

Iranian women to chase historic podium in Asian Handball Championship

Sports Desk

Iranian women's team will be looking to make history by winning a first-ever medal at the Asian Handball Championship in New Delhi, India, where four quotas for next year's World Championship will be on the line.

Iranian girls secured the berth for the global showdown in the previous two editions of the Asian event, but ultimately missed out on the podium following defeats against Kazakhstan and China in the third-place playoffs.

Nashmin Shafeian's team will get its campaign underway against Asian powerhouse Japan – runner-up to South Korea in the last five editions – in Group B on Tuesday, in a repeat of the 2022 semifinal, where the Japanese walked away with a comfortable 43-19 victory. Iran will take on the host on Wednesday, before concluding the group phase against Hong Kong two days later at the Indira Gandhi Arena.

"The first game will be a



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really tough one as Japan is one the best teams in the continent, but we will be looking to take all points

from the next two outings to clinch a world berth, and then hopefully battle for a podium finish," Shafeian

said before her team headed to New Delhi on Friday. The bad news for the Iranian head coach is that she

will have to do without star player Fatemeh Merrikh, who missed the Indian trip after suffering an elbow in-

jury on the eve of the tournament.

With South Korea and Japan being the clear favor-

ites to square off in a sixth successive final showdown, it will likely be a three-way battle between China, Kazakhstan, and Iran for a third-place finish.

China and Kazakhstan are in Group A of the eight-team competition – also featuring 16-time champion South Korea and Singapore – and their encounter on Tuesday will likely decide the runner-up spot in the final standing of the group.

"Our top priority is to seal the World Championship quota, and then we will set our sights on the biggest achievement of our careers, which is an Asian medal," Iranian captain Mina Vatanparast told ISNA, adding: "To that end, I believe we will have overcome China."

"We have played against all of our group opponents before. Japan is a strong team, not only in Asia but on a global level. We defeated Hong Kong in 2018, and beat India by a high margin two years ago, though they will be a much better side at home," added Vatanparast.

Iran's Maqsoodlou finishes third in Int'l President Cup

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Iranian chess grandmaster Parham Maqsoodlou settled for a third-place finish in the 3rd International President Cup in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Maqsoodlou, who captained the Iranian gold-winning team in last year's Asian Games, defeated the host's inter-

national master Saidakbar Saydaliev to finish his campaign with seven points.

This was a sixth win for the Iranian second-seed in Tashkent, with his sole loss coming against Uzbek international master Ortik Nigmatov in the second round. Indian grandmaster Nihal Sarin tallied 7.5

points to win the tournament, which was held in a nine-round Swiss format, with Uzbek GM Javokhir Sindarov standing runner-up with seven points.

Seyyed Mohammad-Amin Tabatabaei was the other Iranian in the tournament, scoring 5.5 points, courtesy of four wins, three draws, and two

losses, to finish 26th in the final standing. Compared to its previous two editions, this year's tournament was the biggest and strongest yet, with 120 players participating in the A Open tournament that boasted a 2401 average rating, with 24 grandmasters among that group.



● IRNA

Onus on Guardiola to prove himself amid City's winless slump

REUTERS – With Manchester City mired in a six-game winless slump and facing one of their biggest challenges this season at Liverpool today, manager Pep Guardiola said the onus was on him to prove he can right the ship.

A loss at Anfield would leave Guardiola's men 11 points adrift of the leaders in the Premier League title race, but the Spaniard said he was thinking big picture rather than the potential ramifications of one game.

"Of course, I am thinking what I can do to help them (the players) but in the long career as a player and a manager you live these situations," said Guardiola, who recently signed a two-year contract extension.

"When you live it – accept it and challenge it. No com-

plaining, no blaming, no pointing the figure or running from your responsibility. If you don't win, you're in trouble, I know that," he added.

"The moment I feel I am not positive for the club, another one (manager) will come but I want the opportunity to try it and I want to rebuild the team in many aspects from now on until the end of the season and the next seasons. I ask for that challenge and this opportunity to do it," he continued, in an answer that stretched for nearly four minutes.

"I know what we need, what we have to do. We don't have the consistency we had right now but which team during 10 years in the world has been consistent, tell me one. They don't exist – not in NBA, tennis, golf.

"It proves how we are as sportsmen and competitors. It is easiest when you have 10, 12 games in a row and everyone is fit and in their prime. I have to prove myself now. I have to find a solution and a way to do it and I am trying every day." City have been stung by injuries to key players but Guardiola kept his cards close to his chest about who might be fit to play today, saying: "We will see." A 4-0 rout by Tottenham Hotspur at The Etihad last weekend marked their third successive Premier League loss and a defeat at Anfield would be their first four-game losing streak in the top flight since 2007. It would also surpass their total number of losses from the whole 2023-24 season. City fans can take comfort

in the fact that their side have climbed back from deficits of eight points or more to win the league four times with Guardiola at the helm.

While a defeat today would make City's title hopes "more difficult," Guardiola said, the Spaniard reiterated that he was not thinking of trophies.

"In the situation we're in, it's not realistic to think about big targets. The situation is to think about the next game and getting the momentum to continue and that will come back," he said.

"I have learned all my life to move forward in the good moments and the bad moments. It's how many times you stand up when again and again you fall. "We will be back, I know that. I don't know when that is – the truth."

