

UWW Ranking Series:

Yousefi wins Zagreb Open gold,
enters the fray for Iran's world spot

Sports Desk

Superheavyweight wrestler Ali-Akbar Yousefi made his return to international scene in style by cruising to the Greco-Roman 130kg crown at the Zagreb Open on Sunday.

A world champion in 2021, Yousefi began his emphatic run with a 10-1 rout of Russian Sergey Semenov, who stunned Turkish great Riza Kayaalp for the European title last year, and then claimed comfortable victories over Hungary's Koppany Laszlo (6-1) and Sarkhan Mammadov (9-1) of Azerbaijan for a place in the final showpiece against Finland's Konsta Mäenpää. Yousefi, whose last international appearance had come in the 2023 Budapest Ranking Series, rounded off his campaign with a 9-1 triumph over the Finnish wrestler, throwing down the gauntlet to reigning world champion and Olympic bronze medalist Amin Mirzazadeh and world U23 gold medalist Fardin Hedayati for the Iranian spot in September's World Championships in the Croatian capital. Gholamreza Farrokhi was also among the Iranian gold medalists at the first Ranking Series of the sea-



Iran's Ali-Akbar Yousefi (L), who went on to win the gold medal, is seen in action against Sarkhan Mammadov of Azerbaijan in the Greco-Roman 130kg semifinals at the Zagreb Open on February 9, 2025.

● UWW

son, thanks to a 6-2 win against Hungarian world silver winner Erik Szilvassy in the 82kg showdown. There were, however, disappointing finishes for the Iranian duo Mohammadreza Gerai and Danial Sohrabi in the 72kg contests.

Ex-Olympic champion and three-time world medalist Gerai fell to a loss on criteria to Hungarian teenager Levente Levai in the semifinals and then finished his campaign empty-handed after an injury ruled him out of the third-place bout

against Ruslan Nurullayev of Azerbaijan. Sohrabi, meanwhile, suffered a 4-3 defeat against 19-year-old Levai and settled for the silver. Mahdi Ahadi also left the Croatian capital with a silver medal following a 7-0 defeat

against Azerbaijan's Elmira Aliyev in the 55kg final. Pouya Naserpour added a bronze medal to Iran's Greco-Roman haul on the final day of the competitions, bouncing back from a last-four setback against Serbia's Georgij Tibilov to

beat Azerbaijan's Huseyn Garibov by superiority (9-1) in the 60kg event. Mohammad-Mahdi Keshkhar had won a first Greco-Roman medal for Iran in Zagreb, taking a silver in the 63kg class. A total tally of double

golds, three silvers, and one bronze saw the Iranian squad finish atop the team table with 147 points – 13 clear of second-placed Azerbaijan – with Hungary in third on 119 points. The Greco-Roman triumph came after the Iranian 16-man team had collected four golds and silvers apiece to finish runner-up to the United States in the freestyle competitions earlier in the Arena Zagreb. Abbas Ebrahimzadeh (65kg), Amirhossein Firouzpour (92kg), and Amirreza Ma'soumi (125kg) walked away with the ultimate prize of their respective weight classes, while Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan came out on top against Ebrahim Khari in an all-Iranian 61kg final. Abolfazl Babalou was beaten by American great Kyle Snyder in the 97kg final, with young prodigies Sina Khalili (70kg) and Mahdi Yousefi (79kg) adding a couple of silvers to Iran's haul.

CAFA Women's Futsal Championship:

Iranian girls rout Uzbekistan in opener

Sports Desk

Iran got off to a dominant start in the 2025 CAFA Women's Futsal Championship in Tajikistan by thrashing Uzbekistan 9-0 on Sunday.

Zahra Kianimanesh put Iran in front with five minutes into the game at the Dushanbe Indoor Hall and her goal was the difference between the two sides at halftime. Roqayyeh Some'eh doubled Iran's lead 15 seconds after the restart before Maral Torkaman and Fatemeh

Hosseini bagged a brace apiece, with Mahtab Banaei, Nasimeh Gholami, and Fereshteh Karimi also on the scoresheet.

Turkmenistan and the Kyrgyz Republic shared the spoils in a 1-1 draw earlier in the day.

Iran's next game in the tournament, featuring five Central Asian countries in a round-robin format, will come against the Kyrgyz Republic on Wednesday.

The event is part of the Iranian girls' preparation for May's AFC Women's Futsal

Asian Cup, which will resume after a seven-year hiatus in China.

Chasing a third successive title in as many editions, Forouzan Soleimani's side will begin its campaign with a game against the Philippines on May 7, before squaring off against Vietnam and Hong Kong in Group B. The top three of the 12-team tournament will punch their tickets for the inaugural FIFA Futsal Women's World Cup – starting November 21 in the Philippines.

In other groups, the host

country is pitted against Uzbekistan, the Chinese Taipei, and Australia in Group A, with Japan – beaten by Iran in the previous two finals – and two-time bronze winner Thailand joined by Indonesia and Bahrain in Group C.



Iranian girls celebrate a goal during a 9-0 victory over Uzbekistan in the CAFA Women's Futsal Championship in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, on February 9, 2025.

● FFIRI

Slot defends Liverpool lineup
after shock FA Cup exit

THE GUARDIAN – Arne Slot defended his team selection after a weakened Liverpool lineup was turfed out of the FA Cup by Plymouth Argyle. Despite a shock 1-0 defeat against the Championship's bottom club, Slot argued that his decision to give senior players a rest would pay dividends later in the season. Slot made 10 changes from the win against Tottenham



Liverpool boss Arne Slot (L) reacts on the touchline during a defeat against Plymouth Argyle in the FA Cup in Plymouth, Britain, on February 9, 2025.

● ADAM DAVY/PA

on Thursday night, with a relatively inexperienced bench and players such as Mohamed Salah, Cody Gakpo and Virgil van Dijk left out of the squad entirely. "Most of the things we do, we do for a reason," Slot insisted. "We have many games to play. The ones who played today need game rhythm, for them to be ready in the upcoming months." The defeat "hurt", Slot admitted, but he was careful too to give appropriate praise to Plymouth. "They worked incredibly hard," Slot said. "There were one or two big chances, but I think if a team is working so hard and

throws themselves into any ball, maybe you deserve to be a bit lucky as well. The goalkeeper made one or two good saves in the end, but we hardly created anything at all." Slot also revealed that Curtis Jones, named on the bench, had declared himself unfit on the morning of the game. And he also offered sympathy for Isaac Mabaya, the substitute who was himself substituted on his Liverpool debut. "I had to take him off," Slot said. "He was already on a yellow. To be taken off after an hour is very disappointing for him, of course." Plymouth are still four points adrift of safety but if

they show this kind of defensive resolve they still have every chance. And for Miron Muslic, the Plymouth manager, "the biggest moment in my coaching career" came with a caveat. "So far," he said. "The biggest moment is yet to come, at the end of the season, when we stay up. This is what I feel, in my mind, in my soul. "We wanted to represent ourselves. To be organised, to be brave, to be full of intensity, to use this huge stage as an opportunity. We had to enjoy defending. And we did. To keep them away from the goal is a huge, huge task."