

Yousefi targets emphatic comeback in 2026 after year-long injury layoff

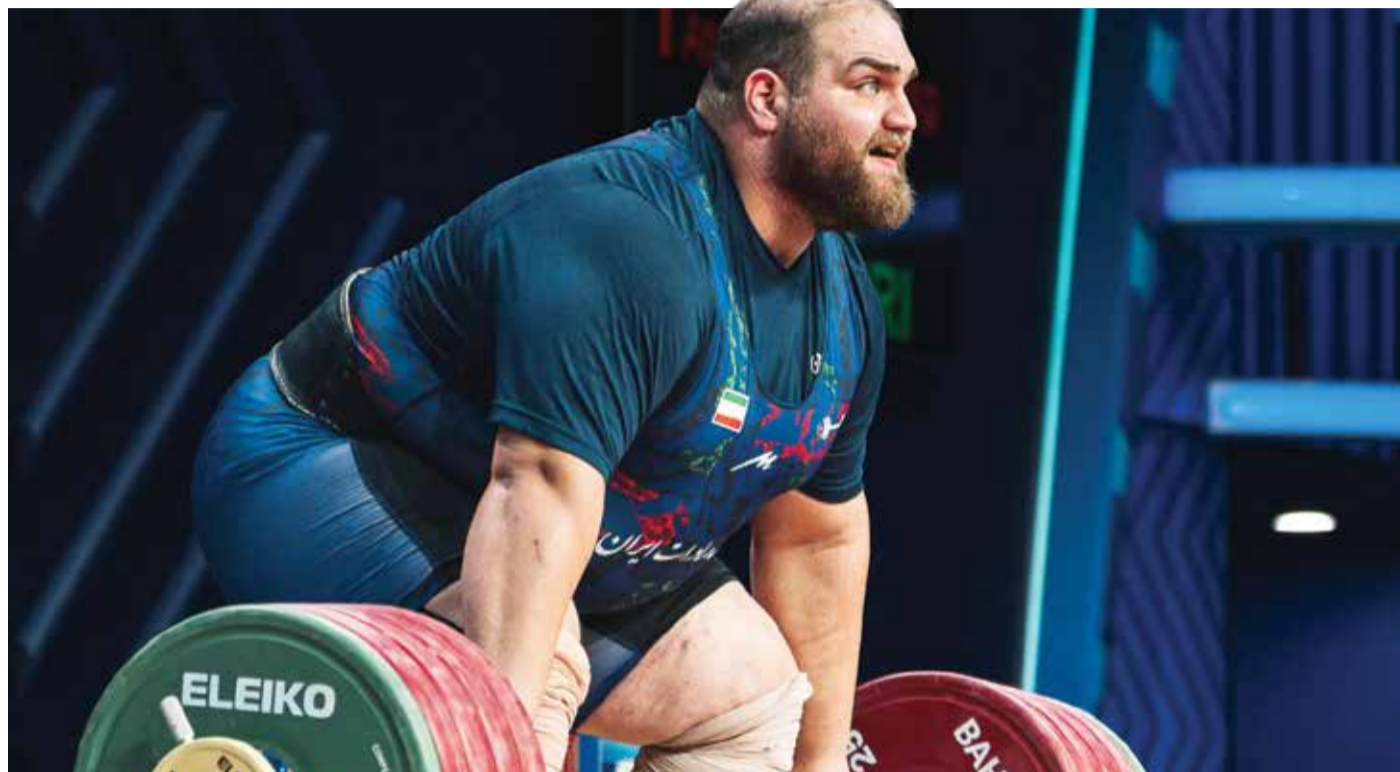
Sports Desk

Iranian weightlifting prodigy Alireza Yousefi is nearing his long-awaited return to action after being sidelined by a knee injury for the past 12 months. The 22-year-old is among the 11 weightlifters called up by head coach Behdad Salimi for the national team's training camp, which began in Tehran on Friday, as preparations get underway for April's Asian Championships in Ahmedabad, India.

With the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in September, followed by the IWF World Championships in Ningbo, China, in October, also on the horizon, Yousefi will be aiming to pick up where he left off before his injury setback.

A two-time world junior champion, Yousefi stole the headlines at last December's Senior World Championships in Manama, claiming gold and bronze medals in the men's +109kg category.

After placing fifth in the snatch, he set an Asian record of 262kg in the clean & jerk to defeat compatriot Ali Davoudi and Armenia's Varazdat Lalayan for gold. His 456kg tally then secured the total bronze, es-



● WEIGHTLIFTING HOUSE

tablishing the young Iranian as a leading contender in the super-heavyweight class in the post-Lasha Talakhadze era.

However, the breakthrough campaign came at a cost. Yousefi underwent knee surgery upon returning from the Bahraini cap-

ital, ruling him out of the 2025 World Championships and the Islamic Solidarity Games.

"Thankfully, the injury is now fully behind me," Yousefi told Mehr News Agency on Friday. "Having completed a lengthy rehabilitation, all potential

post-surgery risks have been resolved. I continued my training in my hometown in Qaemshahr throughout this period and join the national team camp in good shape, which will allow me to build toward peak condition for the upcoming

competitions."

Looking ahead to 2026, Yousefi acknowledged the challenges that await.

"Next year will be a tough one for us. The Asian Games will be our most important competition, and after that come the

World Championships, which will be part of the qualification pathway for the Los Angeles Olympics. I have to make sure I step onto the platform at both events in my best form," he said. Yousefi's 262kg lift in Manama was just five kilograms shy of Georgian great Talakhadze's world clean & jerk record. However, his personal best of 194kg in the snatch remains 24 kilograms below the world standard set by the International Weightlifting Federation for the new super-heavyweight category (+110kg).

The Iranian believes improving his snatch will be key to future success. "My main goal for next year is to post strong numbers in the snatch and close the gap on my rivals. I hope to achieve this important objective," he said.

Before Talakhadze's decade-long dominance, the super-heavyweight division belonged to Iranians, with legends Hossein Reza zadeh and Salimi winning three Olympic gold medals between them across four Games from 2000 to 2012. Now, Iranian fans will hope Yousefi can restore the nation's foothold on weightlifting's most prestigious prize at the Los Angeles Games in two years' time.

Esteghlal, Sepahan to learn knockout path in ACL Two

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League sides Esteghlal and Sepahan will discover their knockout-stage opponents in the AFC Champions League Two when the round-of-16 draw for Asia's second-tier club competition takes place at the AFC House in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday.

Both Iranian clubs will be placed in Pot 2 of the West region after finishing as runners-up in their respective groups.

Goals from Esmail Qolizadeh, Duckens Nazon and Jasir Asani sealed a comprehensive 3-0 away victory for Esteghlal over Bahrain's Al Muharraq in a must-win encounter on Wednesday. Despite opening their

campaign with back-to-back defeats – including a 7-1 thrashing away to Al Wasl – the Tehran Blues surged past the Bahraini side to finish second in Group A.

Sepahan had already secured second place behind Al Hussein in Group C with a 2-0 home win over the Jordanian club in November. The group featured only three teams after Indian champions Mohun Bagan SG were expelled from the competition for refusing to travel to Isfahan, citing concerns over "the safety and well-being of its players, officials and support staff."

In the round of 16, Esteghlal will face one of the Pot 1 sides – Qatar's Al Ahli SC, Al Hussein, or Saudi powerhouse Al Nassr – and will host the

first leg on February 10-11.

A highly anticipated showdown with Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr is also a possibility for Sepahan, which could alternatively be drawn against Emirati side Al Wasl or Al Ahli SC.

The last-16 ties will be followed by the quarterfinals, beginning on March 3, and the semifinals, scheduled for April 7-15, before the tournament concludes with a single-leg West-versus-East final on May 16.



Esteghlal players celebrate a goal during a 3-0 victory over Al Muharraq in the AFC Champions League Two in Arad, Bahrain, on December 24, 2025.

● AFC



Iran FS coach Dorostkar pleased with 'top-notch' National Ch'ships



● FARSHAD BANDANI/IAWFIR

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Pejman Dorostkar said he was pleased with the "high level of competition and strong participation" at the National Senior Freestyle Championships, which marked the opening phase of the country's World Championships trials.

Ali Yahyapour (57kg), Reza Momeni (61kg), Peyman Nemati (65kg), Ebrahim Elahi (70kg), Amirmohammad Yazdani (74kg), Mahdi Yousefi (79kg), Ali Savadkouhi (86kg), Abolfazl Rahmani (92kg), Mojtaba Goleij (97kg) and Morteza Janmohammadzadeh (125kg) were crowned champions across the weight classes at the three-day event, which concluded on Friday in Tabriz, staking their claim to a place in Iran's squad for the upcoming international season, including September's World Championships in Manama.

"We witnessed some top-notch bouts here, and several young talents emerged as serious contenders for a national team spot," Dorostkar told the official website of the Iranian Wrestling

Federation.

"Apart from the seven medalists from the World Championships, as well as Younes Emami, who won gold at the Islamic Solidarity Games, and Hassan Yazdani, who was exempt after recently returning from an injury layoff, all of the country's top wrestlers took part in the competition, and the outcomes in some weight categories were nothing like I had expected," added Dorostkar, who led Iran to the freestyle world team title in Zagreb in September.

"I hope the selection process, which is based on fairness and merit, continues as smoothly as it did in this first stage. The next phase involves participation in international tournaments, where these wrestlers must prove themselves. This will help finalize our team lineup for the Asian Championships, Asian Games, World Championships and U23 World Championships," he said.

Emphasizing the importance of overseas events, Dorostkar added: "International competitions are a crucial part of the selection cycle.

Our criteria are not solely based on domestic results — although domestic competitions are highly important and where contenders make their mark. However, international tournaments carry even greater weight.

"Hopefully, all these wrestlers will be tested step by step throughout the selection cycle until its completion."

Looking ahead, Dorostkar outlined the team's upcoming plans: "Our first training camp will most likely be held in mid-January. Our first international outing will be the Yasar Dogu Tournament in Turkey later that month. After that, we have the Zagreb Open and the Yarygin Grand Prix, before the Ranking Series event in Tirana in late February.

"The Asian Championships will be held in early April, and the results from that event, along with the four tournaments mentioned and the remaining stages of the selection cycle, will gradually shape the final national team roster for the major competitions ahead," Dorostkar explained.