

World Cup Asian qualifiers:

Iran out to win over domestic critics
against Kyrgyzstan

Sports Desk

Iran will look to make a significant stride towards a place in the 2026 World Cup when playing away to Kyrgyzstan in Group A of the Asian qualifiers today. Amir Qalenoee's side is top of the group table with 13 points after five rounds of matches – three points clear of second-placed Uzbekistan, and, more importantly, six above the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

With a top-two finish in each of the three groups securing direct qualification for the finals, maximum points in Bishkek's Dolen Omurzakov Stadium will all but guarantee Team Melli's progress to the showpiece in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Iran defeated North Korea 3-2 in Laos as the Asian qualifiers reached the halfway point on Thursday, though a shaky second-half performance saw a significant portion of the fans and pundits in the country take a swipe at Qalenoee and his players again.

Leading by three goals at the break, Iran went down to 10 men through a straight red for defender Shoja Khalilzadeh six minutes after the restart and then conceded twice inside three minutes.

Mahdi Taremi was denied from the spot by the North Korean keeper and Iran was "fortunate not to be punished", as Qalenoee admitted after the game, by a



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late equalizer when Ri Jo-guk's strike hit the crossbar.

For all the decent run of results since Qalenoee took over on the bench after the 2022 World Cup, the Iranian head coach has hardly avoided scrutiny over the past 20 months.

The 60-year-old is on the verge

of becoming only the second home-grown coach to steer Iran to the World Cup finals – following legendary Heshmat Mohajerani in 1978 – but the imminent feat has done little to keep the critics from questioning his team's inconsistency throughout the 90 minutes, most demon-

strated against North Korea, as well as Qalenoee's overreliance on a certain group of ageing players.

When asked about the criticism in Monday's pre-match press conference, Qalenoee said: "I can only be happy that the team has scored 71 goals in 29 games

since I took the role. We managed to build an attack-minded team in such a short time, despite a whole different approach [under former coach Carlos Queiroz] for a decade."

A commanding display against Kyrgyzstan is what Qalenoee and his men need to prove

their doubters wrong until the next international break in late March.

Missing trio

Khalilzadeh, who will likely be replaced by Hossein Kan'anizadegan in the starting XI, is not the only player to have missed the visit to the Kyrgyz capital.

Ittihad Kalba midfielder Saman Qoddous sat out the North Korea win with a hamstring injury and has returned to the United Arab Emirates for further treatment, while prolific winger Mohammad Mohebbi, who found the net twice on Thursday, will also miss the game with the same problem.

Second from bottom in the group with three points, Kyrgyzstan has proved to be a favorite opponent for Team Melli, which has a 5-0 head-to-head record the Central Asian side, bagging 22 goals.

Qalenoee's men, however, had to dig deep for victory last time out against Kyrgyzstan on home soil, as a Taremi's first-half strike was the difference between the two sides in September's reverse fixture in the group.

Elsewhere in Group A, Uzbekistan will be eager to bounce back from the 3-2 loss at Qatar with a win against North Korea in Vientiane and retain the safe margin over the UAE and Qatar, which will square off in Abu Dhabi.

Daei: It's a great honour to be alongside Ronaldo and Messi

"I don't think it will ever be done," said Ferenc Puskas of the quest to reach 100 international goals in 1993. "If Pele couldn't do it, no-one will."

"The Galloping Major", registrar of 84 for Hungary, endorsed his forecast: "Football is far more defensive these days. Teams used to have four or five players in attack. It used to be about outscoring the opposition. Now the top goalscorer at a World Cup gets six. Before it was 13, 11, 10. I think 100 goals is unreachable."

That same year, a 24-year-old forward from Ardabil, by the Sabalan stratovolcano, made his international debut for Iran. Nobody could have imagined he'd challenge Puskas's tally, yet alone his prediction – not even the man himself.

Ali Daei, however, was a one-of-a-kind marksman. An immaculate finisher with monstrous aerial ability, he bagged 22 goals in only 18 games in 1996 – a tally that included four in 23 minutes against Korea Republic in an AFC Asian Cup quarter-final. Only the immortal Sandor Kocsis, scorer of 23 in 1954, has registered more in a calendar year.

The man with the moustache netted 36 goals in 36 games from 1998 to 2001 to power past Gerd Muller (68), Kocsis (75) and Pele (77) were soon in his rear-view mirror. Once Puskas was, Daei's century quest monopolised headlines.

On 17 November 2004, Daei scored four goals in a World Cup qualifier against Laos to become the first man in history to reach 100 international goals. Such was the accomplishment's magnitude that it was reported on television in over 150 countries across the planet. FIFA caught up with the former Bayern Munich striker to discuss that unforgettable achievement in Tehran, and sharing the century club with Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi.

FIFA: Ferenc Puskas, Pele, Gerd Muller and all these incredible goalscorers hadn't come close. When did you realise that reaching 100 international goals could be possible?

Daei: I think it started to feel achievable when I crossed 80 goals. Until then, I hadn't really thought about it – I was focused on winning games, helping my team, and representing my country with pride. But as I got closer, the idea became more real, and I knew it could happen if I just kept pushing.

You went into the game against Laos on 97. Did you think it was a possibility that day?

Yes, I had a feeling. Going into that game, I was confident and motivated. But football is unpredictable; you never know how a match will go. That day, though, everything came together, and I felt the support of my teammates and fans, which made it even more special.

How did it feel to become the first man in history to reach 100 international goals in front of your adoring public at the Azadi?

It was an unforgettable moment. Playing at the Azadi is always special, but reaching 100 goals there took it to a whole new lev-

el. I felt that I achieved this not only for myself but for everyone who had been there with me, supporting me. That moment was a victory for the entire nation of Iran.

What was the reaction to your accomplishment like? Did you receive any special messages?

Yes, I received many messages from team-mates, coaches and even well-known celebrities from around the world. The pride and support from people was overwhelming. Those messages showed me how football can bring people together, and how a personal achievement can mean something to everyone.

Two extraordinary players have since reached 100 international goals. First, how did you feel when Cristiano Ronaldo broke your record, and what do you think of Cristiano as a player?

Breaking records is part of football, and I'm happy that a player like Ronaldo was the one to do it. He's an exceptional and hard-working player, and he's proven those qualities throughout his career. Ronaldo is a huge role model for young players, and his record shows that anything is possible.

What do you think of Lionel Messi as a player?

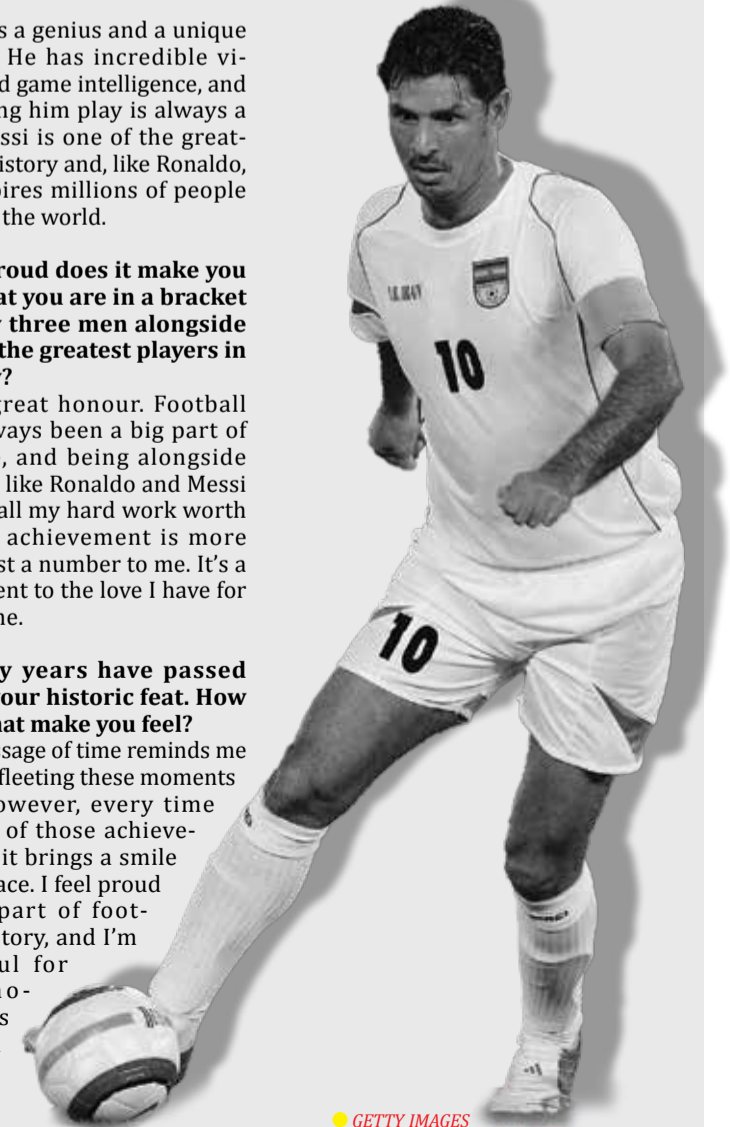
Messi is a genius and a unique player. He has incredible vision and game intelligence, and watching him play is always a joy. Messi is one of the greatest in history and, like Ronaldo, he inspires millions of people around the world.

How proud does it make you feel that you are in a bracket of only three men alongside two of the greatest players in history?

It's a great honour. Football has always been a big part of my life, and being alongside players like Ronaldo and Messi makes all my hard work worth it. The achievement is more than just a number to me. It's a testament to the love I have for the game.

Twenty years have passed since your historic feat. How does that make you feel?

The passage of time reminds me of how fleeting these moments are. However, every time I think of those achievements, it brings a smile to my face. I feel proud to be part of football history, and I'm grateful for the moments football has given me.



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