

UWW Ranking Series:

Young guns to spearhead Iranian freestyle squad in Zagreb Open

Sports Desk

The Iranian freestyle wrestling team will feature some promising young talent at the Zagreb Open, kicking off in the Croatian capital on Wednesday.

Superheavyweight prodigy Amirreza Ma'soumi will headline the Iranian 16-man squad in the World Ranking Series season opener.

The 20-year-old Iranian – the reigning world junior and under-23 champion – is the clear favorite in the 125kg weight class, though he could still face competition from Georgian Solomon Manashvili, and American duo Hayden Zillmer and Mason Parris for the ultimate prize.

Ahoura Khateri will be looking to build on his world under-17 title in 2023 when making his senior debut in the 57kg contests, where all eyes will be on American Spencer Lee and India's Aman Sehrawat – Olympic silver and bronze medalists in Paris last August. Former world junior bronze winner Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan will be joined by fellow-Iranians Ebrahim Khari – world U23 bronze medalist last year – and Reza Mo'meni in the 61kg event, with world U20 champion Ali Korramdel, Abbas Ebrahimzadeh – also a bronze medalist in last year's U23 Worlds – and Yasin Rezei vying for success in the 65kg class.

Former world and Asian under-17 champion Sina Khalili will be the Iranian prodigy to watch in the 70kg event. The 18-year-old wrestler stole the headlines in December's Iranian Premier League final by outclassing two-time world silver winner Amir-Mohammad Yazdani 14-5, and will be eager to continue his impressive form of late



Iranian wrestler Sina Khalili (blue singlet), pictured in a training session in Tehran, will represent the country in the freestyle 70kg contests at the Zagreb Open.
 ● IAWF

in Zagreb, where he will be joined by compatriot Ebrahim Elahi – also an ex-gold winner in the U17 Worlds – in the weight class.

Ali Rezaei (74kg) and Mahdi Yousefi (79kg) won the world U20 and U23 titles re-

spectively last year and will be looking to keep up the momentum at their senior level, while world U20 bronze medalist Abolfazl Rahmani will compete in the 86kg competitions.

High-profile wrestlers will be lined up

for the 92kg glory in Zagreb, including American Aaron Brooks – an 86kg bronze winner at the Paris Olympics – and Georgian world silver medalist Miriani Maisuradze, with Iranian duo Amirhossein Firouzpour – gold med-

alist in the 2024 Asian Championships – and former world U20 champion Mohammad-Mobin Azimi also in the fray.

Asian under-20 champion Abolfazl Babalou will represent the country in the 97kg event, which will also see American great Kyle Snyder return to Zagreb after being stunned by Iranian Amir-Ali Azarpira in last year's final.

Geraei with a point to prove

The freestyle event will be followed by the women's contests, before the Greco-Roman competitions get underway on Friday.

Tokyo Olympic champion Mohammadreza Geraei will be desperate to make up for his first-round setback in last year's World Championships, when taking part in the 72kg contests alongside domestic rivals Danial Sohrabi and Iman Mohammadi.

Mahdi Ahadi (55kg), Pouya Nasserpour (60kg), Mohammad Keshkar and world under-23 bronze medalist Erfan Jarkani (63kg), Mohammadreza Gholami and world U20 champion Ahmadreza Mohsennejad (67kg), Amin Kavianinejad, Amir Abdi, and Ali Oskou (77kg), Gholamreza Farrokhi (82kg), four-time Asian gold medalist Nasser Alizadeh (87kg), Hamidreza Badkan and Shayan Habibzare' (97kg), as well as former world champion Ali-Akbar Yousefi (130kg) complete the Iranian GR squad in Zagreb.

Ex-Spanish football chief Rubiales stands trial over World Cup kiss

REUTERS – Spanish women's World Cup winner Jenni Hermoso confronted former football federation boss Luis Rubiales at his trial on Monday, saying she did not agree to the kiss that triggered a national backlash against sexism in sport.

"I knew I was being kissed by my boss and that should not happen in any social or work environment," she said of the encounter seen live by millions around the world at the 2023 World Cup awards ceremony in Australia.

"I think it was a moment that tainted one of the happiest days of my life," added the 34-year-old forward as Rubiales sat nearby at Madrid's High Court taking notes.

Rubiales, 47, is accused of sexual assault and then attempting to coerce Hermoso – with the help of three other men – into declaring that the kiss had been consensual. Though he apologised for being over effusive in a moment of national triumph, Rubiales denies those criminal charges and has cast himself as



Luis Rubiales, the former head of the Spanish Football Federation, heads to the court for day one of his trial in Madrid, Spain, on February 3, 2025.
 ● CHEMA MOYA/REUTERS

the victim of a witch hunt. Asked by a prosecutor at Madrid's High Court if she had agreed to the kiss, Hermoso replied: "Never." "I didn't hear or understand anything," she added, describing the moment. "The next thing he did was to grab me by the ears and kiss me on the mouth."

Rubiales has said it was consensual and scoffed at critics in the aftermath, but Hermoso said she felt a victim of aggression and

had pressure put on her to sign a statement exonerating him, which she said she refused to do. The ensuing scandal eclipsed Spain's first women's World Cup victory and proved a tipping point for efforts by Spain's female players to expose sexism and achieve parity with male counterparts.

The trial will see several of Hermoso's teammates, including Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Pute-

llas, testify.

Rubiales has asked his daughters to take the stand.

He and his co-defendants – former women's national team coach Jorge Vilda, former Spanish Football Federation (RFEF) sporting director Albert Luque and the RFEF's former head of marketing Ruben Rivera – will testify on or after Feb. 12 once the court has interviewed the rest of the witnesses.

"I trust in justice. I am calm," Vilda said as he arrived.

The prosecution is seeking 2-1/2 years' prison for Rubiales, although in Spain those handed sentences under two years can usually escape incarceration by paying damages instead if they do not have prior convictions.

The scandal sparked a strike by Hermoso's teammates and saw several heads roll at the federation, with both Rubiales and his right-hand man and successor being ousted and a woman appointed to coach the women's team for the first time.

Sinner's red-hot form gives Italian the edge in best player debate, Alcaraz says

REUTERS – Carlos Alcaraz said he has no doubt that top-ranked Jannik Sinner is the best player in the world on current form as the two young players continue to lay the foundations for an epic rivalry.

Alcaraz, the 21-year-old world number three, won the French Open and Wimbledon titles last year, splitting the four Grand Slam tournaments with 23-year-old Sinner.

The Spaniard also improved his head-to-head record with the Italian to 6-4, beating Sinner three times in as many meetings.

Sinner, meanwhile, won 73 of his 79 matches last year including the U.S. Open and the Australian Open, which he successfully defended at Melbourne Park last month. "Jannik is the best right now," Alcaraz told reporters in Rotterdam on Sunday. "He has lost only four or five matches in the past year, so it's crazy. I know people say who's better out of us. They say Jannik is better or some say me. It's all discussion. "But for me, I think for a



● HAMAD I MOHAMMED/REUTERS

tennis player, we have to face Jannik and he's winning everything. He's focused every time, so I think he's the best. Every tournament he plays, he makes the final or lifts the trophy." Alcaraz returns to action in Rotterdam after his quarter-final loss to 24-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic at the Australian Open ended his bid to become the youngest player to capture all four major titles.

"I don't feel that it was a missed opportunity against Novak," added Alcaraz, who won the U.S. Open in 2022. "I really wanted to win the tournament and felt I was able to, but Novak played an unbelievable match. Facing Novak in the quarter-finals at a Grand Slam is the worst thing. "It was a pretty good match. I've tried to take the good things about that match and will look ahead now."