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Iranian speed climber Reza Alipour says he pursued the Olympic berth for "20 long years", though a place in Paris will not be the ceiling of his ambitions.

The 30-year-old Iranian made history when he punched his ticket for the French capital in the Olympic Qualifier Series in Budapest last week, becoming the first climber to represent the country in the Games.

"I finished in the top six in the Shanghai series and collected 31 points to edge closer to the Olympic spot. I ended 13th in Budapest but an overall tally of 63 points over the two series was enough for me to be among the five athletes progressing to the Games. In fact, the event in China was the launch pad for my qualification," Alipour told Mehr News Agency.

"I worked my socks off for 20 long years to reach the Olympics," said the Iranian, adding: "I'm not done yet and will have further goals in Paris, though I will keep it to myself as I don't want to raise the expectations. I'll just keep working hard to deliver

my best performance in the Games."

Alipour's record-breaking performance in the 2017 Climbing World Cup – where the footage of him scaling the 15-meter wall in 5.48 seconds went viral on social media – saw the Iranian earn the nicknames of 'Persian Cheetah' and 'Usain Bolt of speed climbing' before he faded away from the international stage over the course of the following five years.

When he stepped into last year's Hangzhou Asian Games he was regarded as an underdog as some high-profile names of the sport – including Indonesian then-world record holder Veddriq Leonardo and world silver medalist Long Jinbao of China – competed for the top prize.

However, the Iranian beat all odds to leave China with the coveted gold and will now be seeking a more prestigious triumph in Paris.

"Nothing is predictable in climbing. Milliseconds literally play a decisive part in the sport and that is why you can't be confident of one's victory in a competition. The battle against the gravity is the major challenge for every climber."

Alipour 'not done yet' as he gears up for Paris wall



● DIMITRIS TOSIDIS/grapped.com

Iranian Moghanlou set to join Emirati Ittihad Kalba: Report

Sports Desk

Iranian international striker Shahriar Moghanlou is on the verge of signing for UAE Pro League club Ittihad Kalba, Varzesh3 reported, citing Dubai-based newspaper Emarat Al Youm.

Moghanlou, 29, who was part of the national team in January's AFC Asian Cup, was the leading marksman in the Persian Gulf Pro League in the past two seasons, finishing

third in the table with Sepahan in the previous campaign.

He then found the net twice to help Sepahan beat Mes Rafsanjan 2-0 in the final showpiece of the Iranian domestic cup, Khorramshahr Liberation Memorial, earlier in the month – a first trophy for the Isfahan-based club in nine years.

Should the deal go through, Moghanlou will likely team up with fellow-Iranian Mahdi Qayedi, though the latter could also be set

for a new chapter in his career after an impressive loan season with Ittihad Kalba, during which he bagged 16 goals and six assists in 34 games across all competitions.

Iranian top-flight team Esteghlal has reportedly approached Qayedi's parent club Shabab Al Ahli in recent days to seal a second loan move for the Iranian winger, though the Emirati side's asking price could see the Tehran Blues walk away from negotiations.



Sepahan striker Shahriar Moghanlou celebrates a goal during a 2-0 victory over Mes Rafsanjan in the Iranian Hazfi Cup final in Tehran, Iran, on June 20, 2024.
● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

Belgium, France in head-on clash, both battling first round blues



REUTERS – By this stage of the European Championship, favourites France and contenders Belgium would have wanted to be well into their stride and hitting their straps as they enter the knockout stages. Instead, the neighbours go spluttering into the last 16 and into a head-on collision in Duesseldorf on Monday after both failed to finish top of their first-round group.

France's much-vaunted attack is suffering from a crisis of confidence and coach Didier Deschamps, usually a steady hand guiding the squad, looks unsure of what his next move will be.

Belgium will have had some motivation sucked out of their cause following an astonishingly hostile reaction from their own supporters after they limped into the next stage of the tournament in Germany.

Despite Wednesday's draw with Ukraine assuring them progress, they were subjected to loud barracking

from their fans and have since closed ranks.

Captain Kevin De Bruyne did not take kindly to the abuse. His attitude and demeanour will set the tone for the rest of the Belgian side as they look to leave behind them the limp performances from the group stage.

Romelu Lukaku needs to find his scoring touch after a number of missed opportunities in the tournament. His record 85 goals for Belgium does not include any from Euro 2024, and overall he has a poor scoring record at major tournaments.

Few would have envisaged a French forward line failing to score in open play in their opening three matches at the tournament. One of their two goals was a penalty from Kylian Mbappe, the other an own goal from Austria in their opening game.

Deschamps must now decide whether to restore Antoine Griezmann to the line-up and pair him up front with Mbappe.



● MASASHI HARA/GETTY IMAGES

Griezmann has been a long-time mainstay for Deschamps but was dropped for their last game, a 1-1 draw with Poland, which allowed Austria to emerge unexpected winners of Group D, which also included the Netherlands.

Belgium is France's oldest and most frequent opponent. The first international for both countries was a 3-3 draw in Brussels 120 years ago. Belgium lead the win count of 75 past meetings 30-26 but France won the last two – the semi-final at the 2018



● ARIEL SCHALIT/AP

World Cup in St Petersburg and the Nations League semi-final in Turin in October, 2021.

The winner of Monday's clash at the Duesseldorf Arena will take on Portugal or Slovenia in the quarter-finals.