

Iranian prodigy Faraji throws down gauntlet at global stars

Sports Desk

Iranian teenage sensation Benyamin Faraji says he will be looking to build on his impressive display at the Asian Table Tennis Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, to reach the heights of the sport in the near future.

Faraji, 14, stole all the headlines when he came from behind to stun Chinese world No. 1 Wang Chuqin 3-2 (11-8, 3-11, 9-11, 13-11, 11-9) earlier in October – the sole victory for Iran during a last-eight loss in the men's team event.

"I was mentally and physically ready for every challenge coming my way before heading to the tournament," said the Iranian, adding: "The atmosphere of the venue was intense. The Chinese federation had brought a huge crowd, who was absolutely electric throughout the contest. But I was fully prepared for the match."

"I don't feel too much pressure when taking on East Asian players. I just focus on my own game and that's what I did to come out victorious against such a world-class player," added the Iranian, who is fourth in the latest men's world under-15 ranking.

"I knew before the match a victory would be a massive breakthrough for me. No-one really expected me to win, but I still played with full confidence and determination. Beating a world and Olympic champion was like a mission impossible for a 14-year-old Iranian, and I am so thrilled to have claimed a milestone triumph."

Faraji came within touching distance of another major upset in Astana, going neck-and-neck



with world number two Lin Shidong, before relinquishing a six-point lead in the deciding game to suffer a 3-2 defeat against the Chinese the men's singles competitions.

"I had a decent performance against him, but I was just unlucky. Shidong is a great player. He had defeated his high-profile counterpart Ma Long before the tournament and made the most

of his experience to beat me. I really regretted the loss, though the Chinese coach came to congratulate me on my performance after the match."

Faraji's sensational campaign at the Asian Championships saw the Iranian jump up by 33 spots at the latest ITTF World Ranking to sit 177th in the men's singles chart.

The Iranian says he is keen on

playing in the top European and Asian leagues in the future.

"To play in the German or French leagues will be a massive privilege for me as I will get the chance to square off against some of the world's best and improve my game in those two prominent events," Faraji said. The young Iranian boy is full of gratitude for his father, who "played a pivotal role in my af-

fection for table tennis when I was just five."

Asked about his ultimate goal in the sport, Faraji said: "Playing in the Olympics, and not just to participate, but to win a medal. I love to see table tennis take the center stage for Iran at the Olympics, just like wrestling does. I wish I can play Ma Long some day and beat him for the Olympic gold."



Iranian Benyamin Faraji is seen in action during his victory over Chinese world No. 1 Wang Chuqin at the Asian Table Tennis Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Oct. 8, 2024.

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Iran futsal coach Shamsaei nearing exit door: Report

Sports Desk

Head coach Vahid Shamsaei is on the brink of parting ways with the Iran futsal national team, according to ISNA. Shamsaei, who led Iran to the World Cup last 16 in September, is on a contract with the Iranian federation until the end of Persian calendar year (March 20), but the sport's governing body is willing to terminate the deal, should the two sides agree on a compensation fee, the news agency wrote on Sunday.

Widely regarded as the greatest Iranian futsal player of all time, Shamsaei took charge of the national team in 2022 but had to settle for a runner-up finish in his

maiden event after a 3-2 loss to Japan in the AFC Asian Cup, a tournament the Iranian great won on eight occasions as a player.

The 49-year-old coach successfully steered Iran to a record-extending 13th Asian title in April, thanks to a 4-1 victory over host Thailand in the final, and when his team headed to the World Cup in Uzbekistan last month, Iranian fans were eager to see their team improve on its best-ever finish at the flagship international event – the third place under former Iranian coach Mohammad Nazemasharieh in the 2016 edition in Colombia after a shootout win against Portugal.

Iran got off to flying start to its campaign, routing Venezuela 7-1, and then went on to finish atop the group table in emphatic fashion by defeating Guatemala (9-4) and France (4-1), though the latter scoreline triggered angry reactions from other teams and a FIFA probe into tanking allegations, as the defeat would have meant an easier path in the knockout phase for the Group F runner-up.

The top spot sent Iran into a last-16 clash against Morocco, where Iran gave away an early lead to suffer a 4-3 loss to the African champion and fail to progress to the World Cup quarterfinals for the first time in 12 years.

Azmoun set to be sidelined for four weeks with knee injury

Sports Desk

Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun is expected to be out of action for four weeks after suffering a knee injury during Shabab Al Ahli's victory in the UAE President's Cup on Saturday.

The prolific forward headed home his 10th goal of the season with nine minutes into the first half to lead the Emirati club to a 2-0 win

against Dibba Al Hisn in the round of 16, before being forced out injured before halftime.

Iranian fans feared the worst as rumors on social media following the game suggested a lengthy layoff for Azmoun due to a ligament injury, but an early assessment indicated that the Iranian should be able to return to the pitch within 30 days. However, the Iranian talisman, who scored twice to inspire Team

Melli to a 4-1 beating of Qatar in the World Cup qualifiers last week, will face a race against time to be available for the country's next two games in its qualification campaign.

Sitting atop Group A with 10 points, Amir Qalenoee's side will play North Korea – in a neutral venue yet to be confirmed – on November 14 before taking on the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek five days later.



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