# Iran coach Qalenoei wary of complacency against North Korea, Kyrgyzstan

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoei warned his players cannot afford to be carried away by the emphatic victory over Qatar when they face North Korea and Kyrgyzstan in the upcoming World Cup qualifiers.

Team Melli takes on North Korea in Vientiane, Laos, on Thursday, before playing away to Kyrgyzstan at the Dolen Omurzakov Stadium in Bishkek next Tuesday.

Sardar Azmoun and Mohammad Mohebbi scored twice apiece as Iran came from behind to hammer Asian Cup champion Qatar 4-1 in Dubai last time out in the qualifiers in mid-October.

A third win in four outings saw Iran overtake Uzbekistan on top of Group A on goal difference and, more significantly, open a six-point gap on third-place UAE in the six-team table.

With a top-two finish securing direct qualification for the 2026 finals, maximum points against the bottom two sides of the group will help Qalenoei's men edge closer to a place in the showpiece in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

"We are at a crucial stage [of the Asian qualifiers] with two important games ahead of us. Victory in those two games will all but secure the World Cup qualification for Iran. We can become the first team to qualify for the finals," Qalenoei told the official website of the Iranian Football Federation before his team's visit to Vientiane.

"I've already told my players to forget all about the match against Qatar. It has been nearly a month since that game, but, unfortunately, that is part of the Iranian footballers' mindset as they keep basking in the glory of a triumph for too long," added Qalenoei.

North Korea sits bottom of the group with two points, though Qalenoei believes their results don't reflect the true quality of Thursday's opponent.

"Our analysis of them suggests they are a hard-working team with high level of endurance. They held the UAE to a draw [in Al Ain] but were unlucky to miss a penalty in that game. That's also what happened to them when they were beaten [1-0] at Uzbekistan.

"They will be tough opponents, but we will still deliver an attack-minded football and go all out for the three points," Iran coach said.

Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, cost Iran all sorts of trouble when the two sides met in their Group A opener in September, with Qalenoei having a Mahdi Taremi's first-half strike to thank for the hard-fought 1-0 win in Isfahan.

Despite a decent run of results, Team Melli has not been immune to criticism from some fans and pundits, but Qalenoei says his players can use this to their advantage.

"I believe the national team belongs to all Iranians, and we should respect every critic's view. Team Melli has found its way, though I'm not saying we're flawless and all scrutiny, as long as it's not personal, can help us stay on track and continue moving in the right direction."

ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

# Cleveland extend NBA winning start to 12 games

*BBC* – Cleveland Cavaliers became just the eighth team in NBA history to win their first 12 games of a regular season with a 119-113 victory over the Chicago Bulls.

It is the best start to an NBA season since the Golden State Warriors in 2015-16, who went on to win a record 24 successive games.

Donovan Mitchell top-scored with 36 points and five other players reached double figures as the Cavaliers fought back from nine points down in the third quarter to seal victory

"We dug deep," said Mitchell. "For us to continue to be what we want to be, that's what it's going to take.

"It was a complete team win. Every night it's somebody different. We're playing for each other, being selfless. We've got to keep it going."

Zach LaVine scored 26 points while Coby White and Nikola Vucevic added 20 in reply for the Bulls, who slip to 4-7 for the season.

Elsewhere, Victor Wembanyama scored 34 points and had 14 rebounds and six assists as the San Antonio Spurs beat the Sacramento Kings 116-96.

Julian Champagnie scored 13 points and Chris Paul added 12 as all of the Spurs starters posted double figures.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander starred as the Oklahoma City Thunder bounced back from their weekend defeat by the Golden State Warriors with a 134-128 win over the Los Angeles Clippers.

*Cavaliers guard Donovan Mitchell (45) attempts a shot during an NBA win against the Bulls in Chicago, IL, US, on Nov. 11, 2024.*
MATT MARTON/IMAGN IMAGES

Gilgeous-Alexander scored a career-high 45 points, with Jalen Williams adding 28 and Luguentz Dort 19.

The Thunder announced before the game that centre Chet Holmgren will be assessed in eight to 10 weeks after suffering a pelvic fracture against the Warriors.

Cam Thomas scored 17 points as the Brooklyn Nets beat the New Orleans Pelicans 107-105, while the Houston Rockets eased to a 107-92 win over the Washington Wizards.

# Alcaraz given Ruud awakening with defeat in ATP Finals opener

*REUTERS* – An off-colour Carlos Alcaraz suffered a shock 6-1 7-5 defeat against Norway's Casper Ruud in his opening match at the ATP Finals as the Spaniard's hopes of winning the year-end title for the first time suffered a blow on Monday.

The round-robin format of the eight-man event means he could still crown a standout year in style, but the third seed has left himself with little margin for error in his remaining group matches and will need to find a higher level.

"I think he did a really good job today. But I talk about myself, I could just be better. I could play better. Obviously I could feel better on court," world number three Alcaraz, who has been under the weather in the build-up, told reporters.

Ruud, who had lost all four of his previous meetings against Alcaraz, saved break points in the opening game but dominated the first set from then on as surprising errors flowed from his opponent's racket.

Alcaraz responded positively to move 5-2 ahead in the second set, breaking serve with a deft volley, and was two points from levelling the match, only to capitulate.

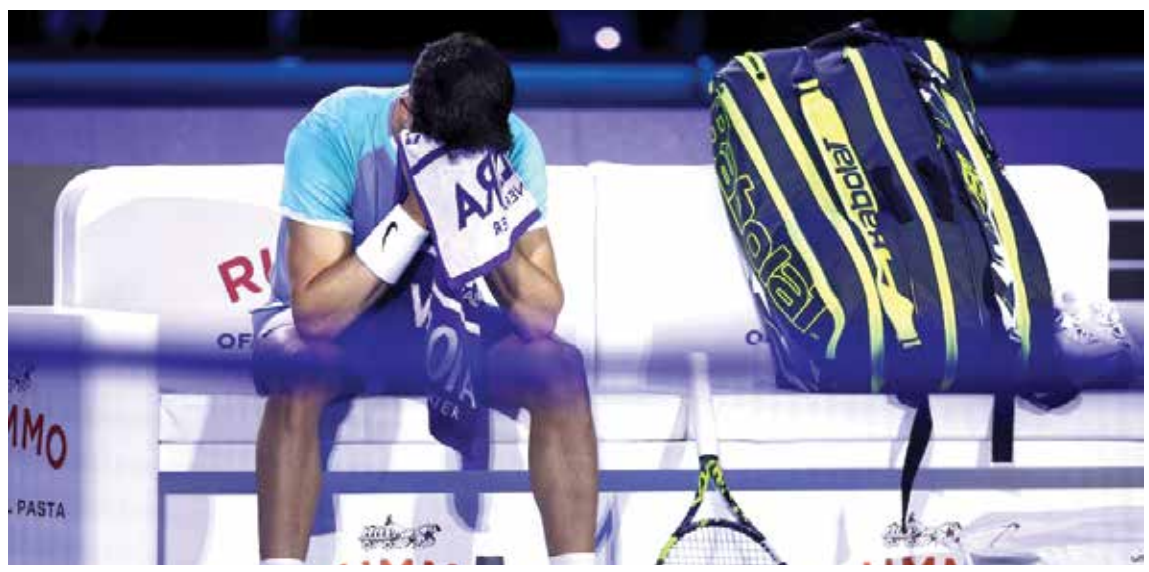
He dropped serve at 5-3 and looked forlorn as world number seven Ruud surged to victory, winning the last five games.

Alcaraz, who won the French Open and Wimbledon titles this year, is hoping to become the first Spaniard to win the prestigious year-ending title since Alex Corretja in 1998.

Ruud failed to convert his first two match points but closed it out at the third attempt to put himself in a strong position in the John Newcombe group in which Germany's Alexander Zverev beat Russian Andrey Rublev 6-4 6-4 in the evening match.

"This is one of the best wins of the season for me," Ruud said in a courtside interview. "I've seen Carlos play better tennis than he played today but I still had to take my chances."

While Alcaraz did claim the Beijing title in October, his form since winning Wimbledon has been patchy including a second round exit at the U.S. Open.

The 21-year-old made 34 unforced errors against Ruud with his usually destructive forehand misfiring and most of the drop shots he attempted either finding the net or being dispatched easily by the grateful Norwegian.

*Spain's Carlos Alcaraz is dejected during a match against Norway's Casper Ruud in the ATP Finals in Turin, Italy, on Nov. 11, 2024.*
GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS