

Iran to chase the elusive Asian Cup crown in Qatar



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

When skipper Parviz Qelichkhani lifted a third successive Asian Cup trophy for Iran on home soil in June 1976 – courtesy of an Ali Parvin's match-winning freekick against Kuwait – it was hard to think that the country's wait for another title in the continent's flagship international event would stretch beyond four decades.

Once the dominant force of the sport in Asia, Iran had to watch Saudi Arabia and Japan steal the show for the best part of the next 11 editions – winning seven titles between them – with Kuwait, Iraq, Australia, and, most recently, Qatar also getting the taste of silverware at the tournament.

For all the talent in the Iranian squad throughout the years, the country has been left regretting the 'what if?' moments, controversial refereeing decisions, and individual blunders when leaving the competition as an unfortunate loser.

From Nasser Mohammadkhani and Hamid Alidousti in the 80s to legendary keeper Ahmadreza Abedzadeh and the magnificent trio of Ali Daei, Khodadad Azizi, and Karim Baqeri in the 90s, and then Mahdi Mahdavi, Ali Karimi, and Javad Nekounam in the early years of the new century, all finished their illustrious careers without the coveted trophy, settling for a consolation bronze or individual awards on each occasion.

"We're tired of losing in the penalties," a weeping commentator Javad Khiabani said on TV after Yahya Golmohammadi's miss from the spot against the 2004



● FFIRI

host China saw Iran fall to a third last-four shootout defeat in the history of the competition. The shootout heartbreak was repeated in the quarterfinals against South Korea in 2007 and Iraq eight years later in Australia, while the South Koreans also sent Team Melli packing, thanks to extra-time winners in the last-eight round, in 2000 and 2011. A sixth semifinal setback came in the previous edition in the United

Arab Emirates, where Carlos Queiroz's star-studded team suffered a devastating 3-0 defeat against Japan.

Fifteen of the Iranian players in the UAE will again be in the 26-man squad when beginning their quest for the Asian Cup glory against Palestine in the Group B opener in Qatar on Sunday.

Widely regarded as one of the finest generations of the Iranian footballers, Amir Qalenoee's men

will be looking to build on years of close bond under Queiroz to end the long-time drought in the event, which could prove to be a fitting finale to the international careers of certain players in the team – most notably the captain of the group Ehsan Hajsafi, as well as Karim Ansarifard and Omid Ebrahimi. For the Iranian head coach himself, the tournament will provide an opportunity for relief.

Having always felt harshly treated

to see his previous spell in charge come to an end after only 11 months following the 2007 loss to South Korea, 60-year-old Qalenoee, in what is likely his last top managerial role, is eager to add the Asian crown to his decorated trophy cabinet, not to mention secure his place on the bench for the World Cup in two years.

However, despite a decent run since he was appointed to the job last March, the challenge is not

going to be any easier this time around as all of the Asian elite teams will have the same high ambitions in Qatar.

Some jaw-dropping results and performances over the past two years – including last September's 4-1 hammering of Germany – make Japan the ultimate favorite to win a record-extending fifth title, while Jürgen Klinsmann's South Korea, chasing a first trophy since 1960, will be spearheaded by top European club stars in Son Heung-min, Kim Min-jae, and Lee Kang-in.

Saudi Arabia, with high-profile Italian Roberto Mancini in charge, will be out there to prove its Pro League's spending spree in the summer has not led to the national team's decline, and Australia will return to Qatar on the back of an impressive World Cup campaign in the Persian Gulf country two years ago.

Qalenoee will yearn for his strike force of Mahdi Taremi and Sardar Azmoun to be in top form during the course of the four weeks, despite the two missing their respective clubs Porto and AS Roma this season, while pinning hopes on Brentford midfielder Saman Qoddous, enjoying his best international spell under the manager, to be the linchpin of his team going forward.

The 2022 World Cup final at the Lusail Stadium saw Lionel Messi walk away with the one single prize that had eluded the Argentine great all his life, and a whole footballing nation of Iran will yearn to watch their team end the decades-long hunt when a second major final showdown is staged at the venue on February 10.

Djokovic poised to scale Grand Slam peak at favourite stomping ground



REUTERS – Novak Djokovic resumes his quest for Grand Slam supremacy at the Australian Open, where the seemingly invincible Serb will be the firm favourite to claim his 25th major singles title and eclipse a record that has stood for half a century.

The 36-year-old enjoyed one of the most dominant seasons of his career in 2023, winning a record-extending 10th crown at the Melbourne major before triumphs at the French and U.S. Opens to go level with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam singles titles.

Australian Court won the last of those trophies in 1973 and Djokovic is poised to go past her on his happiest hunting ground, where 12 months ago he braved a political row involving his father and battled through a torn hamstring to prevail.

Barring a blip in a thrilling Wimbledon final against Carlos Alcaraz and a couple of late-season defeats by another youngster in Jannik Sinner, the world number one was virtually unbeatable last year with little to suggest he will slow down in 2024.

"You're not really meant to play

tennis like that at 36," Djokovic's former coach Boris Becker said in a recent Eurosport podcast.

"When does the guy get tired, or when does he run out of motivation?"

Djokovic has not got off to the best of starts in the new season, suffering his first defeat in Australia in six years at the United Cup mixed team tournament after being hampered by a right wrist issue against Alex de Minaur.

"I think I'll be okay," Djokovic said. "It did have quite an impact, particularly on the forehand and serve. I have plenty of time, I think enough time to get myself in the right shape for the Australian Open."

With his 43-match winning run in Australia ended, Djokovic will be fired up to get a head start in his quest for the Golden Slam – winning all four majors and the gold medal at the Olympic Games – to match Steffi Graf's rare feat in 1988.

"I've always had the highest ambitions and goals. That's not going to be different (in 2024), that's for sure," Djokovic said after outclassing Alcaraz and Sinner in back-to-back matches to secure the year-end top spot at the ATP Finals in November.

"The drive that I have is still there. My body has been serving me well, listening to me well. I have a great team of people around me. The motivation, especially for the biggest tournaments in the sport, is still present.

"It still inspires me to keep going."

Real target Bayern's Davies for next season

BBC – Real Madrid want to add Bayern Munich and Canada left-back Alphonso Davies to their squad for next season.

Davies, 23, has a contract until June 2025 with German champions Bayern.

He has played in all but one of their Bundesliga games this season and started all six Champions League group-stage matches.

Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti has tended to rotate between France's Ferland Mendy, 28, and Spain's Fran Garcia, 24, at left-back this campaign.

Ancelotti has just signed a new deal with Madrid until June 2026 despite interest from Brazil.

The Italian is now looking at how he can rebuild and refresh his squad after only winning the Copa del Rey last season.

Real Madrid are still targeting France and Paris St-Germain forward Kylian Mbappe but Davies is also a key target and they are hopeful he will end contract negotiations with Bayern.

Last summer saw them sign England midfielder Jude Bellingham, but lose their main striker Karim Benzema to Saudi Arabian club Al-Ittihad.

Davies, who was born in a refugee camp in Ghana in 2000, joined Bayern from Vancouver Whitecaps in January 2019.

He has made 176 appearances for Bayern and won 13 trophies, including five Bundesliga titles and the Champions League in 2020.

Davies made his Canada debut aged 16 and has been capped 44 times, scoring 15 goals, including their first at a World Cup finals at Qatar 2022.



● EUROPA PRESS

