

# Hosts UAE stir from slumber

UAE survive early storm to beat India and kickstart 2019 Asian Cup campaign while Bahrain suffer loss

● 'Messi Jay' stunner puts Thailand back on track

● Jordan tame Syria to reach Asian Cup knockouts

AFP | Dubai

Hosts United Arab Emirates threw off the shackles at the Asian Cup yesterday, surviving a hairy start to dispatch India 2-0 and close in on a place in the last 16.

Jordan earlier became the first side to book their place in the knockout stages after winning a bruising derby with Syria by the same scoreline while the "Thai Messi" Chanathip Songkrasin snatched a lifeline for the War Elephants in Dubai.

Khalfan Mubarak and Ali Mabkhout were on target in Abu Dhabi for the Emiratis, who were fortunate to scrape a 1-1 draw in their curtain-raiser against Bahrain after a contro-



United Arab Emirates' forward Ali Mabkhout (2nd-R) heads the ball

versial late penalty last Saturday.

"The Bahrain result was a disappointment and I humbly apologised to the fans," said UAE coach Alberto Zaccheroni, who steered Japan to the Asian Cup title in 2011.

"But the players showed great spirit and willpower tonight and we deserved the victory. It's important to grow into the tournament."

India captain Sunil Chhetri overtook Lionel Messi in international goals as the Blue Tigers stunned Thailand 4-1 in their

opening game to earn comparisons with Indian cricket captain Virat Kohli for his heroics.

The evergreen striker forced a smart save from UAE goalkeeper Khalid Eisa before the home side drew first blood against the run of play.

Mubarak whipped the ball home from an acute angle four minutes before halftime for the Emiratis, who were runners-up the last time the country hosted the Asian Cup in 1996.

Mabkhout sealed the points with a cool finish two minutes



Thailand had sacked Serbian coach Milovan Rajevac after their humiliating loss to India

from the end -- his 47th goal in 75 internationals -- to give the scoreline a somewhat flattering complexion but left UAE top of Group A on four points.

Car alarm

Until Mubarak's strike -- his first for his country -- the 2015 semi-finalists had been largely restricted to pot shots that threatened little but the fleets of luxury cars in the stadium parking lot.

India, who finished runners-up on their Asian Cup debut in 1964 when it was a four-team competition won by Israel,

Asian Cup

Bahrain	0	1	Thailand
Jordan	2	0	Syria
India	0	2	UAE

will still fancy their chances of reaching the knockout phase for the first time.

"We created enough chances to win two games so I think we deserved at least a draw," said India coach Stephen Constantine.

"But if you don't convert your

chances you pay for it -- and we paid for it. I have 23 bitterly disappointed boys."

Jordan have claimed a perfect six points after first-half goals from Mousa Mohammad Suleiman and Tareq Khattab earned a 2-0 win over Syria in a tempestuous Group B clash.



Bahrain's Komail Hasan Alaswad and Thailand's Chanathip Songkrasin vie for the ball

## Djokovic mauls Murray in Open practice match



Serbia's Novak Djokovic at a practice match against Britain's Andy Murray

Reuters | Melbourne

World number one Novak Djokovic gave Andy Murray a stinging reality check in the lead-up to next week's Australian Open, dominating the Briton 6-1 4-1 in a practice match at Melbourne Park yesterday.

Murray has struggled to regain form since undergoing hip surgery last January, and was quickly dismantled by the six-times Australian Open champion at Margaret Court Arena before the players called time on their match after less than an hour.

Serbian Djokovic heads into the tournament as favourite to win a record seventh title and his third Grand Slam in a row, while five-times runner-up Murray, now ranked 230th,

will have far lower expectations at the event starting on Monday.

The 31-year-old three-times major champion returned to action last June but the former world number one cut short a deflating season in September.

The Scot did enjoy a winning start to his season with a victory over local player James Duckworth at the Brisbane International on Jan. 1 but was well beaten by Russian fourth seed Daniil Medvedev in the next round.

Murray is playing in Australia under his protected ranking of world number two, which is used to help players who have suffered long-term injuries.

But the lack of a seeding has left him exposed to a challenging early draw, and he will have to battle past a tough first-round opponent in Spanish 22nd seed and former world number 13 Roberto Bautista Agut.

Local hope John Millman, who dumped Roger Federer out of the fourth round at last year's U.S. Open, is no slouch either as a potential second round match-up for Murray, with 10th-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov another likely roadblock to the last 16.

Murray, who has scheduled a news conference on Friday at Melbourne Park, admitted to still feeling pain in his hip before Brisbane.

## Cilic cruises at Kooyong ahead of Grand Slam

AFP | Melbourne

Last year's Australian Open finalist Marin Cilic rounded off his preparations for this year's edition in style yesterday, winning his second match in as many days at the Kooyong Classic.

With the first Grand Slam of the season starting on Monday, every opportunity is important for the Croatian, who went down in a battle to Roger Federer in the Melbourne Park decider in 2018.

The world number seven beat Spain's Fernando Verdasco 6-4, 6-4, backing up his three-set victory a day before over world No. 6 Kevin Anderson.

Earlier, American Jack Sock lost to fast-rising Canadian teenager Denis Shapovalov 6-2, 3-6, 10-7 after a final set played as a 10-point tiebreak -- the format which will be used at the Australian Open from Monday.



Roger Federer of Switzerland and Serena Williams of the USA leave the court after playing in the mixed doubles match

Under the rules, the first player to win at least 10 points by a two-point margin takes the match.

Ahead of the Australian Open last year, Sock was at a career-high eighth in the world rankings, but after a horror season he has plunged outside the top 100 and is desperate to turn

it around.

His form slump has been dramatic. He played 31 singles matches in 2018, winning a mere nine.

"I had some pretty low moments last year, it was horrendous," said Sock. "I did a lot of regrouping in the off-season, talking to family, team members,

coaches.

"I'm trying to take a positive outlook. I know the level that I can play the game, where my game should be."

With the Australian Open just days away, he is grateful to be out of the spotlight to focus on himself.

"It's nice to be able to fly under the radar and do my own thing."

Shapovalov, 19, made up for lost time after losing in the first round at Auckland this week and then crossing the Tasman to squeeze into the Kooyong draw as a late entry.

"It's great to be here and get another match, fire a few balls," the world No.27 said. "It's another chance to get the match feel."

"You have some of the pressure, there's a crowd watching. It's a chance to get a little bit more ready for the Slam."

## Kohlschreiber flogs feeble Fognini in Auckland quarters

AFP | Auckland, New Zealand

Evergreen Philipp Kohlschreiber rolled back the years to storm into the Auckland Classic semi-finals yesterday with a straight-sets demolition of second seed Fabio Fognini.

The 35-year-old German tore apart the lacklustre Italian 6-3, 6-1 to remain in the reckoning at a tournament where he claimed the title way in back in 2008.

Currently ranked 34th in the world, Kohlschreiber has not dropped a set on his way to a final four showdown with American Tennyson Sandgren, who beat Argentina's Leonardo Mayer 6-3, 7-6 (7/5).

The other semi-final pits Briton Cameron Norrie -- a victor over American Tyler Fritz -- against Jan-Lennard Struff of Germany. Kohlschreiber, un-



Philipp Kohlschreiber of Germany serves during his quarter final match against Fabio Fognini of Italy

seeded this year, was a class above world number 13 Fognini, who appeared unfocused and more interested in boarding a plane to next week's Australian Open in Melbourne.

Despite his advancing years, the veteran is shaping as a strong contender in a field weakened by withdrawals and

upset results that have send all the seeds heading for the exits.

Kohlschreiber comfortably beat Sandgren in straight sets in their only previous meeting in Monte Carlo last year.

"I'm still improving my game even at 35-years old ... I have to be ready for the young ones and I'll try to continue to play for a

few years yet," he said.

Kohlschreiber raced to an early break in the first set then held on as Fognini stretched the German's next service game out for 10 minutes trying to respond.

But the German had all the answers and Fognini's resistance crumbled as the set wore on, with the Italian committing 16 unforced errors and four double faults.



Serbia's Novak Djokovic and Britain's Andy Murray have met four times at the final of the season's opening Grand Slam, with the Serb winning them all