

Iran coach Abdi wary of 'difficult' group at Asian Games

Sports Desk

Iran U23 head coach Hossein Abdi has described his side's group at the 2026 Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games as "very difficult" but insisted his players are ready to embrace the challenge as they pursue both a place in the knockout stage and their long-term goal of qualifying for the 2028 Olympic Games.

The draw for the football competition at the multi-sport event, which will kick off on September 19, took place on Friday, with Iran drawn alongside China, the United Arab Emirates, and North Korea in Group B. "We have been drawn into a very difficult group," Abdi said. "At this age level, every team that comes to the Asian Games is aiming for

success, so there are no easy matches."

Abdi replaced Omid Ravankhah after Iran's disappointing AFC U23 Asian Cup campaign in January, where the team finished bottom of its group with two points. The appointment marks Abdi's third role with one of Iran's age-group national teams.

He led Iran to a semifinal finish at the 2023 AFC U17 Asian Cup in Thailand, securing qualification for the FIFA U-17 World Cup later that year in Indonesia.

Iran began its World Cup campaign with a memorable 3-2 comeback victory over Brazil and went on to finish third in the group before advancing to the round of 16, where it lost to Morocco in a penalty shootout.

The Iranian coach highlighted China, runner-up at the most recent AFC U23 Asian Cup, as one of the strongest teams in the group, while also pointing to the UAE's recent investment in youth football and North Korea's reputation for producing disciplined and resilient youth sides.

Abdi noted that Iran's placement in Pot 3 reflected the national team's results in recent years, meaning the coaching staff had anticipated the possibility of facing several strong opponents. "We knew before the draw that, given our seeding, there was a good chance we would end up alongside some of Asia's strongest teams," he said. "Now we must focus fully on achieving our objectives."

The 59-year-old identi-

fied progressing from the group stage as Iran's primary target. Iran last won the Asian Games football gold medal at the 2002 Busan Games.

"Our immediate goal is to finish among the top two teams in the group and advance to the knockout stage," Abdi said. "From there, the competition will naturally become even more difficult."

The Group B runner-up could face overwhelming favorite Japan, the host nation and the likely Group A winner, in the first knockout round.

"We have a difficult road ahead, but we hope to move forward step by step and use a successful campaign in Nagoya as an important milestone toward our bigger objective

of qualifying for the 2028 Olympics," Abdi added.

The head coach also outlined his team's preparation plans, saying a recent training camp in Turkey and a series of friendly matches formed part of the build-up to the Asian Games.

Abdi stressed that success would require the support of all stakeholders in Iranian football, including clubs, youth coaches, the media, and the national team's technical, medical, administrative, and support staff.

"Everyone must work together toward a common goal. With the support of the entire football community, we hope to strengthen our qualities, address our weaknesses, and build a team worthy of the Iranian people," said the former

Persepolis midfielder.

"We are here because we want to achieve great things," he said. "If the path were easy, our presence would have no meaning. Football is always full of challenges, and success belongs to teams that are prepared to overcome them."

"I hope that, through the efforts of the players, coaching staff, everyone working with the team, and the support and prayers of our people, we can navigate this difficult journey with pride and achieve something that brings honor to our country."



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Asian Youth Hockey5s Championship: Historic bronze sends unbeaten Iran into U18 Hockey5s World Cup

Sports Desk

Iran's men's under-18 team made history by winning the country's first-ever field hockey medal at the Asian Youth Hockey5s Championship in Muscat, Oman, securing a bronze medal and a maiden qualification for the 2026 FIH Hockey5s U18 World Cup.

Iran defeated Bangladesh 4-2 in the third-place playoff on Sunday, capping an unbeaten campaign with a landmark victory. Ashkan Zolfaqarkhaniyan starred for Iran, scoring a hat-trick and earning the Player of the Match award, while Alireza

Taqitash added the fourth goal.

The result marked a watershed moment for Iranian hockey, with the bronze medal becoming the nation's first podium finish in the 54-year history of the Iran Hockey Federation.

The victory also secured Iran's first-ever berth at a Hockey5s World Cup, underlining the rapid progress of the country's youth program.

Iran completed the tournament without suffering a single defeat, beating Iraq and Saudi Arabia twice each in the Men's Challenger event before overcoming Oman in a shootout in the Men's

Qualifier earlier on Saturday.

The historic achievement is expected to boost the profile of field hockey in Iran as the team prepares to make its debut on the world stage.

India defeated archrival Pakistan 3-1 in the final to claim the men's title.

Meanwhile, Iran's U18 women's team finished fourth in the Women's Elite event after suffering back-to-back 9-0 defeats to China in the semifinals and Kazakhstan in the bronze-medal match. China claimed the silver medal at the Paris 2024 Olympics.

FFIRI undecided over head coach Qalenoey's future

Sports Desk

The Iranian Football Federation (FFIRI) will decide the future of national team head coach Amir Qalenoey at a board meeting next week, according to executive board member Farideh Shojaei.

Speaking after a federation board meeting on Saturday, Shojaei said no final decision had been made regarding Qalenoey's position despite discussions over the national team's coaching situation. "The national team was discussed, but it was decided that a decision on Mr. Qalenoey will be made next week or in the near future," Shojaei said.

Asked whether she supported Qalenoey remaining in charge, Shojaei backed the 62-year-old, describing him as her preferred choice among Iranian candidates. "Among the Iranian options, my choice is Qalenoey," she said. "The team performed well at the World Cup, and he has shown he can manage the squad both techni-

cally and psychologically. I support him staying."

Iran drew all three of its Group G matches – 2-2 against New Zealand, goalless against Belgium, and 1-1 with Egypt – to finish third in the standings and miss out on a place in the knockout stage of the expanded 48-team World Cup.

FFIRI president Mehdi Taj said last week that Qalenoey would remain Iran coach through the 2027 AFC Asian

Cup, which begins on January 7 in Saudi Arabia, though there is believed to be disagreement among board members over his suitability for the role.

A semifinalist at the previous two editions, Iran will begin its bid for a fourth Asian Cup title – and its first since 1976 – against China in Group C, which also features Kyrgyzstan and Syria, at Riyadh's Kingdom Arena on January 9.

Debate continues among Ira-

nian fans and pundits over Team Melli's World Cup campaign in the United States.

Iran produced some spirited performances and completed the group stage unbeaten for the first time in its World Cup history, an achievement many considered noteworthy given the politically charged and disrupted buildup Qalenoey's side endured amid the country's conflict with one of the tournament's co-hosts.

His critics, however, argue that he failed to deliver on the team's stated objective of reaching the knockout rounds for the first time in seven World Cup appearances, despite what many observers viewed as a favorable group-stage draw.

The upcoming Asian Cup would be a fourth major tournament for Qalenoey – whose contract, signed in March 2023, expired on Thursday – as Iran head coach. During his first spell in charge, Iran was knocked out by South Korea in the quarterfinals of the 2007 Asian Cup, while his second tenure produced a semifinal finish at the 2024 edition, where Team Melli lost to host Qatar.



● FFIRI

CAFA U20 Women's Championship: Iran beats Kyrgyzstan, finishes runner-up



● FFIRI

Sports Desk

Iran defeated Kyrgyzstan 2-1 in its final game of the CAFA U20 Women's Championship in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on Saturday.

Sara Rahnama and Tara Qorbani gave Iran a two-goal lead before Kyrgyzstan pulled one back in the closing stages.

A second victory in

three games saw Iran conclude the four-team round-robin tournament on seven points, finishing runner-up to Uzbekistan on goal difference.

Iran began the competition with a 3-2 victory over Tajikistan.

Mehrsa Barari, Yasna Ja'farnia, and Maryam Khalilifar, who went on to earn the Player of the Match award, were on

target as Maryam Jahannejati's side staged a remarkable second-half comeback after trailing by two goals at halftime. Rahnama then scored Iran's only goal in a 1-1 draw against Uzbekistan on Thursday. Uzbekistan thrashed host Tajikistan 7-0 later on Saturday to retain the title in the second edition of the tournament.