

# Iranian women determined to defy odds in Asian Cup qualifiers

## Sports Desk

Despite a hampered preparation plan, the Iranian girls have set sights on a successful campaign at the upcoming AFC Women's Asian Cup qualifiers in Amman, Jordan. Iran will be joined by the host country, Lebanon, Singapore, and Bhutan in Group A of the qualifiers, where only one place in next March's finals in Australia will be up for grabs. The event in the Jordanian capital will be a first major test for new Iran coach Marzieh Ja'fari, who took over from Maryam Azmoun in May, after Team Melli had failed to win a single game in 12 outings across different competitions – suffering eight defeats, while finding the back of the net only twice in the process. Having led Bam Khatoun to 11 top-flight titles, as well as an impressive last-eight finish at the inaugural AFC Women's Champions League in March, Ja'fari will be looking to build on a decorated career at the Iranian club football, though the 42-year-old faces significant challenges in her new role. The Iranian girls' training camp in Tehran was disrupted by the 12-day

conflict between the country and Israel, while Ja'fari's players have only played in a couple of friendly victories over Iraq earlier in the month since the end of the domestic league in March.

Injury setbacks have added to Iran's problems in recent weeks, as Arefeh Seyyed-Kazemi and Haji Dabbaghi will miss the visit to Amman, with Mona Hamoudi facing a race against time to reach full fitness for the tournament.

Iran will begin its qualification campaign against Singapore on July 10, before facing Bhutan three days later at the at the King Abdullah II Stadium.

Ja'fari's girls will square off against Lebanon in their penultimate outing and hope to remain in contention with a place in the finals when going head-to-head with Jordan on July 19. Backed by the home support and familiar with Amman's seasonal heat, Jordan will be the favorite to advance from the five-team group, though history favors Iran, as a shootout victory over the Jordanians saw Team Melli celebrate a maiden qualification for the 2022 finals.



● FFIRI

## Iran freestyle squad confirmed for Budapest Ranking Series

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Iran will be represented by 12 freestyle wrestlers at the upcoming the Polyak Imre & Varga Janos Memorial – starting July 17 in Budapest, Hungary. Milad Valizadeh (57kg), Reza Mo'meni, Ebrahim Khari (61kg), Yasin Rezaei (65kg), Abbas Ebrahimzadeh, Sina Khalili (70kg), Reza Shakeri (74kg), Mahdi Yousefi, Fariborz Babaei (79kg), Ali Savadkouhi (86kg), Mobin Azimi (92kg), and Abolfazl Babalou (97kg) will vie for success across different weight classes at the final UWW Ranking Series event of the season. The 79kg contests will serve as part of Iran's World Championships trials, as either Asian champion Yousefi or Babaei – whoever gets the better result in Budapest – will face four-

time world medalist Mohammad Nokhodi for a place in September's showpiece in Zagreb. Eight freestyle wrestlers have already secured their place in the Iranian squad for the world event – including Younes Emami, who defeated Amirmohammad Yazdani in an all-Iranian 74kg final at the Ulaanbaatar Open earlier in June to remain on course for a third world medal. Kamaran Qasempour came out victorious against Abolfazl Rahmani in a domestic head-to-head in Tehran to seal the 86kg spot, while reigning world champion Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) and Ali Mo'meni (57kg) won the Takhti Cup golds to punch the Zagreb ticket, joining Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan, Rahman Amouzad, and Amirhossein

Firouzpour. Mohammadnejad-Javan will be the Iranian 61kg wrestler, thanks to a gold-winning run at February's Zagreb Open, as well as an Asian bronze in March. Olympic silver winner Amouzad will chase a second world 65kg gold after domestic rivals Rezaei and Ali Khorramdel had below-par runs at the Ranking Series season-opener in February, while Firouzpour's dominant campaigns at the Asian Championships and the Zagreb Open, convinced the Iranian coaching staff to pick him for the world 92kg contests. The Iranian 97kg slot will be decided when Ahmad Bzari – also a gold medalist in Ulaanbaatar – lock horns with Olympic bronze medalist Amir-Ali Azarpira in a domestic showdown in the coming weeks.



● LAWFIR

## 'It's not football': Maresca furious after Chelsea's two-hour weather delay

**THE GUARDIAN** – A furious Enzo Maresca suggested that the US is not fit to host the Club World Cup after Chelsea's 4-1 victory over Benfica in the last 16 was delayed for almost two hours in Charlotte because of a severe weather event. Chelsea were 1-0 up and cruising towards the last eight when play was stopped with five minutes of normal left at the Bank of America Stadium after a lightning strike in the area. The teams were ordered off the pitch by the officials had to stay warm in their respective dressing rooms before play resumed after an hour and 53 minutes. There was further frustration for Chelsea when a controversial last-minute penalty allowed Benfica to force extra-time. The Premier League side eventually pushed through to win 4-1, four hours

and 38 minutes after kick-off, but there was concern about off-pitch events a year before the men's World Cup is held in Canada, Mexico and the US. "For 85 minutes we were in control of the game," Maresca said. "After the break, the game changed completely. For me it's not football. It's already seven, eight, nine games that they suspended. I think it's a joke to be honest, it's not football. It's not for us. You cannot be inside. I struggle to understand. I can understand that for security reasons, you suspend the game. But if you suspend seven, eight games, that means that probably [this] is not the right place to do this competition." Storms have caused six games, all held in different cities, to be suspended during the tournament. Teams also had to deal with a heatwave covering much of the east and

centre of the US. "It's something that you struggle to understand. But we tried to go out, continue in the same way, knowing that it was difficult. It's not random that for 85 minutes, we didn't concede nothing. And then for five minutes, we conceded a few chances. Why? It's because it started a completely different game." Chelsea, who have lost Moises Caicedo to a one-game ban, will face Palmeiras next after taking advantage of Benfica going down to 10 men in extra-time with goals from Christopher Nkunku, Pedro Neto and Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall.



Chelsea and Benfica players walk off the pitch due to a severe weather condition during a FIFA Club World Cup last-16 game in Charlotte, NC, US, on June 28, 2025.

● CHRIS CARLSON/AP

