

# AFC Asian Cup: Victory over Japan 'a turning point' for Iranian football, Qalenoeei says

## Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei believes Saturday's comeback victory over Japan in the AFC Asian Cup quarterfinals could go down as "a turning point" for football in his country.

Trailing by one goal at halftime, Qalenoeei's men turned the game on its head with a much-improved performance after the break to win 2-1 right at the death and book a place in Wednesday's semi-final against host Qatar, which defeated Uzbekistan in the shootout later in the day.

Iran was rewarded for its front-foot display 10 minutes after the interval as Sardar Azmoun played Mohammad Mohebbi through with a sublime pass, before the latter ran around his marker and slipped his shot past Japanese keeper Zion Suzuki into the bottom corner, canceling out Hide-masa Morita's 28th-minute strike. Team Melli had several chances to take the lead but had to wait until the sixth minute of stoppage time when Alireza Jahanbakhsh smashed home from the spot to send his fellow Iranians at the Education City Stadium into raptures. "Asian football should be happy with this match, and we should be proud of the performance of our players who gave everything for the fans," Qalenoeei said in the post-match press conference.

"I want to say thank you to everyone who supported us along the way. This match can be a turning point for Iranian football, not just for the senior national team, but also for the U23s, U19s and the whole football setup in



Iranian skipper Alireza Jahanbakhsh celebrates with teammates after scoring the winner in a 2-1 victory over Japan in the AFC Asian Cup quarterfinals at the Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on February 3, 2024.  
● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

the country." Stepping into the game less than 72 hours after an exhausting shootout win against Syria, not to mention missing prolific striker Mahdi Taremi through suspension, Iran was the ultimate underdog against the pretournament favorites, but Qalenoeei and his staff deserve all the credit for

outplaying the opponent in the second half. "We had a plan to control their midfielders though we didn't succeed before their goal, but everything turned in our favor in the second half as our performance was beyond Asian football," added Qalenoeei. "I think everybody should have

the belief in Iranian people. We had a lot of great Iranian coaches in history who never got the chance to coach in Europe. "If we want to have a higher standard of performance, we should have a long-term plan, infrastructure, stadiums and most importantly the support of the authorities in Iran," added the head

coach, who was also in charge of the national team at the tournament in 2007 but was shown the exit door after a shootout defeat against South Korea in the quarterfinals. Saturday's win was Iran's first against Japan in nine Asian Cup attempts – including a last-four 3-0 loss in the previous edition

– while it came 19 years after Team Melli had last beaten the Blue Samurai in all competitions. "We respect Japan football because they are a big team and they have good players who play in top European leagues. Coach Hajime Moriyasu is a friend of mine and a big character. I want to say congratulations to Japan too on their performance," added the Iranian manager. Moriyasu, meanwhile, took responsibility for the setback, while acknowledging that his side failed to cope with Iran's pressing and frontline prowess. "I feel responsible for the result as my staff and players gave their maximum through this game and this tournament," said the Japanese, whose team came to Qatar on the back of a remarkable 10-game winning streak, including impressive results against Germany and Turkey. "As you saw we have to improve on many aspects. We played five matches and we conceded in every game. If we can't keep a clean sheet, we can't win," said Moriyasu, adding: "They put pressure on us and we couldn't resist it. We conceded because of their attacking qualities." "But it's not just the defensive line. We should have scored our second goal which would have changed things. We couldn't win the second balls in the middle of the pitch." While Japan's quest for a record-extending fifth Asian title came to a premature ending, three-time winner Iran will keep chasing a first trophy in the continent's flagship competition in 48 years.

## Esteghlal set to sign Uzbek skipper Masharipov

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Persian Gulf Pro League leader Esteghlal has reached an agreement with Uzbekistani international Jaloliddin Masharipov to make him a second winter signing for the Tehran Blues, the club confirmed on Sunday. Masharipov, 30, is to arrive in Tehran "in the coming days" to undergo medicals before signing a year-and-a-half contract with the capital giant, read the club's statement. Having 12 goals in 60 international caps under his belt, Masharipov captained his team at the ongoing AFC

Asian Cup in Qatar, where he was unfortunate to miss from the spot in the shootout as Uzbekistan was knocked out by the host in the quarterfinals on Saturday. A former winger of Pakhtakor in his home country as well as Saudi club Al Nassr, Masharipov joined Panserraikos in the summer but parted ways with the Greek top-flight side after registering a couple of assists in eight appearances in all competitions. His signing comes as a boost for Esteghlal head coach Javad Nekounam, who will be without versatile fullback Kevin Yamga for the rest of the sea-

son – after the Frenchman suffered a career-threatening eye injury in a training session – while midfielder Saeid Mehri terminated his contract to reunite with ex-Blues boss Ricardo Sa Pinto at Cypriot First Division leader APOEL Nicosia. Having left Esteghlal by the end of the previous campaign, Brazilian center-back Raphael Silva rejoined the Blues in the midseason transfer window. Esteghlal is on top of the Iranian Pro League table after 15 matches with 32 points – one clear of Sepahan and two above archrival and defending champion Persepolis.



● AFC

## Fury v Usyk rescheduled for May in Saudi Arabia

BBC – Tyson Fury's undisputed heavyweight title fight against Oleksandr Usyk has been rescheduled for 18 May. Fury, 35, had been due to fight Ukraine's Usyk on 17 February but withdrew from the contest on Friday after sustaining a cut in sparring. The Briton is the WBC champion while Ukraine's Usyk, 37, holds the WBA, WBO and IBF titles. Their bout in Saudi Arabia will crown the first undisputed heavyweight boxing champion in the four-belt era. Usyk wished Fury a speedy recovery and said he was "ready to fight for undisputed any time, anywhere".

The Ukrainian had been in talks to fight Croatia's Filip Hrgovic as a replacement for Fury on the February date. Hrgovic is the mandatory challenger to Usyk's IBF belt and there were fears he could be stripped of that title if Fury was sidelined for several months. But in a fast-moving 24 hours, Saudi Arabian organisers and Team Fury moved quickly to secure a new date for the undisputed bout. Speaking on the MMA Hour, external, Fury took aim at Usyk's manager Egis Klimas who questioned the legitimacy of his injury. "Egis, never call me a coward again,"

he said. "[I have] never backed down from any man in my life." There has not been an undisputed heavyweight champion since Lennox Lewis defeated Evander Holyfield in 1999. Fury's cut above his right eye required "urgent medical attention" and "significant stitching". It is the third time since 2023 a fight date between Usyk and Fury has been rescheduled. Event organiser Turki Alalashikh, chairman of Saudi Arabia's general entertainment authority, said if either Usyk or Fury withdrew from the new date they would forfeit £9.3m to the other fighter.



● JUSTIN SETTERFIELD/GETTY IMAGES