

Freestyle Wrestling National Championships: Contenders emerge for place in Iranian squad

Sports Desk

The opening phase of the Iranian trials for the World Championships came to an end with the conclusion of the Freestyle Wrestling National Championships on Friday, where 10 wrestlers made their case for a place in the September event in Zagreb, Croatia.

Former world junior and under-23 bronze medalist Ahmad Mohammadnejad Javan will be looking to go all they way to punch his ticket for the Croatian capital after walking away with the ultimate prize in the 61kg contests, thanks to a 4-2 victory over Ali Qolizadegan in the final. Ebrahim Elahi, a world under-17 gold medalist in 2022, was in a 70kg league of his own, conceding a single point in five bouts en route to the final before a 6-1 win against Ali-Akbar Fazli for the top spot.

Fariborz Babaei stole the show in the 79kg event, defeating former world junior champion Erfan Elahi 3-2 in the final showpiece.

Mohammad-Mobin Azimi, a world U23 gold medalist in 2023, introduced himself as a top contender for the national



Ebrahim Elahi (blue) is in action against Ali-Akbar Fazli in the 70kg final at the Freestyle Wrestling National Championships in Gorgan, Iran, on January 3, 2025. **FARSHAD BANDANI/IAWF**

team berth following his technical-superiority win against Fazel Pour-Rajab the 92kg showdown. The 125kg final saw Mahdi Hashemi beat Morteza Jan-Mohammadzadeh 6-2 for the national

gold, though it is hard to imagine anyone other than two-time world champion and Olympic silver winner Amirhossein Zare' as the Iranian super-heavyweight in Zagreb.

Friday's results came after Mojtaba Goleij had showcased his credentials for a shot at world 97kg glory on the preceding night in Gorgan. A world bronze winner in 2021,

Goleij defeated reigning Asian under-20 champion Abolfazl Babalou 6-0 in the final to throw down the gauntlet to Olympic bronze medalist Amirali Azarpira and two-time

world 92kg champion Kamran Qasempour, who is keen on competing in an Olympic weight class ahead of the Los Angeles Games in three years' time. Hadi Rezaei looked to be the favorite for the 57kg title after a massive 7-3 victory over former world silver medalist Alireza Sarlak in the semifinals, but ultimately suffered a 7-1 loss to 20-year-old Milad Valizadeh in the final. Yassin Rezaei capped off his dominant 65kg campaign with a 13-2 win against Dariush Hazratqolizadeh in the final – a fifth victory by technical superiority for the 2023 Asian bronze winner in as many bouts. Hossein Abouzari finished atop the podium in the 74kg class, courtesy of a 7-2 win against Hossein Mohammad-Aqaei, while the 86kg showdown saw Omidreza Soheili come out victorious (10-2) in emphatic fashion against Mohammad-Hossein Norouzi.

Esteghlal considering a move for ex-Brighton winger Tau

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Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal is reportedly weighing up a move for South African winger Percy Tau, with head coach Pitso Mosimane keen on reuniting with his compatriot in the Iranian top flight. A former player of Brighton & Hove Albion and Belgian Pro League champion in 2020 with Club Brugge, Tau, 30, left the Premier League club in 2021 to join Egyptian giant Al Ahly, where he won 11 major trophies, including back-to-back CAF Champions League titles over the past two seasons. Having made his senior club debut at Mamelodi Sundowns in his home country under Mosimane, Tau won double South African league titles as well as the silverware in the African elite clubs' competition in 2016 before leaving the continent for the English top flight.

His time in Brighton was hardly deemed a success as he only made three league appearances for the Seagulls, but still enjoyed prolific loan spells with Union SG, Club Brugge, RSC Anderlecht, bagging 21 goals and 22 assists in 79 games with the Belgian clubs.

On his return to African football, Tae rejoined Mosimane in Al Ahly, contributing with 30 goals and 14 assists in 126 outings for the Egyptian Red Devils – including three Champions League strikes this season. Tehran-based website Varzesh3, citing a report in korabia.net, wrote on Friday that Mosimane has made contact with his former club Al Ahly in recent days to find out about Tau's situation ahead of an official approach by the Tehran Blues. Capped 46 times for the national team since making his debut in

2015, Tau has 15 goals under his belt in the Bafana Bafana colors, finishing third in the Africa Cup of Nations last January, thanks to a shootout victory over DR Congo in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

A disappointing campaign has seen Esteghlal sit 10th in the Iranian league's 16-team table with 18 points – 14 adrift of Tractor on top – and Mosimane, who took over from ex-coach Javad Nekounam in October, will be eager to turn the Blues' fortune around after the mid-season break.

Mosimane's side is eighth – the last knockout spot – in the West Zone standings of the AFC Champions League Elite with five points and remains in contention for a place in the quarterfinals ahead of the final two games of the group phase against Al Shorta and Al Rayyan in February.



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No hugs or kisses from Conceicao for Milan players despite Juve win

REUTERS – AC Milan manager Sergio Conceicao celebrated an Italian Super Cup semi-final success over Juventus in his first game in charge on Friday, but the new boss said he is not there to make friends. Milan went in at the break a goal down, and it took a stern halftime talking-to from Conceicao to spark them into action, and their 2-1 victory set up a derby decider with Inter Milan on Monday. "After the first 45 minutes, in the locker room I didn't give kisses, in fact I got a little angry because the team didn't do the things we had

prepared," Conceicao told Mediaset. "This is a humble group, sometimes they lack a bit of ruthlessness to get to something more but over time we will get there." Conceicao replaced the sacked Paulo Fonseca on Monday, with Milan eighth in the Serie A standings, and the new manager gave a hint of what the players can expect as he aims to turn things around at the club. "I'm not a very nice person, I don't like to give hugs to players, I'm more often angry but a group needs all this," Conceicao said.

"Ours is a quality group, I am very happy with them because they have also accepted a coach who does not smile so much. "I'm not here to make friends, but to win." Conceicao saved his hugs for his son Francisco at the final whistle, after the Juventus winger had been named in the starting side but was forced to withdraw after picking up an injury in the warm-up. "It was the end of a game, I was happier because I won the game and he was sadder but it's part of life," Conceicao said.

