

# Iran GR coach Rangraz expecting 'at least two medals' in Paris

## Sports Desk

Iranian Greco-Roman wrestling head coach Hassan Rangraz says it will be "fair to expect" his men grab at least two medals in the Paris Olympics.

Iran became the first country to complete a full set of six Greco-Roman wrestling quotas for the Games when Amin Kavianejad (77kg) and Alireza Mohmadi (87kg) secured the remaining two slots in April's Asian qualifiers in Bishkek.

The duo will be joined by reigning world champion Amin Mirzazadeh (130kg), Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg), Mahdi Mohsennejad (60kg), and Saeid Esmaili (67kg) in representing the country in the French capital's Grand Palais Éphémère from August 5 to 8.

"I truly believe all six members of the team deserve to finish on the podium in Paris. The competition, however, will take place at such a high level and it is really going to be tough to win a medal there," Rangraz said, adding: "Let's not forget that the Iranians have won an average two medals over the past three Olympics, though the London 2012 [where Iran won a remarkable three golds] was a one-off occasion and the figure was even lower prior to that year."

"That is why I think it fair to expect the team grab at least two medals in Paris," added the 2001 world champion, who took over from Mohammad Bana following the 2022 World Championships.

Asked who are the Iranian hopefuls for Olympic glory, Rangraz said: "Mirzazadeh and Saravi will probably have the biggest chance for a medal and I hope it will be the most colorful one."

Unlucky to leave Tokyo with an Olympic medal three years ago, Mirzazadeh stunned Turkish great Rıza Kayaalp to the world title last year to add to his world silver in 2022.

Still, legendary Cuban Mijaín López – chasing a fifth successive Olympic gold – remains the ultimate favorite for the top prize in the superheavyweight class.

"Mirzazadeh and Kayaalp are the top two in the world 130kg ranking and will be in different halves of the draw in the Olympics, but López will come to Paris as a non-ranked wrestler and could face Mirzazadeh at any stage before the final," Rangraz said.

Meanwhile, Saravi – a winner of one world gold and double bronzes over the past three years – has been in dazzling form since the last-four defeat against Cuba's Gabriel Rosillo in last September's world event and will be looking to improve on his Olympic bronze in Paris.

"Saravi will have a difficult draw, given his No. 3 spot in the ranking, and will likely face a tough battle against the Belarusian opponent [Abubakar Khaslakhanau] en route to the final," the Iranian coach said.

"Sixteen of the world's best have gone through difficult paths to reach the Olympics. The ranking place and the draw will defiant-



● FARSHAD BANDANI/IAWF

ly play a massive part in every wrestler's campaign," added the Iranian.

Speaking about the other Iranians' title shot in Paris, Rangraz said: "Eight ranked wrestlers will participate in each weight class and will be placed in different parts of the draw. Mohsennejad

will be among those eight in the 60kg contests but could still go head-to-head with the world gold and silver medalists in the same half of the bracket."

"The same applies to Esmaili in the 67kg class. He is an exceptional talent but his last international medal came in the world

under-20 60kg and the event in Paris will be his first in the new weight category in a major senior competition.

"Our 77kg and 87kg wrestlers will head to the Games as non-ranked wrestlers, so they will be up against some demanding tests from their very first bout.

"It's been five years since Kavianejad last represented the national team in the World Championships. Mohmadi is just 21 and did a great job to seal the 87kg berth for the country. He won the world 82kg silver last year and the Olympics will make his major 87kg debut."

## FIBA U18 Asia Cup: Iranian girls finish fourth in Division B



● FIBA

## Sports Desk

Iranian women's team settled for the fourth place in the FIBA U18 Asia Cup, Division B after a 64-59 loss to Samoa in Shenzhen, China.

Sanaz Lashkari was the Iranian top scorer with 21 points, while Helya Houdneh had 18 points and eight rebounds.

Peata Manumaleuga chipped in a game-high 22 points for the Samoans, with Kira-May Filmu enjoying a double-double with

19 points and 20 rebounds.

This was a fifth game for the Iranian girls in the event after a clean sweep of three victories over Hong Kong (65-52), Kyrgyzstan (73-40), and Samoa (76-73, OT) had seen the country win Group A for a place in the semifinals, before falling to a 64-49 defeat against Lebanon.

The Philippines came out 95-64 winners against the Lebanese later on Sunday to progress to next year's Division A contests.

## Italy's title defence began with a bang, ends with a whimper



**REUTERS** – Defending champions Italy were never among the favourites coming into Euro 2024, but nobody predicted just how poor they would be, and they leave the tournament having surrendered their crown with barely a whimper.

Italy surprised many three years ago when they won the European Championship, but they leave Germany without ever having looked capable of making a mark, at least not a positive one.

In the round of 16 on Saturday, Luciano Spalletti's side came up against a confident, settled Switzerland, a team which had already impressed in their draw with Germany, and Italy for long periods looked completely out of their depth.

The signs were there in the group stage, where they began with a win but then risked an early exit, and Italian fans could be forgiven for wishing it had indeed all ended sooner, their side playing as though they just wanted the suffering to end.

Even in the opening win against Albania they conceded the fastest ever goal scored at the Euros, perhaps a sign that Italian minds and hearts were never really on the job. That comeback 2-1 win showed promise and character, and there was much talk



Italy's Federico Chiesa (L) and Davide Frattesi look dejected after the last-16 defeat against Switzerland in Euro 2024 in Berlin, Germany, on June 29, 2024.

● ANNEGRET HILSE/REUTERS

of never writing Italy off at a major tournament. But that would be as good as it got. On paper Italy suffered a narrow defeat against Spain, with a Riccardo Calafiori own goal the only difference between the teams. On the pitch, they were outclassed and dominated by a young, energetic Spanish side.

After that harsh lesson, Italy were expected to deal better with an ageing Croatia team, but they did little to impress and needed a 98th minute goal from substitute Mattia Zaccagni to rescue a 1-1 draw

and reach the last 16 as group runners up.

If Spain can be categorised as youthful and the Croatians as the end of a cycle, it's difficult to know where Italy fit in, and that is the biggest problem facing Spalletti, should he survive the backlash that has already begun.

Italy lacked an identity, a clear definable style, as Spalletti searched in vain for a formation and lineup that could carry out his orders.

He began by selecting the same side in the opening two games but then complained

of a lack of freshness and energy from his players and decided to shake things up against Croatia with three changes.

That clearly did not have the desired effect, so the manager made twice as many for the tie with Switzerland. It went even worse, and the Swiss, who have seven players who started all four games, were the fresher-looking side.

Italy's one outstanding player at the tournament was captain Gianluigi Donnarumma, the keeper saving them from even further embarrassment on several occasions, but in front of him there was nobody who could turn on the magic to inspire the others.

The Swiss were simply too good, while Italy lacked any composure, and for their fans the worst thing must have been seeing their side go down without putting up a fight.

Midfielder Bryan Cristante summed it all up with brutal honesty: "They beat us physically and in terms of organisation. The desire was different, then when you can't do things against a team that runs so much better, you try but you don't succeed."

"Now we have to clear our heads and start again next year with a different attitude and energy."