

Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial: Esmaeili recovers from bizarre defeat as Iran completes Olympic roster

Iranian Saeid Esmaeili (blue) is caught off guard by Cuban Luis Orta's throw during a Greco-Roman 67kg semifinal at the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial in Budapest, Hungary, on June 9, 2024.

UWW



Sports Desk

Young Iranian Greco-Roman wrestler Saeid Esmaeili will have to take a lesson from his premature celebration against Cuban Luis Orta at the Polyák Imre & Varga János Memorial when participating at the Paris Olympics later in the summer.

There were more at stake than a UWW Ranking Series medal for six Iranians in Budapest as the outcome of the event settled the country's three remaining slots in the Games.

A former world under-20 gold medalist, Esmaeili was joined by fellow-Iranian Mohammadreza Geraei in the 67kg contests, with the latter – the reigning Olympic champion and a winner of three world medals since the Games in Tokyo – the clear favorite to punch his Paris ticket.

Geraei overcame minnow opponents from Tunisia and France to reach the semifinals before the latest episode of his decay in form since winning the 2021 world

title saw the Iranian suffer a 6-1 loss to world 63kg champion Leri Abuladze of Georgia.

Geraei's setback meant a victory over Orta, who won the gold in last year's world event, in the other last-four clash would have sealed the Olympic berth for Esmaeili.

The Asian champion dominated the first period to race to a 7-0 lead and was a single point away from a massive win, but the Cuban reduced the deficit to two after the break to stay in the contest.

Esmaeili still managed to defend his lead until the final three seconds and when Orta dropped his guard, seemingly accepting the defeat, the Iranian began walking toward his corner to celebrate with his coach.

However, in one of the most awkward scenes in recent history of the sport, Orta approached Esmaeili from behind before launching a four-point throw with 0.1 seconds left on the clock to win the bout.

Devastated by the defeat, Es-

maeili did a great job to come from behind and score a final-second takedown against Japanese Kyotaro Sogabe for a 6-5 win in the third-place battle, keeping his hopes for an Olympic spot alive.

Geraei, meanwhile, came out on top against Ecuador's Andres Montano to share the third podium with Esmaeili, as it all went down to a head-to-head between the two Iranians for a place in Paris.

According to the regulations of the Iranian selection process, Geraei needed one victory to secure his Olympic title defense, while Esmaeili had to win twice.

And it was Esmaeili who rose up to the occasion as he claimed back-to-back triumphs (6-0 and 6-4) against the Olympic champion to earn a well-deserved place in the Iranian six-man squad.

There was further misery for the Geraei brothers on Sunday as the elder of the two Mohammad-Ali also missed out on the Olympic 77kg slot.

The Iranian Wrestling Federation had confirmed prior to the tournament that Mohammad-Ali Geraei or Mohammadreza Mokhtari had to win the gold in Budapest to be given a chance against Amin Kavianejad, who had won the Olympic quota for the country in April's Asian qualifiers, for a Paris ticket.

Geraei fell to a 6-1 defeat against two-time world silver medalist Sanan Suleymanov of Azerbaijan in the quarterfinals, while Mokhtari could only manage to finish his campaign with a consolation bronze, meaning Kavianejad will head to Paris.

Mahdi Mohsennejad had secured the Iranian 60kg spot in Paris earlier in the competitions, despite a final loss to Georgian.

The result still proved to be enough for Mohsennejad, who had won the Olympic quota for Iran in last year's World Championships, as his domestic rival Amir-Reza Dehbozorgi finished behind him on the third podium. Esmaeili, Kavianejad, and

Mohsennejad will be joined by Alireza Mohmadi (87kg), Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg), and Amin Mirzazadeh (130kg) in representing Iran in the summer extravaganza.

Mohmadi will be looking to build on his world 82kg silver when heading to Paris, with Saravi, a winner of one gold and two bronzes in the World Championships, hoping to improve on his Olympic bronze in Tokyo.

World champion Mirzazadeh, meanwhile, will be among the favorites for the superheavyweight glory in Paris – along with Cuban great Mijaín López, who will be chasing a fifth successive Olympic gold, and 13-time world and Olympic medalist Riza Kayaalp of Turkey.

Freestyle five

There were major doubts over Hassan Yazdani's fitness levels before the Budapest tournament as he made his long-awaited return to the wrestling mat just before the tournament after being side-

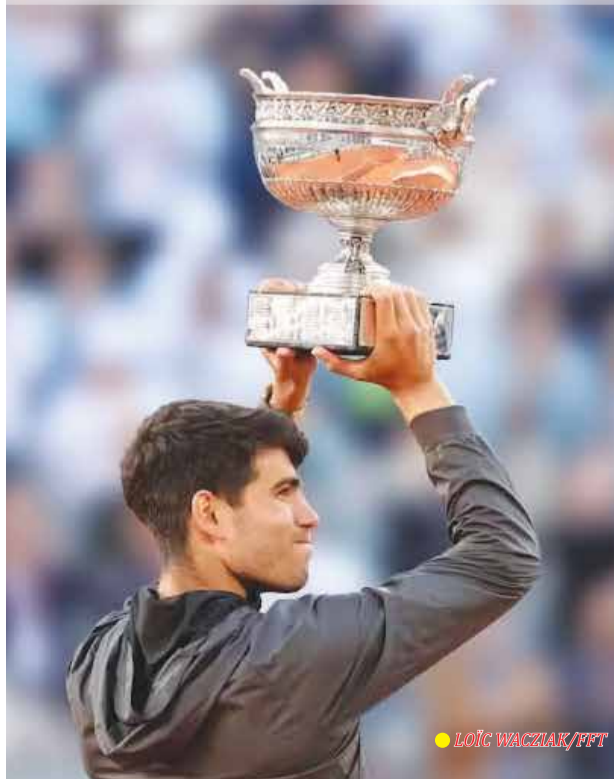
lined for eight months due to a surgery on his shoulder.

The wrestling sensation, however, showed no signs of injury struggles in Budapest, cruising to the ultimate prize of the freestyle 86kg contests to remain on course for a history-making campaign in Paris, where a second Olympic gold will see him overtake taekwondo legend Hadi Saei as the most-decorated Iranian in the history of the Games.

Four Iranians had already been guaranteed participation in Paris. Amirhossein Zare' will be the hot favorite for the 125kg gold as he will be looking to round off a stellar three years in his career, having grabbed double world golds and a bronze, as well as the bronze in Tokyo.

Rahman Amouzad, a world 65kg champion in 2022, will be after a medal in his maiden Olympic presence, with two-time world bronze winner Younes Emami (74kg) and young prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira (97kg) also eager for an impressive run in Paris.

Alcaraz enters all-surface elite with French Open triumph



REUTERS – Carlos Alcaraz made a grand entrance into the tennis history books as he claimed his maiden French Open title to become the youngest man to capture Grand Slams on all three surfaces with a see-saw five-set victory over German Alexander Zverev on Sunday.

The 6-3 2-6 5-7 6-1 6-2 win may not have been a classic, but the Spaniard showed that he belonged among the elite as he added a third Grand Slam crown to his impressive trophy cabinet that already has the 2022 U.S. Open and 2023 Wimbledon titles.

Alcaraz became the seventh man to win a major on hard, grass and clay courts, a feat that eluded some of the sport's greats, including American Pete Sampras, who boasts 14

major titles, but never won at Roland Garros.

At 21 years old, Alcaraz has played in three Grand Slam finals and won them all, while for comparison, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic were in their late 20s before they mastered the sport's slowest surface.

"Since I was little kid, I was running from school to put on the TV to watch this tournament. Now I am lifting the trophy in front of all of you," said Alcaraz, who was described by Zverev as a "Hall of Famer" in his speech.

Sunday's defeat prolonged Zverev's frustration at Grand Slams, with the German still chasing a first title despite reaching the last four eight times.

"I'll be back next year," Zverev promised.

'Unlucky moments'

In the first men's Roland Garros final not featuring any member of the Big Three – Rafael Nadal, Djokovic and Federer – in two decades, Alcaraz and Zverev failed to impress, their lack of consistency making for a disappointing display. "There was some unlucky moments. I heard that at 2-1 the second serve was out. From the Hawk Eye data I saw that. I break back there, I have break chances and then in the next service game, a fifth set can go the other way," Zverev said. "There's a difference whether you're down 3-1 in the fifth set or you're back to two-all.

"It's frustrating in the end, but it is what it is. Umpires make mistakes. They're also human and that's okay. But of course in

a situation like that, you wish there wouldn't be mistakes."

Zverev, who was bidding to become the first German man to win a singles Grand Slam since Boris Becker in 1996, saw his hopes slip away on the biggest stage yet again.

Alcaraz broke once more before serving it out and clinching the title on his first match point.

"When you're playing a fifth set you have to give everything and you have to give your heart. In those moments, it's where the top players give their best tennis," Alcaraz said. "I wanted to be one of the best players in the world, so I have to give extra in those moments, I have to show the opponent that I'm fresh, like we're playing the first game of the match."