

# Iranian female skier Atefeh Ahmadi cuts icy path to Beijing Olympics

The only Iranian woman to qualify for the Beijing Games



Iran's Olympic skier Atefeh Ahmadi poses for a picture as she trains during preparations for the Winter Olympics, on the slopes of Abali some 45 kms from the capital Tehran

Iranian Atefeh Ahmadi learned to ski not long after she could walk, but the path to the Winter Olympics has not been an entirely smooth run for the 21-year-old.

The only Iranian woman to qualify for the Beijing Games, Ahmadi told AFP she was just three when her parents first set her on skis.

"I was so small, I didn't understand what these pieces of wood were for, but I learnt," said the athlete, who hails from Abali, east of Tehran.

Her father had been a member of the national skiing team and a trainer for the women's squad, and initially her elder sister Hadis was the one being coached to conquer the slopes.

But it was not long before Ahmadi's natural talent grew into an Olympic-sized dream of her own.

"When (Hadis) started her first competitions, I would cry because I wanted to follow her," Ahmadi said.

One of the souvenirs her sister brought back from the 2012 Winter Youth Olympics in Austria was the Games' insignia.

"That's when I started dreaming about the Olympics. I remember as a child clumsily drawing the five Olympic rings at the back of my notebook," Ahmadi said.

"I convinced myself that I would participate, without really knowing what the Games were like."

**- 'I had only my will' -**

She said international competitors were often shocked when they heard she was from Iran.

"They ask me if we have snow... They think we are a desert country like Saudi Arabia," the skier said.

"But even in summer, you can practise the sport in Damavand or Alamkouh, glaciers that are 5,600 metres (over 18,000 feet) high."

They are also "amazed to learn that women ski in an Islamic country", she added.

"I tell them that religion does not prevent women from doing sports."

Iran boasts several ski resorts, open to both genders. Those closest to Tehran are popular family getaways in winter and on weekends.

At the age of 10, Ahmadi travelled to Kazakhstan for her first competition abroad, and at 16 she joined the national team.

"When I debuted at the World Championships in St. Moritz in Switzerland, I realised I had to fight to compete with the best," she said.

"They had the financial means -- I only had my will."

### - **'Unfinished journey'** -

Ahmadi's first big disappointment came in the run-up to the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

"I was extremely motivated. I was 17 years old and I wanted to make history, to be the youngest Iranian skier to go to the Olympics," she said.

But the committee did not select her, saying she was too young.

"I was devastated. I cried for two weeks. I wanted to quit skiing," she said.

"Two months later, I picked myself up and started training again. I wanted to prove to everyone what I was capable of despite my age."

Ahmadi said she wanted to finish her father's "unfinished journey" after a lack of funds forced him out of professional sports.

In 2019 she finished 46th in the slalom at the world championships, and finished in exactly the same place in 2021.

One of just three Iranians set to compete in Beijing, she has become something of an icon in her village, and hopes to set an example for other young women.

"I was born in a traditional town where there are not many professional female athletes," she said.

"A girl from our region who reaches the biggest sports arena in the world can be a role model."