

# Iran skipper Hajsafi rejects international retirement rumors

## Sports Desk

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-

cent-

ly-fin-

ished

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 Qaleno-

oei insisting last week that he

and his staff have already em-

barked on a rejuvenation project

for the upcoming qualification

double-header against Turkmen-

istan 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

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 two-

year extension to his contract.

"I think I am in the best form

of my life, though Team Melli's

coaching staff will have the fi-

nal 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 sev-

enth 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 dif-

ferent. I still regret the defeat.

We should have been in the final

and lifted the trophy."

Qalenoeei'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 con-

tinent 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 direct-

ly qualifying for the expanded

World Cup in the United States,

Mexico, and Canada, Iran looks

to have a comfortable path to-

ward 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 coun-

try, 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."



ADAM NURKIEWICZ/GETTY IMAGES

## World Freestyle Wrestling Clubs Cup: Iran's Shahr Bank crowned champion



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## 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), Amir-mohammad 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.

## 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 Jankovic, the Chinese Football Association (CFA) announced on Saturday.

"In order to better prepare for 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.

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

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.

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-

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.



AFP