**Sports** Athletics

# Iran skipper Hajsafi rejects international retirement rumors

## Sports Desk

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Ehsan Hajsafi, the long-serving captain of the Iranian national football team, says he has no intention of calling time on his international career.

The 34-year-old fullback, the third most-capped Iranian player of all time, was part of the team at the re-

ly-fini s h e d AFC Asian Cup in Qatar, where Iran suffered a 3-2 defeat against the host in the semifinals. The Iranian squad was the oldest in Qatar and many think the team needs fresh blood ahead of the World Cup in two-years' time, with manager Amir Qalenoai insisting last week that be

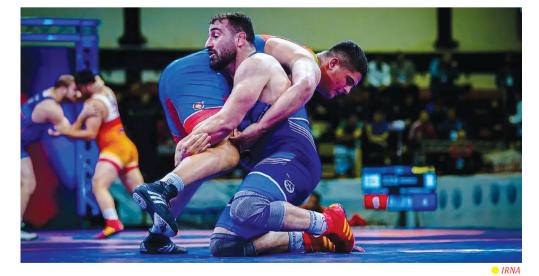
oei insisting last week that he and his staff have already embarked on a rejuvenation project for the upcoming qualification double-header against Turkmenistan in late March, which may come at the expense of some of the senior players.

However, in a recent interview with Varzesh3, Hajsafi, who plays for Greek Super League champion AEK Athens, said he is yet to consider international retirement as he is "in the best form of my life."

"No one has talked to me about that and I have not given it a thought either as I am in top mental and physical form," said Hajsafi, who made four starts in the Asian Cup and was the last player to score from the spot as

World Freestyle Wrestling Clubs Cup:

# Iran's Shahr Bank crowned champion



## Iran defeated Syria in the last-16 shootout.

"I play for one of the top teams in Greece and was the best left back in the league last season, not to mention played against some high-profile sides in the Europa League this term," added the Iranian, whose contribution convinced the club to sign a twoyear extension to his contract. "I think I am in the best form of my life, though Team Melli's coaching staff will have the final say on who will be called up for the national team. All I know is that I will try to deliver my best if I am selected again." The Asian Cup had been tipped as a perfect opportunity for arguably the finest generation of the Iranian footballers in years to celebrate a fitting finale to their Team Melli careers by lifting a first trophy in the continent's flagship international event in nearly five decades but the final outcome turned out to be a seventh last-four heartbreak for the country.

Qatar, which had been hammered

by four goals against Iran in a friendly in October, went on to defeat Jordan in the final for a second successive Asian crown. "I still can't believe Qatar won the title. They were not as good as the previous edition and we were thrilled to land them in the semifinals," said Hajsafi, who represented the country in a fourth consecutive Asian Cup. "I believe in luck in football and if we had converted our chances the result would have been different. I still regret the defeat. We should have been in the final and lifted the trophy."

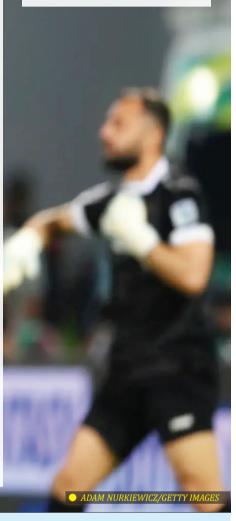
Qalenoei's men stepped into the last-four showdown on the back of a massive 2-1 victory over Japan – widely regarded as the most formidable team in the continent and the pretournament favorite – and many Iranians say the team was carried away by the triumph when taking on the host, but Hajsafi thinks that was hardly the case.

"We were fully focused on the contest and started right on the front foot. When we scored after five minutes, I thought we were going to beat them by three or four goals again. We only had

ourselves to blame for the individual errors on their goals and should take lessons for the future," said Hajsafi, who was forced out with an injury

at halftime in the semifinal. With eight Asian teams directly qualifying for the expanded World Cup in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, Iran looks to have a comfortable path toward a fourth successive berth in the global showpiece, though Hajsafi has other ideas, given some decent runs by the likes of Jordan, Uzbekistan, and Iraq in the Asian Cup.

"All Asian teams have improved as we saw some shock results in Qatar. No one fancied Palestine, given the situation in the country, but they progressed to the knockouts, or even Hong Kong had a good game against us. That was a wakeup call for us as there will be no easy games in the qualifiers."



## Croatian Ivankovic named China head coach

CGTN – Branko Ivankovic, former manager of Oman, has been appointed at the helm of the Chinese men's national football team, succeeding Aleksandar lankovic, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) announced on Saturday. In order to better the Asian section of the 2026 FIFA World Cup qualification, the CFA, after discussions among experts, has decided to hire Branko Ivankovic as the manager of the Chinese men's national football team," the Chinese football governing body said in a statement. Ivankovic, 69, managed Shandong Taishan in the Chinese Super League (CSL) between 2009 and 2011, helping the club win the CSL title in 2010. He also worked as the boss of the national teams of Iran and Oman. Back in 2002, Iran won the football men's gold medal at the Asian Games in Busan, South Korea, under his leadership.

this year with two draws and one loss.

China had the same record as Oman did at the Asian Cup under Jankovic. After two goalless draws against Tajikistan and Lebanon, China lost to Qatar 1-0, failing to advance to the knockout stage vance to the knockout stage, the contract of the manager and the coaching staff was automatically terminated," the CFA said. "Jankovic is no longer manager of the team. The CFA thanks him and his coaching staff for their efforts in managing the team and wishes him good luck in both his life and at work in the future." Jankovic became the manager of China in February 2023. The team finished the 15 games under him with four wins. four draws and seven losses.

#### **Sports Desk**

Iran's Shahr Bank was crowned the champion at the 8th World Freestyle Wrestling Clubs Cup in Tonekabon, northern Iran. The Iranian club dominated the Indian representative 9-1 in the final showdown on Friday.

Mahdi Veisi (57kg), Reza Atri (61kg), Russian Abasgadzhi Magomedov (65kg) – the reigning world silver medalist – Morteza Qiasi (70kg), Amirmohammad Yazdani (74kg), Amirhossein Firouzpour (92kg), Ahmad Bazri (97kg), and Mojtaba Goleij all came out on top against their opponents, with Mohammad Nokhodi handed a walkover victory in the 79kg contest, as the Iranian club claimed the team title for a second successive year. The Indian team's single win came in an all-Iranian 86kg showdown, where Ali Savadk-

### ouhi suffered a shock defeat against Sajjad Gholami.

Iranian side Shazand Petrochemicals defeated the Kazakhstan team 8-2, thanks to victories for Reza Mo'meni (61kg), Armin Habibzadeh (65kg), Ali-Akbar Zaroudi (70kg), Amirhossein Hosseini (74kg), Mohsen Kouchnejad (79kg), Ali Shakouri (86kg), Ali Mansouri (92kg), and Abolfazl Rostampour (125kg), to finish on the third podium.

Ivankovic served as the manager of Oman between 2020 and 2024. The team failed to make it out of the group stage at the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Asian Cup in Qatar the knockout stage.

As a result, Jankovic was sacked, the CFA said in another announcement earlier on Saturday.

"After the Asian Cup in Qatar, since the Chinese men's national football team didn't ad-

