crawley said the England dressing room was more jittery than the former captain as he edged towards three figures. "We were nervous for him for a long while before that," Crawley said.

"You know I think he was less nervous than us. We were just talking about it for ages before he even got there.

"And then obviously when he got there we were, we were chuffed for him and so was everyone at the ground."

Crawley said Root had barely

mentioned the milestone, despite it threatening to become a millstone around his neck.

"He's like his usual self, he's so humble," said Crawley, who exorcised his own Ashes demons with his 76 after bagging a pair of ducks in Perth.

"He's not trying to make too much of a deal of it, but I'm sure inside he's pretty, pretty delighted. He just played a flawless knock. He made it look effortless."

Australia fast bowler Mitchell Starc also paid tribute to Root.

"I think he's scored a lot of 50s in Australia and I'm sure he'd be relieved to get that 100," Starc said.

"He played fantastically well today and assessed the conditions, sucked up some pressure and got the result by the end of the day."

Both teams wore black arm-bands in memory of former England batsman Robin Smith, who died unexpectedly this week.

Australia, who won the opening Test inside two days, went into this match without regular skipper Pat Cummins.

He had been rumoured to be making an early return from a back injury, but instead the hosts sprung a major surprise by leaving out off-spinner Nathan Lyon for seamer Michael Neser. It was the first time in almost 14 years that Australia played a Test at home without a frontline spinner.

Duckett was first to go on



Australia's Mitchell Starc celebrates the wicket of England's Will Jacks in Brisbane yesterday. (AFP)

Wasim's still better, says Starc after left-arm wicket landmark

Australia pace bowler Mitchell Starc said yesterday he could not be compared with Wasim Akram after he surpassed the Pakistani great as the leading left-arm pace bowler in Test history.

Starc's six-wicket haul on day one of the second Ashes Test in Brisbane gave him 418 Test wickets, four more than Akram.

"Wasim's still a far better bowler than I am," said Starc. "So as far as I'm concerned, he's still the pinnacle of left-armers and certainly he's right up there with the best bowlers to ever play the game."

"It's nice to be spoken of up around that, but I'll just try to keep churning a few out."

Starc led the Australian attack in the day-night match at the Gabba in the absence of his usual strike partners Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood, who are injured, and spinner Nathan Lyon, who was dropped.

"I don't think I've ever played in an attack without one of the three of them playing," Starc said.

"So it's a little bit different in that regard."

The 35-year-old, who has taken 16 wickets in the

series, was the only Australian bowler to trouble the English batsmen consistently yesterday.

Starc went past Akram's mark when he bagged England's Harry Brook, caught at slip, for his 415th wicket and third of the innings.

Akram, widely recognised as the greatest left-arm bowler the sport has seen, played 104 Tests for his 414 wickets.

Starc, who made his debut at the Gabba 14 years ago, was playing his 102nd Test and shows no sign of slowing down.

He took a career-best 7-58 in the first innings of the opening Ashes Test at Perth. Starc is now 15th on the all-time wicket-taker list after moving above Indian spinner Harbhajan Singh's total of 417.

He now has South Africa's Shaun Pollock (421) in his sights and New Zealand's Richard Hadlee (431).

He needs just 16 more wickets to go past the most prolific left-arm bowler of all-time - Sri Lanka spinner Rangana Herath, who claimed 433 wickets.

(AFP)

the last ball of Starc's first over, nicking a full ball to Marnus Labuschagne at first slip for a golden duck. Pope then chopped on a wide delivery he could have left alone to leave England wobbling.

Crawley and Root survived an examination from the Australian attack and began to take advantage as the wicket flattened.

Root shared important partnerships with Harry Brook (31), Ben Stokes (19) and Will Jacks (19) as England played more conservatively than they had in the first Test. Root brought up his half-

century off 83 balls, shortly after England had reached 150.

Starc was the only Australian bowler who looked threatening, but Boland did produce the ball of the day - bowling Jamie Smith for a duck with a beautiful delivery which cut back from outside off stump.

England had slipped from 210-4 to 211-6 before off-spinner Jacks justified his inclusion to bolster the batting with some positive stroke play before an expansive drive to Starc brought his downfall

England were 251-7 which

quickly became 264-9 as Gus Atkinson and Brydon Carse came and went to a rampant Starc under the lights.

Just when it looked like England would fold, Archer and Root went on the attack.

Pace bowler Archer hit two towering sixes and Root joined the fun with a reverse scoop off Boland that cleared the ropes at third man.

BRIEF SCORES: England 325 for 9 (Root 135*, Crawley 76, Starc 6-71) vs Australia

FOCUS

Ravindra, Latham tons put NZ in command

AFP
Christchurch, New Zealand

Big centuries by Tom Latham and Rachin Ravindra put New Zealand firmly in control of the first Test against the West Indies with a lead of 481 at stumps on day three in Christchurch yesterday.

The pair put on 279 for the third wicket before Latham was out for 145. Ravindra followed soon after for 176.

At stumps, Will Young was 21, Michael Bracewell was on six and New Zealand were 417-4 to go with their 64-run first innings lead.

"If you asked what a perfect day looked like it would probably look something like that," Ravindra said after surviving two dropped catches to post his fourth Test century.

"It comes with the territory. You have a couple of cover drives and you nick a couple, some go close, some go to hand, it's all part of the game."

"That's my natural game. I go out there, play my shots, obviously within reason, sometimes it gets me out but lucky enough I've had some good games recently."

The West Indies would need to break their own record fourth innings chase to overhaul New Zealand, having reached 418-7 to beat Australia in 2003.

But coach Floyd Reifer did not believe it was beyond them. "The pitch is getting better for batting. Losing three-four wickets on day four that will be a good day for us," he said.

"If one or two of our guys score hundreds that will be good as well. Anything is possible. We've got to take it session by session."

After two days of overcast skies fa-



New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra (right) and Tom Latham run between the wickets during day three of the first Test against West Indies at Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. (AFP)

vouring swing and seam bowling, the pitch flattened out under bright sunshine. The West Indies suffered from a lack of discipline, giving away 23 extras including 11 wides.

Latham and Ravindra presented contrasting styles as they set a New Zealand-best third wicket partnership against the West Indies and Latham passed 6,000 Test runs.

New Zealand captain Latham laid the foundations of the innings in a clini-

cal 84-run opening stand with Devon Conway, who made 37. After a brief partnership with Kane Williamson, who fell for nine, Latham was on 40 when he was joined by Ravindra in an aggressive move. While Latham was methodical and largely chanceless, Ravindra took to the bowling in one-day mode and made the West Indies suffer for dropping him on eight and 13.

His 176 came off 185 deliveries, with one six and 27 fours.

Latham faced 250 deliveries for his 145 and hit 12 fours. For the West Indies, Kemar Roach had both Latham and Williamson caught behind to return figures of 2-61. Ojay Shields took 2-64, bowling Ravindra with a yorker and having Conway caught at square leg.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 231 and 417 for 4 (Ravindra 176, Latham 145, Roach 2-61) lead West Indies 167 by 481 runs.

Oval Invincibles renamed MI London in latest Hundred franchise deal

Oval Invincibles will be re-branded as MI London from 2026 after a deal between the Hundred franchise and the owners of Mumbai Indians. Surrey, who host the Invincibles matches at their Oval stadium, will retain a 51 per cent share in the team, while Reliance Industries Limited now hold the remaining 49 per cent.

Both the men's and women's teams will be renamed as MI London in the Hundred next year. The Invincibles have won five titles in five years across both men's and women's tournaments and are the latest team to become part of the Mumbai Indians name. "We're pleased to have reached an agreement with the Reliance team over our partnership in the Hundred franchise team," Surrey chairman Oli Slipper said. "Reliance bring a significant depth of cricket and business expertise and have had great success with their franchise teams in India and around the world. There's no doubt that they are here to win."

Mumbai Indians are the joint most successful men's team in the Indian Premier League after winning the title five times. Reliance, who also have MI franchises in New York, Cape Town and Abu Dhabi, are reported to have paid around £60 million (\$80mn) for their share in the Invincibles. "We are delighted to welcome MI London into the family and take the MI legacy to new frontiers," Reliance founder Nita Ambani said. The England and Wales Cricket Board also confirmed on Wednesday that Chelsea co-owner Todd Boehly's Cain & Ares Management Credit group finalised their investment in Trent Rockets in October. Deals involving all eight Hundred sides have now been completed after stakes in the other six franchises were sold in July.

GOLF

Ortiz shares lead with Smylie, Fox as McIlroy falters

AFP
Melbourne

PGA Tour winner Ryan Fox, Australian Elvis Smylie and LIV golfer Carlos Ortiz upstaged Rory McIlroy to share the lead at the Australian Open yesterday as the Masters champion struggled with his putter on Royal Melbourne's tricky greens.

Thousands of fans queued early in order to secure a view of McIlroy and his crack-of-dawn tee time with fellow Masters winner Adam Scott and the popular Min Woo Lee, both Australians.

But Northern Irishman McIlroy struggled with a gusting northerly wind and sloped greens, ending seven off the pace after a roller-coaster one-over-par 72 containing five birdies and six bogeys.

"Some crowds for seven o'clock in the morning," McIlroy said of the huge galleries that followed his signature three-ball. "Yeah, it was great. It was a wonderful atmosphere with Adam and Min Woo too. "It was unbelievable to see

how many people were lining the fairways and framing the greens."

Asked how he could claw his way back into contention at the DP World Tour event, the 2013 Australian Open champion McIlroy said: "I need to putt better.

"I holed some good ones, I think I was better from outside 25 feet than I was from inside five, so work on that a little bit.

"I made enough birdies, but I just need to limit the mistakes."

Smylie, last year's Australian PGA Championship winner, was also among the early starters and sank an impressive seven birdies against a lone bogey for a six-under-par 65.

The son of former tennis star Liz Smylie said his rookie season on the European-based tour this year had helped prepare him for the crowds at such a big event.

"It just goes to show how much I've learnt over on the DP World Tour," Smylie said.

"Week-in, week-out, you're always adjusting and adapting as the courses and climates are so different, so you're constantly adding tools to your toolbox.

"I embrace days like today, I think I belong. I'm just happy that I'm able to showcase that on a stage like this."

Among the afternoon starters, Fox, the son of All Blacks rugby legend Grant Fox, matched Smylie's 65 with a round containing eight birdies against two dropped shots.

Fox was a four-time winner on the European tour before moving to the PGA Tour where he recorded his first two victories in the United States earlier this year.

Mexico's Ortiz, who tied for fourth at this year's US Open for his best major finish, finished late in the day with his own 65 containing an eagle, five birdies and two bogeys.

England's Eddie Pepperell, who won his DP World Tour card back through qualifying school recently, was among the players at three-under after a 68. Lee and Scott shot two-under 69s playing alongside McIlroy while the 2022 British Open champion Cameron Smith, who also now plies his trade on the LIV circuit, was one under after a 70.



Northern Ireland's Rory McIlroy reacts during the first round of the Australian Open at the Royal Melbourne Golf Club in Melbourne yesterday. (AFP)

FORMULA 1

Norris won't ask Piastri to gift him title in Abu Dhabi

Norris leads Verstappen by 12 points with Piastri a further four behind

Reuters
Abu Dhabi

Lando Norris will not ask McLaren teammate Oscar Piastri to gift him the Formula One title even if that is the only way he can beat Max Verstappen in Sunday's Abu Dhabi season-end.

The Briton said, however, that he would be willing to do so if the roles were reversed – although that is not mathematically possible this time.

Norris leads Red Bull's four-times champion Verstappen by 12 points with Australian Piastri a further four behind.

The three title contenders appeared together at a news conference at the Yas Marina circuit yesterday, with Verstappen much the more relaxed.

NORRIS NOT GOING TO ASK FOR HELP

Norris was asked to consider a scenario where Verstappen was leading the race with Piastri third and him fourth. In that case, the reigning champion would retain his crown – unless the McLaren drivers switched positions.

Would Norris ask Piastri, or McLaren, to do that?

"I don't think I would ask it because ...I don't know ... it's up to Oscar if he would allow it. I don't think it's necessarily down to me," said Norris.

"It's the same if it's the other way around. Would I be willing to or not? Personally, I think I would just because I feel like I'm always like that and that's just how I am.



McLaren's British driver Lando Norris (left) with teammate Oscar Piastri attend a press conference yesterday ahead of the Abu Dhabi Formula One Grand Prix at the Yas Marina Circuit in Abu Dhabi. (AFP)

"I'm not going to ask it, I don't want to ask it because I don't think it's necessarily a fair question," he added.

"At the same time if that's how it ends and Max wins, then well. That's it. Congrats to him and look forward to next year. It doesn't change anything. It doesn't change my life. He will deserve it over us."

Piastri said the matter had not been discussed.

Mercedes' George Russell, twice a winner this season who could

play his part in the title battle by getting between the contenders, suggested the Australian should unplug the radio in his car.

"I think it would be unfair for either driver to give (up) places," Russell told reporters.

"If Max wins, he deserves to win. I wouldn't want to win a championship because my teammate has pulled over, especially if he's been my rival that year."

McLaren principal Andrea Stella told reporters after last Sunday's Qatar Grand Prix, where a

strategy bungle denied Piastri a win and Norris a podium place, that the team's approach to racing would not change but there would be conversations this week.

He emphasised, however, that McLaren, already crowned constructors' champions for a second year in a row, wanted to win both titles in the same season for the first time since 1998.

"What's important for us is that we are in condition to beat Verstappen with one of our two drivers," he said.

FOCUS

Everything is a bonus for relaxed Verstappen

Reuters
Abu Dhabi

Max Verstappen could become only the second driver after Michael Schumacher to win five Formula One titles in a row this weekend but the Red Bull driver was relaxed about it yesterday.

Neither parent will be in attendance in Abu Dhabi – father Jos rallying in Africa and mother Sophie staying at home with the dogs – largely because he had written off his chances earlier in the season and they had made other plans.

After a home Dutch Grand Prix at Zandvoort at the end of August, Verstappen was 104 points behind then-leader Oscar Piastri.

He is now four clear of McLaren's Australian and 12 behind Lando Norris with potentially the greatest comeback in Formula One history only days away from being realised.

"I guess it was not planned," he said of his parents' absence. "I also didn't really plan to be in the title fight at the end and here we are.

"After Zandvoort everything was a bit cancelled I would say. You can see a lot on TV anyway."

The championship trophy was positioned next to the three contenders in a press confer-

ence with all sitting together on a sofa.

Verstappen observed that he had four similar ones at home already and his signature had not changed.

Asked how he had prepared for the final push, Verstappen differed somewhat from his rivals who talked of going through their usual routines or playing padel and marketing commitments.

"I spent some time with my daughter," said the 28-year-old. "I figured some stuff out for GT3 for next year, figured out some stuff for my sim team as well, planning for next year.

"So yeah, just pretty straightforward stuff before arriving here."

Verstappen, Piastri and Norris have all won seven races this season but Verstappen said he was still the outsider and had already achieved everything he wanted to in F1.

"I'm very relaxed. Nothing to lose, you know," he said. "I'm just enjoying being here.

"Having these wins again is fantastic. So I just take it that everything here is just a bonus, sitting here fighting for the title. So that's also what makes it very straightforward for me.

"We will just try to have a good weekend. But even then, it's not really in my control. So we just try to enjoy it."



Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen attends a press conference in Abu Dhabi yesterday. (AFP)

HORSE RACING

Glory Of The Stars dazzles late to capture Lusail Cup

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Glory Of The Stars extended her perfect season with a breath-taking performance in the Lusail Cup for three-year-old+ Thoroughbred fillies and mares over 1200m yesterday.

At the Al Uqda turf track, the five-year-old bay mare, owned by Eng Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik and trained by Debbie Mountain, was still last approaching the final 300m before unleashing a devastating outside run. Under a well-timed ride from Jefferson Smith, she swept past the entire field to secure a commanding 1¼-length victory, making it two wins from two starts this season.

Glory Of The Stars delivered a

breath-taking late surge to win the day's feature race, contested by 12 runners. The five-year-old bay mare, racing for Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, trained by Debbie Mountain and superbly handled by Jefferson Smith, remained unbeaten this season, securing her second win from as many starts with a commanding 1¼-length success.

Breaking from barrier seven, Glory Of The Stars was dropped out early and settled at the tail of the field where she remained for most of the contest. Up front, Kaliysta took the early initiative before Seduisante moved forward approaching the first bend.

Around the final turn, Ripple Effect, who had been travelling in third, briefly edged to a narrow lead as the field closed tightly together. Yet the moment belonged entirely to Glory Of The Stars.

Still last at the 300m mark, she switched wide and unleashed a devastating turn of foot, sweeping past her rivals with a powerful, sustained run. Under a perfectly timed ride from Smith, she surged clear in the final strides to seal a stylish and authoritative victory.

Behind her, September Leaves, carrying the Al Eida Racing silks for trainer Jassim al-Ghazali under Marco Casamento, finished strongly to claim second. Just a quarter of a length behind came Nano Toro, representing the same connections as the winner and ridden by Mohammed Hassan Ali Alabdulmalik, securing third after a late flourish.

Jefferson Smith guided Glory Of The Stars to the Lusail Cup win yesterday. **PICTURE: Juhaim**



FOOTBALL

All you need to know about 2026 World Cup draw

AFP
Washington

The draw for the first 48-team World Cup takes place today at 8pm Qatar time, ahead of the finals from June 11 to July 19 next year in North America. Here is all you need to know about how it works:

TOP SEEDS KEPT APART

Teams are split into four pots of 12 based on the latest world ranking, with one team from each pot going into each of the 12 groups of four.

For the first time, FIFA has decided that the draw will be done in such a way as to ensure the four highest-ranked nations are kept apart. Spain, Argentina, France and England will not therefore be able to meet before the semi-finals, if all four top their groups.

No group can have more than one team from the same confederation, except UEFA. With 16 teams qualifying, that means four of the 12 groups will contain two European nations.

The three host nations have already been assigned to groups: The United States will be in Group D and will play two matches in Los Angeles as well as one in Seattle. Mexico will be in Group A in which they play two matches at the Azteca in Mexico City – including the tournament’s opening game on June 11 – and one in Guadala-

jara. Canada will occupy Group B with one game in Toronto and two in Vancouver.

EXTRA KNOCKOUT ROUND

An expanded tournament, featuring 50 percent more participants than at the last World Cup in 2022, means a lot more games.

There is now an extra knockout round, with a round of 32 featuring the top two teams from each of the 12 groups, plus the eight best third-placed sides. In other words, the group phase will feature 72 games but will see just 16 of the 48 teams be eliminated.

TEAMS BY SEEDING

Pot 1: United States, Mexico, Canada, Spain, Argentina, France, England, Brazil, Portugal, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany

Pot 2: Croatia, Morocco, Colombia, Uruguay, Switzerland, Japan, Senegal, Iran, South Korea, Ecuador, Austria, Australia

Pot 3: Norway, Panama, Egypt, Algeria, Scotland, Paraguay, Tunisia, Ivory Coast, Uzbekistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa

Pot 4: Jordan, Cape Verde, Ghana, Curacao, Haiti, New Zealand, 4 x UEFA play-off winners, 2 x Intercontinental play-off winners

UEFA play-offs (16 teams split into four paths of four teams in each, with one winner from each path qualifying; one-off semi-finals to be played March 26, one-off finals on March 31)



Forty two nations will be represented in the draw, while six of the teams are yet to be determined, and will only be known in March.

Path A: Wales or Bosnia and Herzegovina v Italy or Northern Ireland

Path B: Ukraine or Sweden v Poland or Albania

Path C: Slovakia or Kosovo v Turkey or

Romania

Path D: Czech Republic or Ireland v Denmark or North Macedonia

Intercontinental play-offs (6 teams split into two paths, with one team from

each path qualifying; one-off semi-finals to be played March 26, finals on March 31; all matches to be played in Mexico)

New Caledonia or Jamaica v DR Congo
Bolivia or Suriname v Iraq

PREMIER LEAGUE

Van Dijk says Salah does not have ‘unlimited credit’

‘HE IS AN AMAZING PLAYER AND HE HAS SHOWN IT CONSISTENTLY’

AFP
Liverpool

Virgil van Dijk says Mohamed Salah’s omission from Liverpool’s team for a second successive match shows no player at the club has “unlimited credit”. The Egypt international was an unused substitute for Sunday’s win at West Ham and was on the bench for the 1-1 draw at home to Sunderland on Wednesday. It was the first time in his Anfield career that he had not started in back-to-back league matches.

The forward was brought on for the second half against Sunderland but struggled to make an impact and is now goalless in five matches. Salah has scored just four Premier League goals for the struggling defending champions this season, in stark contrast to his haul of 29 last season.

Liverpool captain Van Dijk was asked after the Sunderland draw whether Salah’s omission had sent a message to the dressing room. “That’s always been the case,” he said. “It’s not like you have unlimited credit, everyone has to perform. Mo has been doing that but the manager made that decision in the last two games. We all want the best for the club. I am pretty sure Mo will still be a big part of what we are trying to achieve because he is an amazing player and he has shown it consistently.”

Van Dijk praised playmaker Florian Wirtz, whose shot deflected in off Sunderland defender Nordi Mukiele for a late Liverpool equaliser that left them eighth in the table. The German, who joined Liverpool from Bayer Leverkusen in the summer



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transfer window for £116mn, is showing encouraging signs after a tough start to life at Anfield.

“There’s a very good reason why a club like us bought him,” said Van Dijk. “He’s an outstanding, world-class player, in my eyes, who can only become even better but it will take a bit of time. For him he has to

stay level-headed. Don’t get dragged into the outside world of when it’s very good or very bad and don’t get dragged into the numbers game. Nowadays there are a lot of eyes on you if you score goals or have an assist or keep clean sheets but it is also about what you see and the contribution you have for the team.”

ARTETA FEARS INJURY WOES WILL HAMPER ARSENAL TITLE CHARGE

Mikel Arteta fears Arsenal’s mounting injury problems will hamper their bid to win the Premier League title after Declan Rice and Cristhian Mosquera limped off in Wednesday’s 2-0 win against Brentford. Arteta’s side moved five points clear of second-placed Manchester City thanks to goals from Mikel Merino and Bukayo Saka at the Emirates Stadium. The Gunners extended their unbeaten run to 18 matches in all competitions with an eighth successive home victory.

But Arteta, already without first-choice centre-backs Gabriel Magalhaes and William Saliba through injury, was dealt a blow when Spanish defender Mosquera was forced off just before half-time. Even more alarmingly, England midfielder Declan Rice appeared to be nursing a calf injury when he was substituted 10 minutes from full-time.

“Obviously it’s never good news. Declan had to come off. We don’t know. We have to see tomorrow what he’s got,” said Arteta, who is also without Kai Havertz and Leandro Trossard due to injuries. “Declan can walk. He cannot play. The thing is, he’s played a lot of minutes but as well, now we played Wednesday night and we have to play Saturday morning as well.”

With Arsenal having battled through a gruelling week featuring wins over Tottenham and Bayern Munich and a draw with title rivals Chelsea, Arteta had taken the opportunity to give a rest to Saka, Jurrien Timber and Eberechi Eze against the Bees. But all three were eventually needed off the bench, leaving Arteta to bemoan Arsenal’s injury curse.

Indian boy earns official chess rating at age 3

New Delhi: India’s Sarwagya Singh Kushwaha has become the youngest player in chess history to earn an official FIDE rating at the age of three years, seven months and 20 days.

The chess prodigy edged out the previous record of compatriot Anish Sarkar, who was three years, eight months and 19 days when he reached the milestone in November last year. Kushwaha, who is enrolled in nursery school in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, holds a rapid rating of 1,572.

To achieve a rating from FIDE, the International Chess Federation, a player needs to beat at least one FIDE-rated player. A rating is a score that measures a chess player’s strengths based on their performances and is not the same as a ranking.

World number one Magnus Carlsen is the top in rapid chess with a rating of 2,824. Kushwaha’s father Siddharth Singh said: “It’s a matter of great pride and honour for us that our son has become the youngest chess player in the world to achieve a FIDE ranking ... We want him to become a grandmaster.”

Kushwaha defeated three rated players in events across his state and other parts of the country to secure his record-breaking status. India is a stable of chess grandmasters and has produced top stars including latest world champion Gukesh Dommaraju and five-time World Cup winner Viswanathan Anand.

To achieve a FIDE ranking, a player needs to beat at least one international player. The prodigy defeated three such players in events across Madhya Pradesh and other parts of the country, securing his record-breaking status.

SPOTLIGHT

Yemen and UAE post wins as U-23 Gulf Cup gets underway

By Sports Reporter
Doha

The AGCFF U-23 Gulf Cup Qatar 2025 kicked off at Aspire Zone, with Yemen claiming a 2-1 win over Iraq in the opening match of the tournament. Meanwhile, UAE beat Oman 2-0 in the second match of the opening day.

The tournament brings together rising U-23 football stars from across the region to compete for the prestigious title. This is the first time the competition is being held under the auspices of the Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF).

The tournament features eight teams, divided into two groups. Group A features hosts Qatar, playing alongside Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Group B includes Iraq, UAE, Oman, and Yemen.

Hosts Qatar will play their first match today at 2:45pm against Kuwait, while Saudi Arabia will take



on Bahrain at 3pm at Aspire Zone.

The group stage will see a total of 14 matches played across two state-of-the-art pitches at Aspire Zone, that has most recently served as a venue for a historic edition of the FIFA U-17 World Cup.

The final will take place on December 16 at the iconic Stadium 974, the first fully demountable covered football stadium in FIFA

World Cup history that hosted matches during the historic tournament in 2022.

The U-23 Gulf Cup serves as part of an exhilarating football calendar in Qatar, which also includes the FIFA Arab Cup, as well as the FIFA Intercontinental Cup, reflecting country’s ongoing capability to host world-class sporting events.

KHALIFA AND AL-GHAZALI SHINE AT HATHAB



Doha: Khalifa bin Joaan bin Hamad al-Thani won the Amateur round, while Nasser al-Ghazali clinched top honours in the Silver round as the eighth leg of the Longines Hathab – Qatar Equestrian Tour got underway yesterday at Al Shaqab.

Khalifa topped the Amateur class with an impressive time of 54.36 seconds aboard Zion. Mariam Abdulkarim Abdul finished second in 54.89 seconds on Beyonce, with Hamad Nasser al-Marri claiming third place in 55.15 seconds riding Jumbo. The top three riders were crowned by Mohammed Saleh al-Marri, Chairman of the Facilities and Logistics Committee at Hathab. The Silver Round delivered a highly competitive contest, with al-Ghazali securing victory in 26.85 seconds on Dexter. Mohammed Abdullah Jumaa took second place in 27.00 seconds on Viahibe, while Khalid al-Hadi finished third in 27.65 seconds riding Doremi. Tournament director Abdullah Mohammed al-Marri honoured winners.