

## UWW Ranking Series:

## Iran lines up star-studded roster for Muhamet Malo event

## Sports Desk

World and Olympic champions will spearhead the Iranian wrestling squads when the Muhamet Malo Ranking Series tournament gets underway in Tirana, Albania, on February 26.

Mohammad-Hadi Saravi will make his first appearance since grabbing the Greco-Roman 97kg gold at the Paris Olympics last summer, with Iranian prodigy Saeid Esmaeili – a surprise gold winner in the Games – the favorite for the 67kg glory.

Having won the world 82kg title in Tirana last October, Mohammad-Ali Geraei will be back in the Albanian capital for the second Ranking Series event of the season, with Hungary's Erik Szilvassy and Georgian Gela Bolkvadze, who stood behind the Iranian on the world podium, promising a thrilling battle for the ultimate prize.

Reigning world champion and Olympic bronze medalist Amin Mirzazadeh will headline the 130kg draw.

His performance will play a decisive part in settling the three-way debate – also featuring former world champion Ali-Akbar Yousefi and world U23 gold medalist Fardin Hedayati – for the Iranian super-heavyweight spot in September's World Championships.

World and Olympic silver medalist Alireza Mohammadi will be eager to make up for his final defeat against Semen Novikov in Paris, should he take on the Bulgarian in the 87kg contests, with Danish Turpal Bi-



Iranian Greco-Roman wrestler Mohammad-Hadi Saravi, pictured in a training session in Tehran, will make his first appearance since winning the Olympic gold last summer at the upcoming Muhamet Malo Ranking Series event in Tirana, Albania.

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sultanov, who took the Olympic bronze, also in the mix.

Joining the five Iranians in the Greco-Roman squad are world silver medalist Pouya Dadmarz (55kg), world junior and under-23 champion Ali Ahmadi Vafa (60kg), two-time Asian silver medalist Mahdi Mohsennejad (63kg), Iman Moham-

madi (72kg), and Abolfazl Mohmadi (77kg). In the freestyle competitions, two Olympic silver medalists will be part of the Iranian nine-man team.

World superheavyweight champion Amirhossein Zare', who was beaten by Georgian Geno Petriashvili in the final showdown in Paris, will be the wrestler

to watch in the 125kg contests.

Givi Matcharashvili, also from Georgia, will be looking to throw down the gauntlet to the Iranian in his new weight class, having won the Olympic 97kg silver last year.

Meanwhile, Rahman Amouzad – runner-up to Japanese Kotaro Kiyooka in the

Games – will take part in the 65kg event, which will feature some high-profile contestants, including Russian two-time world U23 champion Ibragim Ibragimov, Turkish Ahmet Duman – a world 61kg silver winner last October – and home-favorite Islam Dudaev, who was beaten by Amouzad in Paris before grabbing a consolation bronze.

Two-time world 92kg champion Kamran Qasempour will be back in his favorite territory after missing out on the 97kg podium in the Wrestling Worlds less than five months ago.

Mojtab Goleij – a world bronze winner in 2021 – will be joined by 20-year-old Erfan Alizadeh in representing the country in the 97kg contests, though American great Kyle Snyder will be the ultimate favorite for the gold medal.

Iran will also be represented by two wrestlers in the 74kg class: 2021 world bronze winner Younes Emami and Hossein Abouzari, who will be looking to improve on his Ranking Series silver in the 2024 Zagreb Open.

Ali Moeini, a bronze medalist in last October's U23 Worlds, will compete in the 57kg contests alongside fellow-Iranian Hadi Rezaei.

## AFC U20 Asian Cup:

## Iran hit six past 10-man Yemen

AFC – Iran routed Yemen 6-0 on Sunday as Hossein Abdi's boys continued their perfect start to their Group C campaign at the AFC U20 Asian Cup in Shenzhen, China.

Yemen settled the quicker and issued a warning in the second minute when Anwar Al Turaiqi set Mohammed Al Awami free in the centre, only for the midfielder to send his long-range effort over the bar.

Al Awami again found space at the top of the box before pulling his shot wide four minutes later, while Adel Qasem came close for Yemen two minutes later as he tried to catch Iran keeper Arsha Shakouri with a looping shot. At the other end, Iran almost benefited from a chance in the 10th minute

when Mohammadhossein Sadeghi released a through ball for Reza Ghandipour, who set up Esmaeil Qolizadeh, only for Yemen keeper Osamah Mokref to intervene.

Yemen, however, found themselves in trouble in the 13th minute following Saeed Al Shaban's red card with Iran then attacking in numbers with Mohammad Dindar, Ghandipour and Mobin Dehghan threatening.

Iran's pressing play yielded the opener in the 26th minute after Abolfazl Zamani pounced on a loose ball at the top of the box before sending a stinging shot into the top left corner.

Zamani netted his second in the 34th minute after Yemen failed to deal with a cross from Yaqoob Barajeh, leaving

the Iran No 16 to head home past a rooted Mokref.

Yemen fell further behind in the 42nd minute after Esmaeil Qolizadeh pounced on a poor pass from Ahmed Al Hajj before slotting the ball into the bottom right corner.

Yemen conceded the fourth following Mohammed Moqbel's own goal, leaving the West Asian side on the ropes going into the break.

Iran stretched the lead a minute after the restart when Abbas Kahrizi sent a perfect cross for Ghandipour to nod home.

Yemen suffered further agony, conceding again in the 72nd minute after Nima Andarz supplied a cross for Abolfazl Zoleikhaei to finish with a



close range diving header.

The victory left Iran, who had beaten Indonesia 3-0 in their opener, on top of the group table with six points, ahead of Wednesday's game against

defending champion Uzbekistan.

The top two in each group will progress to the last eight, with the four semifinalists qualifying for September's under-20 World Cup in Chile.



## Title race 'not over yet', says Alonso despite Leverkusen setback

AFP – Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso was not willing to concede the Bundesliga title despite Saturday's 0-0 home draw with Bayern Munich which leaves them eight points behind the league leaders.

Defending champions Leverkusen were dominant but could not break through a Bayern side who sat back, safe in the knowledge a draw would maintain their lead with 12 games left in the season. It was just the second time since 1992 that Bayern failed to register a shot on goal in a league game.

"We played very well. We did everything we could do to win, other than score a goal," Alonso told reporters.

The coach said he was surprised with

his side's dominance against the league leaders.

"To be honest, and I've seen many Bayern games this season and they're very dominant, we were dominant.

"You can see from the stats today how dominant we were. We just missed some precision."

Alonso said his side could still make up the gap on the league leaders.

"For the table it wasn't enough (to make a difference). But the season is not over yet."

"As I said last year (with Leverkusen on the way to the title), we can speak in April. There's still many points to play for," the Spaniard said.

"Without a doubt we'll keep fighting in each competition and we want to keep

winning."

Despite the disappointment, Alonso said the performance "showed we can match it with anyone".

"It's something we can build on in the league, but especially in the Champions League."

In the Champions League, Leverkusen were the only German side to finish in the top eight.

Bayern coach Vincent Kompany hit back at suggestions his team did not deserve the draw.

"Leverkusen earned the right to put us under pressure, but we showed the mentality to block shots – guys like Harry (Kane) and Jamal (Musiala) who are normally scoring goals for us."