

AFC Asian Cup:

Iran looking to benefit from underdog tag against Blue Samurai

Sports Desk

A place at the AFC Asian Cup semifinals will be at stake when two of the continental heavyweights in Iran and Japan square off in Al Rayyan's Education City Stadium today.

Iran's last-16 test was in stark contrast to what the Japanese went through, as the Blue Samurai enjoyed a comfortable 3-1 victory over Bahrain, while Team Melli made a hard work of the game against Syria later on Wednesday.

What was supposed to be an easy fixture turned out to become a nail-biting one for Amir Qalenoee's men, who created the best of the chances during the 1-1 stalemate but eventually had goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand to thank for making the all decisive save in the shootout win.

Qalenoee's side – the oldest squad in the competition – has had less than 72 hours of recovery for today's clash and as if the Iranian fans needed more reason to be anxious about the game, their team will be without the talisman Mahdi Taremi – Iran's top scorer in Qatar – after he received his marching orders for a second bookable offense in the closing stages of normal time against Syria – a déjà vu for the prolific striker, who also missed the last-four 3-0 defeat against Japan in the 2019 edition.

The history of the head-to-head between the two sides also make Hajime Moriyasu's men the favorites to progress to the semifinals as Japan was unbeaten in the previous four Asian Cup meetings between the two sides, winning twice, while Iran's last triumph over today's opponent in all competitions dates back to 2005, when Vahid Hashemian bagged a brace for a 2-1 win on home soil



Iranian players look on during the shootout against Syria in the AFC Asian Cup last 16 in Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium, Doha, Qatar, on January 31, 2024.

ROBERTUS PUDYANTO/AFC

in the World Cup qualifiers. For all the facts and figures being in Japan's favor, Qalenoee will still hope to see his team build on the typical Iranian sense of honor and integrity in pursuit of a first trophy in the continent's flagship international event in

nearly five decades. The Iranian coach, who he did not hesitate to show his frustration with "some of the senior players on the pitch" after Wednesday's hard-fought victory, will also be desperate to see the likes of Sardar Azmoun, Alireza Jahan-

bakhsh, and Saman Qoddous rise up to the occasion and make up for Taremi's absence. While Iran has always proved to beat the odds when coming up against a rather stronger opponent, producing some memorable and heroic performances

throughout the years, Japanese boss Moriyasu has had his own woes over the course of the four outings in the tournament. Having had their 11-game winning streak come to an end with a shock 2-1 loss to Iraq in the group phase, the Japanese has looked

vulnerable at times, even against minnow opponents in Vietnam and Indonesia, while their keeper Zion Suzuki has been far from reliable between the posts, making a series of blunders, including the one that led to Bahrain's goal in the previous round.

Hamilton's Ferrari move was always on the cards

REUTERS – Lewis Hamilton's multi-year deal to race for Ferrari from 2025 means the seven-times world champion is likely to see out his Formula One career in red, the most successful driver in the history of the sport racing for the most decorated team.

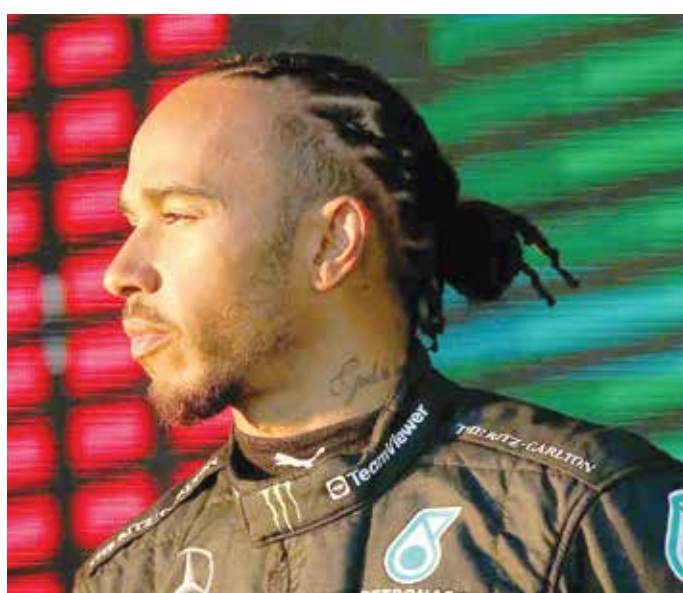
If the surprise news shook the sport on Thursday, coming only five months after the 39-year-old Briton signed a two-year extension with Mercedes, there was also logic to the switch.

Hamilton has long had a fascination with Ferrari, even if Mercedes have backed him from boyhood, and speculation about a potential dream-come-true move to Maranello has punctuated his career.

He has owned the Italian sportscars and, over the years, acknowledged the allure of the most historic and glamorous of marques.

"It's definitely going to be crazy to think that I never drove for Ferrari," he said in 2021. "Because for everyone that's a dream position to be in."

Mercedes have won only one race in the past two years, after eight successive constructors'



MARTIN KEEP/AFP

titles, whereas Ferrari were the only team to beat Red Bull last year.

Mercedes team boss Toto Wolff recognised the attraction in 2019 when he spoke of conversations with his driver, who now has a record 103 wins, about a possible move.

"You have to simply acknowledge that probably it's in every driver's head to drive at Ferrari

one day," the Austrian told reporters then.

"It's the most iconic, historic Formula One brand out there and I totally respect if a driver has the desire to drive at Ferrari."

Until now, it had been felt that the bond with Mercedes was unbreakable, but Hamilton could not resist the allure of the only team to have competed in

every season of the championship since 1950.

Ralf Schumacher, whose brother Michael won five of his seven titles in a golden era of Ferrari from 2000-2004, saw the appeal as the icing on the cake of a stellar career.

"I think Ferrari is one of the places to be in the history of Formula One," he told Sky Sports television.

"Especially for a driver like Lewis that achieved almost everything and was very unlucky not to be eight-time world champion, to be honest.

"I think for him it is just the dot on the i to make it perfect."

Damon Hill, the 1996 world champion, suspected Hamilton would have stayed at Mercedes if he thought there was a real chance of winning a record eighth title there.

"I think he's got to the point where he's probably heard the music coming out of Mercedes maybe a few too many seasons and started to think 'well, I need to invigorate my final years in Formula One, what better way to do it than to drive for Ferrari?'"

"At least I've got a chance. If it goes wrong, at least I've tried."

Gitipasand crowned Iran Premier Futsal League champion



IRNA

Sports Desk

Isfahan-based club Gitipasand sealed the Iranian Premier Futsal League title with four games to spare thanks to a 4-0 away victory over Farsh Ara. Mohammad Derakhshani found the net twice, with Bahman Ja'fari and Mahdi Karimi also on the scoresheet as Mohammad Keshavarz's team celebrated a fourth top-flight crown – first since the 2021/22 season after Mes Sungun had lifted a record fifth trophy last term.

This was a remarkable 21st victory in 22 outings for the newly-crowned champions,

who failed to leave the pitch without maximum points only once, when they settled for a 1-1 draw against Ana San'at Pasargad last October. Mes, meanwhile, came from behind to beat Poushak Hafez Sari 2-1 – courtesy of goals from Hamid Ahmadi and Farhad Fakhim against Taha Mortazavi's strike for a 3-1 defeat at Ana San'at but stays on course for a third-spot finish in the league as it holds an eight-point lead over its victorious opponent.