

## Iranians collect four medals in Asian Youth Chess Ch'ships



MNA

### Sports Desk

Iranians bagged one gold and three bronze medals at the Asian Youth Chess Championships 2023 in Al Ain, the UAE. All four medals came in the blitz competitions of the event, which is being held across six age groups. Ramtin Kakavand claimed the gold in the boys' under-10 contests, with Mohammad-Taha Arkak and Seyyed Kan'an Pourmousavi taking double bronzes in the under-eight and under-12 categories respectively. In the girls' competitions, Niusha Mohammadi also settled for a third-spot finish in the under-14 class – a second medal for the Iranian girls in tournament following Roshia Akbari's under-12 bronze in the rapid event. Iran is being represented by 13 players in the tournament, which will come to an end on Friday.

## Persian Gulf Pro League preview: How will Tehran archrivals fare after derby brawl?

### Sports Desk

Persepolis and Esteghlal will be back in the Persian Gulf Pro League action today, looking to get back to winning ways after sharing the spoils in the most controversial Tehran derby in years, which was dominated by late VAR interventions and press-conference swipes from both sides. The post-derby game has always provided a tricky test for the two archrivals, as both look to move on from the tensions and emotions of the biggest occasion in the Iranian top-flight club football. Awaiting the Reds and Blues today are the relegation-zone strugglers. Sitting atop table, Esteghlal will fancy an easy matchup at the Azadi Stadium against Nassaji Mazandaran and legendary keeper Seyyed Mahdi Rahmati – now in charge of Nassaji's bench – who will step into the game on the back of Thursday's 2-1 loss away to Shams Azar and have only managed two victories in 11 league outings this season. However, a wobble at home could see Javad Nekounam's men surrender the top spot

to in-form Sepahan, which trails the Blues by a point and will be chasing a fifth league win on the bounce when playing away to Havadar in today's early kickoff. Having failed to leave the pitch with maximum points in four of the previous league matches, the Tehran Reds are four points adrift of the top with a game in hand and will visit Ahvaz to take on bottom-club Esteghlal Khuzestan, knowing they can't afford a further slip-up if they are to keep pace with Esteghlal and Sepahan in the title run-in. The good news for Yahya Golmohammadi and his men, who felt unlucky to concede to a VAR-given spot-kick in the stoppage time last time out, is that today's opponent is yet to win a game this season, suffering eight defeats in 12 games. Elsewhere, Sham Azar, unbeaten in seven, welcomes San'at Naft Abadan, which will be hoping to avoid a third consecutive defeat in the league. Iralco and Golgozar Sirjan – equal on points – will go head-to-head in Arak, with Zob Ahan hosting Foolad Khuzestan.



Persepolis striker Shahab Zahedi (red) is seen in action against Esteghlal's Rouzbeh Cheshmi during a 1-1 draw in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on Dec. 14, 2023. ALIREZA SOTAKBAR/ISNA

## First 32-team Club World Cup to be played in US

**BBC** – FIFA has announced the first 32-team Club World Cup from 2025 will be played in the United States from 15 June to 13 July.

The tournament will feature clubs from each of the six confederations, with Europe entering 12 teams. Chelsea, Real Madrid and Manchester City have qualified automatically as the most recent Champions League winners in the four-year cycle.

Bayern Munich, Paris St-Germain, Inter Milan, Porto and Benfica have also secured places in the tournament in 2025 via the coefficient pathway. FIFA president Gianni Infantino confirmed the news at a meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on Sunday.

The revamped format will be played in the same slot where FIFA has previously held the Confederations Cup for international teams, a year before the World Cup.

Football's world governing body said the summer dates had been set to ensure the scheduling aligns with the international match calendar, and to allow sufficient rest time before the start of the domestic seasons.

The powerful European Clubs' Association has backed the tournament but Maheta Molango, head of the Professional Footballers' Association, said FIFA's persistence to go ahead with the expansion shows a lack of concern for player welfare.

"Players have become pawns in a battle for primacy between football's governing bodies," he added. "With no-one willing to take a step back or to work collaboratively to create a sustainable calendar.

"These decisions have consequences – not just for players who are being pushed until they break. But for the future quality of these tournaments, with players becoming injured or withdrawing from games as they make their own decisions about how to manage what have become ridiculous demands."

In a statement, Fifpro, the world players' union, said there was also "a disregard" for players' "personal and family lives".

It added: "The expanded competition will undercut the rest and recovery time of these players at the end of the 2024-25 season, and further disrupt national employment markets by changing the balance between national and international competitions. "Players will have to perform at the end of an 11-month season with little prospect of getting enough rest before the following season starts.

"The extreme mental and physical pressures at the pinnacle of the game is the principal concern of players with multiple club and national team competitions, leading to exhaustion, physical injuries, mental health issues, diminished performance, and risks to career longevity."

FIFA also announced a new Intercontinental Cup competition from December 2024, which will see the winners of the Champions League face a team that comes through inter-continental play-offs.

## Moya unsure how Nadal will cope with Grand Slam demands on comeback

**REUTERS** – Rafa Nadal has shown good progress in training since recovering from a hip injury but his coach Carlos Moya still worries about how the former world number one's body will hold up against the rigours of Grand Slam tennis.

The 37-year-old suffered a muscle issue at Melbourne Park in January that wiped out his season but will return at Brisbane this month before playing in the Jan. 14-28 Australian Open where he won two of his 22 Grand Slam titles. The Spaniard, who had surgery in June, has said 2024 could be his final year on tour and has stepped up training in recent months in order to make a comeback and ensure he finishes his career on court.

"Rafa's going to go from training, which he's doing very well, to competing. It's impossible to have the same conditions in training as in a match," Moya said in an interview with the ATP Tour.

"Playing the best of five sets, win, rest, return to court two days later ... That's the doubt I have right now, especially for a Grand Slam. But we have time. If the Australian Open started tomorrow, it would be a real fear.

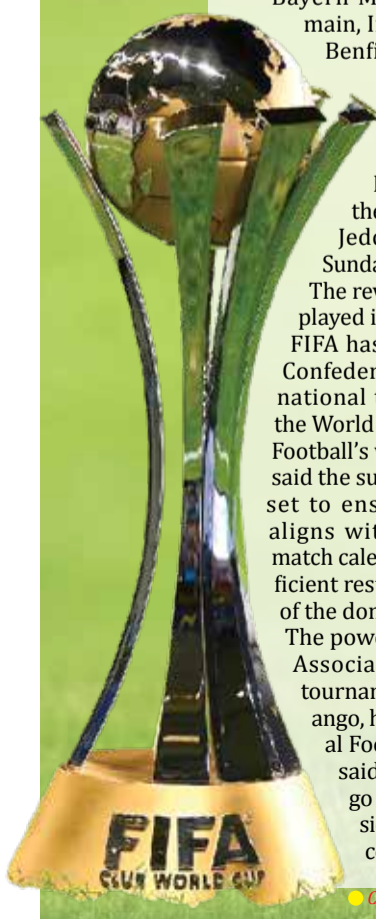
"There's still a month left, a tournament before in Brisbane, demanding training ... I think all of this will put him in a position to be able to endure



LOREN ELLIOTT/REUTERS

it. But now that's my fear." Nadal dropped out of the top 100 for the first time in 20 years earlier this season and has slipped to number 668 but is eligible for a protected ranking having been injured and not competing for at least six months. However, Moya said Nadal

would not be able to avoid strong opponents in the early rounds and would need favourable draws to build up his rhythm. "I've never been of the thought that Rafa needs rhythm because he's too good for that," Moya said. "But now the situation is different."



CGTN