

Everyone to get a 'fair shot' in selection process: *Rangraz*

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A world featherweight gold and bronze medalist in the early 2000s, Hassan Rangraz took charge of the Greco-Roman national squad in 2022, taking over from Mohammad Bana, who stepped down from his role following a below-par run in the

World Championships in Belgrade, where Iran failed to win a single gold across 10 weight classes and settled for a fourth-place finish in the team table. Rangraz led his team to the runner-up spot in the world event last September, courtesy of Amin Mirzazadeh's 130kg gold and Alireza Mohmadi's silver-winning campaign in the 82kg class, coupled with

bronze medals for Pouya Dadmarz (55kg), Mohammadreza Geraei (67kg) and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg). Iran became the first country to secure a full six-man Greco-Roman squad for the Paris Olympics, when Amin Mirzazadeh (77kg) and Mohmadi (87kg) came out on top in the Asian qualification tournament in Bishkek in April.

While Mirzazadeh, Saravi, and Mohmadi have punched their Paris tickets through the national team selection process, the 60kg, 67kg, and 77kg spots remain up for grabs with 50 days until the opening ceremony of the Olympics in the French capital. Rangraz hopes he and his technical staff will have made up their mind on the three weight

classes when the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial tournament concludes in Budapest next Sunday. The following is what the Iranian head coach had to say about his team's Olympic preparation in an exclusive interview with Iran Daily during a training session in Tehran's Wrestling House last week before leaving for Budapest.



IRAN DAILY: Tell us about the team's preparation for the Olympics and the final decision on the unsettled weight classes.

Rangraz: The team is in a second training camp for the Games before we head to the UWW Ranking Series event in Budapest, where we are to decide on the Iranian Olympic wrestlers in the 60kg, 67kg, and 77kg contests.

Mahdi Mohsennejad and Amirreza Dehbozorgi will take part in the 60kg class, and Mohammadreza Geraei and Saeid Esmaeili will compete in 67kg event, with the Iranian with the best result in the two categories securing their Olympic berth.

Mohammad-Ali Geraei and Mohammadreza Mokhtari will be part of the 77kg contests, and should either one of them wins the gold he will be given a chance against Amin Kavianinejad for the Paris place.

Given his glorious results over past couple of years, Amin Mirzazadeh is widely regarded as the top favorite in the Iranian squad to win the gold in Paris. How do you see his chances for the Olympic glory against Mijaín López of Cuba and Turkey's Rıza Kayaalp?

Mirzazadeh's titles belong to the past and will count for nothing when he heads for Paris. Amin is surely going to have a tough job on his hands against the two wrestling greats. López is a true sensation and the most-decorated wrestler in the history of the Games with four gold medals, who will be chasing a fifth in Paris. Kayaalp is also a 13-time world and Olympic medalist. Amin, however, will be a gold favorite, though he will face a daunting task in Paris.

Mohammadreza Geraei established himself as wrestling superstar when he won the world and Olympic gold in 2021 but his performance in the 2022 and 2023 World Championships were under-par by his own standards. Are we going to see him back to his best in the upcoming Olympics?

Mohammadreza is currently one of the top wrestlers in the country but last year's 67kg event was definitely one of the most competitive ones at the World Championships. As I said, he will have to see off domestic rivalry from Saeid Esmaeili for the Olympic spot. I believe both wrestlers have a decent chance of a podium finish in the Games and Geraei, should he secure



the Iranian singlet in Budapest, has what it takes to repeat his Olympic gold in Paris.

How about Mohammad-Hadi Saravi in the 97kg contests? Will he be capable of improving on his Tokyo Olympic bronze?

He has enjoyed an impressive and consistent form over the past four years, and left the international competitions with a medal on every occasion. He is full of determination for the Games, though high-profile Armenian Artur Aleksanyan will come to Paris, not to mention some tough opponents from Cuba and Russia will also be involved, which make the 97kg class one of the congested Greco-Roman events in the Games. I still see the quality in Saravi for a more colorful medal than what he achieved in Tokyo.

Mohammad-Ali Geraei faced missing the Olympics after being handed a one-year ban – for throwing a bottle of mineral water on the mat during his brother Mohammadreza's bout in the World Championships last year – but was lucky to see the UWW overturn its decision. Do you think he will have a chance for the Iranian 77kg slot in the Games?

He recently joined up with the rest of the team in a training camp and the technical staff made a positive assessment of his fitness levels, which is why we decided to give him a second chance in the Budapest Ranking Series. He has been among successful Iranian wrestlers in recent years with three world bronzes. But Kavianinejad won the Olympic quota for the country and, according to the selection process, both Geraei and Mokhtari will have to overcome him for a place in the Iranian squad.

Alireza Mohmadi won a world 82kg silver last year and then moved up to the Olympic 87kg class before claiming a silver in the new category in the Zagreb Open in January. Does it mean we're going to see him shine in Paris?

He is a decent young lad and has improved step by step throughout his career. He did a great job to win the Olympic quota in April's Asian qualifiers. He has been quick to adapt to the physical level of the new weight class in such a short space of time, but will face some tough opponents in the closely-contested 87kg event. We can still expect an impressive finish for him in Paris.

Which countries do you think will compete with Iran in the medal table?

All countries have invested massively on wrestling in recent years as the Olympics are of huge importance throughout the world. All of our six Greco-Roman wrestlers will have to come up against 50 to 60 of the best in the sport. Some 16 wrestlers – selected from the world's best – will participate in each weight class, who will be at their highest level when the Games get underway.

You replaced Mohammad Bana as a former world champion with full knowledge of the Iranian wrestling. What have you significantly changed about the national team since your appointment?

Over the past 20 months or so, we worked on improving the wrestlers' physical and mental form, while devising a proper nutrition program with help from a new medical staff. We've also tried to form a back-up squad for the national team through numerous international tournaments. We've managed to work in line with the selection process for the past two years so that every wrestler

would get a fair shot at the national team.

witnessed Iranians dominate different world age-group championships in recent years. When are we going to see this group of young talents burst onto the seniors' stage?

That has already happened in some weight divisions. You can see 21-year-olds Amirreza Dehbozorgi and Saeid Esmaeili competing with senior wrestlers Mahdi Mohsennejad and Mohammadreza Geraei in the featherweight classes and I am confident we're going to have two teams with the same level of skills and qualities in the long run.

Veteran Iranian head coach Mansour Barzegar recently said that "lack of steam and impetus in the closing stages of the bout" has been the Iranian wrestlers' weak spot in recent years. Do you agree with that?

Mr. Barzegar is a true coaching legend with five decades of experience in the Iranian wrestling, so I'm not going to disagree with his comments. However, there are four aspects to every wrestler's fitness: Physical, technical, tactical, and mental. These four com-

plete each other like pieces of a puzzle to give a clear image of a champion. The physical vigor surely lays the foundation for every wrestler's success, while contributing to the technical and tactical skills. So, Mr. Barzegar has a point there and that's why we have benefited from Professor Bahman Mirzai's bodybuilding program to make sure we don't struggle in that respect.

Is it fair to say that some of our wrestlers ran out of steam in vital bouts against their opponents in the World Championships, as did Mohammadreza Geraei, who had to dig deep for victory over Japanese Kyotaro Soga-be?

I don't think a single narrative applies to every win and defeat in wrestling. Different parameters need to be taken into account when assessing a result. All I can say is that the average fitness of our wrestlers has been at a decent level in different competitions, though other factors have cost the Iranians dearly in one or two weight classes. In Geraei's case, I believe a massive weight loss in the buildup to the tournament saw him struggle against the Japanese wrestler.

Do you think world-class foreign coaches for youth levels could help improve Iranian wrestling?

We boast our own style of wrestling and some top-notch Iranian coaches are already working in the wrestling academies, though I believe we still need to raise our knowledge of nutrition, psychology, and modern-day training methods.



Mirzazadeh will surely be a gold favorite but he will have to come up against two wrestling greats in Mijaín López of Cuba and Turkey's Rıza Kayaalp.