

# Iran's Kiani claims historic women's gold at World Taekwondo Championships

## Sports Desk

Iran's Nahid Kiani poses for a photo with the women's -53kg gold medal at the World Taekwondo Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan, on June 4, 2023.

● WORLD TAEKWONDO



Iran's Nahid Kiani made history on Sunday by clinching a maiden women's gold for the country at the World Taekwondo Championships.

On the final day of the event in Baku, Azerbaijan, Kiani came out on top against China's Ju Zuo – also a world silver winner last year – in straight rounds (14-0, 11-7) to walk away with the ultimate prize of the -53kg weight class, rounding off a dominant campaign in her fourth appearance at the World Championships while making up for her last-16 setback against the Chinese in the previous edition in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Egyptian Shahd El-Hosseiny and Russian-born Tatiana Minina – competing as a neutral athlete – shared the third podium.

"The tournament was surely a top-notch event and thank God I came here in my best form and won all my five bouts. It just feels great [to win a first world women's gold for Iran,]" said the 24-year-old, who is also a reigning Asian



Iran's Nahid Kiani (R) is in action against Ju Zuo of China in the women's -53kg final at the World Taekwondo Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan, on June 4, 2023.

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champion.

"The medal was big step toward securing a quota for next year's Olympics, though my ultimate gold will be to finish on the podium in the Games and I'll put in all my efforts to succeed in Paris," added the Iranian.

"There is no easy fight at the World Championships and Kiani had to face tough opponents right from the off. She was in top physical and technical form and the

precious gold was nothing more than she deserved," Iran coach Minoo Maddah said.

Kiani kicked off her campaign with a 2-0 (12-0, 15-14) victory over South Korean In Su-wan, before a thrilling last-16 bout saw the Iranian bounce back from a 9-5 defeat in the first round to beat Hungary's Luca Patakfalvy 11-3 and 8-6.

Kiani came out victorious (14-13, 19-6) against Croatian Nika Karabatić and then

a 2-1 (5-4, 14-6, 10-6) triumph over Tokyo Olympic silver medalist Minina sealed a place in the final showdown for the former world junior bronze medalist, who also has a 2018 Asian Games bronze as well as a silver at the Asian Championships under her belt.

Despite Kiani's historic feat and a first-ever top-five finish in the women's team table for Iran, the event in Baku was one to forget for the country – two-time

men's champion in 2011 and 2015 – which managed to collect only three medals across 15 classes in the men's and women's draws. Matin Rezaei fell to a semi-final defeat against British Bradley Sinden and settled for a joint-bronze alongside Uzbekistan's Ulugbek Rashitov in the men's -68kg class.

Aryan Salimi bagged a second bronze for Iran in the men's competitions, sharing the third podium with Artsiom Plonis of the Individual Neutral Athletes team in the -87kg contests – after a last-four loss to South Korea's Kang Sang-hyun, who went on to beat Ivan Sapina of Croatia for the gold.

South Korea dominated the men's table with 448 points courtesy of three golds and a silver – a record-extending 26th men's crown for the taekwondo powerhouse since the World Championships were introduced in 1973 – with Croatia (217pts) and Turkey (188pts) in the following spots.

Turkey won the women's title with 288 points, followed by France, Croatia, Hungary, and Iran.

## Benzema's Real exit 'surprise to everyone', says Ancelotti



Real Madrid players throw Karim Benzema in the air after his final game for the club against Athletic Bilbao at Santiago Bernabeu, Madrid, Spain, on June 4, 2023.

● JUAN MEDINA/REUTERS

REUTERS – Karim Benzema's decision to leave Real Madrid after 14 trophy-laden years was a surprise, manager Carlo Ancelotti said, but insisted that the Ballon d'Or winner has earned the right to choose.

The 35-year-old striker will exit Real as a free agent in the close season, with the Frenchman linked with a big-money move to Saudi Arabian side Al Ittihad.

"His departure has come as a surprise to everyone, but it has to be understood. It was a last-minute decision," Ancelotti told reporters after Real's clash against Athletic Bilbao.

"Yesterday, he trained normally, and today he's taken this decision. We have accepted it. I spoke to him this morning, and he said he was leaving, and I understood. "He's thought it through and his de-

cision forms part of the transition of this club, which continues and will continue next year. We have time to reflect on what we have to do. We'll have a competitive squad next year."

Benzema netted a penalty to secure a 1-1 draw against Bilbao on Sunday in his final LaLiga game at the Bernabeu, ensuring they finished second in the standings ahead of local rivals Atletico Madrid.

Having joined Real in 2009 from Olympique Lyonnais, Benzema became the spearhead of the club's attack and their main goal-scoring threat after Cristiano Ronaldo left for Juventus in 2018.

Benzema scored over 350 goals for Real to sit second on the club's all-time scoring list behind Ronaldo and finishes his career at the Spanish capital with a record 25 tro-

phies with the club, including five European Cups, four LaLiga titles and three Copas del Rey's.

"I bid him farewell in the knowledge that I've coached one of the greatest players in the world and one of the best strikers," Ancelotti said.

"We can't be pleased about his departure, but we have to respect his decision. He's earned the right to choose, and we all thank him for everything he's done for this club.

"He's been a legendary, unforgettable figure, and he'll remain forever in the memory of this club."

Real also announced the departures of forward Eden Hazard, attacking midfielder Marco Asensio and striker Mariano Diaz, leaving holes in the attack for club president Florentino Perez to plug in the close season.



Zlatan Ibrahimovic waves to the fans after the 3-1 victory over Hellas Verona in San Siro, Milan, Italy, on June 4, 2023.

● GIUSEPPE COTTINI/GETTY IMAGES

"Last but not least, from my heart, I want to thank you, fans. You welcomed me with open arms and I will be a Milanista my entire life. It's time to say goodbye to football, but not to you. It's too difficult, there are too many emotions. I'll see you around if you are lucky. Forza Milan and goodbye." The striker started his professional career at Malmo in 1999 and left for Ajax in 2001 before embarking on a career which featured spells with leading European teams such as Juventus, Barcelona, Manchester United, PSG, Internazionale and Milan. He scored 511 career goals and won league titles in four countries. Ibrahimovic, Sweden's all-time top scorer with 62 goals in 121 matches, quit the national team after Euro 2016 but returned in 2021 for their unsuccessful World Cup qualifying campaign.

## Heat rally to beat Nuggets 111-108, level NBA Finals at 1-1

AFP – The Miami Heat handed the Denver Nuggets their first home defeat of the playoffs Sunday, surging in the fourth quarter for a 111-108 victory that leveled the NBA Finals at one game apiece.

Gabe Vincent scored 23 points and Jimmy Butler and Bam Adebayo scored 21 points apiece for Miami, who withstood a 41-point performance from Nuggets star Nikola Jokic to get the split in Denver and breathe new life into the championship campaign.

In a game of swinging shifts of momentum, the Heat had the last word, rallying from a 15-point first-half deficit and out-scoring the Nuggets 36-25 in the final period as they silenced the crowd of 19,537 at Ball Arena.

Adebayo sealed it with a pair of free-throws with 48.3 seconds remaining. Denver had a last chance

to tie it, but Jamal Murray missed a three-pointer.

"We know we've got to do it on the defensive end," Adebayo said of Miami's fourth-quarter focus. "That's the biggest thing for us. We got to do it on that end because we know we can score, all five guys we believe in. So the biggest thing for us was getting stops."

Miami, who came through two play-in games and are trying to become the first eighth-seeded team to win the title, host game three of the best-of-seven series on Wednesday.

Miami started strong, leading by 11 with less than five minutes to play in the first quarter.

But the Nuggets remorselessly fought back and were up by 15 in the second quarter on the way to a 57-51 halftime lead.

Denver's second quarter turnaround owed plenty to their bench,

which out-scored Miami's reserves 25-5 in the first half.

But it was two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Jokic who asserted himself in the third, scoring 18 points in the period as Denver turned back the challenge of the Heat.

Miami tied it up at 66-66 midway through the period but didn't manage to get back in front and trailed by eight, 83-75 after Denver closed the third on a 6-0 run.

Miami weren't finished however, opening the fourth on a 15-2 scoring run.

They took the lead for the first time since the first quarter on Vincent's three-pointer with 10:10 to play and never trailed again.

A Butler three-pointer pushed the lead to 95-89 and he followed up with a three-point play.

After a disappointing shooting display in game one, the Heat connect-



Heat guard Gabe Vincent (2) shoots a 3-point basket during a victory over the Nuggets in Game 2 of the NBA Finals in Denver, CO, US, on June 4, 2023.

● MARK J. TERRILL/AP

ed on 17 of 35 from beyond the arc on Sunday.

Perhaps more importantly, after

getting to the free-throw line just twice in game one, the Heat converted 18 of 20 foul shots.