

Iran crowned Asian karate champion despite final-day setbacks



Iranian captain Zabihollah Poursheib won the men's kumite -84kg gold at the Asian Karate Championship in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Sports Desk

A remarkable number of 39 medals – including 14 golds – across all age categories secured Iran a top-spot finish at the Asian Karate Championship.

However, a rather disappointing final day of the competitions in Almaty, Kazakhstan, saw Iran settle for the fourth spot in the seniors' table – following Japan, the host, and Vietnam.

Iranians managed to clinch only one of the six golds up for grabs on Wednesday, when men's captain Zabihollah Poursheib beat Japan's Rikito Shimada 4-3 in the kumite -84kg final.

Meanwhile, Iran's three-year dominance in the men's team kumite contests came to an end at the hands of Kazakhstan.

Iran's four-man team – comprising Poursheib, Sajjad Ganjzadeh, Mehdi Khodabakshi and Kayvan Baban – suffered a 3-1 defeat against the host in the final showpiece and took the silver, with Khodabakshi the only Iranian coming out victorious (7-2) against his opponent.

Saleh Abazari, Ali Meskini, and Mobina Heidari also came short in the final showdowns of their respective kumite categories.

Abazari, representing the country in the men's +84kg division, was beaten 4-0 by Saudi Arabia's Tareq Hamed – a silver medalist at the Tokyo Olympics in August

– while Meskini fell to a 2-1 loss to Abdallah Hammad of Jordan in the men's -60kg final.

Heidari, who had won an under-21 gold earlier in the competitions, suffered a 9-2 setback against Japanese Kayo Someya in women's -68kg final.

In the kata contests, Iranian trio of Abolfazl Shahrjerdi, Milad Farazmehr, and Ali Zand scored 25.02 points against Japan's 26.48 and took the men's team silver, while Iranian women's team – Najmeh Qazizadeh, Elnaz Taqipour, and Shadi Ja'farzadeh) finished its campaign with a consolation bronze after a 24.46-23.42 triumph over Kazakhstan.

This was a second kata medal for Shahrjerdi, who had beaten Chen Chao Ching of the Chinese Taipei to the individual bronze on the preceding night.

Pouria Aqdasi (-55kg) and Ali-Asghar Asiabari (-75kg) had also won a couple of bronze medals in the men's kumite contests on Tuesday with Taravat Khaksar (-55kg), Rozita Alipour (-61kg), and Leila Borj-Ali (+68kg) also finishing on the third podium of their respective weight classes.

Kazakhstan followed Iran in the overall table – courtesy of 11 golds, eight silvers, and 13 bronzes – with Japan finishing third with 10 medals, all of which came in the seniors' event.

Some 500 karatekas from 23 countries took part at the 17th Asian Senior, and 19th Asian Cadet, Junior & U21 Karate Championship.

F1 driver Latifi receives 'extreme' death threats after Abu Dhabi GP crash

Williams driver Nicholas Latifi said he received "extreme" death threats after his crash at the Abu Dhabi Grand Prix led to Max Verstappen controversially winning the Formula 1 world title.

Latifi, 26, crashed with five laps remaining, resulting in the safety car being deployed, BBC Sport reported.

The race was then resumed with one lap to go, in which Verstappen passed Lewis Hamilton to win the race and the title.

In a statement, Canadian Latifi

said he had received "a lot of hate and abuse".

He revealed: "Going back to the race weekend, as soon as the chequered flag dropped, I knew how things were likely to play out on social media.

"The fact that I felt it would be best if I deleted Instagram and Twitter on my phone for a few days says all we need to know about how cruel the online world can be.

"The ensuing hate, abuse, and threats on social media were not

really a surprise to me as it's just the stark reality of the world we live in right now. I'm no stranger to being talked about negatively online, I think every sports person who competes on the world stage knows they're under extreme scrutiny and this comes with the territory sometimes.

"But as we've seen time and time again, across all different sports, it only takes one incident at the wrong time to have things completely blown out of proportion – and bring out the worst in people who are so-called 'fans' of the sport. What shocked me was the extreme tone of the hate, abuse, and even the death threats I received."

The sport's governing body, the FIA, has launched an inquiry into last weekend's events in Abu Dhabi, where race director Michael Masi appeared not to follow the organisation's own rules when it came to the operation of a late safety-car period.

The FIA has admitted the controversy surrounding the race was "tarnishing the image" of F1.

Latifi, who made his F1 debut at the 2020 Austrian Grand Prix, added "only one group of people" needed an apology from him – and that was his team.



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Lakers beaten by Suns in third straight NBA defeat

The Los Angeles Lakers were beaten 108-90 by the visiting Phoenix Suns as their losing streak in NBA stretched to three games.

The Suns recorded their 24th victory in 26 games as Devin Booker scored 24 points in his second game back from a hamstring injury, BBC Sport reported.

LeBron James added 34 points for the Lakers but injured his ankle with six minutes remaining.

Suns' Deandre Ayton also claimed 19 points with 11 rebounds during the win.

The Lakers were without head coach Frank Vogel, plus players Kent Bazemore, Malik Monk, Avery Bradley and Austin Reaves, who all remain unavailable under the NBA's COVID-19 health and safety protocols.

Before Tuesday's victory, the Suns had been 1-2 on the road since their 18-match unbeaten run was ended by the Golden State Warriors on 3 December.

Elsewhere, Tyler Herro returned from a three-game injury absence to lead Miami Heat to a 125-96 win over the Indiana Pacers. Herro tied with Duncan Robinson for a season-high 26 points for the Heat.

Dallas Mavericks denied the Minnesota Timberwolves a fifth-straight victory as they ran out 114-102 winners, while the Detroit

Pistons were beaten 105-91 by the New York Knicks and the New Orleans Pelicans defeated Portland Trailblazers 111-97.

'No logic behind pausing'

Meanwhile, NBA commissioner Adam Silver has said there are no plans to postpone the league despite a rise in coronavirus cases.

Seven games have been postponed since last week, with the league's website saying 84 players from 20 teams had entered health and safety protocols as of Tuesday.

"We have of course looked at all the options but, frankly, we are having trouble coming up with what the logic would be behind pausing right now," Silver said.

"As we look through these cases literally ripping through the country, I think we're finding ourselves where we knew we were going to get to over the past several months, and that is this virus will not be eradicated, and we're going to have to learn to live with it."

Media outlets in the United States have reported the 10 NBA teams playing on Christmas Day have been told the times of their games could change at late notice, potentially the day before the fixtures.



ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES
Suns' Devin Booker (1) shoots the ball during an NBA victory over the Lakers in Los Angeles, CA, US, on December 21, 2021.

Australian Open confident on Nadal, uncertain on Djokovic



Rafa Nadal



Novak Djokovic

Australian Open chief Craig Tiley is confident Rafa Nadal will be at Melbourne Park for next month's Grand Slam despite testing positive for COVID-19, but he is still uncertain whether Novak Djokovic will be playing.

Nadal caught the novel coronavirus while playing in an exhibition tournament in Abu Dhabi last week and said he would make a decision on his future tournaments depending on his "evolution" over the weeks ahead, Reuters reported.

"I'm confident Rafa will be here," tournament organiser Tiley said of the 20-times Grand Slam champion at Melbourne Park on Wednesday.

"Players that are testing positive now will complete a period of time until they are no longer infectious and they will be fine. If you are going to test positive and you want to play the Australian Open, your timing would be now."

Tiley reiterated that all players and staff at the Australian Open would be vaccinated or have a medical exemption granted by an independent panel of experts.

Those requirements have prevented Djokovic, who has declined to disclose whether he is vaccinated, citing privacy, from confirming whether he will bid for a 21st Grand Slam title and a 10th Australian Open crown next month.

Tiley said that as far as he was aware, no players had yet been granted medical exemptions and that it would be up to Djokovic to disclose the grounds on which he gained entry to Australia.

"If Novak shows up at the Australian Open, he'll either be vaccinated or he'll have a medical exemption," he added.

"Medically, he doesn't talk to anyone about it. I'm not going to ask Novak that, it's none of my business.

"I will know that (he fulfils) one of those conditions."

Tiley said that if the world number one was going to play for Serbia in the ATP Cup in Sydney in the first week of January then he would be arriving with the first tranche of players next week.

"We want to have the best players here, I'd love to have Novak here," he added. "If he meets those conditions then great, if not, it's disappointing."

Roger Federer, the other men's player with 20 Grand Slam titles, and Serena Williams, who has won 23 Grand Slam titles, have already ruled themselves out of the tournament as they continue their recoveries from injury.

Tiley also announced that former US Open champion Sam Stosur and her fellow Australians Daria Saville and Maddy Inglis had been granted wildcards for the women's singles draw at the Jan. 17-30 tournament.