

Beach Soccer World Cup:

# Iran leaves with heads held high

## Sports Desk

A third-spot finish was the least Iran deserved at the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup but the Asian champion was still thrilled to emulate an all-time high in the sport's flagship international event by hammering Belarus on the final day.

Twenty-four hours after surrendering a two-goal lead against Brazil to suffer a last-four heartbreak right at the death, Ali Naderi's men bounced back in style to defeat Belarus 6-1 and leave Dubai with a second World Cup bronze since 2017 in the Bahamas, where the Asian powerhouse had last appeared at the competition.

Iran started right on the front foot at the Dubai Design District Stadium and found the net twice early on, when Amirhossein Akbari's overhead kick was diverted home by Ali Mirshekari before Movahed Mohammadpour sent his own acrobat effort flying into the net.

Further goals by Mohammad Moradi, Reza Amiri – who went on to pick up the Player-of-the-Match award – and Mohammad Ma'soumi in the second period put the tie beyond the Belaru-

sians' reach, before Mohammad Mokhtari added a sixth in the third period, which saw him win the Bronze Scorer prize with seven strikes.

Mikita Chaikouski pulled one back with less than three minutes left on the clock but it proved too little too late for the European side, which also headed home with a best-ever finish in the event.

"We wanted to win this tournament. We're upset that we didn't, but gave it our all to finish third today. We had a good knowledge of this Belarus team, which helped us win the match," Ma'soumi said afterwards.

The scoreline saw Iran register the largest margin in a World Cup third-place contest since Portugal beat Uruguay 14-7, also in Dubai, 15 years ago.

The tournament was surely one to remember for the Iranian goalkeepers Hamid Behzadpour and Seyed Mahdi Mirjalili, who made a handful of stunning saves throughout the six outings, while contributing to nine goals between them.

In an event which saw 38 goals scored from bicycle-kicks, Iran led the way with 10 spectacular finishes.



Iran's Mohammad Moradi (5) makes an overhead effort during a 6-1 victory over Belarus at the Beach Soccer World Cup in Dubai, UAE, on February 25, 2024.  
● FFIRI

## Record-extending crown

Later on Sunday, Brazil lifted a record-extending sixth trophy, thanks to a 6-4 victory over Italy.

Rodrigo stole the show for the Brazilians with a hat-trick, with Bruno Xavier and Brendo finding the net either side of a Gianmarco Genovali's own goal. Genovali also bagged a brace for the Italians, coupled with a Tommaso Fazzini's

double, as the Azzurri settled for a third runner-up place in the history of the competition.

Italian Josep Jr. Gentilin still had something to cheer about in the awarding ceremony as he was named the Golden Ball winner – followed by Mauricinho of Brazil and Belarusian Ihar Bryshtsel, who added the Bronze Ball to his

Golden Scorer award after scoring a remarkable 12 goals across the 11 days in Dubai.

Portuguese Leo Martins took home the Silver Scorer prize with seven goals, despite his campaign coming to an end in the quarterfinals, while Brazilian shot stopper Tiago Bobo was named the Golden Glove winner.

## Iran's Olfati wins silver at Artistic Gymnastics World Cup

## Sports Desk

Iran's Mahdi Olfati grabbed the men's vault silver at the FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Cup series in Cottbus, Germany.

Having finished fifth at the season-opening series in Cairo earlier in February, the Iranian scored a remarkable 14.9 points in the final for the runner-up spot.

With the event serving as part of the qualification for Paris Olympics in the summer, the result comes as a massive step for Olfati in his pursuit of berth in the French capital in August.

The Iranian will continue his quest for the Olympic quota when returning to the Apparatus World Cup action in early March.

The final series of the event will take place in Doha in mid-April.

Olfati wrote his name into history books of the Iranian sport last September, when he snatched a maiden gymnastics medal for the country at the Asian Games, claiming a precious silver in the men's vault competition.



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

Persian Gulf Pro League preview:

## Esteghlal looking to continue perfect home run, Sepahan seeking consolation

## Sports Desk

Esteghlal will be looking to maintain its 100-percent record in Tehran's Azadi Stadium when taking on Sepahan in a highly-anticipated Persian Gulf Pro League encounter today.

A victory will see the capital Blues extend the gap on archrival Persepolis to six points on top of the table before the Reds play away to Zob Ahan on Wednesday.

Sepahan, meanwhile, is desperate to snap a five-game losing streak across all competitions – including back-to-back 3-1 defeats against Saudi giant Al Hilal in the AFC Champions League last 16.

The Isfahan-based club is the only team to have inflicted a loss on Javad Nekounam's men in the Iranian top flight this season and a repeat of the 1-0 triumph in last August's reverse fixture will be enough for Sepahan to leapfrog Persepolis into second spot with a game in hand.

Elsewhere, Golgozar will host Nassaji Mazandaran in Sirjan – in head coach Saket Elhami's first game on return to the visiting side's bench – with Foolad Khuzestan and fourth-place Malavan squaring off in Ahvaz's Foolad Arena.

On Wednesday, Tractor will be hoping to bounce back from last Wednesday's 2-0 setback at Persepolis when welcoming in-form Esteghlal Khuzestan, which steps into the contest on

the back of a massive comeback victory over Iralco in a five-goal thriller last week.

Shams Azar will face Moharram Navidkia's resurgent Mes Rafsanjan in Qazvin, while Paykan and San'at Naft Abadan go head-to-head in Tehran.

Former Iranian international midfielder Masoud Shojaei will be looking to continue the impressive start to his managerial career when his Havadar team visits Iralco in Arak.



● RASOUL SHOJAEI/IRNA