

## Asian Indoor Athletics Championships:

# Teenage Aqaei grabs men's 400m gold; Iranian girls post 800m one-two

## Sports Desk

Teenage sprinter Sajjad Aqaei notched up a first men's gold for Iran at the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships in Tehran on Sunday, while his compatriots Totkham Dastar-Bandan and Negin Azari Edalat claimed the women's 800m gold and silver respectively.

Representing the country in the men's 400m final, Aqaei, 18, crossed the finish line in 47.95 seconds to beat Mohammad Jahir Rayhan of Bangladesh, who clocked 48.10 seconds, to the ultimate prize, with Iraq's Yasir Ali Al-Saadi taking the bronze on 48.40 seconds.

"It was a dream come true to win this medal at such a young age," Aqaei said after the final, adding: "I trained so hard over the past year to prepare for this competition. I knew I had a chance to win a medal before the tournament but I never thought it would be a gold."

Meanwhile, Dastar-Bandan registered the fastest time of 2:09.17 minutes in Monday's showdown for Iranian women's second gold at the event on home soil – following Farzaneh Fasihi, who retained her

60m crown on the preceding day. Azari clocked 2:11.43 minutes to finish as the runner-up, while Nurmamet Akbayan (2:13.10 min.) of Kazakhstan settled for the bronze. Elsewhere in the women's contests, Nazanin Eidian and Kazhan Rostami added a silver and a bronze to Iran's medal haul, finishing behind Japanese Nanako Matsumoto in the 400m final.

Eidian registered 55.33 seconds to finish second to Japan's Nanako Matsumoto (55.14 seconds) with Rostami crossing the line in 55.35 seconds.

Male contestants Ali Amirian (1500m) and Mahdi Saberi (shot put), as well as Elham Hashemi in the women's shot put, were the Iranian bronze winners over the first two days of the championships in Tehran's Aftab-e Enghelab Sports Complex.

Sajjad Aqaei celebrates with the Iranian flag after winning the men's 400m final at the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships in Tehran, Iran, on February 18, 2024.

ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA



## Azmoun on target to keep Roma in fourth place hunt

## Sports Desk

Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun marked his first Serie A start with a goal as AS Roma defeated Frosinone 3-0 to remain in the mix for a Champions League spot.

Dutch center-back Dean Huijsen got the visitors off the mark late in the first half before Azmoun doubled the Giallorossi's lead with 20 minutes left on the clock.

Frosinone keeper Stefano Turati managed to keep out a Bryan Cristante's effort from behind the box but the Iranian international found the net with a cool touch on the rebound to bag his second goal in 15 appearances in the Italian top flight.

An 81st-minute spot-kick from Argentine midfielder Leandro Paredes secured the three points for Daniele De Rossi's men, who are sixth in the table with 41 points – four adrift of four-place Atalanta and Bologna.

"It was a tough match, especially in the first half. But we changed tactics at the break

and played much better in the second half. Scoring goals is my job and I'm so happy with the victory," Azmoun said after the match.

When asked about his apologetic gesture to the home supporters at the Stadio Benito Stirpe after his goal, Azmoun replied: "The fans didn't appreciate Huijsen's goal celebration and the Frosinone players made us aware of that. Respect is the most important thing in football. We are colleagues, friends. It might be difficult on the pitch sometimes, but we should respect each other."

Azmoun, who is on a season-long loan from Leverkusen, praised De Rossi's impact since he took over from Jose Mourinho in mid-January.

"De Rossi was very aggressive as a player but also had a big heart. He is the same as a coach as he motivates us a lot," added the Iranian, who will now be looking to have more opportunity in the starting XI following Sun-

day's performance.

Azmoun began the match alongside Romelu Lukaku but was played in a more advanced position after the Belgian striker was replaced by Lorenzo Pellegrini at half-time.

Asked about his decision to substitute Lukaku, De Rossi said: "It was tactical. I didn't like how he and Azmoun were playing together. It was also because Romelu has played so many matches this season. We need him and we need him fresh."

"I liked how Azmoun was playing so I kept him on after that horrible first half we had. I'm the coach and I have to go with those who are doing the best on the pitch."

"Sardar is a forward that can play as a trequartista [No. 10] and get involved in building attacking moves. He knows how to play between the lines. My initial idea was to play [Houssein] Auar, who's another great player, but I saw Sardar doing well in training and I wanted to go with him."

## Sinner savours Rotterdam success after Australian Open high



REUTERS

REUTERS – The Rotterdam title may pale in comparison to winning the Australian Open Grand Slam but Jannik Sinner said his victory in the ATP 500 event was still important to him after the Italian

rose to a career-high number three in the world rankings.

Sinner, who lifted his first major at Melbourne Park by defeating Daniil Medvedev in the final, stretched his winning run in 2024 to 12 matches with a 7-5 6-4 victory over Alex de Minaur in the Rotterdam final on Sunday.

The 22-year-old's second trophy of the season means he leapfrogged Medvedev to number three in the updated rankings on Monday.

"Every time you win a title, it doesn't matter how big, it means a lot," Sinner said.

"I had a bit more attention (as Australian Open champion), but when you earn something, you have to deal with that. I felt like I was trying to put 100% effort into everything I've done and that's the result of this week."

It's going to start again from zero at Indian Wells, so I'm already trying to improve. Let's see what's coming." Sinner will look to gain ground on world number two and defending Indian Wells champion Carlos Alcaraz in the hardcourt tournament next month.

## Israeli swimmer booed by crowd in Doha World Championships

REUTERS – An Israeli medallist was booed by the crowd in a sour finish to the Doha World Aquatics Championships on Sunday, taking the gloss off some stunning achievements in the pool highlighted by Sarah Sjostrom's third consecutive 50 metres freestyle world title.

Anastasia Gorbenko took silver in the women's 400m individual medley but her celebrations were spoiled as a chorus of boos rained down from the terraces, drowning out her post-race interview by the floor presenter.

The jeers continued as Gorbenko left the Aspire Dome pool, and she was booed again at the medals ceremony though there was also applause. Briton Freya Constance Colbert won the race.

The presence of Israeli swimmers at the championships has drawn criticism from some Qatari media outlets and pro-Palestine groups amid

Israel's military campaign in Gaza in response to Hamas's Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel.

Gorbenko said she had been booed multiple times during the week and it had affected her emotionally.

Swimming's global governing body World Aquatics declined to comment. Politics infused the event in Doha where Belarusian swimmers competed as neutrals due to restrictions imposed on their athletes, and Russia's, stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine – which Moscow called a "special military operation".

Russia's swimming federation called the restrictions unacceptable and none of the country's swimmers competed.

The boycott further weakened the competition, with Doha snubbed by a number of top swimmers due to its unusual scheduling in the lead-up to the Paris Olympics in July and August.



Israel's Anastasia Gorbenko is seen with her silver medal of the women's 400m individual medley swimming event at the 2024 World Aquatics Championships in Doha, Qatar, on February 18, 2024.

Oli SCARFF/AFP



AS Roma striker Sardar Azmoun scores during a 3-0 win against Frosinone in Serie A in Stadio Benito Stirpe, Frosinone, Italy, on February 18, 2024.

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