

# Yousefi offers ray of hope for rejuvenated Iranian weightlifting

## Sports Desk

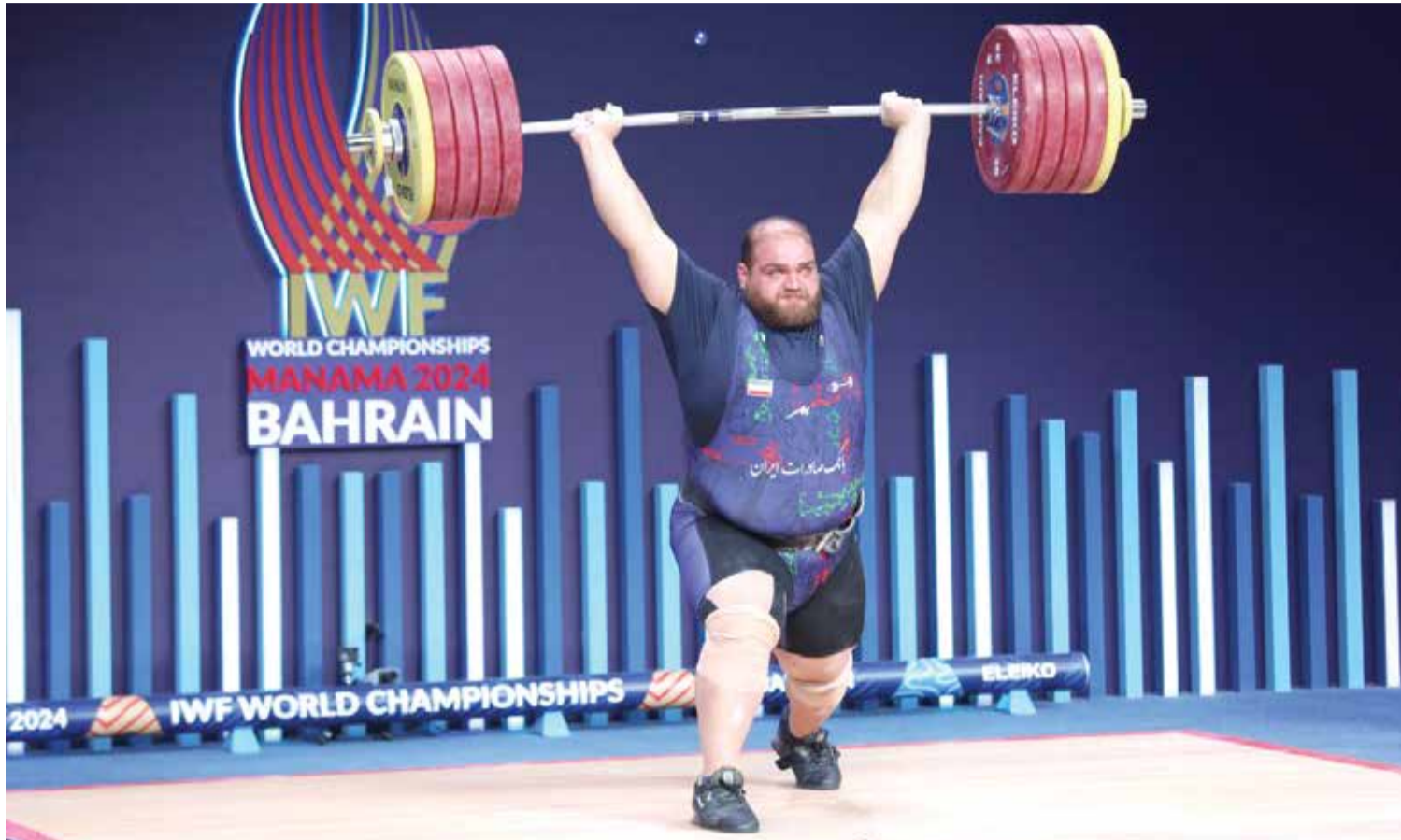
Iran's campaign at the recently-finished IWF World Championships was hardly deemed as prolific, but there were still some positives to cheer about for the country's revitalized men's squad.

Of the men's 30 medals up for grabs in Manama, Iranian men accounted for 10, with superheavyweight prodigy Alireza Yousefi spearheading the haul with a gold and a bronze on the final day, as head coach Navvab Nasirshahal's team collected 560 points to finish runner-up to China.

The race for the +109kg glory was always going to be wide open in the absence of reigning three-time Olympic champion Lasha Talakhadze, with Armenian Varazdat Lalayan and the host's Gor Minasyan – silver and bronze winners in the Paris Games – as well as Iranian Ali Davoudi the favorite trio to end the Georgian sensation's nine-year dominance in the weight class.

Lalayan completed all three attempts to come out on top in the snatch contest with a best lift of 215kg, leading the Bahraini silver medalist by 10 kilograms, while Davoudi settled for the bronze with 206kg.

Yousefi missed out on the snatch podium after registering 194kg in his third



Iran's Alireza Yousefi makes a clean & jerk lift in the men's +109kg contest of the IWF World Championships in Manama, Bahrain, on December 15, 2024.  
● IWFIR

The final-day triumphs came after Ali A'alipour, Alireza Moeini, and Mahdi Karami had collected five medals for Iran earlier in the competition.

A'alipour and Moeini won three medals – the snatch silver plus the C&J and total bronzes – between them in the 96kg weight class, with Karami taking the snatch and total bronzes of the 109kg contests.

With an average age of 22 years and 10 months, the 10-man squad, which also included teenagers Alireza Nassiri, Abolfazl Zare', and Ariya Paydar, was the youngest Iranian team to ever finish on the world podium, much to the delight of Nasirshahal.

"This is one of the youngest squads in the history of the Iranian weightlifting and has much more room for improvement. All the team members put in their best effort during six months of training. I think the runner-up spot was a decent outcome for them, given the Iranian team had won only a couple of medals last year," said the head coach.

attempt to stand fifth – next to Iraq's world junior record holder Ali Ammar Rubaiawi – but went on to steal the show in the clean & jerk event.

The two-time world junior champion began his campaign with a 248kg attempt and made a quick work of securing the C&J

gold with a second effort of 258kg.

A sensational 262kg lift saw the 21-year-old tally 456kg for the total bronze, while Davoudi finished on 206-253-459 to add the C&J and total silvers to his snatch bronze, thanks to a new personal total high.

"When I first joined the national team's training camp my personal records were 170kg and 220kg but I had to work hard for four months with an injured knee, though I was blessed with coaching staff's great support throughout that period. I can't still believe I did such a great job

here," Yousefi said, though he acknowledged he would still need to "improve my snatch performance."

"I'll keep training hard as I'm keen on overtaking all my rivals in the future competitions and ultimately succeed in the Olympics," added the Iranian young gun.

Lalayan, meanwhile, took the C&J bronze before grabbing a second gold in the Bahraini capital with a 215-252-467 record – a first world superheavyweight champion other than Talakhadze since Russian Ruslan Albigov made a clean sweep of triple golds in 2014.

## FIFA Men's World Ranking:

### Iran remains 18th, finishes on all-time yearend high

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The Iranian national football team retained its 18th spot in the latest FIFA Men's World Ranking, released on Thursday. December's ranking marked an all-time best finish in the year-end list for Team Melli, which had moved up by one spot to reach its highest spot in 19 years in the monthly ranking in November.

Amir Qalenoeei's men, however, remained second to Japan among the Asian teams as the Blue Samurai stood in the 15th place.

Following the top two in the list of AFC's member states are South Korea (23rd), Australia (26th), and Qatar (48th).

Iran clinched 15 victories, in-

cluding a shootout win against Syria in the AFC Asian Cup last 16, in 18 games in the calendar year, starting with back-to-back friendly wins against Burkina Faso (2-1) and Indonesia (5-1) in January.

Team Melli then went on to beat Palestine (4-1), Hong Kong (1-0), and the United Arab Emirates (2-1) to win the Asian Cup group in Qatar, before reaching the last eight at the expense of Syria.

The year's most memorable triumph for Iran came in the Asian Cup quarterfinals, where Qalenoeei's side came from behind to defeat Japan 2-1, thanks to Alireza Jahanbakhsh's spot-kick in stoppage time.

Iran still failed to end a 48-year title drought in the flagship

continental event, suffering a 3-2 defeat against ultimate champion Qatar in the semifinals – Iran's sole loss in 2024.

On return to World Cup qualifiers, the Asian powerhouse defeated Turkmenistan twice and walked away with a 4-2 win at Hong Kong before a goalless home draw against Uzbekistan secured the top spot in the preliminary group.

Team Melli began the third round of the qualifiers with a shaky 1-0 home victory over Kyrgyzstan in September and defeated the UAE by one goal in Al Ain, but shared the spoils with Uzbekistan in a second goalless encounter in four months, this time in Tashkent. Iran took revenge for the Asian Cup setback by hammering Qa-

tar 4-1 in the neutral venue of Dubai's Al Rashid Stadium in October, gaining momentum in its qualification campaign.

In the latest international break in November, Iran defeated North Korea 3-2 in Laos and went on to beat Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek by the same scoreline to maintain its hold on the top spot in Group A of the World Cup Asian qualifiers with 16 points – three clear of second-placed Uzbekistan and six above the UAE – with four games to spare.

With the top two of the group progressing to the World Cup finals, Team Melli can clinch a place in the 2026 showdown in North America when taking on the UAE and Uzbekistan in late March.



● FFIRI



● JED JACOBSON/AP

## James sets new NBA record in Lakers win

**BBC** – LeBron James broke the record for the most minutes played in NBA history as he helped the Los Angeles Lakers beat the Sacramento Kings.

The 39-year-old American surpassed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar when he completed his 57,447th minute on court in the 113-100 victory on Friday.

James, who eclipsed Abdul-Jabbar for the NBA all-time scoring record earlier this year, scored 19 points while teammate Austin Reaves led with 25 points. "It's just a commitment to the craft and to the passion and love I have for the

game," said James.

"I don't take much time in the off-season, a little bit more time now."

Elsewhere, Brooklyn Nets centre Nic Claxton was ejected from the court for throwing a ball into the crowd during his side's 101-94 win over the Toronto Raptors.

Claxton showed his frustration after being fouled on his way to the basket before being escorted off court by officials after attempting to throw a cushion. Meanwhile, Zach LaVine scored a season-high 36 points as he guided

the Chicago Bulls to a 117-108 win over defending champions the Boston Celtics.

LaVine sunk six three-pointers while adding six rebounds and four assists as the Bulls recorded their third straight victory.

French star Victor Wembanyama scored 42 points to help the San Antonio Spurs to a 133-126 overtime triumph over the Atlanta Hawks, while Shai Gilgeous-Alexander's 35 points led Oklahoma City Thunder to a 105-99 win over Orlando Magic.