

Iran banking on experience in bid for historic World Cup breakthrough

Sports Desk

Iran will head to the 2026 FIFA World Cup – starting June 11 in North America, betting on experience rather than youth as it seeks to reach the knockout stage for the first time in its seventh appearance at the global showpiece. The 26-man squad, unveiled by head coach Amir Qalenoeei on Monday, has an average age of 29.9 years, making it the oldest Iranian team ever assembled for a World Cup. According to figures released for the 48 participating nations, the average age ranks among the highest in the competition, behind only Panama (30.4) and Colombia (30.1). While the numbers underline the team's experience, they have also reignited debate over the national side's limited generational renewal in recent years. Several young prospects, including Mohammad Khalifeh, Amirhossein Mahmoudi and Kasra Taheri, who had been part of the provisional squad, were omitted from the final roster, leaving just three players under the age of 25 in the group. In contrast, 15 members of the team are aged 30 or older, with



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many expected to form the core of the starting lineup. Alireza Jahanbakhsh is perhaps the most controversial name in the squad after the 32-year-old winger – set for his fourth World Cup appearance – endured a below-par season with Dender EH in the Belgian top flight, recording a single goal and two assists in 23 outings across all competition – only 11 of

which were in the starting XI. The contrast with previous Iranian World Cup squads is striking. Iran's youngest-ever World Cup team was the one that represented the country in its debut campaign at Argentina 1978, boasting an average age of just 25.15 years. More recently, the team that qualified for the 2018 World Cup under Portuguese

coach Carlos Queiroz carried an average age of 26.7, as the Portuguese tactician oversaw a significant generational transition. Eight years later, many of those players remain central figures. No fewer than eight members of Iran's 2018 squad have retained their places for the 2026 tournament, most of them expected to play key roles once again. The

figure is unprecedented in Iranian football history and highlights the continuity that has defined the national team over the past decade.

Historical comparisons illustrate the scale of that continuity.

At the 2006 World Cup, only two players from Iran's 1998 squad – Ali Daei and Mahdi Mahdavi – remained in the team. In 2014, four players from the squad that had represented Iran eight years earlier were still present. By the time of the 2022 World Cup, only three members of the 2014 team – Karim Ansarifard, Ehsan Hajsafi and Jahanbakhsh – remained in the national setup.

The presence of eight survivors from the 2018 campaign marks the highest level of squad continuity Iran has ever taken into a World Cup and reflects the coaching staff's faith in a battle-tested core.

That trend was already evident four years ago. Iran's squad for the 2022 World Cup, with an average age of 28.9, was at the time the oldest in the country's World Cup history, largely because it remained loyal to the backbone of the successful 2018 team.

The 2026 squad has pushed that record even further.

Questions remain over whether an aging roster can cope with the physical demands of the highest level of international football, particularly against younger and faster opponents. Yet supporters of the approach argue that experience could prove decisive as Iran attempts to clear a barrier that has frustrated generations of players. Despite qualifying for six previous World Cups, Iran has never advanced beyond the group stage. The national team came closest in 2018, when it remained in contention until the final minutes of its last group match against Portugal.

Now, with one of the most experienced squads in the tournament and a veteran core that has accumulated years of international football together, Iran hopes that continuity and experience can finally deliver the breakthrough that has eluded the nation for nearly half a century. For a team still chasing its first appearance in the knockout rounds, the 2026 World Cup may represent the ultimate test of whether experience can succeed where youth and transition previously fell short.

Iran eyes Greco-Roman glory at U17 Worlds after dominant Asian campaign

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On the heels of a commanding performance at the Asian Championships, Iran's U17 Greco-Roman wrestling team is setting its sights on a much tougher prize: Defending its title at the U17 World Championships, which begin on July 27 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Despite a turbulent buildup marked by canceled competitions and the lingering shadow of regional conflict, the Iranian squad was in a class of its own at the Asian Championships in Da Nang, Vietnam, this week, collecting eight medals across 10 weight classes. The haul included six gold medals on the opening day of competition. Armin Esmail (45kg), Ali Esmaili (48kg), Vahid Ashiri (55kg), Amirreza Tahmasbpour (60kg), Amirreza Mehri (92kg), and Ali-Akbar Akoo (110kg) captured gold for Iran. Esmail Zaherdoust claimed silver in the 71kg category, while Mahdi Gholamian took bronze at 80kg.

Iran topped the team standings with 205 points, finishing 44 points ahead of runner-up Kyrgyzstan to secure a fifth consecutive Asian title. Speaking to Mehr News Agency, Iran head coach Mohsen Sourian outlined the obstacles his young wrestlers have overcome and the challenges that lie ahead. "Our situation was very unusual," Sourian said. "Due to the wartime situation in the country, we missed a preparatory tournament in Türkiye, while the domestic Rahim Aliabadi Cup was canceled." Sourian added that even Iran's participation in the Asian Championships remained uncertain until shortly before the event. "Even up to the last minute, our participation in the Asian Championships was uncertain. But thanks to the efforts and follow-up of the federation, the team was ultimately able to attend." With no prior international competition to gauge the team's readiness, the gamble paid off.

Still, Sourian believes the medal tally could have been even greater.

"We could have won two or three more gold medals, but some controversial refereeing decisions took that opportunity away from us," he said.

Nevertheless, the coach expressed satisfaction with the overall performance and the insights gained from the tournament.

"We identified the wrestlers' strengths and weaknesses, and now we look forward to the World Championships later this summer."

The upcoming global event, however, presents a significantly tougher challenge, and Sourian is under no illusions about the task facing his team.

"Our entire effort is focused on defending last year's world title, although we have a very difficult challenge ahead," he said. "In recent years, Azerbaijan has been one of our closest rivals, and now they will enjoy home advantage at the World Champi-



Iranian wrestler Ali Esmaili (red) is seen in action during his superiority victory over Kyrgyzstan's Umarali Berdaliev in the Greco-Roman 48kg semifinals at the U17 Asian Championships in Na Dang, Vietnam, on May 28, 2026.

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onships. That will make our job considerably harder."

Adding to the challenge is the return of Russian wrestlers to international competition, further strengthening an already formidable field.

With little time to spare, Sourian outlined a streamlined selection process. The Asian Champi-

onships served as the primary – and, in most weight classes, the only – qualifying event for the World Championships.

"The technical committee decided before the Asian Championships that, given the events of the past year and the impact of the war on the country, our only qualifying competition would

be the Asian Championships," he explained.

The plan is to retain the wrestlers who won medals in Da Nang, provided they remain within their weight categories – a significant consideration at the youth level, where athletes can experience rapid physical development. In weight classes where Iran failed to secure a medal, internal trials will determine the final roster.

The national team's training camps will begin on June 15 and be held in four phases. The first camp will take place in Mazandaran, a northern province renowned for producing wrestling talent. The location of the second camp has yet to be determined, though it is expected to host key selection bouts. The final two camps will be held at Tehran's Wrestling House before the team departs for Azerbaijan.

"We hope to achieve the best possible result," Sourian said. "The work ahead is very difficult, but we are ready."

Safarzadeh inspired by top Iranian honor to vie for Asian, Paralympic golds

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Iranian para-athletics star Hajar Safarzadeh says being voted the country's Female Paralympian of the Year has strengthened her determination to pursue gold medals at October's Asian Para Games as well as the 2028 Los Angeles Paralympics.

The 26-year-old sprinter received the honor after bagging an impressive 400m silver medal in the T12 class at last September's World Championships in New Delhi, adding to the Paralympic silver she won in the same category at Paris 2024.

"I am thrilled and honored to have been chosen by the people," Safarzadeh said. "I hope

I am worthy of this precious recognition and can repay the support of the Iranian people by winning the best medals in future competitions."

Safarzadeh revealed that her immediate focus is the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Para Games, where she hopes to improve her performances and add more gold medals to her collection.

The sprinter currently trains twice a day under coach Mahdi Mousavi as she prepares for the event. At the previous Asian Para Games, she won gold in the 200m event but was disqualified from the 400m following a technical infringement.

Her program for the upcoming event has yet to be finalized, although she is expected to

compete in the 200m and 400m events and could also enter the 100m, depending on her coach's decision.

The road to preparation has not been straightforward. Safarzadeh said the closure of sports facilities amid the wartime situation in the country forced her to adapt her training schedule, often working in public parks when conditions allowed.

"There were days when I could only focus on technical exercises rather than running," she said. "It was a very stressful period, and missiles struck near my training area several times. But I tried not to stay away from training because I want to be in the best condition possible for Nagoya and

raise Iran's flag." Looking further ahead, Safarzadeh has set her sights on an even bigger target: Paralympic gold in Los Angeles in 2028.

The departure of her legendary Cuban rival, Omara Durand, who retired after winning an 11th Paralympic gold in Paris, has opened a new chapter in the event.

"My main goal is to win Paralympic gold," Safarzadeh said. "I am focused on my training and achieving the best possible result in Los Angeles." While the public recognition has increased expectations, Safarzadeh believes it can serve as the inspiration she needs to reach the pinnacle of para-athletics over the next four years.



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