

Yazdani and Qassempour to decide 86kg wrestling berth in Paris



Hassan Yazdani (l) and Kamran Qassempour will likely go head-to-head for the 86kg slot in the Iranian freestyle squad in the Paris Olympics. UWW

Sports Desk

With just over 100 days until the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, the biggest question facing the coaching staff of the Iranian wrestling team is who will be the country's freestyle 86kg contestant in Paris.

Hadi Vafaiepour was hoping to build on double gold medals at the National Championships and the Yasar Dogu & Vehbi Emre tournament in Turkey to get a shot at the Olympic berth against Hassan Yazdani, but his failure to bag the gold in the Asian Championships last week left him out

of contention for the showpiece in Paris.

A fully fit Yazdani, a winner of a national-high nine world and Olympic medals, is all but guaranteed a spot in the squad as he will be looking to beat familiar American foe David Taylor for only the second time in six meetings, should the two dominant forces of the weight class go head-to-head in the Games.

However, with the event fast approaching, questions have been raised about his fitness as the Iranian sensation has just recently returned to light training after being sidelined for six months due

to a surgery on his injured shoulder right after a gold-winning campaign at the Asian Games last October.

"No wrestler in Iran has fully recovered from a shoulder injury over the past 20 years. That's what happened to me as my career came to an end when I was 25. Hassan showed great passion and resilience to participate at the World Championships [last September] and win a medal there but he just couldn't continue like this. I hope he will be the first wrestler to overcome the problem," Alireza Dabir, the chairman of the Iranian Wrestling Federa-

tion, said days after his surgery, with veteran Iranian Mansour Barzegar, the national team head coach in the 90s, sharing his opinion, saying: "From what I've seen over the years, no wrestler has ever been able to wrestle again after a shoulder injury."

Asked about Yazdani's situation days ago, Iran head coach Mohsen Kaveh said: "Hassan will be back in the national team training camp in May and then the technical staff and the federation will decide to send him to a tournament in Armenia or Hungary to have his fitness assessed for the Olympics."

Meanwhile, Kamran Qassempour, a back-to-back world 92kg champion in 2021 and 2022, has been regarded as a contender for the 86kg spot in recent weeks, though he has had his own injury blows over the past 12 months, which ruled him out of the title defense in the world event as well as the following Asian Games.

Qassempour moved up to the 97kg Olympic class for the start of the new year but a comprehensive defeat against Kyle Snyder at the Zagreb Open Ranking Series event in January, followed by Amir-Ali Azarpira's sensational victory over the American great

in the final, saw the Iranian prodigy emerge as the frontrunner in the upcoming Asian Olympic qualification tournament in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Many wrestling pundits in the country have argued against Qassempour moving to the 86kg class, believing he will barely have a chance of success after a massive weight loss in such a short space of time.

"I'm sure the final decision will be in the best interest of the national team," Dabir said last week, adding: "It will all depend on how Yazdani will return from the shoulder injury."

Iranian girl Kiani flexes muscles ahead of Olympics

Sports Desk

Iranian girls bagged a couple of medals at the Galeb Belgrade Trophy G2 - Serbia Open taekwondo event, including a -53kg gold for reigning world champion Nahid Kiani.

Headlining the country's six-woman team in the Serbian capital, Kiani overcame opponents from Thailand and Italy before a 2-1 victory over Bosnian Ada

Avdagic for a place in the final showpiece.

Kiani outclassed Dominika Hronova of the Czech Republic in straight rounds (18-0, 20-0) to walk away with the ultimate prize.

A four-time medalist at the Asian Championships, Kiani will be the favorite Iranian female for the Olympic glory when the Games get underway in Paris in late July.

She will be joined by teenage girl Mobina Ne'matzadeh as well as male duo Arian Salimi and Mehran Barkhordari in representing Iran in the taekwondo contests in the French capital.

Elsewhere in Belgrade,

Saeideh Nasiri (defeated world No. 13 Supharada Kisskalt of Germany (2-1) and then came out victorious against high-profile Croatian Lena Stojkovic - reigning back-to-back world gold medalist - in three rounds to progress to the last-four bout against Spain's Adriana Cerezo Iglesias. Nasiri put in a brave performance against the Tokyo Olympic silver winner, who took the bronze in last year's World Championships, but fell to a 2-1 defeat and settled for a consolation bronze.

Ma'someh Ranjbar (-46kg), Elham Haqiqi, Saghar Moradi (-62kg), and Yalda Valinejad (-67kg) were the other members of the Iranian team in Belgrade but left the event empty-handed.

Leverkusen coach Alonso honoured to be part of special day for champions

REUTERS - Bayer Leverkusen's undefeated run to their first Bundesliga title was fully deserved and it was an honour to be part of a special day for the club, coach Xabi Alonso said on Sunday.

His team had earlier crushed Werder Bremen 5-0 to open a 16-point gap over deposed title holders Bayern Munich with five matches left in the season, securing their first trophy in 31 years amid wild celebrations from a 30,000 home crowd.

"We wanted to play games with a good mentality this season and the players quickly started working well together. After the first few matches we saw this team can play really good football," Alonso told a press conference.

"But to achieve this in such a way was a top performance. Finally it is an honour to say that Leverkusen are champions. It is totally deserved for the team, fans and the club."

The 42-year-old Spaniard, who took over in October 2022, can win more titles this season with his team also through to the German Cup final and the Europa League quarter-finals. "It is a big success for the club.



Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso celebrates with the fans after winning the Bundesliga title in BayArena, Leverkusen, Germany, on April 14, 2024. KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS

The first time is special for everyone. We can say we were part of this big day for Bayer Leverkusen. It feels great," said Alonso, who will stay on at the club despite major interest from top European teams.

Leverkusen are on a 43-game unbeaten run across all competitions and have further extended the longest unbeaten streak in a single Bundesliga season to 29 matches.

"We did not talk much about the title in the changing room but it was in our heads

that this year we could be champions," said Alonso.

"Now we must enjoy the moment. It has been a totally intense season so far and it is not yet over. We cannot forget it."

"Now this is behind us and we still have big goals this season," he said before the players stormed into the room showering their coach with beer.

Leverkusen travel to West Ham United next for their Europa League return game after a 2-0 first leg victory.



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