

## Yazdani not to be rushed back into action, coach Kaveh insists



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### Sports Desk

Iranian wrestling sensation Hassan Yazdani will not be rushed back into action, the national freestyle team head coach Mohsen Kaveh said.

A winner of a national-high nine world and Olympic medals, Yazdani is expected to be sidelined for up to six months after a surgery on his injured shoulder in September, facing a race against time to make it to the Paris Olympics – starting July next year.

“I spoke with Hassan a couple of days ago. He is doing well with the recovery process and the physiotherapy sessions. I will be looking to have him in his best form for the Olympics,” Varzesh3 quoted Kaveh, who took over from former head coach Pejman Dorostkar last week, as saying.

“His health, however, is a top priority for us. He needs to be back on the mat in proper conditions first, before we decide on his Olympic campaign,” added the Iranian.

Yazdani had to cope with the shoulder problem through September’s World Championships in Belgrade, where he had yet another disappointing finish, by his own standards, after a fall defeat against his familiar foe David Taylor in the 86kg final, 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.

The silver medal was still enough to secure the 86kg berth in Paris for Yazdani, meaning he will not have to be involved in the Olympic qualification events in the coming months.

However, the comments made by the Iranian federation chairman, Alireza Dabir, after Yazdani’s surgery raised doubts over the future of the 28-year-old’s career.

“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, a gold medalist in Sydney 2000. Already having an Olympic gold (2016) and silver under his belt, Yazdani will be hoping to overtake former taekwondoka Hadi Saei as the most decorated Iranian in the history of the Olympic Games in Paris.

## 2024 Volleyball Nations League:

# Iran to chase Olympic berth in Brazil, Japan, Philippines

### Sports Desk

Iran will take one last shot at a place in next summer’s Paris Olympics when visiting Brazil, Japan, and the Philippines for the preliminary round of the 2024 Volleyball Nations League – starting May 21.

The international governing body of the sport, the FIVB, on Friday unveiled the initial draw for the men’s and women’s flagship annual event, where the top 16 national teams in each category were divided into three pools apiece.

Iran will kick off its campaign in Rio de Janeiro, alongside the host and 2021 champion Brazil, Japan – which marched to last year’s Finals before finishing third – Cuba, Germany, Serbia, Italy, and Argentina. Week 2 of the preliminary phase puts Iran in the same pool with Japan, Brazil, newcomer Turkey, reigning champion Poland, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Germany – starting June 4 in Japan, with the host city yet to be confirmed.

The third and the final week (June 18-25) will see Iran visit Manila, where massive showpieces against Japan, Canada, USA, the Netherlands, Brazil, Germany, and France could be on the cards for the Asian powerhouse.

The FIVB is yet to announce the fixtures list across the three weeks and the host country for the VNL Finals, which will be joined by the top seven of the 16-team table in the quest for the ultimate prize on June 27-30. This year’s event will also



FIVB

play a crucial part in completing the lineup for the volleyball contests in Paris, as the remaining five slots will be decided through the FIVB Men’s World Ranking by the end of the preliminary round.

Egypt will likely take the African berth for the Games, while the other four spots will go to the four highest-ranked teams, which have not qualified yet. As it stands in the ranking, Italy (third), Argentina (sixth), Slovenia (seventh), and Serbia (ninth) are the

favorites to qualify, with Iran lagging behind in the 15th place.

Iran will be back in Rio de Janeiro after a dreadful run in September’s Olympic Qualification Tournament in the Brazilian city, in which the Asian side finished second from bottom in the eight-team standing, managing a single victory over Qatar in seven outings. Germany, Brazil, Poland, Canada, USA, and Japan have already punched their tickets for Paris thanks to a top-two finish across the

three qualification pools. Iran’s qualification campaign was the latest episode in a disastrous five months under Behrouz Ataei – featuring a 15th-place finish in the VNL, followed by a straight-set defeat against Japan on home soil in the Asian Championship final – which ultimately saw the Iranian head coach step down from his role after a 3-1 defeat against the Czech Republic midway through the tournament in Brazil.

The future of the Iranian

volleyball remains unsettled ahead of the crunch Volleyball Nations League as the national team job has been vacant since Ataei’s departure while the sport’s governing body in the country is yet to know its chairman, after Mohammadreza Davarzani’s four-year reign came to an end in late November.

Vahid Moradi, a vice-chairman to Davarzani, was appointed by the Iranian Sports Ministry as the caretaker of the federation and is tasked with holding the

elections for the new president and board members. According to several reports in recent days, Moradi is also expected to name the head coach of the national team before the end of the year.

The federation unveiled a list of six candidates for the job in November, with former skipper and world-class setter Saeed Ma’rouf as well as Italian Roberto Piazza – now in charge of Allianz Milano in his home country – reportedly leading the race to replace Ataei.

## Russians, Belarusians allowed to compete at Paris Olympics

**THE GUARDIAN** – Russian and Belarusian athletes will be allowed to compete at the Paris 2024 Olympics as long as they have not supported the war in Ukraine, the International Olympic Committee has decided.

However athletes who do qualify in individual sports will have to compete as “neutral” athletes – with no flags, emblems or anthems allowed. Russian and Belarusian teams will remain banned.

The hugely controversial decision comes in defiance of Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, as well as more than 30 western countries – including Britain and the US – who had called for a complete ban.

Unsurprisingly it was quickly criticised by Ukrainian athletes, including the Winter Olympic skeleton star Vladyslav Heraskevych, who questioned whether there would be any Russian or Belarusians in Paris who did not support the invasion of his country.



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“To me this is madness, not something that is subject to common sense,” he said. The news also was greeted with anger in Russia, with the former sports minister Pavel Kolobkov saying: “This feels like some kind of handout.”

“In such a situation, the Olympics have ceased to be such an interesting competition for Russian athletes,” he added.

“It was one thing when we performed on equal terms and competed on equal terms with other

athletes. And it’s another thing when we are asked to participate under such humiliating conditions.”

In a statement explaining its decision, the IOC said that only eight athletes from Russia and three Belarusians had so far qualified for

Paris, out of over 4,600 from around the world.

The IOC confirmed that athletes and coaches who actively support the war will not be able to compete in Paris. “Athletes who are contracted to the Russian or Belarusian military or

national security agencies will not be eligible to be entered or to compete,” it added.

Russian and Belarusian athletes will have to sign a statement promising to respect the Olympic Charter, including “the peace mission of the Olympic movement” and fulfil anti-doping requirements for their sport.

“Among the 4,600 athletes from around the world who have qualified for Paris 2024 so far, there are only 11 individual neutral athletes (eight with a Russian passport plus three with a Belarusian passport),” the IOC said. “In comparison, to date more than 60 Ukrainian athletes have qualified for Paris 2024.”

No Russian or Belarusian government or state officials will be invited to or accredited for the Games. The IOC insisted that its decision was backed by sports and athletes. “The view of the overwhelming majority of athletes is not to punish fellow athletes for the actions of their government,” it said.