

Handball coach confident of Iran's Asian Games prospects despite missing overseas players

Sports Desk

Nenad Kljaić, the Croatian head coach of Iran's men's handball team, says he is full of confidence in his squad's ability to deliver at the upcoming Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games, even though his team will have to do without key overseas players.

The men's handball competition at the multi-sport event will kick off on September 20, with Iran drawn into a daunting Group B alongside Bahrain, South Korea, Kuwait and Kazakhstan. Bahrain won the Asian Championship title in January, while Kuwait finished third in the continental competition. South Korea, meanwhile, is one of Asia's traditional powerhouses in the sport, having won the Asian Championship crown on a record nine occasions, and will regard the Asian Games as part of its preparations for January's World Championship in Germany.

With the Asian Games not being part of the International Handball Federation's international calendar, Iran will have to compete at

the event without players such as Pouya Norouzinejad, Mehran Rahnama and Seyyed Alireza Mousavi, who all play in European leagues.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a training session in Tehran earlier in the week, Kljaić acknowledged the challenges ahead but remained bullish about his team's potential.

"We have very tough training sessions ahead – this is our hardest camp yet," he said. "I know it's difficult for the players to endure, but we have no choice. This is a crucial part of our preparation for the Asian Games. Of course, there have been mistakes early on, but that's what training is for – to identify and correct them."

Kljaić emphasized that time is still on Iran's side, with roughly one month remaining before the Games begin. Friendly matches, he noted, will also be vital in sharpening the squad's form. "Our young players will surprise many in Nagoya," added the Croatian, whose team will visit Serbia for several warm-up matches before the Asian Games.



Iran's Pouya Norouzinejad, pictured against Japan during January's Asian Handball Championship, will not be part of the national team squad at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games.

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"We will play three matches against Serbian Premier League teams, one against a Romanian side, and one against a Croatian club – all of them at a very high level. These games will be extremely beneficial for us,"

Kljaić said.

Reflecting on the broader state of Iranian handball, Kljaić pointed to the country's untapped potential as a key reason he accepted the job in June. "I watched the last Asian

Championship, and I am sure that by moving on from older players and trusting fast, young talents, Iran can achieve its goals," he explained. He justified the intense physical and mental demands of training by say-

ing, "If they are not put under pressure in training, they won't be able to handle match conditions or make the right decisions when it counts." When asked about Iran's medal hopes at the Asian Games, Kljaić did not shy away from ambition, though he admitted the absence of overseas-based players would be felt. "It would have been a completely different story if we had them available, but even with this group, we have a good chance," he said. "If we can avoid powerful teams like Japan and Qatar until the quarterfinals, I believe we can reach the semifinals."

He concluded with a defiant message of intent: "I have full faith in my team. I am optimistic, and I don't leave anything to chance. We are going to fight – and we are going for a medal."

U20 Wrestling World Championships: Iran finds Greco-Roman solace with triple bronzes



Iranian wrestler Amirmahdi Saeidi-Nava (red) is seen in action against Ukraine's Nestor Baran in the Greco-Roman 77kg quarterfinals at the U20 World Championships in Bratislava, Slovakia, on Aug. 16, 2026.

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Sports Desk

Iranian Greco-Roman wrestlers bagged three bronze medals at the U20 Wrestling World Championships in Bratislava, Slovakia, on Monday.

A day after all four Iranians failed to reach the final in their respective weight classes, dealing the country a massive blow to its bid for a fifth successive team title, Ali Gharibi, Amirmehdi Saeidi-Nava and Amirhossein Nematzadeh managed to finish their campaigns with something to cheer about.

Representing Iran in the 63kg division, Gharibi bounced back from a 4-1 semifinal defeat to Russia's Salim Kazmakhov to edge out Georgia's Giorgi Tchikaidze 1-1 on criteria in the bronze-medal bout, adding to the gold medal he won at June's U20 Asian Championships.

Kazmakhov settled for silver following a 9-7 loss to Uzbekistan's Kuvonchbek Ismoilov in a thrilling final, while Azerbaijan's Tural Ahmadov

took the other bronze.

Saeidi, meanwhile, having suffered a 7-1 loss to Azerbaijan's Javidan Nahmatov in the 77kg semifinals, defeated Kazakhstan's Yerkebulan Anapiya 5-3 to win one of the bronze medals. Hungary's Zalan Csaba Toplak claimed the other bronze, while Armenia's Samvel Terteryan secured a 1-1 win on criteria over Nahmatov in the final.

In the 87kg division, Nematzadeh, who was beaten 5-1 by Armenia's Lurik Petrosian in the quarterfinals, secured his second international bronze following another podium finish at the Asian event.

The Iranian overpowered Kyrgyzstan's Mirsaid Iunusov 7-1 in the first round of the repechage and was then awarded the bronze medal after his Austrian opponent, Paul Maier, withdrew from the third-place bout because of injury. Japan's Taizo Yoshida defeated Petrosian by superiority (8-0) in the final to win his country's first

Greco-Roman gold medal in the history of the U20 Worlds, while American Aidan Squier finished joint third alongside Nematzadeh.

Amirhossein Abdevali, who also entered the tournament as the reigning U20 Asian champion, crashed out in the 130kg quarterfinals on Sunday after a shock 6-5 loss to Egypt's Essam Anwar Hussein, as Iran missed out on the superheavyweight podium for the first time in a decade. However, former U17 world champion Armin Shamsipour kept Iran's hopes of winning a gold medal alive after reaching the 55kg final on Monday, thanks to a 3-1 victory over U23 world bronze medalist Khojia-kbar Kuchkarov of Uzbekistan.

There was further disappointment for the Iranian squad elsewhere on the day, as Iliya Alikhani was forced into the repechage in the 67kg division, while Ahmadreza Mohammadian (72kg) and Amirsam Mohammadi (97kg) suffered early exits.

WT President's Cup: Iranians finish with seven poomsae medals

Sports Desk

The first day of the WT President's Cup – Asia 2026 in Lahore, Pakistan, saw Iranian athletes collect seven medals, including a women's gold through Yasaman Limouchi, across different poomsae categories.

Limouchi enjoyed further success by adding an individual freestyle silver to her gold in the

recognized category.

Elsewhere, Mobina Sharifimaher bagged double bronze medals in the women's recognized and freestyle events, while Yassin Akbari bounced back from an early exit in the men's recognized event to claim silver in freestyle.

Morteza Zendedel, meanwhile, won silver in the men's recognized event before going on to take bronze in freestyle.



Iran's Yasaman Limouchi won the women's recognized poomsae gold and the freestyle silver at the WT President's Cup – Asia 2026 in Lahore, Pakistan.

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AFC Champions League Elite: Esteghlal, Tractor avoid Saudi heavyweights in league stage

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League clubs Esteghlal and Tractor were handed favorable draws for the upcoming AFC Champions League Elite, with both sides avoiding the Saudi Pro League heavyweights in the league stage.

The draw for the revamped 32-team competition took place at the AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on Tuesday, where the two Iranian top-flight clubs were given identical pathways in the West Zone. Both clubs will play their home fixtures against Qatar

Stars League champions Al Sadd, Uzbekistan's PFC Neftchi, Emirati club Al Wasl and Al Shamal of Qatar.

Esteghlal and Tractor will also play away to Emirati duo Al Ain and Shabab Al Ahli, as well as Qatar's Al Gharafa and Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor.

The league stage will kick off on September 14.

The top eight finishers in each of the West and East league stages will advance to the round of 16.

Meanwhile, the draw for the group stage of the AFC Champions League Two was also held, with Iran's Golgothar Sirjan drawn in Group B alongside UAE's Al Jazira, Bahrain's Al Muharraq and Turkmenistan's FC Arkadag. The top two teams in each of the eight groups will advance to the knockout stage.

AFC Women's Champions League: Bam Khaton off to emphatic start in preliminaries

Sports Desk

Bam Khaton FC put on a commanding performance to beat Tajikistan's FC CSKA Dushanbe 3-0 in their AFC Women's Champions League 2026/27 preliminary stage clash on Monday.

The Iranian top-flight champion took a two-goal lead in the first half and wrapped up the match after keeping a resurgent CSKA in check to get its Group E campaign off to a confident start in Hisor, Tajikistan.

Striker Sara Didar gave Bam Khaton the upper hand in the ninth minute



when she picked up a cross from Fatemeh Shaban on the right and half-volleyed past a hesitant Ayishatu Simpson in goal.

Simpson palmed away a stinging effort by Roujin Tamrian

in the 32nd minute but failed to prevent Maryam Dini, who latched on to Shaban's cross, from steering a point-blank header into the back of the net in the 37th minute.

CSKA trooped out a more de-

termined side after the break as Erika Ackon forced Khaton keeper Raha Yazdani into a full-length save in the 54th minute and Ruziguli Hasan saw her header cleared on the line minutes later.

The six-time Tajikistan champions, nonetheless, was unable to repel Khaton's pressing and was punished in the 71st minute when Didar broke free of the defense and headed home from close range following a corner.

Simpson managed to keep the scoreline respectable with several crucial saves as Bam Khaton closed the match on a high note.

Khaton will meet Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr Club on Thursday before facing Jordan's Etihad Club, which played to a 2-2 draw against Al Nassr, on Sunday.