

AFC Women's Asian Cup:

Qanbari vows 'utmost effort' but tempers expectations for Iran

Sports Desk

Iran captain Zahra Qanbari has pledged that her side will give their "utmost effort" at the upcoming AFC Women's Asian Cup, while cautioning against unrealistic expectations as Team Melli prepare to navigate a formidable group in Australia.

Making only their second appearance in the continental showpiece, Iran have been drawn in Group A alongside hosts Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines.

Team Melli will open their campaign against South Korea — runners-up in the previous edition — at Gold Coast Stadium on March 2. They will then face the hosts, who reached the semifinals of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup on home soil, at the same venue three days later.

Iran conclude the group stage against 2022 semifinalists the Philippines on March 8. The top two teams from each of the three groups, along with the two



Iran's women's national team players are pictured in a training session in Tehran, Iran, on February 22, 2026.

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best third-placed sides, will advance to the quarterfinals. With the tournament fast approaching, Qanbari offered a candid assessment of Iran's prospects during a final press

conference before the squad's departure from Tehran, reiterating the team's determination despite the odds. "We cannot expect this team to advance from the group stage,"

Qanbari said. "We face a very difficult task, having been drawn against extremely strong opponents. However, we will give our utmost effort and aim to achieve the best possible results."

Iran will be without prolific winger Negin Zandi in Australia after she sustained a ligament injury while on club duty with Bam Khatoon. Still, Qanbari expressed confidence in the squad's depth and unity.

"The national team is a blend of experienced players and promising young talents, and there is a very positive atmosphere within the squad," she said. "We have had good preparation and will strive to deliver strong performances."

The captain also underlined the importance of long-term development, framing the Asian Cup as both a competitive challenge and a valuable learning opportunity for emerging players.

"We must support these young players so they can achieve success in the future," she added. Head coach Marziyeh Jafari echoed her captain's measured outlook, acknowledging the challenges surrounding the team's preparation.

"When I accepted the national team role last May, few believed

I would take on the responsibility given our limited preparation time," said Jafari, who was appointed last April. "I carefully considered whether I could truly help the team under such conditions. With faith and hard work, we have moved forward."

Managing expectations ahead of a daunting group stage, Jafari emphasized Iran's underdog status.

"No one expected this team to qualify for the Asian Cup, and we cannot expect miracles in the finals," said the Asian Women's Coach of the Year.

Rather than focusing solely on immediate results, Jafari stressed the need for a long-term vision for the growth of women's football in Iran, confirming that plans are already in motion to build a sustainable future.

Iran secured their place in the finals in dramatic fashion last July, defeating Jordan 2-1 in a must-win Group A qualifier to top the standings on head-to-head criteria.

Iranian Women's Basketball Super League:

Sahar Academy, Esteghlal set up final showdown



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Sahar Academy and Esteghlal will face off in the Iranian Women's Basketball Super League finals after sealing semifinal series victories on Sunday.

American center Alexis Poole delivered a dominant performance with a game-high 29 points, eight

rebounds, and five steals — posting an efficiency rating of 37 — to power Sahar to an 81-61 win over Palayesh Naft Abadan in Shahr-e Qods.

The result secured a 2-0 sweep for Sahar in the best-of-three series. Poole had also starred in Friday's 68-58 victory in the series opener, recording a double-double of 16

points and 10 rebounds to set the tone for her side's progression. Earlier on Sunday, Esteghlal completed its own semifinal sweep with a second consecutive win over Bahman Group.

After cruising to a commanding 72-50 triumph in Game 1, Esteghlal faced a far sterner test in the second fixture, eventually prevailing 70-63 in overtime.

The Tehran Blues dominated the opening two quarters to take a 38-24 lead into halftime. However, Bahman mounted a spirited comeback in the second half, tying the contest at 60-60 to overtime.

Farzaneh Jamami's side held their nerve in the extra period to seal victory and book a place in the championship series in their top-flight debut season.

Farnaz Khodamardi led the scoring for Esteghlal with 29 points and an efficiency rating of 29. American duo Sabria Dean — the top scorer in Game 1 — and Chia Rael Whitsett also made key contributions in the decisive win.

Persian Gulf Pro League:

El Haddadi screamer sends Esteghlal top



Esteghlal midfielder Munir El Haddadi scores the winner during a 1-0 win against Mes Rafsanjan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Rafsanjan, Iran, on February 22, 2026.

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Moroccan midfielder Munir El Haddadi struck a stunning long-range effort to give Esteghlal a 1-0 victory over bottom-placed Mes Rafsanjan on Sunday, sending the Blues to the top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table.

The former Barcelona forward surged into the opposition half before unleashing a left-footed drive from 30 yards that beat Mes goalkeeper Payam Parsa in the 15th minute. It marked his fourth goal in 27 appearances across all competitions since joining the club last summer. Saeid Saharkhizan believed he had doubled the visitors' advantage two minutes before halftime, but his effort was ruled out following a VAR review for offside in the buildup.

The narrow win was enough

to lift Esteghlal — with Voria Ghafouri serving as interim head coach following Ricardo Sá Pinto's dismissal on Saturday — to the summit of the 16-team standings on 38 points from 21 matches, two clear of Tractor.

Earlier in the day, Tractor were held to a 1-1 draw by Malavan at the Sirous Qayeqran Stadium.

Mohammad-Javad Mohammadi headed home Qaem Eslamikhah's set piece just before the hour mark to put Malavan ahead. However, fullback Danial Esmaeilfar restored parity with a composed left-footed finish in the 87th minute, ensuring Mohammad Rabiei avoided defeat in his first game in charge after replacing Dragana Skočić last week.

Elsewhere in the round, Foolad Khuzestan defeated Zob Ahan 2-1 at home on Saturday, courtesy of

substitute Arash Akbarzadeh's dramatic 97th-minute winner. The result extended Foolad's strong run to three wins and two draws in five matches since Hamid Motahari took over in mid-January.

Foolad climbed to ninth with 28 points, while Zob Ahan remained second from bottom on 19.

On Friday, Persepolis suffered a third consecutive league defeat, falling 2-1 at home to Khaybar to remain fifth on 35 points, as the visitors moved up to eighth with 29.

Chadormalou produced the shock of the round, coming from behind to thrash Golgozar, which led the table before Sunday's games, 5-1 at home. Fajr Sepasi edged Shams Azar 1-0 in Shiraz, while Irilco and Paykan shared the spoils in a 1-1 draw in Arak.

Asian Cadet Fencing Championship:

Iran finishes empty-handed after saber setback against Japan

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Iran's campaign at the Asian Cadet Fencing Championship ended in disappointment as the country suffered an early exit in the boys' team saber event in Jakarta, Indonesia.

The Iranian trio of Hesam Moradi, Mohammad-Taha Abbaszadeh, and Kamyar Shahsavari began their campaign in the round of 16 against Japan. Despite a

spirited performance, they narrowly fell 45-42 in a closely contested bout.

With 16 teams competing in the saber team event, the defeat left Iran with a 10th-place overall finish.

The result compounded an already frustrating tournament for the Iranian delegation, whose fencers had also failed to secure a medal in the individual events preceding the team competition.



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