Afghan team arrives in Qatar for World Cup 2020 qualifiers

KABUL: Afghanistan's National Football Team arrived in Doha from the UAE on Monday for the second round of the Asian Qualifiers for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and the AFC Asian Cup China 2023.

After more than 18 months of inactivity due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Group E is now ready to resume matches.

According to AFC, the battle for top spot looks to be between Qatar and Oman while Afghanistan, India and Bangladesh fight it out for the automatic places in the third round of qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup.

While Qatar holds a four-point lead going into the final phase of matches in the second round of qualifying for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and the AFC Asian Cup China 2023, the side has played one game more than second-placed Oman.

But having dropped just two points so far – in a 0-0 draw with India just eight months after being crowned Asian champions – victory for Qatar over the Indians plus a draw in their meeting with Oman on June 7 would be enough to guarantee top spot and confirm that berth in China in two years' time.

Should Qatar win the group, the runners-up will be in a battle with the other second-placed teams across the eight groups in the second round hoping to have a good enough record to advance to the next phase of FIFA World Cup qualifying, AFC reported.

With seven group winners advancing to the third round, five of the best second-placed finishers would join them in going through.

AFC reported that the Oman side is already in a strong position to claim one of those spots should they not manage to climb over the Qataris, with 12 points from five games and matches against Qatar, Afghanistan and Bangladesh remaining.

However, the Afghan team presents the closest challenge to Oman but, with eight points separating Anoush Dastgir's team from the Gulf side, the chances of overhauling them are slim.

Instead, Afghanistan's focus will be on securing third spot in the group and guaranteeing themselves a place in the third round of qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup China 2023.

Much the same will apply for fourth-placed India, who have picked up three points from three draws in a disappointing campaign so far for Igor Stimac's team, while Bangladesh will be looking to challenge the Afghans and Indians in a quest to avoid last place and the requirement to enter the playoffs for the third round of qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup.

Afghanistan's captain, Farshad Noor has meanwhile been singled out as a player to watch as, according to the AFC, Noor provides a strong, technical presence at the heart of the Afghanistan midfield.

The 26-year-old headed in his side's first goal in the second phase of qualifying for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2023 when he netted the only goal of the game against Bangladesh in the nations' meeting back in September 2019.

The Afghan team, which has just wrapped up a 10-day training camp in the UAE, will face Bangladesh on Thursday and play Oman on June 11 and India on June 15. **The Kabul Times**

ACB sacks Asghar Afghan, introduces new captains

KABUL: Afghanistan Cricket Board on Monday announced its board members have approved the proposal of a split-captaincy for the national team, which effectively removes Asghar Afghan as skipper.

A statement issued by the ACB said: "The decision to remove Asghar Afghan from captainey was taken based on an investigation conducted by ACB's Investigative committee which concluded that some of Afghan's decisions as the captain of the team resulted in Afghanistan's loss to Zimbabwe in the first Test of the series between both sides in Abu Dhabi in March."

"As per the decision, left-hander Hashmatullah Shahidi is appointed the new ODI and Test Captain of the National team while Rahmat Shah will serve as the Vice-captain for both formats.

"Furthermore, it was decided that all-rounder Rashid Khan will remain the Vice-Captain of the T20I team while the decision to appoint the new captain will be taken soon," the statement read.

Shahidi's first assignment as the team's captain is likely to be against Pakistan – which will see Afghanistan play three ODIs and as many T20Is in UAE in September against Pakistan.

Afghanistan is also set to face Australia in a one-off Test in November this year, which as per ICC's original Future Tours Program (FTP) was scheduled to be played last year but was eventually postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Kabul Times

Norwich City: Why Premier League survival will not be bought

It's not a place their sporting director Stuart Webber wants to take the club back to.

As the Canaries prepare to return to the Premier League after a season away, Webber has rejected the idea of spending heavily in the push for survival.

"You can spend £120m net and get relegated. That's been proven more than once," said Webber.

"We can't go all in now just to try to stay up for one season because, if we get relegated, we're in deep, deep trouble.

"You can do that if you have a rich benefactor who says: 'Spend £100m - if it goes wrong, then I can actually afford to write that off.' We don't have that.

"Our version of that would be to go into administration. We can't take that risk." Norwich have bounced between the top two divisions over the past decade - promoted to the Premier League in 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2021, and relegated to the Championship in 2014, 2016 and 2020.

Daniel Farke's side are back in the top flight after winning the Championship, but memories of financial turmoil will stop them overspending.

Norwich have come through perilous financial situations before, most notably coming close to ruin after relegation from the Premier League in 1995. They managed to survive with co-owners Delia Smith, the celebrity chef, and her husband Michael Wynn Jones at the helm.

A relegation to League One in 2009 saw debts stack up to £23m and a brush with going into administration, before a restructuring and back-to-back promotions restored financial equity.

Naomi Osaka withdraws from French Open following threat to expel her from tournament over media boycott

The four-time Grand Slam singles champion was fined $15,000 after she did not conduct a post-match press conference following her first-round win against Romanian Patricia Maria Tig on Sunday.

The four Grand Slam organisers reacted strongly to Osaka's move, releasing a joint statement on Sunday that threatened the 23-year-old with potential disqualification and a ban from future tournaments should she not reconsider.

World No 2 Osaka said she had suffered bouts of depression since winning her first Grand Slam title at the US Open in 2018 and that talking to the media triggered anxiety.

In a statement posted on Twitter, Osaka said: "Hey everyone, this isn't a situation I ever imagined or intended when I posted a few days ago. I think now the best thing for the tournament, the other players and my well-being is that I withdraw so that everyone can get back to focusing on the tennis going on in Paris.

"I never wanted to be a distraction. I accept that my timing was not ideal and my message could have been clearer. More importantly, I would never trivialize mental health or use the term lightly.

"The truth is that I have suffered long bouts of depression since the US Open in 2018 and I have had a really hard time coping with that. Anyone that knows me knows that I'm introverted, and anyone that's seen me at tournaments will notice that I'm often wearing headphones as that helps dull my social anxiety.

"Though the tennis press has always been kind to me (and I wanna apologize especially to all the cool journalists who I may have hurt), I am not a natural public speaker and get huge waves of anxiety before I speak to the world's media. I get really nervous and find it stressful to always try to engage and give you the best answers I can.

"So here in Paris I was already feeling vulnerable and anxious so I thought it was better to exercise self-care and skip the press conferences. I announced it pre-emptively because I do feel like the rules are quite outdated in parts and I wanted to highlight that.

"I wrote privately to the tournament apologising and saying that I would be more than happy to speak with them after the tournament as the Slams are intense. I'm gonna take some time away from the court now, but when the time is right I really want to work with the Tour to discuss ways we can make things better for the players, press and fans. Anyways hope you are all doing well and staying safe, love you guys. I'll see you when I see you."

It's incredibly brave that Naomi Osaka has revealed her truth about her struggle with depression.

Right now, the important thing is that we give her the space and time she needs.

Trailblazer Billie Jean King has offered her support to Osaka, posting on Twitter: "It's incredibly brave that Naomi Osaka has revealed her truth about her struggle with depression. Right now, the important thing is that we give her the space and time she needs. We wish her well."

Martina Navratilova tweeted her best wishes, saying: "I am so sad about Naomi Osaka. I truly hope she will be OK.

"As athletes we are taught to take care of our body, and perhaps the mental and emotional aspect gets short shrift. This is about more than doing or not doing a press conference. Good luck Naomi - we are all pulling for you!

"And kudos to Naomi Osaka for caring so much about the other players. While she tried to make a situation better for herself and others, she inadvertently made it worse. Hope this solution, pulling out, as brutal as it is will allow her to start healing and take care of her SELF." I am so sad about Naomi Osaka.I truly hope she will be ok. As athletes we are taught to take care of our body, and perhaps the mental & emotional aspect gets short shrift. This is about more than doing or not doing a press conference. Good luck Naomi- we are all pulling for you!

World No 25 Coco Gauff responded to Osaka's post on Twitter, writing: "Stay strong. I admire your vulnerability."Skysport

What's behind the big dip in sports ad spending

The past 15 months have been like a game of Twister for the major sporting leagues. The NBA, WNBA and NHL scrambled their regular seasons last year, playing a modified schedule in months when players are usually enjoying summer vacation.

The NFL made scheduling accommodations and changed attendance protocols. NASCAR navigated COVID-19 protocols in host states.

Little wonder that we've seen the results of these changes in lower sports viewership and, more significantly for media companies, in ad spending.

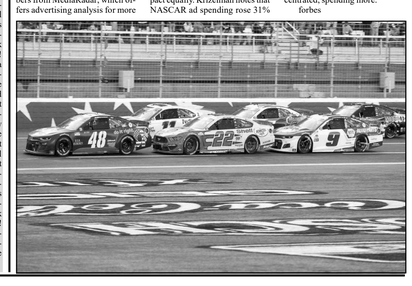
During first quarter of 2021, all TV advertising spending during NFL, NASCAR, NBA, MLB and NHL games and events fell 28% compared to 2020, reflecting a sports economy that remains in flux as we recover from the pandemic. That's according to numbers from MediaRadar, which offers advertising analysis for more than 3.1 million brands. CEO and Founder Todd Krizelman notes that while the decreased viewership was a factor in the declining spending, so were many other things.

"Other factors to consider include canceled games, postponed seasons and the loss of in-person attendance. Games are more fun to watch [on TV] when spectators are cheering," he says.

Those were indirect impacts of the pandemic. Other reasons for pulling back on advertising were more direct.

"Many companies were negatively impacted by the pandemic. Some slowed spending due to budget cutbacks but others to improve perception," he says. "For example, some advertisers sat out the Super Bowl so they could provide money to support vaccine awareness."

Not every league felt the impact equally. Krizelman notes that NASCAR ad spending rose 31% in first quarter this year, up $14 million. He credits the finance and entertainment categories with fueling the bump, including spending by PNC Personal Banking, Chase Bank for Business, Paramount+, Comcast CMCSA 0.0%, and Tubi.

During first quarter, a total of more than 1,500 advertisers invested in NASCAR, NHL, NBA and NFL, down 7% from 2020. That's fairly stable, considering the NBA has 20% fewer games than during the same period a year earlier due to the modified COVID schedule. "Out of the top 100 brands placing ads in sports in first quarter 2020, 83 of them returned in Q1 2021. This is a very high renewal rate," he says. "Spend from the top 100 brands leapt from 35% to 65% of first quarter total spend in these sports leagues. This suggests that the biggest firms are becoming more concentrated, spending more."

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