

Asian Men's Handball Championship: Iran misses out on main round after last-gasp heartbreak against Japan



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Iran squandered a commanding second-half lead to suffer a last-gasp 30-29 defeat against Japan in Group D on Monday, failing to book a place in the main-round group phase at the Asian Men's Handball Championship in Sabah Al-Salem, Kuwait.

Needing only a draw to advance as the group runner-up behind Saudi Arabia, Iran led 15-13 at halftime and stretched its advantage to five goals with 10 minutes remaining. Japan, however, mounted a stunning late comeback, with Daisuke Tanaka scoring a winner at the death to seal victory for the two-time champion.

Pouya Norouzinejad believed he had equalized for Iran with a last-ditch effort from the halfway line, but his goal

was disallowed after officials ruled the ball had crossed the goal line after the final buzzer. The result sent Japan through to the next round alongside Saudi Arabia, where eight teams will be split into two groups.

Mohammadreza Oraei scored a game-high 10 goals for Iran but found little consolation in being named Man of the Match. Norouzinejad and Mehran Rahnama added eight and four goals, respectively, while Yuga Enomoto led Japan with eight.

Iran will now contest the Martyr Fahad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Cup for 9th-15th places, beginning against India in Group IV on Thursday.

Iran opened the tournament with a 24-22 loss to four-time bronze medalist Saudi Arabia, but rebounded to hammer Australia 39-13 and enter

Monday's match ahead of Japan on goal difference.

The defeat marks another recent setback for Iran, coming just two months after Spanish head coach Rafael Guijosa's side was eliminated in the group stage of November's Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh.

In other Group D action, Saudi Arabia maintained its perfect record with a 42-24 win over Australia in a dead rubber for both sides.

Elsewhere, host nation Kuwait defeated the United Arab Emirates 27-22 to finish atop Group C with three wins from three, while Hong Kong beat India 36-30 to finish third.

The 22nd edition of the flagship continental event also serves as a qualifier for the 2027 World Championship in Germany, with the four semi-finalists securing berths.

Sepahan closing in on former winger Mohebbi

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Persian Gulf Pro League club Sepahan is closing in on a deal to re-sign winger Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi from Emirati top-flight side Ittihad Kalba FC.

Sepahan is reportedly willing to pay \$1 million to bring back its former player, who scored nine goals and provided 10 assists in 37 appearances across all competitions for the Isfahan-based outfit last season before departing for the UAE's ADNOC Pro League in August.

That successful campaign earned the 25-year-old Iranian his international debut in a dead rubber against Qatar at the World Cup qualifiers in June. He later netted his first goal and assist for Team Melli in a 3-0 victory over North Korea.

Mohebbi, however, has struggled to make an impact in the UAE, failing to register a goal or assist in nine appearances while also missing seven games due to injury and suspension.

The left-footed winger last featured in Kalba's 3-1 away defeat to Sharjah FC on Sun-

day, where he was substituted at halftime.

Should the deal be finalized in the coming days, it would provide a major boost for Sepahan head coach Moharram Navidkia, who must cope without top scorer Mohammad Askari for the rest of the season after the young striker suffered a torn ligament while on duty with Iran at the U23 Asian Cup earlier this month.

The future of French striker Enzo Crivelli also remains in doubt after he left Iran this week amid regional tensions

and recent domestic unrest. With the World Cup finals less than five months away, a return to the Iranian league could enhance Mohebbi's chances of securing a place in the national team squad for the showpiece event in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.

Sepahan currently leads the Iranian top flight with 31 points from 16 games – three points clear of Tehran archrivals Esteghlal and Persepolis – ahead of Friday's crucial visit to the Capital Reds in the 'Iranian Clasico'.



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Iran remains 20th in FIFA Men's World Ranking, second in Asia



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Iran has retained 20th place in the first FIFA Men's World Ranking of the year, released by world football's governing body on Monday. Team Melli collected 1617.02 points to stay second among AFC member states, behind Japan, which fell one spot to 19th with 1650.12 points. Iran last played in November's Al Ain International Cup, where Amir Qalenoie's side defeated Cape Verde on penalties after a goalless draw, but lost the final to familiar rival Uzbekistan in a similar fashion. Following Japan and Iran in the AFC

standings are South Korea (22nd), Australia (27th), Uzbekistan (52nd), and Qatar (56th). The top seven in the global ranking

remained unchanged, with European powerhouse Spain followed by reigning world champion Argentina, France, England, Brazil, Portugal, and the Netherlands. Morocco rose to eighth despite a final defeat to Senegal in Sunday's Africa Cup of Nations on home soil. Belgium and Germany round out the top 10. Meanwhile, the Iranian women's national team climbed two places to 68th in the FIFA Women's Ranking with 1382.102 points.

Marziyeh Jafari's side, which suffered two friendly defeats against Uzbekistan in the previous international break, ranks 13th in Asia. Japan, North Korea, Australia, China, South Korea, Vietnam, Chinese Taipei, the Philippines, Uzbekistan, Thailand, Myanmar, and India all stand above Iran.

Iran is preparing for the upcoming AFC Women's Asian Cup, which begins on March 1 in Australia. Making only its second appearance at the finals, Iran will open its Group A campaign against South Korea – runner-up to China in the 2022 edition – on March 2. It will then face the formidable host nation Australia, a semifinalist at the 2023 Women's World Cup, in Gold Coast three days later.

Iran will conclude the group stage against the Philippines, a semifinalist in the previous edition, on March 8.

Iranian Basketball Super League: Shahrdari beats Naft 94-87 to move atop the table

Sports Desk

Defending champion Shahrdari Gorgan secured a 94-87 away victory over Naft Abadan in the Iranian Basketball Super League on Monday.

A 12th win in 15 games

moved Shahrdari to the

top of the tight regular-season standings, tying them on 27 points with second-placed Esteghlal and Kaley Mazandaran.

The latest round of fixtures saw Esteghlal beat bottom-club host Petro Novin Mahshahr 79-74,

while Kaley prevailed 90-80 in a visit to Mahgol Alborz.

Elsewhere, Naft Zagros Jonoubi emerged victorious 84-79 at Pas Kurdestan, and Golnour defeated Raad Padafand Havaei 74-70 in the battle of the two Isfahan-based clubs.



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