

# Iran coach Jafari laments race against time in Asian Cup preparation

## Sports Desk

With only a month remaining until Iran's opening match at the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Australia, national team head coach Marzieh Jafari has admitted that time constraints and limited access to players have turned preparation into a challenging race against the clock.

Iran will begin its Group A campaign against South Korea – finalists in the previous edition – at Gold Coast Stadium on March 2, before taking on the formidable hosts, who reached the last four at the 2023 World Cup on home soil, at the same venue three days later.

The final round of the group phase will see Iran face the Philippines on March 8. The top two teams in each of the three groups, along with the two best third-placed sides, will advance to the quarterfinals.

Speaking about the team's plans ahead of the continental tournament, Jafari said the national training camp will begin on February 11, immediately after the



● SOGAN NAZMI/FFIRI

conclusion of the domestic top-flight season. "In practical terms, we only have about one month until our first match at the Asian Cup," the Asian Women's Coach

of the Year told the official website of the Iranian Football Federation. "This short time frame makes preparation extremely difficult and sensitive."

Jafari stressed that the lack of time is the single biggest obstacle facing her squad. Ideally, she noted, national team preparation requires a longer

period, but the league calendar and scheduling limitations have restricted access to players. "I must be honest: limited access to the players has disrupted our preparation process. Up to this point, things have not progressed as well as we expected, and that is a concern for us," she said, emphasizing that self-criticism is essential to making sharper decisions in the remaining time.

The Iran coach underlined that the compressed schedule means the staff must work simultaneously on players' mental, physical and technical readiness. "Every single training session is crucial for us. The Asian Cup is a high-pressure tournament with a very high technical level, and players must be fully prepared both mentally and physically," Jafari said. Managing training load, maintaining player health and improving team cohesion are among her top priorities, especially with little room for mistakes or interruptions. She also pointed to missed opportunities in the build-up to the

tournament. During the most recent FIFA international window, Iran traveled to Uzbekistan with a second-string squad for two friendly matches. Plans for a preparatory friendly in Australia ahead of the tournament could not be realized. "Our first match is on March 2, which means we are entering a very tight and decisive period," Jafari noted, adding that the team is scheduled to depart for Australia on February 24.

Despite the obstacles, Jafari remains hopeful. "We constantly review and criticize our own work so we can fix weaknesses in the time we have left," she said. "Our ultimate goal is the success of Iranian women's football. With unity, cooperation and careful planning, we believe we can send a cohesive and well-prepared team to Australia and represent our country with pride." Jafari led Iran to a second appearance at the finals in dramatic fashion in July last year, as her team defeated Jordan 2-1 in a must-win final Group A qualifier, topping the host nation on head-to-head criteria.

## Maqsoudlou, Tabatabaei retain places, spearhead Iran in FIDE World Rankings

## Sports Desk

Parham Maqsoudlou and Seyed Mohammad-Amin Tabatabaei have remained Iran's top two grandmasters, retaining their places inside the world's top 50 in the February FIDE World Rankings released by the International Chess Federation.

Maqsoudlou, Iran's No. 1 player, stayed 28th in the men's standard rankings with a rating of 2708 – five places above compatriot Tabatabaei, who is ranked 33rd with a rating of 2700.

At the summit of the standings, Norwegian superstar Magnus Carlsen continues his reign as the world's top player with a rating of 2840, followed by American duo Hikaru Nakamura (2810) and Fabiano Caruana (2795).

On the domestic front, Maqsoudlou and Tabatabaei are followed in Iran's men's rankings by

Pouya Idani, Bardiya Daneshvar, Sina Movahed, Mahdi Gholami, Amirreza Pourramazanali, Reza Movahedi, Arash Tahbaz, Arian Gholami, Seyed Khalil Mousavi and Artin Ashraf.

China continues to dominate the women's world rankings, with Hou Yifan leading on 2596. She is followed by compatriots Zhu Jiner in second place with 2578 and Li Tingjie in third on 2566. Iran's young talents have also held their positions in the world junior standard rankings. Daneshvar, rated 2597, remains 17th for the second consecutive month, while Movahed, on 2596, stays 18th. Reza Mahdavi dropped three places to 59th, while Ashraf remained unchanged in 76th position.

In the girls' junior standard category, Melika Mohammadi slipped one place to 12th with a rating of 2342, while Sara Da-



● Parham Maqsoudlou (l) and Seyed Mohammad-Amin Tabatabaei have remained the top two Iranian grandmasters in the FIDE World Rankings for the month of February. IRNA

vari climbed one spot to 40th on 2250.

In the women's national rankings, Mohammadi tops the list,

followed by Mobina Alinasab, Davari, Anahita Zahedifar, Dorsa Mohammad-Ebrahimkhan, Mitra Asgharzadeh, Tannaz Azali,



Rosha Akbari, Rezvaneh Haddadi and Zahra Parvin.

Iran, meanwhile, has retained its global position, remaining

17th in the latest FIDE national rankings with an average rating of 2572, unchanged from the previous month.

## Mansourian continues impressive run with Al Talaba in Iraqi league

## Sports Desk

Iranian head coach Alireza Mansourian continued his impressive



● VARZESH

start in the Iraq Stars League as his Al Talaba side defeated Al Gharraf 3-1 at home in the latest round of top-flight fixtures on Sat-

urday. Zaid Ismael gave Mansourian's side an early lead in the ninth minute at Al Talaba Stadium, before Nigerian midfielder Kingsley Kuku drew the visitors level from the penalty spot deep into first-half stoppage time.

Habib Oueslati restored the hosts' advantage 10 minutes after the restart, with Saif Rasheed adding the third goal six minutes later.

The victory lifted Al Talaba – which had managed just three wins in seven matches before Mansourian's appointment last November – to fifth in the league table with 30 points from 16 games, three points adrift of leaders Al Karma. The result marked Mansourian's sixth win in nine matches in charge, with his only defeat coming in a 2-1 home setback against Al Mina's SC a fortnight ago.

## Iranians bag double gold at Sri Lanka Junior Squash Open

## Sports Desk

Iranians collected three medals, including two golds, on the final day of the Sri Lanka Junior Squash Open 2026, part of the Asian Junior Super Series, on Sunday.

Tiana Tourani came from behind to defeat host-nation opponent Chanumi Thebawena 3-2 (11-9, 6-11, 7-11, 11-8, 11-7) to claim the title in the girls' under-15 category, while Yousef Qorashi overcame Pakistan's Abdul Aahad Butt by the same scoreline (11-4, 4-11, 11-6, 5-11, 11-6) in the boys' under-17 final.

Amir Alvansaz, meanwhile, settled for a runner-up finish in the boys' under-15 category after a 3-0 loss (11-6, 11-4, 11-2) to Indian Shreshtha Iyer in the final.



● Iran's Tiana Tourani (l) won the girls' under-15 title at the Sri Lanka Junior Squash Open 2026. MNA