

Iranian Karimi overcomes personal woes to find consolation in Hangzhou



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Staff writer

Despite a last-four loss for the defending champions in the newly-finished Asian Games, Iranian women's kabaddi player Zahra Karimi says she was still pleased to leave Hangzhou with a bronze medal to put an end to a gloomy 12 months in personal life.

"We were in the midst of the preparation for the Asian Games when my father passed away last year. It was a huge loss for me as he was my biggest support and always by my side throughout my career," Karimi told Iran Daily.

"It took me less than a month to pull myself back together and start all over again because I had promised my dad to go to the Games. I just wanted to make him proud, though I wasn't really pleased with my performance in Hangzhou," added the Iranian girl.

Karimi, 25, was part of the team that stunned India in the final to walk away with the ultimate prize in Jakarta-Palembang 2018 – a maiden team medal for the Iranian female athletes at an international event – but she says they were surprised to see how other teams had improved over the course of five years.

"The competition was held at the highest level. I have to confess that we had underestimated our opponents but all teams were much stronger than they were in Jakarta," Karimi said.

Prior to the Games, Karimi says, the Iranian players thought that only India would stand between them and a second successive gold medal, before a shock semifinal defeat (24-35) against the Chinese Taipei saw them share the third podium with Nepal. The Chinese Taipei went on to settle for the silver after being narrowly beaten (26-25) by India in the final showdown.

"The Chinese Taipei was truly a brilliant team. They shared the spoils with India in the group phase and lost in the final by a single point," Karimi said of the last-four opponent. "I guess we had a better chance against India, had we played them in the semifinals, as we prepared for months for a likely encounter against them. The Taipei team's style of play was in stark contrast with the Indians, that's why we were caught off guard against them. The Taipei players play with a lot of pace, whereas the Indians are more reliant on their physical strength," Karimi added.

The women's bronze was the first of the two kabaddi medals the Iranian teams collected in Hangzhou, with the men's side taking the silver after a controversial defeat against India in the final, having beaten them for the gold five years ago.

"Fifteen members of the Iranian men's team play in the Indian Pro Kabaddi League, which is a top-level competition, though it unfortunately does not feature female players. I wish I can play in the Indian league one day, if they decide to run the women's event," said Karimi, who believes the double achievements in the 2018 Asian Games "brought significant publicity for the sport among the Iranians."

Karimi's time in kabaddi has just been a part of an adventurous journey in the sports over the years, she says.

"I started with the athletics and volleyball when I was a kid and even spent some time in roller-skating and badminton. I embarked on a karate career when I was 10 and won several national medals and an Asian bronze during six years in the sport, before eventually becoming a kabaddi player. I've been a member of the national team for the past nine years," said the Iranian girl, who is also a fitness and swimming coach.

Marouf in contention as Iran names 4+2 shortlist for volleyball team job

Sports Desk

Former Iranian captain and world-class setter Saeed Marouf is a surprise candidate for the national team job after the Iranian Volleyball Federation unveiled a list of six coaches on Monday. The position has been vacant since Behrouz Ataei stepped down from his role in the aftermath of a 3-1 defeat against the Czech Republic midway through the FIVB Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Rio de Janeiro. Iran finished second from bottom in the eight-team table of Pool A, failing to secure direct qualification for next year's Paris Olympics, though the Asian powerhouse will have a second chance to seal a quota through the FIVB Men's World Ranking by the end of the preliminary phase of 2024 Volleyball Nations League.

"I spoke with Saeed last week and asked him to help the national team," Mohammadreza Davarzani, the chairman of the federation, said after Monday's Technical Committee meeting, adding: "He said he has no intention of re-summing his international career after his retirement in 2021, suggesting we stick with the rebuild project within the squad, but he would be thrilled to help the team in other capacities."

Marouf played an integral role during the so-called 'golden era' of the Iranian volleyball, leading the national team to double Asian Championships trophies as well as the gold medal at the Asian Games in 2014 and 2018. He was also a part of the team during the impressive campaigns at the 2014 World League, in which Iran finished fourth, and



FIVB

the Volleyball Nations League in 2019, when Iran made it to the Final Six in Chicago.

Also on the list is Russian Vladimir Alekno, who steered his country to a famous five-set victory over Brazil in the London 2012 final but has been without a team since parting ways with Iran after the Tokyo Olympics, as well as.

Gianlorenzo Blengini is believed to be Davarzani's favorite candidate, but Iran still faces a tough task in securing the 51-year-old Italian's services as he is under contract with Volley Lube club in his home country.

Blengini's fellow Italian Roberto Piazza, the Netherlands' coach in the Olympic qualifiers, is also in the list but, like his compatriot, is committed to club duty with All-

anz Milano in the Italian league. Payman Akbari is the other Iranian shortlisted, though few would fancy the 46-year-old – a decorated coach in domestic and continental club competitions – to be eventually handed the job. High-profile Belgian Vital Heynen is probably the most exciting name in the list for many Iranian fans.

Heynen, 54, led Germany to the bronze medal at the 2014 World Championships before his storied three-year spell on Poland's bench inspired the volleyball heavyweight to the world title in 2018, as well as a silver and a bronze at the Volleyball Nations League.

The Iranians, however, would best remember the Belgian for coaching Poland in some thrill-

ing matches against Iran over the years – including a five-setter won by Alekno's men in Tokyo. With Germany, Brazil, Poland, Canada, USA, and Japan having already joined host France, and Egypt likely to take the African slot for the Olympics, only four quotas remain up for grabs. As it stands in the FIVB ranking, third-placed Italy, Argentina (sixth), Slovenia (seventh), and Serbia (ninth) are the favorites to book a ticket for the French capital, with Iran lagging behind in the 15th place.

Davarzani, however, insisted that the new head coach, whoever that might be, will have to devise "a five-year strategy with the ultimate goal being a podium finish at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics."

Messi not thinking about long-term future after claiming eighth Ballon d'Or

Argentinian Lionel Messi holds the men's Ballon d'Or at the Chatelet Theatre, Paris, France, on October 30, 2023.

STEPHANIE LECOQ/REUTERS



AFP – Lionel Messi said Monday he was not thinking about his long-term future as he sought to enjoy winning the eighth Ballon d'Or of his storied career.

Messi, 36, succeeded Karim Benzema as winner of the prize, awarded on the back of his performances last season, when he inspired Argentina to glory at the World Cup in Qatar.

"The last one I won was also thanks to what we achieved with the Argentine national team in the Copa America (in 2021), but this one is much more special because it comes after we won the World Cup," Messi told various media including AFP after collecting his award at a ceremony in Paris.

"That is the trophy everyone wants to win the most, and it was a dream come true for me, my teammates and my country."

He dragged Argentina to a victory in Qatar that crowned his remarkable career and allowed him to see off stiff competition for the Ballon d'Or from Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland in particular.

Haaland came second in the final voting, with Mbappe third and Kevin De Bruyne in fourth place.

Former Barcelona superstar Messi scored seven times at the World Cup and was named the tournament's best player after Argentina beat France on penalties in the final in Doha.

Yet Messi, who won his first Ballon d'Or in 2009, also had an underwhelming final season at Paris Saint-Germain, before leaving to play for Inter Miami in Major League Soccer. He played down suggestions he could come back for another Ballon d'Or, possibly after the next World Cup in 2026, when he will be 39.

"I am not thinking about the long-term future. I am just enjoying the day to day at the moment," he said.

"We have a Copa America coming up in the United States, where I am now, in which we are the holders, so I am looking forward to coming into that in good shape and then just see how I am getting on from there."

Messi admitted on his return to the French capital that his two-year stint at PSG had not turned out the way he imagined upon signing from Barcelona in 2021.

"Things didn't turn out as I hoped but I enjoyed the city a lot, and my kids liked it a lot and found it hard to leave," he said.

"It is a spectacular city and I was lucky to live here. Football-wise it did not go the way I hoped but I prefer to remember the many good things."