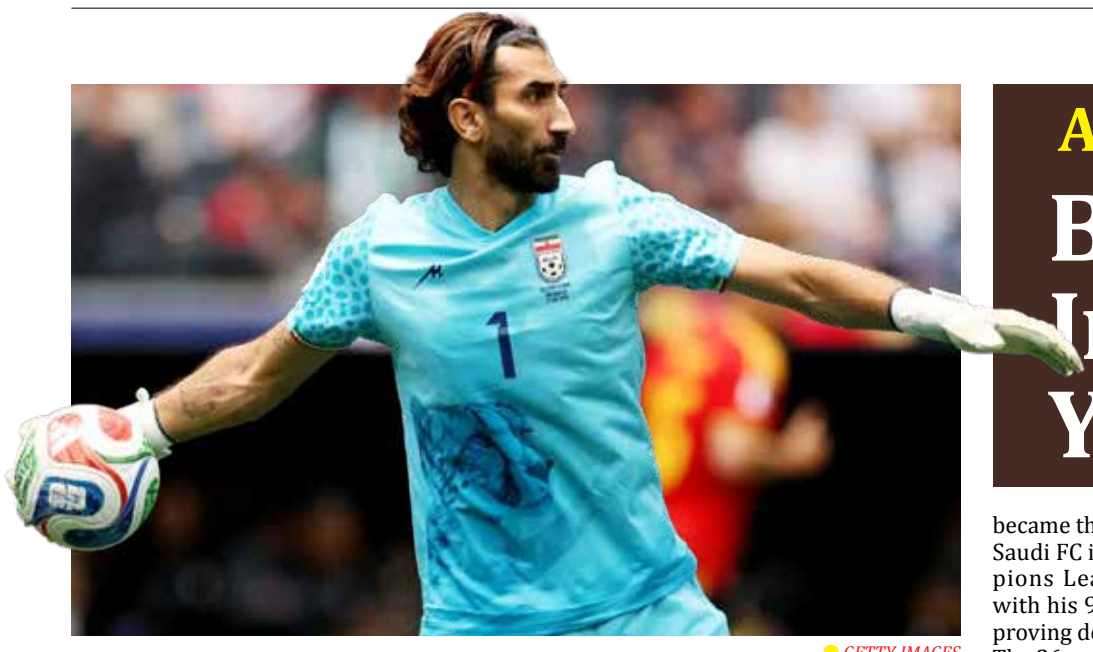


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AFC Awards Bangkok 2026:

Beiranvand bids to end Iran's wait for Player of Year award

Sports Desk

Iranian international goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand will look to end the country's 22-year wait for the Asian Player of the Year award at the AFC Awards, with the annual ceremony set to take place at Bangkok's Aksra Theatre King Power on Thursday.

Hoping to become the fifth Iranian footballer to win the prestigious award, following Khodadad Azizi (1996), Ali Daei (1999), Mahdi Mahdavikia (2003) and Ali Karimi (2004), the Tractor goalkeeper faces competition from Saudi international duo Feras Al Brikan and Salem Al Dawsari.

The Iranian number one once again stood tall on the biggest stage with his splendid performances at June's FIFA World Cup, even as Team Melli missed out on progress from the group stage on goal difference despite going unbeaten in all three matches.

The highlight of his campaign came against European powerhouse Belgium, when Beiranvand produced an astonishing point-blank save to deny Maxim De Cuyper during a goalless draw. The 34-year-old made seven saves in the match and was named Player of the Match.

One of Asia's finest goalkeepers, the 1.95m giant made his senior international debut in 2015 and has become Team Melli's most-capped goalkeeper with 90 appearances, representing the country at each of the last three editions of the AFC Asian Cup and FIFA World Cup.

Beiranvand, who began his professional career in 2011, also enjoyed a stellar campaign at club level with Tractor FC, helping the team reach the last 16 of the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26.

The only goalkeeper to be shortlisted for the award since Saudi Arabia's Mohamed Al Deayea in 1996, Beiranvand is making his second appearance among the nominees after 2019 and could make history with a victory.

Meanwhile, instinctively swiveling to unleash an unerring finish, Al Brikan became the hero for Al Ahli Saudi FC in the AFC Champions League Elite final, with his 96th-minute goal proving decisive.

The 26-year-old's contribution in extra time, possibly the most important strike of his career, helped his club retain the crown and become only the second team to win back-to-back titles in the modern era.

Al Brikan, who is the first Al Ahli Saudi player to earn a nomination, also featured in every league match and contributed five goals to the club's third-place finish, while helping them win the Saudi Super Cup for the second time.

A Saudi Arabia international since 2019, with 19 goals in 80 appearances, Al Brikan scored twice in a crucial victory over Indonesia in the World Cup qualifiers to help his country secure qualification for a seventh FIFA World Cup.

At the finals in the United States, the striker started all three matches as the Green Falcons bowed out in the group stage.

Having won the accolade in each of his previous nominations (2022 and 2025), Al Dawsari could become the first-ever three-time men's winner if he retains the trophy at this year's ceremony and matches Aya Miyama's record of three awards in the women's category.

One of Asia's greatest-ever players, the 35-year-old remains an integral figure for both club and country, captaining both sides. After successfully leading Saudi Arabia through the World Cup qualifiers, Al Dawsari featured in every match at the finals to take his tally to nine appearances across three tournaments. He thus moved into joint second place for the most appearances at a FIFA World Cup by a Saudi player, behind only Mohammed Al Deayea's 10.

Capped 114 times by the Green Falcons, the mercurial attacker has spent his entire domestic career at Al Hilal SFC and ranks among the club's leading appearance-makers (506) and goalscorers (147).

Al Dawsari helped Al Hilal enjoy an unbeaten 2025/26 league campaign as they finished second, while also adding a record 10th King's Cup title.

On Asia's grandest stage, he helped the Blue Wave reach the last 16 of the AFC Champions League Elite 2025/26, taking his career appearances in the competition to a record-extending 110 and moving up to third on its all-time top scorers' list with 35 goals.

Jafari, futsal duo nominated

In other categories, Marzieh Jafari, who made history last year by becoming the first Iranian to win the Women's Coach of the Year award, has again been shortlisted for the prize. She faces stiff competition from Ma Xiaoxu, head coach of China's U17 women's team, and Park Youn-jeong, coach of South Korea's U20 side.

Iran will also look to claim a fourth successive AFC Futsal Player of the Year award, with international duo Hossein Tayyebi and 2023 winner Saied Ahmadabbasi among the nominees. The pair scored nine goals between them to help Iran secure a record-extending 14th Asian Cup title in January.

The Iranian Football Federation is also shortlisted alongside Football Australia and the Japan Football Association for the AFC President's Recognition Award for Grassroots Football (Gold).

Rostamian aiming for Olympic breakthrough after securing LA28 quota

Sports Desk

Hanieh Rostamian took the first step toward a third consecutive Olympic appearance by securing Iran's first quota place across all sports for the Los Angeles 2028 Games, with the pistol shooter now setting her sights on reaching the final and potentially winning a medal at the multi-sport extravaganza.

Rostamian missed out on the podium in the women's 10m air pistol competition at the ISSF World Championships in Doha, Qatar, last week, finishing fourth, but still managed to secure an Olympic quota place after two Chinese shooters occupied the top two positions.

The 28-year-old Iranian, who is now preparing for her third successive Olympic appearance, will have a chance to pursue a more ambitious target this time around, having fallen short of reaching the final at both the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 Games.

Nevertheless, her experience at those two major events, alongside years of competing on the international circuit, could prove invaluable as Iran looks to win only its second shooting medal in Olympic history, following Javad Foroughi's gold in the men's 10m air pistol in Tokyo.

Unlike in her previous appearances, Rostamian will head to Los Angeles with a better understanding of the Olympic environment and what it takes to compete against the world's leading shooters.

She also demonstrated her ability to compete at the highest continental level at the recent Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games, where she won bronze in the mixed event. That achievement, coupled with her latest success in Doha, where she also claimed mixed team silver alongside Vahid Golkhnadan, offers further encouragement about her progress ahead of the next Olympics.



IRISSF

With two Olympic appearances behind her, an Asian Games medal to her name and considerable international experience, Rostamian will be hoping to deliver a different performance in Los Angeles and finally secure a place in the Olympic final, with a medal also within her sights.

Another factor that could benefit the Iranian shooter is her experience competing abroad. Rostamian is among the few Iranian shooters to have pursued a professional career overseas, having competed in the German league alongside international athletes.

Such exposure has given her an opportunity to become familiar with professional shooting environments, gain valuable competitive experience and face different styles of opposition, all of which could contribute to her technical development.

Considering the progress she has made in recent years, targeting an Olympic final and even a place on the podium does not appear beyond her reach.

Shooting, however, is a sport in which the smallest details and the ability to maintain concentration at crucial moments can determine the outcome, with success ultimately depending on performance on the day.

For Rostamian, Los Angeles could represent much more than a third Olympic appearance. It is an opportunity to make up for previous disappointments, demonstrate how much she has developed through years of experience and reach the stage that eluded her in Tokyo and Paris.

The World Championships in Doha, which marked the first stage of Olympic quota allocation for the Los Angeles 2028 Games, have now concluded, with Rostamian becoming the first Iranian shooter to secure a quota place.

However, the road to Los Angeles is far from over, with several major qualification events scheduled for 2027.

According to the announced calendar, shooters will have further opportunities to secure Olympic quota places at competitions hosted by South Korea, Egypt, India, Azerbaijan, Germany, Italy, Mexico and China.

Beyond their importance in the Olympic qualification process, these events will also provide valuable opportunities for athletes to assess their technical readiness and measure themselves against the world's best.

Rostamian, meanwhile, will be looking to make the most of those opportunities, maintain her presence on the international circuit and further strengthen her preparations for what she hopes will be a memorable third Olympic appearance in Los Angeles.

AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup:

Iran to open title defense against Afghanistan



AFC

Sports Desk

Iran will begin its bid for a record-extending fifth title – and third in a row – at the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup when it takes on Afghanistan in Group B today in Phang Nga, Thailand.

The two sides also met in the group stage of last year's competition, with Iran routing its eastern neighbors 14-0.

Having established themselves as the undisputed kings of Asian beach soccer after winning their fourth continental title in 2025 to move past Japan as the most successful team in the competition's history, Iran will be confident of retaining its crown.

Head coach Ali Naderi remains at the helm, with Ali Mirshekari, who was named Most Valuable Player and finished as the top goalscorer at last year's tournament in Pattaya, leading Iran's charge.

Afghanistan endured a difficult campaign in 2025, finishing bottom of Group C after conceding 27 goals and scoring just five in three matches.

Naderi's men will then face Vietnam at Memories Beach Arena on Saturday before concluding the group stage against Lebanon two days later.

A relative newcomer to the tournament, having made only two previous appearances, Vietnam's enterprising performances at Thailand 2025 will not go unnoticed as head coach Mai Van Duc targets a successful campaign, with reaching the knockout stage a priority for the Southeast Asian side.

Lebanon, meanwhile, will view Thailand 2026 as an opportunity to progress beyond the quarterfinals after reaching the last eight in two of the previous three editions. The West Asian side can draw confidence from a strong showing at the 2026 Arab Beach Soccer Championship earlier this month, where it recorded victories over Oman and Libya.

The top two teams in each of the three groups will be joined by the two best third-placed sides in the quarterfinals.

The top three finishers in the competition will qualify for the 2027 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup.