

From UCL nights to fading fortunes in Asia: How Iranian football lost its European pedigree

Sports Desk

As the new UEFA Champions League season kicked off across Europe on Tuesday, football fans in Iran were confronted with a harsh reality: for the first time since the 2017/18 campaign, no Iranian player is involved in the continent's most prestigious club competition.

Mehdi Taremi spearheaded the list of Iranians in the tournament in recent years, which also featured Sardar Azmoun, Sadeq Moharrami, Kaveh Rezaei and Alireza Jahanbakhsh.

Taremi bagged 13 goals in 48 appearances for different clubs in six successive seasons, including a spectacular bicycle kick for Porto against Chelsea in the 2020/21 quarterfinals that earned him a FIFA Puskás Award nomination, though he eventually lost out to Argentine winger Erik Lamela.

The former Inter and Porto striker, however, left Greek heavyweight Olympiacos – for whom he scored against Real Madrid and Bayer Leverkusen in the UCL league phase last season – in the summer, after falling down the pecking order under Spanish head coach José Luis Mendilibar, to sign for Al Wasl in the UAE Pro League, returning to Asian club football after seven prolific seasons in different European leagues. His move, which saw him join international teammate Azmoun – a former striker of Zenit St Petersburg,

AS Roma and Bayer Leverkusen who now plays for Shabab Al Ahli – in the Emirati top flight is another indication of how Iranian football has lost its pedigree when it comes to recruitment by European clubs.

The situation is particularly striking in the aftermath of the 2026 World Cup, where Iran enjoyed an unbeaten group-stage campaign for the first time in seven appearances, despite ultimately missing out on an elusive place in the knockout stage.

The World Cup has traditionally been the biggest shop window for Iranian players seeking a move to Europe.

That was particularly evident with Iran's so-called 'Golden Generation' of the late 1990s. Players who impressed at the 1998 World Cup subsequently moved to Germany, Austria and other European destinations, helping establish a generation of Iranian footballers in the European game.

The contrast after the 2026 tournament could hardly be greater. Rather than Germany, Italy, Spain or England, the only Iranian player to make a move to Europe after the World Cup was veteran defender Milad Mohammadi, who joined Belarusian side ML Vitebsk at the age of 33. While the transfer technically maintains an Iranian presence in European football, its destination underlines the dramatic decline in the level of opportunities available to Iranian players.



Iranian striker Mehdi Taremi is welcomed by Al Wasl teammates ahead of his first training session with the UAE Pro League club. ● AL WASL SC

In a review of the top 45 national teams in the FIFA rankings, including those that were not present at the World Cup, Iran is currently the only country without a representative in Europe's five major leagues – England's Premier League, Spain's La Liga, Italy's Serie A, Germany's Bundesliga and France's Ligue 1.

Even Iran's leading performers in the World Cup struggled to attract major European interest. Goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand received an offer from Turkish heavyweight Besiktas but ultimately remained in the Persian Gulf Pro League. Ramin Rezaei, regarded as Iran's best player at the World

Cup, continued with Foolad Khuzestan at the age of 37 rather than securing a move abroad, while Mohammad Mohebi, who scored against New Zealand in Iran's opening match, moved to Croatian club HNK Rijeka from Russian side FC Rostov.

More concerning is that some of the Iranian players enjoying the strongest starts to the season are those who failed to establish themselves in Amir Qalenei's national team plans, most notably versatile winger Allahyar Sayyadmanesh, who has emerged as the country's most informed European-based player after joining Polish club Lech Poznan.

Age appears to be an increasingly important factor in European recruitment. Leading clubs now rely heavily on statistical data, scouting networks and analytical tools to identify players with long-term potential rather than signing established stars approaching the latter stages of their careers.

That trend has worked against Iran, whose World Cup squad broke the record for the oldest average starting lineup in the tournament's history. Players in their 30s may still provide significant value to the national team, but they are less attractive to European clubs looking to develop assets for the future.

The pattern has also been visible among younger Iranians. Several promising players, including Kasra Taheri, Mohammadmahdi Zare and Mohammadmahdi Mohebi – none of whom were part of the World Cup squad – have moved back to the Iranian league after relatively short spells abroad.

Two decades ago, it was commonplace to see Iranian internationals attached to clubs such as Bayern Munich, Hertha Berlin, Bochum, Hamburg, Bolton, Osasuna and Arminia Bielefeld. Today, the most prominent destinations for Iranian talent are increasingly Russia and the UAE.

The decline is not simply a matter of individual transfers. It reflects the diminishing presence of Iranian football in the global marketplace.

The absence of an Iranian player from the Champions League is therefore more than a statistical curiosity. Taremi's departure from European football has removed one of the last prominent Iranian links to the competition and completed a trend that had already become increasingly difficult to ignore.

For a country that once used the World Cup as a springboard to Europe's biggest leagues, the road ahead now appears considerably narrower.

Asian Cadet, Junior & U21 Karate Championship: Iranians dominate Day 1 with 14 medals



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Iranian karatekas stole the show on the opening day of the AKF Asian Cadet, Junior & U21 Championship in Amman, Jordan, collecting 14 medals – including six golds – across different age and gender groups on Tuesday.

In the girls' cadet kumite contests, Nirvana Razaqi won gold in the -47kg class after defeating Palestine's Mahbooba Darsbahi in the final, with Baran Shadfar overcoming Hessah Al-Rasheed 3-1 to claim the top prize in -54kg. Dina Karimi also finished on

a high in the age group, beating Saudi opponent Alanoud Al-Asiri 3-0 in the -61kg showdown, while Saba Khodaparast settled for silver in +61kg after a 4-0 setback against Thailand's Chonlada Nisangkat. The Iranian-Saudi rivalry continued in the boys' cadet kumite event, as Abolfazl Arab-Yaqoubi outmuscled Mohammed Harbi for the -63kg gold, while fellow Iranian Hamidreza Rezayati defeated Abdulrahman Al-Amri 3-0 in the -70kg final.

Amirali Mahmoudi, meanwhile, collected a second kumite silver for the country, losing 3-0

to the host's Tariq Ahmad in the boys' cadet +70kg final. Iran's sixth gold medal was secured in the girls' cadet individual kata, where Dina Safari outscored Iraq's Lanya Ahmed 5-0 in the final.

Iranians also bagged silver medals across different kata events.

Mohammad Ankouti fell to a 4-1 loss to Hung-yi Hsiao of Chinese Taipei in the boys' cadet individual category, with the female trio of Vanousheh Rostamnejad, Nazanin Haqdoust and Melodi Azizi suffering a 3-2 setback against Chinese Taipei in the cadet and junior team event.

Yazdan Qavam was beaten 3-2 by Saudi opponent Yaqoub Bu Khawwah in the junior male final, while Armin Javani, Amirreza Mosalman and Erfan Beigi teamed up for a silver medal in the cadet and junior male division, falling 5-0 to Kuwait in the final.

Iranian boys Mohammad-Mahan Qassemian (cadet kumite -52kg) and Alireza Nadimi (U21 kata) added two bronzes to the country's medal haul. Following Iran in the team table at the end of Day 1 was Saudi Arabia, which collected two golds, four silvers and five bronzes, with Chinese Taipei in third, bagging two golds and two silvers, as well as five bronzes.

With 338 karatekas from 21 countries participating, the 24th edition of the showcase will run until Friday.

Rahimi wins gold at World Archery Para Series

Sports Desk

Iranian para-archer Somayeh Rahimi clinched the gold medal in the women's individual recurve event at the 2026 World Archery Para Series in Ahmedabad, India, delivering a dominant performance in Wednesday's final.

Competing on the final day of the tournament, Rahimi faced a Chinese opponent in the recurve women's individual final and secured a convincing 6-2 victory to claim the championship title and top spot on the podium.

Her gold-medal run capped an impressive campaign that saw her advance through several challenging rounds. In the semifinals, Rahimi was pushed to the limit by a home favorite from India, with the match ending in a 5-5 draw. She held her nerve in the decisive shoot-off, prevailing against the Indian representative to book her place in the final. Earlier in the competition, Rahimi had also defeated an American opponent 6-4 to reach the semifinal stage.

However, Iran's success in the recurve category was not limited to the individual event. The women's recurve team, comprised of Rahimi and Mohadeseh Babahabib, secured a bronze medal on Tuesday. The pair defeated their Indonesian rivals 6-2 to finish third in the team competition, adding another medal to Iran's tally.

In the recurve mixed team event, Iran's pairing of Somayeh Rahimi and Gholamreza Rahimi faced a tough challenge against Indonesia, ultimately falling 5-1 and settling for fourth place.

Gholamreza Rahimi had earlier ex-



worldarchery sport

ited the men's individual recurve competition after losing 6-4 to an Indonesian archer. Babahabib also saw her campaign end in the individual event, falling 6-2 to a Bangladeshi opponent.

In the compound category, Iran's Hadi Noori delivered a strong performance, advancing to the round of 16. He achieved a 144-144 draw against his Slovakian rival and emerged victorious in the shoot-off to progress. However, his run ended in the next stage when he lost 142-141 to a representative from Iraq.

Other Iranian compound archers

were less fortunate. Amir-Mohammad Barani narrowly lost 141-140 to a Chinese opponent, while Farzaneh Asgari put up a strong fight against a French rival but ultimately fell 143-137. Both were eliminated before reaching the round of 16. The 2026 World Archery Para Series in Ahmedabad features 150 athletes from 19 countries, providing a crucial platform for international competition ahead of major championships. With one gold and one bronze medal, Iran's delegation delivered a mixed but noteworthy performance, highlighted by Rahimi's individual triumph.