

Iran to play Nigeria, Costa Rica in March friendlies



● IRNA

Sports Desk

Iran will face Nigeria and Costa Rica during the upcoming international break in March, Amir-Mahdi Alavi, spokesperson for the Iranian Football Federation, announced on Monday night.

The two matches, scheduled to be played in Amman, Jordan, form part of Iran's preparations for the 2026 World Cup, which will be co-hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada from June 11.

Team Melli will play Nigeria on March 27 before meeting Costa Rica four days later, Alavi said.

The announcement follows months of difficulty for the federation in arranging high-profile friendlies for the national team. Neither Nigeria nor Costa Rica qualified for the World Cup in North America.

Nigeria finished runner-up to South Africa in its qualification group before losing on penalties to DR Congo in the second round of the playoffs last November.

The prospect of facing Atletico striker Ademola Lookman and Galatasaray forward Victor Osimhen, however, could provide a proper test for the Iranian backline.

Costa Rica finished third in its third-

round group in the CONCACAF region, failing to qualify for the finals for the first time since the 2010 tournament.

Iran has been drawn in a group with Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand. Under the expanded format, three teams from each group will advance to the round of 32.

With less than four months remaining until the tournament, Iran faces a series of challenges ahead of its opening match against New Zealand in Inglewood, California, on June 15, including concerns over potential visa issues for members of the squad and efforts to secure additional high-level friendlies.

Iran had been in advanced talks to face Spain in March or June, but Alavi said negotiations between the two sides had collapsed.

"The contract was on the verge of being finalized before they suddenly withdrew from negotiations," Alavi told state television. "Everything had been agreed, including the match time and venue, before they informed us they could not play the match."

"They told us they would be available during the September international break, although our intention was to arrange the match as part of our World Cup preparations."

Skocic walks out of Tractor job

Sports Desk

Croatian head coach Dragan Skocic has parted ways with Persian Gulf Pro League champions Tractor, the Iranian top-flight club announced on Tuesday.

The decision came on the morning of Tractor's final league-phase fixture in the AFC Champions League Elite against Al Gharafa in Qatar, sent shockwaves through the club's vast fanbase.

"Following the match against Al Sadd [on February 10], Dragan Skocic submitted a request to the club's management to terminate his contract. Despite opposition from club officials, multiple meetings, and their insistence on continuing the cooperation, he remained firm in his decision," the club said in a statement.

"Ultimately, on Tuesday morning, the two sides signed a mutual agreement formally terminating his contract."

"Skocic leaves as the most decorated coach in the club's history, having won two major trophies and secured his place in Tractor's record books."

"Tractor Football Club extends its gratitude to Mr. Skocic for his efforts and wishes him success in his future professional endeavors."

The club did not elaborate on the reasons behind the Croatian's departure.

Skocic guided Tractor to its maiden domestic league title last season and lifted the Super Cup in August, thanks to a 2-1 victory over Esteghlal in the season curtain-raiser.

Tractor is second in a tightly contested league table with 35 points from 20 matches, one point behind Golgozar with a game in hand, and level on points with Sepahan and Esteghlal.

The Tabriz-based side has also impressed in the league stage of Asia's premier club competition, securing a place in the round of 16 with two matches to spare.

However, local media have reported tensions between Skocic and several senior players – notably club captain Shoja Khalilzadeh – following last week's 2-0 defeat to Al Sadd, which may have contributed to his decision to leave.

Former Zob Ahan and Mes Rafsanjan head coach Mohammad Rabiei has been reported as a leading candidate to replace Skocic.



● AFC

Iran judo chief confident of medal breakthrough after Tunis success

Sports Desk

Iran's men's judo team is on a trajectory to become a consistent medal contender for the country at major events – including the upcoming Asian Games – in the near future, Arash Miresmaeili, the chairman of the Iranian Judo Federation, insists.

His remarks follow an impressive medal haul by Iranian athletes at the recent Cadet and Junior African Cup tournaments, as well as the African Open event in Tunis.

The national team, which fielded five competitors across the cadet, junior, and senior categories in the Tunisian capital this week, returned with a total of six medals – including two golds – bolstering the federation's long-term strategy of investing in youth development.

Elyas Parhizgar headlined the three-medal haul in the African Open by claiming gold in the -81kg division on Sunday, after Mohammadpouria Banaeian had clinched the men's junior +100kg title.

"Our goal is to increase the ranking points of our judokas for Olympic qualification. Since the start of the new year, we have prioritized participation in ranking tournaments, including the African Open events in Morocco and Tunisia," Miresmaeili told the official



website of the national governing body. He highlighted that a strategic shift to nurture young talent, initiated several years ago, is now bearing fruit. "We began investing in cadets and juniors years ago, and that program is paying off. The national team now has a low average age but has reached a good level of maturity and experience. This was evident in both the Casablanca and Tunis African Open tournaments," he said. While the performance in Morocco was deemed "good and acceptable," Mires-

maeili described the showing in Tunisia as "exceptional."

"It is a commendable achievement," he added.

Miresmaeili was particularly effusive in his praise for individual athletes. He singled out Parhizgar, who secured gold medals in both African Open events, stating the wins demonstrate the judoka has achieved significant self-confidence and maturity. Amirabbas Choopan – a bronze medalist in the -90kg division – was also commended

for an improved performance in Tunis, while 17-year-old Banaeian, who also won a prestigious silver in the seniors' competition, received special mention for his high ranking and quality medals in recent events. "If he hadn't made a momentary lapse in the final in Tunis, he would have definitely taken gold," Miresmaeili noted.

Sobhan Hakimi, competing in the cadet category, secured a silver medal in the -81kg class. "We have invested in him, hoping he can shine for Iran at the Youth Olympics," the president said. He also described Ali Nikseresh – junior -100kg silver winner – as a key asset for the future, noting the judoka currently holds a world ranking of fifth.

Looking ahead, Miresmaeili outlined an ambitious roadmap centered on the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games in September.

"Our goal is to integrate new and young talents into the national team and, with careful planning, head to the Asian Games. Although the task is difficult, we have our eyes on medals there," he stated.

The immediate focus, however, shifts to the Asian Championships – scheduled for the first time in the same year as the Asian Games – followed closely by the Asian U23 Championships. "Given the age profile of our judokas, we are

very hopeful of shining in that event," Miresmaeili said.

The federation's strategy also includes increased participation in Grand Slam and Grand Prix events. "We must step by step raise the preparedness and technical level of our judokas. By sending athletes to major events and holding joint training camps, we aim to provide them with bouts against high-quality opponents from around the world to help them reach full maturity," he explained.

Concluding his assessment, Miresmaeili expressed strong optimism for the future of the sport in Iran. "With God's grace, the planning, and the efforts made, judo is getting closer to securing a place in Iran's medal tally. The recent successes have injected new blood and energy into the sport. Our athletes have gained good self-confidence, and by participating in better and higher quality events, they will grow even more technically."

He reiterated that the long-term investment in youth is now delivering results. "The average age of the national team is low, and these judokas can certainly win medals for Iran for years to come. I hope that by continuing this path, we can fulfill our promise and firmly establish judo in Iran's medal-winning sports basket."