

FIFA Futsal World Cup:

Shamsaei rejects tanking accusations as Iran lands Morocco in last-16

Sports Desk

Iran will have to play African champion Morocco in the FIFA Futsal World Cup last-16 after a 4-1 victory over France saw the Asian powerhouse win Group F in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, on Sunday.

The defeat proved to be a blessing in disguise for France as the runner-up finish in the group meant the World Cup debutants will face a rather easier opponent in Thailand in the knockout stage.

Chances were few and far between in a goalless first half in Bukhara Universal Sports Complex before Salar Aghapour scored either side of strikes from Moslem Oladghobad and Alireza Rafiepour for Iran after the break, with Mamadou Toure pulling one back late for the European side.

Aghapour has now scored six goals at this year's event. The only Iranians to net more in one World Cup edition are Hashem Heidari (eight in 1996) and Saeid Rajabi (17 in 1992).

A perfect record in the group stage was a historic first for the Iranians, who are eager to improve on a best-ever World Cup result in 2016, when Team Melli defeated Portugal in the shootout to finish third.

However, the awkward proceedings in the first half and the manner in which Iran's goals went in sparked scrutiny from some pundits and futsal fans on social media, who suggested that neither side, particularly France, was



Iranian players react to the crowd in Bukhara Universal Sports Complex after a 4-1 victory over France at the FIFA Futsal World Cup in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, on September 22, 2024.

● FFIRI

keen to win the group as it would have meant a much tougher path toward the semifinals. Runner-up to defending champion Portugal in Group E, Morocco was a World Cup quarterfinalist in the previous edition and won a third successive Africa Cup of

Nations crown in April, while it was named the Best Men's National Team in the 2023 FutsalPlanet Awards, with Hicham Dguig rewarded with the Best National Team Coach prize. The winner of Thursday's game between the Asian and Afri-

can champions will likely have to square off against five-time champion Brazil, which will play Costa Rica in the knockouts, in the quarterfinals. However, Iran head coach Vahid Shamsaei categorically denied accusations of his side's inten-

tion of tanking Sunday's game, saying it was normal for his men not to go all out for victory as "even a draw would be enough for us to go through as the group winners." "I think the critics should get tough on the team that was after

it [tanking]. Several of our players came down with the flu before the game and needed to rest. We also had a couple of players suspended and one injured. Even I was not feeling well for today's game, and, not to mention, we have to be back in action in three days. Everyone is free to make their own decisions," said the Iranian coach, who was without prolific players Hossein Tayebi and Saeid Ahmad-Abbasi against France.

"We were eager to win the game and we got what we wanted in the second half. We've now qualified with nine points and from now on, we will fully be focused on our next game," Shamsaei added.

Asked about Iran's daunting knockout path, Shamsaei said: "This is World Cup after all. We're here to play, not to have fun."

"Morocco is an excellent team with some magnificent results over the past two or three years. They won the best national team prize last year and their manager was named the best coach.

"Still, we are proud Iranians and will play with heart and soul to succeed. I just hope the team doctors will do their best to make sure the players are in their best form for the match."

Fonseca hails courageous Milan performance in derby win



Milan coach Paulo Fonseca (R) shakes hands with Inter coach Simone Inzaghi after a Serie A match in Milan, Italy, on September 22, 2024.

● ALESSANDRO GAROFALO/REUTERS

REUTERS - AC Milan manager Paulo Fonseca praised his side's bravery after they beat city rivals Inter Milan 2-1 on Sunday. Milan secured a late victory when defender Matteo Gabbia eluded his marker and found the top corner with a perfectly timed header from a free kick. The win marked Milan's first victory in the Derby della Madonnina since 2022 after suffering six consecutive defeats to Inter. "It was an important match. First of all, because it's a derby that Milan hadn't won in a long time. It was important given the moment we were going through," Fonseca told DAZN.

"I think the players showed a lot of courage and we deserved the win. I don't remember seeing a team who caused this many problems for Inter in a long time." Fonseca brushed off the suggestion that the victory had eased the pressure on him after a poor start to the campaign in which Milan won only once in five matches across all competitions before Sunday. "It makes little difference to me, because I don't read or listen to these things," he said. "It will be a week with a little more confidence, but the important thing for me is to con-

tinue seeing the players believe in our ideas, the way they have done so far.

"We know that we must improve, but this was a victory for the players today," Fonseca added. Inter coach Simone Inzaghi acknowledged that Milan were the better team at the San Siro and questioned the attitude displayed by his players at times during the match.

"Of course Milan are a very good team. They did better than us this evening and deserved the victory," Inzaghi said.

"We had the wrong approach and weren't enough of a team, which is rare for us. We didn't start either half with the right attitude." With two draws and one loss in Serie A so far, defending champions Inter have endured a mixed start to the campaign.

"It's unexpected, we had worked well over the last couple of days in training, but the approach was wrong in both halves. Now we've already dropped a few too many points in Serie A and this is particularly sore," Inzaghi added.

Persian Gulf Pro League:

Sepahan's perfect start ends; Tractor edges out Kheybar

Sports Desk

Sepahan's perfect start to the new Persian Gulf Pro League season came to an end in a 1-1 draw at Zob Ahan in the Isfahan derby.

Tractor, meanwhile, bounced back from last week's shock home defeat against Zob Ahan to beat newly-promoted Kheybar Khorramabad 2-1 on the road.

Young Iranian international full back Aria Yousefi gave Sepahan the lead with a composed finish on the half-hour mark and Jose Morais's men thought they were on course for a fifth successive league victory until the closing stages, before former Persepolis midfielder Kamal Kamyabinia drew the home side level with seven minutes left on the clock.

Sepahan is top of the table with 13 points, while seven-place Zob Ahan is the only team other than its city rival and Persepolis yet to concede a loss in the new campaign.

Meanwhile, Tractor, fresh from a 3-0 win at Al Wakrah in the AFC Champions League Two opener, continued its impressive run under Croatian head coach Dragan Skocic.



Sepahan striker Reza Asadi (L) is seen in action in a 1-1 draw against Zob Ahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Isfahan, Iran, on September 22, 2024.

● FFIRI

Brazilian midfielder Ricardo Alves put the visitors in front with a sublime left-footed effort from the edge of the box 12 minutes into the game. Mehrdad Ghanbari sent Tractor keeper Alireza Beiranvand the wrong way from the spot to restore parity eight minutes later, but Danial Esmaeilifar's 61st-minute strike secured a third league victory for Skocic's men.

The win sent Tractor second in the top-flight table with 10 points - level with Malavan FC and two points clear of Persepolis, which has a game in hand.