

Iran to face newcomer Guam in FIBA Asia Cup opener

Sports Desk

Iranian basketball national team will begin its bid for a fourth FIBA Asian Cup trophy against debutant Guam in Group B today at the King Abdullah Sports City in Jeddah.

Joining Iran and Guam in the group are two-time champion Japan and West Asian force Syria.

Iran will take on Japan on Friday – in a repeat of a group encounter between the two teams in the 2022 edition, which Iran won 88-76 – before squaring off against Syria on Sunday.

The top team in the group will secure direct qualification for the quarterfinal, while the runner-up will be given a second chance for a last-eight spot in a playoff round.

Iran won five in six to finish above Qatar in the Group E of the qualifiers, with its single defeat coming through a 78-77 overtime setback against Qatar and former Iran coach Hakan Demir in Doha last November, in Greek head coach Sotirios Manolopoulos's first game in charge of Team Melli.

Having won the flagship continental title on three occasions between 2007 and 2013, Iran will be looking for a fresh start under Manolopoulos, for whom the event in Jeddah will mark a first major tournament on Iran bench.

Iran's most recent medal at the continental event came in 2017, where it settled for silver behind two-time reigning champion Australia, before an under-par campaign in the previous edi-



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tion in 2022 saw Team Melli crash out in the quarterfinals at the hands of Jordan.

Yet to win a medal in the competition since 1997, the Japanese, meanwhile, have risen as a formidable team in the continent, highlighted by successive appearances at the last two Olympics Games.

Japan also had a decent run at

the FIBA World Cup on home soil two years ago, finishing with a 3-2 record in the classification round to qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Iran and Japan have built an Asian rivalry in recent years, with Friday's game marking the 11th encounter between the two sides in a FIBA tournament.

Iran have won six of the last 10

duels, though Japan came out on top when they last met – a convincing 96-61 home victory during the second round of the 2023 World Cup Asian qualifiers at the Takasaki Arena in Gunma. Despite much of the attention being on Iran and Japan as to which will end up as the No. 1 team in Group B, Syria and Guam have much to prove in Jeddah.

The Syrians enter the competition on the back of a spirited run during the qualifiers, where they punched a ticket following a major turnaround in Window 3. After winning just once in its first four outings, Syria went on to beat the UAE 86-61, and then edged Bahrain 89-87 to sweep the window and return to the Asia Cup for the third time in a

row.

Keron DeShields will be the man to watch in the Syrian roster as the American-born guard is set for his debut in a national team setting.

Guam fell just short of reaching the 2022 event, courtesy of a heartbreaking defeat to Chinese Taipei in the qualifiers, but defeated Thailand in a final qualifying game in March to punch a first-ever ticket for the finals.

Mixed preparation

Power forward Arsalan Kazemi will headline the Iranian 12-man squad as the team captain, with forward Mohammad Amini, guard Sina Vahedi, point guard Mobin Sheikhi, and power forward Arman Zangeneh also expected to make significant contributions.

Navid Rezaeifar, Mohammad Heidari, Matin Aqajanzpour, Mohammad Rahimi, Hassan Ali-Akbari, Salar Monji, and Seyyed Mahdi Jafari complete the Iranian roster in Jeddah.

Iran's Asia Cup preparation suffered a major setback by the 12-day war with Israel in June, but Manolopoulos's men still managed to play in several warmup games before heading to Saudi Arabia.

Iran played three games at the Beirut International Cup, losing to Egypt (60-59) and Lebanon (105-89) but salvaging a 70-61 win over Jordan in its final outing.

Iran then visited Moscow for a couple of friendlies against Russia, winning the first game 70-67 before suffering a 79-58 loss in a final pre-Asia Cup game last week.

Iran international Mohebbi completes Kalba move

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Iran international winger Mohammad-Mahdi Mohebbi left Sepahan to join Ittihad Kalba in the Emirati AD-NOC Pro League.

Kalba had to pay a \$600,000 release clause to secure the signing of the 25-year-old Iranian, who enjoyed a prolific campaign with Sepahan last season, contributing nine goals and 10 assists in 37 appearances across all competitions, to help the club finish runner-up to Tractor in the Iranian top flight and book a spot at the AFC Champions League playoffs.

Mohebbi will team up with fellow-Ira-

nians Shahriar Moghanlou, Saman Qoddous, Ahmad Nourollahi, who joined from Al Wahda last month, and young center-back Amirhossein Samdali at his new club.

Kalba hopes Mohebbi will be a perfect replacement for Iranian winger Mahdi Qayedi, who registered 18 goals and eight assists last term to be shortlisted for the UAE Pro League's player-of-the-season prize before signing for Dubai-based club Al Nasr in July.

An impressive season with Sepahan saw Mohebbi receive a first international callup by Iran head coach Amir Qalenei for June's double header against Qatar and North Korea at the

World Cup Asian qualifiers.

Mohebbi was on the scoresheet and provided Mahdi Taremi with an assist as Iran defeated North Korea 3-0 in Tehran to finish atop the qualification group.

His departure will be a massive blow for Sepahan and new head coach Moharram Navidkia ahead of the new season, which will get underway with a crunch visit to Qatari club Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League playoffs next Tuesday.

The winner of the single-leg tie will progress to the West Region's league phase in the Asian elite clubs' competition.



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Five Iranians secure spot at Karate World Championships

Sports Desk

Five Iranians have been guaranteed a place at the Final Phase Event of the Karate World Championships – starting November 27 in Cairo, Egypt – the World Karate Federation confirmed in a letter to the national governing body of the sport on Tuesday. Reigning Asian champion Atousa Golshadnejad secured her place in the women's -61kg event through the latest World Rankings.

The world No. 4 will be joined

in the kumite competitions by fellow-Iranian girls Fatemeh Sa'adati and Sara Bahmanyar, who punched their Cairo tickets through continental berths. Sa'adati settled for a -55kg silver at the Asian Championships in May, while former world bronze medalist Bahmanyar stood third in the -50kg class in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

The men's draw in the Egyptian capital will see Morteza Ne'mati and Mahdi Khodabakhshi vie for glory in the -75kg and -84kg contests, respectively.

Ne'mati finished runner-up to Kazakhstan's Nurkanat Azhikanov in the Asian showpiece to be handed a continental berth, while Khodabakhshi – a world silver medalist in 2023 – qualified through the World Rankings. The complete entry list for the Final Phase of the world event will be confirmed after the Qualification Tournament in Paris on October 17-19.

◀ L-R: Mahdi Khodabakhshi, Morteza Ne'mati, Sara Bahmanyar, Fatemeh Sa'adati, and Atousa Golshadnejad
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