

Iran aiming high in Futsal World Cup after Asian glory

Sports Desk

The Iranian futsal national team will be looking to build on a title-winning run at the recently-finished AFC Asian Cup when taking part in September's World Cup in Uzbekistan.

Mahdi Karimi, Saeid Ahmad-Abbasi, Ali-Asghar Hassanzadeh, and goalkeeper Baqer Mohammadi were on the scoresheet as Vahid Shamsaei's men defeated host Thailand 4-1 for a record-extending 13th Asian crown in late April.

The latest success saw Iran tally 1469,33 points to stand fourth in the maiden FIFA Futsal Men's World Ranking last Monday – following Brazil (1568,41), Portugal (1527,61), and Spain (1514,42).

Shamsaei, whose debut tournament on Iran bench finished with a disappointing defeat against Japan in the Asian Cup final in 2022, named a proper mixture of youth and experience for

this year's tournament. Iran still had to work hard to clinch the title in arguably most closely-contested edition of the Asian flagship international event, which saw defending champion Japan crash out in the group stage, while Shamsaei's side was given scares by Bahrain – in the group phase – and last-four opponent Uzbekistan.

Shamsaei will hope the integral trio of Hossein Tayyebi, who missed the Asian Cup with injury, reigning Asian Player of the Year Salar Aqapour, and Moslem Oladqobad – all playing for newly-crowned UEFA Champions League champion Mallorca Palma – as well as veteran skipper Hassanzadeh, prolific pivot Ahmad-Abbasi – top scorer in Thailand – and Mohammadi will be in their finest form when the world showpiece gets underway in four months.

Shamsaei's men will learn about its World Cup oppo-

nents when the final draw for the 24-team tournament takes place in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on May 26.

The good news for Shamsaei is that the Asian powerhouse will avoid Brazil, Spain, reigning world champion Portugal, 2021 runner-up Argentina, and the host country in the group stage as all six teams are in Pot 1 of the draw.

Iran enjoyed a best World Cup finish in Colombia eight years ago, when former head coach Mohammad Nazemsharieh led his side to a memorable last-16 victory over five-time champion Brazil before a shootout triumph against Portugal in the third-place match.



Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei (R) gives his ring to Vahid Shamsaei, the manager of the Iranian futsal national team, during a meeting with the squad in Tehran on May 8, 2024.

● khamenei.ir



Iranian 'Clasico' to be staged in all-female venues next season



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Only female fans will be allowed to watch the Persepolis vs. Sepahan double fixtures from the stands when the two Iranian giants go head-to-head in the Persian Gulf Pro League next season, the Disciplinary Committee of the country's football governing body announced on Tuesday.

The unprecedented verdict comes as a response to the incidents in last week's top-flight game featuring the two sides, which finished in a goalless stalemate at Tehran's Azadi Stadium. A viral video after the match showed a Sepahan fan in the stadium making offensive comments about the Reds' female supporters, which sparked a massive backlash from Perse-

polis faithful and players on social media, while Sepahan was quick to denounce the remarks in a statement.

The Sepahan's male fan went on to release an apology for his words a day later but was still handed a 10-year ban from entering the football, futsal, and beach soccer venues in the country.

Tuesday's ruling also saw 13 other men from both sets of supporters receive a 30-day ban from attending all games in the Iranian league.

This is not the first time that the Disciplinary Committee comes up with a drastic decision against the controversial events in a so-called Iranian 'Clasico'. The two fierce rivals were forced to square off in neutral venues in the 2021/22 season



Persepolis (red) and Sepahan players are seen in action during a goalless game in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on May 1, 2024.

● PAYAM.SANI/IRNA

following a quarrel between members from both camps in a league meeting in Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium in the preceding campaign.

Iranian women had been forbidden from entering the football stadiums since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 – except for several international games in recent years – before they were given the green light to attend the club games for the start of the 2022/23 season, though their presence has been limited to segregated sections in the stands.

Flying under the radar, Dortmund stun Europe with final spot

REUTERS – Borussia Dortmund were not on anyone's Champions League radar when the season started but the club's sensational run to the final with a 2-0 aggregate win over Paris St Germain on Tuesday proved their plan was right all along, said coach Edin Terzic.

Dortmund came into the season on the back of a bitter Bundesliga title loss on the final matchday of the previous campaign.

And while their league results quickly confirmed Terzic's team did not have the consistency to be a serious title contender this season, it was a different story in Europe.

Dortmund, who won the tournament in 1997 and were runners-up to Bayern Munich in 2013, cruised through their

group with only one loss in six matches against PSG, AC Milan and Newcastle United.

"There is always a team that no one has on their radar that reaches the quarter-finals or the semi-finals. We wanted to be the team that will not necessarily be on anyone's radar," Terzic said. "That road has been unbelievable."

They did not play the kind of spectacular football that instantly attracts attention but scored key wins at Newcastle and Milan. After losing on the first matchday Dortmund went five group games without defeat to top the section.

"After the second matchday (following a loss at PSG and a home draw against Milan) almost no one believed in us any more," said captain Emre Can.

"We only had one point after two matches but we kept believing in us and that was the most important thing. Keeping two clean sheets in two matches against PSG is no mean feat."

Prior to their two 1-0 wins over PSG in the last four, Dortmund had dispatched PSV Eindhoven in the round of 16 and Atletico Madrid in the quarter-finals.

"We will come up against a very tough opponent, no matter who it is," said Dortmund's Mats Hummels, who scored the winning goal on Tuesday. "Since that second matchday we have kept believing we can hold our own in the Champions League. There is absolutely no reason whatsoever not to believe that we can also win the final."



Dortmund players celebrate after the second-leg victory over PSG in the UEFA Champions League semi-finals in Paris, France, on May 7, 2024.

● KAI.PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS