

World Cup 2026 Asian qualifiers: Iran fancies easy progress after favorable draw



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

Sports Desk

Iran will begin its quest for a seventh World Cup participation – fourth in succession – with a home game against Kyrgyzstan on September 5. Eighteen teams were divided into three groups in the third-round draw of the Asian qualifiers in Kuala Lumpur on Thursday, where Iran was placed in Group A – also featuring Qatar, Uzbekistan, the United Arab Emirates, and DPR Korea. Seeded in Pot 1 of the draw alongside Japan and South Korea, Iran was lucky to avoid the continent's fellow-old guard members Saudi Arabia and Australia as well as Jordan, Iraq, and Bahrain, which were all impressive in January's AFC Asian Cup. With the top two in each group progressing to the finals in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, Iran

head coach Amir Qalenoeei hopes his side will have secured qualification when the final round of the group fixtures takes place on June 10 next year. However, the qualifiers could still pose some tricky tests for Qalenoeei's men, who shared the spoils with Uzbekistan in a double header in the previous round, either side of a last-four defeat against eventual champion Qatar in the Asian Cup. Iran has also face two other group opponents over the past 12 months, thrashing Kyrgyzstan 5-1 in the inaugural CAFA Nations Cup last year before beating the UAE 2-1 in the Asian Cup group phase. The game against the North Korea, meanwhile, will be a first encounter with the East Asian team for Iran in 13 years. The second and third matchdays will

see Iran visit the UAE and Uzbekistan respectively, followed by home fixtures against Qatar and North Korea. "Qatar won the Asian Cup in the past two editions and has a top-notch league. Uzbekistan has also invested massively on the youth levels and the recent results show the country is a rising power in the Asian football," said Qalenoeei, who remained "confident" Iran will qualify as a top-two side in the group. Meanwhile, Andranik Teymourian, a member of Qalenoeei's coaching staff who played for the country in the 2006 and 2014 World Cups, said: "The level of the Asian teams is so close and there are no easy games in the continent, though I still believe we were handed a favorable draw, given the formation of other groups." Elsewhere in the draw, South Korea was pitted against Iraq, Jordan,

Oman, Palestine, and Kuwait in Group B and will have to make long trips to the Middle East for the away games. "We are aware of each team's abilities and every game will be tough but we will try our best to achieve our target," said Lee Lim-saeng, the technical director of the Korea Football Association. "I won't say we are completely happy with the draw because we have a lot of tough games. We respect the qualities of all the teams in our group but we have to be confident that we can make it," added the South Korea. Asian heavyweights Japan, Australia, and Saudi Arabia will be the favorites for a top-two finish in Group C – also including Bahrain, China, and Indonesia. Australia head coach Graham Arnold was unfazed by the daunting

challenge awaiting the Soccerroos, saying: "I believe we can finish in the top two. You've got to have that belief and that energy to bring the focus to getting the job done." "I do believe we've gotten stronger as a team, I think in the last campaign we didn't probably have the depth that we've got today. "Individually some players have got promoted in the English Premier League and in the German Bundesliga 1, so as a young team – and we still are a young team – we're getting better and better." The teams finishing third and fourth in each group will have a second chance to head to the World Cup as they will be drawn into two groups of three, with the group winners going through and the runners-up going head-to-head for a place in the inter-continental playoff.



Familiarity but no fear for Switzerland against Italy



REUTERS – Familiar opponents Italy and Switzerland meet in the Euro 2024 last 16 in Berlin today, and while familiarity hasn't bred contempt, there is also no fear from the Swiss in facing a country many of their players call home. Italians and Swiss have long had close ties, sharing a border and Italian is one of the official languages of Switzerland, but that will all be forgotten in Berlin. Italy and Switzerland have met 61 times, the most common opponent for each country and while the Swiss have beaten the Italians only eight times, most recently in 1993, they have impressed more in Germany. Switzerland came close to topping Group A before conceding an added-time equaliser in the final game against hosts Germany, and it was a performance which showed they have no fear of anyone at this tournament. Italy needed a late goal to snatch a 1-1 draw with Croatia to progress, and the defending champions have failed to impress, unlike Euro 2020 when they eased through the group stage and beat the Swiss comfortably.

After seeing off Turkey 3-0 in their opening game three years ago, Italy beat Switzerland by the same score. Bologna were a team who took Serie A by storm last season, finishing fifth in the standings to secure Champions League football and there could be as many as three Bologna players on the pitch in Berlin, all on the Swiss side. Unfortunately for Italy, Luciano Spalletti will not have Riccardo Calafiori available, with the Bologna defender suspended. Calafiori made the opposite move to many Swiss players when joining Basel before returning to Italy. Midfielder Michel Aebischer scored in Switzerland's 3-1 opening win over Hungary, forward Dan Ndoye put them in front against Germany Remo Freuler completes the Swiss Bologna trio. "I'm sorry for Riccardo, really. I would have liked to have faced him at the Olympiastadion," Freuler said. "On Saturday, however, the challenge will be Switzerland against Italy. Not Bologna against

Italy." Freuler was on loan at Bologna from Nottingham Forest last season, but before that he spent six years at Atalanta, and this will be no ordinary game for the 32-year-old. "Of course, it's not a match like any other for me. In Italy I built my career, also finding an ideal country to spend my life with my family," he said. "On Saturday, however, there won't be all this love. It's a round of 16 and there will be no room for feelings." Freuler knows the next part of the tournament is where the Swiss will really be judged. "Doing well in the first part of the tournament is important. The matches that make the difference, those capable of changing the dimension of a national team, however, are others," Freuler said. "But I'm not afraid. And Switzerland are not afraid of Italy."

Switzerland players applaud their fans after the match against Germany in Euro 2024 in Frankfurt, Germany, on June 23, 2024.
● PIROSCHKA VAN DE WOUW/
REUTERS

LeBron James' son Bronny drafted by dad's Lakers

BBC – Bronny James was picked in the second round of the NBA draft by the Los Angeles Lakers where he could play alongside his legendary father LeBron. The 19-year-old was the 55th choice of the draft in New York on Thursday after weeks of speculation about which team he would end up on.

Four-time NBA champion LeBron, 39, is probably entering the final year of his career and could become a free agent this summer by declining his \$51.4m (£40.6m) player option when the window opens at the end of June. However, that prospect seems remote given the four-time NBA champion said after the All-Star

game in 2022 that his "last year will be played with my son". No father-son pairing has ever played together in the NBA before. On Instagram, Bronny wrote "Beyond Blessed", while his father posted a series of pictures of the pair and the caption "Legacy". Bronny has completed his first

year of college basketball with the University of Southern California Trojans, where he averaged 4.8 points and 2.1 assists per game. Unlike his father, who stands at 6ft 9in and is the NBA's leading all-time scorer, teenager Bronny is 6ft 1in and is more of a defensive player.



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