

Asian Wrestling Championships:

# Firouzpour, Zare' grab golds as Iran reclaims freestyle title



Amirhossein Firouzpour (L) and Amirhossein Zare' celebrate with the Iranian flag after grabbing the freestyle 92kg and 125kg gold medals respectively at the Asian Wrestling Championships in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on April 12, 2024.

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## Sports Desk

Five gold medals and three bronzes across 10 weight classes saw Iran lift the freestyle trophy at the Asian Wrestling Championships in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Having seen a run of four successive titles come to an end by Kazakhstan last year, Mohsen Kaveh's squad tallied 190 points to finish above Japan (130 points) and the host country (121 points) in the team table.

On Friday, reigning world superheavyweight champion Amirhossein Zare' brought the curtain down on a glorious campaign for Iran by easing to a 11-0 technical fall victory over home-favorite Aiaal Lazarev with 32 seconds left on the clock in the 125kg final – a first Asian title for the 23-year-old Iranian, who has double world golds and a

bronze under his belt as well as a bronze at the Tokyo Olympics.

Zare' proved to be in a league of his own in the Kyrgyz capital as he scored 26 points without giving away a single point across the three bouts and showcased his dazzling form with less than four months to go until the Paris Olympics.

"This was my last competition before the Olympics and I needed the ranking points for the event, not to mention the Asian medal is precious for my country so I'm so grateful that I will not leave empty-handed," said a humble Zare', who also won the gold at last year's Asian Games as well as the Zagreb Open Ranking Series event in January.

Meanwhile, Amirhossein Firouzpour, a four-time world gold medalist in three age groups, won his second Asian se-

nior gold in emphatic fashion by outmuscling Uzbekistan's Sherzod Poyonov 8-3 – following three technical-fall victories en route to the 92kg final showpiece.

Firouzpour scored three stepouts in the first period, while giving up one himself, and then added three more in the second before finally scoring a takedown off an underhook. Poyonov scored a takedown in the closing seconds.

Elsewhere, Hadi Vafaeipour bounced back from a last-eight defeat against two-time world bronze medalist Azamat Dauletbekov of Kazakhstan to beat China's Li Peilong 10-0 for a consolation bronze at the 86kg contests – alongside Tatsuya Shirai of Japan – though his failure to win the gold will virtually mean the end his quest for a shot at the Olym-

pic berth against Iranian sensation Hassan Yazdani.

Dauletbekov went on to defeat Uzbekistan's Javrail Shapiev 5-2 in the final for his third Asian gold in a row.

Hossein Abouzari added another bronze to Iran's medal haul, courtesy of a 5-2 win against Kazakhstan's Syrbaz Talgat in the 74kg weight class.

Japanese wrestler Kota Takahashi, victorious over Abouzari in the semifinals, came out on top against Viktor Rassadin of Tajikistan in the final.

Friday's results came after the Iranians had won three golds and a bronze on the preceding night in Bishkek.

In a repeat of last year's 65kg final, former world champion Rahman Amouzad defeated Tulga Tumor Ochir to walk away with a second consecutive Asian gold, while making amends for his set-

back against the Mongolian in the Asian Games final last October.

Two-time world silver medalist Amir-Mohammad Yazdani picked up the first gold in his senior career thanks to a 13-9 triumph over world under-23 silver medalist Yoshinosuke Aoyagi of Japan in a thrilling 70kg showpiece, while Mohammad Nokhodi, winner of back-to-back world silvers before a bronze in Belgrade last year, made a light work of Mongolia's Byambadorj Enkhbayar with a 12-2 technical fall in the 79kg final.

Two-time Asian champion Mohammad-Hossein Mohammadian recovered from an 8-2 defeat against world champion Akhmed Tazhudinov of Bahrain in the semifinals to beat Japanese Hibiki Ito in the bronze medal contest of the 97kg event.

Persian Gulf Pro League roundup:

## Esteghlal edges out Iralco to maintain grip on top spot



Esteghlal striker Gustavo Blanco (R) celebrates with injured teammate Mahdi Mahdipour's No. 9 shirt after scoring the winner in a 1-0 victory over Iralco in Arak, Iran, on April 12, 2024.

ALI KARIMI/IRNA

## Sports Desk

Argentine striker Gustavo Blanco headed home his third goal in two games to help Esteghlal walk away with a 1-0 victory at Iralco in the Persian Gulf Pro League. Having seen their lead on archrival Persepolis on top of the table reduced to a single point after a 2-2 home draw against Mes Rafsanjan last week, Javad Nekounam's Blues held out a desperate push by the home side in the closing stages to stay atop with 50 points with seven games to spare.

Later in the day, Persepolis, chasing a seventh league crown in eight years, had Issa Alekasir to thank for a 1-0 win against a brave Malavan side at Tehran's

Azadi Stadium.

Alekasir, who rejoined the Reds from Sepahan in the mid-season transfer window, headed in the winner on an Omid Alishah's cross four minutes into the second half but Malavan, which would have moved up to third in the standings with maximum points, felt unfortunate to concede as the Persepolis striker looked to be just off-side.

The Reds also had to hold off a late surge by the opponent to secure a massive victory, while under-23 shot stopper Amir-Reza Rafiei, filling in for injured international keeper Alireza Beiranvand, was delighted to keep a third clean sheet in as many appearances.

Elsewhere on Friday, third-place Tractor was hammered 4-1 at home by Zob Ahan to see the gap on the second spot extended to nine points.

Mohammad-Hossein Eslami scored twice with Mohammad-Javad Mohammadi and Amirhossein Jeedi also on the scoresheet before Mehdi Abdi's stoppage-time consolation from the spot as Mohammad Rabiei's side claimed a first league win in eight matches.

Once regarded as the ultimate favorite for the title, Sepahan suffered another blow to its quest for a first league crown since 2015 after a frustrating goalless stalemate at home against bottom-side Nassaji Mazandaran left the Isfahan-based club in the fourth place with 39 points.

Meanwhile, Pouria Sarabadani's strike with 20 minutes left on the clock saw Shams Azar defeat Foolad Khuzestan at home, with Havadar beating visiting Golgozar Sirjan by the same scoreline, courtesy of an in-form Dariush Shojaeian's goal midway through the first half.

Mes and Paykan played to a 2-2 draw in Rafsanjan, while in a decisive survival battle, Iraqi forward Aso Rostam bagged a 91st-minute winner to steer Esteghlal Khuzestan to a 2-1 victory at home over San'at Naft Abadan.

The win lifted the southern Iranian Blues to third from bottom – three points clear from relegation candidates San'at and Nassaji.

## Wembanyama stars as Spurs beat Nuggets

BBC – Victor Wembanyama scored 34 points as the San Antonio Spurs stunned the Denver Nuggets to open up the race for top seed in the Western Conference.

Denver knew two wins from their final two games would secure top spot and home advantage in the play-offs. But their defeat plus wins for the Minnesota Timberwolves and the Oklahoma City Thunder leaves the trio level.

It is the first time in NBA history there has been a three-way tie for top spot with one game left.

Wembanyama, 20, added 12 rebounds, five assists and two blocks, while Devonte' Graham hit the decid-

ing jumper with 0.9 seconds left on the clock to seal victory.

Despite the win, San Antonio remain level with the Portland Trail Blazers at the foot of the Western Conference. At the top, Oklahoma City beat the Milwaukee Bucks 125-107 while Minnesota were 109-106 winners against Atlanta.

Oklahoma City lead the Conference because of their superior head-to-head record between the other two sides, with Minnesota second and Denver third.

The only way Denver can regain top spot is if both Oklahoma City and Minnesota lose in their final games today.



REUTERS