

Iranian fencer Pakdaman on course for Paris spot



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Sports Desk

Ali Pakdaman is all but guaranteed a place in the saber competitions of the Paris Olympics in the summer after the Iranian fencer stood fifth in the latest FIE World Rankings. The 33-year-old Iranian collected 155,000 points to move up by two spots in the ranking, with Georgian Sandro Bazadze, Aron Szilagyi of Hungary – a silver medalist in the Tokyo Olympics – Egyptian Ziad Elsisy, and South Korea's Oh Sang-uk standing first to fourth respectively. Pakdaman grabbed a first individual medal in five years for the country at the Fencing World Cup in mid-February, when he beat Bazadze to reach the final showdown in Tbilisi, only to settle for the silver after a 15-7 defeat against Szilagyi.

Iran could miss Palma players for Futsal Asian Cup

Sports Desk

Iran faces the prospect of being without three instrumental players for the AFC Futsal Asian Cup, starting April 17 in Thailand.

Prolific pivot Hossein Tayyebi as well as Mohsen Oladqobad and Salar Aqapour play for Spanish Primera Division club Mallorca Palma and the reigning European champion is reluctant to release the trio for the Asian flagship international event as the tournament is not part of the FIFA international calendar.

The three players were named in Iran's provisional 25-man squad for the tournament as head coach Vahid Shamsaei is eager to dethrone defending champion Japan in Thailand.

In his first major tournament on Iran's bench, Shamsaei led the country to the Asian Cup final two years ago, before his side suffered a 3-2 defeat against the Blue Samurai

in Kuwait.

Shamsaei said last week that the Iranian federation and the Spanish team have been in talks in recent days, hoping the two sides would settle the issue in "a friendly and professional manner."

However, the Iranian futsal great confirmed the trio will play no part in the friendly tournament in Vietnam in the buildup to the Asian Cup.

The Iranians have played an essential role in Palma's domestic and continental campaigns this season.

Tayyebi bagged a double, taking his tally to 11 for the season, with Oladqobad also on the score-sheet as Palma defeated Cordoba 4-2 on Saturday to sit fourth in the Spanish top-flight table.

Oladqobad also scored four in three outings to help Palma win the group in the UEFA Futsal Champions League elite round last December and progress to the final tourna-

ment, starting in early May.

Chasing a record-extending 13th title, Iran will begin its Asian Cup campaign against Afghanistan on April 18 in Group D.

Shamsaei's men will then take on Bahrain before an encounter against Kuwait on the final day of the group stage.

The top two of each four groups will head into the quarterfinals with the final showpiece set to be staged in the Bangkok Arena on April 28 – less than a week before Palma is in the Champions League last-four action against either fellow-Spanish club Barcelona or the Portuguese archrivals Benfica and Sporting.



Palma's Iranian duo Hossein Tayyebi (R) and Moslem Oladqobad as well as Salar Aqapour (not pictured) hope the Spanish club will give them the go-ahead for participation in the AFC Futsal Asian Cup in April.

● MALLORCA PALMA FUTSAL



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Asian Age Group Aquatics Championships:

Iran off to flying water polo start with Malaysia rout

Sports Desk

Iran began its water polo campaign at the Asian Age Group Aquatics Championships in emphatic fashion, hammering Malaysia 34-3 in a Group B encounter in the Filipino city of Capas on Monday.

Ali Pirouzkah's boys won the first three quarters by 8-1, 9-1, and 7-1 scorelines respectively before scoring 10 without response in the final quarter.

Group B also Kazakhstan, Singapore, and Sri Lanka,

with Iran taking on the latter in its second outing today.

Singapore sits atop the group table with maximum points, thanks to back-to-back victories over Malaysia and Sri Lanka, while Kazakhstan opened its campaign with a 43-1 thrashing of Sri Lanka on Sunday.

The Iranian water polo team will be looking to continue the country's impressive run in the competition following medal-laden performances in the swimming and diving events.

Sam Vajer, who claimed

the best diver award in the 15-17 age class, bagged a couple of golds in the boys' board level 3m and 1m contests, as well as the platform silver.

He also teamed up with Kiminars Aslani to win the 3m synchronized springboard silver and finish on the third podium in the synchro board level final.

Samyar Abdoli, meanwhile, led the charge for the country in the swimming contests with a men's 50m freestyle gold in the over-18 class, while he was

part of the four-man team alongside Homer Abbasi, Mehrshad Afghari, and Matin Sohran that won the 4X100m freestyle relay bronze.

Mohammad-Mahdi Gholami also enjoyed a prolific campaign with five medals in the 13-14 age category despite leaving Capas without a gold – grabbing double silvers in the 200m individual medley and 200m butterfly events – as Iran finished with three golds plus seven silvers and bronzes apiece.



● IRSF

Foden is best player in Premier League, Guardiola says after derby triumph

REUTERS – Phil Foden is the best player in the Premier League on current form and will become a Manchester City legend, manager Pep Guardiola said after his second-half double inspired a crucial 3-1 comeback win against Manchester United on Sunday. City were utterly dominant but still trailing to a spectacular eighth-minute pile-driver by Marcus Rashford when forward Foden took centre stage in the second half. The 23-year-old local boy struck a sublime left-foot shot into the roof of the net in the 56th minute

and then beat Andre Onana with a precise finish after 80 minutes.

Erling Haaland's 18th league goal of the season rounded things off in stoppage time – his sixth goal of the week – but nothing could steal the limelight from Foden who now has 11 league goals this season, equaling his record.

"It is the amount of games he is playing. He was always a talented player but now he is more mature and understands more the game, especially defensively," Guardiola told the BBC. "He can play middle, right, make moments

and cut inside, play in the left, scoring from the left. What can I say? He is the best player in the Premier League right now for the amount of things he does. Unbelievable." Foden's quality and level of consistency is making him undroppable even in a squad laced with world class players. His current form also makes it unthinkable that he cannot be accommodated in Gareth Southgate's England side.

"We don't negotiate over that," Guardiola said when asked about Foden's defensive discipline. "The guy who doesn't do that doesn't

stay in the team. He loves football, he lives for football. He is a joy and his work ethic is unbelievable."

Guardiola was no less effusive in his praise of Foden when talking to Sky Sports.

"He will already be a legendary player because in a short age, the games played, the minutes, the goals scored, the titles won and he is from the home and that is why the connection with the fans is unbelievable," Guardiola said.

"He is the player of the season. No-one has been so decisive for us as him this season."



Manchester City's Phil Foden (R) scores his second during a 3-1 win against Manchester United in the Etihad Stadium, Manchester, Britain, on March 3, 2024.

● JAY BARRATT/AMA