

Wrestlers to lead Iran's quest for Olympic glory in Paris



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

When the 30th Olympic Games get underway in Paris later in the summer, all Iranians' eyes will be on the French capital's Grand Palais Éphémère from August 5 to 11, as the country's 11 wrestlers will be in hunt of the most prestigious prize in the sports.

Of the 76 Olympic medals won by the Iranians through the previous editions, the wrestlers take credit for 47, with 11 of the 24 golds for the country coming in the wrestling events.

Legendary wrestlers Gholamreza Takhti, Abdollah Movahed, Emam-Ali Habibi had the Olympic golds under their belts in the 50s and 60s, before Rasoul Khadem, Alireza Dabir, Omid Norouzi, Hamid Sourian, Qassem Rezaei, Komeil Qassemi, Hassan Yazdani, and Mohammadreza Gerai all left the Games with the ultimate prize over the past three decades. The Iranian sport apparatus had a superb performance by the Greco-Roman and freestyle wrestlers to thank for a most prolific Olympic campaign in London 2012, while the wrestling competitions produced four out of the seven medals for Iran in the latest edition in Tokyo.

Expectations will again be high of the Iranian wrestlers in Paris after they claimed four runner-up team titles across the Greco-Roman and freestyle contests at the World Championships over the past three years.

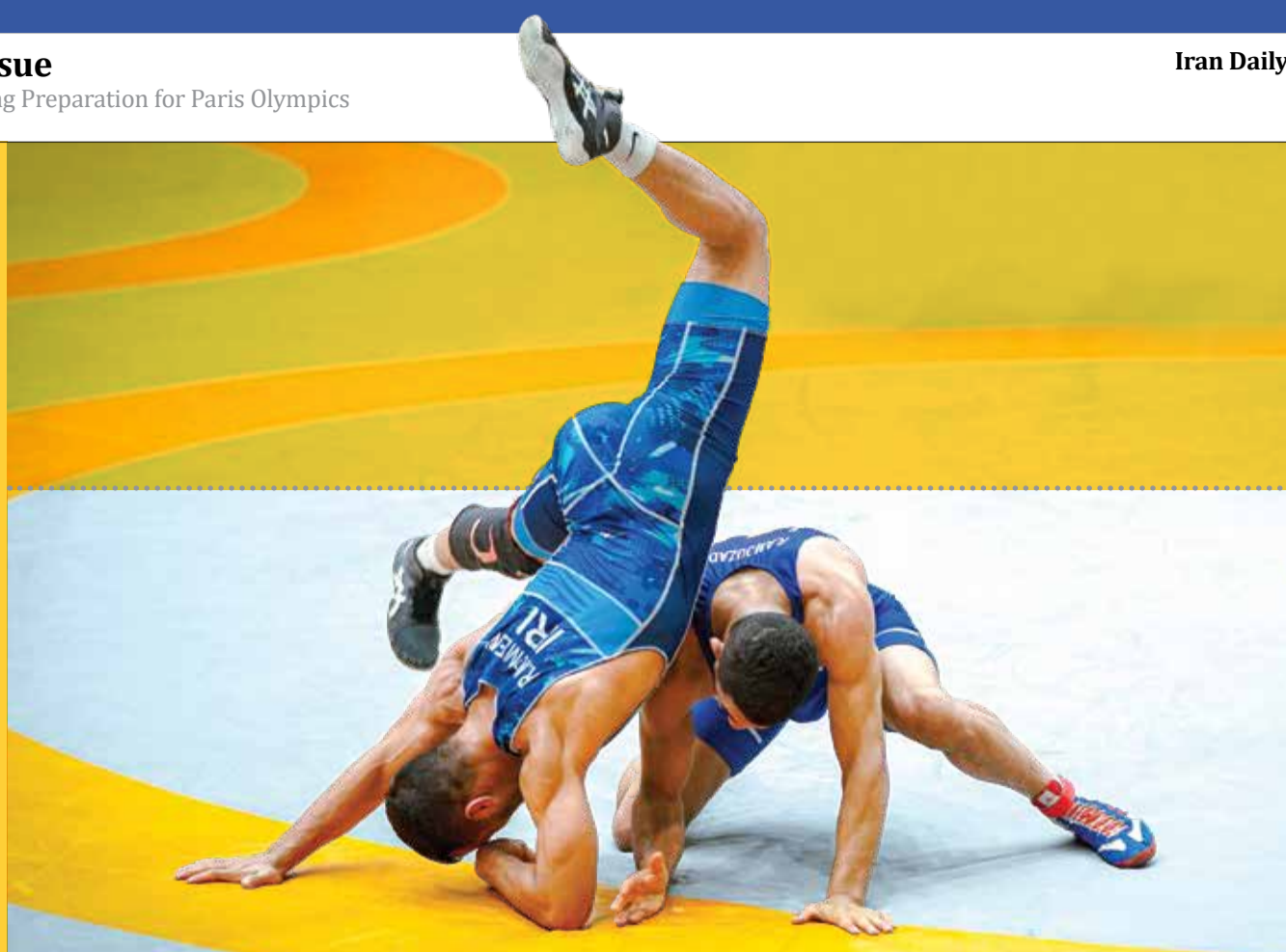


Heading to Paris as the reigning world champions, Amirhossein Zare' and Amin Mirzazadeh will be the hot favorites to walk away with the gold in the super-heavyweight competitions.

Mohammad-Hadi Saravi, Rahman Amouzad, Younes Emami, and Alireza Mohmadi will also be looking to build on their world success in recent years when participating in the biggest sporting showpiece of them all, while Iranian freestyle prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira could emerge as a surprise medalist in the freestyle 97kg event.

Meanwhile, Yazdani – a winner of a national-high nine world and Olympic medals – and Gerai – a gold medalist in Tokyo – are yet to secure their places in the Iranian squads, though they still fancy their chances of going all the way to finish on the Paris podiums.

The two Iranian coaching staffs are undecided on four slots for the Games – the Greco-Roman 60kg, 67kg, and 77kg berths as well as the 86kg spot in the freestyle team – with the outcome of the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial tournament, starting today in Budapest, playing a decisive part in completing the country's two Olympic lineups.



It takes 'right attitude' to succeed at the Olympics: FS coach Kaveh

By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

Mohsen Kaveh was only named as the head coach of the Iranian freestyle wrestling team last December, taking over from Pejman Dorostkar, who stepped down after three years in charge. The 62-year-old might be relatively new to his role, but he is still blessed with

years of working as a coach and technical director in the Iranian federation over the past three decades. His team will be represented by five wrestlers at the Paris Olympics after Alireza Sarlak failed to win the 57kg quota in May's world qualifiers in Istanbul. While the team roster for the Games has been settled in four weight classes, Kaveh and his coaching staff are yet to come up with the final deci-

sion on the 86kg slot. Wrestling sensation Hassan Yazdani has only made his long-awaited return to training following a surgery on his injured shoulder last October and will have his fitness levels assessed in the in the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial tournament – starting today in Budapest. Meanwhile, two-time world champion Kamran Qasempour remains in

contention for the Iranian 86kg, and recently threw down the gauntlet to Yazdani, saying he is "ready to face any opponent" for a place in Paris. The following is what Kaveh had to say in an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, days before leaving for the Hungarian capital, about how Iranian wrestlers are fairing with less than two months until the Olympic Games.

IRAN DAILY: Tell us about the national team selection process for the Olympics.

Kaveh: The process began with the National Championships [last Decembers] and then the Iranians wrestlers participated at the Ranking Series event in Zagreb, the Asian Championships, and the Olympic qualifiers before we confirmed four members of the team.

Rahman Amouzad (65kg), Younes Emami (74kg), Amir-Ali Azarpira (97kg), and Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) have already secured their place in the team and we will decide on the 86kg slot after a full assessment of Hassan Yazdani in the ranking tournament in Budapest.

This is our eighth training camp since I took over. The federation, the Sports Ministry, and the National Olympic Committee want to guarantee a best preparation for the team ahead the Games. The wrestlers are under full pressure in training and I just hope their tireless efforts will pay off in the Olympics.

Kamran Qasempour is to take part in a tournament in Sassari, Italy, to have him tested for the 86kg spot. Do you still have any doubts on Yazdani's form?

Hassan had to undergo a surgery on his injured shoulder after the Asian Games but has had a decent recovery process. I saw him in back in training recently and he was in good form. However, we will have to make sure the best wrestler takes part in the Olympics. It has been more than seven months since Hassan participated

in any tournament, which is why he will be assessed in Budapest. If his full recovery is approved, he will be our 86kg wrestler in Paris.

And if not?

Then we will consider Kamran as an alternative. As I said, it all depends on how Hassan will perform in Budapest.

American David Taylor will not be in Paris. Is it good news for Yazdani and Iranian wrestling?

Well, Taylor was beaten by Aaron Brooks in the US Olympic trials, which means Brooks is also a decent wrestler and Hassan is not going to have an easy job against him. Taylor and Yazdani are both world-class wrestlers but when these two met, Taylor came out on top on most occasions. I don't want to get into it at the moment as we're only focused on best results at the Olympics.

Don't you think the Iranian wrestlers have to improve their vigor and impetus against their stronger opponents?

We have to work on both physical and technical aspects of the Iranian wrestlers, though the significance of every aspect is different for every weight class. Let me put it to you this way, Rahman Amouzad and Mohammad Nokhodi are not supposed to have the same level of technical skills and physical fitness. Nokhodi uses his mind when taking on an opponent, while Amouzad is a more dynamic wrestler on the mat. We had four months to improve every feature of their wrestling.

As the Iranian head coach, how many medals do you think your five-man squad will win in Paris?

I'm pretty confident about grabbing colorful medals in the Olympics. But let's not forget that the event is going to be a tough one for everyone. Honestly speaking, our major rivals are currently ahead of us, as we spend a six-month period to prepare for the Games while they dedicate four yours to Olympic success. Still, the history of the Games has been full of surprises as many wrestlers have won the gold on their Olympic debut, as American Henry Cejudo did in Beijing 2008.

It takes the right mindset and attitude, and not just the vigor and robustness, to deliver your best performance in the Olympics.

If a wrestler seeks the Olympic glory, he will have to plan for each and every second of his life, let alone the six-minute duration of a bout in a tournament, and that is the fact that I want the Iranian wrestlers to realize. They will face some tough opponents in Paris and you can only find out who is the better one once they square off on the mat.

Rahman Amouzad had a below-par season last year. How do you see his chances for the Olympics?

He still managed to win the Olympic quota in the World Championships and made up for his loss against the Mongolian wrestler in the Asian Games in April's Asian Championships. He is in good form and we have changed his gameplan but he knows

he will have to work harder for the Olympic glory as six or seven world-class wrestlers will take part in the 65kg event. I still believe he will have a decent chance for a medal.

What about Younes Emami?

He will also face a daunting challenge, with American Kyle Dake and Russian Zaurbek Sidakov the favorites in the 74kg class. Serbian Khetag Tsabolov and Japan's Daichi Takatani will also make it a close battle for the podium.

Amirhossein Zare' is widely regarded as the hot favorite for the 125kg gold. Don't you think high expectations could affect his preparation?

He fully deserves the Olympic gold but he will have to fight for it. He will have to come up against two experienced world and Olympic medalists in Geno Petriashvili and Taha Akgül.

Amir-Ali Azarpira has emerged as rising star over the past year. Do you hope he will establish himself as a new 97kg force in Paris?

I've been pleased with his performance over the past months and I'm really optimistic about his success in the Games despite his young age. He defeated Kyle Snyder in the Zagreb Open though the American will surely be a different wrestler in Paris. Russian great Abdurashid Sadulaev and Bahraini world champion Akhmed Tazhudinov will be the frontrunners for the 97kg gold.

If a wrestler seeks the Olympic glory, he will have to plan for each and every second of his life and career, let alone the six minutes of a bout.

