

FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

By **Bavand Karim**

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For the first time in more than 30 years, the Iranian national basketball team will compete in The Olympic Games. Led by center Hamed Ehdadi's 31 points, Iran defeated Lebanon, 74-69, in the gold medal game of the FIBA Asia tournament. This is the first continental title for Iran since the inaugural games in 1960.

Iran's 2008 Summer Olympic team will feature one of the tallest players in the tournament: 7-foot-5 beanpole [Jaber Rouzbehani](#). Rouzbehani can grab the rim flat-footed, dunk on his tip-toes and has a soft shooting touch. The catch? Although he's only 21, Rouzbehani didn't begin playing basketball until he was almost 16. He's still learning the fundamentals of the game.

Rouzbehani has been training with ex-Georgetown center [Wesley Wilson](#) and Sacramento Kings forward [Shareef Abdur Rahim](#), but it remains to be seen if he will be the first Iranian in the NBA. Besides his inexperience, there are health concerns: Jaber was born with the same pituitary disorder as Pavel Podkolzine and [Yao Ming](#), which limits his mobility and energy. However, Rouzbehani's potential is undeniable: he averaged 12 points, 8 rebounds and 7 blocks in the FIBA 19-Under World Championship three years ago, *before he started training*.

Just to give you an idea of the basketball interest in Iran, most of the courts are converted indoor soccer arenas with tile, not wood, on the floor. If nine kids show up to play and there's no tenth player, everyone goes home. To be fair, the professional league in Iran has grown since the Islamic Republic has opened its doors to Western basketball players in an effort to promote interest in the sport (former University of Texas power forward [Gabe Mouneke](#) plays for Iranian Super League Champion [Saba Battery](#)). While some international teams provide passports for non-nationals to play, as Russia did this year for CSKA's American point guard [Jon Holden](#), the national team is Persians-only, comprised of the best players from Super League teams Saba, Ahan Esfahan and Paykan Tehran.

Now the bad news: Although they dress ten players, only seven actually play, and of those only four are "true" basketball players. They had better sign an endorsement deal with GatorAde. Due to their collective lack of experience in international competition, Iran is likely to go winless throughout the tournament with an outside shot of being blown out of every game. And you can bet they'll enjoy every gut-wrenching second of it. Iran's Olympic hopes represent what's best about basketball, and the ability of sports to cross political and ideological boundaries. The basketball team should be a great source

of national pride in Iran, where medals of significance are often displayed in historical museums. Perhaps NBA Commissioner David Stern could be convinced to host some 2009 preseason games from Tehran.

The Summer Olympics will begin in July of 2008.