

Skocic hints at shock Tractor departure

Sports Desk

Croatian head coach Dragan Skocic said his tenure at Persian Gulf Pro League side Tractor could come to an end after only a season in charge, citing family reasons.

A former manager of the Iranian national team, Skocic was appointed to Tractor job last summer and led the club to a maiden Iranian top-flight trophy at the newly-finished campaign.

However, Tractor hierarchy may now need to find a new coach before next season begins following Skocic's shock revelation in an interview with Football 360's Adel Ferdosipour, which was released on Monday.

"I'm under contract with the club, but I've already told [Tractor owner] Mr. Zonouzi that I'm mentally exhausted," the Croatian said, adding: "I've also had to deal with some family issues lately. My father has recently been diagnosed with cancer and I had to go back to my country before the Shams Azar game [May 2] to arrange his surgery. I've been away from my family and need to spend more time with them."

"I'll have to come up with the right decision that is in the best interest of Tractor and my personal life. My players delivered their best version this season. It's been a successful project and



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we did great things together. "The truth is, whenever I feel drained, I turn to football. Football gives me peace, though I'll

still have to think of my father, my wife, and my daughter [when deciding on the future.]" An impressive run of 10 vic-

tories and three draws in the final 13 games of the season saw Tractor secure the Iranian league title with two games to

spare, finishing on 68 points – matching the all-time highest tally in the Iranian 16-team top division.

Pundits in the country credited both a successful summer transfer window and Skocic's tactical acumen and man management of a star-studded squad as the driving forces behind the glittering campaign for the north-western Iranian club.

The Croatian coach, however, believes the proper mindset and attitude of his squad played a pivotal part in their title charge.

"The players showed real mental strength and kept improving as the season progressed. We learned how to play in front of our supporters after a first home defeat [against Zob Ahan on matchday four]," Skocic said.

Tractor suffered its fourth and final league defeat on January 26 – a 2-0 away loss to defending champions Persepolis. Many believed the setback would derail their title challenge for the remainder of the season but Skocic has other ideas.

"It was a really tough game as some of my players were facing their former club, but I never doubted our title credentials. The only thing that could have jeopardized our chances was losing our mental strength. While we made naïve mistakes throughout the season, we learned from every single one. Sometimes you need these setbacks to ultimately succeed."

Azarpira, Nokhodi back in the mix for spot at world wrestling event

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Freestyle wrestlers Amir-Ali Azarpira and Mohammad Nokhodi are back in the fray for a spot in the Iranian squad at September's World Championships in Zagreb, Croatia.

Azarpira had been sidelined with a torn ligament injury following a 97kg bronze-winning campaign in at the Paris Olympics last year.

Nokhodi, meanwhile, had to undergo a knee surgery after he won a fourth world medal in Tirana, Albania, last October, settling for a third-spot finish in the 79kg event. The Iranian duo will return

to action during a 10-day training camp – starting today in Tehran.

According to the latest selection path unveiled by the Iranian Wrestling Federation, Ahmad Bazri, who won the 97kg gold at the International Takhti Cup in Isfahan earlier in May, will head to the Ulaanbaatar Open Ranking Series event – kicking off next Thursday – where a gold medal will earn him a domestic head-to-head showdown against Azarpira for the Zagreb ticket.

Fariborz Babaei – also a gold medalist at the Takhti Cup – will have to repeat the success in the Mongolian capital to stay in the 79kg

mix alongside Nokhodi and reigning Asian champion Mahdi Yousefi.

The Iranian world spots in the 70kg, 74kg, and 86kg classes also remain up for grabs, which will be decided through the Iranians' results at the in Ulaanbaatar.

Reigning world champion and Olympic silver medalist Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) and Ali Mo'meni (57kg) secured their place at the World Championships after winning the gold medal in their respective events at the Takhti Cup, joining Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan, Rahman Amouzad, and Amirhossein Firouzpour in the Irania

10-man freestyle squad. Mohammadnejad-Javan will be the Iranian 61kg wrestler, thanks to a gold-winning run in February's Zagreb Open, as well as an Asian bronze in March. Amouzad, an Olympic silver medalist last year, has been given a shot at a second world 65kg gold after domestic rivals Yassin Rezaei and Ali Khorramdel had below-par runs at the Ranking Series season-opener. Firouzpour's impressive run of results in recent months, which has seen him win the Asian and Zagreb Open titles, convinced the Iranian coaching staff to pick him for the world 92kg contests.



Amir-Ali Azarpira (L) and Mohammad Nokhodi are in contention for the Iranian freestyle 97kg and 79kg spots at the World Championships. ● UWW

Iranian teams head to Tashkent for Asian Karate Championship



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The Iranian men's and women's teams left the country for Tashkent ahead of the 21st Asian Senior Karate Championship – kicking off Friday in the Uzbek capital. Former world bronze medalist Sara Bahmanyar (-50kg) will be joined by Fatemeh Sa'adati (-55kg), 2023 Asian champion Atousa Golshadnejad (-61kg), Mobina Kaviani (-68kg), and Hannaneh Salehi (+68kg) in representing Iran in the women's kumite contests.

The men's competitions will see Behnam Dehqanzadeh (-55kg), Ali Meskini (-60kg), Reza Besharati (-67kg), Morteza Ne'mati (-75kg), Mohammadreza Gilanpour (-84kg), and Mahmoud Ne'mati (+84kg) chase the Asian glory. Four-time Asian bronze medalist Fatemeh Sadeqi will be among the favorites in the women's individual kata event, having walked away with ultimate prize in January's Karate 1-Series A event in Tbilisi, while the trio of Sepideh Amini, Melika Ez-

zati, and Zeinab Hosseini will be looking to improve on their Asian bronze last year, when taking part in the team event.

Ali Zand will compete in the men's individual kata competitions and will team up with Abolfazl Shahrjerdi and Milad Farazmehr in the team event.

The trio will again fancy their chances for a podium finish in Tashkent, having collected double silver and bronze medals apiece at the Asian event since 2017.