

World Cup Asian qualifiers:

Pole position at stake as Iran visits Uzbekistan in crunch Central Asian derby

Sports Desk

Uzbekistan will host Iran in Tashkent's Bunyodkor Stadium today, with both sides keen to claim the maximum points and take a significant stride towards the World Cup finals in two years' time.

The two teams are tied on six points, and a goal difference of +2, with Uzbekistan leading the table in Group A of the qualifiers after scoring more goals in the wins against North Korea (1-0) and Kyrgyzstan (3-2).

There was little to separate the two sides when Iran and Uzbekistan shared the spoils in both meetings of the previous qualifying group phase.

Uzbekistan pulled off a sensational fightback in the second half to come from two goals down on home soil in November last year, before no goals were scored in the dead-rubber reverse fixture at Tehran's Azadi Stadium in June.

Sardar Azmoun was on target when Iran last beat Uzbekistan 1-0 in the CAFA Nations Cup final last year – Team Melli's 10th victory in 14 games against the fellow-Central Asians since they first met in 1998, with Uzbekistan's sole win (1-0) coming in a World Cup qualifier in Tehran 12 years ago.

While Iran remains an undisputed member of the old guard in Asian football, Uzbekistan is building on an impressive run in



youth-level competitions over the past decade to establish itself as a rising force in the continent.

Persepolis winger Oston Urunov and Esteghlal midfielder Jaloliddin Masharipov are Uzbekistan's familiar faces for Iranian fans, though the former is a doubt for today's encounter after suffering a

groin injury during warm-up ahead of Saturday's top-flight game against Chadormalou.

However, there are more to expect from Uzbekistan's formidable frontline, as AS Roma striker Eldor Shomurodov will be looking to add to his 41 international goals, while Abbasbek Fayzullaev, with

two strikes in nine appearances for CSKA Moscow this season, could make a contribution off the bench.

'More clinical'

Despite not being at its free-flowing best, Iran secured 1-0 wins against Kyrgyzstan and the United Arab Emirates last time out in the group, but head

coach Amir Qalenoee says his players will have to be more clinical in today's encounter if they are to leave Tashkent with a decisive victory.

"I want my players to make the most of their chances. Iran should have scored more goals in the last two games but we were wasteful and a repeat of that will

cost us against Uzbekistan," the Iranian said in the pre-match press conference on Wednesday.

"It is going to be a tight and physical game and, hence, there won't be too many clear-cut chances for either of the two sides. We'll have to be spot-on with our tactical plan and more clinical in our finishing."

Asked about his team's performance in last year's 2-2 draw, Qalenoee said: "Our players were a bit tired in that game and lost motivation as the game wore on. Uzbekistan still deserve credit for the way they fought back in the second half and could have even won that match."

Qalenoee will be without center-back Hossein Kan'anizadegan, who is set to be sidelined for three weeks due to a hamstring problem, with Shoja Khalilzadeh and young Sepahan prodigy Mohammad-Amin Hazbavi likely to form the backline partnership.

Elsewhere in the Asian qualifiers today, the UAE – third in Group A with three points – will play at home to North Korea, with Qatar and the Kyrgyz Republic squaring off in Doha's Al Thumama Stadium.

Jordan and South Korea, the top two in Group B with four points, will go head-to-head in Amman, while Oman will chase first points in the group when hosting Kuwait.

Iraq, also on four points, welcomes Palestine to the Basra International Stadium.

In Group C, a highly-anticipated fixture will see Roberto Mancini's Saudi Arabia and Japan battle it out in Jeddah.

Australia and China will meet in Adelaide, with Bahrain facing Indonesia at home.

World Taekwondo Junior Championships:

Double delight for Iran coach in winning the title in sport's hub

Sports Desk

Head coach Fatemeh Safarpour, who led Iran to the women's crown at the World Taekwondo Junior Championships in Chuncheon, South Korea, said she felt an even greater sense of triumph in winning the title in a country considered the hub of the sport.

Ghazal Houshmand, Parnian Nouri, Aynaz Nasiri, and Hana Zarrinkamar all walked away with the ultimate prize of their respective weight classes, with Saghar settling for a silver, as Iran finished atop the medals table, followed by the host, which bagged a single gold and three silver medals.

This meant that South Korea missed out on the girls' trophy for only a third time across the 14 editions of world junior event.

Iran celebrated a first ti-

tle in Burnaby, Canada, in 2016 before Russian girls' triumph two years later in Hammamet, Tunisia.

"There was a unique joy of winning this title in a country where taekwondo is a traditional sport," Safarpour told Mehr News Agency.

"With all the global contenders in the mix, the competition was held at such a high level. It's always a real test when South Korea hosts a taekwondo event, but the Iranian girls and all of my colleagues in the coaching staff, as well as the federation, deserve credit for working tirelessly to make this success happen," added the Iranian, who was named the Best Women Team Coach on the final day of the event.

"The gold medals of the 10 weight classes were won by seven countries. Iran collected four of them and South Korea,

the Chinese Taipei, Tunisia, Croatia, Morocco, and the Philippines claimed one apiece, which shows many countries have invested on the sport," said Safarpour, whose team had finished runner-up to South Korea in Sofia two years ago.

"There was a high number of contestants in all weight classes, and each participant had to win at least six bouts to win a gold medal, which made it even a more precious achievement for the Iranian girls. They surely deserved this title."

Head coach Fatemeh Safarpour hugs Parnian Nouri after the Iranian girl's win in the -52kg final at the World Taekwondo Junior Championships in Chuncheon, South Korea, on Oct. 1, 2024.

WORLD TAEKWONDO

