

How are Iranian wrestlers faring ahead of Olympic qualifiers?

Sports Desk

Iranian Greco-Roman and freestyle head coaches are left with crucial decisions to make ahead of the Olympic qualifiers following mixed results for the country's wrestlers at the recently-finished Zagreb Open.

Iran has already secured seven slots across the two divisions for the Games through last September's World Championships, with the remaining five set to be decided in the Asian qualification event – starting April 19 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan – or May's World OG Qualifier in Istanbul.

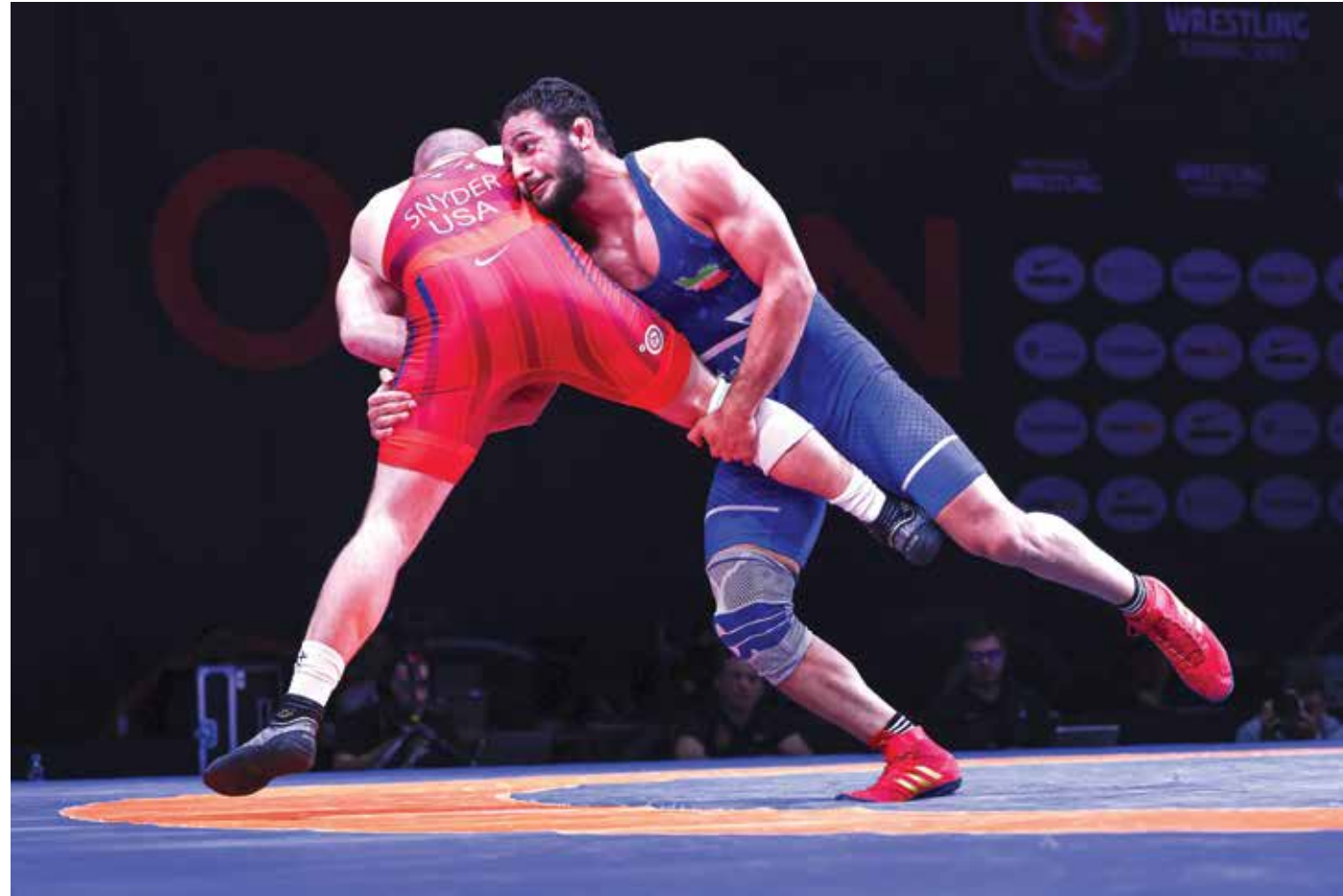
Hassan Yazdani (86kg) and Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) stood on the world podium in their respective weight classes and Rahman Amouzad finished fifth in the 65kg contests to seal three freestyle quotas, with the 57kg, 74kg, and 97kg spots still up for grabs.

Three world Greco-Roman medals for Mohammadreza Gerai (67kg), Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg), and Amin Mirzazadeh (130kg), as well as Mahdi Mohsennejad's fifth place in the 60kg class in Belgrade, mean Iranians will be chasing the 77kg and 87kg berths in the coming months.

Ambitious Azarpira

When the Iranian freestyle squad headed to the season-opening Ranking Series event in the Croatian capital, wrestling fans in the country were eager to see how two-time world 92kg champion Kamran Qassempour would perform in the 97kg competitions.

The final outcome, however, saw Iranian prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira emerge as a surprise contender for the Olympic place, after the former world under-23 gold medalist recovered from a three-point deficit to claim a massive 6-3 victory over American great Kyle Snyder – a winner of nine



Iranian Amir-Ali Azarpira goes for a takedown against American Kyle Snyder in the freestyle 97kg final at the Zagreb Open Ranking Series in Zagreb, Croatia, on Jan. 11, 2024. **KADIR CALISKAN/UWU**

world and Olympic medals – in the final showpiece.

Meanwhile, returning to the mat following a months-long groin injury that had kept him out of the World Championships and October's Asian Games, Qassempour fell to a 4-0 defeat against Snyder and settled for a bronze. In an interview with Mehr News Agency on Sunday, Iran head coach Mohsen Kaveh said Azarpira still is far from a "safe margin" in leading the line for the country in the Olympic qualifiers, adding: "I believe Kamran had a decent run in Zagreb, given

his long-time injury layoff. He is working hard to get back to his best form and we will decide in the future training camps on who will participate at the Olympic qualifiers."

Amouzad and Zare' punched their tickets for Paris after reaching the final in Zagreb, with the former pulling out of the 65kg showdown with a neck injury, while reigning world super-heavyweight champion Zare' came out on top against fellow-Iranian Amir-Reza Ma'soumi for the 125kg gold and will be the favorite to walk away with

the ultimate prize in Paris.

In the 74kg event, national gold medalist Hossein Abouzari will have a slight edge over Younes Emami – a winner of double world bronzes – thanks a narrow win in an all-Iranian quarterfinal in Zagreb but his 10-1 loss to low-profile American Jason Nolf leaves the Iranian qualification slot hanging in the balance.

Iran had no 57kg participants in Zagreb and Ahmad Mohammadnejad Javan, who dominated the National Championships in December with a final triumph over 2021 world silver medalist

Alireza Sarlak, will likely be the Iranian frontrunner in Bishkek unless the coaching staff decides to send the former world U20 and U23 bronze medalist to the Asian Championships – coming days before the qualification tournament.

77kg headache

Amir Abdi's early exit in Zagreb has left Greco-Roman head coach Hassan Rangraz with unanswered questions about the Iranian 77kg wrestler in the Kyrgyz capital.

With Mohammad-Ali Gerai

servicing a one-year ban by the United World Wrestling, Abdi will hope to bounce back from the Zagreb fiasco when he is joined by Amin Kavianejad in March's Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament in Antalya.

A world 82kg silver medalist last year, Alireza Mohmadi built on the national title in December – at the expense of Nasser Alizadeh in the final – to flex muscles in his first international outing in the 87kg contests in Zagreb, where he took the silver.

"Alireza is making a consistent progress in the new weight class. He had some great victories in Zagreb, including the last-four win against Alan Ostae, who had beaten Hungarian world champion David Losonczy earlier in the competition," Rangraz said of the Iranian, adding: "He still needs to work on a couple of flaws that cost him in the final [against Milad Alirzaev]."

The other impressive Iranian in Zagreb was the world under-20 champion Fardin Hedayati, who cruised to the gold in his senior 130kg debut.

"Fardin was sensational in the 130kg contests as he defeated high-profile opponents to win the gold," Rangraz said.

On his way to the final, Hedayati outmuscled China's Wenhao Jiang, in a repeat of last year's world junior final, Cuban four-time world medalist Óscar Pino, as well as Lithuania's Mantas Knystautas – world bronze medalist in 2022 – though he remains behind world champion Mirzazadeh in the pecking order for a place in the Iranian squad in Paris.

In the 67kg event, Danial Sohrabi blew the chance to throw down the gauntlet to Mohammadreza Gerai after a third-round 7-2 loss to Lithuanian Kristupas Sleiva in Zagreb, meaning Gerai is all but guaranteed an Olympic title defense in August.

Roma sack Mourinho with club ninth and keen on De Rossi

THE GUARDIAN – Roma have sacked their manager José Mourinho with the club ninth in Serie A. The decision follows Sunday's 3-1 defeat at Milan and last Wednesday's Coppa Italia exit in the derby against Lazio.

"AS Roma can confirm that José Mourinho and his coaching staff will leave the club with immediate effect," the club said in a statement. "Further updates on the new first-team coaching staff will follow imminently."

Daniele De Rossi is Roma's preferred choice to replace Mourinho and talks have been opened.

De Rossi played more than 600 games for the club from 2001 to 2019.

The former midfielder's only experience as a manager was a short stint in Serie B with SPAL that ended last February but he has worked as a coach with Italy under Roberto Mancini and held age-group roles in the Italian Football Federation.

GREGORIO BORGIA/AP

Mourinho took charge of Roma in 2021 and led the club to their first trophy in 14 years by winning the Europa Conference League in 2022. He also reached the final of last season's Europa League, losing on penalties to Sevilla.

Roma have one win from their past five matches – against Cremonese in the Coppa Italia – and also lost to Juventus in that spell. Mourinho departs with the club facing a Europa League tie against Feyenoord next month having been second in their group behind Slavia Prague.

Mourinho finished sixth in each of his two full Serie A seasons with Roma. The former Chelsea, Real Madrid and Manchester United manager, who will be 61 this month, leaves with the club five points behind fourth-placed Fiorentina and 22 points behind the leaders, Inter.

Roma's owners, Dan and Ryan Friedkin, thanked Mourinho "for his passion and efforts" and said: "We will always have great memories of his tenure at Roma but we believe that an immediate change is in the best interests of the club."

Messi named FIFA player of 2023, Spain's Bonmati wins women's award

REUTERS – Argentine Lionel Messi retained the FIFA men's player of the year trophy on Monday, beating Manchester City's treble-winning Norwegian striker Erling Haaland and France's Paris St Germain forward Kylian Mbappe to the award.

Spain's 2023 World Cup winner Aitana Bonmati was voted the best women's player of the year. Messi, who also secured the men's award in 2022 after guiding Argentina to World Cup victory, clinched the Ligue 1 title with PSG alongside Mbappe following that success, before moving to Major League Soccer team Inter Miami.

The 36-year-old, voted the best player by national teams coaches, captains, journalists and fans, helped Inter Miami win the 2023 Leagues Cup -- a competition between MLS and Mexico's Liga MX sides – scoring 10 goals.

Messi was not present to collect the trophy.

The award period for the men's prize ran from Dec. 19, 2022 to Aug. 20, 2023, and started the day after the World Cup final in Qatar.



FIFA

Haaland, who helped City clinch a treble of Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League titles by scoring 52 goals in 53 matches across all competitions in the 2022-23 season, finished second in the voting.

The 23-year-old had the same points as Messi but lost out by having fewer first-place votes from national team captains. City's Pep Guardiola won the Best Men's Coach award. The Spaniard, who before winning the treble with City last term had achieved

the same feat at Barcelona in 2008-09, dedicated his award to fellow nominees Simone Inzaghi and Luciano Spalletti.

Inzaghi guided Inter Milan to the 2023 Champions League final, where they lost 1-0 to City, while Spalletti won Serie A with Napoli to end the club's 33-year wait for the title.

Sarina Wiegman claimed the Best Women's coach prize after leading England to the World Cup final where they lost 1-0 to Spain.