

Iran women draw confidence from Russia friendlies ahead of Futsal World Cup

Sports Desk

Iran women's futsal head coach Shahrzad Mozaffar said she was pleased with her team's performance during a couple of friendly games against Russia last week.

Iran, which will take part in the inaugural Women's Futsal World Cup in the Philippines in a month, played to a 2-2 draw against the European opponent on Thursday, before winning 4-3 two days later in the Russian city of Tula.

Maral Torkaman, the top scorer in May's Asian Cup, impressed again in the Iranian outfit by finding the net on four occasions – including a double in the first game.

"The camp in Russia played a vital role in assessing our strengths and weaknesses, while it also improved the players' technical and mental cohesion ahead of the World Cup," Mozaffar said.

"We had worked on the tactical aspects of our game in recent training sessions, devising various defensive, offensive, and transition strategies. We also fo-

cused intensively on improving the players' physical and mental condition. However, none of these drills had been tested in an actual match. That's why the two friendlies were crucial in putting what we had practiced into action," said Mozaffar, who returned to the Iranian job for a second spell in June, replacing Forouzan Soleimani after a below-par Asian Cup campaign in China, where the two-time champion failed to defend its title and finished third.

"It took us some time to find our rhythm in the first match, given it had been several months since our last international game. We conceded two early goals but as the match progressed, the team seized control of the game. The connection between the lines improved, and we ultimately managed to turn the match around. It showed that the team is on the right track mentally," added the Iranian coach.

"We worked on the details between the two games, focusing on Russia's playing pattern, how to defend against their

quick rotations, and exploit open spaces in our counter-attacks. Fortunately, the players executed the instructions perfectly. The result itself showed that the team learned from the first match and was able to adapt more quickly to the conditions.

"All 15 players in the squad got some playing time, which was crucial because it helped us evaluate the players' performances in different situations and against a strong opponent like Russia. These games gave us a better understanding of the players' form, which will certainly influence our final selections for the World Cup."

Iran will get its World Cup campaign underway against eight-time Copa America champion Brazil – the top team in the latest FIFA World Ranking – on November 23, before taking on Panama three days later.

Mozaffar's side will hope to be in contention for a top-two finish in Group D and a place in the round of 16, when squaring off against world No. 7 Italy on November 29.



Iranian players and coaching staff are seen ahead of a futsal friendly against Russia in Tula, Russia, on Oct. 18, 2025.

AFC Champions League Two: Sepahan, Esteghlal eager to build on domestic momentum

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League clubs Sepahan and Esteghlal will look to take inspiration from their recent domestic form when resuming AFC Champions League Two action.

Sepahan will take on Turkmenistan's Ahal FC in Group C at Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium today, with Esteghlal hosting Jordan's Al Weh-

dat in Group A at the Shahr-e Qods Stadium on Wednesday.

Sepahan will head into the home game on the back of two wins either side of goalless draw against city rival Zob Ahan in the Iranian league, having failed to win any of its first six games in the new season.

Mohammad Daneshgar and Ehsan Hajsafi were on target as Sepahan walked away with a 2-0

win at Esteghlal Khuzestan on Friday to move up to seventh in the Iranian league table.

Moharram Navidkia's men suffered a 1-0 away loss to Jordanian top-flight champion Al Hussein in their opening game in the group, which now features only three teams after India's Mohun Bagan SG was expelled from the competition for refusing to travel to Iran for the previous matchday in September.

Ahal FC will also chase a first win the Asian second-tier competition, following a 4-1 home defeat against the Jordanian side last time out.

Esteghlal, meanwhile, will step onto the pitch fresh off a hard-fought 1-0 victory over Mes Rafsanjan in Tehran on Friday.

In-form Albanian winger Jasir Asani found the net in the first half – his third goal in six league outings – as the Capital Blues celebrated only a second victory across all competitions in the new campaign – Esteghlal's first win in 58 days.

The result took Esteghlal to third in the table, easing the pressure on under-fire Portuguese coach Ricardo Sa Pinto, but his team still can't afford to drop points today after back-to-back defeats in its opening two matches.

Esteghlal began its campaign with a 7-1 humiliation against the UAE's Al Wasl in Dubai, and then fell to a 1-0 home defeat to Bahrain's Al Muharraq.

Al Wehdat is also desperate to end a two-game losing streak in the competition.

The Jordanian team was beaten 2-1 by Al Wasl at home, before the 4-0 rout at Al Muharraq in mid-September.



Esteghlal winger Jasir Asani (L) celebrates his goal during a 1-0 win against Mes Rafsanjan in Tehran, Iran, on October 17, 2025.



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'I won't get carried away': Faraji unfazed after stunning Asia's elite

Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis prodigy Benyamin Faraji insists he "won't get carried away" after pulling off stunning upsets against two top-ranked players at the Asian Team Championships earlier in October.

The men's competition was hardly one to remember for the Iranian team as before successive defeats to China, South Korea, and North Korea in the knockout phase saw the country settle for an eighth-place finish, though the result was still enough to secure a berth at next April's ITTF World Team Championships in London.

Faraji, who first made the headlines by stunning Chinese world No. 1 and reigning world champion Wang Chuqin at last year's Asian Championships, was back in giant-slaying mode in Bhubaneswar, India. The 15-year-old sensation came from behind to beat Lin Shidong – ranked second behind his compatriot in the ITTF World Ranking – 3-2 in the quarterfinals, before rallying from two games down to defeat South Korean world No. 13 An Jaehyun in the 5th-8th placement match.

Faraji came within touching distance of beating Lin at the Asian Championships last year, only to relinquish a six-point lead in the deciding game to suffer a 3-2 defeat.

"The bitter taste of that defeat always stayed with me because I had come so close to beating Lin in our previous match," Faraji told ISNA. "When we were scheduled to play China, I told the national team head coach, 'If I get to play Lin, I will beat him this time. I am fully prepared.' I was in the right mindset, not to mention I always play well against Chinese players."

On the secret behind his sensational victory, Faraji said: "I had no significant technical or tactical superiority over Lin, but, as I said, I was fully prepared mentally and that's what made the difference in the end."

"These individual wins come and go; what truly matters is the success of the team. A victory over China would have meant we beat the Olympic champion and secured a first-ever semifinal spot for Iran at the Asian Championships. Nonetheless, I am delighted with my victories over these table tennis giants, and hope I can maintain this momentum," added

the Iranian, who won a historic under-15 bronze at the 2024 World Youth Championships.

"After I defeated Lin, all eyes were on me but I kept my composure because the tournament wasn't over – we still had a match against South Korea. An is formidable opponent and a former world bronze medalist. I lost the first two games, but managed to stage a comeback and win. It was a real thriller.

Despite already being regarded as a high-profile young prospect before the tournament, Faraji said the level of attention changed dramatically after his wins.

"So many fans asked for photos and selfies. Even during training sessions, all the cameras were on me. However, I won't let any of this distract me. I won't get carried away by these victories – they only motivate me to work harder and achieve even more," Faraji said.

Reflecting on his growing dominance against Chinese players, Faraji said: "I beat most of my Chinese opponents at the junior level last year. I think I had an 8-3 record against them. A decade ago, Iranian players were quite intimidated when competing against the Chinese, but that's not the case anymore as we play with no fear against them – a level of fearlessness I don't see in players from other countries."

"Even though we couldn't win a medal in this tournament, we've learned that we are getting closing the gap on China, Japan, and South Korea. As I said before, we used to be afraid of the Chinese, but this time, I was confident that we could win a medal. Perhaps we were a bit unlucky against China. I'm sure we can beat China and Japan in a couple of years and play with much more confidence at the next Asian Games."

When asked if he is concerned that, now as a well-known player, his tactics might be predictable for his future opponents, Faraji said: "We analyze every opponent the night before the match and I come up with a specific gameplan for each player."

"You might need long serves against an opponent, while against another, serving short could be the key. I won't let anyone figure out my tactics as I have thousands of them at my disposal," Faraji asserted.