

# From Tokyo ashes to Paris podium: Kiani's journey toward Olympic milestone



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Nahid Kiani felt like the loneliest person in the world when she arrived at Tehran's Imam Khomeini Airport following a disappointing taekwondo campaign at the Tokyo Olympics, as only family members were there to welcome her back to the country.

A politically-charged contest had seen Kiani square off against fellow-Iranian Kimia Alizadeh, representing the IOC refugee team, in the first round and a defeat meant her run in what she later described in an Instagram post as the "Covid-hit and unpeaceful Olympics" came to an end after a single bout.

The overwhelming consequences of the result were hard to deal with for the Iranian girl, for whom "overcoming the unpleasant circumstances in the aftermath of the defeat were one of the toughest things to do in my life."

"I was devastated by the fact that a part of my compatriots cheered my opponent's victory, which is why I had to seek professional help from a therapist," Kiani told Varzesh3 in January.

Three years on, the 26-year-old, along with other three Iranian taekwondo medalists, received a hero's reception on her arrival in the same airport, having etched her name into history books of the Iranian sport at the Paris Olympics. The country's maiden female gold medalist in the World Championships, Kiani built on her historic success in 2023 toward another milestone in Paris, as she became the first Iranian girl to reach the final showpiece in any sporting event over the 30 editions of the modern Games.

Her -57kg campaign finished with a straight-round loss to South Korean Kim Yu-jin, though the precious silver medal was still enough to make August 8 "the sweetest day of my life," as she had promised in the buildup to the event.

"I had beaten the Korean opponent in the previous meetings but she was in her best form in Paris," Kiani told Mehr News Agency, adding: "There were valuable lessons for me in the Olympics, which I am sure will contribute to my achievements in the future."



Kiani's journey in the French capital's Grand Palais, ironically, began with another clash against Alizadeh, now competing under the Bulgarian flag. All the sad memories of Tokyo were relived when Alizadeh won a thrilling first round 10-7.

Kiani, however, was not to back off this time around and drew the contest level in the second round before producing a heroic fightback in the final 20 seconds in the third to tie the scoreline at 6-6 and eventually sealing the victory on criteria. Kiani went on to beat Tunisian Chaima Toumi in the quarterfinals and then

came out on top in successive rounds against Lebanese Laetitia Aoun for a historic place in the final showdown. Sports fans might say it just takes three victories to stand on the Olympic podium.

For the athletes, though, it is about years of dedication and hard work to succeed in the grandest sporting extravaganza. "Those who have experienced the Olympic setback know how tough it is to recover from the mental and emotional blow. That was the case for me three years ago, but I rose up again and promised myself to get the job done in Paris,"

Kiani said. "I had visualized myself with an Olympic medal time and again before the Games. I was fully aware of what was to come my way in Paris, and was confident August 8 would be the day that all the years of tireless efforts would pay off."

Kiani can rest and enjoy all the publicity for now, but it will be no time before she embarks on preparations for the next challenge: A world title defense in Wuxi, China, next year or, perhaps, a shot at further Olympic history; the ultimate prize itself in LA 2028.



Iran's Nahid Kiani celebrates her first-round victory over Bulgaria's representative Kimia Alizadeh in the women's taekwondo -57kg contests at the Paris Olympics on August 8, 2024.

● WORLD TAEKWONDO

## Inzaghi lets off steam after Inter lose lead in late draw at Genoa



Inter coach Simone Inzaghi reacts during the match against Genoa in their Serie A opener in Genoa, Italy, on August 17, 2024.

● ALBERTO LINGRIA/REUTERS



REUTERS -

Inter Milan manager Simone Inzaghi said his side were sloppy in failing to protect their late lead, as Genoa secured a last-gasp draw in the first Serie A match of the season on Saturday.

Inter were pegged back to a 2-2 draw at Genoa after a stoppage-time goal from Junior Messias, who scored on the rebound after a penalty awarded for a handball, cancelling out Marcus Thuram's second goal for Inter six minutes before time.

"A team like ours, leading in the 84th

minute, shouldn't concede any more goals, especially in that way," Inzaghi told DAZN after the match.

"Football owes you nothing. Today we had to give a bit more," he said.

"Conceding two goals like that makes it difficult to win matches. Credit to Genoa, but it's a draw that doesn't leave us much satisfaction given what we created."

He said Inter would struggle to defend their Serie A title playing as they did in the match.

"Yes, winning is difficult, winning it again even more so. The boys know it, they are mature enough and that's why I'm disappointed."

Inzaghi added that, despite the hectic season for several of the players, including the recent European Championship and Copa America, there was no excuse for their performance.

Inter will next host Lecce on Aug. 24 in Serie A.

## Barca boss Flick hopeful Gundogan will stay this season



● GETTY IMAGES

REUTERS - New Barcelona manager Hansi Flick said he expects Ilkay Gundogan to stay this season after reports linked the midfielder with a move away from the LaLiga club. The 33-year-old German international is in the final year of his Barcelona contract, having joined from Manchester City in 2023.

Gundogan is one of the top earners at the club, and Spanish media reports suggested he might leave after the signing of midfielder Dani Olmo.

Gundogan missed Barcelona's opening league match, a 2-1 win at Valencia on Saturday due to a minor injury. «(Gundogan) hurt his eyebrow on Monday and that's why he's staying at home,» Flick told reporters after the game.

"I appreciate what kind of player he is and what he is like as a person. I've talked to him a lot, but it's something between me and him, we have a good relationship. I know him well. I have the feeling that he will stay."

Barcelona host Athletic Bilbao next in LaLiga on Saturday.