FIBA World Cup Asian qualifiers:

Iran desperate to bounce back in crunch double-header

Sports Desk

Iran's national basketball team will look to recover from a disappointing start to its Group E campaign when head coach Sotiris Manolopoulos's men return to action in the FIBA World Cup Asian Qualifiers later this month.
Having topped the first-round Group C with back-to-back victories over Jordan, either side of a win against Syria in June, Iran opened the second round with a 93-91 overtime defeat to New Zealand before suffering a 68-56 loss to the Philippines in August. Both games were staged in Pasay, the Philippines. Although the group opener was designated as a home fixture for Iran, Manolopoulos's side was forced to play at the neutral venue of SM Mall of Asia Arena due to security concerns amid the conflict in the region. The same circumstances had previously forced Iran to move its home game against Syria to Amman, Jordan, in the first round.
The Iranian Basketball Federation appealed to the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) in September to have its hosting rights reinstated for the remainder of the campaign, but the request was rejected. Iran will therefore have to play its upcoming double-header in Seremban, Malaysia.
Iran will take on Australia at Karisma Arena on November 27 before facing the Philippines at the same venue two days later.
With the top three teams in the group standings qualifying for the World Cup, third-placed Iran remains firmly in contention for a place at next year's showpiece in Qatar. However, further slip-ups in the remaining four fixtures could allow Jordan, currently fourth on 13 points and level with Iran, to overtake it.
The Greek coach has called up 18 players for the latest training camp, which began in Tehran on Saturday.
Arsalan Kazemi, Mohammad Jamshidi, Arman Zangeneh, Peter Gregorian, Seyyed Mehdi Jafari, Amirhossein Tousian, Mohammadmehdi Rahimi, Alireza Sharifi, Khashayar Aliakbari, Mobin Sheikhi, Seyyed Mohammad Ghaffari, Mohammadmehdi Heydari, Navid Rezaeifar, Matin Aghajanpour, Sarem Jafari, Hassan Aliakbari, Jalal Aghamiri and Mohammadmehdi Jalali are included in the preliminary roster.
Overseas-based players Behnam Yakhchali, Mohammad Amini, Mohsen Asgarinia and Salar Taheri are expected to join the squad in the coming days.
The return of prolific duo Yakhchali and Amini, who missed the previous window for different reasons, will provide Manolopoulos with a major boost ahead of the crucial double-header.s
Yakhchali's international experience and ability to score from beyond the arc could strengthen Iran's offensive game. Amini, meanwhile, brings athleticism, penetration and an effective presence in attacking situations, offering another dimension to the team's offense.
Their availability will give the Greek coach more options in devising attacking strategies. However, integrating the two players into the squad and the limited time available for collective training remain key considerations ahead of the games.



ROUELLE UMALI/XINHUA


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AFC Women's Champions League:

Khatoon crashes out after finishing bottom of Group A

Sports Desk

Iranian top-flight champion Bam Khatoon was knocked out of the AFC Women's Champions League after suffering a third successive defeat in Group A, going down 3-0 to host Ayeyawady FC in Yangon, Myanmar, on Saturday.
The defeat capped a dismal campaign for head coach Marziyeh Jafari's side, which opened its group campaign with a 4-1 loss to Japan's Kobe Leonessa before suffering a 6-1 thrashing at the hands of defending champion Naegohyang of North Korea last Wednesday.
Nwe Than Than scored in each half, with Hinari Miyamoto adding a third just after the hour mark to seal the victory for the Myanmar side, which finished third in the standings with three points.
Both teams came into the match on the back of successive defeats, but Ayeyawady capitalized on a shaky start from Khatoon.
The hosts' high press forced Khatoon defender Melika Motevalli into an error as early as the second minute, allowing Nwe Than Than to pounce on the loose ball and set up Phyu Phyu Win, whose long-range effort looped over goalkeeper Raha Yazdani and found the net.
Khatoon tried to respond, but Mona Hamoudi's effort was blocked before Fatemeh Shaban sent a long-range free kick over the bar in the fifth minute.
Ayeyawady continued to create the better chances, with Min Htone May Zitar firing wide in the 14th minute before Yazdani denied Naw Htet Htet Wai's low effort two minutes later.
The Myanmar side threatened again in the 27th minute when Kurumi Iwashita met Phyu Phyu Win's cross following a corner but sent her effort over the bar. Shaban's strike sailed narrowly over at the other end in the 32nd minute.
Ayeyawady picked up where it had left off after the break, with Yazdani denying Nwe Than Than from close range in the 48th minute after the forward was set up by Naw Htet Htet Wai.
Nwe Than Than made no mistake 10 minutes later, though, as Win Win's through ball found Phyu Phyu Win, who surged into the box before squaring for her teammate to fire into the top-left corner.
The Iranian side conceded again in the 63rd minute when Kana Ueda lofted the ball into the box for Hinari Miyamoto, who beat the advancing Yazdani with a deft chip.
Despite their best efforts, Khatoon failed to find a way back into the match. Shahnaz Jafari headed over from inside the box in the 80th minute before Roujin Tamrian was sent off two minutes later after receiving a second yellow card.

Mozaffar hails players' commitment despite travel fatigue

Sports Desk

Iran women's futsal head coach Shahrzad Mozaffar was full of praise for her players following a 3-1 victory over hosts China on Saturday, saying they gave everything despite severe travel fatigue and a demanding schedule. The victory marked Iran's second successive win at the friendly tournament in China, following a 6-0 triumph over Hong Kong in their opening match.
"Our journey was extremely long. It took us around 24 hours from the time we left Iran until we arrived at the hotel. The players had limited time to rest before facing Hong Kong the following day. Despite their travel fatigue, they put in an excellent performance and secured a 6-0 victory," she said.
"The game was entirely under our control, and we created numerous scoring opportunities. The players performed well in both defense and attack, and everyone got the chance to play. Only Fatemeh Rahmati missed the match due to a minor injury she had sustained during league action."
Reflecting on the subsequent match against China, Mozaffar highlighted the demanding schedule, noting that the players had to compete on consecutive days following their lengthy journey.
"The gap between the two matches was very short, and the players had to play on consecutive days after a 24-hour journey. I believe they overcame not only their two opponents but also fatigue," she said.
"We conceded early and were caught by surprise, but managed to finish the first half 1-1. We had some problems in the opening period, particularly in our defensive structure. We discussed those issues at halftime and provided the players with the necessary solutions. Fortunately, they implemented our instructions very well and did not allow the opposition to create any serious or dangerous chances in the second half," she said.
"The second half was entirely under our control, and we could even have scored more than two additional goals. China resorted to the power-play system in the final four to five minutes, but our players defended resolutely and even managed to score once during that period."
The Iranian coach was particularly pleased with her players' commitment and team spirit throughout the tournament.
"I am genuinely satisfied with the players' performances. Despite severe travel fatigue and the demanding schedule, they gave everything. Their work rate, commitment and self-sacrifice were admirable. They played wholeheartedly and for one another, providing a perfect example of a united and cohesive team. This unity and mutual support were evident both on and off the court," Mozaffar said.
She also acknowledged the quality of the Chinese team, saying it had undergone considerable changes since last year's Asian Cup.
"Almost half of their players are different from those who featured in the continental championship. Nevertheless, China are a very strong team in terms of physical strength, coordination in combination play and overall team structure. It is clear that a great deal of work has gone into preparing this team," she added.
"We beat China 3-1 at the Asian Cup, but their current team is different and they are a very high-quality opponent. Considering that our own squad is a blend of young and experienced players who have not had much experience playing demanding matches together, I believe the players have successfully passed a difficult test at this stage of the tournament," she said.



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