

### Zagreb Open Ranking Series: Mohmadi bags GR 87kg silver



● IWF

#### Sports Desk

The first day of the Greco-Roman competitions at the season-opening Ranking Series event saw Iranian Alireza Mohmadi take the 87kg silver at the Zagreb Open.

Elsewhere on Day 1, Amir Abdi – a 77kg gold medalist in December's National Championships – suffered an early exit from the Croatian capital after a first-round 11-3 defeat against the host's Antonio Kamenjasevic.

An 82kg silver winner in last September's World Championships, Mohmadi was on a high heading to Zagreb after grabbing the national gold with a victory over Nasser Alizadeh – in what was the first episode of the head-to-head between the two in leading the line for the country in the Olympic qualification events in the coming months.

Mohmadi began his campaign in Zagreb with 5-0 win against China's Chengwu Wang and went on to defeat Venezuelan Luis Avedaño (9-2) and Georgian Achiko Bolkvadze (3-3) for a place in the semifinals against Russian Alan Ostaev, who took part as a neutral competitor.

A closely-fought clash saw the Iranian edge his opponent 2-1 and head progress into the final against Russia's former world under-23 champion Milad Alirzaev, also representing the neutral athletes team. Mohmadi got a par terre advantage and managed to throw Alirzaev but failed to get a correct throw. Alirzaev blocked him during the throw to score two points, a decision which Iran challenged and lost, giving Alirzaev a 3-1 lead.

The Iranian reduced the deficit with a stepout but that was only after Alirzaev was awarded a point for par terre, making the final scoreline 4-2.

# Iran's Kiani seeking redemption in Paris after securing Olympic taekwondo berth



● WORLD TAEKWONDO

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Nahid Kiani will be chasing her Olympic dream in August as the Iranian girl officially punched her ticket for Paris through the World Taekwondo Rankings on Friday.

Kiani retained the fourth spot in the women's -57kg class of the latest Olympic kyorugi rankings – standing behind China's Zongshi Luo, Team GB's Jade Jones, and Canadian Sky-

lar Park – to become the second Iranian to seal a taekwondo quota for the Games, following Mehran Barkhordari, who won a gold in the Grand Slam Champions Series in Wuxi, China, in December to guarantee a men's -80kg slot.

Two more berths will still be up for grabs for the Iranians when the Asian Qualification Tournament gets underway in Tai'an, China, on March 15.

#### Chasing redemption

Kiani will head to the Olympics as the reigning world -53kg champion and will be among the favorites to leave the French capital with the ultimate prize of the -57kg contests.

The 25-year-old girl defeated China's Zuo Ju in straight rounds for the country's first-ever women's world gold in Baku last June – a third major medal for the Iranian in an impressive 2023 campaign,

which saw her also bag a couple of Grand Prix silvers in Rome and Taiyuan.

As if the Iranian needed more reasons to give it all out for the Olympic success, the occasion in Paris will provide Kiani with the opportunity to get over the bad memories of her participation at Tokyo Games. Kiani suffered an early exit from the Games three years ago following a first-round defeat against her fellow-Iranian Kimia Aliza-

deh – a bronze winner for Iran in Rio 2016 who took part at the Tokyo event as a member of the IOC Refugee Team after leaving her birth country a year before. In an interview with Varzesh3 earlier in January, Kiani opened up about her mental struggles after the setback.

"The bout was a one-off in the history of the Olympics and overcoming the unpleasant circumstances in the aftermath of the de-

feat was one of the hardest things to do in my life," Kiani said.

"I was devastated by the fact that a part of my compatriots cheered my opponent's victory and that's why I had to seek professional help from a therapist."

Kiani wrote in an Instagram post last week that she would leave the social media until the event in Paris to stay focused on "making my Olympic dream come true."

## Thompson, Curry lead Warriors to win over Bulls



● REUTERS

BBC – Klay Thompson and Stephen Curry led the Golden State Warriors to a much-needed 140-131 victory against the Chicago Bulls on Friday. The Warriors had lost their two previous games and made another sluggish start to trail the Bulls 75-62 at half-time.

But 48 points in the third quarter put Golden State in control heading into the closing stages in Chicago. Thompson finished with 30 points

and six assists and Curry added 27 points.

"I think we got off-track emotionally, spiritually, the last couple games," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said.

"Our fans could feel it. We got booed for the first time since I've been here, and as I said both nights, we deserved it because our energy and our competitive spirit was not there. "We found that again tonight."

Elsewhere, San Antonio Spurs rookie Victor Wembanyama scored 26 points and claimed 11 rebounds as they thrashed the Charlotte Hornets 135-99.

In Detroit, the Houston Rockets edged past the Detroit Pistons 112-110, with Fred VanVleet scoring 17 of his 20 points in the second half.

The defeat was the Pistons' seventh in a row since they ended their record-equalling 28-game losing streak against the Toronto Raptors last month.

Also, reigning champions Denver Nuggets beat the New Orleans Pelicans 125-113 thanks to Nikola Jokic's 12th triple-double of the season and the 10th of his career.

The Serb, who is a two-time NBA Most Valuable Player, scored 27 points with 10 rebounds and 14 assists.

## Qatar's Afif still dreams of European return but country comes first

REUTERS – Akram Afif still harbours hopes that he will be given another chance to shine at a European club but for now the Al Sadd playmaker has no plans to leave his homeland, saying it his duty to help Qatar retain their Asian Cup crown.

Afif stole the show with two goals in Friday's Asian Cup opener as hosts Qatar beat Lebanon 3-0 while he was also the busiest attacking player on the pitch, creating numerous chances for his team mates.

Lebanon coach Miodrag Radulovic said Afif proved to be the difference in the game, describing him as "one of the best players in Asia" and that he would not be out of place at a European side.

The 27-year-old has already had a taste of European football, playing for Eupen in the Belgian Pro League before signing for Villarreal, where he was sent out on loan to Sporting Gijon and back to Eupen. He returned to Qatar in 2018 to join Al Sadd, where opportunities were plentiful and the goals started to flow, even



● THAIER AL-SUDANI/REUTERS

earning the Asian Player of the Year award in 2019.

"Every player wishes to play in Europe. I want to play in Europe tomorrow if possible," Afif told reporters after being named Player of the Match against Lebanon.

"But it's not about Akram. I can't go out of the country and go sit on the bench (when in Europe)."

"I'm helping my country. But if you ask me, I do wish (to go play in Europe)."

Not just a terrific finisher, Afif is also a creator of goals, topping the assists charts at

the 2019 Asian Cup with 10 – more than twice as many as any other player as Qatar won the title.

The 27-year-old has also struck up a lethal partnership with striker Almoez Ali, who was top scorer in 2019, but when asked about their chemistry on the pitch he stayed true to his 'team first' mentality.

"It can't be me and Almoez against 11. Others are also involved, they defend and try to play the ball to us," he said.

"We are all brothers helping each other."