

Pragmatism the new norm: Solid defense defines Iran's World Cup approach



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Iranian fans were perhaps treated to a glimpse of what to expect from their national team at next summer's World Cup when Team Melli played to a goalless stalemate against Cape Verde on Thursday before winning the shootout to advance to the Al Ain International Cup final.

While Iran barely created a clear-cut chance throughout the 90 minutes, head coach Amir Qalenoeei praised his team's disciplined defensive display against one of Africa's World Cup representatives — a welcome sign for a side that has looked vulnerable even against Asian minnows such as North Korea, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan over the past couple of years.

"Results are the last thing that matter in friendly matches, as they are all about identifying your strengths and weaknesses. Our main objective in this match was to work on our defensive shape, and I think we managed to do that effectively," the Iranian coach said after the game.

"Many critics are just waiting for us to drop a game so they can attack us, but for me, the real victory was the significant improvement in our defensive structure."

A solid backline must be the top priority for a team of Iran's caliber when facing elite opponents at the global showpiece — just as it was under former coach Carlos Queiroz, most notably at the 2018 World Cup, where his side conceded only two goals



Iranian midfielder Saeid Ezzatollahi (6) goes up for a header during a friendly game against Cape Verde in Al Ain, UAE, on November 13, 2025.

● VARZESH3

"Iran adopted a largely reactive approach, opting to give up possession and play on the break," former Iran international center-back Mohammad Nosrati said of Thursday's match.

"The players sat deep and ceded space as part of the new strategy, though I believe Cape Verde's superior ball retention also influenced the flow of the game. For most of the match, the African side controlled the tempo and dictated possession, but still struggled to create meaningful chances," Nosrati added.

The Iranian team that executed this same style so effectively under Queiroz was younger and fitter, but the current squad is aging and may lack the sharpness required for three high-intensity group-stage matches at the World Cup. That may leave Qalenoeei with no choice but to inject fresh blood into his roster. The Iranian Pro League will continue without pause over the next four months, providing an excellent opportunity to assess a new generation of players ahead of the next international break in March.

Iran's transformation for the World Cup is underway, and December's draw will play a pivotal role in shaping the team's approach to the finals.

For now, what is clear is that the technical staff has set aside past idealism and is moving decisively toward pragmatism.

against Morocco, Spain, and Portugal.

Long associated with an attacking style during his club career, Qalenoeei — who vowed to change Iran's "decade-long mindset" under his Portuguese predecessor upon taking charge in 2023 — now appears to have come to terms with the realities of top-tier international football.

New Italian assistant Antonio Gagliardi, who was part of Roberto Mancini's coaching staff during Italy's Euro 2020 triumph, sat on Iran's bench for the first time against Cape Verde, and he seems to have quickly contributed to Iran's tactical shift.

Instead of seeking high possession and applying constant

pressure, Iran ceded the ball to their African opponents and, by closing down spaces, effectively controlled the match from deeper positions, looking to create chances through swift counter-attacks.

It was a game plan that served the national team well and now appears to be the new norm for Team Melli, with the World Cup

less than seven months away.

This tactical shift also meant a departure from Qalenoeei's usual demand for his fullbacks to constantly join the attack. Their roles changed; the primary responsibility of the wingers and defensive midfielders was now to provide cover and maintain defensive solidity.

Riyadh 2025 Islamic Solidarity Games: Iranians bag four muaythai silvers



Iran's Fereshteh Hassanzadeh is seen in action in the women's muaythai 45-50kg category at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 14, 2025.

● IRNA

Sports Desk

On the seventh day of the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Iranians collected four silver medals in muaythai on Friday.

A third silver medal for Iranian women came in the 60-65kg category, where Fereshteh Hosseinkhani fell 30-27 to Türkiye's Bediha Tacyildiz Sahin in the final.

In the men's competition,

Iran's Majid Hashembeigi missed out on victory in his last international outing, suffering a 30-26 setback against Iraq's Mustafa Al-Tekreeti in the 75-80kg final.

Elsewhere in the Games on Thursday, the Iranian men's handball team got off to a losing start, as Rafael Guijosa's side was beaten 39-23 by Asian powerhouse Qatar in Group A.

Ahmad Madadi and Abdulraz-

zaq Murad topped the scoring chart for Qatar with six goals apiece, while Reza Shojaei also scored six times for Iran. Iran will resume action against the Maldives today, before taking on the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday.

In the women's division, however, Iran bounced back from a first-day defeat against Türkiye to beat Guinea 23-21 in Group A on Saturday, securing a place in the semifinals.

Asia Oceania Wheelchair Basketball Championships: Iran settles for men's bronze, misses out on world berth

Sports Desk

Iranian men's wheelchair basketball team defeated South Korea 57-44 to settle for a third-place finish at the IWBF Asia Oceania Championships in Bangkok, Thailand.

Mahdi Abbasi contributed with 18 points and 14 rebounds for Iran, followed by Amirreza Ahmadi, who finished on 14 points, while South Korean Seung Hyun Cho chipped in a game-high 19 points.

The bronze medal secured Iran's place at the 2026 Asian Para Games, but it was not enough for Reza Soltani's men to qualify for next year's World Championships, as the Ottawa Para Games was awarded only to the two finalists, Australia and Japan.

Runner-up to Australia in the previous edition, Iran began its campaign with victory over China in the Division A league phase,



● IWBF

but suffered back-to-back defeats against Japan and Australia, before bouncing back to beat South Korea and Thailand for a place in the quarterfinals.

A second victory over China saw Iran progress to the semifinals, where a second setback against

Japan ended the team's bid for a first Asian crown in 20 years.

In the women's competition, Iran finished sixth — courtesy of victories over Laos, the Philippines, and India, plus losses to Cambodia and the host — to qualify for the Asian Para Games.

Iranian women to play Uzbekistan in friendly double-header

Sports Desk

Iranian women's national team will face Uzbekistan in a friendly double-header in Tashkent at the upcoming international break,

the Iranian Football Federation announced on Saturday.

The two sides will square off on November 29, before meeting again three days later.

The games will be part of both

side's preparation for next year's AFC Women's Asia Cup, starting March 1 in Australia.

Iran is joined by the host country, South Korea, and the Philippines in Group A of the competition.