



Iranian players celebrate a shootout victory over Spain in the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Dubai, UAE, on February 15, 2024.
● FIFA

Beach Soccer World Cup: 'Never-say-die attitude' seals winning start for Iran

Sports Desk

Iranian Mohammad Mokhtari believes his team's "never-say-die attitude" was key to the comeback victory over Spain in their FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup opener in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates. Mokhtari was the hero of the night for Iran as he bagged four goals and delivered a Player-of-the-Match performance as the reigning Asian champions defeated the 2013 finalists 3-1 in the shootout following a 6-6 thriller at the Dubai Design District Stadium on Thursday.

In what will go down as an instant classic in the recent history of the competition, La Roja found the net with two seconds into the contest through David Ardil and took a 3-0 lead by the 10th minute, before Moslem Mesigar pulled one back and Mokhtari reduced the deficit to one after the interval.

The Spaniards still thought they had done enough for maximum points when Jose Arias made it 5-2 in the second period but Mokhtari had other ideas as he scored three more goals to force the game into extra time before

Reza Amiri gave Iran a first lead of the night after the restart. However, Chicky's strike with two seconds left on the clock ensured a shootout ending to the match, in which Ali Mirshekari, Movahed Mohammadpour, and Amir Akbari capitalized from the spot, with Mahdi Mirjalili denying Chicky to seal the triumph for Ali Naderi's men.

"We're over the moon," Mokhtari told FIFA.com after the match. "We're relieved as well. It's not often you're losing 3-0 and 5-2 in a World Cup and you come back to

win. Yet alone against a team like Spain.

"But we always believed we could do it. Our coach kept telling us we could do it. I think that's one of our assets: Our never-say-die attitude."

"We followed exactly what our coach told us," Mesigar said.

"He kept telling us we could win the game. We didn't panic and change our game plan. Our coach told us to keep doing what we were doing, we followed his orders, and here we are with the victory.

"Iran will never give up. When you

wear this shirt, you never give up." Mokhtari deflected the plaudits post-match, insisting "it was a team effort and every one of us gave it everything," but his captain disagreed.

"Mokhtari is a rare genius in beach soccer," said Mesigar.

"Today was just another day of him pulling off heroics. He's scored four goals against Spain. He's showed once again why he is one of the best players in the world."

It was also milestone night for the Iranian skipper, who, along with Spain's Dana, set a new record for

the longest time between their first and last World Cup appearances with 17 years.

Portugal legend Belchior had held the record at 16 years.

Iran will be back in action today in Group B against Argentina, which fell to a 4-3 defeat against Tahiti earlier on Thursday.

Tahiti, a two-time runner-up in the competition, is top of the table with three points, with Iran in second on one.

The top two of each of the four groups will progress to the quarterfinals with the final showdown set to be staged on February 25.

Klinsmann sacked by South Korea



● AFP

BBC - Jurgen Klinsmann has been sacked as head coach of South Korea after just 12 months in the role and following the country's Asian Cup semi-final defeat.

South Korea lost 2-0 to Jordan in the Asian Cup, prolonging the country's 64-year wait for the title.

Fans, politicians and the Korean media had called for the German to be sacked after their semi-final exit in Qatar and there were also reports of in-fighting between top players during the tournament.

"Coach Klinsmann failed to demonstrate leadership that we expected from the national team coach, including game management, player management and work attitude, which elevate the competitiveness of the national team," said KFA President Chung Mong-gyu.

AFC Champions League last 16:

Sepahan's Morais rues red card in late collapse against Al Hilal

Sports Desk

Sepahan manager Jose Morais said his side's home defeat against Saudi giant Al Hilal in the first leg of the AFC Champions League last-16 tie was down to Mohammad Daneshgar's late red card in Isfahan on Thursday.

The game in front of a capacity crowd of 70,000 at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium looked set for a 1-1 stalemate but the Saudi Pro League leaders made the most of the center-back's sending off 14 minutes from normal time, finding the net twice in stoppage time to take a 3-1 win into next week's rematch in Riyadh. A VAR intervention convinced the Kuwaiti referee to show Daneshgar his marching orders for a high tackle on Abdullah Al Hamddan's shin.

Iranian international Ramin Rezaeian gave the home side a 37th-minute lead but Al Hilal's recruitments in a summer of spending spree eventually made the difference as Brazilian Malcom drew the visitors level 12 minutes after the break and Serbian striker Aleksandar Mitrović headed home in the fourth minute of added time for



Al Hilal's Malcom (L) is seen in action against Sepahan winger Farshad Ahmadzadeh in the first leg of the AFC Champions League last 16 at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on February 15, 2024.
● ARYA JAFARI/AFC

his 26th goal of the season. Saudi star Salem Al Dawasari then played Al Hamddan through the middle before his composed finish rounded off a precious away triumph for Al Hilal in the 97th minute. "The only weakness we had was

the red card. I did not see any other weaknesses. Defensive organization is our main strength but I must say conceding the second goal was a surprise as we were defending with nine players to Al Hilal's five," a frustrated Morais said after the match.

"We played against a very good team. With one less player, we will definitely face challenges. We suffered and sacrificed ourselves. Sometimes we didn't make the right decisions, but we played a good game before the dismissal.

"We had many chances but we didn't score, but it's not over yet." Meanwhile, Morais's fellow Portuguese and opposite number on Al Hilal bench Jorge Jesus said his side deserved the victory.

"We won because we were better and we deserved this win. Congratulations to my players," said Jesus.

"It is a good advantage and with respect to our opponents, we will continue to play our game and I want to win again."

Jesus said believed the late introduction of Mohammed Al Burayk and Al Hamddan turned the tide for Saudi side, which is chasing a record-extending fifth trophy in the Asian elite clubs' competition.

"The target was to send on players who are faster and the two of them changed the game.

"The first half was a bit difficult, but we still created a couple of chances. In the second half we showed our strength and the game became difficult for Sepahan, especially after they had a player sent off."

The two teams meet again next Thursday with the winners to face either Uzbekistan's Navbahor or Al Ittihad FC of Saudi Arabia in the quarterfinals.