

Iran 'unprofessional', but has one foot in World Cup finals

Sports Desk

Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun lamented his side's lack of "professional mentality" despite a 3-2 away win against Kyrgyzstan in the World Cup Asian qualifiers.

The hard-fought victory was still enough to see Iran retain the top spot in the Group A table with 16 points – three clear of Uzbekistan and, more significantly, six above third-placed United Arab Emirates.

With a top-two finish in each of the three groups securing direct qualification for the finals, Team Melli is all but guaranteed a place in the 2026 showpiece – cohosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada – with four games to spare in the third round of the Asian preliminaries.

Mahdi Taremi gave Iran a 12th-minute lead, when Saied Ezzatollahi's header from a corner kick was saved by Erzhan Tokotaev, only for the Inter striker to find the net on the rebound.

The visiting side doubled the advantage on the break in the 33rd minute, with Azmoun releasing Saleh Hardani, before the Sepahan fullback slotted home past Tokotaev.

The second-half proceedings, however, were reminiscent of Iran's unconvincing performance last Thursday, when Amir Qalenoee's men led by three goals at halftime but struggled with North Korea's surge after the break, ultimately winning 3-2.

Kyrgyz talisman Joel Kojo pulled one back for the host with a well-placed header in the 52nd minute and then sent Iranian keeper Alireza Beiranvand the wrong way from the spot for the equalizer 12 minutes later.

Pushed by the jam-packed

crowd in Bishkek's Dolen Omurzakov Stadium, Kyrgyzstan looked more likely to bag a third goal, but it was Iran which found the winner against the run of play through Azmoun's thumping header with 14 minutes left on the clock.

Azmoun still rued the complacency within the squad after Iran again came close to missing out on maximum points despite a commanding halftime cushion.

"Unfortunately, we are yet to reach a professional level of mentality," said the Iranian, adding: "We think the game is over every time we are up by two goals. That is a big issue for us and I just hope we can solve it before the World Cup finals." "Iran definitely deserves to be where it is in the group. We might make a hard work of winning matches, but that's the beauty of this game, and, at the end of day, three points are all that matters," added the prolific striker.

Qalenoee, meanwhile, was delighted with the final outcome of a thrilling contest, though he acknowledged that his team's defensive woes need to be addressed before the next international break.

"We managed to get a good win on a difficult day," said the Iranian head coach. "I think it was a match that made the audience happy with five goals.

"In the second half, we conceded with two mistakes. Considering the travelling conditions we had, we have to praise our players who immediately fought back and scored the winning goal and created many chances. I thank each and every one of my players.

"We are happy that we got 16 points from six games. I am thrilled that we've become an attacking team. In our defen-



sive structure, we have a series of problems that we need to fix in the three months we have."

Iran will be back in the Asian qualifiers with a double header against the UAE and Uzbekistan in late March.

Elsewhere in the group on Tuesday, Uzbekistan secured a 1-0 win over North Korea in Vientiane with Abbosbek Fayzullaev's deflected 44th-minute shot giving his side the lead before Umarbek Eshmurodov was sent off and Utkir Yusupov saved Jong Il Gwan's late penalty.

The UAE thrashed Qatar 5-0 in Abu Dhabi, with Brazil-born striker Fabio Lima scoring four, including two from the penalty spot, as Paulo Bento's team

took sole possession of the third place ahead of the reigning Asian champion.

Saudis stunned

In other groups, Japan moved to the cusp of qualifying for the finals as a 3-1 win over host China coupled with Australia's 2-2 draw in Bahrain took Hajime Moriyasu's side nine points clear in the Group C table.

Koki Ogawa's double in Xiamen earned Japan a fifth win in six games and allowed the Blue Samurais to extend the lead over the chasing pack as Australia and Saudi Arabia both faltered. Kusini Yengi's stoppage-time goal salvaged a point for the Socceroos in Riffa while the Saudis fell to a surprise 2-0 loss

against Indonesia in Jakarta.

Australia needed a late equalizer to claim a point having seen Mahdi Abduljabbar score in the 75th and 77th minutes – the first from 40 yards – to cancel out Portsmouth striker Yengi's first-minute opener for Tony Popovic's side.

The Socceroos remain second in the standings, one point ahead of Indonesia, which pulled itself into contention in the group with the stunning home victory. Marselino Ferdinan scored twice to give the Indonesians their first win of the campaign, which moves them level on six points with the Saudis, Bahrain and China.

Meanwhile, Group B leader South Korea was frustrated in



Sardar Azmoun (20) heads home Iran's third goal in a 3-2 victory over Kyrgyzstan in the World Cup Asian qualifiers in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on November 19, 2024.

● FARSHAD ABBASI/varzesh3.com

Amman as Hong Myung-bo's side was held to a 1-1 draw by Palestine.

South Korea failed to win for the first time in five matches, needing Son Heung-min's 16th-minute strike to cancel out an early Zeid Qunbar opener.

Iraq downed Oman 1-0 in Muscat thanks to Youssef Ameen's 36th-minute goal to move onto 11 points, with Jordan in third on nine after a 1-1 draw with host Kuwait.

Guardiola agrees new one-year deal with Man City

THE GUARDIAN – Pep Guardiola has agreed a new one-year contract with Manchester City in a huge boost for the Premier League champions, the new terms taking his tenure to the summer of 2026. Following City's 2-1 FA Cup final defeat to Manchester United in May, Guardiola took time over the summer to consider his future, with the Guardian reporting then he was minded to take any decision sometime this winter.

The manager's last two contract extensions were agreed in November when travelling to Abu Dhabi, the home nation of the club's owner, Sheikh Mansour. Before City's 2-1 loss at Brighton on 9 November, their last game before the international break, Guardiola was asked if he had any plans to go there again during the international break.

He said: "No. I said many times, I won't talk about it [a new contract]. When it happens, it will happen. We're in touch regularly."

City have lost their past four matches, the first time Guardiola has overseen such a run in his 15-year managerial career. They are second in the league with 23 points from the opening 11 match-

es, five points behind the leaders, Liverpool.

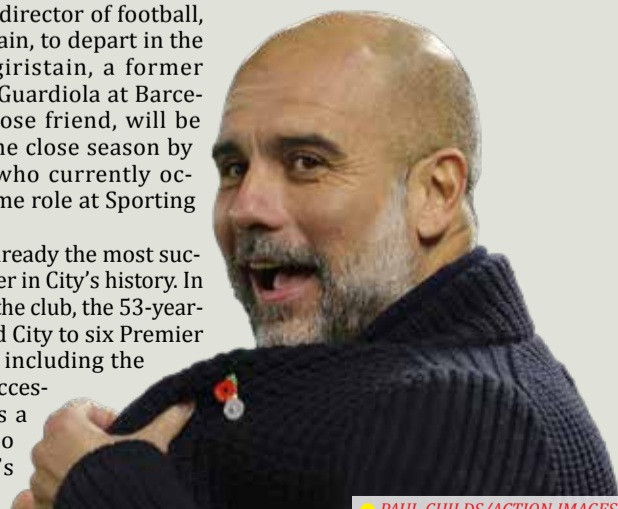
The club is also defending itself at an independent commission against the more than 100 charges of alleged financial wrongdoing brought against it by the Premier League. City deny all of the charges and Guardiola's decision indicates a renewed energy and desire to bring more success to the club he took over in summer of 2016.

It also suggests that Guardiola has not been influenced by the decision of City's director of football, Txiki Begiristain, to depart in the summer. Begiristain, a former teammate of Guardiola at Barcelona and a close friend, will be replaced in the close season by Hugo Viana who currently occupies the same role at Sporting Lisbon.

Guardiola is already the most successful manager in City's history. In eight years at the club, the 53-year-old has guided City to six Premier League titles, including the last four in succession, which is a record. He also claimed City's first Champi-

ons League in 2023, plus two FA Cups and four League Cups.

On Saturday Guardiola aims to arrest the four-game losing sequence when Tottenham visit the Etihad Stadium for the 5.30pm kick-off. After the 4-1 defeat at Sporting in the Champions League, the third City loss in the run, Guardiola said: "It will be a tough season – we knew that from the start. But this is what it is. I like it, I love it, I want to face it and lift my players and try it."



● PAUL CHILDS/ACTION IMAGES

Verstappen poised for fourth successive F1 title

REUTERS – Max Verstappen will be Formula One world champion for the fourth year in a row if he beats Lando Norris in Las Vegas this weekend.

McLaren's Norris must score three points more than his Red Bull rival – requiring at least a top eight finish even if Verstappen draws a blank – to delay the inevitable for one more week and continue the title 'battle' to Qatar.

Verstappen has a 62-point lead with 60 to be won after three races on successive weekends. The Dutch driver can lose two points to Norris and still secure the title on wins given he has eight to the Briton's three.

The reigning champion won on the gaudy, floodlit Strip last season, despite a five-second penalty and later collision, to complete a U.S. triple, while Norris hit the wall on lap three and retired.

"This is the final push for everyone," said Verstappen, who would be only the sixth driver to win at



● AMANDA PEROBELLI/REUTERS

least four titles, going into the season's last run of three races on successive weekends.

"We performed well here last year and it is a really fast circuit, with long straights and a lot of opportunities to overtake and go racing."

Norris, sixth in Brazil on Nov. 3 despite starting on pole position in a race won by Verstappen from 17th on the grid, also has the constructors' championship to think about with McLaren 36 points clear of Ferrari at the top.

That battle, with McLaren

chasing a first constructors' championship since 1998 and Ferrari their first since 2008, could go down to the wire in Abu Dhabi with Red Bull not out of the running either. The defending champions are 49 points behind McLaren after ending a 10-race losing streak.

Verstappen's Mexican team mate Sergio Perez, who had appeared to be in danger of not seeing out the season after his home race in October, is still searching for form but looks safe for the last three.