

Qatar seek Asian Cup encore, ready for Lebanon opener

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

Hassan Al Haydos lifting the Asian Cup trophy four years ago was unarguably Qatar's finest moment in their football history. The memories of their maiden crown are still fresh as Al Annabi begin their title defence seeking a repeat of their glorious triumph.

The hosts take on Lebanon in the opening match of the tournament at the 88000-capacity Lusail Stadium today looking for a strong start to the tournament in front of home fans.

Featuring in the Asian Cup as the most capped player with 175 appearances, Al Haydos admitted pressure of expectations will be there on his side but he hoped it can be used as the strength.

"The 2019 generation raised our levels and ambitions. We are always required to win in any game and championship we partake in. But challenges are part of football and I hope we can deal with this stress and pressure in a positive manner," the 33-year-old forward told a pre-match press conference yesterday.

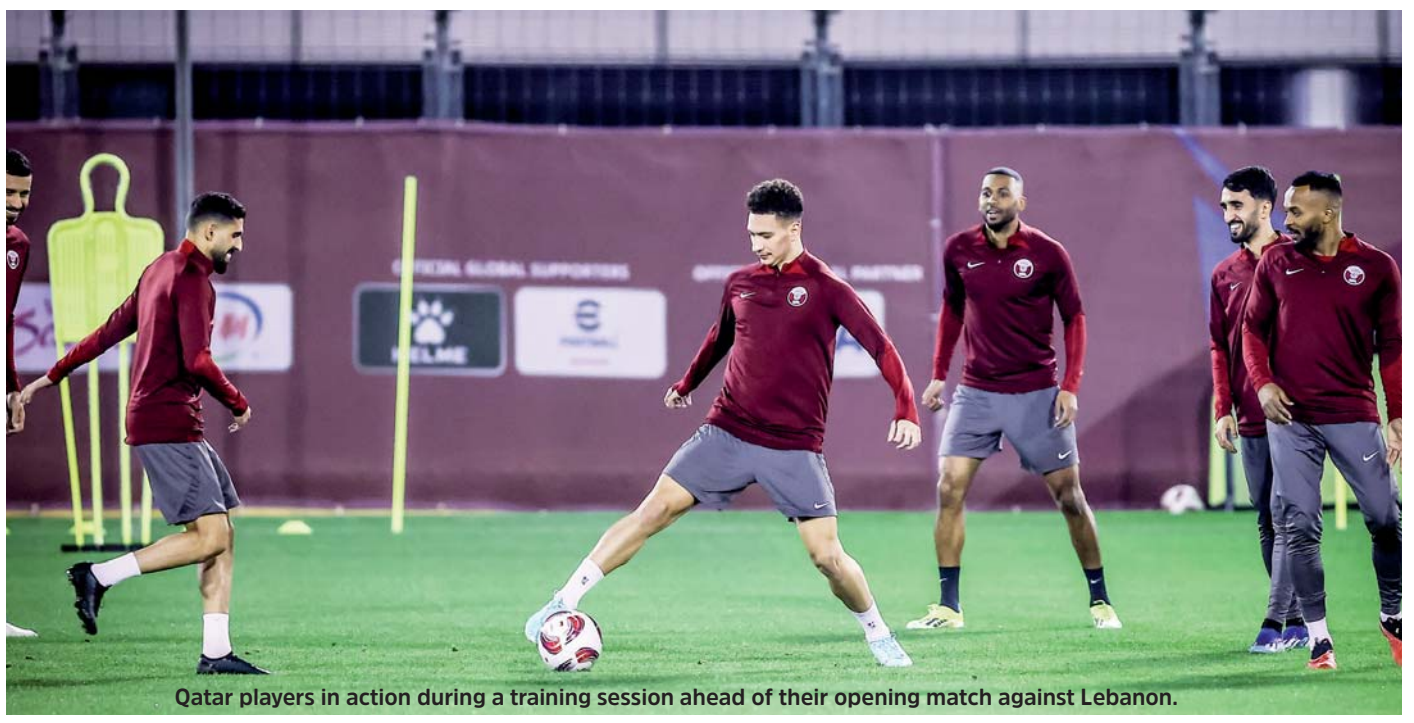
Al Haydos said featuring in the Asian Cup as hosts has put an added responsibility on the players to do well in the tournament.

"We are playing the Asian Cup as title holders and in our own home, so we have to perform and show to the fans that we mean business. For us as players, we need the fans more than ever from the first minute to the end of the game. I hope that we can get as many points as possible to get to the next round," said the Al Sadd star, who also played in 2015 and 2011 Asian Cup editions.

In Group A, Qatar will also meet Tajikistan and China with Al Haydos describing it as "a relatively good group where all the teams have very similar levels."



Qatar coach Marquez Lopez and captain Hassan Al Haydos during the press conference yesterday.


Qatar players in action during a training session ahead of their opening match against Lebanon.

Coach Lopez targets final

Qatar also started their 2019 campaign against Lebanon, beating them 2-0 with Bassam Al Rawi and Almoez Ali scoring the goals.

The duo was also included in the current Al Annabi squad that also comprises several other players including playmaker Akram Afif and goalkeeper Saad Al Sheeb, who was part of the triumphant side in 2019.

The team is under longtime Al Wakrah coach Marquez Lopez, who replaced Portuguese veteran Carlos Queiroz last month. Qatar's main Asian Cup preparations were held under the supervision of Queiroz with Lopez starting his stint on December 24.

Despite getting the short time for preparations, the Spaniard was satisfied with team's readiness saying the target is to reach the final.

"We have undergone extensive preparation and certainly, it's not an easy task especially with the limited time available," Lopez said yesterday.

"I am familiar with the players and their title ambitions. Working under pressure is something I've grown accustomed to over the years and it doesn't faze me much."

"Leading a team that clinched the 2019 Asian Cup is an honour. When entering a competition, the ultimate goal is to reach the final. My players are well aware of my approach as head coach and our aim remains the same since the day I took over this role. The 2019 title provides us with an advantage, offering an additional positive to strive for – lifting the trophy once again," the 62-year-old added.

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>
> **Qatar captain Hassan Al Haydos**

"My primary philosophy revolves around attacking style, a principle I honed during my time at QSL side Al Wakrah. We must be bold, create chances and secure victories while maintaining that essential equilibrium."


Lebanon captain Hassan Maatouk speaks during a press conference.

Lebanon hope to make history

Qatar have never lost to Lebanon winning five and drawing a match against the West Asian opponents in their previous six matches.

But Lebanon coach Miodrag Radulovic was hopeful of earning first victory over Qatar.

"Our goal is to fight for each point to advance to the next round. We have the potential, and I am optimistic about our chances. Tomorrow, we need to be psychologically prepared from the start. My message to the players is that we are playing for the three points," he told reporters yesterday.

Lebanon have not reached the knockout stage in their last two outings with Radulovic saying the team has a good chance of advancing to the Round of 16.

"There are no easy games, but we have analysed all the teams, and they all possess good potential. We believe we have a chance. We are stronger as a group now, and we are ready to take on any team."

Lebanon captain Hassan Maatouk echoed his coach's view.

"We are focused and we are not going to spare any effort despite being in a difficult group. Our game against Qatar is the most important game for us because they are a big team and we will try to produce the best result possible," he said.

"Playing at Lusail (Stadium) will be a great experience and we have to embrace that, it gives us great motivation to do well as we are truly considering qualifying for the next round which will be a first for Lebanon," the 36-year-old added.

The match will kick off at 7pm after the opening ceremony which will get underway at 5pm.

GROUP A - QATAR VS LEBANON



HUGE CHALLENGE FOR LEBANON: Qatar are unbeaten against Lebanon in men's internationals (W6 D1) including wins in their last two meetings by a combined score of 7-0; in fact, their only previous clash at the AFC Asian Cup came in the 2019 tournament and was won 2-0 by Qatar.

AWESOME RECORD: Qatar won all seven of their matches at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 clinching the trophy with a 3-1 defeat of Japan in the final; those seven wins were more than they had won in all their previous 32 games at the tournament (W6 D11 L15).

STRONG FINISH: Lebanon finished their 2019 campaign with a 4-1 win over DPR Korea after picking up just two competition points from all their five previous games (D2 L3).

MERCURIAL AFIF: Qatar's Akram Afif made 10 assists at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019, more than twice as many as any other player.

AMAZING TALENT: Almoez Ali of Qatar scored nine goals at the 2019 Finals, setting the record for the most goals scored by a player at a single edition of the tournament; with 10 of his 16 total shots finding the target.


Lebanon players attend a training session on the eve of their first match.

AFC ASIAN CUP IN NUMBERS

Four-time champs

Runners-up in 2019, Japan are the most successful team in the AFC Asian Cup, having won the competition four times – in 1992, 2000, 2004 and 2011. The Samurai Blue have appeared in five of the past eight finals, with their loss to Qatar in the United Arab Emirates five years ago the only time they have suffered defeat.

Three-peat

While Japan boast the most titles, no side can match Iran's three in a row after Team Melli were crowned champions in 1968 and then successfully defended their title at the 1972 and 1976 editions. South Korea won the inaugural edition in 1956 and held onto the trophy four years later, while Saudi Arabia also went back-to-back by lifting the title in 1984 and 1988.

Home advantage?

While five of the first seven editions of the AFC Asian Cup were won by the host, only two nations have been crowned champions in their homeland in the 10 ensuing editions. Japan won their first title by beating Saudi Arabia in Hiroshima in 1992 and, 23 years later, Australia overcame South Korea after extra-time in Sydney.

Leading the way

Iranian legend Ali Daei is out in front when it comes to number of goals scored at the AFC Asian Cup, with the striker registering 14 times across three competitions between 1996 and 2004. His four-goal second-half haul against Korea Republic in 1996 remains one of the tournament's greatest feats. Daei sits some way in front of second-placed Lee Dong-gook of Korea Republic on 10 goals, while Japan's Naohiro Takahara, UAE's Ali Mabkhout and Qatar's Almoez Ali all have nine.

Prolific Almoez

Daei may have competition for his number one spot should Almoez Ali have a campaign like he did in 2019, when the Qatari striker bagged nine goals in seven games to fire his country to their maiden title.

Like Daei, Almoez also scored four goals in a game – against DPR Korea in the group stage – but it's his acrobatic overhead kick to open the scoring against Japan in the final that will live long in the memory.

Scan to download AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 match schedule


French rider Simon Delestre riding Olga van de Kruishoeve celebrates after his victory.

Delestre bags top honours as Doha Tour gets off to exciting start at Al Shaqab

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Simon Delestre riding Olga van de Kruishoeve claimed top honours as the Doha International Equestrian Tour Championship 2024 started at Al Shaqab's Longines Outdoor Arena yesterday.

The French rider with 10-year-old bay claimed victory in yesterday's feature event - CSI4* (1.50m) with a flawless show of 65.86 secs.

Austrian Gerfried Puck, astride Equitron Melody Vd Smidshoeve was second with a time of 66.31 secs while another French rider Jeanne Sadran also secured a podium finish after clocking 69.54 secs with Unforgettable Damvil.

Meanwhile, Brazil's Santiago Lambre partnered with Chacco Blue II to win the CSI4* (1.45m) while Frenchman Antoine Ermann clinched CSI4* (1.40m) victory with Odin Van 'T Hanegoor.


Simon Delestre receives his trophy.

The national and CSI2* competitions also took place on the opening day of the Doha Tour which be held over three rounds comprising three days of action.

Qatar's Mohammed Dhafi R A Al Marri CSI2* (1.20m) was also among the winners yesterday.

Chairman of Doha Tour's Supreme Organising Committee Sheikh Ahmad bin Nooh Al Thani lauded the strong start to the event as riders produced action on the opening day.

The second day of the opening round will also feature CSI4* and CS12* category events today.

More than 115 show-jumpers representing 20 countries are taking part in the Doha Tour carrying a total prize purse of more than €2m.


Yoshimi Yamashita

Japan's Yamashita first woman referee at men's Asian Cup

AFP – DOHA

Japan's Yoshimi Yamashita will be the first woman in history to referee at the men's Asian Cup when she takes charge of Australia against India, the Asian Football Confederation said yesterday.

Yamashita, who was a fourth official at the 2022 men's World Cup, is one of five women match officials at the Asian Cup in Qatar. The 18th edition of the tournament kicks off today.

Yamashita will take the whistle for the Group B opener tomorrow, with Makoto Bozono and Naomi Teshirogi appointed assistant referees.

The Japanese trio made history in 2022 as the first all-woman refereeing team for a game in the Asian Champions League and in Japan's domestic J-League a year later.

The 37-year-old Yamashita took charge of the opening game of last year's Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand.

Imposing Australia bank on secret weapons in Asian Cup title charge

AFP – DOHA


Australia players during a training session ahead of tomorrow's Group B opener against India. Pic: Twitter/@Socceroos

Australia go for Asian Cup glory boasting few stars but with a record-breaking coach in Graham Arnold, an in-form striker born in Uruguay and an imposing defender whose goal-scoring exploits are more akin to a forward.

With their run to the last 16 of the 2022 Qatar World Cup and good form since, the Socceroos have climbed to their highest FIFA ranking in over a decade at 25.

They return to Qatar for the Asian Cup and are among the favourites to repeat their 2015 exploits, when they beat South Korea 2-1 in the final on home soil.

Australia's opening game is tomorrow against India.

Their first and only Asian title was achieved under now Tottenham Hotspur manager Ange Postecoglou and with a team boasting talisman Tim Cahill, Crystal Palace skipper Mile Jedinak and Valencia goalkeeper Mat Ryan.

Ryan, who now plays for AZ Alkmaar, is the only survivor from the starting XI and with 86 caps the most experienced player in a squad where 15 of them have appeared fewer than 10 times and three are rookies.

None currently play in the English Premier League or Spain's La Liga.

But Arnold, who recently became the longest-serving coach in Socceroos history, called it a "top squad" that he is "really, really happy" with.

Since taking over in 2018, Arnold has often spoken about building depth, having been dealt a difficult hand by a number of high-profile retirements including Cahill and Jedinak. He believes his Asian Cup line-up has finally achieved that.

"I think you can see by this squad, when I first took over in 2018 I didn't have anywhere near this depth," he said.

"Half a dozen to 10 players could've come in as well. It shows where I feel confident, finally I can sit here, if we've got an injury, we've got depth."

'Tallest in Asia'

Australia's secret weapon in attack could be a 36-year-old born in Uruguay.

Bruno Fornaroli has only featured twice before for Australia but got the nod after a prolific season with Melbourne Victory, scoring 13 times in 10 games. "The most important thing with the Socceroos is form," Arnold said.

"Bruno has done a fantastic job and he fully deserves his selection. He definitely gives you something different." Arnold is banking on Fornaroli and Ryan, along with fellow senior players Jackson Irvine and Aziz Behich, to mentor the younger players and new faces in Qatar.

"I'm excited about the potential within this group," he said. "We're welcoming in some new players who I think will prove fantastic additions to that."

Along with Fornaroli, they have another weapon in Scotland-born defender Harry Souttar, who has been frozen out at Leicester City but is a rock at the heart of Australia's defence.

With 10 goals in 21 appearances for Australia he is also a major threat at corners and set-pieces.

Partnered with Ipswich Town's Cam Burgess in defence, Australia have what Arnold said was "probably the two tallest centre-backs in Asia".

Arnold wants Souttar to use his time with the Socceroos to "show your coach at Leicester and ask the question why you're not playing and show the fans how good you really are".

"I feel fortunate that I've got the boss backing me and keeping his faith in me even though I've not been playing football," Souttar said.

Al Harqah lands Al Waab Cup with Henrique

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Alanoud Khalifa A A Al Malki's owned and trained Al Harqah teamed up with jockey Carlos Henrique to grab the Al Waab Cup after a victory in feature at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

The eight-year-old mare decided the 1400m Local Thoroughbred Handicap race with a late surge outpacing Wathnan Racing's Brahms, ridden by Soufiane Saadi, by three quarters of a length.

Finishing third in the feature was Maysara, who had Stephane Ladjadj in the saddle.

The 11th Al Uqda Meeting organized by Qatar Racing and Equestrian Club had seven races on the card with Nazwa, Deliver The Dream, Hazm Al Sulaimi, Full Gambit, Prince Nabeel and Maatnookh also notching up victories.

11TH AL UQDA MEETING AL WAAB CUP DAY

WINNERS: Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

Al Waab Cup, Local Thoroughbred Handicap
Al Harqah, Alanoud Khalifa A A Al Malki, Carlos Henrique

Purebred Arabian Graduation Plate
Nazwa, Rudy Nerbonne, Lukas Delozier

Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75)
Deliver The Dream, Debbie Mountain, M H Ali Alabdulmalik

Purebred Arabian Handicap (50-70)
Hazm Al Sulaimi, Gassim Ghazali, Marco Casamento

Thoroughbred Handicap (55-75)
Full Gambit, Hadi Al Ramzani, Tomas Lukasek

Thoroughbred Maiden Plate
Prince Nabeel, Mohammed Salama Ashour, Jefferson Smith

Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Maatnookh, Mohammed Ghazali, Marco Casamento


Carlos Henrique guides Al Harqah to victory. PIC: Juhaim/QREC

China's Wu Lei eyes better result than last Asian Cup

XINHUA – DOHA

With the stage set for kick-off of the AFC Asian Cup, China forward Wu Lei has expressed his wishes to surpass the team's last-eight finish at the previous Asian Cup.

In the 2019 Asian Cup, China lost to Iran 3-0 in the quarter-finals.

"Everyone is adjusting to the competition condition, both physically and mentally. We are getting better these days here," Wu said.

China was drawn into Group A along with Tajikistan, Lebanon and host Qatar. It faces Tajikistan on Saturday in the first round of group play.

During their three-week training camp in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Aleksandar Jankovic's side lost to Oman and Hong Kong, China respectively, casting a shadow on their prospects. Nevertheless, Wu has remained confident about their campaign.

"All preparations that we have made, including previous matches and training, are aimed to win our first game. Hopefully we can match our result at the last Asian Cup and even go further," he said.

The AFC Asian Cup will take place from January 12 to February 10, with Qatar taking on Lebanon in the tournament's opener.

Real edge Atletico 5-3 to reach Super Cup final

AFP – RIYADH

Real Madrid defeated Atletico Madrid 5-3 after extra-time in a pulsating battle in Saudi Arabia to reach the Spanish Super Cup final.

Mario Hermoso and Antonio Rudiger exchanged early headed goals before Ferland Mendy sent Madrid ahead at the Al-Awwal Park stadium in Riyadh.

Antoine Griezmann levelled with a milestone goal for Atletico to become their all-time leading scorer and Kepa Arrizabalaga's own goal sent the Rojilbancos ahead, but Dani Carvajal smashed Madrid level and forced extra-time. With the game heading towards penalties, Stefan Savic's own goal nudged Madrid ahead and Brahim Diaz wrapped up the win on the counter-attack with Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak stranded out of position.

Djokovic could face Murray in Australian Open third round

AFP – MELBOURNE

Top seed Novak Djokovic was drawn yesterday against a qualifier or lucky loser to begin his bid for an 11th Australian Open crown, and could meet fellow Grand Slam champion Andy Murray in the third round.

The Serbian, who has won 24 majors, defeated Stefanos Tsitsipas in last year's final then added the French and US Open titles to his collection.

But the 36-year-old will begin his defence under an injury cloud after a wrist problem hampered him at the United Cup, where he lost to Australian Alex De Minaur.

Greek seventh seed Tsitsipas has a tough task to repeat his 2023 feat with former top 10 Italian Matteo Berrettini his opening opponent and Djokovic a potential quarter-finalist.

Spanish world number two Carlos Alcaraz, the only man to beat Djokovic at a Slam last year to win Wimbledon, gets his campaign under way against French veteran Richard Gasquet.

Like Djokovic, third seed Daniil Medvedev, a Melbourne finalist in 2021 and 2022, drew a qualifier in the first round.

The Russian could face 27th seed Felix Auger-Aliassime in the third round, with the Canadian facing a stern opening test against former world number three Dominic Thiem.

On the women's side, Polish top seed Iga Swiatek will open her account with a blockbuster rematch of the 2020 Roland Garros final that she won against Sofia Kenin, who went into that match as the Australian Open champion.

There will be no let-up for whoever wins, with a second round clash looming against either 2016 Australian Open winner Angelique Kerber or 2022 Melbourne Park finalist Danielle Collins.



Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas (right) and Aryna Sabalenka (centre) from Belarus react as they push Serbia's Novak Djokovic in a wheelchair during a charity event. AFP

Two-time champion Naomi Osaka also faces a daunting task after being pitted against French 16th seed Caroline Garcia in her first major since having a baby.

Another bumper showdown will see third seed Elena Rybakina, last year's runner-up, take on former world number one Karolina Pliskova.

Second seed and defending champion Aryna Sabalenka should have an easier time, she was drawn against a qualifier.

Korda surges into Adelaide semis for second year

AFP – ADELAIDE

Third seed Sebastian Korda powered into the Adelaide International semi-finals for a second straight year yesterday, but needed five match points to set up a last four clash with seventh seed Jiri Lehecka.

The American, son of 1998 Australian Open winner Czech Petr Korda, finished runner-up at Memorial Drive in 2023, losing to Novak Djokovic.

He defeated Christopher O'Connell 6-4, 6-4 to keep his dream alive of going one better this year, but was tested in the final game.

"I didn't play badly on the match points, but he really raised his level," said Korda, an Australian Open quarter-finalist last season.

"I'm happy to get through that one. I wish we had more weeks in Adelaide, I've played some really good tennis here." He will bid for a second consecutive final against Czech Lehecka, who was too good for Chilean second seed Nicolas Jarry, winning 6-4, 7-5.

Lehecka broke three times and finished with his ninth ace in scorching hot weather.

"It's not easy to play in these conditions even under the (moveable) roof," Lehecka said. "I managed it well, I'm happy to be through.

"The semi-final with Seb will be super-tough, there are no easy matches at this level." Russia's Alexander Bublik also made the semis, ousting Italian fourth seed Lorenzo Musetti 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 7-5 and will play the winner from American top seed Tommy Paul and Briton Jack Draper.

In women's action, sixth seed Jelena Ostapenko survived a wobble in the first set but regained concentration to ease past Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk 7-5, 6-3.

Top seed Elena Rybakina headlines the night session against Ekaterina Alexandrova, with Ostapenko awaiting the winner.

One quarter-final was determined without a ball struck when Germany's Laura Siegemund pulled out of her match with Russia's Daria Kasatkina injured.

Kasatkina will play either American second seed Jessica Pegula or veteran qualifier Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova.

At the WTA Hobart International, Belgian top seed Elise Mertens stayed on track with a 7-5, 6-0 win over the Netherlands' Arantxa Rus.

She will face Daria Saville for a place in the final after the Australian fought past China's Zhu Lin in three sets.

Al Rajhi suffers title-ending crash on marathon Dakar 48-hour stage; Peterhansel breaks down

AFP – SHUBAYTAH

Carlos Sainz benefited from race leader Yazeed Al Rajhi's title-ending crash and Stephane Peterhansel breaking down in the desert, to take the provisional lead after the first part of the Dakar Rally sixth stage yesterday.

The stage is an unprecedented two-day marathon around Shubaytah -- a 780km loop in the kingdom's vast Empty Quarter with more than 600km of specials for motorcycles and nearly 550km for cars.

Yesterday, it was the veteran Spaniard Sainz who showed his mettle and was leading when the day's action stopped at 16h00 (1300GMT) local time with competitors spending the night at the nearest of seven bivouacs dotted around the dunes. The 61-year-old three-time Dakar winner leads the general standings by more than a quarter of an hour on his Audi teammate Matthias Ekstrom of Sweden.

The Prodrive drivers are trailing with Qatar's defending champion Nasser Al Attiyah losing time and sitting some 22 minutes off the pace. France's Sebastien Loeb remains fourth overall at almost 37min.

Nine-time world rally champion Sainz had attempted a daring tactical move on Wednesday, deliberately losing 40 minutes to start behind the leaders on Thursday, to follow their tracks and avoid opening in the dunes.

Al Rajhi and Peterhansel both lost out. The 42-year-old Saudi Toyota driver Al Eahji started the morning leading the standings but disaster struck when he was unable to repair his Hilux after an accident which occurred 51km into the stage.

And Dakar Rally veteran Peterhansel was stranded in the middle of the desert at midday, the victim of a hydraulic failure.

"We had a puncture and the hydraulic jack system started playing up," said Peterhansel, who notched up a record-equalling 50th car stage win on Sunday.

Whatever happens, the Dakar is lost to the man with a record 14 victories, six on motorcycles and eight in cars.

Yesterday's and today's 48-hour stage is the last big part of the first week, before the rest day tomorrow in Riyadh.

beIN Sports reveals exclusive AFCON 2023 coverage plans

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

beIN Sports (beIN), the leading sports broadcaster in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), has revealed its exclusive, extensive coverage plans for this month's TotalEnergies Africa Cup of Nations Cote d'Ivoire 2023 (AFCON 2023), which kicks off tomorrow. beIN will have four brand new dedicated beIN AFCON 2023 MAX channels in Arabic, English, and French ensuring subscribers can follow every pass, tackle, goal, and save at the biennial month-long tournament.

Africa's most prestigious tournament was first held in 1957 and will feature 24 national teams from across the continent, including reigning champions Senegal, Egypt, World Cup semi-finalists Morocco, and hosts Ivory Coast. With all 51 matches being broadcast live and exclusive, studios presented by some of beIN's best talent, and a host of original content, the broadcaster's breadth of coverage of AFCON 2023 will be unrivalled, demonstrating its dedication to bringing the vibrant diversity of African football to MENA audiences.

beIN will offer dedicated Arabic studios for all AFCON matches on beIN AFCON 2023 MAX 1 and MAX 2, while MAX 3 and MAX 4 will broadcast all matches live with English and French commentary respectively. beIN SPORTS NEWS will also offer 16-plus hours of live continuous daily coverage. Additionally, all five channels will simultaneously air a daily live morning show "Sport Morning" from 11:00 until 12:30 MECCA, which will also cover the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023, taking place at the same time.

Matchday kick off times during the group stages are 17:00, 20:00, and 23:00 MECCA, with Arabic studio coverage starting at 16:00 and running until 01.30 MECCA.

beIN's AFCON 2023 programming also includes five documentaries about the Arab teams; nine episodes of Do You Know AFCON? testing viewers' knowledge of previous tournaments; four episodes of Memories of Africa that relive some of the showpiece's most memorable moments; 10 Witness programmes reviewing past AFCONs with the help of those who were there; two Games of My Life programmes featuring stars of yesteryear; and a dedicated documentary about Senegal and their maiden title from 2019. Each final since the 2004 tournament, as well as more than 70 other mini-matches and fillers using archive footage to create best player compilations and plenty more, will also be broadcast before the event's grand finale on February 11.

AFCON 2023 kicks off with hosts Ivory Coast taking on Guinea-Bissau at 23:00 MECCA in Abidjan.



Sri Lanka's Wanindu Hasaranga (second right) celebrates after taking the wicket of Zimbabwe's captain Craig Ervine (second left). AFP

Hasaranga takes 7-19 as Sri Lanka crush Zimbabwe to win ODI series

AFP – COLOMBO

Sri Lankan leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga made a stunning return to international cricket with a career-best 7-19 to guide his side to an eight-wicket win against Zimbabwe and clinch a 2-0 ODI series win yesterday in Colombo.

In a game cut to 27 overs a side by two downpours, Sri Lanka's star bowler, in his first match after a six-month hamstring injury absence, skittled the tourists for just 96. Sri Lanka knocked off the runs inside 17 overs with Kusal Mendis making the lion's share with an unbeaten 66 from 51 balls. Zimbabwe had got off to a good start reaching 43 for no loss but the introduction of Hasaranga proved disastrous for the visitors.

Hasaranga's googly had three wickets by the end of his second over with Zimbabwe slumping to 47-3, ultimately losing four batters trapped leg before wicket. His fourth five-wicket haul is a new record for R. Premadasa Stadium, eclipsing Angelo Mathews' 6-20 against India in 2009.

It was also the second best ODI figures by a Sri Lankan bowler behind 8-19 by Chaminda Vaas, also against Zimbabwe in 2001. Opener Joylord Gumbie top-scored for the visitors with 29. Skipper Mendis made a 73-run stand for the second wicket alongside debutant Shevon Daniel (12) as the hosts cruised to a comfortable win with 62 deliveries to spare.

The first match in the series was washed out due to rain while the hosts secured a hard-fought two-wicket win in the second.

BRIEF SCORES

Sri Lanka 97 for 2 (Mendis 66*) **beat Zimbabwe** 96 all out (Hasaranga 7 for 19) **by eight wickets**

McIlroy surges into two-shot lead at Dubai Invitational

AFP – DUBAI

Rory McIlroy kicked off his year with a sparkling nine-under-par 62 to take a two-stroke lead after the first round of the Dubai Invitational yesterday.

The world number two is playing his first event since the DP World Tour Championship last November, which was also played in Dubai, where McIlroy has won five European Tour titles.

McIlroy made headlines earlier this week when he claimed a "world tour" was his "dream scenario" for golf as talks aimed at ending the split in the sport caused by breakaway circuit LIV Golf continue.

The European Tour's biggest star shone on the day its chief executive Keith Pelley announced his resignation, as McIlroy carded nine birdies in a bogey-free round to sit two shots clear atop the early leaderboard from German Yannik Paul.

"It was nice to get a card in the hand again and sort of feel the competitive juices flowing," said McIlroy.

"I surprised myself a little bit but hopefully more of the same over the next few days." McIlroy has said his main aim for 2024 is to end his 10-year wait for a fifth major title, but also has a sixth Race to Dubai crown in his sights as he eyes Colin Montgomerie's all-time record of eight.

The Northern Irishman, starting on the 10th hole, rolled in birdies on the 17th and 18th greens to make the turn at four-under.

Five more birdies on the front nine ensured he would take the early lead, with a closing birdie on the ninth capping off an excellent day.

Dube shines as India beat Afghanistan by six wickets

AP – MOHALI

Shivam Dube scored 60 not out off 40 balls to help India beat Afghanistan by six wickets yesterday in the opener of a three-match T20 series.

Dube recorded his second T20 half-century as India finished with 159-4 in 17.3 overs. He had earlier bowled two overs for figures of 1-9.

Afghanistan was restricted to 158-5 (20 overs) as left-arm spinner Axar Patel (2-23) and medium pacer Mukesh Kumar (2-33) picked two wickets each.

The second game will be played in Indore on Sunday. Bengaluru will host the third T20 on Jan. 17.

Put into bat, Afghanistan openers Rahmanullah Gurbaz (23) and Ibrahim Zadran put on 50 off 48 balls. Patel got the breakthrough with Gurbaz stumped in the eighth over. Dube sent back skipper Zadran for 25 runs, out caught.

Azmatullah Omarzai scored 29 off 22 balls even as Afghanistan was down to 59-3 in the space of 13 deliveries. Patel bowled debutant Rahmat Shah for three runs.

Omarzai then put on 68 off 43 balls for the fourth wicket with veteran all-rounder Mohammad Nabi. Their partnership partially resurrected the Afghanistan innings, helping it past the 100-run mark.

Nabi top scored for Afghanistan, a 27-ball 42 with two fours and three sixes. Najibullah Zadran scored 19 not out off 11 balls helping the score past 150.

India's chase began on a horrible note. Rohit Sharma was run out for a two-ball duck. His partner Shubman Gill made up for it, with 23 off 12 balls, hitting five well-timed boundaries. Gill was stumped off Mujeeb ur Rahman in the fourth over as India was down to 28-2.

The hosts had to rebuild with Tilak Varma and Dube putting on 44 off 29 balls for the third wicket. Varma was out against the run of play, holing out in the ninth over as India's chase eased off. Dube took command from one end, reaching 50 off 38 balls, finishing with a career-high score. Meanwhile Jitesh Sharma's cameo of 31 off 20 balls put India ahead of the asking rate.

India's tempo in the second half of its innings meant that the chase was never under any threat.