

Brazil has 'an obligation' to win again, new coach Dorival says



● AFP

ESPN – New Brazil coach Dorival Júnior has declared the national team has an "obligation" to win again. Dorival, 61, signed a contract on Thursday with the Brazil Football Confederation (CBF) through the 2026 World Cup.

"I am here today representing the winningest team on the planet, the one that inspires many around the world," Dorival said at his unveiling.

"And it has an obligation to win again. Brazilian football is very strong, it reinvents itself. We can't go through the moment we're going through. We learned the way to victory from Brazilian football. And we need to find that moment again. What we need from now on is to look for solutions."

Dorival joins the national team following the sacking of Fernando Diniz and after preferred choice Carlo Ancelotti turned down the job, choosing to extend his contract with Real Madrid. Under Diniz, Brazil won only two and lost three of their six World Cup qualifiers.

The five-time world champions are sixth in the South American World Cup qualifying standings.

"It's a difficult moment," Dorival said. "But it's nothing that cannot be reversed quickly. I'm counting on all of you, so that Brazilian football can return to have great momentum."

"We need to deliver a reliable national team, which gives credibility to all of us. We have to play great games again. We all need to understand a little more what this national team represents. Above all, let each one take on a little more responsibility when called upon."

Dorival stepped down from São Paulo earlier this week to take the national team reins.

He had led Flamengo to the Copa Libertadores title and the Brazilian Cup in 2022 before joining São Paulo.

"I have the president's trust to do my job from now on, prepare the team, win games and reach a World Cup that will be hard-fought," Dorival said.

"I will work in this direction, I prepared a lot to be here. I have a strong conviction that the Brazilian team will achieve its goals."

Dorival has called for everyone to play a part.

"I'm here to make the first call: to the Brazilian fans," he said. "May they believe more in the team, may they live the team more. From now on it's not Dorival's team, it's the Brazilian people's team."

Zagreb Open Ranking Series: Azarpira stuns Snyder; no superheavyweight surprise as Zare' dominates

Sports Desk

Iranian wrestling's rising star Amir-Ali Azarpira showcased his resolve to go all the way to book a place at the Paris Olympics by coming from behind to beat American great Kyle Snyder 6-3 for the freestyle 97kg gold in the Zagreb Open Ranking Series.

Reigning world champion

Amirhossein Zare' picked up where he left off last year as he walked away with an easy 5-0 victory over fellow-Iranian Amir-Reza Ma'soumi – national gold winner in December – in the 125kg final, which settled the country's superheavyweight berth for the Games in the French capital. Walking into Thursday's final on the back of double tech-

nical-superiority wins, Zare' proved to be in a league of his own in the weight class and remains the ultimate favorite to grab the gold in Paris. This was Iran's third gold in Zagreb following Mohammad Nokhodi's triumph in the non-Olympic 79kg contests, thanks to a 6-0 victory over Georgian Avtandil Kentchadze. The two-time world silver

medalist stepped into the final after a grueling semifinal against American Evan Wick, in which he gave away a six-point lead but still managed to win on point criteria. The Iranian scored six points in the first period against Kentchadze and then held off the Georgian's desperate attacks after the interval to take the gold.



Iran's Amir-Ali Azarpira (blue) celebrates his victory over American Kyle Snyder in the freestyle 97kg final at the Zagreb Open Ranking Series in Zagreb, Croatia, on January 11, 2024.

● UWW

Game-changing victory

All the Iranian eyes were on the 97kg contests in Zagreb, where Kamran Qasempour, looking to add the Olympic glory to his double world 92kg golds, made a first appearance on the mat since the Freestyle World Cup in December 2022, in which he suffered a comprehensive defeat against Snyder in his sole 97kg outing prior to the Zagreb Open before a groin injury kept him out of last September's World Cham-

pionships as well as the Hangzhou Asian Games. Qasempour had an easy job against opponents from China and Turkey to reach the semifinals on Thursday but was given a reality check by the four-time world and Olympic gold winner Snyder, suffering a 4-0 defeat. Awaiting Snyder in the final showdown was the former world under-23 champion Aazarpira, in a repeat of last year's showdown in Zagreb, which the American

had won 3-0. Snyder looked to be on his way to another victory over Azarpira when he scored an early takedown in the second period to take a three-point lead but the young Iranian had other ideas. "I had already thought about the final," Azarpira said after the final, adding: "I had practiced with the other guys [on the Iran team] for a long time to prepare for this competition. I had lost to Snyder last year in the final but this year,

I was confident that I could defeat him." Azarpira reduced the deficit with a takedown and added a stepout, which Snyder challenged but lost. With just over a minute remaining, the American came close to retaking the lead twice but saw his stepout attempts well defended by Azarpira, who sealed the victory with another late takedown. "I was three points behind but I didn't lose my focus because I

With Gaza in their hearts, Palestinian squad seek first win at Asian Cup

REUTERS – The Palestinian squad at the Asian Cup in Qatar hope to bring honour to their compatriots in the war-ravaged Gaza Strip with their first victory at the tournament since the team's debut in 2015. Israel has killed more than 23,000 people in its more than three-month-old offensive, according to Palestinian health authorities in the Hamas-ruled enclave. "For us, the message we are here to deliver through football is to qualify for the second round because Palestine and its people want to live. This is what we can offer," midfielder Oday Kharoub told Reuters on Thursday. The 26-member squad play Asian powerhouse Iran on Sunday followed by the United Arab Emirates and Hong Kong, hoping to advance to the knockout stage.

Kharoub said it has been difficult for players, especially those with families in Gaza, to focus

on training when their eyes are glued to the news between sessions, keenly following what is happening back home. "Our hearts are with them and we can only pray for them," Kharoub said. "Inshallah, we can make them happy, even if it's just a little bit, by qualifying for the next round. This is our ambition." Defender Mousa Farawi said they have steeled themselves to play in high spirits despite the situation in Gaza. "The group we have is really special, so we hope for God to give us good fortune and give each player the bravery to deliver on a high level. I see Palestine in the second round, God willing." Defender Yaser Hamed said: "The whole team is motivated with what's happening in Palestine, it's a difficult time for all families. But we're professional players, we should keep it up the same way as we've been work-



● THAIER AL-SUDANI/REUTERS

ing in the last few weeks." Israel were once Asian Cup champions when they hosted

the tournament in 1964. But amid political tension and boycotts by Middle East nations,

Israel made the switch to European confederation UEFA in 1994.

had a plan," Azarpira said. "I knew that even if I was six points behind, I could win it. I came here with high confidence and knew I was going to win the gold."

The massive triumph gave Azarpira a domestic edge over Qasempour in the quest for an Olympic quota, while it also came as a relief for the young wrestler after a forgettable World Championships. Having been called up late to replace injured Qasempour in Belgrade, Azarpira struggled in the 92kg class and was knocked out by American Zahid Valencia to finish eighth.

"I've been wrestling at the 97kg class for three to four years and I fit in this weight," he said. "The Iranian technical staff decided that I had to participate at the 92kg contests at the world event but, given the weight loss that I had and the lack of preparation, I wasn't at my best [in Belgrade]." Azarpira will now have his sights set on April's Asian Olympic Qualifiers in Bishkek, where another gold-winning campaign will all but punch his ticket for Paris.

"The 97kg class is arguably the toughest in the world and Olympic events but I have high hopes to succeed."

Qasempour, meanwhile, left Zagreb with a consolation bronze – courtesy of a 3-1 victory over Turkey's Erhan Yaylaci – but will face a daunting task in chasing his Olympic dream.

Elsewhere in Zagreb, Rahman Amouzad did well to bounce back from a below-par run in 2023 to reach the 65kg final with four technical fall victories – including a 12-4 triumph over Abbas Ebrahimzadeh in an all-Iranian semifinal – but had to pull out of the showpiece against Armenian Vazgen Tevanyan through injury and settled for silver.

Ebrahimzadeh bounced back from the last-four setback with a 10-0 win against Turkey's Abdullah Toprak in the bronze medal bout. In the 74kg event, Hossein Abouzari was the second best against American Jason M. Nolf, falling to a 10-1 loss in the final, while two-time world bronze medalist Younes Emami – beaten by Abouzari in the semis – was ruled out of the repechage bout due to an injury.