

Underestimated Skocic out to showcase credentials on Iran return



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Staff writer

New Tractor head coach Dragan Skocic will have a point to prove once he begins his reign in the upcoming Persian Gulf Pro League season.

Tractor will be the Croatian's fourth job in the Iranian top flight over the past decade – following Malavan, Foolad Khuzestan, and San'at Naft Abadan – before his controversial appointment to the national team role in for the 2022 World Cup qualifiers.

The 55-year-old coach, who leaves his country's under-21 side for Iran, must have always felt hard done by, perhaps rightly so, since he was sacked by the Iranian Football Federation in September 2022 – fourth months before the World Cup finals in Qatar.

He took over of the Iranian bench in the most critical circumstances as back-to-back defeats against Bahrain and Iraq under Belgian Marc Wilmots had left the Asian powerhouse on the verge of a shock exit in the preliminary

round of the qualifiers.

However, Skocic steered his team to 11 wins in 12 matches and a place in Qatar with three games to spare in the final qualification group phase, with Iran's two defeats in his 18-game spell over two years coming in an away dead-rubber in South Korea and a friendly against Algeria.

Despite a low-profile career before the Iran role as well as the questions being asked of his tactical acumen and control over a star-studded dressing room, the Croatian still believed he had earned the right to sit on the bench against England, Wales, and the United States in the global showpiece.

Mahdi Taj, nonetheless, had other ideas as he axed Skocic two days after being reelected as the head of the federation to bring back fan-favorite Portuguese Carlos Queiroz, whose spot-on defensive tactics had led to some decent performances by Team Melli against international heavyweights Argentina, Spain, and Portugal in the 2014 and 2018 World Cups.

Iranians hoped their team would

achieve a first progress to the World Cup knockouts at the sixth time of asking but defeats against England and USA either side of a 2-0 victory over Wales saw Queiroz's side finish third in the group.

And now, four years after an impressive stint at minnow side San'at Naft, Skocic will be back to prove he could be the right man for every daunting task in the Iranian football as the scale of the new job is nothing like he faced in his previous Pro League roles.

Despite a massive spending spree by owner Mohammadreza Zonouzi in recent years, Tractor has failed to lift a maiden top-flight trophy and a serious title charge is the least the club's devoted fans will expect from their new man-

ager.

The Croatian is set to be blessed by a group of marquee signings during the summer transfer window, with Iranian international goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand and wizard winger Mahdi Torabi – the linchpins of Persepolis's domestic dominance over the past eight seasons – as well as the Tehran Reds' prolific fullback Danial Esmaeilifar all on their way to play for Tractor next season. Still, being Tractor's 14th coach since 2018, Skocic will have to long for Zonouzi's patience and trust during his time in northwest Iran.



IRNA



Spanish teenager Yamal coy over 'dream come true' wonder strike



Spain teenager Lamine Yamal on Tuesday sought to play down excitement over his wonder goal against France, but said reaching the European Championship final was a dream come true for him – and his mother too.

Sixteen-year-old Yamal eclipsed Brazilian great Pele to become the youngest player to score in a World Cup or Euros with a stunning 21st-minute strike that sailed into the top corner, helping Spain come from a goal down to beat France 2-1.

He was asked how he felt about scoring what could be the goal of Euro 2024.

"I'm really happy for the victory and for getting to the final. I don't know if it's the best goal of the tournament but it's the most special for me because getting to a final with the national team in the Euros is something super special for me," he told reporters.

With his creativity, pace and panache, Yamal has glittered as part of a Spain side who have won all their six matches at Euro 2024. They are now within reach of a record-breaking fourth Euros title.

His coach Luis de la Fuente described Yamal's goal as "a touch of genius".

Yamal was asked if he was aware he had become an icon of the tournament and said it did not matter what people thought of his individual contribution.

"I try not to look at that too much. I don't know if I'm the icon or not. That doesn't really help anything on the pitch. I need to help my team, that's what I try to do and that's what I tried to do today," he said.

"I was really happy after the final whistle. It's a dream come true, reaching a final with the senior national team."

He added: "Even my mum said

it was her dream too. So I'm really happy that was my goal against France, my first goal against France, in a semi-final." Yamal's goal and defeat of France was the perfect reply to an earlier remark by French midfielder Adrien Rabiot, who had reportedly said the impressive Yamal would have to do much more against Les Bleus if he wanted to play in the final.

Yamal during the match ran to a television camera yelling "speak now, speak now". He was asked who he was talking to, but declined to say.

"The person I'm talking about, this person will know who this person is," he said.

Lamine Yamal (19) scores Spain's equalizer during a 2-1 victory over France in the Euro 2024 last four in Munich, Germany, on July 9, 2024.

TOM WELLER/AP

Alcaraz fears Medvedev 'wall' as he targets Wimbledon final

AFP – Carlos Alcaraz described his Wimbledon semi-final opponent Daniil Medvedev as "a wall" on Tuesday as the two players talked up each other's strengths ahead of their blockbuster clash.

Friday's semi-final will be a repeat show of last year, where Alcaraz beat Russia's Medvedev in straight sets on the way to his first Wimbledon crown.

The Spanish world number three came through 5-7, 6-4, 6-2, 6-2 against America's Tommy Paul in the quarter-finals on Tuesday while Medvedev outlasted top seed Jannik Sinner 6-7 (7/9), 6-4, 7-6 (7/4), 2-6, 6-3.

Alcaraz, who leads Medvedev 4-2 in head-to-heads, said it would be

tough to face the former US Open winner, picking out his ability to get the ball back in play.

"The most difficult thing about facing Daniil, or the most special thing about him, is he can reach every ball," he said.

"Well, he is like a wall. Every ball bounces back. I feel like I can hit an unbelievable shot, the ball is going to bounce back."

Medvedev, for his part, said three-time Grand Slam champion Alcaraz, 21, was a danger anywhere on the court.

Alcaraz said he was delighted that opponents feared him in such a way because it meant they had to "focus on every shot".

"You know whatever shot you hit,

he can hit a winner from there," said Medvedev. "So you try to make his life difficult. You try to hit the shot as good as you can."

"Maybe he goes for it and he cannot make it. But that's pretty special because there are not many players like this."

The 28-year-old added: "Carlos can do whatever from any position and that's not easy to play against."



Carlos Alcaraz hits a backhand shot during a win against Tommy Paul in Wimbledon in London, United Kingdom, on July 9, 2024.

JOHN PATRICK FLETCHER/SHUTTERSTOCK

