

Asian OG Qualifier: Iran's Azarpira, Emami punch tickets for Paris



Iranian 97kg freestyle wrestler Amir-Ali Azarpira reacts after securing the Olympic berth in the Asian OG Qualifier in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on April 19, 2024.
● UWW



Iranian 74kg freestyle wrestler Younes Emami is seen after the victory over Kazakhstan's Nurkozha Kaipanov in the Asian OG Qualifier in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on April 19, 2024.
● UWW

Sports Desk

Iran's Amir-Ali Azarpira and Younes Emami secured a couple of quotas for the Paris Olympics through the Asian qualification event in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, taking the country's freestyle wrestling berths in the French capital to five. Rising Iranian star Azarpira built on his impressive form in recent months to progress and is all but guaranteed the country's 97kg slot in Paris – ahead of two-time world 92kg champion Kamran Qasempour, who has been dealing with a groin

injury over the past year and was comprehensively beaten by American Kyle Snyder in January's Zagreb Open. Heading into Bishkek event on the back of a morale-boosting victory over Snyder in the Zagreb final, Azarpira defeated Mongolian Asian Games bronze medalist Gankhuyag Ganbaatar 3-0, clinching the victory with a takedown in the second period while on the activity clock. "Today's competition was very tough because the Olympic quota was on the line and there was no room for mistakes," two-time world U23 champion Azarpira said.

"I could be better than this but I had to be careful because I desperately wanted the quota, and my success here would settle the Iranian 97kg wrestler selection for Paris." In his only other match in Bishkek, Azarpira came out on top against Japanese Arash Yoshida – whose father is Iranian and runs a kids wrestling club where he began his career in the sport – in a bout that was close until the Iranian pulled away in the second period for a 9-1 win. Earlier on Friday, two-time world bronze medalist Emami punched

his Paris ticket in emphatic fashion, outmuscling former Asian champion Gong Byung-min of South Korea 15-4 before a technical-fall triumph over Kazakhstan's Nurkozha Kaipanov – a world silver winner in 2019 – in the 74kg semifinals. The Iranian cruised to a six-point advantage with three takedowns in the first period and then extended his lead with a stepout after the restart. A driving takedown was followed by a gut wrench as Emami finished off the contest in 3:49 minutes. Emami had won the 2021 Asian qualifier in Almaty though he

missed out on a place in the Tokyo Olympics, watching fellow-Iranian Mostafa Hosseinkhani suffer a first-round defeat against American Kyle Dake. Meanwhile, Ahmad Mohammadnejad Javan got off to a flying start in the 57kg contests with a 10-0 win against Tajikistan's Aiaal Belolyubskii but his campaign came to an end in the quarterfinals after a 14-3 loss to Mongolian Batkhuyagiin Mönkh-Erdene. Iran will still have a last chance to win a 57kg quota for a complete Olympic six-man squad

when the 2021 world silver winner Alireza Sarlak takes part at the World OG Qualifier in Istanbul next month. Rahman Amouzad (65kg), Hassan Yazdani (86kg), and Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) had already secured three quotas for the country through last September's World Championships. Iran will also be looking to win the remaining two Greco-Roman slots in Bishkek today when Amin Kavianejad and world silver medalist Alireza Mohmadi take on their Asian opponents in the 77kg and 87kg contests respectively.

Persian Gulf Pro League: Esteghlal survives late scare against Shams Azar to move back on top

Sports Desk

Esteghlal held out a late surge by Shams Azar for a 3-2 home victory on Friday to move back atop the Persian Gulf Pro League table. Javad Nekounam's men began the day in the second place after archrival Persepolis had walked away with a 3-0 win at San'at Naft Abadan on the preceding night to overtake the Blues by two points. Mehrdad Mohammadi found the net midway through the first half and doubled his side's lead from the spot five minutes into the second half. Esteghlal's third came through Mohammad-Hossein Moradmand's 76th-minute header, leaving the Blues on their way to a comfortable victory against this year's surprise package of the Iranian top flight. However, Shams manager Saeid Daqiqi and his men had other ideas and when substitutes Faraz Emam-Ali and Mojtaba Fakhrian cut the deficit to one goal in the space of two minutes the visiting side seemed to be on course for a sensational comeback at the Azadi Stadium.

Esteghlal still managed to hang on to the narrow advantage to restore the one-point lead over Persepolis with six games to spare. In Abadan's Takhti Stadium, Danial Esmailifar headed home in the fifth minute before Issa Alekasir's composed finish in 66th minute, followed by Hossein Kan'anizadegan's penalty five minutes later, sealed a seventh win in eight league outings for Brazilian coach Osmar Vieira, while under-21 keeper Amir-Reza Rafiei, replacing injured Iranian international Alireza Beiranvand, registered a fourth successive clean sheet in the start to his senior career with the Reds. The defeat left San'at bottom of the table with 16 points – three points adrift of Nassaji Mazandaran, which ended a 13-game winless run with a massive 1-0 victory over Tractor and caretaker coach Mohammad Nosrati thanks to Mansour Baqeri's effort from the spot in the second half. Elsewhere, Esteghlal Khuzestan put in a late fightback to salvage a point in a 2-2 draw at Golgozar Sirjan.

Rising star Saeid Saharkhizan broke the deadlock for the host 10 minutes after the interval and Qaem Eslamikhah's strike in the final minute of normal time looked to be enough for maximum points, before Golgozar keeper Mohammadreza Akhbari made a mess of saving Iraqi Aso Rostam's header in the second minute of stoppage time and Mahmoud Motlaqzadeh completed the comeback with a sumptuous volley from the edge of the box two minutes later. Having spent the best part of the season rock bottom in the table, the southern Iranian Blues are now one point clear of the relegation zone. In Ahvaz, Saeid Vasei's second-half strike saw Mes Rafsanjan edge Foolad Khuzestan 1-0 and continue the impressive run since Moharram Navidkia took charge of the bench in the mid-season. Paykan and Havadar, meanwhile, played to a thrilling 2-2 draw in Tehran.



Esteghlal defender Mohammad-Hossein Moradmand (R) goes up for a header during a 3-2 victory over Shams Azar in the Persian Gulf Pro League at the Azadi Stadium, Tehran, Iran, on April 19, 2024.
● FFIRI

