'Sitting volleyball saved my life': Mehrzad opens up on journey to Paralympic stardom

IPC – Iran has dominated sitting volleyball at the Paralympic Games for nearly four decades, but for three-time Paralympic champion Morteza Mehrzad, the sport's biggest impact cannot be measured in gold medals.

"My life is basically split into two chapters, before sitting volleyball and after it," Mehrzad said after leading Iran to their fifth straight Asian Para Games title in October.

Mehrzad, who at 2.46 metres is the tallest athlete ever to compete at the Paralympic Games, is known for his aggressive attacks and flawless blocks. But off the court, he is equally known for his humble character.

After helping his team finish at the top of the podium once again, he shared how discovering the sport had changed his life. Born with a condition called acromegaly, he spent years isolated at home in a remote village in northern Iran before making a TV appearance that led to an invitation to try sitting volleyball.

"Because of my physical appearance, I felt (so) self-conscious that I shut myself inside for years and couldn't even bring myself to step outside.

"But sitting volleyball completely saved my life. It helped me shed that shame and step back out into the world through sports."

From there, his rise in the sport was rapid. In a sport where the net hangs 1.15 metres above the floor, Mehrzad's reach and power have been fundamental to the team.

A few years after he tried out the sport for the first time, he made his Paralympic debut at Rio 2016, where he helped Iran beat defending champions Bosnia and Herzegovina in the gold medal match.

He was named Most Valuable Player at Tokyo 2020, where Iran defended their title, and Best Attacker at Paris 2024 after finishing as Iran's top scorer in their win over Bosnia and Herzegovina in the final.



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Mehrzad said sitting volleyball is not just a special sport for him, but also for the Paralympic Movement in his country.

"Sitting volleyball in our country is the first sport for people with impairments, and we have an advantage in sitting volleyball; we have more ability in sitting volleyball," he said.

The team has competed at every Paralympic Games since the country made its Paralympic debut at Seoul 1988.

Now Iran is the most successful men's team in the history of the sport, having won gold in eight of their 10 Paralympic appearances and silver in the other two.

The team has been unstoppable this year. In July, Iran defeated Bosnia and Herzegovina 3-1 to secure a record-extending ninth title at the 2026 Sitting Volleyball World Championships in Hangzhou, China.

Three months later, the team won the men's tournament at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Para Games. Iran have won every men's sitting volleyball gold medal at the Asian Para Games since the sport was introduced to the programme at Guangzhou 2010.

"More than for me, all of the Iranian people are happy about this win and becoming champions in this tournament," Mehrzad said.

Inspiring athletes

While the Iranian women's team have not finished on the Paralympic podium yet, the athletes are looking to emulate the success of the men's team. Today, both national teams compete at major international events.

"Sitting volleyball is progressing and developing in Iran. We also have one of the best technical coaches in Asia and in the world," said Zahra Nejatiaref, an athlete on the women's team.

"We have the champions of the world in the men's category in our country. We always use their experience and guidance; it is very good for us. We also have many championships that are held frequently in Iran."

With two years to go until the LA28 Paralympic Games, the Iranian athletes are looking to continue their dominance and win a fourth consecutive Paralympic gold medal.

The LA28 Paralympic Games will take place from 15-27 August 2028, featuring around 4,480 athletes from around the world.

Mehrzad wants to prove that the dynasty built over decades can continue to dominate on the world's biggest stage.

"Our important goals for the Iranian national team are to be a strong team in the next Paralympic Games and to defend our Paralympic title," he said.

Rezazadeh urges Yousefi to improve snatch performance ahead of LA28



Iranian weightlifter Alireza Yousefi celebrates after setting a new clean & jerk world record in the men's +110kg division at the IWF World Championships in Ningbo, China, on Nov. 8, 2026.
IWF

Sports Desk

Weightlifting legend Hossein Rezazadeh has urged his compatriot Alireza Yousefi to improve his snatch performance if he is to vie for the top prize at the Los Angeles Olympic Games in two years.

Yousefi headlined Iran's eight-medal haul at the recently concluded IWF World Championships in Ningbo, China, claiming clean and jerk gold in the men's +110kg category and setting a new world record in the process, before taking silver in the total on Sunday.

Yousefi's fellow Iranian superheavyweight Ali Davoudi, meanwhile, settled for bronze in the snatch but missed out on the podium in the clean and jerk and total, finishing fourth in both events.

The snatch competition was hardly one to remember for Yousefi, who opened with a successful 186kg lift before clearing 191kg and 195kg on his next two attempts, ultimately settling for fourth place.

Ali Ammar, who controversially lost out to Davoudi in the race for gold at September's Asian Games after being denied an attempt due to a timing error, made history by winning gold in the total and snatch, as well as silver in the clean and jerk, to become the first Iraqi world champion in an Olympic sport.

In the clean and jerk, both Davoudi and Yousefi had two attempts remaining after Ammar had completed his campaign with 255kg.

Yousefi initially lifted 258kg but had the attempt overturned because of bar oscillation. The Iranian and his coaching staff were visibly unhappy with the decision, arguing that the rules only penalize "deliberate oscillation" and that the bar had moved without any intervention from the lifter.

Remarkably, Yousefi, who had trailed Ammar by 16kg in the snatch, bounced back to lift a world-record 263kg and claim clean and jerk gold. The effort also propelled him past Armenian two-time defending champion Varazdat Lalayan, a silver medalist at the Paris 2024 Olympics, into second place in the total with a combined 458kg (195-263).

"World Championships are always highly competitive, particularly in sports where results are decided by the smallest margins. We witnessed closely contested events across several weight categories in Ningbo. Iran had lifters competing in every division from 85kg to +110kg, and fortunately, four of our representatives won medals, bringing our overall tally to eight," Rezazadeh, vice president of the Iranian Weightlifting Federation, said upon the team's return to Iran on Monday.

The two-time Olympic champion, who dominated the superheavyweight class in the 2000s, also praised Davoudi and Yousefi, saying: "Both are accomplished weightlifters and were involved in close contests with their Iraqi and Armenian opponents.

"Had Davoudi managed to lift 261kg in the clean and jerk, he could also have claimed the gold medal in the total," he said.

Commenting on Yousefi's performance, Rezazadeh said the 23-year-old, who also won clean and jerk gold and total bronze on his World Championships debut in 2024, was capable of lifting heavier weights but insisted that "he and the coaching staff need to work on his snatch as well to improve his total, because the combined result is all that matters when it comes to the Asian Games and, particularly, the Olympic Games."

Addressing Davoudi's performance, Rezazadeh said the former Olympic silver medalist had impressed in the snatch at both the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games and the World Championships but needed to improve his clean and jerk.

"Lifting heavy weights in training and competition are two different things. Lifters must be technically and mentally prepared to handle such weights," Rezazadeh said.

Emphasizing the need to plan for upcoming competitions, he added: "We must start planning for next year and, more importantly, the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics. From now on, the weightlifters must devote all their attention and focus to these competitions, because the Olympics are our biggest goal."

Iran's Women's Premier League:

Persepolis edges Sepahan in women's 'Clasico' to retain top spot

Sports Desk

Somayeh Esmaeili netted a second-half winner to lead Persepolis to a 1-0 home win over Sepahan in the so-called 'Clasico' of the Iranian women's top flight on Monday.

The victory saw the Tehran Reds, whose perfect start to the season was ended by a 2-1 away defeat to Gol Gohar Sirjan last week, retain top spot in the Iranian Women's Premier League standings with 18 points from seven games.

Sepahan, meanwhile, remained fifth in the 10-team table with 10 points from six matches after suffering its second defeat of the campaign.

There was little to separate the two sides in a cagey first half at Tehran's Shahid Kazemi Stadium, where chances were few and far between as the teams went into the break goalless.

Persepolis stepped up its game after the restart and began putting greater pressure on the visitors' defense.

Their efforts paid off in the 55th minute when Esmaeili found the back of the net with a superb scorpion kick to put the hosts ahead.

The Reds continued to create chances to extend their lead but failed to capitalize on their opportunities. At the other end, Persepolis goalkeeper Zahra Khajavi produced a solid display to keep Sepahan at bay and preserve her team's narrow advantage until the final whistle.

The Tehran outfit will now turn its attention to one of the most eagerly anticipated fixtures of the season, a home clash against 11-time champions Bam Khatoon next Monday.

Elsewhere, Gol Gohar was held to a goalless draw away to Ista Alborz but remained second in the table on 13 points, ahead of Esteghlal on goal difference.

Esteghlal came from behind to beat Ava Tehran 2-1 away from home and claim all three points, while Malavan secured a 4-2 victory over Palayesh Gas Ilam, ending a two-game losing streak and moving just above the relegation zone.


Persepolis's Somayeh Esmaeili (R) celebrates after scoring during her team's 1-0 victory over Sepahan in the Iranian Women's Premier League in Tehran, Iran, on November 9, 2026.
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