

Wrestlers excel, taekwondo girls make history as Iran relishes Olympic success



Iranian wrestlers Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (l) and Saeid Esmaeili celebrate after their final victories in the Greco-Roman contests of the Paris Olympics.



Greco-Roman wrestler Mohammad-Hadi Saravi rounded off a remarkable three years in his career with an Olympic gold in the 97kg class, while young prodigy Saeid Esmaeili celebrated his major seniors' debut with the ultimate prize of the 67kg contests. In taekwondo, history was made in the French capital's Grand Palais on Thursday, as Nahid Kiani became the first Iranian girl to reach the final showpiece in any sport since the first edition of the Games in 1896, only to settle for the -57kg silver.

Sports Desk

Iran's wait for a first medal at the Paris Olympics came to an end on the 11th day of the event, when Greco-Roman wrestler Amin Mirzazadeh won a superheavyweight bronze, before his compatriots bagged double golds and silvers apiece, as well as a precious taekwondo bronze, as the country enjoyed a massive hike in the medals table.

There was further glory in the Greco-Roman competitions for Iran, with Mohammad-Hadi Saravi rounding off a remarkable three years in his career with an Olympic gold in the 97kg class, thanks to a victory over veteran Armenian Artur Aleksanyan, while young prodigy Saeid Esmaeili celebrated his major seniors' debut with the ultimate prize of the 67kg contests.

Alireza Mohmadi also had an impressive run in Paris, defeating high-profile Ukrainian Zhan Beleniuk in the 87kg semifinals, though his campaign finished with a 7-0 heartbreak against Bulgarian Semen Novikov as the 21-year-old Iranian – the 82kg runner-up in last September's World Championships – claimed a second major silver medal in less than 12 months.

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Her silver medal came after her fellow-Iranian Mobina Ne'matzadeh had won only a second-ever Olympic medal for the country in the women's events, winning a precious bronze in the -49kg weight class on the preceding night.

Victorious over Lesotho's Michelle Tau and Olympic silver medalist Adriana Cerezo of Spain, Ne'matzadeh, 19, came short against China's Guo Qing in the semifinals, but defeated Saudi Arabia's Dunya Abutaleb 3-0 and 4-3 to share the third podium with Lena Stojković – eight years after Kimia Alizadeh had also won a

taekwondo bronze in Rio 2016 to become the maiden Iranian female athlete with an Olympic medal.

Sensational Saravi

On Wednesday, Saravi notched his first win in four career meetings with Armenian superstar Aleksanyan, and it couldn't have come at a better occasion.

Saravi scored a late takedown for a 4-1 victory to improve on the Olympic bronze he had won three years ago.

"Thank God I won a first gold for Iran in Paris, and my first gold at the Olympics after I took bronze in Tokyo," Saravi said.

A winner of a world gold and bronze over the past two years, Saravi looked confident against his decorated opponent, who had previously beaten him in the semifinals at the Tokyo Olympics as well as both the 2019 and 2022 World Championships.

"It's so sweet to win the gold medal after three attempts," Saravi said. "I have a lot of respect for my opponent in the final. He's so professional, but I was able to beat him."

Both wrestlers were unable to score from the top in par terre, and Saravi held a 1-1 lead on criteria in the second period. In a quick flurry, Aleksanyan was knocked backward toward the ground, and Saravi spun behind for a takedown to seal the triumph, sending his fellow-citizens into raptures on the streets of his home city of Amol in northern Iran.

"My city and province are the home of wrestling in Iran," he said. "Everybody is really happy there and celebrates my medal, so I am really proud to have made this happen."

A day later, Esmaeili, who only turned 21 last month, rallied from behind twice to beat Tokyo silver medalist Parviz Nasibov of Ukraine 6-5 in a thrilling showdown at the Grand Palais Éphémère.

Nasibov fought off an arm throw to score a takedown in the first period before adding a passivity point to lead 3-0 at the break.

Esmaeili, who had stunned reigning world and Olympic champion Luis Orta by superiority in the

last eight, struck back quickly in the second period, getting behind for a takedown within seconds, then went ahead on criteria with a passivity point.

Nasibov regained the advantage with a takedown, but Esmaeili stuffed a throw attempt for a two-point exposure to lead on criteria 5-5 before an unsuccessful challenge by the Ukrainian secured a second gold across six weight classes for Iran, as Hassan Ranzraz's team topped the Greco-Roman table with four medals.

"It is the best day of my life in two years after I lost close relatives in an accident. I quit wrestling for a while but I was able to put everything behind and achieve this gold medal," said Esmaeili, who had defeated Tokyo Olympic champion Mohammadreza Geraei in the domestic trials for a place in Paris.

Asked about his new status as the rising star of Greco-Roman, Esmaeili said: "It's a big honor to be called 'a new talent,' and I'm humbled. I have to make more effort to win more medals."

Glorious girl

Having promised last week that "August 8 would be the sweetest day of my life", Kiani began her quest for a coveted Olympic medal with a much-anticipated battle against her fellow-Iranian-born Alizadeh in Tokyo in thrilling fashion, bouncing back from a first-round defeat to edge out Alizadeh in the final five seconds of the third round.

Kiani made amends for her loss to Alizadeh in Tokyo in thrilling fashion, bouncing back from a first-round defeat to edge out Alizadeh in the final five seconds of the third round. Tunisian Chaima Toumi came Kiani's way in the quarterfinals, with the Iranian coming out victorious again in three rounds before cruising to a last-four triumph against Lebanese Laetitia Aoun for a place in the final.

Kim Yu-jin, however, proved to be too strong for Kiani as the South Korean won both rounds for the gold, though Kiani's silver still meant an Olympic milestone for Iran's female athletes, who left the sporting extravaganza with more than one medal.



Iranian girls Nahid Kiani (top) and Mobina Ne'matzadeh pose with their taekwondo medals at the Paris Olympics.