

Will Iran job be an unknown territory for Qalenoeei?



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EXCLUSIVE

Amir Qalenoeei will embark on a new chapter of his career when he sits on Iran's bench in a friendly against Russia at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on March 23. Months of speculations surrounding the Iranian job – following the departure of Portuguese Carlos Queiroz after the World Cup group exit last November – came to an end on Sunday as the 59-year-old

left Persian Gulf Pro League outfit Golgozar Sirjan for the new job.

Iran's first domestic coach in more than a decade, Qalenoeei is back in the role after 16 years, having seen his previous spell end after just over 12 months in charge.

The most decorated manager in the history of the Iranian top-flight with five titles, Qalenoeei was quite clearly not the Iranian Football Federation's first choice for Team Melli's dugout as he was given the job only after Mehdi Taj, the chairman of the federation,

failed to extend Queiroz's stay after the World Cup and negotiations with former Qatar boss Felix Sanchez collapsed last week over the length of the contract.

All that left the country's football governing body with no option but to settle for a manager whose last major honor in the Iranian football came in 2011, when he led Sepahan to the league crown.

However, Qalenoeei, who had the backing of his fellow Iranian counterparts for the role in recent weeks, will be out there to

prove a point. He has always felt hard done by since he was axed following a shootout defeat against South Korea at the 2007 AFC Asian Cup, lamenting lack of proper time at the job, and the next edition of the Asian flag-ship international competition in Qatar will come as a perfect opportunity for redemption for him. Still, some might argue that the veteran will have to come up against numerous challenges in steering Iran in its quest to a first continental crown in 48 years. The Asian Cup will kick off

in less than 10 months and Qalenoeei, whose current contract runs until the end of the tournament in Qatar, will have to decide if he wants to begin a rebuild project or stick with more or less the same squad that was the oldest among the 32 teams at the World Cup. Impressive performances by Saudi Arabia, Japan, South Korea, and Australia at the World Cup indicate that Qalenoeei's men will hardly be the favorite to lift the Asian trophy next January as the Saudis were the only team to beat eventual champion Argentina while

the other three made it to the knockout phase, not to mention Qatar, with Queiroz as the new manager, will fancy its chances to retain the title on home soil. The biggest question facing Qalenoeei's reign, however, will be how he will get certain players within the squad on board.

Despite an emphatic run at the World Cup qualifiers, ex-head coach Dragan Skocic was shown the exit door in September for what was believed to be, in part, his lack of control over the dressing room and discontent among senior players in the team, namely talismanic Porto striker Mehdi Taremi, as well as Iranian skippers Ehsan Hajsafi and Alireza Jahanbakhsh.

The majority of the Iranian internationals had been working under a high-profile tactical tactician in Queiroz for the best part of the last nine years – being given their international debuts by the Portuguese – and might well see Qalenoeei's appointment as a step backward for the Iranian football.

That goes without saying that a disappointing World Cup campaign, coupled with issues on and off the pitch amid the unrest in the country, led to national team players facing clear disaffection among considerable amount of the fans and the federation hopes Qalenoeei will be the man to restore the full support of the Iranians all over the world.

Qalenoeei may have years of working at the highest level of the Iranian club football on his back but the new era at the national team surely means walking into an unknown territory for him.

Seoul to bid for 2036 Olympics without North Korea's Pyongyang: Mayor



● REUTERS

Seoul will pursue a bid for the 2036 Summer Games without reviving efforts to co-host an Olympics with the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon told Reuters.

Amid hopes for better relations with the nuclear-armed North, Seoul sent a proposal for co-hosting the 2032 Olympics with Pyongyang to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2021, before Brisbane was named as host city.

"I think the strategy for 2032 was doomed to failure because of unpredictable inter-Korean relations," Oh said in an interview.

The 2032 joint bid had sought to build on the PyeongChang Winter Olympics hosted in the South in 2018, during which athletes from both Koreas marched under a unified flag at the opening ceremony and fielded a combined women's ice hockey team.

IOC President Thomas Bach welcomed the joint bid at the time as a "historic initiative".

But relations have since soured again, and North Korea has tested a record number of ballistic missiles in the past year.

Pyongyang routinely trades threats with Seoul and its allies in Washington, where officials say North Korea may be preparing to resume nuclear weapons testing for the first time since 2017.

Oh said Seoul would remain flexible to the idea of holding a few events in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) or Pyongyang if relations improved enough by that time.

An official with the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee (KSOC) said it had not received formal statements of intent from either Seoul or the southern city of Busan on a 2036 bid.

It would be up to the individual cities in consultation with the national government to decide whether to jointly host with Pyongyang, the official added, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing deliberations.

Among potential rivals for the Games, Qatar is expected to make a push to host the event following its successful staging of last year's soccer World Cup, while India, Germany and Egypt are also reported to be considering a bid. Mexico has also thrown its hat into the ring for the 2036 Games.

Randle, Barrett spark Knicks over Lakers to snap NBA skid

Julius Randle scored 33 points and R.J. Barrett added 30 to lead New York over the Los Angeles Lakers 112-108 on Sunday, snapping the Knicks' three-game NBA losing streak.

A night after Randle managed only 19 points in a loss to the Los Angeles Clippers, he hit 11-of-24 shots, grabbed eight rebounds and passed off five assists to ignite New York, AFP reported.

"Games like that happen," Randle said. "I'm not going to second-guess myself just because I had a bad game. Come back next game and be better." Randle's 16th 30-point performance on the road this season matched Bernard King's Knicks record for such heroics away from Madison Square Garden. Barrett scored eight points in an 11-6 Knicks run for a 99-94 lead early in the

fourth quarter and finished with 13 points in the final period.

Josh Hart sank two final free throws with five seconds remaining for New York to create the final margin.

LeBron James remained sidelined for the Lakers with a foot injury while the Knicks were without Jalen Brunson due to a sore left foot.

The Knicks improved to 40-30, sixth in the Eastern Conference, while the Lakers saw their three-game win streak snapped and fell to 33-35.

The Lakers stand 11th in the Western Conference but with the same record as Utah, Oklahoma City and New Orleans in the ninth-12th spots and one game behind Minnesota and Dallas in the seventh and eighth positions.

Brooklyn's Mikal Bridges scored 25 points and Nic

Claxton added 20 as the Nets edged host Denver 122-120 despite a triple double by Serbian superstar Nikola Jokic.

Two-time reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Jokic scored 35 points, pulled down 20 rebounds and passed off 11 assists but couldn't pull off a victory in the final seconds for the Western Conference leader (46-22).

The Nets led 109-94 with eight minutes remaining but the Nuggets rallied with a 21-6 run and Jokic lifted Denver within 121-120 on a free throw with 41 seconds to play. Jokic and Bruce Brown missed jump shots in the final 10 seconds and Bridges added a final free throw before Jokic missed a three-pointer at the closing buzzer.

Joel Embiid scored 34 points, grabbed eight rebounds and added four

blocked shots and four assists to spark the Philadelphia 76ers over visiting Washington 112-93.

James Harden contributed 18 points and 14 assists for the Sixers, who stretched their win streak to five games and stayed third in the Eastern Conference at 45-22.

Trey Murphy scored a career-high 41 points to lead the New Orleans Pelicans to a 127-110 victory over visiting Portland. Murphy hit 13-of-20 shots from the floor, including 9-of-14 from three-point range.

Darius Garland scored 28 points and Donovan Mitchell added 23 to lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 114-108 victory at Charlotte. Terry Rozier had 27 points in a losing cause.

Jalen Williams had 21 points, 10 assists and seven rebounds to spark Oklahoma City over host San Antonio 102-90.



Knicks' Julius Randle (30) goes up for a basket during an NBA win over the Lakers in Los Angeles, CA, US, on March 12, 2023.

● AP