

Weightlifting World Championships: Iranians in the mix to capitalize on Talakhadze's absence

Sports Desk

Lasha Talakhadze's decision to skip next month's IWF World Championships means weightlifting fans could be treated to the tightest race for the superheavyweight crown in years.

A triple world-record holder in the men's +109kg weight class, the Georgian sensation picked up a milestone third successive Olympic gold in August, in what was deemed as an average campaign by his standards.

Clearly far from his dominant form in Paris, Talakhadze finished second to Bahrain's Gor Minasyan in the snatch event, and then did just enough to top the clean & jerk contest with 255kg and secure the ultimate prize with 470kg in total – 18 kilograms shy of the Games record he had set in Tokyo three years ago.

With Talakhadze out of the picture, a handful of top contenders will now be looking to make the most of his absence when the world event gets underway in Manama on December 4.

Armenian Varazdat Lalayan, who took the silver in Paris, will be the favorite to finish atop the podium in the Bahraini capital, and become the first weightlifter other than the Georgian giant to win the world superheavyweight gold since Russian Ruslan Albegov did in 2014.

A winner of two silvers and a bronze in the previous three editions of the World Championships, Lalayan has registered a highest entry record of 460kg



– alongside the host's Minasyan – for the upcoming competitions. Minasyan is also tipped for success in Manama, having beaten Talakhadze and Lalayan to the top spot of the snatch contest in Paris by one kilogram before eventually settling for the bronze.

Simon Martirosyan, also from Armenia, was absent in Paris but has registered a tally of 450kg – third-highest in the 25-man entry list – and will be eager to add

the +109kg glory to his double world titles in lower weight divisions.

Iranian trio

Iranian Ali Davoudi, who stood runner-up to Talakhadze in the Tokyo Olympics but missed out on the podium in Paris, is also in the mix, though he will have to improve on his entry record of 390kg to win a second world medal following his clean & jerk bronze in Riyadh last year.

Davoudi overcame 205kg in the Olympic snatch event, before starting his favorite C&J campaign with a 242kg lift. A successful 257kg effort would have seen the Iranian win the bronze in Paris, but two failed attempts saw Davoudi finish fourth with 447kg.

Iran has also named Ayat Sharifi and former world junior champion Alireza Yousefi in the entry list but only of them will join Davoudi in representing the

country in the +109kg class.

Sharifi has submitted the same weight as Davoudi for entry – 10 kilograms more than Yousefi's record.

Yousefi, however, is confident of making an impressive breakthrough in Manama, should he be given the opportunity to participate.

Yousefi, who established a new world junior C&J record of 246kg to win the 2023 Asian seniors' silver behind Minasyan,



Iran's Alireza Davoudi (c) is seen alongside other superheavyweight weightlifters ahead of the men's +102kg contests in the Paris Olympics on Aug. 10, 2024.

● ALIREZA SOTAKBAR/ISNA

said in an interview with Mehr News Agency last week that he has already set his sights on bettering Talakhadze's 267kg-mark in the category in the Bahraini capital.

North Korea 'not a pushover', Iran's Ezzatollahi warns ahead of World Cup qualifier

Sports Desk

Saeid Ezzatollahi warned his Iranian teammates they will have to play with "full intensity" when they face North Korea in a World Cup qualifier in Vientiane, Laos, today.

Iran will step onto the pitch at the Lao National Stadium KM16 – a neutral venue for North Korea's home fixtures – on the back of three wins and a draw, sitting atop Group A of the Asian qualifiers with 10 points. Amir Qalenoee's men hammered Asian Cup champion 4-1 last time out in October to overtake Uzbekistan on top of the six-team table, while North Korea fell to a 1-0 away defeat against the Kyrgyz Republic and is bottom of the standings with two points.

Ezzatollahi, however, believes Team Melli will still need to deliver "a performance worthy of Iranian football" to come out on top against today's opponent.

"We know North Korea is not going to be a pushover at all, as they have proved to be a tough opponent in their previous

games in the group," Shabab Al Ahli midfielder said in a pre-match press conference on Wednesday.

"The head coach told us to forget all about the Qatar victory when we began preparation for this game. We will have to play with full intensity for the whole 90 minutes to achieve what we want.

"Nothing is predictable in football, but we have been working hard to peak our physical and mental form. We can't afford to get caught off guard by North

Korea."

Today's game will be followed by a visit to Bishkek for Iran to take on Kyrgyzstan at the Dolen Omurzakov Stadium on Tuesday.

Iran is six points clear of third-place UAE in the group, and with a top-two finish sealing direct qualification for the 2026 finals, maximum points in the double-header will see Qalenoee's men all but secure a place in the showpiece in the United States, Mexico, and Canada.



● FFIRI

Australia bracing for 'new coach bounce' against Saudi Arabia

REUTERS – Australia will hope the much-travelled Herve Renard will not wield his old magic on his return to the Saudi Arabia dugout when the teams clash in a crunch World Cup qualifier at Melbourne Rectangular Stadium today. While Renard was the man in charge during the Saudis' stunning win over eventual champions Argentina at the 2022 World Cup, he is viewed darkly in Australia for torpedoing the Socceroos' hopes of automatic qualification for Qatar.

A 0-0 draw in Sydney in 2021 and a 1-0 home win over Australia the following year sent Graham Arnold's team down the perilous playoffs route to earn their ticket to Qatar.

Australian soccer had a measure of revenge last year when the Matildas knocked Renard's France out of the Women's World Cup quarter-finals via a penalty shootout.

With Australia second in Group C, locked on five points with the Saudis and Bahrain but ahead of both on goal difference, today's match could go a long way to deciding which teams qualify directly for the 2026 finals in North America. Japan are five points clear at the top and in the box seat to claim one of the group's two automatic



● OZAN KOSE/AFP

tickets to the global showpiece. Australia have enjoyed their own "new coach bounce" under Tony Popovic, who put the Socceroos' qualifying campaign back on track with a 3-1 win over China and a gutsy 1-1 draw in Japan in the last window.

Prior to that, Australia had suffered a rare home loss to Bahrain and were held 0-0 by Indonesia, prompting Arnold to quit after a storm of criticism.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, are looking to right the ship after parting ways with Italian Roberto Mancini following a 2-0 defeat by Japan and 0-0 draw with Bahrain. Renard will be familiar with much of the squad he has inherited and can hope for better relations with senior players following reports of

discord under Mancini. Given the Green Falcons' mostly poor record on the road and their recent scoring woes, Renard and his players will likely be content to eke out a draw against Australia before heading to Indonesia next Tuesday.

Australia defender Cameron Burgess told reporters on Wednesday they were preparing for the unexpected.

"It could be some different things thrown at us," he added. "They've got a new manager and a different way of playing. "They've had that manager before so they'll be familiar with each other.

"So, yeah, there's things to look at, and obviously, more importantly, what we can do to hurt them."