

Iran moving towards international hockey heights, federation chief says



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EXCLUSIVE

Bahram Qadimi, the chairman of the Iranian Hockey Federation, says the recent achievements in the international events have laid the groundwork for the country to cement its status as a global powerhouse of the sport.

Iran has won the Men's Indoor Hockey Asia Cup on a record eight occasions, while it defeated USA in the shootout to win the bronze medal in February's FIH Men's Indoor Hockey World Cup in South Africa.

Qadimi believes the scale of investment on hockey is the difference between Iran and international opponents, describing the rivalry as an "asymmetric warfare", though he remains positive that the combination of the Iranian young talents and top-notch foreign coaches will see the country keep

flourishing on the global stage.

The following is what Qadimi had to say about all aspects of hockey in Iran in an exclusive with Iran Daily.

Would you please tell us where hockey stands in the Iranian sport, and elaborate on the key factors behind the recent success in international events?

As you know hockey is among the top three popular sports in the world, bringing large number of crowds to the venues all around the globe. That is why hockey has been a constant feature of the Olympic Games.

On the other hand, hockey is deeply rooted in the Iranian culture and history. In fact, hockey first emerged from polo, which is an authentic Iranian sport dating back thousands of years.

For all the popularity in the world, hockey was isolated in Iran for years, being thoroughly neglected

within the national sporting setup.

However, the federation has adopted a comprehensive plan in recent years to develop hockey all around the country. All those measures, coupled with the Iranian teams' efforts, have led to significant achievements in the international events, as Iran beat USA for the third place in the Indoor Hockey World Cup in February, while the women's team enjoyed a decent run at last year's Asia Cup before finishing fifth.

Why is it that we haven't heard much about the Iranian hockey over the years?

Well, as I said, hockey had been abandoned by the Iranian sport hierarchy for decades. There were several hockey pitches in Tehran when the 1974 Asian Games took place in the capital but they were all allocated to football and other sports through the years.

Hockey includes the field

hockey and the one that is played indoor. The previous Iranian federations had been solely focused on the men's indoor category but when we took over, through a step-by-step process, the national hockey body decided to equally develop the sport in the men's and women's divisions in both indoor and field hockey.

The Asian Hockey Federation, meanwhile, has provided us with free equipment and classes for hockey enthusiasts. We've also been in full collaboration with the Ministry of Education and other major academic institutes to grow hockey among lower age groups.

The vast expansion of hockey in Iran has led to the country winning major international seats in the Asian governing body of the sport.

What is the difference between Iran and its rivals?

Unfortunately, we are on a limited budget and the Sports Ministry and the National Olympic Academy need to dedicate more funds to hockey – with bonuses and prize money for triumphant national teams for instance.

The federation's annual budget is in six figures and we had to bank on the charities' support to send the team to the tournament in South Africa, while Japan, South Korea and China spend around \$50 million on hockey each year. The rivalry with those countries is like an asymmetric warfare.

However, what keeps us firm on our path is the Iranian players' pure dedication.

Tell us about the federation's efforts to identify and cultivate the hockey talents in Iran.

The provincial hockey organizations have been doing a great in that respect. A Pakistani coach has been hired by the federation to visit all provinces to identify the talented youths while the recruitment of a Chinese coach for the national women's team and an American for the men's team is also on our agenda. I believe high-profile foreign coaches are a necessity for Iranian hockey, most significantly in the women's field category, which was only introduced two years ago.

Iranian coaches will receive the required instructions in the federation's classes – which will begin later this month run through February next year – before being sent on a mission to different provincial departments.

As you mentioned hockey is among the popular sports throughout the world, but that is not the case in Iran. What have you done to create a fan-base for the sport in the country?

Different types of media platforms have been a great help in promoting the sport as the Hockey World Cup was broadcast live by IRIB TV for the first time in February. Meanwhile, eigh-

teen teams from all over the country have signed up for a new women's field hockey league which will be held in two tiers.

What are the future international events for the Iranian national teams?

A field hockey tournament will be held in Oman in September which will serve as the Asian qualifiers for the next World Cup and we expect both Iranian men's and women's teams to finish on the podium in that event. I am optimistic that the women's team will soon be among the top 10 teams in the world.

Do you see Iran win the men's world title anytime in the future?

Many countries have been majorly investing on hockey. The United States, for instance, has allocated \$5 million to its scouting system. Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Argentina, and USA are currently the top teams in the world and way ahead of us in terms of funds and infrastructures. We first need to make sure to hold on to the third-spot finish in the recent World Cup, but I'm sure even bigger achievements will be well within our reach in the coming years.

Vondrousova writes her own happy ending at Wimbledon to leave Jabeur in tears



REUTERS – When Marketa Vondrousova punched away a volley and fell to the ground after completing one of the most unexpected runs to the Wimbledon title, a jumble of thoughts must have been running through her head.

After all, Saturday was meant to be the day when Tunisian sixth seed Ons Jabeur would finally become the first Arab and first African woman to win a Grand Slam title.

Instead, a distraught Jabeur was left with tears streaming down her face as her Wimbledon dream was wrecked in the final for the second year running with a 6-4 6-4 drubbing.

In stark contrast, Vondrousova knelt down on the grass in her moment of triumph – staring at the turf that until this fortnight had not brought her much joy.

The Czech left-hander had won only one match at the All England Club before this year and 12 months ago she had come to London as a tennis tourist with her arm and elbow in a plaster cast as she recovered from a second bout of wrist surgery.

Her time out from the sport meant that she fell so far off the tennis radar that she no longer even had a clothing sponsor.

But the 42nd-ranked Czech put those problems behind her to become the first unseeded woman to lift the Venus Rosewater Dish as she completed her own phenomenal comeback story.

"I don't know what's happening right now," Vondrousova said during the presentation ceremony as she was given a standing ovation by a 15,000-strong capacity Cen-

tre Court crowd that included tennis greats Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova.

"Ons, you are such an inspiration for all of us and I hope you will win this one day; you are an amazing person."

"This time last year I had a cast on so it's amazing that I can now stand here and hold this (trophy), it's crazy," added the Czech, whose husband Stepan Simek had flown in from Prague especially for the final after being relieved of his cat-sitting duties at home.

"It's amazing as tomorrow is the first anniversary of our wedding. I am exhausted but I am so proud," said Vondrousova.

While the clearly elated Czech began her victory lap to all corners of Centre Court, Britain's Princess of Wales was left to console a sobbing

Jabeur who could not fathom how she had messed up her chance of holding aloft the most famous trophy in women's tennis.

The truth of the matter was that she was the architect of her own downfall, with the 31 unforced errors she produced telling their own story. "This is very, very, tough. I am going to look ugly for those photos," the 28-year-old Jabeur told the crowd through tears.

After the hollering fans gave the crowd favourite a prolonged ovation, she added: "This is the most painful loss of my career."

"Today is going to be a tough day for me but I'm not going to give up and I am going to come back stronger. It's been a tough journey but I promise I will come back and one day win this tournament."

Marketa Vondrousova celebrates with the Wimbledon trophy after winning the women's singles final against Ons Jabeur in London, Britain, on July 15, 2023.

AP