

Asian Men's Handball Championship: Iran routs Australia to revive main-round hopes

Sports Desk

Iran bounced back from a first-day setback against Saudi Arabia to rout Australia 39-13 in Group D of the Asian Men's Handball Championship in Kuwait on Saturday. Mehran Rahnama topped the scoring chart 10 goals, with Ali Heidarian and Milad Qalandari contributing with eight and six goals, respectively, while Pouya Norouzinejad was named the Man of the Match. Caleb Gahan was Australia's top scorer with seven goals. The victory lifted Iran to second in the group table on two points, thanks to a superior goal differ-

ence over Japan, ahead of the winner-takes-all meeting between the two sides today. The game will be a rematch of the of main-round encounter at the previous edition, which two-time champion Japan won 25-23 before ultimately falling to Qatar in the final. Four-time bronze medalist Saudi Arabia, which had beaten Iran 24-22 in their opener on Thursday, defeated Japan 27-24 later on Saturday to seal qualification for the next round ahead of today's dead-rubber against Australia. The top two teams from each of the four groups will advance to the main round, where they

will be divided into two groups of four. Elsewhere, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates maintained their perfect run with a second successive victory in Group C to book a place in the main round. The host country eased to a 39-25 win against Hong Kong to sit atop the group table, while the UAE hammered India 43-21. The top spot in the group will be at stake when Kuwait and the UAE go head-to-head today. The 22nd edition of the flagship continental event also serves as the World Championship qualifiers, with the four semifinalists punching tickets for the 2027 showpiece in Germany.



● IRIHF

Golmohammadi departs as Foolad head coach



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

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Yahya Golmohammadi has left his role as head coach of Foolad Khuzestan "by mutual agreement," the Persian Gulf Pro League club announced on Saturday. The decision followed Foolad's goalless draw at home against fifth-placed Chadormalou on Friday, as the Iranian top flight resumed after the mid-season break. The result left Foolad 11th in the 16-team table with 17 points from 16 matches – only three wins so far – and four points above the relegation zone. The move surprised many Iranian football fans, coming after a busy transfer window in which Foolad signed Esteghlal full-back Ramin Rezaeian on loan, Persepolis winger Farshad Ahmadzadeh, and Brazilian striker Matheus Costa from Mes Rafsanjan. A three-time domestic league champion as Persepolis manager, Golmohammadi took over at Foolad at the start of last season after the club had narrowly avoided relegation on the final day of the 2023/24 campaign. He led them to an impressive fourth-place finish. Hamid Motahari, a number two to Golmohammadi on Foolad bench, is expected to take charge as the caretaker manager for the remainder of the season, starting with a visit to Malavan on Thursday.

Sepahan stumbles against Malavan

Meanwhile, league leader Sepahan was held to a frustrating goalless draw by Malavan at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium in Isfahan on Saturday. The visitors played most of the second half with 10 men after Malavan midfielder Gholamreza Sabet-Imani was shown a straight red card for a heavy challenge on Sepahan striker Kaveh Rezaei five minutes after halftime. Mohammad Daneshgar thought he had given Sepahan the lead in the 66th minute, but his goal was disallowed by VAR after Milad Zakipour was judged to have handled the ball in the buildup. Sepahan stays top with 31 points, three clear of second-placed Persepolis ahead of the Tehran Reds' visit to Fajr Sepasi on Sunday. In other matches, bottom-side Mes Rafsanjan staged a dramatic comeback to beat Khaybar 2-1. After falling behind to Mohsen Sefid-Ghoqaei's 56th-minute opener, Mes struck twice in four minutes late in the game through Alireza Afkham and Farnam Arab to secure only its second win of the season. Paykan made a strong start to the second half of the campaign, defeating Zob Ahan 2-0 at home thanks to late goals from Hojjat Ahmadi and Farid Amir. The win lifts Paykan to 10th with 18 points, while Zob Ahan remains in 14th on 14.

Greco-Roman coach Bana aiming to end Azerbaijan's Olympic gold drought

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Newly appointed head coach Mohammad Bana has set his sights on ending Azerbaijan's long wait for an Olympic gold medal after taking charge of the wrestling powerhouse's Greco-Roman national team. Azerbaijan last claimed an Olympic Greco-Roman gold through Farid Mansurov in the 66kg weight class at Athens 2004. Bana was officially unveiled by the Azerbaijan Wrestling Federation last week, marking his return to a major coaching role since parting ways with Iran's national team following a below-par campaign at the 2022 World Championships in Belgrade, where his 10-man squad won two silver medals and one bronze, finishing fourth in the team standings. The federation highlighted Bana's distinguished record in its announcement: "Under Bana's leadership, the Iranian national team won three gold medals at the London 2012 Olympic Games – a record in Iranian wrestling. At Tokyo 2020, the same team secured one gold and one bronze. In 2011, Bana was named the world's best coach by United World Wrestling." It added, "He is regarded as one of the most successful and respected head coaches in Greco-Roman wrestling history. Bana's coaching philosophy is built on systematic training, discipline, tactical thinking, and psychological resilience." The 67-year-old will be joined in Azerbaijan by fellow Iranian coaches Sabah Shariati, Bahrouz Hazratipur, and Ra-

soul Chazini.

"I am very happy to have been selected as head coach of the Azerbaijan national team," Bana said after signing his contract. "This is a very strong team that has consistently won medals on the world stage. The responsibility is significant, but together with our selected staff, we are working with great determination. I hope we can not only maintain the high level of Azerbaijani wrestling but also elevate it further. There is a medal that has been elusive for 23 years. Now, our aim is to achieve even greater success by winning an Olympic gold. God willing, through our planned programs, the qual-

ity of wrestling will improve day by day." He outlined the team's clear objective: "In our discussions with the leadership of the Azerbaijan Wrestling Federation, our main goal has been clearly defined – to focus entirely on winning Olympic gold. We face two major challenges ahead, and we intend to overcome them. Our priority is to follow a correct and effective path over the remaining two years leading to the Games. "This journey will bring various accomplishments, but ultimately, we want to reach Olympic gold. I am proud to be here and to shoulder this great responsibility."



Iranian coach Mohammad Bana (l.) poses for a photo after taking charge of the Azerbaijani Greco-Roman national team in Baku, Azerbaijan, on January 12, 2025.
● AWF

Iran's Pakdaman stands 26th in FIE World Rankings

Sports Desk



● ISNA

Iranian saber captain Ali Pakdaman is ranked 26th in the latest FIE World Rankings, released by the International Fencing Federation on Sunday. The 35-year-old, who holds 67,000 ranking points, last competed at the FIE Grand Prix event in Tunis earlier this month, where he fell in the round of 32 after a narrow 15-14 loss to Hungary's fifth-seed Krisztian Rabb.

Meanwhile, fellow Iranian Mohammad Fotouhi dropped to 123rd in the men's saber rankings, two places ahead of compatriot Nima Zahedi, who was eliminated in the pool stage in Tunis. Georgian fencer Sandro Bazadze leads the world rankings with 224,000 points, tied with France's Jean-Philippe Patrice in second. Another French fencer, Sebastien Patrice, who beat Rabb 15-11 in the Tunis final, is third with 178,000 points.