



PHOTO: AFP

Manchester United's veteran winger Ryan Giggs (C) scores from a penalty during their Premier League encounter against Tottenham Hotspur at Old Trafford on Saturday.

MU return to top

AFP, Manchester



An exquisite finish by Nani helped send Manchester United back to the top of the English Premier League table after a 3-1 win over Tottenham Hotspur at Old Trafford here on Saturday.

Following a drab first half, Ryan Giggs opened the scoring from the penalty spot but United looked set for a frustrating afternoon after Ledley King powered in a 70th minute equaliser.

But Nani's wonderful finish made it 2-1 10 minutes from time before Giggs sealed the points with his second goal from the penalty spot.

United are two points clear of nearest challengers Chelsea, who play host to Stoke on Sunday, with two games remaining while Tottenham still have work to do if they are to qualify for next season's Champions League.

Just as the sudden return of Wayne Rooney from injury lifted United in their recent Champions League game with Bayern Munich, his surprise absence from this game left the team subdued.

The England striker, who only returned from an ankle injury last week, was missing after suffering a groin strain in training on Thursday.

It was left to Dimitar Berbatov to lead the attack against his former club yet the Bulgarian endured another frustrating afternoon as he failed to find the target for the sixth successive game.

Both teams have produced some cracking entertainment this season and this was an eagerly-awaited showdown between two of the league's in-form clubs.

Yet the high-stakes clash was a dull affair for half an hour, Tottenham enjoying plenty of possession but doing little with it while United looked anything but title contenders.

The second-versus-fourth game was so devoid of incident that the first shot of the match did not arrive until the 29th minute, Roman Pavlyucheko's tame effort causing United

keeper Edwin van der Sar no problems whatsoever.

Fortunately, the game lived up towards the end of the half with United carving out four chances in quick succession without hurting the visitors.

Berbatov was denied his 13th goal of the campaign by Ledley King's excellent 29th minute block before Heurleho Gomes saved well from Antonio Valencia after the Ecuador international fly with a vicious low effort.

Tottenham's defence, which had remained solid, was starting to feel the strain as left-back Patrice Evra blazed another opportunity over the bar before half-time.

However, it did not look like it was going to be United's day, particularly when Berbatov, who cost United 30.75 million pounds when they brought him from Tottenham in September 2008, failed to keep his composure after Rafael da Silva's cross.

Tottenham, who had won seven of their previous eight league games, were living dangerously as they invited United to attack them.

The visitors survived another scare when Darren Fletcher narrowly failed to divert Berbatov's header over the line before United's pressure finally paid off when Benoit Assou-Ekotto upended Evra inside the penalty area.

Former Monaco full-back Evra had vomited on the pitch at the start of the second half but it was Tottenham who were feeling sick when Giggs kept his composure to beat Gomes from the penalty spot in the 58th minute.

Yet United's lead lasted just 12 minutes as King stunned Old Trafford after taking advantage of sloppy defending to power home the equaliser following a corner by Gareth Bale.

But Nani, who was United's best player, came to the rescue with a wonderful 80th minute finish to restore his side's advantage after a great move involving Darren Fletcher and substitute Federico Macheda.

Tottenham's hopes of stealing a point faded when Giggs kept his cool to make it 3-1 with his second from the penalty spot in the 86th minute after Nani had been fouled by Wilson

IN BRIEF

Lopez pans Lyon

AFP, Lyon

Lyon's Argentine striker Lisandro Lopez on Friday criticised his side's defensive mindset after their 1-0 Champions League semifinal first-leg defeat at Bayern Munich on Wednesday.

Bayern were reduced to 10 men with the dismissal of winger Franck Ribery in the 37th minute but Lyon were unable to capitalise and had Jeremy Toulalan sent off early in the second half before Arjen Robben struck Bayern's winner.

The return leg takes place at Stade Gerland on Tuesday.

"It's clear. The team must change their attitude and their mentality for the next match on Tuesday," said Lisandro.

"We didn't play enough when we had the ball. We were waiting in our own half too much. At 11 against 11 we had chances to attack more but we didn't hurt our opponent enough and definitely not at 10 against 11.

"You saw a team that played too defensively. We have to correct the tactics and show a more positive spirit to go for victory."

Scholl leaving Bayern

AFP, Munich

Former German international Mehmet Scholl is to leave his job as Bayern Munich's reserve coach at the end of the season, severing an 18-year association with the club, it emerged Friday.

"It's Mehmet's decision - we leave on good terms," the club's sporting director Christian Nerlinger told the Muenchner Merkur newspaper.

Scholl, 39, is to devote his attention to working as a consultant with broadcaster ARD.

He made his Bayern debut in 1992 and played 334 Bundesliga matches before retiring in 2007.

Loew heads to London

AFP, Frankfurt

Germany coach Joachim Loew will meet his captain Michael Ballack after Chelsea's Premier League match with Stoke this weekend, the German Football Federation (DFB) announced on Friday.

"This trip has been planned for a while," said Loew.

"It will enable us to exchange ideas with Michael when things have settled down after the match (on Sunday)."

Loew is keen to assess Ballack's fitness, as the Chelsea midfielder has been plagued by a series of minor injuries in recent weeks and has often spent time on the substitutes' bench.

It is thought the pair will also discuss matters pertaining to Germany's World Cup preparations, with the chances of a recall for in-form Schalke striker Kevin Kuranyi likely to be high on the agenda.

Ancelotti wants title

AFP, London



Carlo Ancelotti admits he will only regard his first season at Chelsea as a success if the Blues win the Premier League title.

Ancelotti's team host Stoke on Sunday in the first of a three-game run that will decide if Chelsea regain the English crown from Manchester United for the first time since 2006.

After winning the title two years in a row under Jose Mourinho, Chelsea have been forced to play second fiddle to Sir Alex Ferguson's side for the last three seasons, but the west Londoners can end United's dominance by winning their remaining fixtures against Stoke, Liverpool and Wigan.

Ancelotti knows Chelsea's Champions League defeat against Mourinho's Inter Milan has raised unfavourable comparisons with the former Blues boss and the Italian is desperate to prove his critics wrong by delivering the title just a year after arriving from AC Milan.

"Yes, we have to win the league. At this point of the season we have to win," he said.

Despite opening up a four-point lead over United earlier this month, Chelsea failed to press home their advantage and a 2-1 defeat at Tottenham last weekend allowed the champions back into the race.

Ancelotti still believes his players are capable of passing the finish line first and he takes heart from the impressive way they responded to that European exit.

"I always said I have a very good squad, not only technically but mentally. We have lost some games but we have all the qualities to finish this season well," Ancelotti said.

"This season we have moved on from very difficult moments. We went out of the Champions League and had a very good reaction. This team showed a lot of courage in defeat."

"Now is not a difficult moment for us. It is a moment to maintain control and stay focused. We have the title in our hands. We can decide our future. Nobody else."

Managing Chelsea, with all its myriad factions competing for power in the dressing room and the board room, could have been a draining experience for Ancelotti.

But he has coped well enough with the egos in his squad and the political intrigue behind the scene and insists he has relished every moment.

"It is a new experience. I trained players with different characteristics. Sometimes I changed the shape of the team. It has been a very good experience," Ancelotti said.

"To do this job I have to be clear, I have to show my character in front of my players, the fans, the owners."

"This is my character. I want to be clear and clean. This is the best thing for me."

Ashley Cole's quicker than expected return from a broken ankle suffered in February is a major boost for Ancelotti as he will be without several key players through injury and suspension.

John Obi Mikel, Michael Essien and Ricardo Carvalho are all injured, while captain John Terry is banned following his dismissal at Tottenham.

Those absences could prove problematic against a Stoke team who have already troubled Chelsea twice this season.

Potters boss Tony Pulis, who welcomes back defender Ryan Shawcross from injury, said: "We've had some good matches with Chelsea and we've been close to getting something from them on at least a couple of occasions."

"They beat us with two late goals at Stamford Bridge last year and scored in the 94th minute here at Stoke this season."

"We've got a chance of causing an upset but we also know if they get it right in the final third of the pitch there is always a chance you could end up getting your backsides slapped."

Bolt supports Argentina

AFP, Paris

Triple Olympic sprint champion Usain Bolt revealed on Friday that he will be supporting Argentina at the forthcoming football World Cup in South Africa.

With his Jamaica homeland having failed to qualify for the quadrennial showpiece event, Bolt said he would be cheering on the Argentina team of current World Player of the Year Lionel Messi.

"For me, Argentina are my football side," said Bolt, who is also a fan of English giants Manchester United, during a conference call with journalists on Friday.

"But I think they need a new central midfielder player to help them dominate on the pitch," he added.

Under the guidance of controversial former great Diego Maradona, Argentina squeezed into the World Cup only after winning their final two games in the South American qualifying competition.

They will play Nigeria, South Korea and Greece in Group B after a kind draw, but Bolt does not expect them to mount a serious challenge for the tournament, which runs from June 11-July 11.

"Right now, it's either Brazil or Spain," he said.

Adler set to resume training

AFP, Leverkusen

Bayer Leverkusen's Germany goalkeeper Rene Adler looks set to go to the World Cup despite fracturing a rib, after saying on Friday that he will resume training next week.

"From a medical perspective, nothing's preventing me from resuming training with my team-mates at the start of next week," said Adler.

A date for Adler's return to the first team has not been set but Leverkusen coach Jupp Heynckes believes he will play again before the end of the German season on May 8.

Adler, 25, hurt himself after colliding with an opponent during his side's 2-1 Bundesliga defeat at Stuttgart last Saturday.

Germany coach Joachim Loew has already stated that Adler, who has nine international caps, will be Germany's first-choice goalkeeper at the June 11-July 11 World Cup.

His rivals for the number one shirt are expected to be Schalke's Manuel Neuer and Tim Wiese of Werder Bremen. Germany begin their World Cup preparations on May 12 and will travel to South Africa on June 6.

They have been drawn against Australia, Serbia and Ghana in Group D.

Aussies get S. Korea



AFP, Doha

Asia's top-ranked team Australia was pitted against fellow World Cup finalists South Korea at the 2011 Asian Cup draw on Friday while three-times champions Japan will face Saudi Arabia.

The Soccerros, who struggled in their tournament debut at the last Asian Cup in 2007, have their work cut out in a tough Group C that also includes Bahrain and minnows India.

At a glitzy draw at the Aspire Dome that culminated 21 months of qualifying, Japan were drawn alongside all-Gulf opposition, with Syria and Jordan making up Group B. Defending champions Iraq will take on Iran, North Korea and UAE while hosts Qatar are in Group A with China, Kuwait and Uzbekistan.

"It is not an easy group, but then none of them are," said the Australian team's technical director Han Berger.

"No game in this type of tournament is going to be easy." He expressed fears that some of his European-based players, like Tim Cahill and Harry Kewell, may face opposition from their clubs to play with domestic seasons in full flight.

"Maybe it will be a problem. I'm Dutch so I know European clubs don't like to lose their players for tournaments like this. We will try to have our strongest team possible."

Australia will also have a new coach, with Pim Verbeek already announcing he will step down after the World Cup.

India, who have qualified for the first time in 24 years, look like being the group whipping boys and coach Bob Houghton is under no illusions about the task ahead.

"It's probably the toughest group there is," said the Englishman.

"We've had good preparations so far, but it's a

big ask. We need to improve, but you never know what might happen."

Japan won the tournament in 1992, 2000 and 2004 and plan to add to the tally in January.

"We aspire to be in the final," said their technical director Hiroshi Hara.

"It's amazing that we have all Gulf nations but I am glad we avoided South Korea and Australia," he added.

"Who is the toughest team in our group? Well, all Asian teams are strong nowadays so I can't single one out."

The tournament opens at the 50,000 capacity Khalifa Stadium and will be played in January rather than July to avoid the searing summer heat in the Qatari capital.

Asian Football Confederation president Mohamed bin Hammam said he had high hopes for the tournament.

GROUPS

Group A:	Qatar, Kuwait, China, Uzbekistan
Group B:	Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Japan
Group C:	South Korea, India, Bahrain, Australia
Group D:	Iraq, North Korea, UAE, Iran

The 16 teams in today's draw represent the hopes and aspirations of millions of people," Bin Hammam himself a Qatari, said.

"Each of them dreams to take the coveted Asian Cup back home."

"Today the Asian Cup highlights everything that is exceptional in Asian football. This competition will bring together our very best players."

"I am confident that new benchmarks will be set here in Doha next year."

The last tournament was hailed as a turning point for Asian football and despite Berger's concerns, organisers are confident there will be no problem with European clubs releasing their top Asian stars.

"FIFA regulations say that players must be released by their clubs to play the Asian Cup," said AFC vice president and Asian Cup organising committee chairman Zhang Jilong.

"We don't foresee any problems." Five stadiums will be used -- Khalifa Stadium, Al Sadd Stadium, Al Gharafa Stadium, Al Rayyan Stadium and Qatar Sports Club Stadium.



PHOTO: AFP

Stuttgart striker Cacau celebrates his opening goal against Bochum during their Bundesliga clash in Bochum on Friday.

Stuttgart go fifth

SOCCERNET



Early goals by Cacau and Ciprian Marica were enough to steer Stuttgart to victory over Bochum as they moved level on points with fifth-placed Borussia Dortmund in the Bundesliga on Friday night.

Brazilian striker Cacau was an attacking threat from the outset and he gave the visitors the lead after 14 minutes when he slotted home from close range.

Four minutes later Marica sealed matters with a right-footed shot to make it 2-0.

The result saw Stuttgart close to within a point of third-placed Werder Bremen in the Champions League qualifying berth ahead of the remaining weekend games, but left Bochum still hovering perilously close to the relegation zone.

Cacau produced the first threat on the

Bochum goal after six minutes, unleashing a curling shot which appeared destined for the top corner until goalkeeper Philipp Heerwagen pulled off a good save.

However, eight minutes later the 29-year-old put his side ahead when Marica deflected Timo Gebhart's cross into his path and he coolly slotted home.

Cacau returned the favour just four minutes later when he played a through-ball to Marica, who bore down on goal before firing into the net.

Bochum had few chances although Anthar Yahia ghosted past two Stuttgart players before seeing his cross blocked.

Cacau sent in a long-range shot which flew narrowly wide eight minutes into the second half as the visitors looked to extend their lead.

Christian Fuchs missed a great chance to reduce the deficit in the 64th minute, failing to test Jens Lehmann with a header from Yahia's free-kick before Serdar Tasci almost put through his own goal.

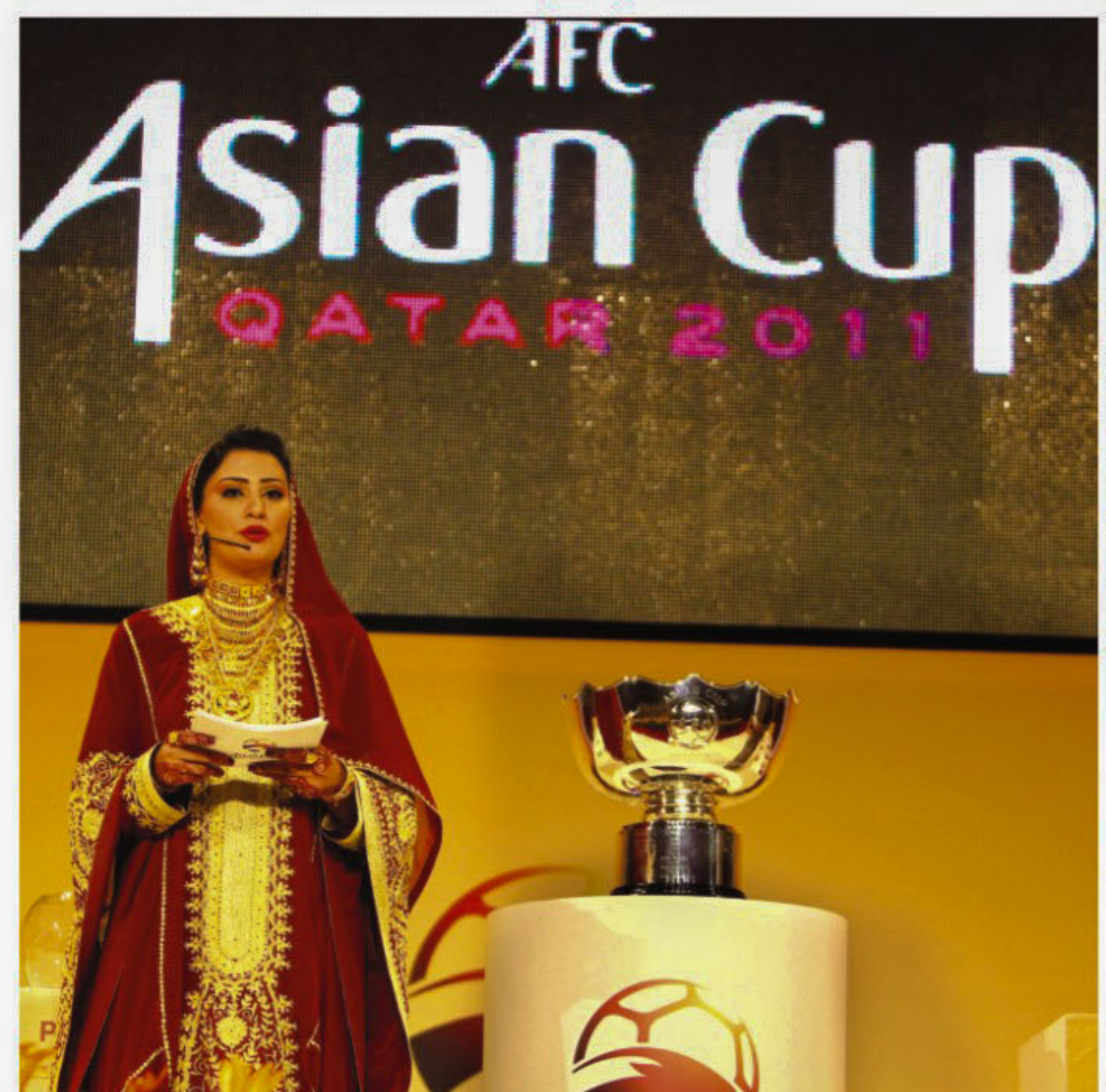


PHOTO: AFP

Qatari TV presenter Nada Al-Shaibani anchors the 2011 Asian Cup draw ceremony at the Aspire Dome in Doha on Friday.