

AFC Asian Cup: Time for Iran to move on from Japan jubilation



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

"The occasion is worthy of a final showdown," Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei said ahead of last Saturday's AFC Asian Cup quarterfinal clash featuring two of the continental heavyweights in Iran and Japan.

And when Alireza Jahanbakhsh smashed home from the spot deep into stoppage time to seal a 2-1 victory, capping one of the most emphatic 45 minutes in the history of the national team, the scenes of euphoria among the Iranians on the pitch and in stands resembled the celebrations of winning the ultimate prize itself.

After all, Qalenoeei's men stepped into the game at the Education City Stadium less than 72 years after a draining shootout win against Syria, no to mention missing their talisman Mahdi Taremi through suspension, while pretournament favorite Japan, for all its group phase struggles, had walked away with a comfortable victory over Bahrain.

Qalenoeei went on to relish in a first triumph over the formidable foe in 19 years as a "turning point" for the Iranian football.

And that might be the case as the pivotal outcome of the contest could mark "a fresh belief in the homegrown coaches in the country", as Qalenoeei insisted, while many believe it restored the bond between Team Melli and part of its supporters all around the world, which had been tarnished for certain reasons over the past 18 months.

Still, the massive result only



Iranian players celebrate the AFC Asian Cup last-eight victory over Japan at the Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on February 3, 2024.
● THAIER AL-SUDANI/REUTERS

meant another semifinal spot for Iran in the continent's flagship international event and the manager will have to make sure his players are not carried away by the last-eight jubilation when taking on the defending champion and host Qatar today for a place in the final showpiece. For all the praiseworthy performances in the previous editions, three-time champion Iran is no

stranger to last-four heartbreak at the Asian Cup, losing at this stage on five occasions – the most recent of which came against Saturday's opponent in 2019.

The manager should realize that his tactical acumen as well as the players' trademark passion and heroics, showcased in the second-half dominance against Japan, will count for nothing, should his side fail to go all the

way to lift the trophy, one that has been eluding the Iranian football for nearly five decades, at the Lusail Stadium in three days.

Lineup dilemma

Taremi's late red card against Syria was perhaps a blessing in disguise for Qalenoeei in the Japan game. Saman Qoddous was pushed forward to join up with Jahan-

bakhsh and Mohammad Moezzi and provide support for loan striker Sardar Azmoun in frustrating the Blue Samurai's backline.

Veteran Omid Ebrahimi, meanwhile, was called into action and did a superb job in helping fellow-holding midfielder Saeid Ezzatollahi outplay the Japanese trio in the middle of the park. In an interview after the game,

Taremi acknowledged the outcome could have been different with him on the pitch as Iran's gameplan "was in stark contrast to the one that features me."

It is hard to believe that the prolific Porto man, chasing his fourth strike in Qatar, will not restore his role in the starting XI today, meaning Qoddous could be back in the midfield duo alongside Ezzatollahi, with Ebrahimi returning to bench.

The Brentford player's creativity and contribution to the team when going forward has been second to none but his lack of defensive qualities has, nonetheless, made Iran look vulnerable at times – even against minnow group oppositions – and that may cost Iran dearly against the deadly Qatari duo of Akram Afif and Almoez Ali in Doha's Al Thumama Stadium.

However, history is on Iran's side today as the Asian powerhouse enjoys a perfect record in the previous six meetings between the two teams, including a one-goal win in the 2015 Asian Cup group stage and, most significantly, a 4-0 crushing in a friendly tournament in Jordan last October – a statement victory for Qalenoeei over his Portuguese predecessor Carlos Queiroz, who was shown the exit door by his employers in the aftermath of the humiliation.

An Asian Cup crown could be a fitting international finale for the most players in one of the finest generations of the Iranian footballers, and standing between them and eternity will just be a couple of more matches.

In the meantime, let's keep fingers crossed.

Djokovic, Nadal to headline 'Six Kings Slam' in Saudi Arabia

REUTERS – Saudi Arabia will host a new elite tennis exhibition featuring Novak Djokovic and Rafa Nadal with three other Grand Slam winners in October, the country's General Entertainment Authority has announced. Carlos Alcaraz, Jannik Sinner, Daniil Medvedev and Holger Rune will also play at the 'Six Kings Slam', which will form part of the Saudi cultural and entertainment festival Riyadh Season, organisers said. With Sinner having recently won the Australian Open, Dane Rune is the only player

on the six-man roster without a Grand Slam title. Spaniard Nadal, who signed up as an ambassador for the Saudi Arabian Tennis Federation last month, said he was looking forward to the event. "After some other tennis players have done so, I am very excited to play for the first time in Riyadh," the 22-times Grand Slam champion said in the press release. While exhibition events in the Persian Gulf are nothing new, they are usually played during breaks in the ATP season or after it has finished.

The ATP has a full schedule in October, including mandatory Masters 1000 tournaments in Shanghai and Paris. Saudi Arabia will also host the season-ending Next Gen Finals for men's under-21 players in Jeddah from 2023 to 2027, the ATP announced last August. The oil-rich country has invested heavily in sports like soccer, Formula One and golf over the last few years. However, critics have accused the country of using sport to cover up its poor record on human rights and equality

issues. The debate over Saudi Arabia potentially hosting the women's WTA Finals has intensified, with tennis greats Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova objecting to the move, prompting heavy criticism from Saudi ambassador to the US last week.



● MIKE FREY/USA TODAY SPORTS



● TABNAK

Khadem-Haqiqat, ex-Iran wrestling chief, dies aged 94

Sports Desk

Seyyed Mohammad Khadem-Haqiqat, the former chairman of the Iranian Wrestling Federation, passed away at the age of 94.

Laid to rest in Tehran on Tuesday, Khadem-Haqiqat was in charge of the country's wrestling governing body on three spells between 1966 and 1978, playing his part in helping

Iran emerge as a global force of the sport.

Serving as a referee at numerous major events, including the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, Khadem-Haqiqat was also the chef de mission of the squad at the 1961 World Championships in Yokohama, Japan, where Iran dominated the freestyle competitions.

Legendary wrestlers Gholamreza

Takhti, Emam-Ali Habibi, Mohammad-Ali San'atkar, Ebrahim Seifpour, and Mansour Mahdizadeh walked away with the ultimate prize of their respective weight classes, while Nasrollah Soltaninejad settled for a flyweight silver and Hamid Tavakkoli took a bronze as Iranian freestyle team celebrated a maiden world title.