

FIFA World Cup:

'Written in history': Iran coach Qalenoee hails hard-fought point against Belgium

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee is full of praise for his players after Team Melli produced a resilient performance to hold Belgium to a goalless stalemate at the FIFA World Cup in Los Angeles on Sunday.

The result took both sides' tally to two points in Group G, keeping Iran well in contention for a maiden knockout-stage spot at the global showpiece ahead of Friday's game against Egypt. The African side came from behind to beat New Zealand 3-1 later on Sunday to move atop the group standings with four points.

Alireza Beiranvand delivered a goalkeeping masterclass to spearhead a solid display by Iran, who lined up with an unprecedented five-man backline. The pinnacle of his man-of-the-match performance came in the 58th minute, when he pulled off a heroic save to keep out Maxim de Cuyper's close-range effort, which is already being tipped as one of the saves of the tournament.

Iranian center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh, who was on the receiving end of severe criticism after a shaky performance in the 2-2 draw against New Zealand, also deserves credit for his composed display, which was reflected in the Opta statistics after the game. Despite dominating possession throughout the match, Belgium was fortunate not to fall behind in the 25th minute after Iranian striker Mahdi Taremi converted an inventive, well-worked set



Iranian goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand saves a close-range effort from Belgium's Maxim de Cuyper (5) during a Group G match at the FIFA World Cup in Los Angeles, California, US, on June 21, 2026. ● REUTERS

piece, only for VAR to rule that he had been in an offside position before finding the net.

The Belgians also had Thibaut Courtois to thank for keeping them level, as the Real Madrid goalkeeper denied Hossein Kan'anizadegan and Taremi in either half.

The pivotal moment of the contest at SoFi Stadium came in the 66th minute, when Belgian defender Nathan Ngoy was sent off for denying Taremi a clear goalscoring opportunity. Iran enjoyed more possession thereafter and found the courage to push forward, with Qalenoee making a couple of attacking substitutions

in pursuit of what would have been a dramatic victory.

The game still finished goalless as Iran avoided defeat in back-to-back World Cup matches for the first time in the history of the tournament, while the European Red Devils – ranked 10th in the FIFA rankings – were left frustrated by another draw.

'Great achievement'

Qalenoee believes Iran's unbeaten start will be talked about for years to come, having arrived at the tournament after a politically charged build-up that was hampered by extraordinary circumstances.

Iran's World Cup participation was in doubt because of the country's war with co-hosts United States, while the team had several pre-tournament friendlies cancelled by prospective opponents.

"I want to go back six months," the Iranian said after the game. "We were in war conditions for six months; we didn't have our league operating."

"Many teams cancelled the games they would play against us. We came to the World Cup in the worst conditions possible."

Iranian players have continued to face disruption at the World Cup. They are based in Mexico and, for

their games on U.S. soil, must fly in a day before each match and leave on the same day because of visa restrictions.

A win against Egypt would see Iran reach the knockout stage, while even a draw could be enough to progress as one of the best third-placed teams. However, Qalenoee says his players have already achieved something remarkable given the circumstances.

"The players who came to this World Cup in this condition need to be congratulated," he added.

"We had the opportunity to win [against Belgium], but I think this is a great achievement."

"We have played two World Cup matches under these conditions – we had less than 16 hours to train before the game."

"This will be written in the history of our football and future generations will talk about what we have achieved."

Qalenoee was also grateful to "all the Iranians, with different attitudes regarding politics, who supported us and gave us energy." The Iranian head coach, however, was disappointed by the limited impact of his substitutions after Belgium went down to 10 men, although he acknowledged that Iran was "lucky not to lose" against such strong opposition.

"I don't think any team in the world could have coped with such conditions and played like this – the conditions have been extremely hard for us," he said.

"Our players are really giving everything; they are playing with their hearts," added Qalenoee,

who also reserved special praise for Beiranvand for keeping Iran in the contest.

"Tomorrow we need to focus on the game with Egypt. Egypt are a very strong team and have very good players. Our first and foremost aim is to reach the next round," said the manager.

Beiranvand, meanwhile, said the result was down to the teamwork shown by the entire squad and coaching staff.

"The game was very tough. After all, the Belgian team is one of the best in the world. They put incredible pressure on us, especially in the first half."

"After the red card, Belgium sat back a bit more. They were looking to intercept a pass from us and capitalize on our mistakes through counterattacks. We could have won the game if we had been more focused, but hats off to all the players who played today. They played with their hearts."

Iranian midfielder Alireza Jahanbakhsh, who earned his 100th international cap after coming on as a halftime substitute, also paid tribute to the team's "spirit" and "amazing performance."

He said the team would draw upon the experience of narrowly missing out on progression at the last World Cup, when they were eliminated following a 1-0 defeat to the United States.

"Last World Cup, we tried to do our best, but at the very last minute, we couldn't do it," he said.

"But now I think the most important thing is that we recover well and make sure we are ready for the next game."

Yazdani embraces new weight challenge ahead of Wrestling Worlds

Sports Desk

Iranian wrestling sensation Hassan Yazdani says he is prepared to test himself against the world's best at 97kg after securing his place on the freestyle national team for October's World Championships in Astana, acknowledging that the transition to a new weight class has been one of the toughest challenges of his decorated career.

The 31-year-old defeated reigning world silver medalist Amirali Azarpira in back-to-back bouts at Iran's national team trials on Friday, winning 4-2 and 5-3, and is now set to chase a fourth gold medal at the global showpiece.

Yazdani moved up two divisions after recovering from an 18-month shoulder injury – which he suffered during his 86kg final setback at the Paris Olympics – last December, entering a new chapter of his career.

October's event will mark Yazdani's return to Wrestling Worlds for the first time since the 2023 final loss to his familiar American foe David Taylor. Despite his success at the trials, Yazdani admitted he is still adapting to the physical demands of his new division. He said improvements in his



Freestyle wrestler Hassan Yazdani (red) is seen in action against Amirali Azarpira during the Iranian national team trials in Kerman, Iran, on June 19, 2026. ● ADIB MOHMADI/IWFIR

conditioning have helped his transition, although he believes there is still significant work to be done before he reaches peak form.

The former Olympic champion estimated that he was operating at "around 70 percent" of his ideal form during Friday's double header, expressing confidence that he will be considerably better prepared by the time the World Championships begin.

The 97kg division is expected to feature a star-studded cast in Astana, with Ameri-

can Kyle Snyder defending his title, while former world and Olympic champion Abdurashid Sadulaev will also be in the mix if he earns a place on the Russian team. Reigning Olympic champion Akhmed Tazhudinov of Bahrain and Japanese world bronze medalist Arash Yoshida, who defeated Azarpira for the Asian title in April, will also fancy their chances in Astana. Georgian Olympic silver medalist Givi Matcharashvili and former world 92kg champion Rizabek Aitmukhan of Kazakh-

stan will also pose a threat to Yazdani, who, rather than viewing the increased competition as a deterrent, welcomed the opportunity to measure himself against the sport's top names.

"I hope I can perform well in this weight class too," Yazdani told the official website of United World Wrestling. "There will be great champions at the event, and I hope I get the chance to wrestle them, test myself and deliver my best performance at the World Championships."

The decision to move up in weight was made last year with an eye on long-term success, which is an elusive second Olympic gold in LA 2028.

Yazdani said he wanted to make the switch early enough to address weaknesses, gain experience and fully adapt to the division before the next Olympic cycle reaches its peak.

He acknowledged that changing weight classes becomes "increasingly difficult with age," especially after turning 30, but insisted he had carefully considered the challenges awaiting him at 97kg.

"There are definitely challenges in this weight class, and I have thought about all of them," he said. "I hope I can deliver my best performance and achieve an excellent result."

Beach Wrestling World Series:

Iran sweeps four medals to win team title

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Sports Desk

Iran completed a clean sweep of the medals – including two golds – across the four weight classes to claim the team title at the third Beach Wrestling World Series event of the season in Batumi, Georgia.

Ali-Akbar Zaroudi capped a five-win campaign in the 70kg class with a 2-0 victory over Ukraine's Oleksii Boruta in the final.

The other gold medal for Iran came in the +90kg division, where Seyyed Amirreza Sahraei Mahalli defeated Ukraine's Vazha Dauri 3-0 in the final.

Iran's Ali-Mohammad Gholami, meanwhile, had to settle for silver in the 80kg class after suffering a 2-1 defeat against host wrestler Luka Chkhvitunidze in the title bout.

Amirhossein Kavousi also fell short in his final, losing 3-2 to Azerbaijan's Ahrif Ashirov in the 90kg showdown.

The results saw Iran top the team standings with 90 points, finishing 20 clear of second-placed Georgia, which added three bronze medals to Chkhvitunidze's gold.

Azerbaijan finished third on 55 points, courtesy of one gold and one bronze medal.