

# A 'fit' Yazdani deserves a shot at Olympic title, Dabir says



● iawfir

### Sports Desk

Wrestling sensation Hassan Yazdani deserves the opportunity to win a third Olympic medal, should he be fit and ready when the Paris Games kick off in July, Alirez Dabir, the chairman of the Iranian Wrestling Federation said.

Dabir still insisted that Yazdani will have to convince the Iranian coaching staff of his fitness when he takes part in the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial tournament – starting June 6 in Budapest.

Having won the Olympic 86kg quota for the country thanks to a silver medal in the previous World Championships, Yazdani had to undergo a surgery on his injured shoulder right after a gold-winning campaign in last September's Asian Games and only made his long-awaited return to training two weeks ago.

"Hassan is surely one of the four special figures in the history of the Iranian wrestling alongside Gholamreza Takhti, Abdollah Movahed, and Hamid Sourian," Dabir told Mehr News Agency of the winner of a national-high nine world and Olympic medals.

"He truly deserves to go Paris according to the selection process of the national team," added Dabir.

A gold medal in April's Asian Championships would have handed Hadi Vafaiepour a shot at the Olympic berth with a head-to-head against Yazdani but his failure in Bishkek left him out of contention for the Games.

"Let's not forget that Hassan has been out of action for nine to 10 months, so he will be tested in Budapest to have his fitness level assessed," Dabir said, adding: "I'm confident that he will be a favorite for the Olympic gold if his body bears the pressure in the Hungarian tournament."

However, Dabir said Kamran Qasempour re-

mains "a plan B" for the Iranian 86kg spot in Paris if Yazdani still struggles with a shoulder problem.

"We don't really care who goes to Paris. The important thing will be to win the gold there," said the Iranian, who enjoyed the taste of the Olympic glory in Sydney 2000.

A two-time world 92kg champion Qasempour, who had to deal with his own injury woes over the past 12 months – which ruled him out of the world title defense in Belgrade last year – moved up to the Olympic 97kg weight class for the start of the new year.

His below-par results in January's Zagreb Open, including a comprehensive defeat against American great Kyle Snyder, saw Iranian prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira – gold medalist in the Croatian capital – emerge as the frontrunner for the Iranian 97kg slot in the French capital.

Yazdani, a gold winner in Rio 2016, will be eager to seek a third successive Olympic medal after his familiar foe David Taylor, who has a 5-1 head-to-head record against the Iranian, was stunned by fellow-American and reigning world under-23 champion Aaron Brooks in the U.S. Olympic trials in April and called time on his illustrious career on Friday.

"Taylor's defeat had nothing to do with the decision on Yazdani, though I won't deny that he might be even more motivated by his major opponent's absence," Dabir said, while he went on to praise American young gun Brooks.

"When someone beats the Olympic champion, you will have to count on him as a top contender," said the Iranian wrestling chief.

A second Olympic gold will see Yazdani overtake Iranian taekwondo legend Hadi Saei as the country's most-decorated athlete in the history of the Games.

# Jahanbakhsh fancies Bundesliga future once Feyenoord contract expires

### Sports Desk

Feyenoord midfielder Alireza Jahanbakhsh hinted at a future away from the Dutch Eredivisie as he is to embark on a new chapter in his career.

The 30-year-old Iranian, whose contract with the Dutch club runs out at the end of season, said the German Bundesliga could be a fascinating destination for the start of next campaign.

"Bundesliga has always been one of my favorite leagues in Europe. We had many Iranian players in the German league, who played at the highest level and I grew up watching them play for their clubs and the national team," the Iranian said in an interview with Ziggo Sport in the Netherlands.

Iranian football legends Ali Daei, Karim Baqeri, Khodadad Azizi, and Mahdi Mahdavia joined the German top flight in the mid-90s, before Ali Karimi and Wahid Hashemian won the league with Bayern Munich in the early years of the new century.

The Iranian skipper, meanwhile, added a move to the Italian Serie A could also be on the cards.

"I like Serie A a lot. We already have Iranian players in that league, so that would be interesting to play in Italy. Let's see what happens in the future," added Jahanbakhsh, who has 17 goals in 83 international caps under his belt.

International teammate Sardar Azmoun is spending a loan season in AS Roma from Leverkusen, while Porto striker Mahdi Taremi is set to join Inter as a free agent in the summer.

First introduced to the European football with NEC Nijmegen over a decade ago, Jahanbakhsh signed for fellow-Eredivisie club AZ Alkmaar in 2015.

A remarkable three seasons with AZ – during which the Iranian bagged 37 goals and 31 assists in 111 appearances, winning the league's top scorer prize – saw Brighton & Hove Albion come knocking in 2018 and Jahanbakhsh joined the Premier League side for a then-club record of €22.5 million.


His three-season spell in England, however, was one to forget as he only managed to score four goals in 61 appearances across all competitions – making 21 league starts under Chris Hughton and Graham Potter – though his wonder overhead strike against Chelsea in January 2020 was a contender for the goal of the season.

Jahanbakhsh returned to the Netherlands with Feyenoord in the summer of 2021 and won the league last season before lifting the KNVB Cup trophy in April.

A runner-up with Feyenoord in the inaugural UEFA Europa Conference League in 2022, the Iranian has netted 17 goals, while providing his teammates with 15 assists, in 104 matches for the club in all competitions.



● feyenoord.com



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Ave 250		CCS(kg/p)
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Ave5		-6 mm%
Max 4		A.1%
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# Jokic-inspired Nuggets win to peg back Timberwolves

BBC – Nikola Jokic starred as the Denver Nuggets, defending NBA champions, beat the Minnesota Timberwolves 117-90 to reduce the deficit to 2-1 in the Western Conference semi-finals of the play-offs.

Serbian Jokic, who joined some of the NBA's all-time greats by winning the league's Most Valuable Player award for the third time on Thursday, scored 24 points while recording 14 rebounds and nine assists.

Game four of the best-of-seven series takes place on Monday, again in Minneapolis.

In Friday's other game, Indiana Pacers



● RON CHENOY/USA TODAY SPORTS

beat the New York Knicks 111-106 to avoid going 3-0 down in their Eastern Conference semi-final.