

Iran coach Shamsaei wary of minnow teams' threat at Futsal World Cup

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Vahid Shamsaei believes his side cannot afford to underestimate its Group F opponents when the FIFA Futsal World Cup gets underway in Uzbekistan in mid-September.

The draw for the 10th edition of the sport's flagship international event took place in the ancient Uzbek city of Samarkand on Sunday, where top-seed Iran was pitted against Venezuela, Guatemala, and France.

Venezuela will be making only a second World Cup appearance after reaching the last 16 in Lithuania three years ago, while Guatemala, beaten by Iran in all six previous meetings between the two sides, has failed to go beyond the group stage in five attempts. France, meanwhile, will be a debutant in Uzbekistan courtesy of an elite-round group win in the European qualifiers.

Some might fancy a comfortable progress to the knockout stage for Iran, which was ranked fourth in the inaugural FIFA men's ranking in early May, but Shamsaei has other ideas.

Having steered his team to a record-extending 13th Asian Cup trophy in April, Shamsaei in no stranger to recent surprises after witnessing some shock results in the continental event in Thailand. While Tajikistan and Afghanistan –

a debutant at the competition – finished in the top five to celebrate a maiden World Cup berth, Iran had scary moments against Bahrain and Uzbekistan, with defending champion Japan crashing out in the group stage, failing to qualify for the world showpiece.

"A number of up-and-coming teams have burst onto the international scene since I took over the Iranian job two years ago," Shamsaei said after the draw.

"Venezuela finished third to Brazil and Argentina in Copa América [in February] while France made it into top 10 in the world ranking and has seven or eight players in the high-profile Spanish league," added the Iranian.

"Guatemala may be the weakest of the four teams in the group, but the World Cup is still a place for formidable sides," said Shamsaei, who believes the host country – drawn against the Netherlands, Paraguay, and Costa Rica – enjoys the easiest group lineup among the five Asian sides at the tournament.

Making a ninth World Cup appearance in the upcoming edition, Iran, whose best finish came in 2016 thanks to a shootout victory over Portugal in the third-place play-off, will begin its campaign against Venezuela on September 16.

Shamsaei's men will face Guatemala on September 19 before squaring off against the European opponent three days later.



AVC Volleyball Challenge Cup: Iranian girls beat Hong Kong, to face India for fifth place

Sports Desk

Iranian women will be hoping to repeat last year's fifth-place finish at the AVC Volleyball Challenge Cup when taking on India in Manila, Philippines, today.

Padideh Bolourizadeh's girls defeated Hong Kong 3-1 (26-24, 26-24, 19-25, 25-19) in Tuesday's 5th-8th semifinals, though the

victory proved costly for the Iranian coach as first-choice setter Dorsa Fallah and Elaheh Poursaleh were forced out injured midway through the contest and will be doubts for the final-day game.

Today's encounter will be a second between the two sides at this year's event after the Indians came out on top in straight sets in Pool A opener

last week.

Taking part at the event for only a second time, Iran also suffered defeats against the Philippines (3-0) and Australia (3-1) and managed a single victory over the Chinese Taipei in four sets to finish second from bottom in the five-team group, with the host and Australia progressing to the last four thanks to a top two spot.



● ROUELLE UMALI/XINHUA

Nadal says Olympics main goal after early Roland Garros defeat

Rafa Nadal likened his struggles with injury in the last 18 months to being in a jungle as the 14-times French Open champion hoped to return to Roland Garros for the Olympic Games after making a premature exit from the Grand Slam on Monday.

Never far from physical issues in his glittering career, the 37-year-old missed almost all of 2023 with a hip problem and his comeback earlier this year was stalled by a muscle tear, before small niggles affected his preparation for the clay-court major.

Nadal crashed to a 6-3 7-6(5) 6-3 defeat by fourth seed Alexander Zverev in Paris and although there were positives, he said he could not predict how his battered body would respond to the demands of the Games in July and August.

"My body has been a jungle for two years. You don't know what to expect. I wake up one day and I find a snake biting me. Another day a tiger," Nadal told a packed press conference following his earliest exit from Roland Garros.

"I've been fighting with all the things that I went through. But the dynamic is positive the last few weeks. I felt ready. I think tomorrow I'll be ready to play again if I have to. But I will not have to.

"So that's the thing. Now, I need to prepare myself, I need to clear my ideas and see what's the new calendar to try to be

ready for Olympics. I can't say anything today, but my main goal now is to play the Olympics."

Nadal will be eyeing his third gold medal after triumphing in singles in the 2008 Beijing Games and doubles eight years later in Rio.

He had expressed doubts about his fitness ahead of what is likely his final French Open.

"Today in the match, I felt I was able to move myself much better than in the previous tournaments. But I had a very tough opponent in front of me. He played well," Nadal added.

"Of course disappointed to lose, but in terms of body feelings, I'm happy that I finished

healthy and I had a tough battle out there. And I was ready for a little bit more."

Nadal said it would be unwise to prepare for the grass-court season that follows with a potentially difficult transition back to clay for the Olympics.

"It looks difficult, honestly. For me now I can't confirm what's going on, but it looks difficult to make a transition to grass, having the Olympics again on clay," Nadal said.



● REUTERS