



Iran undone by India in women's kabaddi final

Sports Desk

Iran had to settle for silver in the women's kabaddi at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games after suffering a 37-34 defeat to India in the final on Saturday.

Unlike the meeting between the two sides in the group stage, which India won comprehensively 37-23, the showdown at the Tokai Citizen Gymnasium was a neck-and-neck contest from start to finish. India edged the raiding exchanges 26-21, but Iran hit back hard on bonus points, picking up eight to India's six, keeping the tie in the balance deep into the second half.

India took the first half 22-16, built on 16 out points, three bonus points and one all-out, which came after the sides were locked toe-to-toe before India forced the match's first all-out. Iran stayed within range through the half courtesy of seven bonus points but could not convert that into scoreboard pressure before the break.

Iran came out swinging after the restart, outscoring India 18-15 in the second half and closing the gap to a single point at 27-26 after converting an all-out opportunity.

India, however, held its nerve under pressure, with Sanju Devi's super raid swinging momentum back in India's favor before captain Pushpa Rana sealed an all-out of her own to restore some breathing room. Pooja then capitalized on visible uncertainty in the Iranian defense to further extend the lead. Iran refused to fold, chipping away with a super tackle as well as 14 out points in the half, but it was not enough to deny India a third

successive gold medal at the multi-sport event.

Iran head coach Gholamreza Mazandarani said the narrow margin reflected the difference in experience between the two teams, arguing that Iran had performed well physically and tactically but lacked composure when the outcome was at stake.

moments," Mazandarani said. "A player needs to know which points must not be lost and when to engage in a challenge. Our players have not yet reached the necessary maturity in this regard. "Unfortunately, experience is not something that can simply be gained through training. Players need to participate in

changed from the previous edition. It is normal that such a major change would affect the team's performance."

Despite the disappointment of missing out on gold, Mazandarani expressed confidence in the team's long-term prospects. "Our players are very young, and this team can have a lot to offer in at least the next two

eventually overcome India.

"India is a powerful team and one of the strongest sides in the world. However, given the motivated players we have, we will definitely train harder and come back stronger," she said. "I am sure that next time the gold medal will be ours, God willing."

India have now won the wom-

Saturday's result marked a fifth medal in as many editions for Iranian women, who had won bronze in Hangzhou 2022.

Beach volleyball

Elsewhere, the Iranian pair of Abbas Pourasgari and Alireza Aqajani continued its perfect run in the men's beach volleyball, defeating Thailand's Wachirawat Muadpha and Netitorn Muneekul 2-0 (27-25, 24-22).

A third straight-set victory saw the Iranian pair, which won the Fans' Choice prize at July's AVC Gala Awards, finish atop the Pool F standings and progress to the round of 16.

The Iranian team began its campaign with a win against Timor-Leste's pair before claiming an impressive victory over Oman's B team of Ahmed Al-Housni and Khalfan Al Mamari.

Joining the two Iranians in Tuesday's knockout stage are their compatriots Abolfazl Khakizadeh and Amirali Qalenovi, who finished second in Pool H after losing 2-1 (21-17, 19-21, 15-12) to the hosts' Kota Kurosawa and Taito Mizumachi in their final group outing on Friday.

Alamian brothers out in doubles

In table tennis, Nima and No-shad Alamian failed to replicate their impressive success of the previous edition, suffering a 3-0 loss (11-6, 12-10, 11-3) to China's Wen Ruibo and Xiang Peng in the men's doubles quarterfinals. This was yet another setback for the Alamian brothers – doubles and team bronze medalists at Hangzhou 2022 – who were also part of the team when Iran was beaten 3-0 by Chinese Taipei in the last eight of the men's team event earlier at the Games.



Members of the Iranian women's kabaddi team pose with their silver medals on the podium at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games in Japan on September 26, 2026. **VARZESH3**

"The difference actually shows the gap in our players' experience. We were better than our opponents physically and there was nothing lacking in our teamwork, but the main issue was experience in crucial

such tournaments, experience the atmosphere of major competitions and gradually reach the necessary maturity," said the Iranian coach.

"The average age of our team is below 23, and 11 players have

editions of the Asian Games," he said. "A good foundation has been laid for the future."

Iran captain Zahra Karimi, meanwhile, echoed her coach's sentiment, saying she remains confident that the team can

en's kabaddi gold at every edition of the Asian Games since the event's debut in 2010, with the sole exception coming in Jakarta 2018, where it was beaten by Iran in the final.

Iran's taekwondo men facing daunting road to glory

Sports Desk

Iran will enter the taekwondo competition at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games with four world and Olympic champions in its men's team, but a major change to the weight categories is expected to make the path to gold more difficult than in previous editions. The taekwondo competition will kick off on Thursday, with Iran fielding full teams in both the men's and women's sections in poomsae and kyorugi. For the first time, the kyorugi competition at the Asian Games will be contested in four Olympic weight classes, replacing the eight divisions used in earlier editions and the six-weight format adopted more recently. The reduction in weight categories has brought several leading Asian contenders together in the same divisions, raising the level of competition, particularly for the gold medals. South Korea remains a major force in world tae-

kwondo, while China, Jordan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are also expected to field strong lineups in Aichi-Nagoya. Thailand, the Philippines, Chinese Taipei, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan will also have notable contenders.

Iran's men's team will be led by Abolfazl Zandi, Mahdi Hajmoussaei, Amir Sina Bakhtiari and Arian Salimi, all of whom won gold at the 2026 Asian Championships.

Reigning world champion Zandi will compete in the 58kg division, which features 16 athletes. Jordan's Jaafar Al-Daoud, ranked third in the world and seeded No. 1 in Nagoya, is regarded as one of his main rivals.

Zandi has previously defeated the Jordanian at the World Cadet Championships and will enter the Asian Games as the No. 2 seed, meaning the pair cannot meet before the final.

China's Huang Kefen, Kazakhstan's Tamirlan Tleules and Uzbekistan's Asadbek Samandarov are

among the other notable names in the division, while South Korea will be represented by An Hyang-sik. Zandi's technical variety, ability to attack with both legs and aggressive style make him one of Iran's leading medal hopes in the lighter weight class.

Hajmoussaei will compete in the 68kg division, which has 15 entrants. The Asian champion and 2023 world silver medalist has extensive international experience and has defeated several world and Olympic medalists during his career. He has also developed his

ability to use both legs in attack, addressing what had previously been considered a limitation in his style. South Korea's Mun Jin-ho, who recently won Grand Prix gold in Muju and is also an Asian champion, is among the leading contenders. Jordan's Zaid Kareem, the 2024 Olympic sil-

ver medalist, Kazakhstan's Samirkhon Ababakirov and Thailand's 2025 world champion Banlung Tuhtim-dang are also expected to challenge for the podium. Hajmoussaei skipped the recent Grand Prix event to focus on preparations for Nagoya.

Bakhtiari will compete in the 80kg division, one of the most competitive categories in the tournament. Uzbekistan's Jasurbek Jaysunov is among his principal rivals, while Jordan's Olympic silver medalist Saleh Elsharabaty, Kazakhstan's world U21 champion Batyrkhan Toleugali, China's world silver medalist Xiang Qizhang and South Korea's Kang Jaeg-won are also in contention.

Bakhtiari has been Iran's leading performer at 74kg over the past two years and also produced strong performances when competing at 80kg. His fighting spirit and technical variety have been among his main strengths, while his 2026 Asian Championship title

demonstrated his ability to compete successfully against the continent's leading athletes.

Salimi, the Olympic and Asian champion, will compete in the +80kg division. The Iranian is seeded No. 1 in Nagoya despite being ranked third in the Olympic rankings and will receive a first-round bye in a 15-athlete field.

South Korea's Kang Sung-hyun, a two-time world champion, is considered one of his toughest rivals. Salimi has faced Kang three times, winning two of those encounters.

Uzbekistan's Marat Mavlonov, whom Salimi has defeated three times in recent months, Chinese Taipei's Huang Yu-jen and Kazakhstan's Beibarys Kablan, a world U21 champion, are among the other notable contenders. Salimi has built a reputation for producing strong performances in high-pressure bouts and will be seeking another major title after his Olympic and Asian Championship successes.



Iran's taekwondo contestant Abolfazl Zandi (R) will compete in the men's 58kg division at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games. **WORLD TAEKWONDO**