

Persepolis scapegoat Zahedi relishing in life in Japanese top flight



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The wonder goal against Gamba Osaka in the J1 League on Friday was the latest episode in a roller-coaster season for Avispa Fukuoka's Iranian striker Shahab Zahedi.

The Iranian picked up the ball midway through his own half, saw the keeper off his line, and suddenly unleashed a left-footed strike from over 70 yards out which found the back the net as Avispa went on to win 1-0 and end a run of four successive draws.

When Zahedi, 28, decided to leave Persian Gulf Pro League giant Persepolis in March to become the first Iranian to play in the Japanese top flight, few fans and pundits fancied him to find instant success in the Far East.

However, being no stranger to twists and turns throughout his career, Zahedi has enjoyed a flying start to life in the J1 League as his goal against Gamba was his sixth in eight matches for Avispa.

Zahedi, whose previous spell in the Tehran Reds shirt had finished with four cameo appearances a decade ago, rejoined the Iranian capital side on loan from Ukrainian club Zorya Lugansk in the summer with high expectations weighing on his shoulders. He returned to the Iranian league after six impressive seasons across Europe – during which he bagged 50 goals and 14 assists in an overall 148 games for Iceland's IBV, Zorya and Olimpik Donetsk in Ukraine, as well as Hungarian side Puskás



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With Issa Alekisir and Mahdi Abdi leaving Persepolis for the start of the new season, Zahedi was left with the enormous task of leading the line for the defend-

ing league and cup champion, which has been crying out for a prolific marksman ever since Ali Alipour left for Portuguese league in September 2020. It took Zahedi five games into the

season to get off the mark for the Reds – the winner in the home victory over Golgothar last October which was followed by a hat-trick in the 3-1 win at Paykan. The Iranian had to wait another

seven matches to find a league goal, when he headed home on the half-hour mark to secure maximum points against Nassaji Mazandaran before he netted a sublime scissor kick in the 1-1

draw at Mes Rafsanjan on the following matchday.

Finding the net once in the Reds' ill-fated AFC Champions League campaign – a header in the 2-1 home defeat against Al Duhail which saw Persepolis crash out of the group stage – Zahedi had seven goals and two assists under his belt and was the club's top scorer for the season when he made his final appearance for the club against Mes on the first day of the new year.

Still, constantly blamed for the team's lack of efficiency in front of the goal, Zahedi hardly won the Persepolis supporters over and his decision to skip a couple of training sessions to force a winter exit did not seem to disturb any of the Reds faithful, who were welcoming back Alekisir from Sepahan, while new Uzbek signing Oston Urunov added more depth to the frontline.

Zahedi, meanwhile, wasted no time in making his mark for the new employers as he contributed with an assist in his debut as a substitute against FC Tokyo before scoring in back-to-back matches, the later coming in a 1-0 triumph over former Asian champion Kashima Antlers in April.

For all their unimpressive campaigns in Europe this season, Porto talisman Mahdi Taremi and Roma striker Sardar Azmoun may still be the favorites to make a frontline partnership for the national team, but few would argue against in-form Zahedi – capped only once by Iran – deserving a call-up by head coach Amir Qalenoee for the World Cup qualifiers against Hong Kong and Uzbekistan in June.

Iranian Esmaeili heads into Asian youth boxing final

Sports Desk

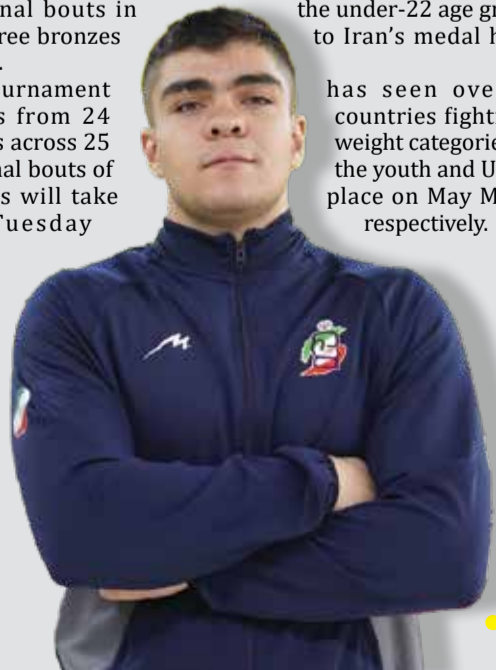
Iranian boxer Amir Esmaeili marched into the final showpiece of his respective weight class at the ASBC Asian U22 & Youth Boxing Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan.

Representing the country in the men's youth 92kg contests, Esmaeili knocked out high-profile Indian boxer Aryan in the first round to book a final place.

Meanwhile, Amir-Reza Soltani (54kg) and Amir-Reza Malk-Khat-abi (86kg) fell short in the last-four bouts against opponents from Uzbekistan to finish their campaigns with a couple of bronze medals.

Mohammad Mahshari (75kg), Ali Seyyed-Sadri (86kg), and Reza Khalilzadeh (+92kg) also suffered defeats in their semifinal bouts in the under-22 age group to add three bronzes to Iran's medal haul in Astana.

The tournament has seen over 390 boxers from 24 countries fighting for medals across 25 weight categories. The final bouts of the youth and U22 categories will take place on May Monday and Tuesday respectively.



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James favored to stay with Lakers as potential suitors emerge

REUTERS – LeBron James is going to take some time away from the court to decide where – and even if – he will play his 22nd NBA season.

The Lakers were back in the news with Friday's firing of coach Darvin Ham after two seasons. Who general manager Rob Pelinka tabs to replace Ham could also weigh heavily on James' decision.

James could choose to become a free agent, or he could decide to pick up his \$51.4 million player option for the final year of his current contract. At 39, he could even opt to retire.

The Lakers are the -500 favorite at DraftKings to be the team James begins the 2024-25 season with, but the sportsbook is also offering odds on nine other potential NBA destinations in Cleveland Cavaliers (+1200), Golden State Warriors (+2000), New York Knicks (+2500), Oklahoma City Thunder (+4000), Phoenix Suns (+4000), San Antonio Spurs (+4500), Chicago Bulls (+10000), and Portland Trail Blazers (+20000).

A return to the purple and gold remains the heavy favorite, and the public has backed that likelihood with 32 percent of the money wagered at the book. However, the second-most popular choice has been a move to Oklahoma City to pair with star Shai Gilgeous-Alexander. At



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+4000 longshot odds, the Thunder have attracted 26 percent of the money. Tied for third is Golden State and Philadelphia, with both backed by 13 percent. James just completed his 21st NBA season, which included his 20th consecutive All-Star Game selection. He is a four-time NBA champion, a four-time NBA Finals MVP and a four-time regular-season MVP. Asked about taking any confidence moving forward from the Lakers pushing the defending champion Denver Nuggets in the series that went five games,

much thought," and his priority was returning home to spend time with his family. James declined to address his future following the Lakers' first-round playoff exit, offering only that, "I haven't given it

James said, "No, 'cause we lost. ... I'm not a 'participation' guy. We lost and you move on and see how you can get better. "Our season has been derailed all season with ... injuries and guys in and out. I talked about it all year. ... It's hard to say who we are, what we can be 'cause we have yet to be whole. I think we were only probably whole one or two times this year. I know one of them was during the in-season tournament, we got whole and we showed what we (are) capable of doing.