

**25** Federer and Nadal stay on track as Sharapova sets up Wozniacki clash

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## Iran, Iraq draw at Asian Cup

Proud Son sparks Koreans to win over China, Philippines crashes out



DUBAI: Iran's defender Roozbeh Cheshmi (top) fights for the ball against Iraq's midfielder Ahmed Yasin during the 2019 AFC Asian Cup group D football match between Iran and Iraq at the Maktoum Stadium in Dubai yesterday. — AFP

**DUBAI:** Iran claimed bragging rights over arch-rivals Iraq yesterday as they finished top of their Asian Cup group after an engrossing but goalless draw at a packed Al Maktoum Stadium in Dubai.

The latest instalment in one of football's great rivalries failed to live up to their classic 2015 quarter-final, won by Iraq on penalties, as a raw and uncompromising first half gave way to a more measured second period.

It meant that Iran, Carlos Queiroz's three-time winners, finished top of Group D on goal difference after their 5-0 thrashing of Yemen and 2-0 win over Vietnam. Iran welcomed back Brighton's Alireza Jahanbakhsh, last season's Eredivisie top-scorer, from injury as they set about going unbeaten for a 20th straight game at the group stage.

And in a physical first half in front of a deafening crowd, Iran, Asia's top-ranked side, were largely on top but couldn't make their advantage count.

As the challenges flew in, Jahanbakhsh and Iraq's Safaa Hadi both wiped away blood, and Iranian midfielder Saman Ghoddos was lucky not to see red for a stamp. Iran's Sardar Azmoun came close with a header, Ghoddos saw a powerful drive deflected away and Jahanbakhsh fizzed one over on the rebound. Iran also strongly claimed a penalty when Hadi handled accidentally.

At the other end, Ahmed Yasin's low shot was just off target and 18-year-old forward Mohamad Ali, scorer of a brilliant solo goal against Yemen, glanced a header wide.

Jahanbakhsh withdrew just after the hour mark and Iraq's Ali followed shortly afterwards, following a final attempt which the teenager drove straight down the throat of goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand.

It looked like both sides were happy to settle for a draw before Iraq's Humam Tariq swung a cross to substitute forward Alaa Abbas, whose header was acrobatically palmed away by Beiranvand. However, clear-cut chances were scant in the second half as the former war-time foes saved their energies for the bigger challenges to come in the knockout phase.

Earlier, an effervescent Son Heung-min inspired title-chasing South Korea to a comfortable 2-0 victory over China yesterday to finish top of their Asian Cup group. Hwang Ui-jo and Kim Min-jae were on target as the Koreans, boosted by the arrival of their talisman, ran China ragged in Abu Dhabi.

Son won the penalty converted by Hwang and fizzed in the assist for Kim to help South Korea finish top of Group C with a perfect nine points as they look to end 59 years of Asian Cup hurt. "Of course I'm a bit tired-I didn't

expect to play for so long," Korean captain Son told AFP after completing 87 minutes despite a punishing run of 13 games for Tottenham since the start of December.

"But it's an honour to wear this red shirt and play for the national team. My first game of the tournament, clean sheet, 2-0 — it's a happy afternoon!" Marcello Lippi's China finished as group runners-up having likewise already sealed their place in the last 16 by winning their first two matches.

Spurs forward Son, who played in the London club's 1-0 defeat by Manchester United three days ago, showed quick feet to tempt China defender Shi Ke into a rash challenge 12 minutes. Hwang calmly tucked away the spot-kick to send thousands of Korean 'Red Devils' fans wild at the compact Al Nahyan Stadium.

South Korea, who beat Asian Cup first-timers Philippines and Kyrgyzstan 1-0 in their opening two games, went for the jugular. A Hwang Hee-chan rocket forced China goalkeeper Yan Junling into a fingertip save before Hwang Ui-jo curled an effort against the post.

The Koreans, joint title favourites with Iran, doubled their lead six minutes after the break when Son's corner was met by Kim's thumping header.

But the addition of the mercurial Son has clearly ener-

gised the Taeguk Warriors, who suddenly look a very different proposition. "We are very satisfied with the effort that Son made," said South Korea coach Paulo Bento, who is yet to learn the identity of his team's last-16 opponents.

"What's important in this moment for Son and the rest of the team is to enjoy this result and then go again." China, Asian Cup runners-up in 1984 and 2004, began the competition by edging Kyrgyzstan 2-1 and overpowering the Philippines 3-0.

But they were no match for South Korea and were lucky not to concede further goals in a lop-sided game. "Let's be honest, the Korean team is much stronger than us—they're faster, technically superior and play with greater intensity," shrugged Lippi, whose side face Thailand in the last 16.

"They are one of the favourites to win the tournament—we have to accept that and focus on our next challenge."

Elsewhere in Group C, a Vitalij Lux hat-trick sent Sven-Goran Eriksson's Philippines crashing out and gave Kyrgyzstan hope of progressing as one of the best third-placed teams in a 3-1 victory. German-based Lux struck once in the first half and twice in the second in Dubai before the Philippines grabbed a consolation goal through Stephan Schrock with 10 minutes to go. — AFP

## Japan's only homegrown sumo champ bows out in tears

**TOKYO:** The only Japanese-born grand champion or "yokozuna" in sumo tearfully insisted he had "no regrets" as he announced his retirement yesterday after a disastrous run of form and injury. Kisenosato, the first Japanese-born wrestler to reach the heights of yokozuna since 1998, decided to throw in the towel after three straight losses in the New Year "basho" or tournament. "I feel that I did everything I could," he said, with tears running down his cheek. "I was supported by so many people... I have nothing

but gratitude," he said. With the retirement of the 32-year-old, there will only be two fighters left in the top rank of the ancient sport—Hakuho and Kakuryu, both Mongolians. Top government spokesman Yoshihide Suga described the retirement as "very regrettable." "It's sad," he told reporters at a regular briefing. "I think he captivated many fans as the first Japanese-born yokozuna in 19 years," he added.

Kisenosato won promotion to yokozuna in March 2017, much to the delight of fans eager to see a home-grown champion. He had a promising start, winning his first basho as a yokozuna, but suffered a chest injury that forced him to miss eight consecutive tournaments. He managed to win the autumn tournament last year but was again forced to retire in the basho after that following four consecutive losses. This prompted officials to voice disappointment with his performance, sparking speculation that he needed good results in the New

Year tournament to retain his top-ranked status.

Local wrestlers have been unable to repel a flood of foreigners who have dominated in recent years. The overseas invasion began in earnest with Hawaiian behemoth Konishiki, who was nicknamed "Dump Truck" and tipped the scales at a whopping 285 kilos (628 pounds), and other hulking Pacific islanders in the 1990s.

The subsequent rise of the Mongolians has tormented sumo traditionalists in the absence of a Japanese challenge. Sumo has also been rocked by a series of scandals in recent years, including the 2017 resignation of yokozuna Harumafuji after a brutal assault on a rival wrestler while out drinking.

In 2018, the sport drew accusations of sexism over a long-standing prohibition on women entering the "dohyo" or dirt rings where sumo is practised. The rings are viewed as sacred in the Shinto faith and women—considered to be ritually unclean—are not allowed to enter them. — AFP



TOKYO: Japan's sumo grand champion or "yokozuna" Kisenosato reacts after announcing his retirement at Ryogoku Kokugikan stadium in Tokyo yesterday. — AFP