

'Ready to face any opponent': Qassempour eager to take a shot at 86kg slot for Olympics



the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial tournament – starting June 6 in Budapest – to have “his fitness levels assessed and approved [by Iran coaches] for the Paris Olympics,” the governing body of the sport in the country has confirmed, leaving the door open for Qassempour to head to the Games.

“As I said, I’m ready to compete in any showdown that the national team’s coaching staff tells me to, be it an international tournament or a domestic head-to-head,” Qassempour added.

“All I want is for the federation and the coaching team to give me a second chance. I’m not intimidated by any opponent or competition. That’s why I was annoyed to hear some people say: ‘Kamran is frightened and has backed off,’ though I decided to stay silent over those remarks out of respect for the other wrestlers in the team selection process,” Qassempour said.

Hadi Vafaiepour made a case for an Olympic place after claiming the 86kg title in last December’s National Championships but a failure in winning the gold at the Asian Championships in April left him out of contention for the Games.

“I just hope to get the opportunity, so that the best and fittest wrestler heads to the Olympics,” Qassempour added.

Both Qassempour and Yazdani will fancy their chances of going all the way to win the ultimate prize in Paris after the latter’s familiar foe David Taylor – a winner of three world golds and the reigning Olympic champion – was stunned by fellow-American Aaron Brooks in the U.S. Olympic trials earlier in April.

The Iranian 86kg slot remains the only weight division in question for the summer extravaganza in the French capital. Joining Azarpira in the five-man squad is Amirhossein Zare’, a winner of two world 125kg golds and a bronze since grabbing the Olympic bronze in Tokyo three years ago, who will be the ultimate favorite for the superheavyweight crown, while Rahman Amouzad – world champion in 2022 – will hope to bounce back from an under-par run in 2023 when participating in the 65kg.

Two-time world bronze medalist Younes Emami will also be chasing a podium finish in the 74kg event at Grand Palais Éphémère in August.

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Sports Desk

Two-time world champion Kamran Qassempour broke his silence over the Iranian 86kg slot for the Olympics and threw down the gauntlet to fellow-Iranian Hassan Yazdani, saying he is “ready to face any opponent” for a place in Paris. Qassempour, who was the dominant force of the freestyle 92kg contests in 2021 and 2022 before a groin injury ruled him out of last year’s World Championships, moved to the 97kg weight class for the start of the new interna-

tional season in January in an attempt to add the Olympic glory to his medal haul. However, the Iranian had an unimpressive campaign at the Zagreb Open on his return to the wrestling mat, falling to a comprehensive defeat against Kyle Snyder in the semifinals, while young Iranian prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira came out on top against the American great in the final showpiece and will take part at the Games after securing a berth through the Asian qualification tournament in Bishkek last month.

“The decision to choose the 97kg class

was because of the wrong advices that I received last year. By the time, I had only tested myself in the new weight division once before,” Qassempour, whose previous 97kg experience had also finished with a loss to Snyder at the 2022 Freestyle World Cup, told Tasnim News Agency.

“After two unsuccessful tryouts I realized that my body is better suited for the 86kg class, which I had competed in before,” said the Iranian, a former world under-23 and Asian 86kg champion, adding: “Now I’m ready to wrestle anyone in any tournament [to earn an

Olympic place.]”

Qassempour’s comments come as a veiled challenge to wrestling sensation Yazdani, who will be eager to win a third successive Olympic medal in the French capital.

A winner of a national-high nine world and Olympic medals, Yazdani remains the frontrunner to represent the country in Paris after making his long-awaited return from a shoulder surgery earlier in May.

Having been sidelined for nine months, Yazdani will still have to participate in

Iran crowned Asian indoor hockey champion

Sports Desk

Iran defeated Malaysia 7-1 in the final to lift a record-extending ninth trophy at the Men’s Indoor Hockey Asia Cup in Taldykorgan, Kazakhstan.

Amir-Mahdi Mirzakhani, Payam Lashgari, and Hamid Nouranian scored two apiece, with Sajjad Mamizadeh also on the score-sheet, as Iran made up for the shootout loss to the Southeast

Asian opponent in the 2022 final in Bangkok.

Mirzakhani was the top scorer of the eight-team event with 24 goals, while Mamizadeh was named the most valuable player of the tournament.

Iran began its campaign with three emphatic victories over Singapore (8-0), Thailand (10-4), and Tajikistan (37-0) in the preliminary round to ease into the top-four group phase.

A 5-3 win against the host was followed by a 3-3 stalemate against Malaysia in Pool C for Iran, which won the group for a place in Saturday’s final showpiece and will be joined by the runner-up team in representing the continent at the 12-team FIH Indoor Hockey World Cup – starting February 3 next year in Porec, Croatia.

Kazakhstan beat Thailand 7-2 in the third-place playoff.



● IRNA



● TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS

Celtics surge late vs. Pacers, take 3-0 lead in East finals

REUTERS – Boston Celtics guard Jrue Holiday went the entire day feeling under the weather before spending Saturday night making the Indiana Pacers feel sick.

The 15-year NBA veteran was a thorn in the Pacers’ side during the final 38.9 seconds of Saturday’s 114-111 victory, as Boston took a commanding 3-0 lead in the Eastern Conference finals.

Holiday was battling a fierce fever and spent much of the day sleeping. He wasn’t cleared to play until approximately 45 minutes before tipoff.

Holiday’s efforts present the Celtics with a chance to clinch the best-of-seven series tonight in Indianapolis.

He converted a go-ahead three-point play and added a key steal in the final seconds as Boston

closed the game with a 13-2 run to hand the Pacers their first home loss in seven games this postseason.

Jayson Tatum recorded 36 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists as Boston recovered from an 18-point, third-quarter deficit.

Andrew Nembhard scored a career-best 32 points and added nine assists for the sixth-seeded Pacers.