

Having sights set on Olympic triumph, Zare' will be the Iranian athlete to watch in 2024



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

Heading into 2024, Amirhossein Zare' will be looking to build on an impressive three years in his career – most notably a dominant performance over the past 12 months – when beginning preparations for the biggest sporting prize of all: A gold medal at the Paris Olympics.

All eyes will be on the freestyle wrestler in the Iranian delegation for next summer's event, after he reclaimed the super-heavyweight crown in September's World Championships in Belgrade before easing to the top podium at the Asian Games three weeks later.

"I will give my full dedication to the success in Paris right from tomorrow, when I wake up in my hotel room," Zare' said after he walked off the mat for the last time in Belgrade.

At the age of 22, Zare' is already among the most decorated Iranian wrestlers over the past decade, courtesy of double world golds and a bronze, as well as the Olympic bronze in Tokyo in 2021. The victory over Mongolian Mönkhörtiin Lkhagvagerelgold – world runner-up in 2022 – in the Hangzhou final rounded off a 13-bout winning streak in 2023 for Zare', including a last-four win against Turkish sensation Taha Akgül at the World Championships, followed by an 11-0 demolishing of Georgian Geno Petriashvili in the final.

Zare's second world final victory over the Georgian giant in three years was one of the seven wins



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that the Iranian sealed before the six-minute mark over the course of 12 months.

The Iranian tallied 115 points in three major international outings – starting with the Zagreb Open triumph in January – while conceding only eight points against his opponents.

In fact, Daniel Ligeti of Hungary and Belarusian Dzianis Khramiankou were the only wres-

tlers to take points from the Iranian in 2023.

Zare', Petriashvili, and Akgül will again be involved in a three-horse race for the ultimate prize in Paris, unless American Gable Steveson, who embarked on a career as a professional wrestler after winning the gold in Tokyo, makes a surprise return for the competition.

Zare' is all but guaranteed a

place in the country's Olympic squad but he will still have to see off fellow Iranian prodigy Amir-Reza Ma'soumi – a world gold medalist in all age groups, who threw down the gauntlet to Zare' by dominating December's National Championships.

The two are tipped to go head-to-head when representing the country at the UWW Ranking Series in Zagreb.

For all the illustrious wrestling history Iran has enjoyed in the Olympics since collecting five medals in Helsinki 1952 – including double silvers for Nasser Givhechi and legendary Gholamreza Takhti – a superheavyweight gold has been eluding the country over the past 29 editions of the multi-sport event, and the occasion in July and August could see Zare' and Amin Mirzazadeh –

world Greco-Roman champion in Belgrade – break that duck.

Retired wrestler Komeil Qassemi has an Olympic gold in the weight class under his belt, but he was only handed the ultimate prize of the freestyle 120kg category a decade after London 2012, thanks to positive doping test results for the initial top two Artur Taymazov and Davit Modzmanashvili.

VNL 2024:

Volleyball heavyweights standing between Iran and Olympic spot



FIVB

Sports Desk

Iran will take one last shot at a place at next summer's Paris Olympics when getting its Volleyball Nations League campaign underway against reigning world champion Italy in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on May 21. With Germany, Brazil, Poland, Canada, USA, and Japan having already punched their tickets for the French capital – thanks to a top-two finish across the three pools in last October's qualification tournament – the four remaining spots for the Games will be decided through the FIVB Men's World Ranking by the end of the VNL preliminary round. Egypt is likely to take the African slot and, as it stands in the ranking, Italy (third), Argentina (sixth), Slovenia (seventh), and Serbia (ninth) are also the favorites to qualify, with Iran lagging behind in the 15th place.

The Asian powerhouse will then take on Argentina, Serbia, and Cuba in Week 1 of the annual event, before heading to the Japanese city of Chiba for the second week of action – starting June 4 – against Japan, Brazil, newcomer Turkey, and Bulgaria.

Week 3 will see Iran square off against the Netherlands, Germany, France before finish the preliminary round against the USA on June 23 in Manila, the Philippines.

The top seven of the 16-team table of the preliminary phase will join host Poland in the VNL Finals in Lodz from June 27-30.

The Iranian Volleyball Federation is yet to name the new head coach for the national team following Behrouz Ataei's departure in the aftermath of four-set defeat against the Czech Republic midway through the Olympic qualification tournament in midway through the FIVB Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Rio de Janeiro in October.

The national governing body of the sport announced a four-man shortlist for the job last week. Former Iran skipper Saeed Ma'rouf and Belgian Vital Heynen – world champion with Poland in 2014 – plus Italian duo Angelo Lorenzetti and Roberto Piazza, now in charge of clubs Sir Sicoma Perugia and Allianz Milano in their home country respectively, are in contention for the role.

Azmoun given go-ahead by Roma for Asian Cup



FABIO ROSSI/GETTY IMAGES

Sports Desk

Serie A club AS Roma gave Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun the green light to feature in the upcoming AFC Asian Cup – starting January 12 in Qatar.

The Iranian Football Federation said on Sunday that the prolific frontman could miss out on the continent's flagship international event due to a clause in his one-year loan contract from Leverkusen with the Italian side.

However, the Iranian federation, announcing the 26-man squad for the tournament on Tuesday, said the Giallorossi's sporting director Tiago Pinto was convinced to release the Iranian after next Sunday's top-flight game against Atalanta, as he will join up with his teammates in Doha on January 10 – four days before Iran's

Group C opener against Palestine. Sepahan prodigy Mohammad-Javad Hosseinnejad – named in the provisional squad on Sunday – was omitted from the list, while Mahdi Qayedi, whose last international appearance came in the CAFA Nations Cup final against Uzbekistan in June, kept his place in the squad following an impressive run of late with Farhad Majidi's Ittihad Kalba in the UAE Pro League. Chasing a first Asian Cup title since lifting the trophy on home soil in 1976, the three-time champion Iran will take on Hong Kong in its second game in the group in Al Rayyan's Khalifa International Stadium on Jan. 19. The final round of the group fixtures will see Amir Qalenoee's side face the United Arab Emirates at the Education City Stadium on January 23.