

Azmoun relishing fresh start in Asian football

Sports Desk

When Sardar Azmoun joined UAE Pro League club Shabab Al Ahli in July, his move was deemed by many as the beginning of the end for the Iranian striker.

Three months on, the 29-year-old has been quick to silence those critical of his decision by bagging 12 goals and double assists in 14 appearances across all competitions.

Azmoun was a rare product of the Iranian youth system to kickstart his senior career in European club football, when he joined Rubin Kazan in the Russian Premier Liga from Sepahan under-19 side back in 2013.

Azmoun then went on to take the Russian league by storm for the best part of nine years, scoring 85 goals in 208 outings for three teams – as well as memorable strikes against Bayern Munich and Atletico Madrid in the UEFA Champions League.

His 52 strikes and 20 assists in 79 league games helped Zenit St. Petersburg lift the top-flight trophy on four occasions, while the Iranian won the top scorer prize in the 2019/20 season before being named the Player of the Season the following campaign.

Time came for Azmoun to embark on a new chapter by joining one of the major European leagues as he signed for Bayer

Leverkusen in January 2022.

Azmoun struggled to make an impact at Bayer Leverkusen, scoring five goals and providing teammates with five assists in 44 matches, leading the club to loan him to Serie A side AS Roma for the start of the 2023/24 season.

His season-long spell in the Giallorossi colors was similarly underwhelming, with three goals in 29 appearances – most of which came as a substitute – under Jose Mourinho and Daniele De Rossi as he battled a couple of injury setbacks, while committed to international duty for the AFC Asian Cup earlier this year.

On his return from the loan spell in the Italian capital, Azmoun failed to report for Leverkusen's first preseason training session in July, indicating he would have no part to play in head coach Xabi Alonso's plans for their Bundesliga title defense.

All the downward trajectory in his career, regarding goals and game time, led the Iranian fans and pundits to believe the Team Melli talisman's best years were behind him, and his move to the Emirati league, despite reported interest from La Liga side Sevilla, only reinforced this notion.

Azmoun, however, has had other ideas.

He marked his Asian club debut with a goal in his home country, as Shabab Al Ahli hammered



Sepahan 4-1 in the AFC Champions League Elite playoffs, though Shabab Al Ahli failed to progress to the league phase of the competition after the defeat against Al Gharafa in the final

round of the preliminaries. Azmoun's tally of six goals in as many games has seen the Iranian sit third in the domestic league's leading marksmen chart, while Shabab Al Ahli

trails Sharjah on top the table by one point with a game in hand. His latest contribution came in an AFC Champions League Two visit to Al Hussein of Jordan in Group D, where

his superb volley strike from behind the box inspired the Emirati side to a comeback 3-2 victory and a knockout place in the continent's second-tier club competition.



Djokovic eager to beat Sinner, Alcaraz at Grand Slams

CORINNE DUBREUIL/ATP TOUR

REUTERS – Novak Djokovic is ready to challenge Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz at the Grand Slam stage when he returns to action at the Australian Open after an underwhelming campaign this year, the 24-times champion said.

After winning three of the four Grand Slams last year, the 37-year-old has endured a dry spell in 2024, failing to win any majors for the first time since his injury-plagued 2017 campaign.

World No. 1 Sinner dethroned Djokovic at Melbourne Park en route to his maiden Grand Slam win and the 23-year-old Italian also beat the Serb in the Shanghai Masters final in October.

Reigning U.S. Open champion Sinner added the ATP Finals title to his tally, while Djokovic pulled out from the season-ending event with injury.

Djokovic withdrew from the French Open quarter-finals due to a knee injury, while 14-times champion Rafa Nadal lost to Alexander Zverev in the first round, allowing Alcaraz to dominate Roland Garros.

The 21-year-old Spaniard Alcaraz also retained his Wimbledon title. However, Djokovic clinched his maiden Olympic gold in Paris, defeating Alcaraz three weeks after their Wimbledon final—proving his resilience.

"I feel I can still play at the highest level. Sinner and

Alcaraz have established themselves as the two best players in the world, not to forget (Alexander) Zverev," Djokovic said in an interview with Gazzetta dello Sport on Saturday.

"All of them will be the main candidates to win the Slams and other titles. However, physically and mentally I am ready to play my tennis again and I have the feeling that I can challenge these guys, my experience can come in handy," Djokovic, who slipped to seventh in the ATP rankings, said 2024 was perhaps his least profitable season in the last 10 years. "So next year I will play more tournaments and the Grand Slams will be my priority. I will give my best to win, of course if

my body allows me to," he said.

Asked what advice he would give Sinner, Djokovic said: "It seems to me that he is doing well even without my advice. But winning your first two Slams and becoming No. 1 is one thing, staying at that level for years is another." Following the retirements of Roger Federer, Andy Murray and Rafael Nadal, Djokovic remains the last man from his generation still pushing for the crown. Former Wimbledon and U.S. Open champion Murray has joined Djokovic's coaching team as the latter bids to win a record-extending 11th Australian Open when the season's first major starts on Jan. 12.

Kyrgyz striker Kojo set to join Esteghlal

Sports Desk

Kyrgyzstan international Joel Kojo is nearing a deal with Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal.

The Ghana-born striker bid an emotional farewell with Dinamo Samarqand fans on Saturday, after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over Sogdiana in the final round of fixtures of the Uzbekistan Super League.

Dinamo head coach Vadim Abramov confirmed Esteghlal's interest in Kojo after the game, saying the clubs have had an "oral agreement" on the move, according to Varzesh3.

"Kojo is looking for a new challenge in his career, and we don't want to force him to stay. He has one year left on his contract, but he will be released if his \$300,000 asking price is met," Varzesh3 quoted the Uzbekistani coach as saying.

Kojo, 26, netted 10 goals and provided his teammates with four assists in 26 domestic appearances to help Dinamo finish



championAsia

eighth in the Uzbekistan top-flight table. Capped 23 times for Kyrgyzstan, Kojo has 10 goals under his belt since making his international debut in June last year – including a double in the 3-2 home defeat against Iran in November's World Cup qualifier.

Esteghlal struggles in the 10th place of the Iranian league standing with 11 points after 10 games, while sitting seventh in the West Zone's 12-team table in the AFC Champions League Elite ahead of today's game against Al Ahli Saudi in Jeddah.

Antetokounmpo's triple-double lifts Bucks to sixth straight win



REUTERS – Giannis Antetokounmpo recorded his third triple-double of the season with 42 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists as the Milwaukee Bucks extended their winning streak in NBA to six games, beating

the visiting Washington Wizards 124-114 on Saturday night.

Damian Lillard had 25 points and 10 assists, Brook Lopez scored 18 points, AJ Green added 13 off the bench and Taurean Prince had 11 for Milwaukee, which won for the eighth time in its past nine games. Antetokounmpo registered his first career 40-point triple-double and went 15-for-24 from the field.

Washington lost its 14th straight game and is two setbacks away from matching its franchise-record losing streak of 16. The Wizards were 9-for-32 (28.1 percent) from 3-point range.

Jordan Poole led Washington with 31 points. Former Bucks point guard Malcolm Brogdon tallied season highs of 29 points and 11 rebounds, and Jonas Valanciunas and Corey Kispert had 16 points apiece.