

'Bonkers' to still be winning 30 years on, O'Sullivan says



WORLD SNOOKER

BBC— Ronnie O'Sullivan says it is "bonkers" to have won the UK Championship for an eighth time, 30 years on from his first triumph as a 17-year-old in 1993. The world number one's 10-7 victory over Ding Junhui on Sunday saw him become the oldest UK champion, two days before his 48th birthday. It was the Englishman's 40th ranking title and his 22nd Triple Crown success since turning professional in 1992.

"I feel a more complete player now than ever," O'Sullivan said.

"I've got better, I feel like I got better in many ways. I started off pretty raw. I was all right when I first turned pro and I lost my way. It's bonkers to be still playing and winning tournaments at the age of 48."

The seven-time world champion became the youngest winner of a ranking event with the first of his record eight UK titles – a 10-6 win over Stephen Hendry. O'Sullivan's latest victory saw him eclipse Doug Mountjoy to become the oldest winner of the UK title.

Asked if he could have foretold his own longevity three decades ago, O'Sullivan, who has claimed almost every major record during an unprecedented spell at the top of snooker, added: "I'd have said, 'You're off your nut, you are crazy.'"

Widely regarded as the greatest player of all time, O'Sullivan typically arrived at the York Barbican under the spotlight, with the release of his documentary coming amid a row with the game's governing body that has cast doubt over his future on snooker's main professional tour.

"I don't know [how long I'll continue]," said O'Sullivan, who will target an eighth Masters title in January. "I don't really want to put a number on it."

"I think [I'll continue] as long as my sponsors keep supporting me and I don't fall off the tour. If I did fall off the tour it would be nice to get a wildcard off World Snooker to keep playing, but you never know, they might give me a knockback as usual."

"I just keep playing. As long as they want me to keep playing I'll play. But they sent me a letter the other week saying they want me to consider my future on the tour, I don't know what's going through their heads at the moment."

# New era for Iranian freestyle wrestling ahead of Olympics

Sports Desk

Iranian freestyle wrestling will turn to a new page after Pejman Dorostkar stepped down from his role as the national team head coach last week, making way for Mohsen Kaveh to take over ahead of next year's Paris Olympics.

With eight months to go before the opening ceremony in the French capital, the new coach, also an advisor to the chairman of the Iranian federation, Alireza Dabir, will have quite a job on his hands as three Olympic berths are yet to be secured for the country. Amirhossein Zare' (130kg) and Hassan Yazdani (86kg) have already sealed the Olympic quotas of their respective weight classes, thanks to their medal-winning campaigns in September's World Championships, while Rahman Amouzad clinched the 65kg slot after finishing fifth in Belgrade. However, the 57kg, 74kg, and 97kg spots will be up for grabs in the qualification events in the coming months.

"It was the hardest decision that I had to make, though I'll be looking to succeed at the Olympics," Kaveh said after his appointment.

"We only have eight months to prepare and I've already begun planning for the Games," added the new head coach.

"I know expectations will be high of the freestyle team in Paris, but I'll do all I can to avoid the mental pressure on the Iranian wrestlers for the Olympics."

With the Americans and



iawfir

the Russians in impressive form in the latest UWW Worlds, Kaveh knows his men will have a mountain to climb to walk away with the ultimate prize in Paris.

In the Iranians' eight bouts against either an American or a Russian opponent in Belgrade, only Amouzad managed to come out on top against Team USA's Nick Lee, while last week's final showdown of the Iranian Pro League saw the Iranians suffer five defeats against the Russians – including losses for Olympic contenders Alireza Sarlak

and Younes Emami. Sarlak fell to a 7-0 setback against reigning Olympic champion Zaur Uguev in the 57kg contest, before Emami, a two-time world silver medalist, was beaten 5-4 by Magomedrasul Gazimagomedov.

The other major challenge facing Kaveh will be the form of Yazdani before the Olympics, after the 86kg sensation underwent surgery on his injured shoulder in November and is set to spend up to six months on the sidelines.

A winner of a national-re-

cord nine world and Olympic medals, Yazdani had to cope with the shoulder problem through September's World event, where he had yet another disappointing finish, by his own standards, after a fall defeat against his familiar foe David Taylor, which gave the American a 3-1 lead in the head-to-head battles with the Iranian in the recent four major finals – including the showdown at the Tokyo Olympics. While Yazdani has promised to "come back to his best in the near future",

Dabir's comments raised doubts over the wrestler's condition ahead of his quest for a third Olympic medal.

"No wrestler in Iran has fully recovered from a shoulder injury over the past 20 years. That's what happened to me as my career came to an end when I was 25," said Dabir – an Olympic champion in Sydney 2000.

When Kaveh was asked about Yazdani's situation back then, he said: "Hassan is in a league of his own and hard to replace.

I'm sure he'll put in all his efforts to make it to the Games."

Kaveh still added there would be other alternatives for Yazdani, should he fail in the race against time for a proper challenge in Paris.

"Our priority will definitely be Yazdani but Ali Savadkouhi has recently moved up to the 86kg class and could be in contention, along with [former world silver and bronze medalist] Alireza Karimi as well as Hadi Vafaeipour," Kaveh said in November.

# Haaland and Guardiola upset with ref after Spurs draw

THE GUARDIAN – Manchester City's 3-3 draw with Tottenham ended in fury for the champions, prompting Pep Guardiola to say he would not make a "Mikel Arteta comment" and Erling Haaland to write "wtf" on X after the referee, Simon Hooper, stopped play with Jack Grealish clear on goal in added time.

Hooper, having waved play on for a foul on Haaland, halted the game after a pass by the Norwegian had put Grealish in behind the Spurs defence. Angry City players surrounded the referee – which may provoke a Football Association charge – and Guardiola re-monstrated with the fourth official. When Hooper blew for time, Haaland departed the pitch visibly upset.

Guardiola, asked about the incident, responded pointedly. "Next question," he said. "I will not do a Mikel Arteta comment. It is hard when you review the image: the referee decides to blow the whistle after he has already said to play on.



Erling Haaland (c) reacts after the referee, Simon Hooper, stops play with Manchester City through on goal against Spurs in a Premier League 3-3 draw at the Etihad Stadium, Manchester, Britain, on December 3, 2023.

ROBBIE JAY BARRATT/GETTY IMAGES

After the pass, the whistle, so I do not understand this action."

Guardiola was referring to Arteta's comments after Anthony Gordon's winner for Newcastle against Arsenal was allowed to in the wake of three VAR checks. Arteta called the decision "an absolute disgrace".

City's manager was more forthcoming when asked about Haaland's reaction at the end. "It's normal," he said. "His reaction was the same for 10 players. The rules are you cannot talk with the referees or fourth officials so we should have had 10 players sent off today. He's a little bit disap-

pointed. Even the referee, if he played for Man City today he would be disappointed for that action, that's for sure."

Guardiola refused to blame the decision for the result. "I make mistakes, the players make mistakes. I don't want to criticise him. On the touchline sometimes I

lose my mind and my gestures are not proper but here normally for many years as a manager I'm not a guy when I'm refreshed [calm] to comment. But I would say we didn't draw for that."

On X, Haaland wrote "wtf" above a clip of the incident. The FA is likely to charge

him or Guardiola only if it concludes they have questioned the referee's integrity. In a thrilling match, Son Heung-min opened the scoring on six minutes before the Spurs captain's own goal equalised three minutes later. City took the lead via Phil Foden, Giovanni Lo Celso levelled after the break, Grealish made it 3-2, and Dejan Kulusevski's goal shared the points.

Ange Postecoglou indicated he was unhappy at half-time. Asked by Sky Sports to elaborate on what he had said, the Spurs manager replied: "There would probably only be a few words I can say. Joking aside, it was more trying to get the players to believe in themselves rather than anger at them."