

Iranian teams clear to host in AFC competitions, Taj confirms

Sports Desk

Iranian national team and the Persian Gulf Pro League clubs have been given the go-ahead by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) to play on home soil again, Mahdi Taj, the head of Iranian Football Federation, confirmed.

Iranian teams were forced to play their home games in the continental events in neutral venues after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched a missile strike on targets in the Israeli-occupied territories on October 1 last year – days after the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in an Israeli air strike in Beirut, Lebanon. Iran faced Qatar in the World Cup qualifiers in Dubai on Oct. 15, coming out 4-1 winner, while Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractor, and Sepahan also had to fly to Dubai and Doha for their home games in the two Asian club competitions.

"We received the good news from the AFC hours ago, and Persepolis and Esteghlal are clear to play their home games [in the AFC Champions League Elite] in Tehran's Azadi Stadium," Taj said on Monday, adding: "The situation will be reassessed by the AFC representatives in Tehran on February 11, though I'm confident

there won't be a problem regarding Iran's home games in the World Cup qualifiers."

Sitting eighth in the west zone's 12-team table with five points, Esteghlal will be back in the Asian elite clubs' competition against Iraqi bottom-club Al Shorta on Feb. 3, hoping to remain in contention for a knockout spot ahead of the visit to Al Rayyan of Qatar on the final day of the league phase.

Sixth in the table with six points, Persepolis will play away to Saudi powerhouse Al Hilal, before welcoming Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr on Feb. 17.

Tractor is the Iranian team in the AFC Champions League Two knockouts, hosting Bahrain's Al Khaldiya SC in the second leg of their last-16 tie in Tabriz's Yadegar-e Imam Stadium on Feb. 18 – a week after the first leg in Riffa.

Iran, meanwhile, is top in Group A of the qualifiers with 16 points – three clear of Uzbekistan and six points above the United Arab Emirates with four games to spare – and with the top-two securing direct qualification for the 2026 finals, Team Melli is on the verge of progress ahead of the home fixtures against the UAE and Uzbekistan on March 20 and 25.



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

Australian Open: Medvedev advances after meltdown, red-hot Fritz through

REUTERS – Three-times finalist Daniil Medvedev allowed his frustrations to boil over in a Melbourne Park meltdown before advancing to the second round on Tuesday while Taylor Fritz made a strong start in his bid to end a 22-year Grand Slam drought for American men.

Danish 13th seed Holger Rune was pushed all the way to five sets and Emma Navarro also had a tough time in one of three all-American ties, the women's eighth seed surviving a major scare to beat Peyton Stearns 7-6(5) 6-7(5) 7-5.

It was plain sailing for former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina as she blitzed Australian wildcard Emerson Jones 6-1 6-1 with new coach Goran Ivanisevic watching on impressed. In a French thriller on Court Three, experience got the bet-



● FRANCIS MASCARENHAS/REUTERS

ter of potential as Gael Monfils edged Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard 7-6(7) 6-3 6-7(6) 7-6(5) 6-4, while there were also wins for 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu, ninth seed Daria Kasatkina and former men's world number six Matteo Berrettini. Russian Medvedev, runner-up last year, smashed his racket and a net camera after dropping serve in the third set but rallied

for a 6-2 4-6 3-6 6-1 6-2 win against Thai wildcard Kasidit Samrej.

The frustrated fifth seed's behaviour earned him a code violation for racket abuse as play was held up before the fourth set as staff swept up debris from the court but he cut a happy figure after the match.

"At the end of last year, this match I probably would have

lost," said Medvedev. "Now it's a new year and new energy ... So I'm happy to win this match."

Fourth seed Fritz stayed cool throughout his match against compatriot Jenson Brooksby, the U.S. Open finalist easing to a 6-2 6-0 6-3 win that showed why he is now considered best placed to end America's 22-year wait for a major men's prize.

The 27-year-old played an integral part in the United States winning the United Cup to begin the new season and continued his fine form within 106-minute drubbing of Brooksby on John Cain Arena.

Brooksby, returning from two years on the sidelines after having operations on both wrists and serving a 13-month doping suspension, fought until the bitter end but was no match for Fritz, who sealed the victory with his 34th winner.

"I'm super happy with how the match went today," said Fritz, who will next face qualifier Cristian Garin.

"It's never easy playing that first match in a slam so there were some nerves."

Iranian Majidi named head coach of Al Bataeh in UAE Pro League

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Iranian Farhad Majidi was appointed as the new head coach of UAE Pro League club Al Bataeh, the Emirati side announced on Monday.

Majidi, 48, took over from Croatian Goran Tomic, whose contract was terminated by the club last week, following a poor run of results in Emirati league.

Al Bataeh has managed only a couple of victories in 12 league games this season, suffering eight defeats, an is 12th in the 14-team table with eight points – two above the relegation zone.

This will be a second spell in the Emirati top flight for the Iranian, who parted ways with Ittihad Kalba in March last year, after leading the club to 17 wins in 51 outings in all competitions across two seasons, steering his team to an all-time best finish (eighth) in the league table in the 2022/2023 campaign.

Widely regarded as an Esteghlal legend, Majidi was also in charge of the Tehran Blues' bench when they went a whole campaign without a defeat to lift a first Persian Gulf Pro League trophy in nine years in the 2021/22 season.



● AFC

Fury announces retirement from boxing again

BBC – Former world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury has announced his retirement from boxing.

Fury last fought in December when he lost his rematch against WBA (Super), WBC and WBO champion Oleksandr Usyk.

The 36-year-old Fury previously announced his retirement after beating Dillian Whyte in April 2022 but returned six months later.

The Briton has enjoyed two stints as heavyweight champion and holds a record of 34 wins, two defeats and one draw.

"Hi everybody, I'm going to make this short and sweet," Fury said.

"I'd like to announce my retirement from boxing, it has been a blast, I've loved every single minute of it and I'm going to end with this; Dick Turpin wore a mask."

The Briton shocked long-reigning world champion Wladimir Klitschko in 2015 to



● FRANK AUGSTEIN/AP

win the WBA (Super), IBF, WBO, IBO, and The Ring heavyweight titles.

After over two-and-a-half years out of the ring, during which he tackled mental health issues, Fury returned to action in 2018 and became a two-time champion by beating Deontay Wilder to claim the WBC belt in 2020.

Fury's decision to retire denies fans the chance to see a long-anticipated clash with fellow Briton Anthony Joshua.

Matchroom's Eddie Hearn, who promotes Joshua, has however questioned the legitimacy of Fury's announcement.

"We've been here before. If that is the end, congratulations on a great career," Hearn told BBC Sport.

"One of the best heavyweights of this generation and made a bucket load of money. If your hearts not in it, if the fight has been punched out of you, it's definitely time to call it quits.

"A few people will always suggest that he could be calling a bluff, but I don't know him well enough to give you an answer. If you don't want it anymore, if your hearts not in it anymore, if you've had the fight punched out of you – it's a dangerous game."