

Azmoun eyes long-awaited return with World Cup in sight

Sports Desk

Iranian international Sardar Azmoun is set to make his long-awaited return from injury this week when his Shabab Al Ahli side travel to face Al Ahli Saudi FC in a crunch AFC Champions League Elite fixture on Monday.

After more than 130 days on the sidelines, the prolific striker has fully recovered from ankle surgery — Azmoun's second injury setback of the season after he missed the early stages of the campaign with a knee problem, limiting his contribution to just one goal in three appearances across all competitions. Azmoun was last in action during a 1-0 victory over Al Ittihad Club in the Asian elite club competition last September, and Portuguese head coach Paulo Sousa will hope the Irani-

an's return against another Saudi opponent can help Shabab Al Ahli secure a place in the knockout stage.

The Emirati champions sit sixth in the West Zone's 12-team table with 11 points — three clear of Qatari sides Al Duhail SC and Al Sadd SC, who occupy seventh and eighth — and a draw would be enough to send Shabab Al Ahli through to the last 16.

Azmoun's return would also provide a major boost for national team head coach Amir Qalenoee.

With the World Cup finals less than four months away, Qalenoee appears to have settled much of his squad for the tournament in North America, and the frontline partnership between Azmoun and Mahdi Taremi is expected to lead the line as Team Melli target a first-ever knockout-stage appearance at

the seventh attempt on football's biggest stage. While Taremi has been enjoying a strong season in the Greek

Super League with Olympiacos, Azmoun's trajectory has been far more turbulent. The 29-year-old will be eager to rediscover his sharpness ahead of March's international window. The coming month could prove decisive. With five crucial club fixtures before the March friendlies, Azmoun has an opportunity to rebuild match fitness and firmly stake his claim for a national team recall.

Azmoun, who has scored an impressive 57 goals in 91 caps, last featured for Team Melli in

a home draw against Uzbekistan in World Cup qualifiers 11 months ago. The former AS Roma

and FC Zenit Saint Petersburg striker recently made a cameo appearance for Shabab Al Ahli's under-23 side against Sharjah, delivering a promising display. He was also available for selection against Al Hilal last week, though Sousa ultimately left him out of the squad.

For Azmoun, the objective is clear: regain form, reclaim his place in the starting XI for club and country, and look ahead to what could be the third World Cup campaign of his career.



● shababalahli.ae



Younes Emami (red) will compete in the freestyle 74kg contest at the Muhamet Malo Ranking Series event in Tirana. ● IAWFIR

Iran to send freestyle trio to Muhamet Malo tournament

Sports Desk

Iran will be represented by three wrestlers in the freestyle competition at the upcoming Muhamet Malo tournament, which is set to begin on February 25 in Tirana, the Iranian Wrestling Federation confirmed on Friday.

The second Ranking Series event of the international season will also serve as the next stage of Iran's selection process for major events in 2026, including the World Championships in Manama and the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games later in the summer.

Two-time world bronze medalist Younes Emami will compete in the 74kg division in the Albanian capital as he targets a third

world medal in Manama. Emami narrowly missed the podium at last year's World Championships in Zagreb, falling to Slovakia's Tajmuraz Salkazanov in the bronze-medal bout.

Joining Emami in Tirana will be Mohammad Nokhodi, a five-time world medalist, including two silver medals. Nokhodi will contest the 79kg category, marking his first international appearance since claiming bronze in Zagreb last September.

In the 92kg division, Amirhossein Firouzpour will aim to build on an impressive 2025 campaign. The two-time world U23 champion secured Asian gold in Amman last year before earning a bronze medal on his senior World Championships debut. However, he is

likely to face stiff competition from reigning world silver medalist Amanula Gadzhimagomedov, who is entered as a neutral athlete and is considered a strong contender for the title.

Iranian Olympic bronze medalist Amirali Azarpira, who won world silver and Islamic Solidarity Games gold last year, was initially listed in the 97kg entries for the Muhamet Malo event. The Iranian coaching staff, however, opted to reserve him for the Asian Championships in April.

Two-time world silver medalist Amirmohammad Yazdani (74kg) and reigning world U23 champion Mohammad-Mobin Azimi (92kg) have also secured places in Iran's squad for the Asian Championships in Bishkek.

Tunis Junior African Cup:

Banaeian claims gold as Iran bags two medals on Day 1

Sports Desk

Iranian judokas secured two medals — including a gold in the men's +100kg division — on the opening day of the Tunis Junior African Cup in Tunis on Friday.

Mohammadpouria Banaeian clinched the superheavyweight title with a victory over Egypt's Abdalla Abdalla in the final.

The Iranian began his campaign with a win against Serbia's Petar Novakovic, before defeating home favorite Adem Kouki in the semifinals to book his place in the gold-medal bout.

Compatriot Ali Nikseresht had to settle for silver in the men's

-100kg category after falling to Belarus' Yauheni Morau in the final. After receiving a first-round bye, Nikseresht opened his campaign with a victory

over Tunisia's Adem Landolsi to top Pool A and advance to the semifinals, where he overcame American Caedmon Haddad. The silver medal

marked a significant

improvement for Nikseresht compared to his outing at last month's African Open Casablanca, where he exited in the second round of the pool stage.

Banaeian and Nikseresht will have another opportunity to add to their medal haul when they compete in the senior event later in Tunis. They will be joined by Elyas Parhizgar and Amirabbas Choopan, while Sobhan Hakimi is set to feature in the cadet competition.

The one-day junior event brought together 125 competitors from 19 countries across various men's and women's weight divisions.



Iranian judokas Mohammadpouria Banaeian (R) and Ali Nikseresht won gold and silver, respectively, on Day 1 of the Tunis Junior African Cup. ● IRIJF

2026 Karate One-Youth League:

Iranians impress with three medals in Fujairah

Sports Desk

Iran's rising karate talents claimed three medals, including one gold, on the second day of action at the opening Karate One Youth League event of the season in Fujairah.

Ghazal Fathi Cheshmeh led the charge on Friday, capturing gold in the junior female kumite -48kg division. She edged past Egypt's Noor Abdelaziz 1-0 in a tightly contested final, with a single clean score proving decisive. In the junior male -76kg category, Arash Razani bounced back from a third-round 2-0 defeat to Uzbekistan's Asilbek Kobilov. Razani progressed through



Iran's Ghazal Fat'hi Cheshmeh (2nd L) poses with her junior kumite -48kg gold medal at the Karate One-Youth League event in Fujairah, UAE, on February 13, 2026. ● IKF

the repechage rounds with victories over opponents from Armenia and Türkiye before sealing a 4-0 win against Italy's Nicola Esposito to secure a bronze medal.

Compatriots Amirsam Zeinali and Amirreza

Kaki also competed in the same division but were eliminated in the pool phase.

Iran's second bronze came in the men's individual kata competition through Arash Alhaki. Alhaki advanced with victories over compet-

itors from Egypt, Italy, Hong Kong, Portugal, and Saudi Arabia before falling 4-1 to Japan's Takamasa Yatoji. He concluded his campaign with a 3-2 triumph against Germany's Haruaki Kuniyasu to clinch bronze.