

Sports

With royal backing and Snoop Dogg rap, Malaysia minnows challenge best in Asia

'Southern Tigers', continental giants face off

News in brief

Basra to host 25th Gulf CUP

DOHA: Arab Gulf Cup Football Federation (AGCFF) Executive office assured the 25th GCC Cup will take place in Iraq's Basra City for between January 6th and 19, 2023. In a statement, the AGCFF's President Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Bin Ahmad Al-Thani, explained that a session was held to discuss the upcoming agenda and to decide on event 25's location in Basra following their recent visit on its facilities. The AGCFF's secretary general Jassem Al-Rumaihi presented a detailed explanation on Basra's preparations and arrangements for hosting the championship. —KUNA

S Korea bids to host Asian Cup

SEOUL: South Korea officially submitted its bid to host the 2023 Asian Cup following China's withdrawal due to the coronavirus, the Korean Football Association (KFA) said Thursday. China was due to host the games in June and July next year, but pulled out of staging the tournament last month due to challenges over its strict zero-COVID strategy. The Asian Football Confederation then invited new bids to host the quadrennial tournament, saying interested countries must submit by June 30. Top regional sides including Japan, South Korea, Australia and reigning champions Qatar had already qualified, as have China. "Today, the KFA officially submitted a letter of intent to host the 2023 AFC Asian Cup to the Asian Football Confederation," the KFA said in a tweet. "South Korea is trying to host and win the Asian Cup for the first time in 63 years! We ask for your support and interest!" —AFP

Boca supporters arrested

SAO PAULO: Three supporters of Argentine football giants Boca Juniors have been arrested in Brazil, accused of racism and making a Nazi salute during their team's match away to Corinthians, local authorities said on Wednesday. Two of the fans were arrested for a "racial slur" having allegedly directed monkey chants at Corinthian fans during Tuesday night's Copa Libertadores last 16 clash. The third fan was arrested for "racism" and "apology for crime" for having allegedly raised his arm in a Nazi salute. Sao Paulo's security ministry said in a statement that all three were "caught red-handed" at the Neo Quimica Arena in Brazil's largest city and spent the night in police cells, where they remain. The first two face between one and three years in prison if found guilty. Their bail was set at 20,000 reais (\$3,850), the inspector in charge of the case told CNN Brasil. The third fan, for whom no bail was granted, faces between three and six months in jail if found guilty. —AFP

Burglary at Ronaldo house

MADRID: Six people have been arrested in connection with the three-million-euro burglary at the house belonging to former Brazil forward Ronaldo, AFP learned on Thursday from sources close to the investigation. Paris Saint-Germain player Marco Verratti was staying at Ronaldo's house in Ibiza but was not home when the burglars struck on Monday, making off with jewellery and money. Two people were arrested in the port of Denia in eastern Spain and four others were held in the southern city of Malaga, these sources told AFP without further details. According to the Spanish press, four of the six arrested are Albanian, the other two being a Spaniard and a Romanian, making up an organised gang specialising in burglary. Press reports also claim that the Spanish police recovered a large part of the loot, estimated at around three million euros. —AFP



Giorgio Chiellini

L AFC 'perfect for me': Chiellini

LOS ANGELES: Veteran Italy and Juventus defender Giorgio Chiellini said Wednesday he's looking forward to bringing a high level of play and a wealth of experience to Los Angeles FC as they pursue the Major League Soccer crown. "I am fully convinced that this club is perfect for me," Chiellini said in his first official press conference for LAFC, flashing his new No 14 jersey. LAFC have yet to win a major honor since joining MLS as an expansion team in 2018. They currently lead the league with 33 points from 16 matches, and are clearly doing all they can to ensure they stay on top. Since announcing the acquisition of Chiellini two weeks ago, the club have confirmed the imminent arrival of Wales captain Gareth Bale on a 12-month contract that features options through 2024. Meanwhile, longtime franchise cornerstone Carlos Vela has agreed to an extension through the 2023 season. —AFP

JOHOR BAHRU: A wealthy prince and some astute promotion involving US rapper Snoop Dogg have helped turn Malaysia's Johor Darul Ta'zim from footballing minnows into one of Asia's top clubs. The club, commonly known as JDT, has its roots in the former Johor FC and other clubs in the southern state, who kicked around the lower reaches of Malaysian football with an occasional minor cup win as their only honors.

But that all began to change in 2012, when Tunku Ismail Sultan Ibrahim, crown prince of the Johor royal family, took control of football in the state. With their new nickname of "Southern Tigers", JDT have dominated Malaysian football since 2014, winning the country's top-flight Super League in each of the last eight seasons. In April they became the first team from Malaysia to reach the knockout stages of the Asian Football Confederation's Champions League.

Now the club from the sleepy country of 32 million will in August face continental giants and two-time Asian champions Urawa Red Diamonds of Japan for a place in the last eight. "This is the harvest of a seed that was planted 10 years ago, with a lot of effort," JDT's head coach Benjamin Mora told AFP at the club's training centre in state capital Johor Bahru.

"We're a very small team compared to the giants of Asia," the Mexican manager said, but added that JDT's "fighting spirit" made them serious contenders. When Tunku Ismail became president of the football association in Johor, just north of city-state Singapore, its state team was average at best. He pushed through a major organisational revamp, upgrading stadiums and bringing in top players and foreign staff.

The team was rebranded in 2013 as Johor Darul Ta'zim - the last two words mean "abode of dignity" in Arabic, an official honorific for the state in Muslim-majority Malaysia. Tunku Ismail, the eldest son of the powerful Sultan Ibrahim Sultan Iskandar, established the club in 2013 before he was announced as its owner in 2016. His father, the sultan, heads one of Malaysia's nine Islamic royal families and, while he is a ceremonial ruler, wields considerable influence. He is a flamboyant figure - he has his own private army, and has built a house inspired by his favorite cartoon, The Flintstones.

Pogacar set as Denmark reaches Tour de France fever pitch

COPENHAGEN: With one day remaining ahead of the Tour de France's 'Grand Depart' in Denmark, Tadej Pogacar sounded a warning to those hoping to dethrone the double champion. The world's greatest bike race embarks from Copenhagen on Friday and if the 30,000 fans who turned out for the unveiling of the teams on Wednesday is anything to go by the Danish public will be out in force for the three opening stages here. A confident Pogacar was thrilled by the prospect. "I can't wait," the fresh-faced 23-year-old Slovenian said. "We are all ready, we have a strong team and it's just a matter of not stressing too much until Friday." The opening stage around the streets of Copenhagen may be hit by rain.

"I don't know what to think about the time-trial but I'm ready and I'm sure it's going to be fast. It's short and technically challenging," he said before the 13.2km individual test. "Everyone seems to be stressed but we are confident," said the surprise 2020 winner who defended his title 12 months ago. Jumbo-Visma's co-captain in Dane Jonas Vingegaard said he was hoping

to simply survive the first week rather than attack it. But his teammate Wout Van Aert, possibly the world's best one-day racer, was planning to open with a bang after two editions impacted by COVID-19.

"Wearing the yellow jersey myself at the beginning of the race has been a big goal for me this season," said Belgian Van Aert, one of the favorites to win the opening stage. "I was surprised by the amount of people on the road sides. After two years, we can finally have a Grand Depart with huge crowds," he said. His key rival could be Ineos's Italian world time-trial champion, the gentle-giant Filippo Ganna. "Lots of people want this yellow jersey so it won't be easy," said Ganna, who won the Giro d'Italia's opening day time-trial in May. "Now I want the yellow jersey for my museum too," he said.

The 2018 champion Geraint Thomas is racing his 12th Tour de France, and has promised Pogacar, Vingegaard and the rest of the contenders his Ineos team will be racing aggressively, in the manner they have adopted this season to such success. On a darker note Danish police raided the hotel of

Morata to return to Atletico as loan at Juventus ends

MILAN: Alvaro Morata will return to Atletico Madrid after his loan at Juventus comes to an end on Thursday, the Serie A club have announced. The Spanish international forward will leave Turin after the two clubs failed to come to an agreement that would have allowed him to extend his stay in Italy. "Alvaro Morata's adventure at Juventus has come to an end," the Italian club said in a statement. "The Spanish forward, on loan from Atletico Madrid over the last two seasons, leaves the Bianconeri for the second time and returns to the ranks of the Colchoneros."

Bangladesh hope to rebound in T20 series with West Indies

ROSEAU: Comprehensively beaten in both Test matches by the West Indies, Bangladesh's cricketers are hoping the clouds of uncertainty ahead of their three-match T20 International series will blow away in time for Saturday's opening encounter at Windward Park in Dominica. While it is expected the visitors will be much more competitive in both the T20Is and then the three-match One-Day International series which rounds off their tour, question marks over the availability of key players could have an unsettling effect



JOHOR BAHRU: This picture shows a nutritionist preparing food at the Johor Darul Ta'zim football club training centre in Johor Bahru. —AFP

Tough fight ahead

Mora - who started with JDT's reserve team in 2015, before becoming the main team's coach in 2017 - said the crown prince's hands-on approach had helped the side. For most owners, "their priorities are not the game (but) the industry" and connections they can make, he said. But Tunku Ismail is "all in", and takes an interest in everything, "merchandise ... foreign players, local players, staff, training sessions," Mora added.

The revitalized team won the Super League in 2014, and the following year became the first Malaysian side to win the AFC Cup, Asia's second-tier continental club tournament, defeating Tajikistan's Istiklol 1-0. In an effort to boost their profile, JDT recently roped in Snoop Dogg to perform a rap called "Pioneers", alongside Malaysian hip-hop artist Joe Flizzow.

The colorful music video features scenes of the players, flag-waving supporters and fireworks exploding above their state-of-the-art, 40,000-seat, Sultan

Ibrahim stadium, which was opened in 2020. Defender Mohamad Aidil Zafuan Abdul Radzak, who has been with the club since 2013, said access to new equipment, such as oxygen therapy machines and infrared saunas, made a big difference. "I haven't seen other teams in Malaysia having what JDT has," the 34-year-old said.

JDT's players now make up the bulk of the national team, with 13 of them in the 23-man line-up at the 2023 Asian Cup qualifiers in June. However, it remains to be seen whether they can make a difference to the poor performance of the national side, which is ranked just 147th in the world. Despite their rapid rise, JDT face a tough fight against Asia's best sides in the Champions League's knockout stages in August, having been drawn against Japan's Urawa Reds. "It's going to be almost impossible because the Japanese and Korean teams are very strong," Mora said. JDT will have to play "almost perfect games, without mistakes," he added. —AFP



COPENHAGEN: Slovenia's cyclist Tadej Pogacar (left) and riders of the UAE Team Emirates ride during a training session, in Koge, on June 29, 2022, ahead of the start of the 2022 edition of the Tour de France cycling race, in Copenhagen, on July 1, 2022. —AFP

Bahrain-Victorious early on Thursday, but after two hours of searching all the team cars, nothing was requisitioned.

Fjords and bridges

Whoever wins on Friday, Saturday's second stage runs 202.5km from Roskilde to Nyborg along verdant roads adjacent to fjords and it culminating with a 20km crossing of the Great Belt Bridge where a second

equally tense struggle for the lead is expected. Some 12 million cars and trucks cross the bridge each year but the 176-strong peloton is liable to be subject to strong crosswinds on the sea crossing. Sunday's final day in Denmark is a 182km run from Vejle to Sonderborg, a municipality that boasts more than 300km of bike paths in a nation where five times more journeys are made by bicycle than by car. —AFP

Morata was in his second spell at Juve after being loaned there by Atletico in 2020, winning the Italian Cup the following year and scoring 32 times in all competitions. He previously played for the club between 2014 and 2016, when he won two league and cup doubles and reached the final of the Champions League in 2015. The 29-year-old was happy at Juventus and said that he wanted to stay in Turin. "Having the chance to wear this shirt is one of the best things that ever happened to me," Morata said in a farewell message on Instagram.

Juventus needed to pay 35 million euros to make Morata's move permanent according to the deal struck with Atletico, but Italian media report that he could still return if the Spanish side lower their asking price during the summer. Juve also made official the departures of Paulo Dybala and Italy international Federico Bernadeschi, whose contracts expire on Thursday. In March the club's

on a squad in dire need of stability and direction.

Even after he endorsed Bangladesh's greater affinity to the white ball formats of the game, and especially the 50 overs-per-side version, information coming out of Dhaka suggests Test captain Shakib al Hasan will miss the ODI leg of the campaign. This is apparently because these matches do not form part of the ODI Super League where points are earned towards qualification for next year's World Cup in India.

"I expect us to be a lot more competitive in the white ball formats," said Shakib in the immediate aftermath of his team's ten-wicket defeat in the second Test in St Lucia on Monday which gave the West Indies a 2-0 sweep of the series. "The One-Day format is something we always do well in and we are not far behind in the T20 format either so I believe we will put on a show



Spain's forward Alvaro Morata

CEO Maurizio Arrivabene said that Dybala's contract would not be renewed, with the Argentina striker hotly tipped to sign for arch rivals Inter Milan. —AFP

and be very competitive against the West Indies."

'Turned the corner'

Recent history bears out that confidence as Bangladesh won both the ODI and T20I series on their last visit to the region in 2018. At last year's World T20 in the United Arab Emirates and Oman, West Indies just managed to hold on for a three-run victory over the Bangladeshis, the only victory for the then title-holders at the main group stage of a massively disappointing campaign. Apart from Shakib's anticipated absence for the ODIs, there is also speculation that three players originally selected in the T20I squad - Mohammad Saifuddin, Shohidul Islam and Yasir Ali - will not be involved in the two matches in Dominica at the weekend and the finale in Guyana on July 7. —AFP