

World Cup Asian qualifiers: Iran 'fortunate to avoid punishment,' Qalenoeei says after North Korea win

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoeei said his team was lucky not to be punished after surviving a late scare to secure a 3-2 victory over North Korea in a World Cup qualifier in Vientiane, Laos, on Thursday.

It was a game of two halves in an eventful evening at the Lao National Stadium KM16, as Iran took a commanding 3-0 lead at halftime but went down to 10 men after the break before North Korea found the net twice in the space of three minutes.

Mahdi Qayedi gave Team Melli a well-deserved lead on the half-hour mark, when Iranian skipper Mahdi Taremi sent him through to slot home past North Korean goalkeeper Kang Ju-hyok. Taremi was again the provider in the 41st minute, playing a one-two with Mohammad Mohebbi, who smashed the ball into top corner.

Mohebbi bagged his second of the night four minutes later, thanks to another assist by Taremi, who teed up the Rostov winger on the edge of the box before his strike found the bottom corner.

The Asian powerhouse looked to be cruising to a comfortable victory but the game turned on its head seven minutes after the restart, as Iran center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh was shown his marching orders for a last-man foul on Ri Jo-guk.

North Koreans pulled one back four minutes later, with Taremi inadvertently steering Kang Kuk-chol's cross past Iranian keeper Alireza Beiranvand, and then the margin was reduced to one, when Jang Kuk-chol's header across the goal was bundled in by Kim Yu-song.

Taremi had the chance to squash North Korea's revival hopes with a VAR-given penalty in the 65th minute, only to see his effort from the spot cleared by Kang. North Korea went close to completing

the comeback on a couple of occasions, with Ri hitting the crossbar in the 75th minute, but Iran held out to collect all points.

"Today's game taught us a very important lesson, we had two totally different halves," Qalenoeei said after the game.

"We were fantastic in the first half, scored three goals and didn't give North Korea any opportunities, but in the second half, we didn't have a good game after losing one of our players and control of the match.

"During the break, we reminded the players to treat the score as if it was level because North Korea is a dangerous team, and their past performances have shown they cannot be underestimated. We were fortunate to hold on for the three points in the second half.

"We managed to control the game through our substitutions, though we were fortunate that football spared us today and didn't punish our mistakes. We needed to be more focused in situations where we fell short, and that is something I take seriously as a coach. Nevertheless,

I am extremely grateful to my players," added the Iranian coach, whose team will be back in action on Tuesday against Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, with a win seeing Team Melli take a huge stride towards a place in the 2026 finals in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

"We have to be happy we got the three

points today and from tomorrow we must be focused for the next match against Kyrgyz Republic," Qalenoeei said. The hard-fought victory sent Iran three points clear on top of the table in Group A as the Asian qualifiers reached the halfway point.

The top two finishers in each of Asia's

three qualifying groups advance automatically to the 2026 finals in North America while the third and fourth placed nations progress to another phase of preliminaries.

In Doha, Lucas Mendes scored 12 minutes into stoppage time to secure a 3-2 win for Qatar over Uzbekistan after Abbasbek Fayzullaev scored twice to cancel out Alimoez Ali's first-half brace for the host.

Despite the last-gasp heartbreak, Uzbekistan is second in the group with 10 points, but is now only three points ahead of both Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, which handed Kyrgyzstan a 3-0 defeat in Abu Dhabi.

In other groups, Branko Ivankovic's China reignited its qualification hopes with a 1-0 win over Bahrain in Riffa thanks to a Zhang Yuning's 91st-minute strike, while French coach Herve Renard marked his return to the Saudi Arabia dugout with a 0-0 draw against Australia in Melbourne.

The Chinese moved to six points from five matches, level with second-placed Australians and Saudis in Group C, with Bahrain fifth on five points.

In Group B, Son Heung-min scored his 50th international goal to help South Korea cement its hold on the top spot with a 3-1 away win against Kuwait.

Jordan and Iraq are second and third in the table with eight points – five adrift of South Korea – following a goalless stalemate in Basra and fourth-placed Oman had a late Muhsen al-Ghassani strike to thank for a 1-0 win over Palestine.



Iranian players celebrate a goal during a 3-2 victory over North Korea in the World Cup Asian qualifiers in Vientiane, Laos, on November 14, 2024.
● MOHSEN DAVOUDI/FFIRI

Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship: Iran's San'at Mes routs Oman's Ahli Sidab for first win

Sports Desk

Iran's San'at Mes Kerman celebrated a first win at the Asian Men's Club League Handball Championship in Doha, Qatar, defeating Ahli Sidab Club of Oman 33-19 in Group B.

Aref Taei and Allahkaram Esteki scored five goals apiece, while Reza Shojaei delivered a man-of-the-match performance with three, as the Iranian club bounced back from a first-day 31-22 loss to defending champion Khaleej Club of Saudi Arabia.

The victory left San'at in the third place of the group's five-team table with two points, with Khaleej Club on top with four points thanks to a superior goal difference over the host's Al Duhail.

San'at will be back in action today against Kazma SC of Kuwait, before taking on Al Duhail on Sunday.

The winner of the nine-team tournament will secure qualification for the 18th IHF Handball Club World Championship – to be hosted by New Administrative Capital, Egypt, in October 2025.



● ASIANHANDBALL.ORG

Medvedev targets improvement after '6.5/10' year

REUTERS – Daniil Medvedev said he needs to "build a better version" of himself after Thursday's ATP Finals defeat to Jannik Sinner ensured the Russian will end the season without a title for the first time since 2017.

Former U.S. Open champion Medvedev was beaten 6-3 6-4 by world number one Sinner in his final group match, leaving him no chance of reaching the last four in the season-ending tournament in Turin.

"I want to be number one in the world, but I didn't play well enough this year, by far. Jannik is playing much better. He proved it many times," Medvedev told reporters.

"But I'm number four in the big tennis world. I'm super proud about that because, as I said, especially in the end of the year, I struggled throughout the whole year. Every practice, every match was a struggle for me.

"Before I would feel I had the edge on the opponent and win it easy. Now I needed to win three sets, tie-breaks, breaks in the end of the set. I would put it (season) somewhere on six and a half out of 10."

Medvedev, who opted to skip ATP 250 events and only play in bigger tournaments this year, reached the final of the Australian Open and In-



dian Wells.

Asked about his plans for the pre-season, Medvedev said: "We're going to try to really build something a little bit new. I see right now that it's not good enough, especially against guys like Jannik and Carlos (Alcaraz).

"If we talk purely tactics, I feel like I played fine. It's just execution... That's what we're going to work on a lot in pre-season, to build a little bit better version of myself, which is not



Russia's Daniil Medvedev hits a serve during his singles group stage match against Italy's Jannik Sinner at the ATP Finals in Turin, Italy, on November 14, 2024.
● GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS

easy when you're 28 years old. "About titles, I'm not that concerned. I could have gotten some different tournaments. I basically played three 500s this year and all the rest was Masters and Grand Slams."