

Head coach Manolopoulos extends Iran contract until 2028



Sports Desk

Sotiris Manolopoulos has committed his future to Iran's national basketball team through 2028, the Iranian Basket-

ball Federation announced on Thursday.

The 55-year-old Greek tactician, who previously coached Panathinaikos B.C. and AEK Athens B.C. in his homeland, as

well as Romania's CS Dinamo București, took charge of Iran in August 2024.

He guided Team Melli to a third-place finish at the FIBA Asia Cup in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, last August – the coun-

try's first podium appearance at the tournament since 2017.

Iran swept all three of its Group B games, topping a pool that included Japan, Guam and Syria, before mounting a dramatic comeback to edge Chinese Taipei 78-75 in the quarterfinals. A heavy 92-48 semifinal defeat to eventual champion Australia halted Iran's title bid, but the West Asian powerhouse rebounded to defeat New Zealand 79-73 in the bronze-medal game.

Turning his focus to the next challenge, Manolopoulos has named a 15-man squad for the upcoming double-header against Jordan and Syria in Group C of the Asian qualifiers for the 2027 FIBA Basketball World Cup.

Top spot in the group will be on the line when Iran faces Jordan on neutral court at the Nouhad Nawfal Sports Complex in Zouk Mikael, Lebanon, on Friday. Both sides opened their qualifying campaigns in December with perfect 2-0 records, defeating Iraq and Syria, respectively.

The matchup will mark their first meeting since the 2022 Asia Cup quarterfinals, where Jordan claimed a 91-76 victory to extend its head-to-head advantage to 6-2. The Falcons will be seeking a third consecutive win in the current qualifying cycle.

Iran will also stage its designated home fixture against Syria in Zouk Mikael on March 2.

Iran got off to an emphatic start in the

qualifiers, draining a remarkable 19 three-pointers to defeat Iraq 94-68 in its group opener in Zouk Mikael – led by Sina Vahedi's 21 points – before Piter Girgoorian contributed a game-high 21 points – including 12 from behind the arc – to lead Iran to a 86-71 win in the second outing.

Under the qualification format, the top three teams from each of the four first-round groups will progress to the second round. The 12 advancing teams will be divided into two groups – with Group A paired with Group C, and Group B with Group D – carrying forward results against fellow qualifiers. The top three teams from each second-round group, along with the best fourth-placed side, will secure spots at the 2027 World Cup in Qatar.

The following is Iran's 15-man squad for the upcoming games in World Cup qualifiers:

Arsalan Kazemi (Esteghlal), Arman Zanganeh (Palayesh Naft Abadan), Sina Vahedi (Meralco Bolts), Salar Monji (Al Sulaibikhat), Mobin Sheikhi (Shahrdari Gorgan), Matin Aqajanpour (Kaleh Mazandaran), Piter Girgoorian (Shahrdari Gorgan), Seyyed Mahdi Jafari (Esteghlal), Mohammad-Mahdi Heidari (Esteghlal), Hassan Aliakbari (Esteghlal), Amirhossein Azari (Tabiat Eslamshahr), Seyyed Mohammad Qafari (Tabiat Eslamshahr), Alireza Sharifi (Esteghlal), Mohammad-Basir Momeni (Petro Novin Mahshahr), Mohammad-Mahdi Rahimi (Esteghlal).

Heavyweight prodigy Yousefi makes commanding comeback to stage

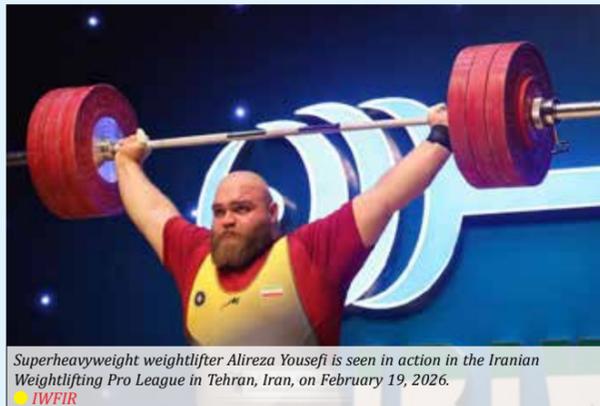
Sports Desk

Iranian weightlifting star Alireza Yousefi marked his return to competition in emphatic fashion on Thursday, capturing the superheavyweight title at the Iranian Weightlifting Pro League.

Representing Foolad Mobarakeh, the 22-year-old prodigy, who had been sidelined for 14 months following knee surgery, totaled 430kg to secure the top spot in the +110kg division.

Yousefi opened with a 188kg lift in the snatch and sealed the title with a commanding 242kg effort in the clean and jerk, underlining his return to form after more than a year away from the platform.

The appearance marked his first competition since his breakthrough performance at the World Championships in



Superheavyweight weightlifter Alireza Yousefi is seen in action in the Iranian Weightlifting Pro League in Tehran, Iran, on February 19, 2026.

December 2024. In Manama, Yousefi stunned compatriot Alireza Davoudi and Armenian Olympic silver medalist Varzadat Lalayan to claim clean and jerk gold with a continental record lift of 262kg. He went on to secure bronze in the total with 456kg.

Reza Hassanpour finished runner-up on Thursday with a total of 407kg. The former world junior silver medalist trailed Yousefi by just one kilogram in the snatch but was unable to surpass 220kg in the clean and jerk after sustaining an injury. **Hamidreza Mohammad-**

di-Tanha, a triple Asian junior silver medalist in 2024, placed third with lifts of 177kg in the snatch and 212kg in the clean and jerk for a combined 389kg. A two-time world junior champion, Yousefi will now look to translate his statement victory into selection for Iran's national team ahead of a busy 2026 calendar. However, competition for a place in the superheavyweight squad remains fierce, with Davoudi and reigning Asian champion Ayat Sharifi among the leading contenders.

Iran's first major assignment of the year will be the Asian Championships in April in Ahmedabad, India. The Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in September and the IWF World Championships in Ningbo, China, are also looming on the international schedule.

Sa Pinto to stay on as Esteghlal coach despite ACL Two exit: Report



Sports Desk

Portuguese head coach Ricardo Sa Pinto is set to remain in charge of Esteghlal despite the club's elimination from the AFC Champions League Two round of 16, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA).

The Tehran-based side conceded two late goals in a 3-2 defeat to Jordanian champion Al Hussein in Amman on Tuesday, crashing out 4-2 on aggregate in the first knockout round of Asia's second-tier club competition.

The loss fueled intense speculation in Iranian media over Sa Pinto's future, with former Esteghlal coaches Javad Nekounam and Sohrab Bakhtiarizadeh among the names linked to a potential return. Questions had mounted amid inconsistent domestic and continental campaigns.

However, IRNA reported Friday that the club's board has opted for continuity, particularly with fixtures

coming in quick succession, after talks with Iranian candidates reportedly reached a deadlock in recent days.

Sa Pinto began his second spell in charge last summer. During his previous stint in the 2022/23 season, he guided Esteghlal to a third-place league finish and the final of the Hazfi Cup, where the Blues fell 2-1 to archrival Persepolis. Esteghlal currently sits third in the Persian Gulf Pro League standings with 35 points from 20 matches – one point behind leader Golgozar Sirjan, which has played a game more, and level with Tractor in second. The Capital Blues travel to face bottom-placed Mes Rafsanjan on Sunday, a match that will also mark a reunion with former coach Mojtaba Jabbari, who led the club to domestic cup success last season.

Esteghlal remains in contention for a second successive Hazfi Cup title and is set to meet Khaybar Khorramabad in the quarterfinals.

Singapore Smash 2026:

Faraji crashes out in first round



Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis prospect Benjamin Faraji bowed out in the opening round of the men's singles qualifiers at the WTT Singapore Smash on Thursday, falling 3-2 to India's Akash Pal.

Faraji, who captured a historic under-15 bronze medal at the 2024 ITTF World Youth Championships, made a bright start by taking the opening game 11-8. However, Pal responded by claiming the next two games 13-11 and 11-7 to seize control of the match.

The Iranian teenager rallied to level the contest with an 11-6 win in the fourth game, forcing a decider. But Pal – ranked No. 106 in the world – held his nerve to seal the fifth game 11-7 and close out the 43-minute encounter. With \$1.55 million in prize money at stake, the Singapore Smash main draw boasts a star-studded field. Among the leading contenders are world No. 1 Wang Chuqin of China, Brazil's world No. 2 Hugo Calderano, and China's Lin Shidong, who is ranked third in the latest ITTF World Rankings.