

## Zagreb Open Ranking Series: Iranian Greco-Roman prodigy Hedayati to enter seniors' territory

Sports Desk

Iranian young gun Fardin Hedayati will be looking to have an impressive introduction when making his senior international debut at the Zagreb Open later this week.

A world superheavyweight under-20 champion last year, Hedayati will be a part of the country's five-man Greco-Roman squad at the UWW's season-opening Ranking Series event – starting with the freestyle contests today – alongside Danial Sohrabi (67kg), Amir Abdi (77kg), Alireza Mohmedi (87kg), and Mahdi Bali (97kg).

Hedayati punched his Zagreb ticket after a dominant performance in December's National Championships, which saw him outmuscle former world champion Ali-Akbar Yousefi in the final, and could go head-to-head with some high-profile wrestlers – including four-time world medalist Oscar Pino, Iranian-born Sabah Shariati, who won a bronze for Azerbaijan in Rio 2016, and China's Meng Lingzhe – in the Croatian capital.



UWW

Reigning world champion Amin Mirzazadeh remains the favorite to be the Iranian 130kg wrestler in next summer's Paris Olympics, and probably go all the way to win the ultimate prize, which means Hedayati needs to finish atop the podium in Zagreb to have a slight chance for a berth in the French capital, though he is all but guaranteed a shot at glory in April's Asian Championships.

Meanwhile, Mohmedi – last September's world 82kg silver winner – will be flying high ahead of the 87kg contests after a final victory over Nasser Alizadeh in the national event, hoping to lead the line for the country when the Olympic qualifiers get underway in two-months' time.

Sohrabi – absent at the National Championships – will step into the Zagreb Open on the back of a bronze in October's Asian Games, but will face a daunting challenge in the 67kg competitions, which will feature the reigning world top-two in Cuban Luis Orta and Hasrat Jafarov of Azerbaijan.

With veteran Mohammad-Ali Geraei serving a one-year ban by the international governing body of the sport, Abdi will likely be the Iranian 77kg frontrunner in the Olympic qualifiers, and will build on the national title in Zagreb. Bali, meanwhile, knows he is behind Mohammad-Hadi Saravi – a four-time world and Olympic medalist since 2021 – in the pecking order for a place in Paris but will still look to add the Ranking Series glory to last year's Asian title.

# Franz Beckenbauer was a graceful and visionary 'libero' who changed the face of football

AP – By taking a step back, Franz Beckenbauer put himself a step ahead.

The "libero" – taken from the Italian word for "free" and describing a player who had a covering role behind a defensive line – was not an entirely new concept to football by the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It was just that nobody who'd played in that rare position had ever done so with the vision, grace and ability on the ball demonstrated by Beckenbauer, the football revolutionary who died Monday at the age of 78.

The epitome of elegance in that iconic white Germany jersey with No. 5 on the back, Beckenbauer was regarded as a pioneer because he brought an attacking element to the deepest outfield position on the pitch.

Whether it was surging out from the back with the ball at his feet or picking out a teammate with a long, precise pass forward, he was the guy who started his team's attacks – whether it was for Bayern Munich, which he helped become a force in the German game in the mid-1960s, or his national team, with whom he won the World Cup in 1974.

"As a kid he was the first foreign footballer I'd ever heard of," former England and Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher wrote on X, formerly Twitter. "That's because if any player tried to play out from the back whether at pro or amateur level, I would hear, 'He thinks he's Beckenbauer.'"

"That just shows the impact he had on the world game and how he helped change it."

Beckenbauer actually started out as a central midfielder, the position he played in the 1966 World Cup final when West Germany lost to England, and would still play there at times later in his career. But it was as a libero – or a "sweeper," as some call it – that he really became a phenomenon through the way he read the game and surveyed the scene ahead of him.

"He was essentially a midfielder playing at the back and he made

it look so easy," Paul Lambert, a Champions League winner with Borussia Dortmund in 1997, told the BBC. "He could have kept his suit on most of the time."

Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann said Beckenbauer's interpretation of the libero role changed the game, epitomizing perhaps the cultural liberalism and spirit of freedom pervading through Europe in the 1960s.

"His friendship with the ball made him free," Nagelsmann said. "Franz Beckenbauer could float across the grass."

Whereas the modern-day sweeper is typically the middle central defender in a back three, Beckenbauer was one of two nominal center backs used as a libero behind a three-man line for Bayern and would pick his moment to step out and bolster the midfield. That particular role has disappeared from the game, though lives on in ball-playing center backs in a back four such as David Alaba at Real Madrid or, a few years back, Rio Ferdinand at Manchester United.

Such was his excellence that "Der Kaiser" – as Beckenbauer was known – was a two-time Ballon d'Or winner (1972 and 1976) and finished second in the voting in 1974 and 1975, amid an era he bestrode while winning three straight German league titles (1972-74) and three straight European Cups (1974-76).

His most famous goal might be a free kick he scored in that period with the outside of his right boot for Bayern at Duisburg in March 1974, an example of the class and impudence of a player who could do things defenders weren't supposed to even attempt.

Of all the tributes to Beckenbauer that poured in Monday, few were as fitting as that of UEFA President Aleksander Čeferin.

"His unparalleled versatility, graceful transitions between defense and midfield, impeccable ball control, and visionary style reshaped the way football was playing in his era," Čeferin said.



GETTY IMAGES

## Henry reveals battle with depression throughout career



JOHANNA GERON/REUTERS

AFP – Arsenal and France legend Thierry Henry has revealed he suffered with depression during his stellar playing career.

The 46-year-old, who won the World Cup with France and is Arsenal's all-time top goalscorer, told the Diary of a CEO podcast that the coronavirus pandemic made him appreciate his mental health struggles as he cried "almost every day."

Henry has linked that to his past and a search for approval from his father, who was often critical of his performances as a young player.

"Throughout my career, and since I was born, I must have been in depression," said Henry.

"Did I know it? No. Did I do something about it? No. But I adapted to a certain way. That doesn't mean I'm walking straight, but I'm walking. You've got to put one foot (forward) and another one, and walk. That's what I've been told since I'm young."

"I never stopped walking, then maybe I would have realised. (But during) Covid – I stopped walking. I couldn't. Then you start to realise."

Henry was in charge of Canadian side Montral Impact when the pandemic hit, leaving him isolated and on the other side of the world from his family.

"I was in isolation in Montreal, and not being able to see my kids for a year was tough," he added.

"Tears were coming alone. Why I don't know, but maybe they were there for a very long time."

"Technically, it wasn't me, it was the young me. (Crying for) everything he didn't get, approval."

Henry, who is now coach of France's under-21 team, said his father's desire was for him to be "an amazing football player" from the moment he first held his son.

"As a little boy it was always 'you didn't do that well'. So obviously when you hear that more often than not, that's what's going to stay," said Henry.

"(It) did to a degree help the athlete....(it) didn't help so much the human being".