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PREVIEW / FIFA 2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

Qatar prepare for Iran clash as Australia eye win in Japan

QATAR, THE TWO-TIME ASIAN CHAMPIONS, SET TO TAKE ON THE CONTINENTAL GIANTS IN DUBAI

Qatar will hope they have turned the corner after Thursday's 3-1 win over Kyrgyzstan when they face Asian giants Iran in a 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifier tomorrow.

Qatar, the two-time AFC Asian Cup champions, entered last Thursday's tie with just a point to their name and another negative result would have had drastic implications on their qualification hopes.

However, the Marquez Lopez-coached side lifted the home gloom with a fighting 3-1 win over Kyrgyzstan on Thursday at Al Thumama Stadium where the home side totally dominated the first half and did enough in the second to secure a welcome win.

Lopez welcomed back Abdelkarim Hassan to the side after more than two years in the wilderness and the Al Wakrah defender delivered with threatening runs and astute defence. Al Duhail striker Almoez Ali, who opened the scoring in the 39th minute against Kyrgyzstan, kept the visitors backline busy on Thursday.

Mercurial Akram Afif - short-listed for this year's AFC Player of the Year award - and his teammates will be aiming for a win against Iran and a victory tomorrow will complete their turnaround and Qatar can then optimistically look forward to the rest of their campaign.

In other Group A games tomorrow, points leaders Uzbekistan will host the United Arab Emirates looking to return to winning ways after drawing 0-0 with Iran last week. Kyrgyzstan, who were beaten by Qatar, tomorrow face North Korea in the group's other game.



Qatar's playing XI that beat Kyrgyzstan 3-1 during their 2026 FIFA World Cup qualifying match at Al Thumama Stadium in Doha last Thursday. Qatar face Iran in their next qualifier to be played in Dubai tomorrow.

The first two finishers in each group qualify automatically for the World Cup with the third and fourth-placed finishers advancing to another round of preliminaries.

Meanwhile Australia coach Tony Popovic will look to continue the Socceroos' World Cup qualifying renaissance against a familiar foe tomorrow as he takes his team to Saitama Stadium to face ex-teammate Hajime Moriyasu and his rampant Japan team.

Popovic led Australia to a 3-1 win over China on Thursday in his first game since replacing Graham Arnold, reinvigorating the team's

hopes of an automatic berth at the 2026 World Cup. Australia picked up one point from their opening two matches but victory over the Chinese has moved them up to second in Group C as the Japanese defeated Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were held to a 2-2 draw by Indonesia. The Samurai Blue lead the standings by five points having won all three of their games so far, scoring 14 times without conced-



Australian players celebrate during their 3-1 win over China last Thursday. Australia, coached by Tony Popovic, take on hosts Japan at Saitama Stadium tomorrow. (@Socceroos)

ing to go into the clash as favourites with the Australians having never won in Japan. Despite the odds being heavily in the home side's favour, the journey will hold few concerns for Popovic, who spent four years playing alongside Moriyasu at J-League outfit Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

"I know the coach very well, he was my captain when I played in Japan, a wonderful person that's been there several years now," the former defender said. "You can see

the evolution of Japanese football and how he's changed, bringing players in and out, how they've improved their style of play.

"Obviously, it's a big challenge but also a big opportunity as well to win in Japan," Popovic said.

While Japan and Australia meet in their top-of-the-table encounter, Saudi Arabia host Bahrain in Jeddah aiming to bounce back from their loss to Japan while Indonesia travel to face pointless China looking to pick up a win after three draws.

FOCUS

Al Rayyan crowned champions of Qatar 3x3 Basketball League



Mohammed bin Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation (QBF), Yassin Ismail, General Supervisor of the 3x3 competitions, and Essam Lotfi, Technical Expert at QBF, with the Qatar 3x3 Basketball League champions Al Rayyan. **Below:** Runners-up Al Wakrah.

The 2024-2025 Qatar 3x3 Basketball League concluded with Al Rayyan Club emerging as the new season's champions. Al Rayyan dominated the league, amassing an impressive 430 points to secure the title, ahead of fierce competition.

Al Wakrah secured second place with 410 points, while Qatar Club completed the podium in third place, earning 335 points.

The remaining teams ranked as follows: Al Gharafa Club finished fourth with 295 points, Al Khor Club came fifth with 250 points, and Al Sadd Club placed sixth with 235 points. Al Ahli Club followed in seventh with 205 points, Al Shamal Club in eighth with 185 points, and Al Arabi Club finished in ninth and last place with 140 points.

The championship's crowning moment came during an official ceremony attended by Mohammed bin Saad al-Mughaiseeb, President of the Qatar Basketball Federation, Yassin Ismail, General Supervisor of the 3x3 competitions, and Essam Lotfi, Technical Expert at the Federation.



The winners were honoured with their respective awards, with Al Rayyan receiving gold medals and a cash prize of QR50,000. Al Wakrah's players were awarded silver medals and QR30,000, while Qatar SC received bronze medals and a third-place cash prize of QR20,000.

This victory solidifies Al Rayyan's standing as a dominant force in Qatari basketball, setting the stage for an exciting season ahead.

MOTORSPORT

Belleli wins 2024 FIM MiniGP Qatar Championship title



Young riding sensation Marton Belleli secured the 2024 FIM MiniGP Qatar Championship title despite finishing fifth in both races in the fifth and final round at the Lusail International Circuit.

Heading into the final round with a slender lead over his closest rival Jake Franklin, Belleli had to avoid a major upset in the last two races, but finishing within the top five on both occasions made sure he remained on top with a total of 147 points.

Franklin, after finishing third in Race 1 and fourth in Race 2, came second with 144 points. Riley Robinson secured third place in the standings with 121 points.

Franklin's second-place finish also secured his place in the starting line-up of the FIM MiniGP World Final which will be held at the Circuit Ricardo Tormo in Valencia from November

10-14 during the Valencia MotoGP weekend. He will be joined by one other MiniGP Qatar Championship rider after Belleli's age made him ineligible for this year's World Final which will feature riders from 22 countries in the 160cc class.

On Saturday, at the 1.124-kilometre Lusail track, Nolann Macary secured victories in both races in the final round. His back-to-back wins took his points tally to 100, securing him the sixth place in the championship standings.

In Race 1, Macary completed the 15-lap race in 15:34.366, while setting the fastest lap time of the event - 1:01.738. Makar Novichkov followed in second place, finishing 21.403 seconds behind the winner, while Franklin came third. Petr Mayorov finished in fourth place, while Belleli rounded up the top five.

The second race was another

thriller, but again, Macary was in dominant form. Macary clocked an even faster best lap time of 1:01.322 and finished the race in 15:28.662. Novichkov was second again, trailing by 22.532 seconds, while Mayorov and Franklin came third and fourth, respectively. Belleli finished fifth again, adding 11 more points to his account to secure the title glory.

Final Championship Standings:

- 1: Marton Belleli - 147 points
- 2: Jake Franklin - 144 points
- 3: Riley Robinson - 121 points
- 4: Andrea Giaccherio - 114 points
- 5: Mohammed Al Mutawa - 108 points
- 6: Nolann Macary - 100 points
- 7: Makar Novichkov - 73 points
- 8: Petr Mayorov - 54 points
- 9: Mahmoud ElBanna - 40 points
- 10: Aaron Robinson - 24 points
- 11: Carlsen Solis - 22 points
- 12: Ivan Maiorov - 20 points

TENNIS

Sinner wins in Shanghai to deny Djokovic 100th title

'THIS YEAR HAS BEEN VERY, VERY TOUGH FOR ME. AT POINTS I LOST A LITTLE BIT OF SMILE'

AFP
Shanghai

World number one Jannik Sinner defeated 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 yesterday to win the Shanghai Masters.

Sinner took a crucial break in the fourth game of the second set to defeat the Serb in 1hr 37min and deny him a 100th career singles title.

"He was just too good today, too strong, too fast," Djokovic said after the match.

Sinner said it was a "very special day", saluting his opponent as a "legend" who kept playing "incredible tennis... year after year".

In a nod to former Djokovic rival Roger Federer, who was watching from the stands, the 23-year-old joked: "There are legends everywhere, I just try to keep up a little bit."

Facing off before an impassioned crowd, neither player blinked in the first set, unable to break the other's serve.

Sinner quickly took control in the tiebreak, breaking Djokovic's serve on the first point and going 5-1 up.

The Serb steadied himself but then netted a volley to bring up set point at 6-3.

Sinner failed to convert initially but didn't miss the second time



Italy's Jannik Sinner (right) is greeted by Serbia's Novak Djokovic after Sinner won their singles final match at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. (AFP)

behind serve. The next key moment came in the fourth game of the second set when Sinner was up 40-15 on Djokovic's serve.

Djokovic saved one break point with a fiery ace but couldn't stop a superb forehand down the line from Sinner that saw him pull ahead.

All that remained was for the Italian to hold his nerve, hitting an

ace to finish the match and claim the title.

'Tough year'

Sinner's victory is the latest triumph in a formidable season, in which he has won two Grand Slams and retained the top spot in the rankings since June.

But it is also a year that has seen him embroiled in controversy af-

ter he twice tested positive for a banned steroid in March.

In August, the International Tennis Integrity Agency accepted Sinner's explanation that the drug entered his system unintentionally when his physiotherapist used a spray containing it to treat a cut, then provided massage and sports therapy to the player.

However, the World Anti-



Former tennis player Roger Federer (second left) of Switzerland and Spain's Carlos Alcaraz (right) watch Serbia's Novak Djokovic and Italy's Jannik Sinner play during their singles final at the Shanghai Masters yesterday. (AFP)

Doping Agency said last month it would appeal against the decision to clear him of wrongdoing and was seeking a ban of up to two years.

That news came as Sinner was contesting the China Open, where he lost in the final to Spain's Carlos Alcaraz, who was also watching from the stands yesterday.

"This year has been very, very tough for me. At points I lost a little bit of smile," Sinner said yesterday.

"It's never easy to play in these kind of circumstances," he added. "I feel like I'm strong when I go on the court trying to not think about it... When I wake up I try to focus on every single (match or practice) I do, but then of course I have moments when I think about it which

is not comfortable." Djokovic said Sinner played "the big points better" and "deserved to win".

The 37-year-old said that getting a 100th title was "not a live-or-die type of goal", but he would keep trying.

Djokovic became the last man standing on tennis' golden era after Rafael Nadal announced his retirement this week and said that, despite the loss, he was pleased with his performance in Shanghai.

"I played pretty good, which gives me, I guess, a reason to believe that I can still play with these guys that are the best in the world at this level," he said.

"As long as that's the case, I guess I'll still feel the need to keep on competing and the motivation to be out there."

FOOTBALL

England beat Finland 3-1 to get back on track



Finland's forward Topi Keskinen (left) and England's striker Harry Kane (centre) vie for the ball during the UEFA Nations League match at the Olympic Stadium in Helsinki, Finland, yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Helsinki

England avoided fresh embarrassment after their Greek tragedy as Trent Alexander-Arnold's superb free-kick inspired a 3-1 win against Finland in the Nations League yesterday.

Four days after Greece earned their first ever win over England at Wembley, Lee Carsley's side were again far from convincing for long periods in Helsinki. But they mustered just enough quality in the final third to spare their interim manager more misery.

Jack Grealish's composed finish put England ahead in the first half, but Finland wasted several chances before Alexander-Arnold and Declan Rice sealed the win in the second half.

Although Finland's Arttu Hoskonen netted in the closing stages, England's third victory in four games since Carsley replaced Gareth Southgate kept them in contention for promotion from Nations League Group B2.

However, in the 'land of a thousand lakes', it was far from plain sailing for Carsley, who is in the spotlight as the Football Association ponder who should succeed Southgate on a permanent basis.

After winning his first two games against Ireland and Finland in September, Carsley's tactical gamble - changing his formation to play with five attacking midfielders and no recognised striker - backfired badly in the Greece defeat and raised doubts about his suitability for the role.

Reports yesterday claimed former Bayern Munich and Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel is in talks with the Football Association, who have also been linked with Newcastle manager Eddie Howe. Carsley is expected to remain in charge for England's trip to Greece on November 14 followed by Ireland's visit to Wembley three days later.

Calling for a "reaction" to the Greece debacle, Carsley made six changes as he went back to a more "conventional" line-up.

Dean Henderson replaced Jordan Pickford in goal for his first

England start, while Harry Kane's return from injury saw Carsley ditch his striker-less experiment.

Grealish, Kyle Walker, Marc Guehi and Angel Gomes also came into a team that found it hard going at times against a Finland side 60 places below them in FIFA's world rankings.

Gomes' sloppy pass deep inside his own half left England exposed in the opening moments, but Topi Keskinen wasted the chance as he scuffed wide from 10 yards.

That escape stirred England into action and they took the lead with a well-crafted 17-pass move in the 18th minute.

Alexander-Arnold rifled a pass into Gomes and the Lille midfielder turned nimbly to play a clever ball through the heart of the Finland defence.

Grealish timed his run perfectly to apply the finishing touch from close range for his fourth England goal.

He celebrated by sucking his thumb like a baby in tribute to his daughter Mila, who was born two weeks ago.

Grealish, back after missing the

Greece game due to injury, has been a bright spot under Carsley after being left out of the Euro 2024 squad.

England were still vulnerable at the back and Keskinen should have done better than shoot straight at Henderson after the visitors carelessly conceded possession.

Carsley deployed Alexander-Arnold at left-back instead of his usual right-back berth and the Liverpool star was caught out of position when Fredrik Jensen fired just over.

Jensen squandered a golden opportunity to equalise, smashing over from just six yards after England once again let the hosts prise them open far too easily.

Carsley sent on Ollie Watkins and Noni Madueke for Palmer and Kane, who has now been replaced in each of his last seven England appearances.

The changes gave England a spark and Alexander-Arnold doubled their lead with a brilliant free-kick that whistled past Lukas Hradecky from 25 yards in the 74th minute.

COMMENT

Dutch strikers expect more space in clash against Germany

Reuters
Munich

Netherlands striker **Cody Gakpo** believes there will be more space for his team to attack in today's Nations League clash away to Germany after a difficult game with Hungary on Friday when the Dutch met stubborn resistance from the home defence.

The Netherlands take on Germany three days after they drew 1-1 with Hungary in their Group A3 game in Budapest, coming from behind to snatch a late equaliser through Denzel Dumfries after captain Virgil van Dijk was sent off.

"I expect more space. Germany will play a bit more forward and be a bit more open, which will create spaces for us," said Gakpo at a press conference yesterday.

The Netherlands drew 2-2 with Germany last month in an open and attacking game in Amsterdam and a similar style encounter is expected for the return in Munich.

Germany lead the standings on seven points, two more than the second-placed Netherlands after three games.

"It was difficult for us because of how they played," added coach Ronald Koeman of the Hungary game. "In the second half it went better, with more deep runs. There was space on the wings but we didn't use that well."

Gakpo's Liverpool teammate Van Dijk will be missing as he sits out a one-match ban after Friday's red card.

"Virgil is an exceptional player, but now we are obliged to replace him. There are other good players who can do that," Gakpo added.

Koeman said either Stefan de Vrij or Dumfries would replace Van Dijk as captain and added that whoever got the armband had big shoes to fill.

"Virgil is someone who coaches a lot from the back. Now others have to do that. Some people are more capable of that than others and it also has to do with experience. I certainly think it will be interesting to see how that works in the team now that Virgil is not there. He has almost always been available," Koeman told the press conference.

Belgium eye France win

Belgium coach Domenico Tedesco has urged his players to be brave and clinical against France as his



side seek a first competitive victory over their neighbours in 43 years in their Nations League A Group 2 clash in Brussels today.

Belgium trail pool leaders Italy by three points and second-placed France by two at the mid-way point in the group, needing to finish in the top two to qualify for the quarter-finals.

Defeat at home and an expected win for Italy over Israel could effectively end their hopes to reach the knockout stages with two rounds left to play.

"We must be brave against France. We won't get many opportunities and we have to finish the ones we get," Tedesco said.

"We won't be able to put pressure on them for 90 minutes, so it's also important to defend well in our own box. It's going to be a big game."

Belgium, who are without Kevin De Bruyne and Romelu Lukaku after they asked not to be considered for this international window, earned a 2-2 draw in Italy on Thursday having been two goals behind inside 24 minutes.

Tedesco is hoping his side will start better against France, who won 2-0 in Lyon when the teams met last month.

"We didn't start well (against Italy)," he said.

"We wanted to be compact, but we were way too impatient. And that quick (first) goal did not help. We are just human. It is in my character to also talk about the bad things. We must not hide that."

"But the match lasted 90 minutes, not half an hour. I want to emphasise that we showed a good response. With this young group it was anything but a bad result against Italy."

Belgium have not beaten France in a competitive match since a World Cup qualifier in 1981. Their two victories since then have both been in friendly fixtures, the last in 2015.