

## AFC U20 Asian Cup:

Iran coach Abdi 'proud'  
despite last-eight exit

## Sports Desk

Iran head coach Hossein Abdi praised his team's performance despite a shootout defeat against Japan at the AFC U20 Asian Cup quarterfinals in Shenzhen, China. The two sides played to a 1-1 draw on Sunday but the Blue Samurai came out on top 4-3 in penalties to go through and book a place in September's U20 World Cup in Chile.

Reza Ghandipour gave Iran a fifth-minute lead, only to see his strike canceled out by Kosei Ogura on the half-hour mark. Iran missed the first two spot-kicks, with Erfan Darivsh-Aali hitting the crossbar, before Pouria Shahrabadi's effort went wide.

Goalkeeper Arsha Shakouri converted Iran's third attempt and then denied Niko Takahashi, but his heroics did little to turn the tide for Abdi's boys as the four-time champion's bid for a first title since 1976 came to an end.

"The players tried their best, and I believe we could have won this game too. Congratulations to Japan for advancing, but I'm also proud of my team," said Abdi.

Iran enjoyed an emphatic campaign in the group stage, making a clean sweep of three victories, including a 2-1 win against defending champion Uzbekistan.

"These players have a bright future ahead of them. I've worked

with them for three years, and I have no doubt they can compete with anyone. This mentality will take them far, and they will continue to improve," added the Iranian, who led this group of players to the last-16 round at the U18 World Cup in Indonesia two years ago.

Meanwhile, Abdi's opposite number, Yuzo Funakoshi, hailed his players' fighting spirit and composure after finding themselves behind early on.

"It was a tough game, as we knew Iran would be difficult opponents but we stayed focused and didn't panic after conceding early," said Funakoshi.

"We didn't try to change anything in terms of our approach. I trusted my players and even waited for the final whistle because I knew they would get the job done in the shootout. So many fans came to cheer for our team. We made our fans smile and we are very happy about that."

Japan will take on Australia on Wednesday for a place in the final showpiece.

Elsewhere on Sunday, South Korea gave away a two-goal lead in stoppage time in a six-goal thriller against Uzbekistan, but managed to come out victorious in the shootout to set a last-four date with Saudi Arabia.



## Asian Track Championships:

Teenage cyclist Mirbaqeri wins  
second men's junior medal

## Sports Desk

Iranian cycling prodigy Seyyed Mohammad Mirbaqeri took his haul to two medals at the Asian Track Championships, grabbing a bronze in the men's junior points race event in the Malaysian city of Nilai.

Mirbaqeri, 18, scored 360 points to finish behind Japanese Sota Yoshida and South Korean Junu Jang, who finished on 450

and 405 points respectively.

The Iranian's first medal in Nilai came in the junior omnium competition, where the 18-year-old tallied 540 points for the silver, finishing runner-up to Doyun Kim (600pts) of South Korea, with Sotaro Matsuuda settling for the bronze with 480 points.

It has been a glittering two weeks for the young Iranian, after he collected a gold and a silver medal

at the Asian Junior Road Cycling Championships in Phitsanulok, Thailand, earlier in February.

Mirbaqeri won the ultimate prize in the individual time trial final, thanks to a fastest time of 26:30.690 minutes, and then went on to picked up the road race silver.

The Iranian clocked 2:40:20, with Hong Kong's Hon Man Yip crossing the finish line in 2:40:17 hours for the gold.

Liverpool's Slot warns against  
complacency after City win

REUTERS - Liverpool manager Arne Slot cautioned against complacency despite his side opening up an 11-point lead in the Premier League with Sunday's 2-0 win at Manchester City. Liverpool are on 64 points from 27 matches, with second-placed Arsenal, who have played a game less, on 53 points after Saturday's 1-0 home loss to West Ham United.

"In every other league, having a lead like this would be very comfortable, except for this one," Slot told reporters on Sunday.

Every game presented the potential for a slip-up, he said, pointing to Liverpool's difficult 2-1 home win against relegation-threatened Wolverhampton

Wanderers last week.

"We are in a good position but we also know how hard it is to play against Wolves," he added. Slot expects another tough game on Wednesday against fifth-placed Newcastle United, who drew with Liverpool in December and are coming off a 4-3 win over Nottingham Forest.

"Now we play Newcastle, we played 3-3 over there, which in my opinion was also a good result ... but we also experienced how difficult that one is," he said. "We work every single day to achieve this and it is three months of very hard work to maintain this. There is no secret. We are 11 points clear but Arsenal has one game in hand."

Foolad, Shahdab  
to square off in Iranian  
Volleyball Cup final

## Sports Desk

The Iranian Volleyball Cup trophy will be on the line when Foolad Sirjan and Shahdab Yazd go head-to-head in a third major final in less than a year today in Tehran. Behrouz Ataei's Foolad came out on top in straight sets (25-15, 28-26, 25-22) against Mes Rafsanjan in Sunday's last-four clash in the Iranian capital.

Mehdi Mahdavi, mean-

while, will have a shot at a maiden trophy since taking charge at Shahdab, after his team also defeated Tabi'at 3-0 (25-21, 26-24, 25-14) earlier in the day.

Foolad and Shahdab squared off in the Iranian Super League final back last April and then met in the AVC Asian Club Championship showdown in September, with Ataei's men coming out victorious on both occasions.



Foolad Sirjan players celebrate a point during a straight-set victory over Mes Rafsanjan in the Iranian Volleyball Cup semifinal in Tehran, Iran, on Feb. 23, 2025.  
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