The Peninsula
Local focus, Global vision
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SPORT

AFC ASIAN CUP QATAR 2023

HEAVYWEIGHTS MEET IN LAST EIGHT

Australia, South Korea set for feisty clash

FAWAD HUSSAIN
THE PENINSULA

Australia are set to meet South Korea in a tasty quarter-final clash, with coach Graham Arnold saying self-belief can steer his side to victory in their toughest challenge at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 so far.

Today's clash between two of the top ranked AFC teams at the Al Janoub Stadium headlines the last eight stage as fans anticipate another nail-biting match in the tournament.

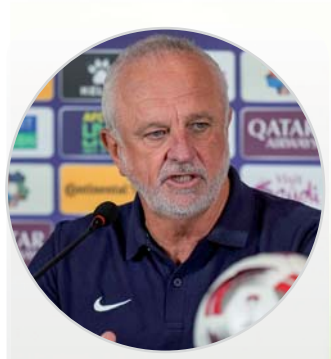
It is the first time the two heavyweights are squaring off in the continental showpiece since Australia defeated South Korea in the final at home to claim their maiden title in 2015.

The Socceroos relatively had a comfortable ride to the quarter-finals, topping their group before trouncing Indonesia 4-0 in the Round of 16.

But South Korea, who advanced as a second-placed side from their group, are confident after a morale-boosting win over Saudi Arabia in a last 16 thriller.

Arnold is aware of the quality of Son Heung-Min's South Korea but he said his team has the potential to clear the hurdle.


South Korea players in action as they gear up for the quarter-final clash against Australia.



> We're up against a top opponent and we have got to go out and believe in ourselves. We've got that belief and my expectations are always the same, we go out on the pitch to win.
> **Graham Arnold**
> Australia coach

"We're up against a top opponent and we have got to go out and believe in ourselves. We've got that belief and my expectations are always the same, we go out on the pitch to win," the Australia coach said yesterday.

"It's full focus on ourselves. They've got a strong squad, but it's about what we do if we get our game right. We know their strengths and we'll deal with them the best way we can. It's about getting our game right," he added.

Australia have conceded only one goal in the tournament when they leveled with Uzbekistan 1-1 in the group stage and Arnold said the team's defense will play a crucial part in the match.

"I believe that the most important thing for us is with the ball defensively. We'll be well set up. We've conceded only one goal so far and they've conceded seven, but we've got to make sure with the ball we're better tomorrow.

"Our intention is to be in their faces for 90 minutes and put pressure on them. One of their strengths is technique and we want to take away that technique and one of the ways to do that is by pressuring them," he said.

Two-time champions South Korea are on a mission to end their 64-year title drought with coach Jurgen Klinsmann telling his players to embrace Australia's challenge to keep their hunt for the trophy intact.

"I want them to experience what it would mean to get to the end of a tournament, all the way to the end and to play for the trophy. So that's what I tried to tell them, that they utilise this moment in time, they understand this moment in time," the German legend said.

"Now it gets down to the grinding phase. Now it's the big stage. And I love this moment. I personally love this moment and I hope they enjoy that too, that they love that too. And then the better team will win and it will be another nail-biter against the Socceroos," Klinsmann, who won the World Cup as a player added.

The 59-year-old rated Australia a "good team" but was optimistic about coming out from the quarter-final as winners.

He seemed unconcerned as South Korea will return just 72 hours after beating Saudi Arabia on penalties in an epic clash, saying his team is "ready for a battle".

"Rest days is what it is, you accept it, you move on," said Klinsmann. "We're ready for this huge game and we're very hungry.



> Now it gets down to the grinding phase. Now it's the big stage. And I love this moment. I personally love this moment and I hope they enjoy that too, that they love that too. And then the better team will win and it will be another nail-biter against the Socceroos.
> **Jurgen Klinsmann**
> South Korea coach


Australia players during a training session.


South Korea's Cho Gue-sung (left) celebrates after scoring his team's first goal against Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. AFP

Mental resilience key for South Korea: Cho

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

Cho Gue-sung believes mental strength will be key for South Korea against Australia when the two sides meet in the quarter-finals of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 at the Al Janoub Stadium today.

In their Round of 16 match against Saudi Arabia, Cho's last-minute equaliser forced extra time, with South Korea ultimately winning the penalty shoot-out 4-2 as they advanced to the quarter-finals for the seventh consecutive edition.

"It's all about mental strength now. A lot of us in the team have experience playing high-intensity football, and we are just focused on getting the result tomorrow. Many players are currently on yellow cards, but I don't think we are concerned so much.

"It's all about winning the game, playing each match with all our hearts, and securing the results that we want," said the 26-year-old forward, who plays for Danish Superliga club Midtjylland.

"I also have my own way of navigating through difficult moments. More importantly, I have positive people around me, from the head coach to my teammates. There's a very positive vibe in the dressing room – so it's all about accepting the criticism for not scoring goals and moving forward."

Nine years have passed since Australia defeated South Korea in the 2015 AFC Asian Cup final in Sydney but Cho believes there is no point dwelling in the past and wants the Taeguk Warriors to chart their own history.

"I wasn't there so I'm not so worried about that match as it was a long time ago. However, Australia are a solid team. They are very good in defence and have the physical advantage. But we have our own strengths, there's no pressure on us.

"We have plenty of quality going forward. We have speed upfront and have very quick players who can utilise the strength of the team. For us it's more about how we play and we need to maximise our strength and hopefully we get the result that we want."

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Australia and South Korea are set for a thrilling AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 quarter-final today. Australia cruised into the quarter-finals while South Korea had to work hard to book their spot.

Honours even
Their three previous meetings in the AFC Asian Cup are evenly split (W1 D1 L1), with Australia winning the latest encounter – a 2-1 victory in extra-time in the final of the 2015 edition.

Impressive
Australia's 4-0 win over Indonesia in the Round of 16 makes them the only team to have won by a four-goal margin in an AFC Asian Cup knock-out stage match more than once, having defeated Uzbekistan 6-0 in the 2011 semi-finals.

Tough outfit
Australia have the best defensive tallies going into the quarter-finals. They have conceded the joint-fewest goals (1), registered the lowest expected goals against and faced the fewest shots on target (4). South Korea, meanwhile, have failed to keep a clean sheet in their last six games in the competition (including UAE 2019), their joint-longest conceding streak.

Fashionably late
South Korea have scored three goals after the 90th minute at Qatar 2023. No team has done more in a single edition since 2007. They are the only side to have scored at least one goal each via open play, free-kick (directand indirect combined), corner, and penalty.

Master creator
South Korea's Lee Kang-in has created more chances (16) and big chances (6) than any other player in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023. He also completed almost twice more crosses (16) than any other player.

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Iran's players celebrate their win over Syria in last 16.


Iran's forward (centre) scores his team's first goal from the penalty spot against Syria.

Ghalehnoy's penalty strategy pays off for Iran

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

Ardeshir Ghalehnoy pinpointed tactical substitutions as the key to Iran reaching the quarter-finals of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 at the expense of Syria after their Round of 16 match went all the way to a penalty shootout on Wednesday.

Mahdi Torabi was brought on in extra time as Ghalehnoy plotted for the shootout early on, with two other substitutes - Omid Ebrahimi and Karim Ansafarid - three of the five players who scored in the shootout as Iran emerged 5-3 winners after the match ended 1-1 after 120 minutes.

Having dominated for much of the match, a change in tactics was necessary after Mehdi Taremi was shown a red card late in the second half after picking up two bookings.

"We made a substitution before the match went into penalties," said Ghalehnoy. "We put Torabi in, who is a good penalty kicker.

"We know who our best kickers are and also we know that (Alireza) Beiranvand can help us because we trust him between the sticks."

"I think we could have scored five goals against Syria (earlier in the game), we had so many opportunities. I'm not really happy with the performance of 2-3 players but I'm very happy with the discipline we showed after we went one man down.

"Before we went down to 10 men, I would consider our performance to be one of the best we have produced in the competition."

Custodian Ahmad Madanieh produced a string of saves in the first half before eventually conceding to a Taremi penalty late in the half but Syrian showed good response after the break, finding the equaliser through a penalty of their own with Omar Khrbin netting from the spot.

Beiranvand saved Fahd Youssef's attempt in the shootout, with Iran converting all five but Syria head coach Hector Cuper was very proud of his men, with the West Asian side reaching the knockout stage of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time.

"I'm very satisfied with the players' performance and sacrifice," said the Argentine. "Unhappy with the result because we wanted to go through but I couldn't ask more from them.

"We wanted to exploit them after the red card but the Iranian team closed down the spaces very well. Even with one man less, they managed their defence well and are a tough team to overcome. We tried all avenues but they managed to stop us.

"Overall, I'm satisfied with our performance in the whole tournament, we managed to show our quality against a lot of strong teams."


Iran's forward Mehdi Taremi (right) celebrates team's goal against Hong Kong in the group stage.


Iran's coach Ardeshir Ghalehnoy gestures during group match UAE.

Australia will be up for challenge, says Duke

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

Mitch Duke believes Australia are well-placed to advance to the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 semi-finals at South Korea's expense today.

The tie at the Al Janoub Stadium promises to be a thrilling encounter with Duke saying the Socceroos will take full advantage of the extra days of rest.

"We are looking forward to this game and the challenge that Korea Republic will bring," said the 33-year-old FC Machida Zelvia forward. "After the Indonesia (Round of 16) game, the body is feeling good and back in great condition.

"We've had a couple of days rest and coming up against Korea Republic, it's going to be a different approach. I'm ready to go whether it is for 90 minutes or 120 minutes."

"We have got to do better than what we did in the game against Indonesia. I expect an improved performance from us and I believe we have that energy to go back on the field and make Australia proud by winning against Korea Republic.

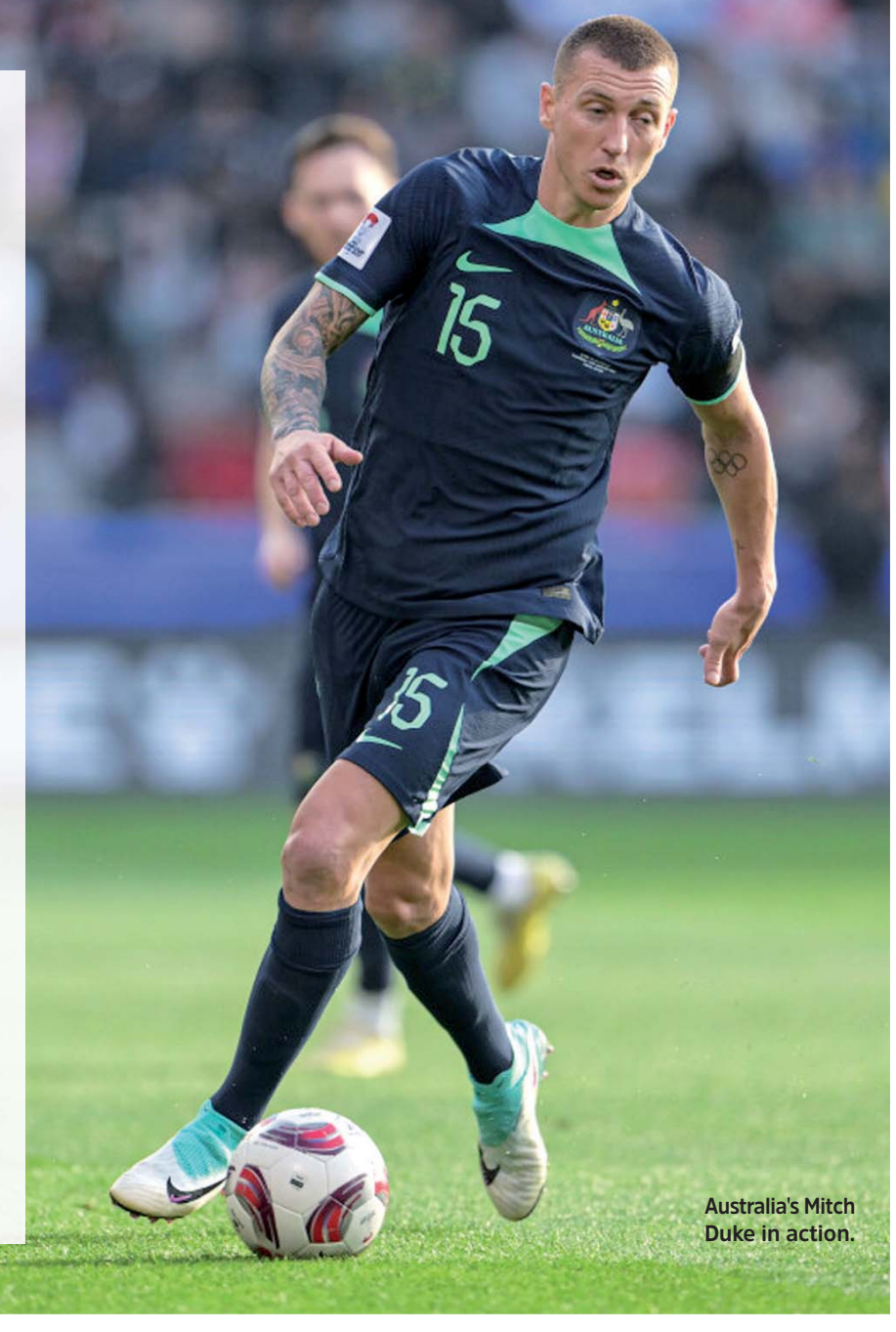
"They're going to be coming at us, (and) we're going to be going at them. There'll be more space and maybe more fluidity to play football as well. Hopefully, that's going to suit us even better. We know when we perform to our best, nobody can stop us."

The Al Janoub Stadium will always have a special place for the New South Wales native, who scored the only goal of the game against Tunisia at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

"We've been quite lucky in Qatar, with it being our base for training and our second home during the FIFA World Cup Qualifiers. We have made special memories here, especially at the last World Cup and individually for me, scoring that goal. Hopefully I'm looking to make more memories for the next match.

"As professional players, it's down to big moments and big players can step up to those big moments and I'm looking forward to that."

> We have got to do better than what we did in the game against Indonesia. I expect an improved performance from us and I believe we have that energy to go back on the field and make Australia proud by winning against Korea Republic.


Australia's Mitch Duke in action.



Asian Cup continues to break records: LOC

THE PENINSULA/QNA — DOHA



Members of AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Local Organizing Committee during the press conference yesterday.

The Local Organizing Committee (LOC) of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 yesterday said that the tournament continued to break records as it reached the quarter-final stage after exciting group stage and Round of 16 clashes.

Director of Communications and Marketing at the LOC of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 Hassan Rabeea Al Kuwari said that the tournament set many records during the group stage both in terms of attendance and the tournament's official platforms.

Addressing a press conference at the Main Media Center in Msheireb, Al Kuwari said that the LOC was keen to provide a unique hosting for players and fans alike after hosting the best-ever FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

He added that the record number of crowd attendance has been exceeded, with 1,170,219 fans present during the matches so far. About three million people used the Doha Metro and Lusail Tram. The total number of tickets sold for the matches amounted to about 1,200,000 tickets.

Al Kuwari pointed out that the opening match between Qatar and Lebanon at Lusail Stadium on January 12 recorded the highest attendance rate of 82,490.

Headded that the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 witnessed the presence of about 2,000 media professionals, while interaction through social media and digital platforms for the tournament reached approximately 689 million followers, five million shares, and 208 million views of the videos released.

The Director of Communications and Marketing sees that the continued demand for ticket sales shows the great interest that the tournament enjoys among fans on the continent. Brig. Abdullah Khalifa Al Muftah, representative of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 security force said in the press conference that no crimes or events disturbing public security had been recorded and that Qatar, thanks to the cooperation of all partners, has become a safe place for hosting sporting and other events due to its long experience.

Al Muftah added that the total number of passengers who used the Abu Samra Port to attend the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 starting from Jan. 10 to 31 reached about 600,000, while the number of vehicles passing through the Port during the same period exceeded 200,000.

The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 is heading to its final rounds and Al Muftah calls on the sports fans to use the metro to reach the stadiums to save time and avoid any traffic jams or delays. He additionally stressed the importance of arriving early to the stadiums, which also gives them the opportunity to enjoy the events near the stadiums before the match.

Director of Shared Services at Qatar Tourism Omar Al Jaber said that the success of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 is thanks to the combined efforts of all partners to provide an exceptional experience and services for the fans.

Al Jaber added that they have made sure to provide an enjoyable experience over the past weeks. The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 recorded a distinguished attendance of fans and followers from all over Asia and the world.

He expressed his pleasure to have them join Qatar once again after the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Expect more from Japan, warns Moriyasu


Japan's coach Hajime Moriyasu reacts during the Asian Cup last 16 match against Bahrain on Wednesday. AFP

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

Hajime Moriyasu warned the remaining teams at the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 that the Samurai Blue can do better after seeing his side hand Bahrain a 3-1 defeat at Al Thumama Stadium to book their place in the quarter-finals on Wednesday.

The four-time champions won despite a minor wobble in the middle of the second half when an own goal gave Bahrain hope following strikes from Ritsu Doan and Takefusa Kubo, but Ueda scored soon after to seal a deserved victory.

"I think the win was the result of the effort my players and staff put into training," said Moiryasu.

"We had six days to rest and trained very well, we prepared very well to play Bahrain.

"We analysed ourselves after the Indonesia game and we fixed a few things. We played better.

"I don't think today's performance was 100 percent. We can improve for the next games as well."

The Japanese were in control throughout the first half and took the lead when Doan pounced to score on the rebound after Seiya Maikuma's shot from distance had come back off the post.

Kubo then doubled the lead three minutes into the second half when he swooped on Hazza Ali's misplaced pass into his path, the Real Sociedad man registering after the goal had been confirmed by a VAR check.

A mix-up between Ueda and goalkeeper Zion Suzuki when Sayed Baqer headed goalward in the 64th minute saw Bahrain pull a goal back but Ueda made amends eight minutes later with a clinical finish to confirm Japan's place in the next round.


Japan's Ayase Ueda celebrates during the match against Bahrain.

"We did well to defend against Bahrain during the game and we picked up the second balls efficiently," said Moriyasu.

"We did what we aimed to do before the game. Of course not every play was perfect, I admit that, but I think we can improve in the next matches."

The result brings Bahrain's AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 involvement to an end, with Juan Antonio Pizzi hoping his side can build on their performance when the Preliminary Joint Qualification – Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 returns in March.

"We are satisfied with the performance," said the Argentinian. "Since I started coaching the team we have played matches against strong teams and we have seen a lot of progress.

"The players are progressing and the way we are playing is good. We are learning from every single match and now we are getting ready for the qualifiers for the World Cup."

Pizzi admitted the gulf in class between the two sets of players left him feeling fortunate not to lose by a greater margin.

"The Japanese team used the space in the second half and we could have lost with a bigger goal difference," he said. "Our idea was to not give so much space to the Japanese and to prevent that threat. We relied on swift counterattacks.

"There was some tension before playing Japan and we were able to be in control until the 35th minute, but with so much pressure we couldn't cope."

Tajikistan must contain Jordan's dangerous trio in last 8: Islomov

THE PENINSULA — DOHA

Tabrez Islomov has highlighted Jordan's attacking trio of Mousa Al Tamari, Ali Olwan and Yazan Al Naimat as the threat Tajikistan must neutralise in their maiden AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 quarter-final at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today.

Islomov has prior knowledge of the trio as the teams played to a 1-1 draw in Group G of the Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 in November.

"Our preparation is going well to face a strong opponent who are appearing at this stage of the tournament for the fifth time in their history," said the FC Istiklol player.

"In comparison (to our last meeting), we noticed that compared to then, they look like a good attacking group, especially the front three. That is the major difference that we can see of Jordan in this tournament.

> **"In comparison (to our last meeting), we noticed that compared to then, they look like a good attacking group, especially the front three. That is the major difference that we can see of Jordan in this tournament.**
> **Tabrez Islomov**

"However, we also have good defenders and we have done our homework and I'm sure Tajikistan can compete with them, even with the improvements that they have made."

The 25-year-old defender has thus far been trusted by head coach Petar Segrt as the player to rely on when the team head into the final part of matches with three consecutive appearances from the bench against Qatar, Lebanon and UAE.

Tajikistan's journey in their debut AFC Asian Cup has captured imaginations back home and Islomov said the players are well aware of the huge attention.

"In the (Round of 16) match against UAE, when we saw our supporters who came from Tajikistan, it gave us a lot of energy. Two more flights have been organised by the federation for this match and that will surely give us another boost to fight.

"From our first day here, maybe not everybody believed in us, even back home. Mostly everyone was waiting for us to go home after the group stage but we proved to ourselves and everyone else that we can make it.

"After UAE, we saw a lot of celebrations all over Tajikistan. This kind of feeling in Tajikistan regarding football is a first for us and we want to keep this going."


Tajikistan's Tabrez Islomov in action in this file photo.



Stunning results as Round of 16 concludes

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 has now reached the business end of the competition as only eight teams remain in search of continental glory.

The Round of 16 threw up some fascinating encounters and they didn't disappoint with three of the eight matches going all the way to penalties as fans of Asian football were treated to some nail-biting action.

Jubilant celebrations, set-piece secrets and a vintage jersey all feature as the-AFC.com takes a look at the social media channels of those involved.



Tajikistan – Fireworks and Dances

Tajikistan's fairytale journey in this year's competition continues as they overcame the United Arab Emirates in their Round of 16 tie with Vahdat Hanonov's first-half header giving them the lead only to be pegged back by a 95th-minute equaliser.

It eventually needed a penalty shootout to separate the sides, and the Tajik players held their nerves to earn Petar Segrt's team a quarter-final date with Jordan. And the players certainly enjoyed their post-match celebrations, with fireworks and dancing on the cards upon returning to the team hotel.

Australia – Souttar shares set-piece secrets

Socceroos' commanding centre-back Harry Souttar scored with yet another header in their 4-0 victory over Indonesia with the 25-year-old continuing to be a threat from set-pieces. Following the match, he revealed exactly what he does during such situations.

"I always speak to the player who's marking me. Just to try and get them less concentrated, try to get them to think I'm not really concentrating and I'm joking a little bit. And he kind of lets down his guard."

Whatever he's been doing is certainly working and it will be fascinating to see if he can get the better of fellow centre-back Kim Min-jae in the upcoming clash against Korea Republic.


Action during last 16 match between Qatar and Palestine.

Indonesia – All smiles at the breakfast table

PSSI chairman Erick Thohir flew to Doha following Team Garuda's historic achievement of reaching the knockout stages of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time ever.

Before their match against Australia, the chairman asked the players if they had already packed their bags to return home. Everyone responded 'No!' but, despite ultimately suffering defeat in the Round of 16, the Garuda returned to Indonesia having done their nation proud on the grand stage.

Iraq – Al Ammari bows out with pride

Iraq were eliminated by Jordan in dramatic circumstances with goals in the 95th and 97th minutes meaning the latter progressed to the quarter-finals at the expense of the 2007 champions.

Midfielder Amir Al Ammari, who has been ever-present for the Lions of Mesopotamia in the centre of the park, spoke about his pride at being able to play for Iraq and noted that they were able to win the faith and hearts of the Iraqi people following their performances in Qatar.

Japan – Doan stresses unity

"One team! Great Win!" was the message from Samurai Blue winger Ritsu Doan following Japan's 3-1 victory over Bahrain. It was Doan who opened the scoring, with Takefusa Kubo and Ayase Ueda later finding the back of the net.

Having been a key part of the squad in 2019, Doan remains a crucial component of Hajime Moriyasu's team as the East Asians gear up to face the Islamic Republic of Iran in the quarter-finals.

Thailand – Ishii impressed with vintage Kashima kit

Thailand's Japanese head coach Masatada Ishii was all smiles in the pre-match press conference ahead of the game against Uzbekistan after spotting a Thai journalist wearing a 1994 season Kashima Antlers kit.

The now 57-year-old was a Kashima player that season and the 30-year-old jersey gave the former midfielder flashbacks of his playing career.

Last 16 in numbers



THE PENINSULA - DOHA

We are down to the final eight teams in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 after four days of action in the Round of 16 where matches were decided by the finest of margins as three of the eight ties went to penalties and another three were settled by a one-goal margin.

Holders Qatar, four-time winners Japan and 2015 champions Australia all made statement wins in the last 16 while Tajikistan and Jordan took their fairytale runs into the quarter-finals, so join the-AFC.com as we review the Round of 16 by taking a closer look at some of the key facts and stats that caught the eye.

1.06 million and counting

The 2023 edition of the continental showpiece set a new total attendance record of 1.06 million after 63,753 fans packed Al Bayt Stadium to watch hosts and holders Qatar defeat Palestine in the Round of 16.

The previous spectatorship record was held by the 2004 edition hosted by China PR which saw 1.04 million fans attend the tournament.

Quarter-final debutants

Tajikistan are the only side making their quarter-final debut in the 2023 edition after they edged the United Arab Emirates on penalties in the last 16. Goalkeeper Rustam Yatimov emerged as their hero by denying Caio Canedo in the shootout as the Central Asians became the first debutants to reach the last eight since Australia in 2007.

The Tajiks also became the first team to win their maiden knockout game in the tournament since Japan defeated China 3-2 on their way to winning their first-ever continental crown in 1992.

On the mark

No player has registered more shots on target during a single match in the ongoing tournament than Sardar Azmoun who managed to fire five of his six shots on target during Islamic Republic of Iran's penalty shootout win over Syria that sent them through to the quarter-finals on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Palestine's Oday Dabbagh and Korea Republic's Son Heung-min have registered the most shots on target in total so far, with eight shots from four matches, followed by Son's teammate Lee Kang-in who has seven shots on target with a shooting accuracy of 78 percent.

Solid at the back

With seven interceptions in the Round of 16 tie against Saudi Arabia, Korea Republic centre-back Kim Min-jae is the player with the most interceptions in a single match at the AFC Asian Cup so far. The Bayern Munich defender's contributions proved decisive as the Koreans booked their place in the last eight on penalties.

Uzbekistan defender Abdukodir Khusanov ranked second on the list as he made five interceptions in their 2-1 victory against Thailand on Tuesday.

Jordan's maiden triumph

After failing to win in any three of their previous appearances in the knockout stage, Jordan finally tasted their first knockout success as they came from behind to defeat former champions Iraq, courtesy of injury-time goals from Yazan Al Arab and Nizar Al Rashdan.

The Jordanians were knocked out in the quarter-finals by Japan and Uzbekistan in 2004 and 2011 respectively before losing to Vietnam on penalties in the Round of 16 in 2019.

11 out of 11

Following the 2-1 defeat of Palestine on Monday, hosts and defending champions Qatar have now won 11 matches in a row in the AFC Asian Cup.

The Maroons have also won five knockout ties in a row, having previously not registered a win in the knockouts before the 2019 edition, when they lifted the trophy for the first time.

Leaving it late

With Korea Republic seconds away from elimination, Cho Guesung became their saviour, scoring deep into injury time against Saudi Arabia to force extra time before they went on to win on penalties. It means the Koreans have now scored thrice in second-half injury time.

The Taegeuk Warriors forced a 91st-minute own goal from Yazan Al Arab to draw 2-2 with Jordan on Matchday Two before captain Son Heung-min converted from the spot in the 94th minute in a 3-3 draw with Malaysia in their final group outing.


Akram Afif

Super-saver

Syria goalkeeper Ahmad Madanieh made the most saves in a single match in the tournament when he made nine stops in his side's shootout defeat to Iran. The 34-year-old made four of those saves from shots from inside the box and enjoyed a save percentage of 90.

Ahmed Al Kassar also put on a valiant display between the sticks for Saudi Arabia in their shootout defeat to Korea Republic with six stops – the second highest number of saves in the last 16 stage.

Awesome Afif

Akram Afif **(pictured)** has been involved in a goal in each of his four matches so far, with tournament leading scorer Aymen Hussain the only other player to achieve that feat.

Afif registered a record 10 assists as Qatar won their maiden title in 2019 and is replicating that form four years later in their title defence. The 27-year-old began the 2023 campaign with a double against Lebanon and was again on the scoresheet against Tajikistan. It was followed by an assist in the 1-0 win against China before a penalty and another assist helped his side progress with a 2-1 defeat of Palestine.

Lee shines bright

Korean attacking midfielder Lee Kang-in was the player who created the most chances in the Round of 16 with the 22-year-old creating seven chances against the Saudis of which five came from open play. Tajikistan's Shahrom Samiev took second place with six chances created in their win against the UAE.

Paris Saint-Germain star Lee also matched Australia's Craig Goodwin as the player to create the most chances in a single match, with the Socceroos star doing so in their 2-0 win against India on Matchday One.

Qatar 2023 well poised to smash television viewership records

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

The AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 achieved truly global broadcast coverage throughout the Group Stage as close to 60 media partners and over 120 channels provided worldwide coverage of the pulsating action featuring Asia's top 24 teams.

Having already cemented its place as the most extensively covered and accessible edition ever with a broadcast footprint in 160 territories, the 18th edition of the Continental showpiece also marked the first time that all Group Stage matches were broadcast live in markets beyond AFC territories including the USA, Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

Audiences have also grown within traceable markets, with cumulative TV ratings up by 14% from the Group Stage during the 2019 edition, assisted by free-to-air broadcast in several participating team territories.

Vietnam is among one of the best performing markets, with over 200 million total TV reach tuning into the Group Stage matches on VTV5 and other local channels. This represents an 84% increase in TV ratings from the 2019 Group Stage.

Extensive coverage by tvN and tvN Sports in Korea Republic delivered a 51% TV rating increase from the 2019 Group Stage, with over 65 million TV reach closely following as Korea Republic progressed to the Knockout Stage.

Indonesia's return to the AFC Asian Cup for the first time since 2007, and subsequent progression to the Knockout Stage for the very first time, drew a total of 154 million TV reach on RCTI and various domestic channels.

With audience data from the Group Stage still being gathered from a number of major markets, this will only serve to enhance the sprawling footprint and rising cumulative TV audience of the competition.

Viewership also saw a significant jump on the Asian Football Confederation (AFC)'s social channels, with views of the Group Stage highlights on YouTube already up by over 120% from the entirety of the 2019 edition.

AFC General Secretary Datuk Seri Windsor John said: "The preliminary eye-catching TV viewership figures reinforce the growing demand for AFC football and reiterates the world-class platform of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 for our players, teams and passionate fans alike.

"In addition to a truly global audience outreach so far, we look forward towards working hand in hand with our valued media and broadcast partners as we strive to scale the volume of TV coverage and engage with the hundreds of millions of Asian football fans like never before."

Football fans can go to the-AFC.com for more detailed information on the broadcaster line-up in their respective nations and territories. In addition, the information is also readily available on the AFC LIVE mobile application.



Sensory rooms deliver incredible experiences at Asian Cup in Qatar

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

Fans with sensory needs are able to be part of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 excitement in a safe and comfortable environment. The tournament's Local Organising Committee (LOC) has set up sensory rooms at three stadiums: Al Bayt, Lusail and Education City. The spaces allow fans to watch matches in a quieter space, equipped with assistive technology and managed by expert staff.

The sensory rooms were first introduced during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and continue to be a pivotal feature in the tournament's accessibility strategy. For Jassim Al Jaidah, LOC Sustainability Communication & Stakeholder Manager, making the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 accessible to everyone is a key priority for organisers.

"The sensory rooms are a crucial part of our commitment to providing an accessible tournament to all fans. We believe everyone has the right to enjoy football. We wanted to make sure fans with sensory needs are able to enjoy all the excitement of a stadium experience from a comfortable environment. By working with local stakeholders, we were able to make sure that fans with sensory needs across Qatar were able to enjoy the action straight from the pitch and support their teams," said Al Jaidah.

During match days, children, parents and teachers were able to access the sensory room prior to, during and after the match, allowing fans extra time to acclimatise to their new surroundings and avoid crowds when entering and leaving the stadium. Sensory rooms are fitted with controlled lighting and interactive projections to engage the senses and create an inviting and stimulating internal atmosphere. They open up to a row of dedicated seats, from where fans can enjoy the match proceedings and interact with the crowd at their own pace.




Jassim Al Jaidah

Sonia Besbes, a special education teacher, sees the inclusion of sensory rooms in stadiums as an important step towards integrating children with sensory needs into the football fan community. "Sensory rooms at the Asian Cup are creating wonderful memories. Allowing children with sensory needs, such as children with autism, to attend football matches is really important for their growth and development," said Besbes.

In addition to sensory rooms, the LOC offers audio descriptive commentary in Arabic for blind and partially sighted fans. All stadiums have wheelchair accessible seats as well as seating options for fans with limited mobility.

Qatar is hosting the AFC Asian Cup for a record third time after successfully hosting it in 1988 and 2011. Twenty-four of the continent's best teams will compete for the continent's most prestigious football title. A total of 51 matches will be played across nine stadiums, with the final set for 10 February 2024.





#eAsianCup: All you need to know

THE PENINSULA - DOHA

The AFC eAsian Cup kicked off yesterday with 20 teams from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC)'s Member Associations competing for the title in Doha.

While the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 has reached the quarter-final stage, the five-day AFC eAsian Cup will see the 20 teams engaged in intense battles to fly their national flag high on the virtual pitch.

KNOW YOUR TEAMS

With the 20 teams of three players poised to etch their names in history as they embark on the inaugural edition of the AFC eAsian Cup, the-AFC.com provides you with the first look at the trailblazers who are set to make history in this groundbreaking tournament.

Group A

Qatar: Hassan Al Qadi, Abdulaziz Shaheen, Mohammed Al Ahmad

Tajikistan: Shuhratjon Hakmov, Ayub Bekov, Sharifi Behruzi

Lebanon: Nadim El Dsouki, Imad El Zein, Ali Makki

Group B

Uzbekistan: Akmal Abduvaliyev, Salokhiddin Esanov, Rashid Khakimov

Syria: Mazen Dhbour, Wael Al Kabbani, Anas Tulaimat

India: Hemanth Krishna Kommu, Ibrahim Gulrez, Charanjot Singh

Group C

Islamic Republic of Iran: Amirhesam Karami, Mahdi Ezzati, Hassan Pajani

United Arab Emirates: Saeed Alyammahi, Ali Murad Alblooshi, Khalid Alshamsi

Hong Kong, China: Wong Yiu Hang, Choi Ka Lok, Liem Jason

Group D

Japan: Satake Shinichi, Aihara Tsubasa, Hashiki Shumpei

Indonesia: Mohamad Akbar Paudie, Elga Cahya Putra, Rizky Faidan

Vietnam: Nguyen Minh Hung, Nghiem Xuan Nam, Le Doan Thanh Tam



The enticing clashes will continue on Friday and see the conclusion of the remaining battles in each of the six groups.

Group E

Korea Republic: Kim Woo-jun, Song Young-woo, Kim Min-hwan

Malaysia: Shaharil Shaifuddin, Muhamad Khairul, Mohamad Norhaikal

Jordan: Sief Addeen Dababneh, Sara Haddadin, Samer Alsbeiat

Bahrain: Hasan Ali Ahmed, Fadhel Abdali, Abdulaziz Faqeehi

Group F

Saudi Arabia: Ahmed Alamri, Amjad Alqarni, Abdulaziz Albuhayri

Thailand: Thanan Sukmueng, Teinvithit Srinam, Natthaphat Pornkriengrai

Kyrgyz Republic: Turatbek Omurkulov, Mukhamed Anvar, Samat Temirov

Oman: Mohammed Said Salim, Abdullah Ali Al Balushi, Fahad Al Kindi



QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY

Ostberg and Barth lead after opening super special stage



QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannai flags off Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah's car during the ceremonial start of the Qatar International Rally.

THE PENINSULA – LUSAIL

Norwegian driver Mads Ostberg and his Swedish co-driver Patrik Barth got to grips with their Škoda Fabia RS Rally2 and moved into a slender lead after the opening 4.36km super special stage of the Qatar International Rally at the LCSC Karting Academy last evening.

Twenty-two competitors from 16 nations were flagged away from the ceremonial start at a new location on Lusail Boulevard earlier in the evening by QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannai.

They then tackled two laps and two passes of the 1.09km asphalt course at Lusail and the Norwegian was 0.8 seconds quicker than second-placed Pierre-Louis Loubetand Loris Pascaud.

The French duo are competing in a desert rally for the first time in their SRT Škoda Fabia RS Rally2 and the opening tarmac stage was not a true reflection of what the French crew will face over the next two days.

Loubet said: "It's a pleasure to be here and I am looking forward to the rally. I know it is going to be very challenging. I hope I can find my braking points in the open desert for the corners and not brake too late!"

After sharing last year's regional championship title with Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah, Abdullah Al Rawahi will be hoping to go one better this season with his Jordanian co-driver Ata Al Hmoud. The Omani guided his Autotek-run Škoda to third on the opening stage.

Al Rawahi said: "This first rally of the year is going to be quite a challenge, bearing in mind our last event was in Cyprus (October 2023). I hope this will be an amazing year. We are pushing. We want to compete for the win. Every year we get closer and closer. Last year was very disappointing. We broke the engine. This year we also have a new challenge of the JWRC and we have Rally Sweden in a couple of weeks. I am very excited about that. These will be new experiences. Hopefully, this year is another good learning curve for us."

Al Attiyah and co-driver Giovanni Bernacchini came home fourth in their Autotek Motorsport Volkswagen Polo GTI.

Local driver Abdulaziz Al Kuwari and Irish co-driver James Fulton are competing in a Sarrazin-supplied Volkswagen Polo GTi for the first time. The Qatari finished the opening stage in fifth position.

He said: "I am looking forward to this rally and happy to be in a rally car again after even more than a year. They are good stages, mixed, some technical sections and some fast and some bumpy sections. We did a good test. It's the first time in the Polo. I need some more time in the car to properly adapt but we are happy. It's very similar to the Škoda. It is going to be a very good competition. Thanks to the QMMF for putting me in a rally car again."

Nasser Khalifa Al Atya has teamed up with Lebanon's Ziad Chehab for the forthcoming season and the 1993 Qatar International Rally winner guided his Motortune Ford Fiesta to 10th position.

Al Atya said: "I did two days of testing with the new car. I am hoping to adapt better than last year. I feel more committed in the car now and hope to be pushing hard this year. I have more experience and I did two rounds in the World Championship in Portugal and Sardinia. That gave me a lot of time to sit and race. I am also happy with my new co-driver Ziad and the Motortune team. This year will be different for me."

Shaker Jweihan drew first blood with the fastest time in the MERC2 category for production class machines. The Jordanian held an overnight cushion of 11.4 seconds over Lebanese driver Ahmad Khaled.

Indian debutant Fabid Amer stopped his Subaru WRX-STi with reported fuel feed issues.

Latvia's Mārtiņš Sesks was taken ill in the build-up to the rally in Doha and received medical treatment for a virus.

With co-driver Renārs Francis not able to read pace notes in English, it would have been necessary for his team to find both a replacement driver and co-driver for the third SRTŠkoda but this was not logistically possible in the timescale available.

Today, competitors will tackle two loops of three gravel stages through Qatar's northern deserts. The Waab Al Mashrab (15.32km), Al Waab (15.33km) and Umm Birka (21.38km) specials will be run in the morning at 09.20hrs, 09.48hrs and 10.30hrs, respectively.

They will then be repeated in the afternoon at 13.20hrs, 13.48hrs and 14.30hrs after a return to the Lusail Sports Arena for a regroup and midday service from 11.30hrs.

A strengthening wind is forecast for today and part of tomorrow. This will alleviate potential dust issues on the special stages provided that it does not intensify and create sandstorm conditions and poor visibility.



A fan takes a selfie with Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah.



QMMF President Abdulrahman Al Mannai, Executive Director Amro Al Hamad and Secretary General Abdul Razzaq Al Kuwari pose with competitors during the ceremonial start of the Qatar International Rally at Lusail Boulevard yesterday.

2024 QATAR INTERNATIONAL RALLY - POSITIONS AFTER SS1

1. Mads Østberg (NOR)/Patrik Barth (SWE)Škoda Fabia RS	4min 37.6sec
2. Pierre-Louis Loubet (FRA)/Loris Pascaud (FRA)Škoda Fabia RS	4min 38.4sec
3. Abdullah Al Rawahi (OMN)/Ata Al Hmoud (JOR) Škoda Fabia Evo	4min 40.2sec
4. Nasser Saleh Al Attiyah (QAT)/Giovanni Bernacchini (POL) Volkswagen Polo GTI	4min40.9sec
5. Abdulaziz Al Kuwari (QAT)/James Fulton (IRL)Volkswagen Polo GTI	4min45.0sec
6. Khalid Al Suwaidi (QAT)/Ross Whittock (GBR)Volkswagen Polo GTI	4min50.0sec
7. Shaker Jweihan (JOR)/Mustafa Juma (JOR)Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X	4min 50.2sec
8. Ahmad Khaled (LEB)/Samer Sfeir (LEB)Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX	5min 01.6sec
9. Husam Salim (JOR)/Nancy Al Majali (JOR)Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X	5min 02.8sec
10. Nasser Khalifa Al Atya (QAT)/Ziad Chehab (LEB) Ford Fiesta Mk II	5min 07.4sec
11. Ihab Al Shurafa (JOR)/Yousef Juma (JOR)Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX	5min 14.5sec
12. Shadi Shaban (JOR)/Samer Issa (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX	5min 15.0sec
13. Zakariya Al Aamri (OMN)/Mohammed Al Mazrui (OMN)Subaru WRX-STI	5min 18.2sec
14. Jassim Al Muqahwi (KWT)/Thamer Al Mutairi (KWT) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X	5min 19.6sec
15. Rashid Al Muhannadi (QAT)/Taha Al Zadjali (OMN)Subaru WRX-STI	5min 30.7sec
16. Mohammed Al Atteya (QAT)/Savvas Laos (CYP)Mitsubishi Lancer Evo X	5min 33.6sec
17. SaneemPayyaakkal (ARE)/Musa Sherif (IND)Ford Fiesta Rally 4	5min 33.4sec
18. Stefano Marrini (ITA)/Stefano Tiraboschi (ITA) Can-Am Maverick X3 (T4)	5min 38.0sec
19. Filippo Epis (ITA)/Gabriele Zanni (ITA) Yamaha YXZ 1000R (T4)	5min 42.2sec
20. Khalid Al Muhannadi (QAT)/Mohammed Innab (SAU) Polaris RZR Pro XP (T4)	5min 53.6sec
21. Issa Abu Jamous (JOR)/Saqer Abu Jamous (JOR) Mitsubishi Lancer Evo IX	5min 58.7sec

Pakistan host India Davis Cup tie for first time in 60 years

AFP – ISLAMABAD

Pakistan host arch-political foe India this weekend in their first Davis Cup tennis clash on home soil in six decades -- one of the few encounters in any sport between the two nations in years.

The two sides meet in a Group 1 playoff fixture on the grass courts of the Pakistan Sports Complex in Islamabad, although it has yet to be decided if spectators will be allowed because of security concerns.

When India and Pakistan were forged out of violent partition 76 years ago, the split also created one of sport's greatest rivalries -- mostly in cricket, but also in hockey and other events.

But political differences over Kashmir mean sporting teams from each side rarely visit the other unless taking part in sanctioned multi-national events.

"Hopefully this tie will act as an example of a bridge between Pakistan and India, as I'll love to see the Indian cricket team play in our country in the near future," said home player Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi.

India team manager Sunil Yajman said the team were looking forward to the tie.

"The whole team is extremely happy and excited to be in Pakistan," he added.

Brahms wins Ras Rokn Island Cup after thriller

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Brahms, ridden by Alberto Sanna, outpaced Al Yateema by a short head in the final moments of an exciting feature to bag the Ras Rokn Island Cup for owners Wathnan Racing at Al Uqda Racecourse yesterday.

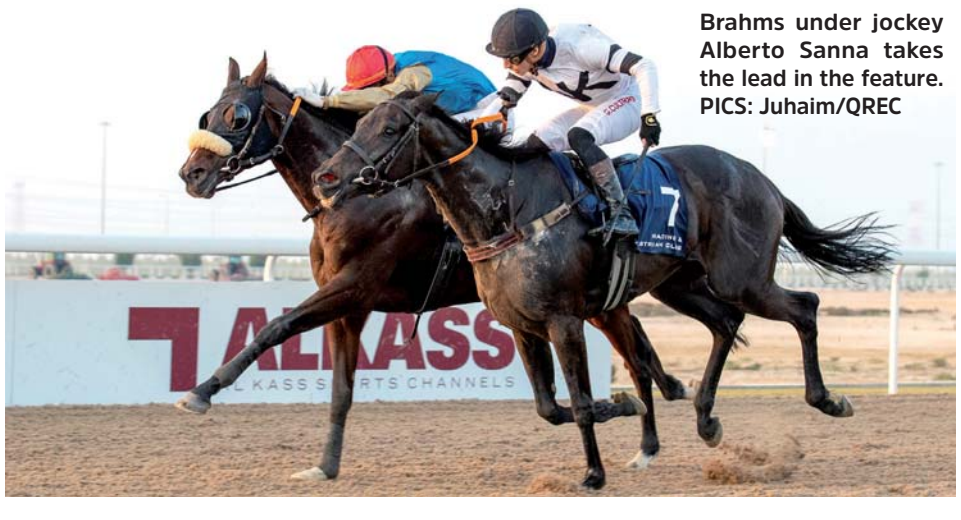
The Local Thoroughbred Handicap - the final contest of the seven-race 17th Al Uqda Meeting – ended up in thrilling fashion when the Alban de Mieulle-trained made a late surge to emerge victorious after getting a strong challenge from Al Yateema, led by jockey Giuseppe Cultraro, throughout the 2000m run.

Saleh Salem Al Marri rode Suheal Qatar to third place in the feature. The winners were by honoured by Al Uqda Complex Manager Abdulaziz Jassim Al Boenain.

Also yesterday, Sanna had guided Gassim Ghazali-trained Townsend to Thoroughbred Handicap win to claim his first title of the day.



The connections of Brahms celebrate after their win.



Brahms under jockey Alberto Sanna takes the lead in the feature. PICS: Juhaim/QREC

17TH AL UQDA MEETING: RAS ROKN ISLAND CUP DAY

WINNERS: (Horse, Trainer, Jockey)

Ras Rokn Island Cup - Local Thoroughbred Handicap
Brahms, Alban de Mieulle, Alberto Sanna

Thoroughbred Handicap
Owners Dream, Mohammed Ghazali, Ivan Rossi

Thoroughbred Handicap
Golden Trick, Mohammed Ghazali, Hamed Al Busaidi

Thoroughbred Handicap
Townsend Manor, Gassim Ghazali, Alberto Sanna

Purebred Arabian Handicap
Nuwar, Mohammed Salama Ashour, Jefferson Smith

Purebred Arabian Maiden Plate
Yaqoob, Jean de Mieulle, Faleh Bughanaim

Ras Rokn Island Cup Day, Al Uqda Racecourse
Monya, Julian Smart, Samuel Legrix

WORLD AQUATICS CHAMPIONSHIPS

Participation records set to be broken as Doha set to host aquatics festival

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Doha 2024 will break the record for the highest number of athletes competing and number of countries represented at the World Aquatics Championships as Qatar host the flagship competition for the first time from today until February 18.

The records were announced during a joint press conference held by World Aquatics and the World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 Local Organising Committee on the eve of the event.

More than 2,600 athletes representing 201 countries and one refugee team will travel to Doha to compete across six aquatic sports, with qualification spots for the Olympic Games Paris 2024 on offer to add to the excitement. Four of the sports will see a record number of participating countries, including swimming, and three will see a record number of competing athletes.

Among the athletes are USA's Artistic Swimming World Champion, Bill May; defending high diving world champion, Constantin Popovici from Romania; captain of the reigning water polo world champions, Sabrina van der Sloot of the Netherlands; Canada's PanAm Games gold medallist in diving, Pamela Ware; and USA two-time world junior swimming champion, Katie Grimes.

The five athletes attended the opening press conference where they expressed their excitement for the World Championships and praised the quality of the venues in Doha.

The six aquatic sports will take place at three venues across Doha, including the state-of-the-art Aspire Dome – the biggest aquatic sports complex in the world. The Hamad Aquatic Centre and Old Doha Port will also host competitions providing a spectacular backdrop for the world's best athletes.

Speaking ahead of the World Aquatics Championships, World Aquatics President Husain Al Musallam said:"We are delighted to be in Doha for the World Aquatics Championships. Qatar has proven itself as an excellent host of major sports events and we have every confidence that athletes will be provided with the very best conditions to compete. Already we have received positive feedback from athletes who are excited for competitions to get underway. As the first time this region has hosted the World Championships, we are also excited by the role the event can play in extending our reach and ensuring everyone can participate, compete in and benefit from aquatic sports"



World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 Local Organising Committee's Director General Khaleel Al Jaber speaks during a press conference held in Doha, yesterday. World Aquatics Executive Director Brent Nowicki (left) and Director of Marketing, Communications, Opening and Closing Ceremonies Committee Sheikha Asma bint Thani Al Thani are also present. BELOW: Officials pose for a photograph with athletes and Doha 2024 mascots Nahim, a playful Qatari whale shark, and Mayfara, a walking, talking, smiling coral.



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Doha 2024 Director General Khaleel Al Jaber said: "The World Aquatics Championships – Doha 2024 will be a unique celebration of aquatics sports and Qatar's rich heritage. It is fitting that these Championships are set to break records for participation reinforcing the importance of this event. We are humbled that more athletes, and more countries, than ever before have opted to compete in these Championships. We have no doubt that they will entertain the thousands of spectators in attendance and inspire the next generation of aquatics athletes in Qatar and the wider MENA region."

More than 1000 volunteers will ensure that fans enjoy an unforgettable experience, while the Fan Zone, located between the Aspire Dome and Hamad Aquatic Centre, will enhance their enjoyment of the competition further. The International Broadcasting Centre and Main Media Centre are also located on site, to ensure a seamless experience for the hundreds of media in attendance.

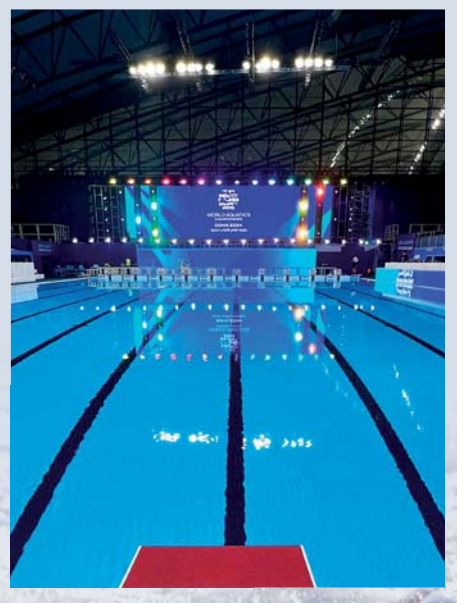
The competition at Doha 2024 is set to inspire the next generation of aquatics athletes to 'Dive Into Your Thrill' in a country and region with a rich marine heritage. Doha 2024 ambassadors will visit local schools and clubs to encourage participation alongside mascots 'Nahim', a playful Qatari whale shark, and 'Mayfara' a walking, talking, smiling coral, who are intimately tied to Qatar's heritage and represent the inclusivity of the Championships.

The action in Doha will begin today with artistic swimming and diving, ahead of the Opening Ceremony on 4 February at the Aspire Dome. The open water swimming will also take place in the first week of competition with high diving and swimming competitions taking place in the second week, while the water polo will be ongoing throughout.





All venues are ready to host the World Championships.





Qatar win skeet mixed team gold at Cairo World Cup



Reem Al Sharshani celebrates with her mother.

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

Qatar's pair of Rashid Saleh Al Athba and Reem Al Sharshani came from four shots down just after the halfway point in their skeet mixed team final against France 1 to win World Cup gold in Cairo on the final day of the event.

When Al Athba missed his first shot in the fourth of the six rounds the gap between his team and the French pairing of Eric Delaunay and Lucie Anastassiou, who had both shot maximums on their previous round, began to look unbridgeable.

But then a sudden drop in form by the latter shooter in her penultimate round, when she missed all five clays, tipped the contest towards the Qatari pairing, who went into the final round with a one shot lead in a competition taking part in unpredictable winds.



Reem Al Sharshani and Rashid Saleh Al Athba.

With all but Al Athba missing one target in the final round of an event that will feature for the first time at the Paris 2024 Olympics it meant that Qatar eventually took gold 38-36.

For the 31-year-old Anastassiou, who had suffered a similar dip in the women's skeet final which dropped her out of a bronze medal position that was eventually filled by Al Sharshani, this was another bittersweet day.

Al Sharshani, fifth at this month's Asian Championships in Kuwait, earned her first individual World Cup medal as she took bronze.

Earlier on the shotgun range at the Egypt International Olympic City the bronze medal went to the Mexican pairing of Luis Gallardo Oliveros and Gabriela Rodriguez, who defeated a United States 2 team comprising Christian Elliott and Caitlin Connor 39-32.

The Peninsula
Local focus, Global vision
FRIDAY 2 FEBRUARY 2024
SPORT

‘Dark horses’ Tajikistan eye quarters spot

CHINTHANA WASALA
THE PENINSULA

Tajikistan, under the guidance of head coach Petar Segrt, will aim to go a step further in their dream Asian Cup run as they take on a resilient Jordan side for a place in the semi-finals, today.

The high-octane quarter-final clash will take place at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

The Asian Cup debutants have already made their mark at the continental showpiece, surpassing expectations by finishing ahead of China in Group A and defeating the United Arab Emirates – the semi-finalists in the last two tournaments – in a thrilling shootout.

“We are ready to continue our dream,” Segrt said during the pre-match press conference, yesterday.

“Maybe everyone is laughing at me but I believe in a dream,” Segrt said. “We know we are the dark horses of this tournament and the dark horse is still running,” Segrt said, adding that his team is “ready to face Jordan,” and continue their dream run in Qatar.

Despite being the lowest-ranked team among the last eight standing at Qatar 2023, Tajikistan have fared well against Jordan, having drawn their joint qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup 2026 and the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 in November

“Against us in the qualifiers, we were leading in the 89th minute, and seconds later they scored. They are a smart team that doesn’t give up,” Segrt commended his opponents.

The tactician kept calm throughout the group and Round of 16 stages, easing the pressure off his players. That has paid high dividends for the Central Asian side.

“I took the pressure from the players in the group stage because it was new for them and they were not ready for this level of pressure, but now after the group stage I cannot take the pressure for them because we are in the last 16 teams and now it is all to play for,” Segrt said.

“I’m proud of my players, we are a group like a family and I’m happy to be the leader of this team, but there is too much focus on me now, you should focus on the players because they are the stars.”

On the other side, Jordan’s head coach, Hussein Ammouta, also remains optimistic about his team’s chances.

The former Morocco international who is no stranger to Qatar, was part of the Al Sadd side which won the Amir Cup as well as the Qatar Cup in 1997. Ammouta’s men salvaged a draw against South Korea – one of the title favourites – in the group stage. However, Ammouta knows what’s at stake in today’s do-or-die encounter.

“We are about to go into an important match for us, a game that separates us from our first-ever semi-final.

Ammouta acknowledged their opponents’ strengths.

“Tajikistan are a tough, organised team who are quick in transitions and have caused us a lot of trouble in the previous game against them. Any team that makes it to the quarter-finals has earned the right to be here. It will not be an easy game against a strong opponent which we faced a couple of months ago and drew 1-1. It was a difficult game and we expect the same, especially in a competition like this where all teams are prepared. Our preparations have gone well and morale is high in our dressing room,” Ammouta said.

Ammouta also noted that only two Arab teams standing as of now. “It is unfortunate that all Arab teams including my country Morocco were eliminated from both the Africa Cup of Nations and the AFC Asian Cup. There is only us and Qatar now, and we know that we get a lot of compassion from Arab fans, we saw that with Morocco during the World Cup,” Ammouta said.

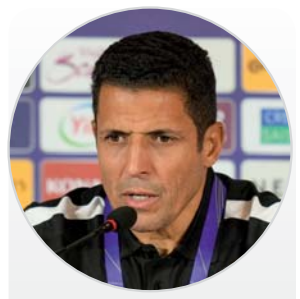
“We are motivated and ambitious to represent ourselves first, this is our responsibility and duty.”


Tajikistan’s players in action.


Jordan players during a training session.



“We are ready to continue our dream. Maybe everyone is laughing at me but I believe in a dream. We know we are the dark horses of this tournament and the dark horse is still running.”
Petar Segrt
Tajikistan coach



“Tajikistan are a tough, organised team who are quick in transitions and have caused us a lot of trouble in the previous game against them. Any team that makes it to the quarter-finals has earned the right to be here.”
Hussein Ammouta
Jordan coach

TJK **14:30** JOR
Ahmad bin Ali Stadium

Tajikistan and Jordan will both be chasing history when they meet in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 quarter-finals today. Debutants Tajikistan stunned United Arab Emirates on penalties in the Round of 16 while Jordan registered a thrilling 3-2 victory over Iraq to book their last eight spot, with both sides having never featured in the semi-finals of the continental showpiece.

Confidence boost
Tajikistan have not lost their last two meetings with Jordan (W1 D1), having suffered defeat in three previous encounters before that with multiple goals conceded each time.

Resilient
Tajikistan have not conceded more than a single goal in their first four AFC Asian Cup matches. The last team who had such a run in their first five games in the competition was Jordan in 2004-2011 (7).

Hot and cold
Jordan have scored nine goals and conceded five in their four games at Qatar 2023, as many as in the previous two editions combined (W3 D2 L2). They have, however, scored 3.7 goals more than expected, the biggest positive difference in the current edition.

Shoot on sight
Four of Jordan's goals have been scored from outside the box, more than any other side in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023. Uzbekistan in 2011 (5 goals in 6 games) are the last team to have scored more such goals in a single edition.

Al Arab eyes historic Asian Cup semi-final

THE PENINSULA – DOHA

A place in the history books is the focus of Yazan Al Arab **(pictured)** as Jordan attempt to make the semi-finals of the AFC Asian Cup for the first time when they meet Tajikistan at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today.

Two previous appearances in the quarter-finals ended in defeats against Japan (2004) and Uzbekistan (2011) respectively with Al Arab determined to help Jordan break through the barrier.

“Tomorrow’s match is a very difficult match,” said the centre-back.

“We’ll play against a team who are physically strong. We will draw motivation from our fans and hopefully we can reach the semi-finals.”

The 28-year-old has played a pivotal role in Jordan’s run to the last eight, with the team’s only defeat thus far coming in the final Group E match against Bahrain, a tie which Al Arab did not feature in.



Al Arab’s physical presence is not only key to Jordan’s defence but he’s also a threat in the opposition box, as was proven by the equalising goal he scored in the fifth minute of added time in the Round of 16 match against Iraq.

Seven years on from making his senior international debut in a 4-1 win over Afghanistan, Al Arab is a permanent fixture and firmly believes that the current squad has what it takes to scale new heights.

“You can see that the Jordanian team doesn’t give up and even the tying goal that I scored was not an individual effort, it was a group effort.

“Every single one of us was very determined, not only for 90 minutes but until the last whistle. It’s our responsibility now and we will do our best to reach the semi-finals.”

Qatar to host charity match to support quality education for children worldwide

QNA – DOHA

Qatar is hosting a historic charity football match on Feb. 23 as part of the inaugural 'Match for Hope' initiative. The event brings together some of the world’s top content creators and football legends.

The inaugural Match for Hope will be held in Ahmad bin Ali Stadium, one of the Qatar World Cup 2022 stadiums. The match will see social media sensations Chunkz and AboFlah captain each side.

The two captains will lead teams made up of both famous content creators and World Cup legends for a showdown match in the 45,000-capacity stadium which hosted seven matches during Qatar World Cup 2022, and will host seven matches in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

Match for Hope will be played to raise money and awareness for Education Above All (EAA) Foundation, a global non-profit organisation dedicated to transforming lives through education. All proceeds from the match will be donated to EAA projects in Mali, Rwanda, Tanzania, Pakistan, Palestine, and Sudan.

The full line-up of players will be announced in the coming weeks by event organiser Q Life, a cultural platform under Qatar’s International Media Office (IMO). The event, organised in collaboration with Qatar Football Association (QFA), will also feature live music performances, with artists to be announced shortly.

Tickets go on sale from Ticketmaster and can be purchased by visiting www.match4hope.com. Fans can also donate to the cause by clicking the ‘Donate’ button on the Match For Hope website.

The match will be live streamed in Arabic and English for fans to tune in around the world.

