

Lack of logic hampering Iranian football's quest for national coach



Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

EXCLUSIVE

It's been more than three months since the 1-0 defeat against USA in the final round of the World Cup group fixtures marked the end of Carlos Queiroz's second, and ill-fated, reign as the head coach of the Iranian national football team.

In the buildup to the showdown in Qatar, Mehdi Taj, the chairman of the Iranian Football Federation, seemed to have a clear idea of what the future would hold for the Asian powerhouse's bench after the event: Give Queiroz the technical manager role and appoint Javad Nekounam as the new coach.

But while Queiroz was believed to be Taj's favorite candidate for the job even after a rather disappointing World Cup campaign – dominated by the off-field saga amid the protests in Iran – the Portuguese decided to go back to the southern coasts of the Persian Gulf and accept a probably more lucrative deal with the Qatar Football Association.

All that has left the country's football governing body with one

of its most daunting challenges in years in naming the new head coach, who will be tasked with taking the national team back to Qatar for the AFC Asian Cup in less than 12 months.

The federation unveiled a list of seven Iranian candidates for the job this week, comprising: Nekounam, who stepped down from his Foolad Khuzestan role last week, Golgozar boss Amir Qalenoeei, Farhad Majidi – currently in charge of Emirati top-flight club Ittihad Kalba – Hossein Faraki, who has been without a team for two years, as well as Hamid Motahari, Saket Elhami, and Mehdi Tartar – three managers in minnow sides in the Persian Gulf Pro League.

And while Nekounam and Majidi have been muted on their situation, the rest of the group were quick to decline the job offer for different reasons.

However, what has been, even more annoyingly, evident in the shortlist is the federation's lack of a clear pathway toward the recruitment of the national manager.

Is a first Asian title since 1976 the top priority for the federation? Or does it have a long-term vision for a rebuild project in the squad – which was the oldest in Qatar



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– ahead of the Asian qualifiers for the next World Cup in three-years' time?

That goes without saying that in naming the list, the federation has been approaching seven coaches, whose career, record, and tactical approach over the

years have been in stark contrast to each other.

With the shortage of required funding keeping the organization from opting for a high-profile foreign tactician – though former Qatar coach Felix Sanchez's name has also been

brought up in recent days – Taj and his group will likely have to settle for a domestic name before late March's international break, but to that end, the chairman will have to decide what it is, exactly, that he is looking for in the new manager.

Giannis returns, Bucks beat Nets 118-104 for 15th straight



Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo (34) goes up for a basket during an NBA victory over the Nets in Brooklyn, NY, US, on Feb. 28, 2023.

NBA

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 33 points and 15 rebounds, and the Milwaukee Bucks extended their winning streak to 15 games by beating the Brooklyn Nets 118-104 on Tuesday night.

Jrue Holiday had 14 points and eight assists for the Bucks, who went 10-0 in February and have passed the Boston Celtics for the best record in the NBA. They got Antetokounmpo back after he missed their home victory over Phoenix on Sunday with a bruised right quadriceps, AP reported.

Brook Lopez added 13 points and 10 rebounds, and Khristian Middleton had 18 points off the bench. Milwaukee held Brooklyn to 42 second-half points, dealing the Nets their third straight loss and seventh in their past nine games.

Mikal Bridges led Brooklyn with 31 points. Spencer Dinwiddie had 26 points and eight assists, and Cam Johnson added 19 points and seven rebounds.

Trailing by 10 at halftime, the Bucks outscored the Nets 66-42 in the second half, using a 14-4 third-quarter run to pull even at 68. Bridges answered Milwaukee's run with his own personal 10-0 spurt, but the Bucks outscored the Nets 39-23 in the third, including 18-7 over the final 5:04 after Antetokounmpo went to the bench after picking up his fourth foul.

Then the Bucks, who rank No. 1 in the NBA in defensive rating and fourth in the league by allowing 111.2 points per game, turned up the defense in the fourth. Brooklyn was just 7 of 23 in the fourth, missing nine straight over a span of 4:23.

Elsewhere, Ja Morant scored 28 of his 39 points in the third quarter and added 10 assists and 10 rebounds, and the Memphis Grizzlies beat Los Angeles 121-109 in the Lakers' first game since LeBron James injured his right foot.

Xavier Tillman finished with 18 points and 11 rebounds for Memphis, while Jaren Jackson Jr. and Desmond Bane scored 16 points apiece.

Anthony Davis led the Lakers with 28 points and 19 rebounds, while Lonnie Walker IV scored 21 points. Austin Reaves had 17, while matching his season high with four 3-pointers.

French football president Le Graet resigns after damning report

French Football Federation president Noel le Graet has resigned following a damning report into the organisation and accusations of sexual harassment.

The 81-year-old stood down in January while the French government carried out an audit into the federation, BBC Sport reported.

"Considering his conduct towards women, his public comments and the governance failings of the FFF, Mr Le Graet no longer has the necessary legitimacy to run and represent French football," the report concluded when it was published earlier this month.

It also said Le Graet, who has always denied any wrongdoing, should not return to his role because his "behavioural excesses are incompatible with the carrying out of his functions".

Several members of the FFF have said that Le Graet will continue his role with world governing body FIFA.

In January 2022, he was appointed as FIFA president Gianni Infantino's delegate in the organisation's new office in Paris.

Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas said Infantino had "seized the opportunity to use Noel's capabilities", adding "if that means indirectly that it comes at a good time for Noel, it's a good thing".

Le Graet, who was in office for 11 years and had a mandate until 2024, has previously faced claims of sexual harassment, which he denies.

There were also calls for him to quit over his comments about Zinedine Zidane, who won the World Cup and Euros as a player for France and guided Real Madrid to three successive Champions League titles.

Le Graet said he would not take a

call from Zidane about becoming France coach before apologising for his "clumsy" remarks.

The French government began the audit in October after being made aware of sexual harassment and bullying allegations at the organisation, which the FFF has denied.

Announcing his resignation on Tuesday, the FFF said it "recognises the remarkable sporting and economic performance of Noelle Graet".

Referring to the audit, it added: "The FFF nevertheless notes that the report is based less on objective facts than on comments that have sometimes led to exaggerated bad-mouthing of the body."

In an interview published later on Tuesday, Le Graet told French sports daily L'Equipe his lawyers would challenge the sports ministry's report, and insisted he had "never harassed anyone".

Le Graet took office in 2011, with the men's national team winning the 2018 World Cup and finishing as runners-up at Euro 2016 and the 2022 World Cup.

Before he stood down earlier this year, Le Graet extended Didier Deschamps' contract as manager of the national side until 2026. Vice-president Philippe Diallo will remain as interim president until June when a permanent successor will be chosen.

Le Graet's resignation comes after captain of the women's team Wendie Renard and two other players said they will not play at this summer's World Cup and criticised the country's football "system".

France are due to play at the Women's World Cup later this summer and Diallo said a decision on head coach Corinne Diacre's future would be taken "very soon".



GETTY IMAGES

Return to top spot more special after tough year: Djokovic

Djokovic



WILL MURRAY/GETTY IMAGES

Novak Djokovic said his return to the top of the world rankings felt like a big achievement after a year of turmoil where he had to skip several tournaments including two Grand Slams, but the Serbian expects a see-sawing battle for the position in 2023.

Djokovic missed the 2022 Australian Open and was deported from the country due to being unvaccinated against COVID-19 before returning this year to clinch a record-extending 10th title at Melbourne Park and 22nd major to reclaim the number one spot, Reuters reported.

He was forced out of big tournaments in the United States last year, including the U.S. Open, as he was unable to enter the country due to his refusal to take his shots.

The 35-year-old also received no points for winning the Wimbledon title due to the grasscourt Grand Slam being penalised for its decision to ban players from Russia and Belarus over Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

"I think this is the least points I've had as number one. It happens," Djokovic told reporters following his win over Tomas Machac in Dubai on Tuesday.

"It's not only due to my circumstances of not playing a couple of Grand Slams and everything that happened last year, but also other players, some players missing some slams for injuries, some not having the biggest consistency."

"I guess that makes the achievement bigger, at least in my team's and my eyes. I'm overwhelmed with pride. I work as hard as anybody else. I'm really committed to the sport. And I try."

Djokovic is now into his 378th week as the world number one, surpassing Steffi Graf's record for the most weeks at the top of the sport.

The Serb first topped the rankings in July 2011 and has managed a best run of 122 consecutive weeks at the top, between July 2014 and November 2016.

But he said younger players like Carlos Alcaraz and Stefanos Tsitsipas will eventually catch up with him.

"These guys are playing at a high level constantly. They're playing a lot of tournaments. I'm not playing as much and don't plan to play as many weeks as they do," Djokovic said.

"Eventually they'll take the number one, then I'll bring it back again, then they'll take it again. We'll go in circles."