

AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup:

Iran must raise the bar in ultimate test against Japan

Sports Desk

Iranian girls will be facing their toughest challenge yet at the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup when they take on Japan in the semifinals in Hohhot, China, today.

Far from convincing in its past four games in the tournament, the two-time defending champion will have to rise to the occasion against the Japanese if it is to reach the final and, more importantly, secure a spot in the inaugural Women's World Cup in the Philippines in November.

Having finished runner-up to Vietnam in Group B, Forouzan Soleimani's team had to work hard for a 3-1 extra-time victory over the Chinese Taipei in the quarterfinals on Tuesday.

Maral Torkaman gave Iran a second-minute lead from the spot – after Mahtab Banaei was brought down in the area by goalkeeper Chu Fang-Yi – only to see her goal canceled out by Liu Wen Ling through a well-worked kick-in routine in the 18th minute.

Iranians dug deep for a second goal after the break but their efforts were either tame or off target as the contest went into extra time.

Just when the two sides looked to be heading for the shootout, Fereshteh Khosravi restored the lead for Team Melli, before goalkeeper Farzaneh Tavassoli's smart long ball from her own area found the back of the opposition net seconds before the final buzzer as Iran set a last-four date with Japan – a repeat of the previous two final showdowns in the competition.

Just as the match seemed destined for a shootout, Iran struck twice in quick succession through Fereshteh Khosravi and goalkeeper Farzaneh Tavassoli



Iranian players celebrate after a 3-1 victory over the Chinese Taipei in the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup in Hohhot, China, on May 13, 2025.

● FFIRI

li – whose brilliant long-range lob from her own area found the back of an empty net seconds before the final buzzer – to set a last-four date with Japan, re-igniting their rivalry after two consecutive final meetings in the tournament.

"We came here to win a third successive title, but we know it won't be easy as all teams are out there to give their absolute best," Soleimani said after the hard-fought victory.

When asked about her team's chances against Japan, the Iranian head coach responded: "The winning team will be the one that is more clinical and

mentally prepared and plays with greater determination. Our players will be highly motivated as they are determined to bring the joy to their fellow-Iranians."

Iran, which was on a 10-game winning run in the Asian Cup prior to this year's edition, got off to an unimpressive start to its campaign in Hohhot, edging out the Philippines 1-0 in their opener, before beating Hong Kong 3-1 to secure a knockout spot.

The embarrassment came in the final group game on Sunday, when Iran deliberately played for a goalless draw against Vietnam, tanking the match to finish

second and avoid Japan until the final. The cynical approach, however, backfired as Japan's shock defeat to Thailand later in the day forced the two powerhouses into the same half of the knockout bracket.

'Experience' driving Iran forward

While other contenders may possess more youth, Iran captain Tavassoli believes that their collective experience is an advantage in the Central Asians' quest to collect a third straight title.

"I think that in a tough situation, that experience that we have

keeps us going on and getting through," Tavassoli told the AFC official website.

The Iranian skipper has also been around long enough to notice that the gap between the top teams and others in the region has narrowed considerably in recent years, pointing to how Chinese Taipei gave them a close run as well as the other results in Hohhot.

"Maybe for the two previous editions, it was just Japan and Thailand who were our main rivals. But now, all teams are very, very strong and have developed a lot. We know that we have a lot of hard work to do if we

want to win," added Tavassoli, who is one of five players alongside Fereshteh Karimi, Nasimeh Gholami, Sara Shirbeigi and Tahereh Mahdipour in the Iranian squad at Hohhot who have been involved in all three editions of the continental showpiece.

Tavassoli is looking forward to accomplishing another feat with the national team: qualifying for the Women's World Cup later this year.

"I think it is a pity for our generation that the inaugural World Cup for women's futsal has come only now, but I am happy that I still have a chance to participate in it, and I am also very happy for the future generations who can play regularly at the Asian Cup and also the World Cup," she said. When asked whether reaching the global stage would be a perfect career swansong, Tavassoli admitted that she would be lost without futsal and instead aims to play on for as long as she can.

"Actually, futsal is my life because when I was very young, maybe six or seven years old, I played football in the streets with my cousins and with boys, and from then on I fell in love with the ball," she smiled. "And one of my concerns is how to say goodbye, because it's my life; I cannot even imagine what would happen to me after that."

"I hope that if we can win this Asian Cup and go to the World Cup, maybe the vision (future) will be different for women's football and futsal in Iran, and we can improve more."

Iran to face Oman for Asian beach handball crown

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Iran will be looking to round off an impressive Asian Men's Beach Handball Championship campaign in style when facing Oman in today's final showdown in Muscat.

Mahdi Qashaqei's men defeated Pakistan 2-0 (15-9, 16-12) in the semifinals on Tuesday to secure qualification for the 2026 IHF World Championships, while the home side came out on top in both periods (19-8, 12-10) against Jordan.

Ali Heidaeri was the Iranian

top scorer on Tuesday with 13 goals.

Vahid Arabzadeh added six for Iran, with Alireza Pirzadeh and Amin Kazemi finishing on four apiece, while Pakistan's Hussain Muzammal chipped in a game-high 15.

This was Iran's sixth straight win in Muscat.

A 2022 Asian champion on home soil, Iran had also beaten Pakistan 2-0 in their Group B opener before defeating India, Jordan, and the Philippines to progress to the knockouts as the group winner.

Heidari then scored 14 to lead Iran to a 2-0 (14-8, 32-15) win against Maldives in the quarterfinals.

Today's showdown at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex will be a repeat of the last-four battle in the previous edition two years ago, when Oman came out victorious but settled for a runner-up finish after a final loss to Qatar.

"We had set our sights on reaching the final and qualifying for the World Championships since the first day of the event here. Pakistan was a truly tough oppo-

nent and cost us all sorts of trouble in both games," Iran coach Qashaqei said after the last-four victory, adding: "The final will be a much different occasion as Oman is the host and a nine-time finalist, but we are not done yet and will definitely go out there to win the title."



Iran's Mohammad Heidarianpour (10) makes an effort during a last-four victory over Pakistan at the Asian Men's Beach Handball Championship in Muscat, Oman, on May 13, 2025.

● IRIHF



Pacers escape 19-point hole, KO Cavaliers in Game 5

REUTERS – Tyrese Haliburton scored 31 points and dished out eight assists as the Indiana Pacers eliminated the host Cleveland Cavaliers with a 114-105 decision in Game 5 of the NBA Eastern Conference semifinals on Tuesday. Pascal Siakam put up 21 points for fourth-seeded Indiana, which closed the best-of-seven series with consecutive wins.

Indiana has qualified for back-to-back trips to the Eastern finals for the first time since 2013-2014, when it lost to the Miami Heat twice. The Pacers were beaten by the eventual champion Boston Celtics last season. Donovan Mitchell posted 35 points and nine rebounds while playing with a sprained left ankle and sore calf for top-seeded Cleveland,

which blew a 19-point lead on Tuesday and lost all three home games in the series.

Elsewhere, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander finished with 31 points as the Oklahoma City Thunder rallied late for a 112-105 home win over the Denver Nuggets in Game 5 of the Western Conference semifinals on Tuesday. Down by nine with 8 1/2 minutes to go, the Thunder wound up out-

scoring the Nuggets 34-19 in the fourth quarter to take a 3-2 lead in the best-of-seven series.



Oklahoma City, which overcame a monster game from Nuggets center Nikola Jokic (44 points, 15 rebounds), would advance to the Western Conference finals with a win on Thursday in Denver.

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