

Iranian Salimi on double major medals and Olympic ambitions



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The failure in making one last push toward the ultimate prize at the Hangzhou Asian Games turned out to

become the familiar story for the Iranian taekwondo squad, giving a the country's governing body of the sport a reality check ahead of next summer's Paris Olympics. While Matin Rezaei and Mehran Barkhordari left China with a couple of bronze medals, Mahdi Hajimousaei, Alireza Hosseinpour, and Arian Salimi had to settle for a finish on the second podium in their respective weight classes – eventually leading to the men's head coach Bijan Moghanlou stepping down from his role after the event.

However, Salimi, 19, believes the final outcome in Hangzhou could go down as a success for the Iranian men's taekwondo, which had won double golds – coupled with a silver and bronze medals apiece – in the previous edition of the Asian Games in Jakarta-Palembang 2018.

"All countries brought their full-strength squads to the Asian Games, but every member of our team still managed to win a medal. We had three finalists across five weight divisions, and I'm sure we would have won at least two golds, had it not been for some controversial decisions by the referees," Salimi told Iran Daily.

The young Iranian had a decent run en route to the final in Hangzhou – beating opponents from the Philippines, Jordan, and the Chinese Taipei – only to suffer a 2-1 defeat against the host's Song Zhaoxiang in a thrilling +80kg showdown, in which the two contestants scored a remarkable 96 points between them.

"The opponent had the support of the home crowd, but I was in full control of the final, except for the final 10 seconds of the first and the deciding rounds. That's where the result was settled," Salimi said of his bout against the two-time world bronze winner.

"He was very smart and made the most of his opportunities, not to mention I had six points chalked off by the refs in the closing seconds. I could still have won the final but I made some mistakes, which I can't afford to repeat in the future events," added the Iranian teenager.

The Asian Games silver rounded off an impressive four months for Salimi, who, at such a young age, already has two major international medals under his belt – following the joint bronze he grabbed at May's World Championships in Baku.

Salimi overcame some high-profile contestants – including Spaniard Raúl Martínez – before falling to a defeat in a last-four thriller against South Korea's Kang Sang-hyun, who went on to snatch the 87kg gold, thanks to a victory over Croatian Ivan Šapina.

"For some reasons, I was not in my best mental conditions and I also had to deal with a minor injury through the competition, which kept me from delivering my best performance against the South Korean opponent, whom I had beaten in the Grand Slam series last year," Salimi said of his campaign in Baku.

Salimi said he has now set his sights on securing a quota for next year's Paris Olympics.

"I will give it my best shot to seal the berth for the Olympics and then win a medal in Paris. I'm currently the number one in the Grand Slam ranking and will have to retain my position when this year's event gets underway in December [in Wuxi, China] to boost my chances of qualification for the Olympics."



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Asadi's screamer leads Sepahan past Persepolis in 'Iranian Classico'



Sepahan's Reza Asadi (bottom) celebrates with teammates after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over Persepolis in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on November 12, 2023.
● HAMIDREZA NIKOOMARAM/FARS

Sports Desk

A Reza Asadi's outrageous free-kick from 40 yards out was the difference between Persian Gulf Pro League giants Sepahan and Persepolis in Isfahan's Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium on Sunday.

The much-needed 1-0 victory in the so-called 'Iranian Classico' saw Jose Morais's men get their title charge back on track after a stalemate at Nasaji Mazandaran and a shock home defeat against Malavan had ended their perfect start to the season.

Meanwhile, Persepolis manager Yahya Golmohammadi was left with much to think about during the upcoming international break – ahead of massive continental showdowns against Al Nasr and Al Duhail as well as mid-December's Tehran Derby – after his side – hit with injuries and a flu virus in recent weeks – left the pitch without a win for a fourth successive game across all competitions.

There was little to separate the two sides in a cagy first half, but few would argue that Sepahan

did not ultimately deserve the maximum points, given the chances the home side created before breaking the deadlock 20 minutes from normal time.

Reds keeper Alireza Beiranvand produced heroic saves to deny Milad Zakipour and substitute Shahryar Moghanlou but the Iranian international could only watch Asadi's sizzling strike go in off the bar.

Persepolis desperately pushed for an equalizer in the closing stages but it proved too little too late for the defending cham-

pion, which suffered only a first defeat in the Iranian top-flight since mid-March, when the Reds were beaten at home by the same opposition before lifting the league and cup trophies by the end of the previous campaign.

The result leaves Persepolis five points adrift of archrival Esteghlal, which walked away with a 2-0 home victory against Tractor on the preceding night – courtesy of goals by Iman Salimi and new Argentine signing Gustavo Blanco – to stay atop the table with 22 points.

Zob Ahan also made the most of the Tehran Reds' wobble, as a Fardin Yousefi's stoppage-time winner led Mohammad Rabiei's men to a 2-1 win at Nasaji, lifting them to second with 18 points.

Asadi, meanwhile, will be looking to build on his flying form – which has seen the league's leading marksman bag nine goals and double assists in 11 outings – when representing the national team in the World Cup qualification double-header against Hong Kong and Uzbekistan in the coming days.

Djokovic beats Rune in ATP Finals to secure year-end No 1 spot

PA MEDIA – Novak Djokovic ensured he will finish the year ranked world No 1 for an eighth time after battling to a late-night victory over Holger Rune in his opening match at the ATP Finals.

Djokovic is chasing a record seventh title but again found the 20-year-old Rune, who is making his debut at the eight-player event, a troublesome opponent before pulling off a third win in five meetings.

It was past midnight in Turin when Djokovic completed a 7-6 (4), 6-7 (1), 6-3 victory after three hours and four minutes on court.

Rune has fared much better against Djokovic than most of his rivals over the last couple of years, beating him in Paris last autumn and Rome in the spring before a narrow defeat in the French capital a



Novak Djokovic hits a serve during a victory over Holger Rune in the ATP Finals in Turin, Italy, on November 12, 2023.
● GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS

week-and-a-half ago. The Serb went on to win the Masters series title, maintaining his record of not having lost a match since the Wimbledon final.

Djokovic told Prime Video: "It took everything. I saw in the first game when he fired shots from

the baseline, I knew it was going to be a tough night for me. I thought he played great. I played great in some moments. Overall a win is a win. It was a very emotional win and a tough win knowing the significance of tonight's match. After a really terrible sec-

ond-set tie-break I think I played a really solid third set."

Earlier, Jannik Sinner delighted the crowd in Turin by defeating Stefanos Tsitsipas in the opening singles match.

The 22-year-old Italian played as an alternate two years ago but quali-

fied for the first time this season after claiming four ATP Tour titles and rising to world No 4. He is one of the favourites to lift the trophy this week, which would be the dream scenario for the home fans, and a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Tsitsipas is a big step towards the semi-finals. There had been doubts over Tsitsipas's fitness heading into the event and he failed to force a break point on the Sinner serve during the 85-minute contest.

"I was excited to step on court and opening the finals is really, really special," said Sinner. "I knew it was going to be very tough but I think I handled the situation well. I tried to stay aggressive and I am very happy with the performance. I am happy to start off with a win and hopefully I can continue with this intensity."