

Iranian football at crossroads over women's presence at Asian Games

Sports Desk

Despite securing a historic spot in the 2026 Asian Games, the Iranian women's national football team is facing an uncertain future, as neither the country's Football Federation nor the National Olympic Committee (NOC) has presented a clear plan for the team's participation in the event.

The women's national team navigated one of its most turbulent periods, both on and off the pitch, over the past several months. While the team faced challenging results against continental powerhouses such as Australia, South Korea, and the Philippines during the AFC Asian Cup in Australia, the Iranian squad became the center stage of a propaganda war regarding a couple of players seeking asylum in the host country amid Iran's military conflict with the United States and Israel. The team suffered three



● FFIRI

successive defeats to finish bottom of its group, but the overall performance still displayed signs of progress and greater cohesion compared to previous years, re-establishing Iran as a

competitor at the top level of Asian football. With that foundation, the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Games – starting September 19 in Japan – represents one of the most important up-

coming events, marking the maiden appearance of Iran's women's national team at the multi-sport event.

The importance of this tournament extends be-

yond its competitive nature. The Asian Games offer a valuable platform for gaining international experience and exposure to diverse playing styles across the continent. For

a team like Iran, currently on a path of development and stabilization, such a tournament could play a crucial role in preparing for larger events, including future Olympic qualifying campaigns.

However, with a limited timeframe remaining before the start of the Games, no clear picture has yet emerged regarding the team's program for the competition. Neither the sport's national governing body nor the NOC has provided specific updates about the team's dispatch, training camps, or related planning, creating significant ambiguity about the team's status.

This situation is particularly notable given that in recent years, the National Olympic Committee has adopted a 'quality-based' approach, prioritizing the dispatch of sports with realistic medal chances. Nevertheless, a look at past Asian Games – specifically in men's football

– shows that participation has not been strictly limited to medal hopes; maintaining a presence at the continental level has also been recognized as a valid objective.

Given the recent signs of progress and competitive capability shown by the women's team, participation in the Asian Games could greatly benefit the squad. Beyond gaining valuable experience for the players, such participation could sustain the team's upward trajectory and create favorable conditions for future success.

With the countdown to the event underway, resolving the status of the team's participation in the Asian Games has taken on special urgency. Making use of this opportunity could prove instrumental in the continued development of women's football in Iran, while missing out would mean losing a vital arena for growth and visibility at the continental level.

Asian Beach Games:

Iranians through in beach volleyball, set up China, Japan tests

Sports Desk

The two Iranian pairs progressed to the knockout stage of the men's beach volleyball event at the Asian Beach Games in Sanya, China, setting up last-16 dates with duos from the host nation and Japan today.

Alireza Aqajani and Abbas Pourasgari defeated Syria's Orwa Alsakka and Kutiba Albirini in comfortable fashion, winning in straight sets (21-8, 21-9) on Saturday to finish atop Pool G with a clean sweep of four victories.

Standing between the Iranian duo and a quarterfinal spot today will be Japan's Kosuke Fukushima and Nassim Malki, who finished

runner-up in Pool H with three wins from four outings.

In Pool B, meanwhile, the top spot decider saw Abolhassan Khakizadeh and Amirali Qalenovi suffer a 2-1 setback (21-11, 21-23, 15-10) against the formidable Qatari pair of Cherif Younousse and Ahmed Tijan – bronze medalists at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics – and settle for runner-up spot with two wins from three games.

Khakizadeh and Qalenovi will face China's Wang Yanwei and Wu Jiabin – Pool A winners with maximum points – today, with the winner taking on Lebanese or Kazakh pairs in the quarterfinals.

Beach soccer dominance

Elsewhere in the multi-sport event, Iran continued its emphatic start to its men's beach soccer campaign with a 13-1 win over Thailand on Saturday. Mohammadali Nazarzadeh and Mohammadali Mokhtari each scored a hat-trick, with Mohammad Ma'soumizadeh and Davoud Shokri adding two goals apiece, while Seyyed Mohammad Dastan, Seyyed Mahdi Mirjalili, and Movahhed Mohammadpour were also on the scoresheet for Ali Naderi's side.

A second successive victory in Group B – following the opening-day 5-2 win against the United Arab

Emirates – saw Iran stand atop the table, thanks to a superior goal difference over Saudi Arabia, and secure a place in Monday's semifinals.

The top spot in the group will still be on the line when Iran and Saudi Arabia go head-to-head at the Sanya Bay Yuhai Club Venue today.

3x3 basketball

In the men's 3x3 basketball, Iran got off to a winning start against Macau before falling to the host in Group A on Saturday.

Piter Girgoorian chipped in a game-high nine points, with Mohammadmahdi Rahimi adding seven to lead Iran to a 21-9 victory in its opener.



● volleyball.ir

Rahimi then delivered a five-point contribution later in the day, but Iran lost 14-13 to China to sit second in the group table ahead of today's crunch test against the Philippines, which defeated both China and Macau by similar

21-18 scorelines.

The top two from each of the four groups will advance to Tuesday's quarterfinals.

Iran is being represented by 57 athletes across 10 sports, including beach

wrestling, beach volleyball, beach handball, beach soccer, jiu-jitsu, beach kabaddi, athletics, 3x3 basketball, sport climbing, and water polo at the sixth edition of the multi-sport event, which runs through Thursday.

AFC Champions League Elite:

Iran granted two direct spots in league phase for 2026/27 season

Sports Desk

Iran has been guaranteed two direct berths in the league phase of the AFC Champions League Elite for the 2026/27 campaign.

The Asian Football Confederation unveiled the slot allocation for next season's revamped 32-team competition, which saw Iran secure two direct berths in the West zone's 16-team table – an improvement from the previous two editions, which saw one Iranian club forced to find its way through the qualifying playoffs.

Sepahan failed to advance to the league stage in the 2025/26 campaign after a

3-2 setback against Al Dhail in the playoffs and continued its Asian journey in the AFC Champions League Two, falling 3-2 on aggregate to Qatar's Al Ahli in the round of 16.

Iran will be represented by one club at the second-tier club tournament next season, the new slot allocation confirms.

Clubs from the Saudi and Japanese top-flight leagues, meanwhile, are due to see their slots in the elite competition increased to five, including three direct ones, from next season. Japan had three automatic berths in the league phase over the previous two editions, while Saudi Arabia had

two plus a playoff place.

The United Arab Emirates has also seen its allowance increase to three automatic slots with one playoff place available, while Qatar has been granted three confirmed berths.

Esteghlal, Sepahan, and Tractor have been selected as Iran's continental competitors after the country's Football Federation announced last week that the remaining eight rounds of the Persian Gulf Pro League fixtures – postponed since February 28, when the United States and Israel initiated a military campaign against Iran – will be staged after "the conclusion of the national team's games at the

FIFA World Cup (June 11 – July 19)."

With the AFC setting May 31 as the deadline for confirming the 2026/27 continental club lineup, the Iranian federation was left with no choice but to put forward the league's current top three for the two tournaments.

Esteghlal tops the table with 41 points from 22 games – two points clear of second-placed Tractor and Sepahan.

Tractor finished third in the West's 12-team table of the newly concluded elite season with 17 points from eight matches before suffering a 3-0 loss to the UAE's Shabab Al Ahli in the round of 16 a fortnight ago.



Tractor's Mahdi Hashemnejad (L) is seen in action against Shabab Al Ahli's Sardar Azmoun in the AFC Champions League Elite last 16 in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on April 14, 2026.

● AFC