

# Dip in European status leaves Team Melli leaning on domestic league

## Sports Desk

When the Iranian Football Federation confirmed in April that the Persian Gulf Pro League season – postponed since February 28 due to the country's military conflict with the United States and Israel – would not resume before the upcoming FIFA World Cup, fans and pundits expected Team Melli head coach Amir Qalenoee to build his team around overseas players for the global event in North America.

Last week's announcement of the provisional 30-man squad, however, proved otherwise.

As the squad headed to Antalya, Turkey, on Monday for a final training camp before the showpiece, a stark contrast has emerged between the roster's domestic league players and those plying their trade abroad, compared to previous World Cup campaigns. In fact, with 22 players in the list, the Iranian top flight accounts for the highest number of domestic-based players in the squad in six World Cup editions since the country's debut in 1978, when all members played in the Iranian league.

Upon naming the list, Qa-

lenoee insisted that "nothing other than technical criteria" played a part in his team selection, though a couple of high-profile exclusions have argued against his stated approach.

Sardar Azmoun is the most shocking absentee, as the Shabab Al Ahli striker is set to miss out on a third successive World Cup participation, having been a linchpin of the Team Melli frontline since making his international debut more than a decade ago.

Iran's third all-time top scorer with 57 goals in 91 appearances, Azmoun missed the best part of the UAE Pro League season due to two major injury setbacks and managed only three starts – finding the net twice – after returning to action in late February.

His omission, however, is believed to be driven by off-field issues, following his controversial social media post regarding the war in the early stages of the conflict.

Allahyar Sayyadmanesh is also a surprise absentee, after the 24-year-old winger enjoyed an impressive season with KVC Westerlo in the Belgian top flight, bagging seven goals and five assists in 29 outings.



Iranian national team players arrive in Antalya, Türkiye – for their final training camp before the World Cup on May 18, 2026.



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Meanwhile, midfielder Mohammad-Javad Hosseini must feel unlucky to be overlooked by Qalenoee despite registering four goals and three assists for Dynamo Makhachkala in 37 appearances across the Russian league and cup seasons.

## Drastic shift

In the previous World Cup in Qatar, Iran boasted 14 overseas players in the

squad. Today, only a handful continue their club careers beyond Iranian borders. A closer look at their fate over the past four years tells the story of their diminished status.

Sadeq Moharrami, formerly of Dinamo Zagreb, moved to Tractor last summer hoping for more game time after recovering from a ligament injury, but was barely given a chance by

Qalenoee. Fullback Ehsan Hajsafi has gone from AEK Athens to Sepahan, while Shoja Khalilzadeh, then at Al Ahli Doha, now plays for Tractor, with both veterans expected to be on the flight to the United States.

Milad Mohammadi also departed AEK Athens to join Persepolis. Saeid Ezzatollahi moved from Vejle in Denmark to Shabab Al Ahli. Karim Ansarifard, once at

Omonia Nicosia, has retired from football, while Hossein Kanaanizadegan followed a similar path to Khalilzadeh, leaving Al Ahli Doha for Persepolis.

Of the 12 European-based players from the previous World Cup roster, only Mehdi Taremi, Ali Qolizadeh, Alireza Jahanbakhsh, and Amir Abedzadeh have managed to retain their positions in Europe at all. However, Jahanbakhsh has dropped from Feyenoord to Belgian bottom-side club Dender EH, while Taremi swapped Porto for Inter, before joining Olympiacos last summer. Abedzadeh, who is absent from Qalenoee's list, has gone from being a starting goalkeeper at Ponferradina to a backup at Castellón.

Those profiles suggest a dip in Iranian players' status in Europe.

For the upcoming World Cup, the national team will include four new overseas players: Rostov's Mohammad Mohebi, Al Nasr winger Mehdi Qayedi, Mohammad Qorbani of Al Wahda, and Dennis Eckert Dargahi of Standard Liège. Apart from the former German U19 international Eckert, who began his club career in Europe, the other three are new to the so-called

"legionnaires" pool but play their football in Russia and the United Arab Emirates rather than in top European leagues.

The key takeaway is that the 26-man squad heading to the United States will feature the lowest number of high-profile international and European-based players in recent memory. With only a handful of players remaining in Europe, Iranian football finds itself trailing continental rivals such as Japan, South Korea, and even an emerging Uzbekistan in terms of overseas representation. The coaching staff now faces a monumental task, relying on younger, less experienced domestic players to fill the gap. While there is hope that a new generation of legionnaires will emerge, the current reality signals a clear decline in manpower quality for Team Melli ahead of the World Cup, where, despite all the complications Qalenoee has had to grapple with on and off the pitch in recent months, the Asian powerhouse will fancy its chances of securing a maiden knockout-round appearance in seven attempts when facing New Zealand, Belgium, and Egypt in the group phase.

## Wushu veteran Mohammadseifi eyeing 'fitting finale' with Asian Games gold

## Sports Desk

Iranian wushu great Mohsen Mohammadseifi says he will draw on years of experience for a fitting tribute to his illustrious career with one last shot at Asian Games glory, should he secure a place at the upcoming Aichi-Nagoya 2026 in September.

of shape and body weight." Despite the training camp starting later than scheduled due to wartime circumstances in the country, the 36-year-old veteran welcomed the fact that preparations have finally begun.

"We have just finished the first phase of training, and on Friday we will take part

however, is a fierce domestic rival in Erfan Moharrami, who won gold on his World Championships debut last year before claiming the top prize at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh.

"Erfan is a truly worthy talent, and I'm sure he will have even more to offer in the coming years. I just hope whatever the outcome

Games experience, while the other eight have never competed at the event.

"The atmosphere of the Asian Games is different from world or continental championships. From the moment an athlete enters the Games Village, the environment and emotions can get the better of them," he said. "The young athletes have a lot of work ahead in the coming months to reach the right mindset. I hope that with the efforts of the coaching staff – Ramin Movahednia, Akbar Mohammadzadeh, and Moein Taqavi – we will go to Nagoya as a cohesive and well-prepared team."

Wushu has consistently been a source of success for Iranian sport at the Asian Games, yielding 29 medals, including nine golds, since Mohsen Ojaqi and Mohammad Aqaei won gold and silver, respectively, in Busan 2002. "This year, the Ministry of Sport has made gold medals a key objective, and we will try to achieve that," he said.

Regarding his personal motivation, Mohammadseifi was emphatic. "In the fitness tests, everyone was surprised by my condition. I train hard to achieve my goal. If I succeed in the trials and make the final lineup, I will build on all my years in the sport for a fitting finale to my career," he said. "This is my last Asian Games as an athlete, and I am eager to display the best version of myself."



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Speaking to IRNA on Tuesday, the most decorated male athlete in Iranian wushu history said he is in peak physical condition ahead of the team's final selection trials for the multi-sport event in Japan.

"I'm in decent form," said the five-time world sanda champion, adding: "We took fitness tests a week ago, and I was excellent in terms

in the first of three final selection bouts," Mohammadseifi explained. The best-of-three selection process across various weight categories has been a routine for the Iranian Wushu Federation for years and, in the Iranian captain's view, a fair approach.

Standing between Mohammadseifi and a 70kg spot in the Iranian men's squad,

of the trials will be in the best interest of the national team," said the three-time Asian Games gold medalist, who had to settle for silver in the previous edition in Hangzhou, China.

The squad heading to Japan will be relatively inexperienced, as Mohammadseifi and Shoja Panahi are the only members of the training camp with previous Asian



## Asian Taekwondo Championships:

## Iranian quadruple finish empty-handed in poomsae event

## Sports Desk

Iran got off to a disappointing start at the Asian Taekwondo Championships in Ulaanbaatar, as the country's four participants all missed out on a podium finish in the individual poomsae contests.

Competing in the men's freestyle under-30 class, Yassin Akbari scored 8.6 points to progress to the final, before an 8.36-point performance saw the Iranian settle for sixth place in the final standings. The outcome, however, was enough for Akbari to secure qualification for the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games in September. Yasaman Limouchi represented the country in the women's freestyle event, finishing ninth in the preliminaries with 7.4 points to miss out on the final showdown.

In the individual male under-30 contests, Yassin Zandi began his campaign with a victory over Yubraj Rana of Nepal but suffered a setback against Muhammad Riza of Indonesia to crash out in the round of 16.

The women's event was one to forget for two-time world silver medalist

Marjan Salahshouri, who defeated Hong Kong's Tsz Ki Liu in their opener but was undone by South Korea's Jooyeong Lee in the last 16.

Iran will still eye poomsae glory in the Mongolian capital when the team competitions get underway today.

Given a bye in the first round, Zandi and Salahshouri will team up against the winner of the battle between the Filipino and Singaporean duos in the mixed pair quarterfinals, while Akbari and Limouchi will compete in the freestyle team event.

The poomsae competitions will be followed by the kyorugi contests on Thursday.

Yassin Valizadeh will get Iran's Asian team title defense underway in the -54kg division, while reigning Olympic champion Arian Salimi will be among the favorites in the +87kg class, aiming to make up for a below-par World Championships campaign last year – where he suffered a last-16 exit – by defending his continental title.

In the women's event, Masoumeh Ranjbar will compete in the -46kg class, while Fatemeh Ahmadi will be part of the +73kg draw.