2026 Summer Youth Olympics:

Dakar delivers damning verdict on youth development in Iranian sport



NATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

Sports Desk

Iran wrapped up the fourth edition of the Youth Olympic Games in Dakar with a disappointing performance, finishing 38th in the medal table with just eight medals – one gold, four silver and three bronze – in a result that raises serious questions about the country's youth development system and its ability to produce future champions.

Benyamin Soltanian saved the day on the final day of Iran's action at the multi-sport showpiece, claiming gold in the men's +73kg taekwondo event on Thursday.

Asal Goltappeh, meanwhile, claimed silver in the women's 63kg category after losing to Germany's Luna Fellinger in the final.

The first of Iran's four silver medals came in swimming, where Parsa Shahshahani clocked 2:02.74 to finish runner-up to New Zealand's Ariel Muchirahondo in the men's 200m backstroke final.

A gold medalist at July's Asian Cadet Judo Championships, Sobhan Hakimi also settled for silver in the men's -81kg category after falling to Slovenia's Maks Cebulj in the final.

In beach wrestling, meanwhile, Iran's Amirali Domirkolaei suffered a 4-0 defeat to Venezuela's Wilfredo Grabiel Rodriguez Gonzalez in the men's 60kg final.

Iran also collected a beach wrestling bronze through Reza Jalalian in the men's 80kg class, while Arash Pahali won bronze in men's wushu, finishing third in the changquan combined event in taolu.

The country's other women's medal came in futsal, where Iran bounced back from a semifinal defeat to Venezuela to beat Italy 5-2 and claim a consolation bronze.

The outcome marked a significant decline from Iran's previous appearance at the event and continued a downward trend in the country's overall standing at the global youth competition.

Resuming after a four-year delay, Dakar 2026 marked the first time the Youth Olympic Games had been staged on African soil.

Iran's result was a far cry from the country's previous campaign in Buenos Aires in 2018, when Iran enjoyed its most successful outing in the history of the competition, collecting seven gold, three silver and four bronze medals to finish seventh in the standings.

Eight years later, Iran's gold medal tally had fallen from seven to just one, while its position in the medal table dropped by 31 places.

However, the decline is not limited to a comparison with the impressive 2018 campaign.

Iran finished 26th at the inaugural Youth Olympics in Singapore in 2010 with two gold, two silver and one bronze medal, before claiming three gold and three bronze medals to place 24th in Nanjing, China, four years later.

The 38th-place finish in Dakar therefore represents the country's worst performance across its four appearances at the event.

With 29 athletes competing in 14 disciplines, Iran's delegation was expected to showcase some of the country's emerging sporting talent. Yet the medal haul fell well short of expectations, particularly given the country's previous record at the competition.

While results at international events are influenced by several factors, including the strength of the field, the participating nations and athletes' individual circumstances, the considerable gap between Iran's performances across the four editions cannot be overlooked.

Shortcomings in talent development

The Youth Olympics are about more than medals. The event provides an important platform for assessing the effectiveness of talent identification systems, discovering emerging athletes and evaluating national federations' long-term plans for developing future champions.

In that regard, Iran's performance in Dakar should be viewed as more than a disappointing position in the medal table. It offers a worrying indication of the state of the country's talent development system and raises a number of important questions.

What has gone wrong with Iran's efforts to develop the next generation of athletes? Have national federations been effective in identifying and nurturing young talent? Were preparations adequate for the level of international competition, and, perhaps most importantly, was there a sustainable strategy in place to build on the success achieved in Buenos Aires?

These are questions that Iranian sports authorities and national federations must address if the country is to reverse the downward trend.

It would be unfair to place the responsibility for the disappointing campaign entirely on the young athletes who competed in Dakar and gave their best. They may, in fact, have had the least influence over the factors behind the overall result.

Much of the responsibility should instead be sought in the performance of the country's sporting administration, national federations, talent identification structures and long-term development programs.

Warning signs must not be ignored

Although the Dakar Games have come to an end, Iran's performance should mark the beginning of a serious review of its youth sports development policies.

The athletes competing at youth level today are expected to carry the country's medal hopes at future Asian Games, world championships and Olympic Games. If signs of decline are already evident at this crucial stage of their development, the country's sporting authorities cannot afford to ignore them.

The fall from seventh in Buenos Aires to 38th in Dakar, coupled with the reduction in gold medals from seven to one, is a record that demands attention.

Dakar should serve as a serious wake-up call for Iranian sports officials – a warning about a generation of athletes whose potential must be identified, supported and developed today if they are to deliver success on the biggest stages tomorrow.

Open SCO Cup:

Parhizgar wins gold in men's judo as Iran bags three medals

Sports Desk

Elyas Parhizgar got Iran off the mark at the Open SCO Cup in Moscow by claiming gold in the men's judo competition on Sunday.

A winner of four gold medals at this season's IJF Asian Open, Parhizgar defeated a Russian judoka in the semifinals before overcoming a Tajik opponent to claim the top prize in the -81kg division.

Amir-Abbas Movahed added a second judo medal to Iran's haul later in the day by claiming bronze in the men's +100kg class.

Elsewhere at the multi-sport event, Mobina Alinasab bagged a bronze medal in the women's rapid chess competition.

The Iranian woman grandmaster collected seven points to finish behind Belarus' Aliaksandra Tarasenka, who also scored seven points but edged Alinasab into runner-up spot on a superior tiebreak score.

Tarasenka's compatriot Varvara Poliakova tallied 7.5 points after nine rounds to win the gold medal.

International master Anousha Mahdian was the other Iranian player in the women's rapid competition but missed out on the podium, finishing fourth with 6.5 points. International masters Reza Mahdavi and Arash Daghli, meanwhile, represented the country in the men's rapid event, finishing fourth and seventh with six and four points, respectively.

Bringing together more than 2,000 athletes from Shanghai Cooperation Organisation member states and invited teams, the Open SCO Cup will run until next Monday in the Russian capital, with around 100 sets of medals up for grabs.

The competition program features 11 sports: table tennis, trampoline gymnastics, sambo, sport climbing, artistic gymnastics, weightlifting, fencing, rhythmic gymnastics, chess, judo and wushu.

Iran is being represented by a 70-member delegation competing in sport climbing, judo, weightlifting, artistic gymnastics, chess and table tennis.



Iranian judoka Elyas Parhizgar won men's -81kg gold medal at the Open SCO Cup in Moscow, Russia.
IJF

Mozaffar eyes fresh faces as Iran continues women's futsal rebuild

Sports Desk

Iran women's futsal head coach Shahrzad Mozaffar says the national team will continue its youth-oriented rebuilding process, with the door remaining open to talented newcomers who could earn call-ups to future training camps.

The Iranian coach made the remarks after her team won the title at a friendly tournament in China, also featuring the host nation and Hong Kong, last week.



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Mozaffar's side defeated Hong Kong 6-0 and 9-1, either side of a 3-1 victory over China, before falling 2-1 in a second match against the hosts but still managing to lift the trophy on goal difference.

Speaking to Mehr News Agency, Mozaffar said the event came at an important stage for a team that has undergone significant changes since last year's Women's Futsal World Cup.

"Only five players from our 14-member World Cup squad remain in the team. Naturally, bringing so many new players together and developing an understanding among them takes time. We needed to put them to a serious test in actual match conditions," she said.

"Iranian women's futsal has made considerable progress in recent years and is now one of Asia's leading powers. Playing in another country and facing foreign opponents was particularly important from a mental and psychological perspective, especially for players making their first international appearances," she added.

Mozaffar also addressed Iran's first-ever defeat to China, attributing the result largely to physical exhaustion and a demanding travel and match schedule.

Several factors contributed to the loss, she said, with the players struggling to recover after a hectic domestic and international schedule that saw them play five matches in the space of nine days.

The coach stressed that results were not her main priority in China, describing the tournament as an opportunity to assess the team at the beginning of a new rebuilding process.

"Personally, the results were not the main concern for me. What mattered was testing the team at the start of a new journey. Considering the extensive changes, the limited time the players had spent together and the difficult travel and match conditions, I believe the team passed the test," she said.

"I am very satisfied with the players' performances, their attitude and conduct, as well as the unity and positive atmosphere within the squad.

"When you make such extensive changes and bring in so many young players, you cannot expect immediate results. They need time to develop, build cohesion and gain confidence. I hope this process will eventually produce positive results at major competitions such as the Asian Cup and the World Cup," she added.

The tournament was part of Iran's preparations for the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games, which were originally scheduled to start on December 11 in Riyadh but were postponed until late March due to security concerns in the region.

Mozaffar played down the impact of the postponement of the multi-sport event, explaining that with the domestic league continuing until March, there would be little room for extended national team training camps.

Mozaffar further indicated that several players have caught the coaching staff's attention through their performances in the Iranian league and could be added to the national team squad by mid-season.

"The changes we have made so far are only the beginning, and the process will continue. The doors of the national team remain open to talented players," she said.