

Kiani faces grueling path to second Olympic medal

Iranica Desk

Iranian taekwondo star Nahid Kiani has embarked on what she describes as an extremely demanding journey toward a second Olympic medal, with the road to Los Angeles 2028 potentially requiring her to compete in as many as 20 major tournaments over the next year. The 28-year-old has not been short of history-making success throughout her career. She became the first Iranian woman to claim a World Championships gold in 2023, but the pinnacle of her achievements came at the Paris Olympics a year later. Kiani, who suffered a first-round exit against her compatriot and IOC team member Kimia Alizadeh at Tokyo 2020, avenged the setback in the French capital and went all the way to the final, before securing a maiden women's Olympic silver medal for the country. Now with her sights set on yet another milestone success in Los Angeles, she has already begun her qualification campaign for the next Games. Knocked out in the last 16 at the 2025 World Championships, Kiani bounced back in style at the start of the ongoing international season by capturing gold at the Asian Championships in May, followed by a silver medal at the Korea Open, officially entering the qualification race for Los Angeles.



● WORLD TAEKWONDO

Under the qualification system set by World Taekwondo, athletes seeking an Olympic berth through the world rankings must accumulate ranking points over a period of roughly 18 months by competing in international and ranking events. For Kiani, that means an exceptionally congested schedule, with little room for rest between some of the sport's biggest competitions. "I had a good test in South Korea," Kiani told Varzesh3 during Iran's joint training camp with the Turkish national team. "The Korea Open was a very high-level competition. It is the oldest taekwondo tournament in the world and one of the most high-profile events in the

sport, and it offered 20 Olympic ranking points. I faced two or three of my main rivals for the Asian Games there, so it was a very good test for me. "I was satisfied with my performance because, given that I was only relatively prepared, I managed to get a good result. I hope this silver medal and the points I earned will be a good step toward qualifying for the Olympics." The Korea Open, however, was only the beginning of an exhausting stretch. After the training camp in Türkiye, Kiani is due to travel to Lahore for the President's Cup, which carries 30 Olympic ranking points. She will then head directly to Taiyuan,

China, for the Women's Open Championships, where another 40 points will be available. That competition will bring together many of the world's leading athletes and, according to Kiani, could prove even tougher than a world championship because of its open format, which allows major taekwondo nations such as South Korea, China and Russia to enter as many athletes as they wish. The Iranian will then travel to South Korea for a Grand Prix event before returning home for only two weeks. She will subsequently head to the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in Japan, followed shortly afterward by another Grand Prix in Italy.

"I have two or three very busy months ahead of me," Kiani said. "I hope I can get the results I want in these competitions and create a good gap between myself and my rivals." Among all those events, Kiani regards the Asian Games as particularly important. "The Asian Games are very important to the Iranian people, and I will give everything I have at these Games because they matter to the public and receive a lot of attention. Our main goal is to make people happy, and what better opportunity is there than winning medals for them?" For Kiani, however, the ultimate prize remains another

Olympic medal. "If I want to qualify through the rankings as I did for the previous Olympics, the path will definitely be difficult," she said. "I will have to compete in around 20 tough tournaments over a little more than a year. There are less than two years until the Olympics, and I will do everything I can to first qualify and then win an Olympic medal for the second time. "I have the highest Olympic medal among Iranian women athletes, and I hope this success continues not only for me but for all Iranian women athletes," she said. "Believe me, whenever I see my fellow female athletes succeed, I enjoy it. I hope that at the Los

Angeles Games, Iranian women athletes can become Olympic champions for the first time." Kiani also expressed gratitude to her family, friends and the Iranian Taekwondo Federation for supporting her through a demanding career. "This level of being away from home may be difficult for family, friends and those close to me, but I thank them for understanding me," she said. "The federation has done everything it could, and this camp in Türkiye is a very good development because Türkiye are the world champions. "I hope this process continues and that one day the Iranian women's taekwondo team can become world champions."

Iranian teams to compete at FIBA 3x3 Youth Nations League



● FIBA

Iranica Desk

Iranian men's and women's teams will get their campaigns underway at the Asia Central/East division of the FIBA 3x3 Youth Nations League in Cangzhou, China, on Monday. The Iranian women's team, comprising Farnaz Khodamoradi, Mahla Abedi, Shamim Nouri, Mahsa Karani and Zahra Moqaddasi, will open its Pool A campaign against the host country before taking on Kazakhstan later in the one-day Stop 1 of the competition, which also features Japan, Mongolia and South Korea in Pool B. In the men's competition, mean-

while, Iran will square off against top-seeded Mongolia in Pool A, followed by an encounter with Kazakhstan later at Cangzhou Sports Stadium. Mohammad-Mahdi Rahimi, Seyyed Mohammad Ghaffari, Mohammad-Basir Mo'meni, Sarem Jafari and Argen Minasians are the members of the Iranian men's team, for whom the tournament will serve as part of their preparations for September's Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games. China, Japan and South Korea complete the field in the men's Pool B. The pool winners will go head-to-head in the men's and women's finals.

Iran handball set for uphill battle at Asian Games without overseas players

Iranica Desk

Iran's men's handball team faces a daunting task at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games after being drawn in a challenging group and likely having to travel to Japan without any of its European-based players. With Croatian Nenad Kljaić set to make his debut as Iran coach, his team has been placed in Group B alongside Bahrain, South Korea, Kuwait and Kazakhstan – a cast described by national team player Yasin Kabirianjou as the "group of death." The group features at least three of Asia's established handball powers. Bahrain won the Asian Championship title in January, while

Kuwait finished third in the continental competition. South Korea, meanwhile, have traditionally been one of Asia's strongest sides and will also use the Asian Games as part of their preparations for the World Championship. "Kazakhstan were not in the previous edition, so we do not have much knowledge about this team," Kabirianjou told IRNA. "I doubt they are a strong team, but Kuwait, South Korea and Bahrain will certainly come with powerful teams again." The Iranian said the tournament would be particularly demanding because of changes to the competition format. "The previ-

ous Asian Games had four groups, but now there are only two," he said. "The format, the number of teams and the groupings have all changed, so qualifying from the group will be very difficult this time." At the Hangzhou Asian Games, Iran were placed in a more favorable preliminary group and advanced to the next round after beating New Zealand and drawing with Saudi Arabia. The task in Nagoya is expected to be significantly tougher, particularly with Iran potentially missing several key players who are based in European leagues. Iran Handball Federation president Alireza Pakdel has confirmed that nego-

tiations to bring the overseas-based players to the Asian Games have effectively reached a dead end because the continental event clashes with European club competitions. Players including Pouya Norouzinejad, Mehran Rahnama and Seyyed Alireza Mousavi, who play in European leagues, are therefore unlikely to join the national team in Japan. Their absence could force Kljaić to rely on a younger squad, representing a significant change from the team that competed in previous major tournaments and potentially reducing Iran's chances of challenging for a medal. Despite the difficult cir-

cumstances, Kabirianjou believes Iran can draw encouragement from its previous encounters with some of the group opponents. "South Korea have been one of Iran's rivals for many years, and we have a history of beating them," he said. Iran will also have to contend with the physical and tactical demands of a compressed international schedule after recent concerns over its ability to maintain performance levels late in matches. Kabirianjou acknowledged that the team's tendency to concede ground during the final 10 minutes of games has been extensively analyzed, with different ex-



● IRIHF

planations offered for the problem. "Experts have analyzed those final 10 minutes extensively," he said. "Some said it was a physical problem, and the federation brought in a good fitness coach. Others said it was

a problem with the head coach, and a good coach was added." Iran's most successful run at the Asian Games came in Guangzhou 2010, where the country settled for silver following a defeat by South Korea in the final.