

## AFC U17 Asian Cup: Iranian young guns on the verge of World Cup berth after South Korea win



### Sports Desk

Iran is 90 minutes away from securing a place at November's FIFA Under-17 World Cup after a 2-0 victory over South Korea saw Hossein Abdi's boys march into the last-eight round of the AFC U17 Asian Cup in Thailand – a first knockout spot for the 2008 champion since 2016, where Iran finished as the runner-up. Having been held to a goalless stalemate by Qatar last time out, Iran started right on the front foot against Thursday's opponent as Abdi's team needed the maximum points to overtake the South Koreans for a top-spot finish in Group B.

The brave start paid off as two goals inside 90 seconds gave Iran a morale-boosting lead for the rest of the way against the team that came into the contest on the back of a tournament-high 10 goals, thanks to a 6-1 thrashing of Qatar a comfortable four-goal victory over Afghanistan.

Nima Andarz broke the deadlock in the 18th minute when his low drive from inside the box went underneath goalkeeper Hong Seong-min into the net. A minute later, Esmail Qolizadeh's backheel touch picked up Mahan Sadeqi, whose superb left-footed effort found the top corner to round off an

Iran's brilliant counter-attack.

The young winger became the sixth Iranian to find the back of the net in Thailand – no other team has had more different scorers.

"I told my South Korean counterpart before the kickoff that this is an early final and I believe it was probably one of the best games so far in the tournament," Abdi said after the game.

"That's the way we need to play in every match. Our gameplan was to harm them with quick attacks and score the first goal. We also managed to keep them at bay in every aspect of their game. I'm proud of what my players did to-

night," added the Iranian.

The result came after Iran had wasted a load of chances against Qatar and Abdi was thrilled to see how his team responded to the frustrating draw in style.

"I've been a coach long enough to know how to help the players recover both mentally and physically in these kinds of situations. It was hard to handle their stress for the game against South Korea as they are only a bunch of 16-year-olds and could easily be overwhelmed by emotions. "I want the players at this age to enjoy the game. The result is not all that matters but it is important for them to give it all out for their best performance," Abdi

added.

Thursday's triumph means Iran will play Yemen, which finished second to Thailand in Group A, in Sunday's quarterfinal, while South Korea will face the host, which won the group with a perfect record.

"The players are so happy. When you analyze South Korea you see what a great team they are so it is normal for my players to be excited about the result. But we have a tough game ahead of us and anything can happen in there. We need to prepare properly, while enjoying the contest with a different tactic," Abdi said.

The four semifinalists of the tournament will qualify

Iranian players celebrate a goal during a 2-0 victory over South Korea in the AFC U17 Asian Cup in Pathum Thani, Thailand, on June 22, 2023. **FFIRI**

### IOC strips IBA of recognition as governing body



UESLEI MARCELINO/REUTERS

**REUTERS** – The International Boxing Association's (IBA) recognition as the global body for the sport was stripped on Thursday by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) due to its failure to complete reforms on governance, finance and ethical issues.

The IOC's extraordinary session, held online on Thursday, rubber-stamped an executive board recommendation by 69 votes to one to withdraw the IBA's recognition.

The IBA, which called the decision "a tremendous error", had tried to have it blocked through an urgent appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, sport's highest court, which rejected the appeal on Tuesday.

The IOC had previously suspended the IBA in 2019 over governance, finance, refereeing and ethical issues and did not involve it in running the boxing events at the Tokyo Olympics.

Boxing is part of the Paris 2024 Olympics but the qualification bouts and the competition are being run by the IOC and not the IBA, as was the case at the Tokyo Games in 2021.

Other issues such as a sponsorship deal with Russian energy giant Gazprom that was terminated in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine further complicated the position of the IBA, which is led by Russian businessman Umar Kremlev.

"The IOC has made a tremendous error by withdrawing its recognition of the IBA, revealing its true politicized nature," the IBA said in a statement. "We have successfully implemented all recommendations outlined by the IOC in its roadmap."

"Despite the challenges, the IBA remains committed to the development of boxing, the preservation of its independence, and the organization of official tournaments and World Boxing Championships at the highest level."

"We possess the legal right to do so, and we are prepared to defend it before any appropriate authority," the IBA said. While the IOC regularly removes or adds sports to the Olympic Games programme to make them more attractive to younger audiences, it is extremely rare for the Olympic body to strip an international sports federation's recognition.

The IBA's actions have led to the creation of a breakaway group called World Boxing and several countries have left the IBA to join the new organisation.

"All national boxing federations now have a critically important decision to make if they want boxers from their country to have the opportunity to compete at the Olympic Games at Los Angeles and beyond," World Boxing said in a statement.

## Rice keen to join Arsenal despite City interest



**THE GUARDIAN** – Declan Rice remains keen to join Arsenal despite Manchester City planning to enter the race to sign the West Ham midfielder.

Arsenal's first two bids for Rice have been rejected, leaving Mikel Arteta at risk of missing out on his top target. City have the financial wherewithal to meet West Ham's asking price of at least £100m, and it would be hard for the 24-year-old to turn down the chance to play for Pep Guardiola.

Rice spoke to Guardiola towards the end of last season and City are planning for life without Ilkay Gundogan, who has decided to join Barcelona on a free transfer. However, the treble winners are not short of options in central midfield. They are close to signing Mateo Kovacic

from Chelsea and have Rodri and Calvin Phillips to play in central midfield.

Rice would be more likely to start regularly at Arsenal and his preference remains to stay in London. The England international became a father last year and is extremely close to his family. Rice also admires Arteta's football and Arsenal should not have any problems when it comes to personal terms.

Arsenal's problem remains agreeing a fee. Their first offer was £60m plus £15m in add-ons and that was followed this week by a bid of £75m plus £15m in add-ons. West Ham were unimpressed with Arsenal's attempt to spread the £75m payment over five years and unhappy with what they deemed a series of unrealistic add-ons.

West Ham want the guaranteed portion of the fee to be paid in fewer instalments to boost their financial position. The expecta-

tion remains that Rice will join Arsenal for a fee that could top £100m once add-ons are taken into account. There were indications on Thursday night that the transfer was rumbling towards a conclusion, though suggestions Arsenal have lodged their third bid have been denied.

Arsenal will need to make Rice their record signing. Arteta wants more physicality in midfield and is also targeting Southampton's Roméo Lavia, who is valued at £45m. Arsenal are close to completing an initial £60m deal for the Chelsea forward Kai Havertz, who is due to have a medical. Havertz is expected to be unveiled next week. Arsenal are prepared to make room for Rice by selling Granit Xhaka, who has an offer from Bayer Leverkusen, and Thomas Partey. There is interest in Partey from Saudi Arabia and Juventus and he would prefer to stay in Europe.

JUSTIN SETTERFIELD/GETTY IMAGES