

FRANCE WORLD CUP 1998 / First Round

Lyon, Stade de Gerland, June 21, 1998

IRAN - UNITED STATES

2-1

POLITICS IN THE BALL

In 1979, the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini had transformed Iran from a monarchy supported financially and economically by the United States of America to an Islamic Republic, the first Islamic state led by a religious rather than a political power, based on Quranic law and not a constitution. Relations between the two countries came to an abrupt halt on November 4 of that year: several hundred university students penetrated the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, taking hostage 52 U.S. diplomats and officials who were to remain under seizure for 14 months before being freed in exchange for the supply of weapons for the war Iran had meanwhile waged against Iraq. Since then, for the Persian people, the United States is the Great Satan and personifies the devil on earth that Quranic law demands to fight and defeat. Twenty years later, the World Cup in France'98 pits these two world superpowers against each other in a team sports competition for the first time since that event, and there is great fear about the possible political implications of the event. But the two teams take the field with a soothing intent, the Iranians deliver flowers to the American players, and a match opens in a surreal atmosphere that is played with extreme stubbornness on both sides but equal fairness. And it is a wonderful match under the eyes of the whole world. The U.S. gets off to a rocket start and seems to be able to dominate its opponents: in the 3rd minute on a long cross by Ramos from the right side there is McBride's header that goes to print on the crossbar. The American siege continues and ten minutes later again McBride goes to hit the post, again on Ramos' cross, but the referee stops the action for dubious offside by the American striker. In the 20th minute an Iranian flash: Bagheri stops Ramos in midfield, Ali Daei overtakes and immediately launches Azizi into the opponent's half, the Asian Golden Ball winner burns Dooley on the sprint, anticipates Keller coming out with a touch and is run over by the American goalkeeper. There seems to be a clear penalty and a sacrosanct ejection, but referee Meier instead lets it go! The match now becomes balanced, the US continues to make play but Iran is very quick on the counter-attack with young Mahdavia on the right flank who looks like he is from another planet when thrown on the run. In the 33rd minute a left-footed slingshot by Reyna from outside the box goes to hit the third post of the night for the United States, with the Iranian goalkeeper beaten, but it is Iran that takes the lead in the 40th minute with a spectacular play on the right, Zarincheh touches to Mahdavia who makes him go to the back on an overlap, cross into the box where Estili's header turns the ball behind Keller with a mocking lob. Iran is surprisingly in the lead but the Americans are not up for this impression in front of the whole world and in the second half they set off again with their heads down toward the Iranian goal, but they do not take into account the marvelous counter-attacking ability of the Islamists: in the 5th minute of the second half Bagheri makes a kilometer-long throw that finds Ali Daei on the opponents' three-quarter to juggle elegantly and then touch on Mahdavia who goes to finish with his left footer just wide of the post. The American momentum as the minutes passed seemed to fade with Iran, charged by the result, managing the game well with quick counter-attacks set up by Bagheri's precise saber-rattling. U.S. coach Sampson fielded two forwards to try everything: Stewart and Preki: in the 62nd minute Moore's cross from the left, McBride's tower and Reyna's mid-area reverse that ended resoundingly out. Again the U.S., Reyna's assist for Regis who from a defiladed position hits a left-footed volley and the ball ends up on the post for the fourth time. There is also the

goalkeeper Abedzadeh to work miracles, instinctively parrying a Hajduk conclusion from two steps, on a cross by Cobi Jones and spizzed by McBride, who was unbeatable with his head. But the result did not change. At the moment of the greatest American forcing, Estili steals the ball in his own three-quarter and passes to Ali Daei, who with a no-look throw into the opponent's half finds to sprint to the splendid Mahdavikia, alone against the outgoing Keller, and fulminates him with a right-footed shot at the far post: 2-0!

Indescribable enthusiasm for Lyon's Gerland Stadium, packed with Iranian fans. The U.S. does not break down, inside also Maisonneuve and all forward, but restarts the Iranian counterattack, Mahdavikia is uncatchable, then returns the favor to Ali Daei in the middle of the area, but the Iranian totem, alone in front of Keller, gets his conclusion rejected, the rebound favors him and this time he strikes an empty goal but the shot is not strong enough and Regis in slip manages to reach it and reject it on the line. Reversing in front, Reyna's corner and Abedzadeh unbelievably comes out for butterflies: at the second post McBride hits a header and two Iranian defenders on the line fail to rebound and the ball ends up in the net. Three minutes left and it all opens up again!

Iran is scared and the Americans throw themselves forward for the final siege, 4 minutes of recovery time but no dice, the ball doesn't go in and Iran celebrates a historic victory (their first in a World Cup) on a fantastic evening in which sport overcame 20 years of political and religious hatred.

IRAN: Abedzadeh 5.5, Zarinchah 7 (from 77' Saadavi sv), Minavand 6.5, Pashazadeh 6.5, Mohammadkhani 6 (from 75' Peyravani sv), Khakpour 6.5, Mahdavikia 8.5, Bagheri 7.5, Estili 7.5, Ali Daei 7.5, Azizi 6 (from 74' Mansourian sv). All. Jalal Talebi.

UNITED STATES: Keller 6, Hejduk 6.5, Cobi Jones 6.5, Pope 6, Dooley 5.5 (from 83' Maisonneuve sv), Regis 7, Wegerle 5 (from 59' Stewart 6), McBride 7.5, Moore 6.5, Ramos 6.5 (from 59' Preki 6), Reyna 7. All. Steve Sampson. Referee: Meier (SVI) 5.5

At 40' Estili 1-0.

At 83' Mahdavikia 2-0; at 87' McBride 2-1.



Iran and U.S. mingle with each other for historic photo before world match