

Head coach Mozaffar urges new vision for Iranian women's futsal

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Shahrzad Mozaffar has called for the country's women's futsal to "surpass Asian standards" and adopt an international vision after her team suffered a group-stage exit at the inaugural World Cup in the Philippines.

Iran was beaten by Brazil (4-1) and Italy (3-1), either side of a 6-2 win against Panama, to finish third in Group D last week and miss out on a place in the quarterfinals.

Mozaffar said she was still pleased that her players showed fighting spirit against two global powerhouses, despite the team's limited preparation for the event. "The players performed beyond expectations. They gave their all, fought fiercely, and showed that Iranian women's futsal has immense potential," Mozaffar told the official website of the Iranian Football Federation.

"Brazil is an exceptional team, boasting the best generation of futsal players in the world right now. Their level of coordination and individual quality is extraordinary. As the tournament progressed and we observed Brazil's results against other teams, it became even more evident what kind of team we played against and how brilliant our performance was."

"The significant point about Italy is that at least half of its players are of Brazilian origin. Therefore, it is completely natural for their playing style and quality to resemble Brazil's. The reality is



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that we played against the first- and second-best versions of Brazil, which is a major challenge for any team."

"We lost control of the game for a few minutes in the second half against Italy, and that's precisely when we gave away the result, despite all statistics – including possession and chances created – being even at fulltime."

"I think international experience made the difference between

the two sides. Italy has played against the world's top-tier teams for years and has high tactical maturity, which plays a pivotal role in such situations."

Mozaffar replaced former coach Forouzan Soleimani after a mediocre campaign at May's Asian Cup, where the two-time champion finished third – a result that eventually placed Iran in a tougher World Cup group compared to Asian finalists Ja-

pan and Thailand.

"We would have definitely advanced to the knockout phase if we had been placed in another group. Nevertheless, this great experience of playing against two global heavyweights is a valuable asset for us – one that we can build on for the future," she added.

"Our first training camp began in early July, and we had only about four and a half months to prepare

for the tournament – and even that preparation was hampered for various reasons."

"The team was not in good mental form after the Asian Cup, so our primary goal was to rebuild the players' confidence and then address major tactical issues," said Mozaffar, who guided Iran to the Asian title in 2018 during her previous spell in charge of the national team.

"We had to completely change

the team's defensive structure. The team used to play zonal defense, which is not effective at World Cup level, as modern futsal relies heavily on individual marking."

"Implementing the new defensive system requires high physical intensity and years of practice, but the players executed it remarkably well in such a short time."

"We had four months to bring the players to peak readiness in defense, attack, mentality, and physicality. Our effort was to reach a world standard in all aspects within this short period, and I think the progress was completely tangible. We built a squad that stood toe-to-toe with the world's best, from a team that had struggled against the Philippines and China and lost to Japan in the Asian Cup."

Mozaffar believes a shift in vision is essential for the future of women's futsal in Iran if the country hopes to achieve global success.

"Now that the World Cup has been initiated, we must change our outlook and move beyond continental standards, measuring ourselves against the world's top teams. We need consistent exposure at the highest levels of world futsal, along with top-tier preparation and training camps. "For the next World Cup, precise planning must start today. We need to build a new generation, inject fresh blood, and implement structured programs. That's how a last-four finish – and even stepping onto the podium – will become achievable."

Russian great Sadulaev set to join Iranian FS Premier League: Report

Sports Desk

Russian wrestling sensation Abdurashid Sadulaev is in advanced talks to join Bank Shahr in the Iran Freestyle Premier League, according to the sports news website Varzesh3. Should the deal be finalized, the 29-year-old will represent Bank Shahr in the 97kg weight class in the league semifinals against Khaybar Khorramabad.

Nicknamed "The Russian Tank," six-time world champion Sadulaev won Olympic gold medals at Rio 2016 and Tokyo 2020, but missed the chance to pursue a third title in Paris last year.

He was barred from competing in the European Olympic qualifiers after United World Wrestling (UWW) found new information regarding his support for the Russia-Ukraine war, deeming him ineligible to represent the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as an individual neutral athlete.

With Bank Shahr and Esteghlal Juybar dominating the preliminary phase of this season's Iranian league, a third meeting between the two star-studded clubs is on the cards in the final – where Iranian fans could be treated to a highly anticipated showdown between Sadulaev and Iran's 10-time world and Olympic medalist Hassan Yazdani.

Yazdani, who has been sidelined with a lengthy shoulder injury since his 86kg final defeat at last year's Paris Olympics, joined Esteghlal in early November but was not part of the 10-man roster when his team suffered a 7-3 loss to Bank Shahr in Group B last Friday.

Esteghlal had edged Bank Shahr 5-5 (42-41) in the reverse fixture earlier in the season. Sadulaev was also ruled out of September's World Championships in Zagreb after Croatia denied him an entry visa – the third major event he missed following Paris 2024 and April's European Championships.

The last time Sadulaev faced an Iranian opponent, he staged a dramatic comeback with four seconds remaining to defeat two-time world champion Kamran Qasempour 5-3 in the semifinals en route to the 92kg gold at the 2024 World Championships in Tirana, Albania.

● UWW

Iran suffers second defeat against Uzbekistan in friendly double-header



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The Iranian women's national football team fell to a second defeat against Uzbekistan in four days, losing 1-0 in a friendly match in Tashkent on Tuesday. Marziyeh Jafari's side had previously suffered a 2-0 loss to the Central Asian side on Saturday. The matches were part of both teams' preparation for next year's AFC Women's Asia Cup, which begins on March 1 in Australia. Iran will face Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines in a tough Group A.

"These two games gave us the chance to see more players in real match conditions. Some of the girls really impressed me and made me reconsider certain positions. The players have reached

a good level of confidence, which is a major boost for the team because we can't afford to rely on a limited group of players," Jafari said after Tuesday's defeat. Iran had to play both games without star players Zahra Qanbari, Negin Zandi, and first-choice goalkeeper Zahra Khajavi – all absent from the trip to the Uzbek capital for various reasons.

"I would have appreciated having a few more players available so we had more options for arranging the lineup, but even with this group, we put in a decent performance – especially in the second game, which we dominated throughout the 90 minutes. I'm sure with a bit more coordination among the players and an established striker up front, we definitely could have won the match," added the Asian women's

coach of the year.

"These games helped clarify the selection pathway for the squad heading to Australia. I've now seen almost every player in competitive action, and if I need to make changes to the lineup in the future, I have a much clearer and more detailed understanding of each individual."

Iran, which was knocked out in the group stage on its Asian Cup debut in 2022, will begin its campaign in Australia against South Korea – runner-up to China in the previous edition – in Gold Coast on March 2. Team Melli will then face the formidable host nation – a 2023 World Cup semifinalist – on March 5, before concluding the group phase against the Philippines, a 2022 Asian Cup semifinalist, three days later.