

Iranian prodigy Hedayati keen to wrestle Mirzazadeh for Olympic berth

Sports Desk

Greco-Roman prodigy Fardin Hedayati is eager for a bout against fellow-Iranian and reigning world superheavyweight champion Amin Mirzazadeh in the coming months as he fancies his chances of representing the country at the Paris Olympics.

A world under-20 gold medalist last year, Hedayati made his senior debut in style when he cruised to the 130kg gold at the Zagreb Open earlier in January. "Thank God I was at my best in Zagreb," Hedayati told IRNA, adding: "Some high-profile wrestlers were at the tournament but I was fit in every way to take them on. Zagreb was a proper test for me to showcase my prowess."

Hedayati outmuscled Hungarian Laszlo Darabos and China's Wenhao Jiang – in a repeat of the world junior final – as well as Oscar Pino of Cuba and Lithuanian Mantas Knystautas before a final victory over Chinese Meng Lingzhe.

Asked about his toughest bout in the season-opening Ranking Series event, the young Iranian said: "The match against Cuban Pino was surely a hard one. He has a world silver and three bronzes under his belt and has been a top



Iranian Fardin Hedayati celebrates after the victory over China's Meng Lingzhe in the Greco-Roman 130kg final at the Zagreb Open Ranking Series event in January 2024.

contender in the weight class for the past seven years. Knystautas is also a former world bronze winner, while Meng came into the event on the back of an Asian Games silver."

The gold in Zagreb means Hedayati stays on course for an Olympic berth though he is behind Mirzazadeh in the pecking order for a ticket to the French capital. Mirzazadeh, who was unfortu-

nate to leave the Tokyo Olympics empty-handed after a loss to Riza Kayaalp in the bronze-medal contest, stunned the Turkish sensation in the World Championships last September to walk away with

the ultimate prize – a second successive world medal for the Iranian following the 2022 silver – and will be keen to add the Olympic glory to his medal haul. Hedayati, meanwhile, knows he

will face a quite daunting path to throw down the gauntlet to Mirzazadeh.

The two could go head-to-head when taking part in March's Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament in Antalya, Turkey, and then Hedayati will have to clinch the Asian gold, should head coach Hassan Rangraz decide to send him to Bishkek in April, to have the chance of locking horns with Mirzazadeh in the Iranian trials before the Olympics.

"My rivalry with the international opponents will go down to the wire so that I can find the opportunity to face Mirzazadeh in the final round of the trials. Amin is a great champion and we are good friends off the mat. I hope I can wrestle him before the Olympics. I'm sure the best wrestler will represent the country in Paris," Hedayati said.

"I'll keep pursuing the Olympic dream and remain focused on the future events. I'll take one step at a time and don't care how the other opponents will fare though I have utmost respect for all of them," said the 19-year-old, for whom the biggest test in his career could come in a best-of-three contest against the world champion before the Olympics.

AFC, Football Australia back Iranian ref Faghani over online abuse



Iraqi striker Aymen Hussein (2nd R) is shown a red card by referee Alireza Faghani during a game against Jordan at the AFC Asian Cup in Khalifa International Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on January 29, 2024.

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The Asian Football Federation and Football Australia threw their support behind Alireza Faghani after the Iranian referee was subject to online abuse in the aftermath of last-16 match at the Asian Cup in Qatar.

The high-profile Iranian, representing the Australian football governing body at the tournament, was targeted on social media for his decision to show a second yellow card to Iraq striker Aymen Hussein for his controversial 'grass-eating' goal celebration after giving his team a 2-1 lead in the 76th minute of the game against Jordan on Monday.

Hussein seemed to be mocking the Jordanian players' celebration after their first-half goal.

Down to 10 men, Iraq failed to hold on to the lead as Jordan scored twice deep into stoppage time to win 3-2 and progress to the quarterfinals.

Furious fans took to Instagram to attack the Iranian afterwards, exposing his personal information, while a petition signed by over 750,000 people has called for his suspension.

In a statement released by the Australian Associated Press late on Tuesday, Football Australia said it is "in constant contact with Alireza and is providing he and his family with all the support they require."

"Football Australia is also working with e-Safety and relevant law enforcement agencies on this matter," FA added.

The AFC, meanwhile, did not name the Iranian ref but

said: "We strongly condemn any form of threat, harassment, or disclosure of personal information targeting our referees, players, officials and all stakeholders." The Asian football governing body also banned the "aggressive" journalists who confronted Iraq head coach Jesus Casas after the game. At the post-match press conference, Iraqi journalists were seen shouting at Casas and more than a dozen stormed out while pointing fingers at the Spaniard. Some were led away by officials when they approached the podium.

"The AFC strongly condemns any type of unruly and aggressive behavior and takes a zero-tolerance stance against such actions," it said in a statement. "(The AFC) have taken the swift decision to bar the re-

sponsible individuals from covering not only the AFC Asian Cup but also future AFC tournaments."

Iraq Football Association said the journalists' actions were a "black mark in Iraqi media history".

"These events have no connection to the authentic Iraqi media that is known for its honorable positions," Iraq's FA said.

"We denounce the blatant and abhorrent behavior that occurred against the coach, and we confirm that we have decided not to deal with these media personnel who seek to cause chaos in the future."

Reuters and AFP contributed to the report.

Morocco's Regragui takes responsibility for bitter AFCON exit

REUTERS – Morocco coach Walid Regragui said he took full responsibility for the team's surprise Africa Cup of Nations exit after a last-16 loss to South Africa, lamenting their lack of cutting edge in Tuesday's 2-0 defeat.

The Atlas Lions, one of the pre-tournament favourites, became the latest high-profile team to bid farewell to the tournament as they spurned a few goal-scoring chances and were punished by South Africa at the Laurent Pokou Stadium in San Pedro.

Evidence Makgopa scored against the run of play in the 57th minute before Teboho Mokoena wrapped up the win in stoppage time, curling home a free kick awarded for a last-man

foul that led to the dismissal of Morocco midfielder Sofyan Amrabat.

"We could have maybe settled the game in the first half but, at this level, you get immediately punished for any chance you waste," Regragui told beIN Sports.

Morocco had a golden chance to draw level with five minutes remaining when they were awarded a

penalty for a handball but Achraf Hakimi blasted his effort against the crossbar.

"The penalty hurt us a lot, and surely we didn't do everything that is required but I take full responsibility," Regragui added.

Morocco were hoping to win their first Cup of Nations title since 1976, having made history at the 2022 World Cup after becoming the first African team to reach the semi-final.

However, their displays have been far from convincing in the Ivory Coast, and they were affected by the absence of some key players against South Africa, including injured duo Hakim Ziyech and Sofiane Boufal.

"We will learn from this unexpected stumble ... this is a disappointment for our fans who supported us a lot," Regragui said.



● SIPHIWE SIBEKO/REUTERS