

Sports Desk

Iran will be the clear favorite to lift a record-breaking trophy at the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup when the flagship event gets underway in Pattaya, Thailand, on Thursday. Stepping into the competition as the reigning champion and the World Cup bronze medalist, Iran is drawn in Group C alongside two-time champion United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, and Indonesia. Iran played Russia in a couple of friendlies in Bushehr last week, suffering defeat on both occasions. Mohammad Naderi's men were beaten 5-1 in the first game and then shared the spoils with the European opponent in 3-3 draw before Russia came out on top 4-3 in the shootout. Naderi has made four changes to the squad that won a prestigious bronze medal in last year's World Cup in the UAE, with former skipper Moslem Mesigar playing no part for Team Melli after calling time on his illustrious career following a friendly outing against Belarus in January. Seyyed Mahdi Mirjalili, Abbas Rezaei, Reza Amirizadeh, Saeid Piramoun, Seyyed Ali Nazem, Mahdi Shirmohammadi, Ali Mirshekari, Movahed Mohammadpour, Mohammad-Ali Mokhtari, Mohammad-Ali Nazarzadeh, Mohammad

Ma'soumizadeh, and Seyyed Mohammad Dastan are the 12 players in the Iranian squad for the visit to Pattaya. Iran will begin its title defense against Indonesia on Friday, before taking on Afghanistan two days later at the Jomtien Beach Arena. The final round of the group fixtures will see Iran square off against the UAE on March 25. The top two of the group will progress to the last-eight of the 11-day tournament. Host Thailand is joined by Kuwait, Lebanon, and India in Group A of the competition, while Japan – also a three-time champion – is in Group B with China, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. In Group D, Bahrain – the inaugural champion in 2006 – and 2015 winner Oman will vie for a top-two finish along with Malaysia and Vietnam. The top three teams of the competition will qualify for the 2025 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup – starting May 1 in Victoria, Seychelles.



Iranian beach soccer players (white) are seen in action during a friendly game against Russia in Bushehr, southern Iran, on March 11, 2025.
● MOHAMMADREZA FALLAHI/FFIRI

AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup: Iran to chase record fourth title in Thailand



● L'ÉQUIPE

Sepahan set to sign French striker Ben Yedder

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Persian Gulf Pro League club Sepahan is set to sign former French international Wissam Ben Yedder as a free agent in the coming days, according to Iranian media. Ben Yedder, 34, who is in Isfahan for talks with the Iranian top-flight heavyweight, has been without a club since parting ways with Ligue 1 outfit Monaco last July. The prolific striker made his professional debut with Toulouse in his home country in 2010, bagging 71 goals and 21 assists in 174 appearances across six seasons with the top-tier club.

Ben Yedder joined LaLiga club Sevilla for the start of the 2016/17 campaign and went on to net 70 goals – including 10 in the UEFA Champions League – in three seasons, while providing his teammates with 22 assists. On his return to the French top flight, Ben Yedder signed for AS Monaco and registered a remarkable 118 goals and 31 assists in 201 outings to become the club's second all-time top scorer. He was the joint leading marksman of the French league in the 2019/20 season – canceled out in April due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the country – with 18 goals, alongside then-

PSG striker Kylian Mbappé. Capped 19 times for the national team, Ben Yedder has three international goals under his belt, lifting the UEFA Nations League trophy with Les Bleus in 2021. Should a deal with the Iranian club go through, Ben Yedder will be teaming up with fellow-Frenchman and former Sevilla teammate Steven Nzonzi. Sepahan is desperate to make a frontline signing after prolific winger Mahdi Limouchi suffered a knee injury during a 1-1 draw against Esteghlal Khuzestan in the Iranian league last week and could face a lengthy period on the sidelines.

Norris holds off Verstappen to win F1 opener in Australia

REUTERS – McLaren's Lando Norris swept to victory in a wet and wild Australian Grand Prix on Sunday, holding off defending champion Max Verstappen in a white-knuckle finish to a Formula One season-opener littered with crashes and safety cars. Mercedes' George Russell was third on the slippery Albert Park circuit where only 14 of the 20 cars finished in the treacherous conditions. Norris, the pre-season favourite for the drivers' title, started the Formula One

season as he finished the last at Abu Dhabi, with victory from pole. The Briton's win ended Verstappen's long run at the top of the championship standings dating back to May 2022. Norris's teammate Oscar Piastri started second on the grid but finished ninth, his dreams of becoming the first home driver to claim victory or a consolation podium ending with a skid into grass. Norris claimed his first win in Melbourne and the fifth of his career, saying it was difficult with Verstappen breath-

ing down his neck. "It was amazing. Tough race, especially with Max behind me," he added. "I was pushing, especially in the last two laps. It was a little bit stressful, not going to lie. "This time we got it right and ended on top so I'm happy." Red Bull kept Verstappen out on worn tyres hoping for a break in the rain but he was ultimately forced to pit, potentially costing him a better shot at Norris. Verstappen said it was "worth the gamble". "It was quite spicy on the slick tyres. It was alright in the end," he said. "This is where I expected to be. In the first stint we were lacking a bit of pace to the McLaren." Lewis Hamilton's debut for Ferrari proved a damp squib with the Briton finishing 10th, two places behind teammate Charles Leclerc. Seven-times world champion Hamilton complained his car was "hard to drive" and said the team had made the wrong call with the weather late on which proved costly. "It was very tricky and it went a lot worse than I thought it would go," he said.



McLaren's Lando Norris celebrates with teammates after winning the Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 16, 2025.
● TRACEY NEARMY/REUTERS



Real's Ancelotti vows no more matches with less than 72 hours' rest



● PABLO MORANO/REUTERS

REUTERS – Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said his team will no longer play matches after less than 72 hours' rest because of the physical strain it puts on players. Following Real's 2-1 comeback win at Villarreal, thanks to Kylian Mbappe's brace, the coach was concerned about his side's physical condition following Wednesday's shootout win over Atletico Madrid in the Champions League. "I think today is the last time we will play a game before 72 hours. We will never play a game with less than

that," Ancelotti told a press conference. "The team is exhausted, but that was to be expected. It's a victory that says a lot about our squad and the resources we have." Ancelotti noted that his club had contacted LaLiga about the scheduling conflicts but had yet to receive an answer. "The important thing for us was to win today, tomorrow I will watch the game but as a football fan. The result doesn't matter," Ancelotti said.