

Iran Football Federation names domestic shortlist for national team job



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Sports Desk

The countdown for the appointment of Iran national team manager is on as the country's Football Federation has unveiled a list of five domestic coaches for the role. The job has been vacant since last November when Portuguese Carlos Queiroz and Iran parted ways following a World Cup group exit in Qatar.

Golgozar Sirjan manager Amir Qalenoee, Javad Nekounam – who abruptly left Foolad Khuzestan this week after leading the club to the AFC Champions League quarterfinals – Farhad Majidi, now in charge of Ittihad Kalba in the Emirati top flight, as well as Zob Ahan boss Mehdi Tartar, and Hossein Faraki – an assistant to Branko

Ivankovic at the 2006 World Cup – are the five men on the list. Qalenoee is the most decorated coach in the history of the Persian Gulf Pro League and was Iran's manager at the 2007 Asian Cup, where his team fell to a shootout defeat against South Korea in the last-eight round.

However, the 59-year-old coach was quick to decline the offer via an Instagram post on Saturday, though he did not open up on the reason behind the decision.

Nekounam enjoyed a decent spell with Foolad before his resignation, lifting the Hazfi Cup and Super Cup trophies with the southern Iranian club in 2021, although his side managed only five wins in 20 league outings in the ongoing season and is ninth in 16-team ta-

ble.

Esteghlal legend Majidi, whose team is eighth in the UAE Pro League standings, led the Tehran-based Blues to a first league title in nine years last season after going a whole campaign without the defeat, though some might argue he is relatively inexperienced for the national team hot seat.

Tartar and Faraki might be the unlikely candidates in the list as the former's club is struggling in the bottom half of the Iranian league table, while the latter has been without a team for the past three years.

Speaking to the Iranian IRIB Varzesh TV on Friday night, Amirmehdi Alavi, the head of the federation's public relations, said that Havadar manager Saket Elha-

mi and Nassaji Mazandaran coach Hamid Motahari have also been added to the list and the federation has asked all seven men to put forward their plans for the role, though "further changes could be made to the list before the federation board meeting on Tuesday." The new head coach will be tasked with steering Iran at the AFC Asian Cup in Qatar later this year, where Team Melli will be chasing a first continental crown since 1976.

Should the man for the job be named within the coming weeks, his first games on the bench will come against Iraq and Russia during late March's international break.

Meanwhile, Alavi did not rule out a move by the federation for a for-

ign head coach.

With Mehdi Taj, the chairman of the federation, rumored to be favoring a foreigner for the position, Varzesh3 website, citing anonymous sources at the federation, reported on Friday that the Iranian football governing body has been in talks with Portuguese Jose Morais – the head coach of Iranian league leader Sepahan – and Paco Jemez, whose Tractor side has been in flying form since the Spaniard took over last December.

The website added that Spanish Felix Sanchez, who led Qatar to the Asian Cup crown in 2019 before leaving the World Cup host after three straight defeats in the group phase, is also on federation's radar.

Liverpool must plan for summer signings now, says Klopp



JON SUPER/AP

Liverpool have to start working on their player recruitment plans for the summer transfer window regardless of their Champions League status next season, manager Jurgen Klopp said, highlighting the spending power of other Premier League clubs.

Liverpool lost 5-2 to Real Madrid in the first leg of their Champions League last 16 clash and they are eighth in the league, seven points adrift of the fourth spot which secures Champions League qualification, albeit with two games in hand, Reuters reported.

"I'm sorry that I cannot guarantee Champions League at this moment but we fight for it and it is not done yet," Klopp told reporters.

"But it is tricky and it will be a late decision. We have to start work earlier before we know where we will end up position-wise and European competition-wise. These things are clear."

Liverpool are six-times Champions League winners, last lifting the trophy in 2018-19.

"I think we played five years in a row in the Champions League, which is massive money, and went to the final three times in that time, which is also massive from a money point of view," added Klopp.

"We built a stand, we built a training ground, and the club is in a really good place, but around us obviously a few people (clubs) are speeding up a little bit and you cannot ignore that. We cannot ignore these kind of things."

John W Henry, Liverpool's principal owner, stated this week that he was confident of attracting new investment when confirming Fenway Sports Group does not intend to sell the club. Klopp welcomed the update – "I'm optimistic when John is optimistic, because that's his business," he said – but highlighted his team's role in generating the funds that have transformed Liverpool and Anfield on FSG's watch. He insisted the club could not afford to stand still given the growing threat around them, with Chelsea and Newcastle under wealthy ownership and Manchester United expected to follow suit.

"My job is to make 100% clear what we need from a sports point of view and then other people are responsible for giving us the resources or whatever," he said.

"It is still about finding the right players, not about bringing in a lot, and thank God in the world of football there are a lot of right players."

Ibrahim Moustafa Ranking Series: Dalkhani, Saravi bag GR golds as Geraei is stunned in the semis



Iran's Meysam Dalkhani (blue) reacts after the victory over Georgia's Leri Abuladze in the 63kg Greco-Roman final at the Ibrahim Moustafa Ranking Series in Alexandria, Egypt, on Feb. 23, 2023. UWW

Sports Desk

The Iranian three-man Greco-Roman team had mixed results at the Ibrahim Moustafa Ranking Series in Alexandria, Egypt, as Meysam Dalkhani and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi won the gold medals of their respective weight classes, while Mohammadreza Geraei fell to a 72kg semi-final defeat before settling

for a fifth-spot finish.

An Olympic and world champion in 2021 and silver medalist in last year's UWW Worlds, Geraei, wrestling in a class above his preferred 67kg, breezed past host's Omar Essam Okil (10-1) and Sheroz Ochilov of Tajikistan (11-3) but was far from his usual best in the last-four clash with Georgian Otar Abuladze – a world cadet bronze winner

in 2017 – and suffered a shock 8-0 loss.

Geraei, who had to deal with an eye injury throughout the event, withdrew from the third-place bout against Indian Ankit Gulia and finished fifth.

Abuladze, meanwhile, was outmuscled 6-0 in the final by his compatriot Ramaz Zoidze, who was beaten by Geraei in the World Championships two years ago

and took the bronze.

Friday's setback for Geraei came after Dalkhani and Saravi – also world champions in 2021 – had walked away with the ultimate prizes on the preceding night.

Having been ruled out of September's World Championships with an elbow injury, Dalkhani came out on top against Georgia's Leri Abuladze in a repeat of

the world 63kg final in Oslo, where the Iranian won a thrilling contest 5-4.

The final in Alexandria was nothing short of excitement compared to the previous meeting as Dalkhani pulled off the victory by the thinnest of margins once again. The Iranian made the early inroads with a 5-0 lead at the break, but after giving up an inactivity point and three consecutive guts, he watched his lead evaporate and turn into a two-point advantage for Abuladze who came out firing in the second period.

Dalkhani scored a stepout to cut the lead to just one point and needing a take-down at 7-6 with a minute to go, he put on the burners and it was a re-drag with 10 seconds left that pushed Abuladze to give up a take-down and Dalkhani to the gold.

Thursday's other final featuring Iranian and Georgian wrestlers did not go ahead after two-time world bronze medalist Roberti Kobliashvili had to pull out injured as Saravi – bronze winner in the Tokyo Olympics and last year's world event – was handed the 97kg gold.