

Iranians eager to restore taekwondo success in Paris



By Amirhadi Arsalanpour
Staff writer

Four Iranians will be looking to end the country's eight-year wait for an Olympic medal when the taekwondo competitions of the Paris Games get underway.

Kimia Alizadeh's historic -57kg bronze in Rio 2016 – the only Olympic medal won by an Iranian girl to date – remains the last taekwondo achievement for the country in the sporting extravaganza as the occasion in Tokyo three years ago was the first in six editions to yield no success for the Iranian representatives.

Hadi Saei, the head of the national governing body of the sport, wrote his name into history books in Sydney 2000 when he grabbed a first taekwondo medal for Iran – a men's -68kg bronze – and went on to become the country's most-decorated Olympian of all time by winning back-to-back golds in 2004 and 2008. Yousef Karami took the men's -80kg bronze in Athens 2004 before Mohammad Baqeri-Mo'tamed settled for the men's -68kg silver in London 2012 as the taekwondo contests have been the third-most productive event – following wrestling and weightlifting – for Iran in the history of the Olympics with six medals.

And now four Iranians will be hoping to add to the haul at the four-day taekwondo showpiece



L-R: Nahid Kiani (women's -57kg), Arian Salimi (men's +80kg), Mehran Barkhordari (men's -80kg), and Mobina Ne'matzadeh (women's -49kg) will represent Iran at the taekwondo competitions of the Paris Olympics.

in the French capital's Grand Palais – starting August 7. Nahid Kiani will headline the Iranian squad in Paris, stepping into the women's -57kg contests as the reigning world bantamweight champion. Her -53kg triumph in Baku last year marked a first women's gold for Iran throughout the 26 editions of the World Champion-

ships and the 25-year-old will be keen to notch up another milestone medal in Paris. As if Kiani needed more motivation to go all out for an Olympic medal, a successful campaign in Paris will provide her with personal redemption after she crashed out of the Tokyo Olympics in the most controversial fashion.

She fell to a first-round defeat against her fellow-Iranian Alizadeh, who represented the IOC Refugee Team in Tokyo, and, in an interview with Varzesh3 in January, Kiani said overcoming the mental struggles in the aftermath of the loss was "one of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life." "The bout was a one-off occa-

sion in the Olympic history and I was devastated by the fact that a part of my compatriots cheered my opponent's victory, which is why I had to seek professional help from a therapist," she said. Joining Kiani in the women's draw will be 19-year-old prodigy Mobina Ne'matzadeh, who will be looking to build on an im-

pressive run over the past two years when taking part in the -49kg event.

A world junior champion in 2022, Ne'matzadeh won the Asian silver in the same year and then picked up the bronze in last year's Asian Games, coupled with a couple of bronze medals in the World Taekwondo Grand Prix, before punching her Paris ticket in March's Asian Qualification Tournament in Tai'an, China.

Iran will also be represented by two athletes in the men's competitions.

Mehran Barkhordari will be part of the -80kg draw, with Arian Salimi chasing a medal in the +80kg contests.

Barkhordari finished third in the 2022 world event but suffered an early exit last year in Baku, though he has fond memories of the French capital as he claimed the gold in the second series of the Grand Prix in Paris last September.

He also fell to a last-four loss to former world champion Park Woo-hyeok of South Korea in the Asian Games and settled for a consolation bronze.

Salimi, meanwhile, will hope to improve on his 2023 world bronze.

The Iranian came short in the final showpiece against China's Song Zhaoxiang in the Asian Games but bounced back to cruise to the gold at the Asian Championships in May, thanks to a final victory over South Korean Park.



Mirzazadeh given Olympic boost after Turkish Kayaalp receives doping ban

Sports Desk

Turkish Greco-Roman wrestler Riza Kayaalp was handed a provisional suspension by the United World Wrestling after testing positive for banned substances, meaning the 13-time world and Olympic medalist is ruled out of the Paris Games later this month. Kayaalp will be replaced by reigning world under-23 champion Hamza Bakir in the country's Greco-Roman squad heading to the Games, Turkish online newspaper T24 reported.

The news come as major boost for

Iranian Amin Mirzazadeh in his quest for the 130kg gold in Paris. Mirzazadeh and Kayaalp have been familiar foes of the super-heavyweight class since they first squared off in the Tokyo Olympics three years ago, when the Turkish wrestler beat the Iranian 7-2 in the bronze medal bout and won his third Olympic medal. Kayaalp repeated his victory over Mirzazadeh in the final showpiece of the 2022 World Championships, coming out on top on criteria, before the Iranian celebrated a first win against the Turkish great when he overturned a 2-0 defi-

cit late on to beat Kayaalp to the world gold last year in Belgrade. However, legendary Cuban Mijain López will be the ultimate favorite for the superheavyweight glory in Paris as the 41-year-old will return to the Games to chase a remarkable fifth successive Olympic gold.



Iranian Amin Mirzazadeh (L) is seen in action against Riza Kayaalp in the 130kg final at the 2023 Wrestling World Championships in Belgrade, Serbia.

UWW

Below-par Kane is vital for England, teammates say

REUTERS – Harry Kane's England teammates have rallied behind him after a string of uninspiring performances at Euro 2024, with Luke Shaw and Trent Alexander-Arnold praising their captain's leadership and the threat his presence poses for opponents. Kane has scored twice in the tournament but has looked out of sorts, lacking pace and short on chances, prompting calls for him to be dropped for today's semi-final against Netherlands in Dortmund.

"Anyone who is facing England would like to see Harry Kane not playing," Alexander-Arnold said.

"You just know he is a threat. Anything in and around the box, you need to be on red alert.

"He can finish it from every angle. I always say he is the best finisher I've seen or played with. He can drop down and build play up and his hold-up play is incredible too."

Left back Shaw, who returned from injury late in the Switzerland game, said Kane was a world-class player.

"At any time he can score a goal and make that difference. He's a very important player, he's our captain," Shaw said.

"You give him time in and around the

box he'll score, he takes opportunities we know that, we see it day in day out, we know the quality he has and what he brings to the team and it's very important he's on the pitch."

Shaw said Kane had the right mindset despite his performances.

"I don't sense any frustration from him, he's the same Harry that we have from the start of the camp, nothing changed," he said. "He'd have liked to have scored more goals. Nothing changed, he's still very positive ... he's our captain, he's our leader, he leads by example and we all follow him."



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