

World Cup dream's a mirage

India's chances of qualifying for Qatar 2022 look bleaker after 1-0 loss to Oman

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For the record, India's road to Qatar 2022 ended in a rather indifferent manner in Oman. For all practical purposes at least. Yet to win a game in the qualifying campaign and having scored just three goals in five games, India are fourth in a five-team group.

While the top spot, which ensures automatic qualification to the next round, is out of the question, India still are in with a mathematical chance to finish second. For that, however, they will have to win their three remaining matches by handsome margins to erase Oman's 9-point advantage and massive goal difference. And going by their current form, neither seems likely.

A sympathetic summation of India's 1-0 defeat to Oman in Muscat on Tuesday night would be that they were at the receiving end of a poor refereeing call, which led to the solitary goal (scored by Mohsin Al Ghassani in 33rd minute). The chance of a comeback was made tougher after three key players got injured — two in the first half itself — that forced substitutions, throwing coach Igor Stimac's plans out of track. These points, however, will only momentarily numb the pain for India.

The fact is that India never posed any threat to Oman. They did not have a single shot on target in the regulation time as well as during the six added minutes. There was no urgency in their largely indifferent play and, at least in the early parts of the match, India's defenders created more goal-scoring chances for Oman than the Omani players did for themselves.

From that perspective, India were lucky to escape with a 1-0 loss.

Oman, who had defeated India 2-1 in the campaign-opener in September, were always going to be out of reach for India, especially since they have looked woefully out of form in the last two games. Injuries to players like Sandesh Jhingan and Rowlin Borges only added to Stimac's headache, forcing him to once again tinker with his starting 11.

The Croat made three changes to his side that drew Afghanistan 1-1 in Dushanbe last week - strikers Manvir Singh and Farukh Choudhary, and defender Nishu Kumar coming in for Pritam Kotal, Mandar Rao Desai and Sahal Abdul Samad. Playmaker Anirudh Thapa continued to warm the bench, with Stimac opting for a physically-stronger Pronay Halder for the second consecutive match.

It was an attacking line-up; ambitious play one would think given the gulf between the two teams. They paid for it almost immediately - in the continuance of the first leg between the two teams,



Ashique Kuruniyan (right) and Oman's Saad Suhail contest for the ball. AIFP

POINTS TABLE: GROUP E

	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
Qatar	5	4	1	0	10	13
Oman	5	4	0	1	7	12
Afghanistan	5	1	1	3	-9	4
India	5	0	3	2	-2	3
Bangladesh	4	0	1	3	-6	1

Oman's pacey winger Rabia al Mandhar sprinted past right-back Rahul Bheke, who tripped him inside the box. The consequent penalty, in the seventh minute, was shot over the bar by Mohsin Al Ghassani.

Oman continued to operate at a high tempo after the missed penalty, and Ghassani made amends soon after the half-hour mark after he got on the end of a beautiful defence-splitting through pass by Mohsin Johar Al Khaldi and beat goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu with a first-

time effort. Replays, however, showed Ghassani to be marginally offside when the pass was played.

India's troubles were compounded almost immediately as Stimac had to make a forced substitution after centre-back Adil Khan picked up an injury. Minutes later, midfielder Halder, too, had to be brought off after he injured his shoulder.

Stimac, who has made a habit of making game-saving substitutions late in the second half, now had to make two inside the first 45 minutes. He brought on centre-back Anas Edathodika, who joined the team only on Monday following a family emergency, and Vinit Rai as replacements.

India played better in the second half with a lot of ball possession and attacks at the opposition citadel but a clear chance eluded them. Oman nearly doubled their lead in the 64th minute but Sandhu dived full length to his left to block an Al Khaldi free-kick. Another Omani header from close range flew over the crossbar.

Under Stimac, India have made it a habit

to allow an early goal before making a late comeback. That, however, was not possible on Tuesday as Oman's midfield and defence did not allow the visitors any space in their half. An injury to Bheke, who was substituted by Sarthak Golui, took away whatever little chance India had to make a comeback.

India will now have to win at least two of the three matches to finish third in the group behind Qatar and Oman. From the beginning, India's target from this joint qualifying campaign was to make the cut for the 2023 Asian Cup. Teams finishing third are guaranteed a spot in the next round of qualifiers for the continental championships.

India's three remaining matches will be played next year - Qatar at home on March 26, Bangladesh away on June 4 followed by Afghanistan at home on June 9. A third-place finish looked a safe bet for India at the start of the campaign. The recent results, and a host of injuries, have put that in question now.

ITF rejects Pakistan's appeal, Davis Cup tie to be played in Nur-Sultan

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, NOVEMBER 19

THE INTERNATIONAL Tennis Federation (ITF) on Tuesday confirmed that the Pakistan versus India Group 1 Davis Cup tie will now take place in Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan. The world body had on November 4 announced that the tie would be shifted to a neutral venue instead of being played in Islamabad. The Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) subsequently appealed against the decision, but now, merely 10 days before the tie, the ITF has announced the final venue.

"The Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) appealed the Davis Cup Committee decision to move the tie from Islamabad. The appeal was dismissed by an independent tribunal on Monday 18 November," the ITF said in a statement. "Further to the decision of the PTF not to nominate a neutral venue, in accordance with Davis Cup regulations, the Davis Cup Committee has voted in favour of the tie being hosted by the ITF on neutral ground at the National Tennis Centre in Nur-Sultan (previously Astana), Kazakhstan on 29-30 November."

The tie being moved to a neutral venue accentuates the gulf in class between the two teams.

India's star players had previously made it clear that they will be unavailable for the tie should it be held in Pakistan. For the meeting in Kazakhstan though, the All India Tennis Association (AITA) has named a strong seven-man team that will be travelling. Spearheading the Indian team will be the country's second highest ranked singles player Sumit Nagal (131), along with Ramkumar Ramanathan (175), Sasikumar Mukund (261), Saketh Myneni (390) and first-time call-up Sidarth Rawat (500). The team will also include doubles specialists Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan (110) and 18-time Grand Slam champion Leander Paes (105). On Monday, India's highest ranked doubles player Rohan Bopanna (38) was ruled out

The occasion will also mark the seventh time the two teams will compete against each other in Davis Cup. India last hosted the tie in Mumbai in 2006, but the last time an Indian Davis Cup team travelled to Pakistan was for the 1964 tie in Lahore. The Indians were drawn to travel to play an away tie across the border in 1973, but just as it is now, that tie too was shifted to a neutral venue, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia being the host city on that occasion.

due to a shoulder injury.

The Pakistan team in turn, is expected to miss the services of veterans Aisam-Ul-Haq Qureshi and Aqeel Khan, who made clear their stand that they will boycott the tie should it take place outside Pakistan. While Qureshi, who is ranked 52 in doubles and is the only player from Pakistan placed within the first 1300 ATP ranks, Khan is the most capped Davis Cup player from Pakistan with 51 ties. Apart from the two, Pakistan has named five different players for the four ties they have played at home since the ITF lifted the 12-year ban on Davis Cup ties being held on Pakistani soil in 2017. M Abid Ali Khan Akbar, Muhammad Abid, Shahzad Khan, Muzammil Murtaza and Heera Ashiq have been nominated for their country since 2017, all of whom have played only a handful of ITF Future events this year.

The tie at the National Tennis Centre in Nur-Sultan is expected to be played on an indoor hard court, contrary to the Pakistanis desire to play on grass courts.

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Give new Davis Cup a chance, says Murray

Madrid: Andy Murray believes negativity around the reformed Davis Cup has been unfair and is urging people to give the new competition a chance to succeed.

The inaugural Finals of the 119-year-old tournament started on Monday in Madrid, where 18 teams will now compete across the week at the Caja Magica for the chance to play in Sunday's final.

Barcelona footballer Gerard Pique has been at the heart of the changes after his marketing company Kosmos struck a \$3-billion deal over 25 years with the International Tennis Federation.

"I think generally people have been fairly negative about the new concepts," Murray said in a press conference on Monday. "I just feel in tennis sometimes we are quite reluctant to make changes and this is a big change. I feel like we should give it an opportunity to see how it goes."

Participation from the game's top players had dwindled as the previous system required winning teams to play four weekends across the year.

Organisers hope the prestigious trophy can be revitalised in a more congested format, with Murray, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal all in attendance this week.

"They've done a really good job with the facilities," said Murray. "The team room is really good, the food and the transport has been good. There's nothing really to complain about so far. It feels like there's a few people that want to bash the event before it's started. I think they have to let that go and wait for the event to finish before we give a fair view on what this event is now."

Mahut-Herbert give France win over Japan

Two days after clinching the doubles title in the ATP Finals, French duo Pierre-Hugues Herbert and Nicolas Mahut gave France an opening win in the Davis Cup Finals. Herbert and Mahut rallied to defeat Ben McLachlan and Yasutaka Uchiyama of Japan 6-7 (4), 6-4, 7-5 in the deciding doubles match in Group A on Tuesday, giving top-ranked France a 2-1 victory.

The French duo squandered two match points while serving at 5-4, but capitalized on their chance at 6-5 to clinch the victory for last year's Davis Cup runner-up. The teams were tied after Jo-Wilfried Tsonga cruised past Uchiyama 6-2, 6-1 and Yoshihito Nishioka defeated Gael Monfils 7-5, 6-2.

Herbert and Mahut did not drop a single set in five matches at the ATP Finals, where they defeated Raven Klaasen of South Africa and Michael Venus of New Zealand in the final on Sunday. Argentina comfortably defeated Chile 3-0, while Kazakhstan also needed the doubles match to beat the Netherlands 2-1 and clinch its first away Davis Cup win since 2011.

Guido Pella beat Nicolas Jarry 6-4, 6-3 and Diego Schwartzman defeated Cristian Garin 6-2, 6-2 to give Argentina the opening win in Group C. The tie was already decided when Maximo Gonzalez and Leonardo Mayer topped Jarry and Hans Podlipnik-Castillo 6-3, 7-5 in doubles.

"It's the end of the season but I think I played one of the best matches for sure of the year, maybe in my career," the 14th-ranked Schwartzman said. AFP/AP

Tokyo finishes building stadium for 2020 Olympics

REUTERS
TOKYO, NOVEMBER 19

CONSTRUCTION WORK has been completed at Tokyo's National Stadium, set to be the centrepiece of next year's Olympic Games, the site's owners said on Tuesday. The Japan Sports Council said the final work had been completed on Thursday with just the final quality and safety checks remaining before the stadium opens next month.

It will be officially unveiled on December 21, with the Emperor's Cup soccer final being the first sporting event to be held there on New Year's Day. Completed at a cost of more than \$1.25 billion, the stadium, which can accommodate 60,000, will also host the athletics and soccer events during the Games. Construction started in December 2016, about 14 months later than planned, after the original design was scrapped because of a public outcry over spiralling costs.

The delay meant the stadium could not host matches of the Rugby World Cup, as orig-

inally planned. The National Stadium is one of eight new venues to be used at the Tokyo Games, all of them are either complete or on schedule to be finished before the event.

Paris mayor sounds alarm

The mayor of Paris, due to host the Olympics in 2024, has taken issue with a sponsorship deal between the Games and Airbnb Inc, saying the short-term rental firm pushes working people out of the housing market, French media reported on Tuesday. Mayor Anne Hidalgo has written a letter to International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach in response to a nine-year deal under which Airbnb will help provide accommodation for five Olympics and Paralympics events.

Hidalgo told Bach she was writing to alert the IOC about the "risks and consequences" of the deal with Airbnb, according to France's Le Monde newspaper, which cited the contents of the letter. "By taking out a significant number of properties in Paris, Airbnb is contributing to price rises for housing, and wors-

ening the shortage of housing in the rental market, penalising all Parisians and, in particular, the middle class," Le Monde quoted Hidalgo as saying in her letter.

Short-term rentals via Airbnb can "cause a nuisance for residents, destabilise local trade and present tough competition for the traditional hotel trade," Hidalgo was quoted as saying in the letter. Responding to a Reuters request for comment on Hidalgo's letter, Airbnb said on Tuesday the tie-up for the Olympics will bring real economic ben-

efits to French communities and athletes and will leave a positive legacy.

The Paris mayor's office did not immediately respond to a request to confirm the authenticity of the letter. San Francisco-headquartered Airbnb has grown rapidly to become one of the major players in room rental. But it has faced a backlash in some cities, where local politicians say it can push up prices and turn once-vibrant city neighbourhoods into dormitories where many properties are turned over to short-term rentals.

The firm is currently revamping policies to improve trust after a mass shooting in California last month at a property that was advertised on the Airbnb online listing service. Announcing the tie-up with Airbnb, the IOC president said it would help host cities save and make the games more feasible and sustainable. Airbnb co-founder Joe Gebbia said he hoped the partnership would help leave a "positive legacy for athletes and host communities", as well as give benefits for the company, such as integrated booking of accommodation with online ticket purchases.

[SPORTS BAR]



Rajeshwari sets new trap national record

The National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) has confirmed that Punjab's Rajeshwari Kumari has created a national record in the women's trap competition during the ongoing 63rd National Shotgun Shooting Championship here. Rajeshwari shot a score of 118 out of 125 in qualifications on the way to winning silver in the event. She shot rounds of 24 23 24 and 23 to top the 69-strong field. Her qualification score was two better than the previous record jointly held by seasoned women trap shooters Seema Tomar, Shreyasi Singh and Manisha Keer.

Rajput misses out on finals by a point

India's Sanjeev Rajput missed out on the finals by a point in the World Cup Finals for the year's top-ranked rifle and pistol shooters here on Tuesday. Rising Czech star Filip Nepechal and Briton Seonaid McIntosh won the men's and women's 50m rifle 3 positions (3P) gold medals respectively. Rajput, who has already secured an Olympic quota, shot 1153 to claim the ninth spot in a low-scoring qualification round. Polish shooter Tomasz Bartnik took the eighth and final qualification spot with an effort of 1154. Sanjeev would have made it through even if he had tied with Tomasz, given he had two more inner 10s than the shooter from Poland. Akhil Sheoran, the second Indian to have made the cut in the ISSF season-ending showpiece, finished 13th with a score of 1147.

FMSCI bans president after Jodhpur tragedy

National motorsport federation FMSCI has banned its own President J Prithiviraj from officiating in the wake of the organisational blunder that led to death of three, including a minor, during the ill-fated Rally of Jodhpur. While Prithiviraj will continue to be president of the FMSCI he won't be allowed to officiate in national championships for three years. Top rally driver Gaurav Gill had crashed into a trespassing motorcycle carrying three people, including a minor, during the rally in September, forcing the organisers to call off the rally. A shocked Gill was granted bail last month in connection with the case.



Luis Enrique will replace Spain coach Robert Moreno ahead of Euro 2020.

Enrique returns as coach after daughter's death

Luis Enrique will return as coach of Spain and replace Robert Moreno ahead of Euro 2020, the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) confirmed on Tuesday. Moreno took charge in June after Luis Enrique had resigned to take care of his daughter Xana, who died in August of bone cancer. "Today we can confirm Luis Enrique returns to his position of work," RFEF president Luis Rubiales said in a press conference at the national team's training base in Las Rozas. Rubiales said Luis Enrique has a contract until the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and that it will be up to him whether Moreno is offered a chance to resume his previous role as assistant coach. The pair were close friends and also worked together at Barcelona, Celta Vigo and Roma but Moreno appears upset at the manner of his departure. "Luis Enrique stepped down because of the worst possible thing that can happen to a father," Rubiales said. "He has always been the leader of our project and he has a contract until (the) World Cup in Qatar."

City's revenue rises to 535 million pound

Manchester City's on-field success saw the club's revenues swell to 535 million pound (\$692 million) last season as the Premier League champions posted a profit for the fifth straight year. A 20 percent surge in broadcast revenue saw City's income rise from 500.5 million pound in the 2017/18 season. Pep Guardiola's men completed an unprecedented quadruple of England's domestic trophies by winning the Premier League, FA Cup, League Cup and Community Shield. The sale of a host of players unable to break into the first team helped boost profits to 10.1 million pound.



Doncic scores 42, Mavs top Spurs 117-110

Luka Doncic grew up idolising LeBron James, and now the young NBA prodigy has joined James in the record book. The Dallas Mavericks needed everything Doncic delivered in a sensational performance Monday night. Doncic scored a career-high 42 points to go with 12 assists and 11 rebounds as the Mavericks held off the skidding San Antonio Spurs 117-110. The 20-year-old second-year guard joined James as the only players in league history younger than 21 to have a 40-point triple-double. "It feels like every day there are stats you don't know about, stats that you read about," Doncic said. "It's great to hit." Dallas led wire to wire but had to fend off a late Spurs rally, with Doncic hitting a 3-pointer with 26.5 seconds to play that put Dallas up 115-110 after the Spurs had rallied from 14 down.

250 players in fray for India International

A total of 250 shuttlers from India and 12 other countries will lock horns during the Infosys Foundation India International Challenge tournament, which will be held here from Wednesday. The tournament, which has the overall prize money of \$25,000, will be played at the Cricket Club of India and the qualifying rounds will start on November 20 and the main draw from November 21. The final will be held on November 24. Apart from Indians, this year will see participation from star players from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and upcoming players from countries like Russia, United States, Bhutan, among others.