

Future of bodybuilding belongs to Iran: *Salari*



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EXCLUSIVE

Iranian bodybuilder Abbas Salari believes the country is on its way to become the dominant force of the sport in the near future.

"The future of bodybuilding belongs to Iran," Salari said in an interview with Iran Daily, adding: "The main rivalry at the top-notch events will be between the Iranians and the Americans in the coming years."

Born in Minab in the utmost southern Iranian province of Hormozgan, Salari, 34, says he first fell in love with bodybuilding when he saw pictures of a famous figure of the sport.

"I started bodybuilding when I was 12. It simply began when I first saw a photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger in a magazine and was insistently captivated by it. I knew I had what it takes to become a decent bodybuilder," said the winner of numerous trophies in international and national events.

"I won the juniors' national trophies in 2008 and 2009 and then claimed the bodybuilding and the body classic golds in the country in 2012. I also collected the top prize of the 75kg weight class in 2015, 2017, and 2018," added the

Iranian, who has been dedicating his time to participation at the international events for the past five years.

"I took the silver in the bodybuilding up-to-75kg category at the 2014 WBPF World Championship in Mumbai, India, in 2014 before repeating the success in Fujairah, the UAE, a year later.

"I won the overall title at the Legends Bodybuilding International Championship in Al Ain in 2018. I repeated the feat in the UAE in 2021 and 2022," added Abbsi, whose latest triumph came at the 18th Oman Open Championship in early March – where he was crowned the overall champion.

When asked about his future plans, Abbsi said: "I'll be looking to move up to the 90kg weight class in the upcoming tournaments. I'll have to obtain my NPC license to be qualified for the professional events and, to that end, I should finish atop the overall ranking at the Dubai pro event later this year. I won the 85kg gold last year but failed with the overall title."

Salari's fellow countryman Hadi Choopan grabbed the headlines in December when he became the first Iranian to be crowned Mr. Olympia – the most prestigious prize in professional bodybuilding.

Asked if Choopan's historic success has motivated him to fancy his chances at the high-profile Las Vegas competition, Salari said: "I intend to take part at the physique classic category of Mr. Olympia in the near future, though I'll have to gain some weight to be qualified for the 212lbs. (96kg) class.

"At 34 years of age, I'm at the peak of my physical condition and will be looking to reach the pinnacle of my career in two or three years.

"Choopan's trophy has surely been a morale-boosting success for all bodybuilders in the country. Iranians have always enjoyed a massive load of talent and skills to excel and I'm sure there will be much more to hear from them at the international stage.

"Future belongs to Iranian bodybuilding."



Verstappen admits he was lucky to survive and win Monaco GP



Red Bull's Max Verstappen (C) celebrates after winning the Monaco Grand Prix in Monte Carlo, Monaco, on May 28, 2023.
● STEPHANE MAHE/REUTERS

AFP – Max Verstappen tip-toed through the rainswept conditions in the latter stages of his victory in Sunday's Monaco Grand Prix and then declared he had been lucky to survive several brushes with the barriers.

In the aftermath of a challenging race in increasingly difficult conditions, Red Bull's defending world champion and the current series leader admitted he was fortunate in the way his car smacked the railings.

"I clipped the walls a few times," he said after his second win in the Mediterranean principality and fourth this season.

"It was super difficult out there today, but that's it. That's Monaco."

He explained that he was struggling while racing on a set of worn medium tyres, having started the race on them, as the rain began.

"I locked up the rears and I couldn't get out of it as the car slides," he said.

"So it was about trying to control that with a bit of drifting. And, luckily, the wall stopped that in a way from sliding anymore."

He added that the way in which he glided into the walls in the closing stages of the race had probably saved him from a more damaging contact.

His comprehensive triumph, after a virtuoso lap had secured his first Monaco pole on Saturday, brought him his 39th career victory and a 39-point lead over team-mate Sergio Perez in the drivers' championship ahead of next weekend's Spanish Grand Prix, the scene of his maiden win for the team.

Victory also gave some relief to agitated team boss Christian Horner who admitted he had felt apprehensive ahead of the Monaco race.

"We were on the ropes here," he said. "We knew coming into this weekend that it was going to be our biggest challenge in the first half of the year and the low-speed nature was playing to their strengths.

"We actually thought Ferrari might be the main opponent, but Fernando's just been on fire all weekend. I mean, unbelievable.

"When they pulled the covers off, you could see quite a few of them went on the hard tyre and with rain around.

"In the race, it felt like maybe we had gone a lap too long before going on to the intermediates. Had Fernando picked the inters, it would have been much tighter and put more pressure on our pitstop.

"When you're the lead car, you can only lose. You've got nothing to gain. And you've just got to try and work with the conditions, but thankfully, he picked the slick tyre just as the rain came in stronger."

Sevilla's Europa League love affair could give them edge

AFP – Sevilla and Roma may seem an even match on paper in the Europa League final but the Andalusians' love affair with the competition may give them an edge in Budapest on Wednesday.

They are the record six-time champions, with the closest contenders – Inter Milan, Liverpool, Juventus and Atletico Madrid, on three each.

Despite their disappointing season in La Liga, Sevilla have stepped up a gear in the Europa League, blowing away Manchester United and then Juventus to reach a seventh final.

The other six they have emerged victorious in, with captain Jesus Navas saying his side come out of the blocks flying in the competition.

"We transform (in the Europa League) and it's incredible how we come out in every match," Navas told UEFA last week.

"It's a competition that has given us a lot, and the joy it provides us every time we take part in it drives us to go as far as possible."

This season an added goal is paying back the fans for their support after one of the worst Sevilla La Liga campaigns in recent memory.

Since they were promoted in 2001, they have never finished in the bottom half, but are currently 11th with one game left to play.

It could have been a lot worse. They flirted with relegation for much of the campaign, sacking Julen Lopetegui and then Jorge Sampaoli, before Jose Luis Mendilibar steadied the ship.



Sevilla's Moroccan forward Youssef En-Nesyri (C) and teammates celebrate qualification for the Europa League final after the victory over Juventus in Seville, Spain, on May 18, 2023.
● DENIS DOYLE/GETTY IMAGES

"We're a family, we've showed it, we've had some very bad moments but the last quarter of the season has been spectacular," striker Rafa Mir told DAZN on Saturday.

"Now we have the prize of the final, we want to come back here with the cup."

Mourinho factor

Meanwhile, Jose Mourinho will put his remarkable European record on the line on Wednesday with a second straight continental cup up for grabs.

The 60-year-old coaching icon has never lost a European final in his career, five wins from five over two decades making him the first manager to reach a UEFA final with four different clubs.

Mourinho announced himself on the big stage in 2003 when he led Porto to the UEFA Cup, the Europa League's precursor, and the following year he claimed the first of two Champions League triumphs.

And 20 years on he is ready to take his tally of European trophies to six at Roma, who taste

success in last year's Europa Conference League.

The Italian capital has become a happy home for a coach whose time had looked to be over following his unfulfilling time at Tottenham Hotspur.

"Better coach, better person, same DNA. The DNA is motivation, is happiness. Desire for these big moments, and these are the feelings that I try to pass to the boys," Mourinho told reporters on Thursday.

"I think you can be better and better with your experienc-

es... I think your brain becomes sharper and the accumulation of knowledge is better with the years.

"I think you stop when you lose motivation, my motivation grows up every day... I think I am better now."

Mourinho has become a bona fide hero to Roma fans after winning their team's first ever major European honour last season, a triumph which moved the Portuguese veteran to tears.

A deep emotional connection has developed between coach and the supporters – who had waited since 2008 to see their team lift a trophy.

It was reminiscent of his passionate, short-lived love affair with Inter Milan where in his pomp 13 years ago he won the treble of Serie A, Champions League and Italian Cup.

"It's because I give everything... People aren't stupid. In the Roma case I think it is above winning or European finals. I think they feel like I wore the shirt and I fight for them every day," said Mourinho.

Mourinho's future beyond this season is in serious doubt as Wednesday's final could be his last major act at Roma.

"The only thing I'm focussed on is the final. I'm not thinking about my future or anything else. Everything else becomes secondary when you have a final to play," said Mourinho.

"I'm not thinking about myself, I'm thinking about the players and the supporters... we want to play, and Wednesday we will be there."