

Iran snooker passion grows as fans take cue from world-class Vafaei



● WST

AFP – A passion for snooker has swept Iran in recent years, a trend fans attribute largely to the country's first internationally renowned star Hossein Vafaei, known as the "Persian Prince". Ever more enthusiasts in the Islamic republic have taken to the cue sport played on a billiards table, and Tehran last week hosted an Asian regional tournament. "In the past, Iran did not have much of a place in the Asian and world champi-

onships in billiards and snooker," said referee Mohammad Afghil Morshedi, 34, of Iran's Bowling, Billiard and Boules Federation. But in recent years, said Morshedi, the sport – invented by British officers in colonial-era India – "has gained many enthusiasts... and now we are among the top three teams in Asia in winning titles and medals". Much of this is due to one man, he said: "Mr Vafaei is the brand of this sport in Iran.

"Whenever the name of Iran is brought up in snooker, his name will come up too. He's the flag-bearer of this sport in Iran." Vafaei, 28, is Iran's first professional snooker player, and the first to win a world ranking title, in 2022 in the English city of Leicester. "I'm happy to make history for my country, that was a very good moment for me and snooker," he said at the time. Vafaei, who hails from Abadan in the southwest-

ern province of Khuzestan bordering Iraq, said Iran has "very little snooker history", speaking last week with state news agency IRNA. He lamented that so far he had received little official support in his home country, complaining that "no one has done anything for me and I have not received any money or reward". On the subject of still lacking Iranian sponsors, Vafaei said that "it is not only about me, as most of our

athletes have the same problem". Nonetheless, he has received huge gratitude from Iran's snooker and billiards enthusiasts, including at the tournament that brought teams from the Persian Gulf, South Asia and as far as Malaysia and Hong Kong. "Reaching the position that Vafaei has attained is the ultimate goal of almost all Iranian snooker players," said Shirin Zarrin, 38, an employee at the Iran bil-

liards federation. "He has been very impactful," she said. "If you ask any Iranian snooker player, they will cite Vafaei as their role model." She voiced hope that Iranian women, too, would gain more prominence in the sport in the future. "If women can have more access to billiards clubs, more presence in this sport and the chance to practise better, they can progress significantly," she said.

Djokovic hungry for more Grand Slams as he eyes number 24 at Wimbledon

REUTERS – Novak Djokovic is not resting on his laurels after claiming the all-time men's record with his 23rd Grand Slam title last month and the Serbian said on Saturday that he is already eyeing number 24 at Wimbledon where he is the defending champion.

Djokovic went past Rafa Nadal's tally of 22 Slams when he won the French Open last month and, though his old Spanish rival will not be challenging for titles this year due to injury, Djokovic has no plans to put his feet up and relax. The 36-year-old has won the last four Wimbledon crowns and is one shy of tying Roger Federer's men's record of eight titles at the All England Club. He also now sits just one Grand Slam behind Margaret Court who won a record 24.

"I don't feel more relaxed, to be honest. I still feel hungry for success, for more Grand Slams, more achievements in tennis," Djokovic told reporters. "As long as there's that drive, I know that I'm able to compete at the highest level. If that goes down,



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then I guess I'll have to face probably different circumstances and have a different approach. "So far there's still the drive. A few days after Roland Garros, I was already thinking about prepara-

tion for grass and what needs to be done. The tennis season is such that it doesn't really give you much time to really reflect or enjoy." Djokovic said that although he was proud of

his historic achievement, life as a professional player demands that kind of mentality and intensity as he looks to win as many majors as he can before his body can take no more. "If you really want to have

a chance and have a go at more slam titles, you need to maintain that concentration and devotion," he said. "I want to try to use every Grand Slam opportunity I have at this stage where

I'm feeling good in my body, feeling motivated and playing very good tennis, to try to get more." Djokovic comes into Wimbledon as the second seed this year with 20-year-old Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz now world number one after his first title on grass at Queen's. However, that does not faze the Serbian. "I think for someone his age, it's impressive, everything he (Alcaraz) is doing. With his team, of course, he's got Juan Carlos Ferrero, former world number one, in his corner who can guide him and mentor him," Djokovic said. "For me, I don't need to have Carlos or anybody else really to find that extra drive and motivation when I enter Slams because I know that I have to win seven matches to win a title. "So whoever I get to face across the net, it doesn't make a difference for me. I need to do what I need to do." Djokovic will begin his Wimbledon title defence against Argentina's 67th-ranked Pedro Cachin today.

Iran's Fasihi shatters 100m national record in Kazanov Cup triumph



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Sports Desk

Iranian women's 100m national record changed hands for a second time in just over a month as sprinter Farzaneh Fasihi set a new benchmark in Kazakhstan's Kazanov Cup. The 30-year-old crossed the finish line in 11.41 seconds to win the ultimate prize at the event and shatter the country's previous mark by 0.02 seconds. Fasihi's record will be officially registered after a negative test result by the National Anti-Doping Organization of Iran. Hamideh Esameilnejad had claimed the national record when she ran the 100m event in 11.43 seconds for the gold medal at the Erzurum Sprint & Relay Cup in Turkey in on May 30. Fasihi's benchmark means she is now a double national record holder in the female athletics – following her gold-winning campaign in February's Asian Indoor Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, where she registered 7.25 seconds in the qualification heat before ultimately coming out on top in the 60m final.

Esteghlal signs Iranian winger Mohammadi



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Sports Desk

Iranian winger Mehrdad Mohammadi is the first summer signing under new Esteghlal manager Javad Nekounam after joining the Persian Gulf Pro League club on a two-year deal for an undisclosed fee. Mohammadi, 29 – the twin brother of international fullback Milad – spent last season at Qatar Stars League, where he scored eight goals in 15 appearances for Al Saliya but could not help the club avoid relegation. Former Sepahan and Rah Ahan player will be back in the Iranian top flight after four years, having enjoyed decent spells with Portuguese side C.D. Aves and Qatar's Al Arabi.