

Iran beats Bulgaria to continue unbeaten run

Sports Desk

Mohammad Mohebbi bagged the winner as Iran walked away with a 1-0 victory over Bulgaria in a friendly in Plovdiv on Thursday. Brentford midfielder Saman Qoddous was first to an ill-fated back pass by home side's Ilia Gruev before his volley cross found Rostov striker Mohebbi, who headed home with 14 minutes into the contest. Having seen his contribution to the national team being limited to cameo appearances over the past six years, Qoddous will be looking to build on the man-of-the-match performance he delivered at the Hristo Botev Stadium ahead of January's AFC Asian Cup in Qatar. Goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand had to be replaced by Payam Niazmand midway through the first half after suffering a groin injury. The news is a massive blow for Persepolis fans and the manager Yahya Golmohammadi, whose team will have to take on Cristiano Ronaldo and co. in an AFC Champions League opener against Saudi side Al Nassr in 10 days. This was a fifth successive win for the Asian powerhouse under head coach Amir Qalenoeei, who is yet

concede a loss since taking over from Portuguese Carlos Queiroz following a group stage exit at last year's World Cup. "We were good in defense and enjoyed an overall decent performance, though we're disappointed not to have converted our chances," Qalenoeei's assistant Antonio Manicone said after the game. "We have a big goal at the Asian Cup and will keep working hard toward that objective," added the Italian. The three-time champion will be chasing a first trophy at the continent's flagship international event since 1976 when starting its campaign in Group C against the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, and Palestine. Next for Iran is a friendly against Angola in Tehran on Tuesday. Ranked 116th in the world, Angola shared the spoils with Madagascar in a goalless stalemate at home on Thursday to finish second to Ghana in the qualification group and progress to the Africa Cup of Nations in Cote d'Ivoire earlier next year. Qalenoeei's side will fly to Jordan in October's international break to take part in a four-team tournament, also featuring Qatar and Iraq.



Iran's Mohammad Mohebbi (10) and Saman Qoddous celebrate after the winner in a 1-0 victory over Bulgaria at the Hristo Botev Stadium, Plovdiv, Bulgaria, on September 7, 2023. ● FFIRI

Four more Asian cadet medals for Iranian taekwondo



Narina Khayat (R) and Pinar Lotfizadeh (L) pose with their Asian cadet medals alongside Hadi Saei, the head of the Iranian Taekwondo Federation, in Beirut, Lebanon, on September 7, 2023. ● taekwondo.ir

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Having bagged six medals – including two golds – on the first day of the Asian Cadet Taekwondo Championships, Iranians picked up where they had left off on Day 2 by capturing another four in Beirut, Lebanon. Narina Khayat defeated Uzbekistan's Rabboniya Ruslanova in straight rounds for the gold medal of the girls' -164cm class on Thursday. Pinar Lotfizadeh, however, had to settle for a silver in the girls' -168cm event after a 2-0 defeat against Rushanakhon Ravshanova – also from Uzbekistan.

In the boys' competitions, Pouya Kiaheyrati came short against Jordanian Osama al-Manaseer in the -168cm final and took the silver, while Armin Masoumi finished his boys' -172cm campaign with a consolation bronze. Seyyed Mohammad Abdollahi (boys -152cm) and Fatemeh Zahra Baqeri (girls -148cm) were the Iranian gold medalists on the first day of the cadet event. The results came after the Iranian 10-girl squad had won the Asian junior title earlier in the Lebanese capital, courtesy of a remarkable six golds, two silvers, and a bronze.

South Korea still a work in progress, says Klinsmann

REUTERS – Coach Jurgen Klinsmann said South Korea are still going through a transition period and wants to see his squad build a strong mentality as they head toward next year's Asian Cup in Qatar. The Koreans extended their winless run under the German to five games on Thursday with a 0-0 draw against Wales. Klinsmann, 59, was appointed in February and tasked with building on South Korea's run to the knockout rounds of last year's World Cup. Prior to Thursday's game they had drawn against Colombia and El Salvador and lost to Uruguay and Peru. "The team is in the process of developing toward Qatar," Klinsmann

told reporters in Cardiff. "It's a normal process between two World Cups that there's a type of a turnover into the next generation of players. "For me, it's very important to see where they are mentally ... and I look a lot about how the team develops as a group. If you want to win or want to go far in a tournament, you need a very, very strong spirit." Captain Son Heung-min also came to Klinsmann's defence after the German was criticised for spending more time at his U.S. home than in South Korea since his appointment. "I understand where fans come from, as someone who's been on the national team for a long time," Son said. "I am not saying



South Korea head coach Jurgen Klinsmann (L) speaks with Wales manager Robert Page before the goalless friendly at Cardiff City Stadium, Cardiff, United Kingdom, on September 7, 2023. ● ACTION IMAGES

the coach is always right, but I also don't think fans are always right, either. "Many different players

have been getting opportunities. In some ways, the coach is trying to identify new players, in-

stead of trying to put up results right away. I am sure he knows what he's doing."

Sabalenka fends off Keys to reach US Open final

AFP – Aryna Sabalenka fought back from the brink of defeat to overcome American 17th seed Madison Keys in a third-set tie-break and line up a US Open final against home favourite Coco Gauff. Keys served for the match in the second set but incoming world number one Sabalenka overhauled the 2017 runner-up to win 0-6, 7-6 (7/1), 7-6 (10/5) to reach her second Grand Slam final. "I'm really proud of myself that I was able to

turn around this game and get this win, because it was just incredible," said Sabalenka. "I was just, like, 'Come on, keep trying, keep pushing, like, I don't know, do something extra. Just try to turn around this match.'" "It really means a lot to be in the final of the US Open for the first time," she added. Sabalenka rode an emotional rollercoaster, angrily remonstrating with her coaching team at times, before being able to sheepishly laugh off celebrating prematurely in the decisive tie-

break. "I thought that we play tie-break up till seven. I was just all over the place," she said. The Australian Open champion will bid for her second Grand Slam title on Saturday against the 19-year-old Gauff. The American holds a 3-2 edge but this will be their first meeting at a major. "She's an unbelievable player," said Sabalenka. "The crowd will be supporting her a lot. I will do everything I can. I'll be fighting for every point and I will do my best."