

Bahrain set to face Australia

Bahrain Olympic team face do-or-die clash with Australia

TDT | Manama

Bahrain's Olympic football team head into a do-or-die clash with Australia this afternoon in the 2020 AFC U23 Championship in Thailand.

The Bahrainis are currently in last place in Group A of the tournament's preliminary round, and need nothing less than all three points to have any chance of advancing to the next stage. However, not even a win would guarantee that they go through.

Despite the huge hurdle ahead of them, Bahrain's Mohammed Marhoon and Sayed Hashem Isa remained upbeat and vowed to fight until the very end.

"We will fight until the very end, even if we only have one percent chance of qualifying," Marhoon was quoted as saying.

"We will give it all we have and if we manage to reach the quarter-finals, the semi-finals will be our next target."

Isa added: "We will start the third match with the hope to win but we must fix the mistakes that we've made in the previous matches."

Bahrain head coach Samir Ben Chammmam echoed his players' sentiments.



Bahrain players take part in drills during training last night

"We have one more match and all we can try to do is win it so that we get to four points and then we have to hope that we can

qualify," Ben Chammmam said. "For the game against Iraq we were focused on the mental side and we prepared the players

mentally. "But for Australia we will have to focus on the fitness side and prepare the players physically



Bahrain's Ben Chammmam instructs players during training last night

and we will try to get our last chance in the group to get the three points so we can qualify for the second round."

The match is scheduled for a 4.15pm kick-off, Bahrain time. It will be played at Thammasat Stadium in the Thai province of Pathum Thani.

Bahrain must finish in the top two in Group A to advance to the quarter-finals. Group B consists of Qatar, Japan, Saudi Arabia

and Syria; Group C features defending champions Uzbekistan, South Korea, China and Iran; and Group D comprises Vietnam, North Korea, Jordan and the UAE.

The last eight will be played on January 18 and 19, followed by the semi-finals on January 22. The match for third place will be held January 25 and then the gold medal game the following night.

Federer ready and in good shape for Australian Open campaign

Reuters | Melbourne

Roger Federer declared himself ready yesterday to kick off the new season at next week's Australian Open despite having played no competitive matches since.

The 20-times Grand Slam winner was scheduled to warm-up for the year's first major at the inaugural ATP Cup in Australia but withdrew to spend more time with his family.

In contrast, his rivals Novak Djokovic and Rafa Nadal were part of some closely-fought matches at the team event, which was played in Brisbane, Perth and Sydney.

Federer, 38, said he was happy with his preparation at home.

"I've trained long and hard in the off-season and I didn't have any setbacks, which is crucial," Federer said at a promotional event in Melbourne.

"Last week I was asking myself 'am I happy to go to Australia, or I should rather just stay here and stopping pack immediately? Because I can."

"I could easily just stay home and I was like, 'no, no, I'm really happy to go to Melbourne and kick off the season there'.

"I have kept myself in good shape, obviously I had an amazing team around me."

A six-time winner at Melbourne Park, Federer won the Australian Open title in 2017 and 2018 but lost to Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas in the fourth round last year.

Djokovic went on to win a record seventh Australian Open



Roger Federer hits a return (file photo)



Roger Federer has won Australian Open title six times

title in 2019 and looks in perfect shape to add another after his ninth consecutive hard-court win over world number one Nadal on Sunday as Serbia were crowned champions at the ATP

Cup.

Nadal has also shown no sign of trouble with his game or his fitness and the contenders at the Australian Open could again be the Big Three, who have shared the last 12 Grand Slam titles.

"I'm aware that at 38 I shouldn't be the favorite, it should be someone probably in their 20s, but the three of us have been able to stay as the favorites which is great for us," Federer said.

"Both guys are already showing great signs. I was watching a little bit of their ATP Cup match and thought that was a great match. Both guys, injury free, are always tough to beat."

Federer also offered Australian Ash Barty some advice as she prepares to play her home Grand Slam as women's world number one.

"What a year she's had; it was a pleasure watching her play," Federer said. "She can have a different mindset."

"It can relax you and you can really explore all of your potential and that's what happened to me when I won my first major, and I broke through as world number one after that."

"I thought, 'well now I'm the guy to beat and I prefer to be in this position rather than being a contender'. I hope that Ash is also going to see it that way."

Barcelona set to sack Valverde - reports

AFP | Barcelona

Barcelona are set to sack their coach Ernesto Valverde, according to reports in the Spanish press.

Valverde took training yesterday morning but his future looks bleak, with the club expected to announce his departure following a board meeting in the afternoon at Camp Nou.

Valverde arrived more than two hours early at the Ciutat Esportiva Joan Gamper and took training as usual, despite Barca's public pursuit of their iconic former midfielder Xavi Hernandez at the weekend.

Xavi, currently the coach of Qatari team Al-Sadd, indicated he is not prepared to take charge immediately but the negotiations left Valverde in limbo.

After training on Monday, Valverde met with club president Josep Maria Bartomeu. Bartomeu then drove to

Camp Nou, where he held a board meeting with several club officials including chief executive Oscar Grau, technical secretary Javier Bordas, vice president Jordi Cardoner and sporting director Eric Abidal.

According to Catalunya Radio, Valverde was told the club would negotiate the terms of his exit with his agent. ESPN added that Valverde had collected his belongings from the training ground.

Barca could install a temporary replacement like B team coach Francisco Javier Garcia Pimienta, perhaps with a view to appointing Xavi at the end of the season.

Otherwise, they could opt for a more permanent solution immediately. Former Tottenham Hotspur coach Mauricio Pochettino is a viable option, despite his previous claims he would never coach Barcelona due to connections with rivals Espanyol.



Ernesto Valverde reacts during a match (file photo)