

# Iranian fencers to take a shot at Olympic history



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour  
Staff writer

Iranian saber team will be hoping to round off years of progress by grabbing a first-ever Olympic medal when the sporting extravaganza gets underway in Paris in less than three weeks' time.

"Iranian fencing has been craving for Olympic glory for 12 years. I think the Games owe us a medal," said the Iranian head coach Payman Fakhri, whose team will be represented by Ali Pakdaman, Mohammad Rahbari, Mohammad Fotouhi, and Farzad Baher in the French capital's Grand Palais on July 31. "I don't know if it is written in the stars for the Iranian team,

but I'm sure this group of fencers have reached the maturity to win an Olympic medal," added Fakhri, who took charge of the national team for a second spell in June.

His men made it to the team saber final at the Asian Championships in Kuwait but came short against fencing powerhouse South Korea, which featured two members of the Tokyo Olympic gold-winning team in Oh Sanguk and Gu Bongil.

Iranian captain Pakdaman, meanwhile, is also set to be a part of the individual contests in Paris through the FIE ranking.

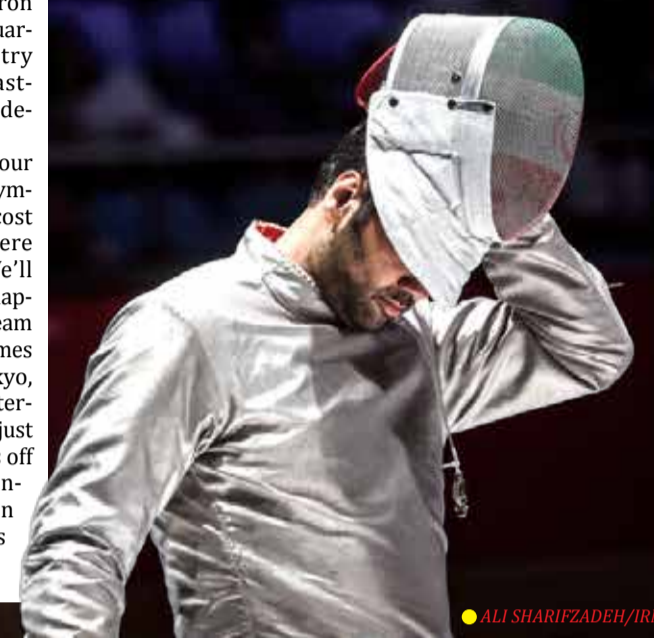
"We've enjoyed all sorts of success in recent years," Pakdaman said in a training session attended by Iranian Sports Minister Kioumars Hashemi on Saturday.

"We've excelled at different Fencing World Cup events. We came out on top against Italy in its own backyard in 2019. We've beaten Hungary. Iran has truly become a household name in the sport and the Olympic medal is the only piece of glory eluding the country. The Paris Olympics could be a turning point for Iranian fencing," added the world number five in the Olympic qualification ranking. Iran came closest to the Olympic podium in Rio 2016, where Mojtaba Abedini suffered a last-four heartbreak against American Daryl Homer before falling to a loss to prominent South Korean Kim Jung-hwan in the battle for bronze.

The campaign in Tokyo, however, was one to forget for Iran as Abedini and Rahbari were

knocked out in the round of 16 and Pakdaman was beaten by eventual gold winner Áron Szilágyi of Hungary in the quarterfinals, while the country failed to go beyond the last-eight round after a narrow defeat against Italy.

"We've surely learned from our mistakes in the previous Olympics. Refereeing decisions cost us against Italy and we were unlucky to lose 45-44. We'll have to make sure it won't happen this time around. The team started preparing for the Games right after the event in Tokyo, taking part in numerous international competitions, and I just hope all the hard work pays off in Paris," said Rahbari, an individual bronze medalist in Kuwait as well as last year's Asian Games.



● ALI SHARIFZADEH/IRNA

## Morais to stay on as Sepahan manager, club confirms



● PAYAM SANI/IRNA

### Sports Desk

Portuguese head coach Jose Morais will spend a third season at Sepahan, the Persian Gulf Pro League club confirmed on Sunday.

The news ends weeks of speculation swirling around the Sepahan bench following the final victory over Mes Rafsanjan in the Iranian domestic cup, Khorramshahr Liberation Memorial, in June – a first trophy for the top-flight side in nine years.

The Portuguese is to return from vacation in the coming days as Sepahan's first training session for the new season will begin by the end of the week, the Isfahan-based side said in a statement.

The club's first game of the new

campaign will come on August 6 at Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, where Morais's men will host Emirati side Shabab Al-Ahli in the preliminary round of the inaugural AFC Champions League Elite season.

The winner of the tie will play away to Qatar Stars League's Al-Gharafa a week later for a place in the 12-team league phase of the competition in the West region.

Morais, 58, led his team to the runner-up spot in the Iranian league in his first season in charge, before a controversy-laden campaign saw Sepahan finish third behind Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal last term.

Widely regarded as the favorite to lift the league trophy after some emphatic

victories in the early stages of the season, Sepahan had to part ways with several signings midway through the season due to the Iranian Football Federation's financial rules and fell short in the title race in the second half of the campaign.

Morais faces the prospect of being without two instrumental figures in his squad for the next season as Iranian international striker Shahriar Moghanlou, the leading marksman in the league with 16 goals, is on the verge of joining Ittihad Kalba in the UAE Pro League, while prolific fullback Ramin Rezaeian, who bagged 14 goals and 12 assists across all competitions, has announced the cup final against Mes was his last appearance in the Sepahan shirt.

## 'Something special': Koeman relishes semi-final clash with England

**THE GUARDIAN** – Ronald Koeman savoured the prospect of a Euro 2024 semi-final against England as "something special" after the Netherlands booked their place with a thrilling comeback win over Turkey.

Two of Europe's old powers will meet in a major tournament for the first time since 1996 after Stefan de Vrij and an own goal from Mert Muldur overturned a half-time deficit. Koeman's players rode their luck late on but saw out a storm of pressure and face what promises to be a high-octane occasion in Dortmund.

"For the whole nation it is something special," Koeman said, reflecting on the fact that the Netherlands had not reached a Euros semi-final since 2004. "We are a small nation and to be part of the semi-finals with England, France and Spain we are really proud to get the opportunity."

Twelve days previously

Koeman had criticised his side for a poor performance against Austria but this time he praised their attitude and application in a deafening, sometimes impossibly intense, environment at Olympiastadion. "It was really an emotional match," he said. "We had a big heart and we sometimes get criticism about that – that we don't have that compared to other nations. The players showed a big heart after going 1-0 down. We had to suffer but finally it is a great success."

England were taken the distance by Switzerland earlier in the evening but Koeman played down any notion that extra time and penalties will have taken a greater toll on Gareth Southgate's team. "If you win the match that always gives a good feeling," he said. "We need to recover, like England. It is not a physical difference between them and us. We played on the same day, we need to travel like them.

It is not the physical [aspect] that will decide the result."

Asked if he would have a preferred final opponent, Koeman offered a clear choice. "First of all we need to fight to win the semi-final," he said. "It will be a great night on Wednesday between two big nations historically. If we play the final, my preference is Spain because we had France in the group stage."

The Turkey manager, Vincenzo Montella, whose players were denied by some last-ditch defending and a brilliant stoppage-time save from Bart Verbruggen, saw honour in defeat. "I think we are among the top five in the European Championship," he said. "We are proud that we have gained an identity by feeling our whole country behind us and adopting our strategy. Our players should be kissed on the forehead. We should be really proud: we have come this far, but could have achieved even more."



● NETHERLANDS' head coach Ronald Koeman celebrates his team's last-eight victory over Turkey in Euro 2024 in Berlin, Germany, on July 6, 2024.  
● RONNY HARTMANN/AFP

