

'Untimely injury' 'lapse of concentration' cost Iranian wrestlers Olympic gold, freestyle coach Kaveh says

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Since Gholamreza Takhti and Nasser Givvehchi won a couple of freestyle silvers and Mahmoud Mollaqassemi, Abdollah Mojtavavi, and Tofiq Jahanbakht won triple bronzes in Helsinki 1952, wrestling has been the most prolific sporting event for Iran in the history of the Olympics.

Of the 88 medals won by the Iranian athletes at different editions of the modern Games, wrestlers take credit for 55, with 13 of the 27 golds clinched on the two-color circle mat.

Takhti and fellow-wrestling legends Abdollah Movahed and 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 Geraei all left the Games with the ultimate prize over the past three decades.

The Iranian sport apparatus had a superb display by the Greco-Roman and freestyle participants to thank for a most productive Olympic campaign in London 2012, while the wrestling competitions delivered four out of the seven medals for the country in Tokyo three years ago.

Following a quiet first week at the recently-finished Paris Games, all Iranians' eyes were on the wrestling competitions at the French capital's Grand Palais Éphémère, where the Greco-Roman team kicked off the country's realistic quest for Olympic glory.

Led by head coach Hassan Rangraz, the six-man squad

rose up to the occasion as Saeid Esmaeili (67kg) and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg) notched up sensational gold medals, while Alireza Mohammadi (87kg) won a precious silver in only his second major senior event.

Amin Mirzazadeh, meanwhile, had to settle for the super-heavyweight bronze following a last-eight defeat against Cuban great Mijaín López, who went on to grab a record fifth Olympic gold.

The story, however, was a bit different in the freestyle contests, as the final outcome for the Iranian team was met with mixed receptions among wrestling fans and pundits in the country.

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Yazdani's quest for a coveted second Olympic gold, one that would have seen him become the most-decorated Iranian in the history of the Games, ended in vain following a 7-1 loss to Bulgaria's Magomed Ramazanov in the 86kg final – during which the wrestling sensation struggled with a recurring shoulder injury from the get-go, calling for treatment on several occasions throughout the six minutes of action.

Amirhossein Zare', meanwhile, widely regarded as the favorite for the 125kg gold in the buildup to the event, came short against familiar Georgian foe Geno Petriashvili in a thrilling final.

Elsewhere, Rahman Amouzad, who finished fifth in last year's World Championships, seemed to be back to his ruthless form in Paris as he crushed two reigning world champions in American Zain Retherford and Hungari-

an Ismail Musukaev, as well as European gold medalist Islam Dudaev of Albania to reach the 65kg final, though he was the third Iranian to suffer a final loss – stunned 10-3 by low-profile Japanese Kotaro Kiyooka.

Having convinced the Iranian coaching staff to pick him over two-time world champion Kamran Qasempour for the 97kg slot, young prodigy Amir-Ali Azarpira was the surprise Iranian medalist in Paris, bouncing back from a first-round loss to eventual gold medalist Akhmed Tazhudinov to beat American great Kyle Snyder for the 97kg bronze.

Younes Emami was the sole Iranian freestyle wrestler to leave the Games empty-handed following a technical-fall defeat against American Kyle Dake in the 74kg quarterfinals.

The Iranian freestyle head coach Mohsen Kaveh stepped down from his role last week, only eight months after being appointed to the job, and Dabir, the head of the Iranian Wrestling Federation, was quick to replace him by Pejman Dorostkar, from whom Kaveh had taken over last December.

Clearly frustrated by somewhat unfair criticism he received upon returning from the Olympics, Kaveh believes the Iranian freestyle squad had a decent campaign in Paris, though there would have been more jubilation in the medal haul, had it not been for an untimely injury blow and uncharacteristic errors in the final showdowns.

The following is what Kaveh had to say in an exclusive interview with Iran Daily two days before confirming the end of his short spell in charge of the national team.

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Iranian wrestler Amirhossein Zare' (red) and Georgian Geno Petriashvili react after the freestyle 125kg final at the Paris Olympics on Aug. 10, 2024.
● IAWF



Iran's Amir-Ali Azarpira (red) is seen after the victory over American Kyle Snyder in the 97kg bronze-medal contest at the Paris Olympics on Aug. 11, 2024.
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IRAN DAILY: What do you make of each Iranian wrestler's display at the Paris Olympics?

Kaveh: The Olympic Games have been full of shock results over the years. That is why we worked hard in the training sessions to make sure the wrestlers would have the right mindset to deal with any unexpected incident coming their way in Paris.

I think the freestyle team had a relatively decent campaign, though I'll have to admit the final outcome could have been much better. Some pundits believe all five members of the squad were good enough to be among the gold hopefuls in their weight classes.

I'm sure Hassan Yazdani would have easily won the 86kg gold if it wasn't for his dislocated shoulder in the final. He truly showed great courage and determination to continue with one arm against the Bulgarian opponent and set an example for the younger generation of the Iranian wrestlers.

I also expected Amirhossein Zare' to win the 125kg gold but he simply had the worst day of his entire career in the final, not to mention the referees favored his opponent. Before the decisive four-point-er in the first period, Petriashvili should have been cautioned and given away a point for repeatedly hitting Amirhossein in the face. He then did everything to interrupt the bout when he ran out of steam in the second period. The whole course of the final would have changed if the refs had acted by the rules and punished the Georgian.

Rahman Amouzad and Amir-Ali Azarpira also produced some brilliant performances. Rahman was superb in the 65kg contests, though his Japanese opponent truly deserved the final victory. I knew Kiyooka's style would make him the toughest opponent in the 65kg class and when he took Rahman down, he managed to score eight points through successive leg laces in the space of 20 to 25 seconds. Rahman did a great job to claim emphatic victories over two world champions and a European gold medalist on his way to the final showpiece.

Azarpira, meanwhile, established himself as top contender in the 97kg class. He deserved to beat Tazhudinov in his first bout but couldn't control the final 40 seconds, though he was still superb to bounce back and overcome American Kyle Snyder in the bronze-medal contest.

In the case of Younes Emami, I think he had a tough job on his hand in the 74kg class, which featured seven to eight world-class wrestlers.

Let's not forget Younes beat Italian [two-time world champion] Frank Chamizo, who had been undefeated against the Iranians, in the first round and the scoreline could have been different against Kyle Dake if had a different approach in the first 60 seconds of the bout. Younes should realize that much more work needs to be done if he is to stand on the top podium in

the future events.

Speaking of Emami, Alireza Dabir, the head of the federation, recently said he failed to live up to the high expectations in Paris and perhaps Iran should be looking for another 74kg wrestler in the upcoming tour-

naments. Do you agree with that?

I still believe Younes is the best 74kg wrestler in the country, though young talents have been making significant progress. Ali Rezaei, for instance, is a member of the Iranian under-20 squad and had a great campaign in June's Ranking Series event in Budapest and was only beaten by Uzbekistan's Razambek Zhamalov, who went on to win the Olympic gold. Fariborz Babaei and Erfan Elahi are also among the rising stars of the class, though they will have to work hard to find the chance in the major international tournaments. Competitive sports are all about a number of contenders battling for one single position.

