

# A brief overview of Iranian sport



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*The year 1403 will be remembered for sensational Olympic medals for the Iranian sports, though there were more reasons for both joy and grief for the fans in the country over the past year.*

*As the Persian calendar year draws to a close on March 20, the following provides a quick summary of how Iranian athletes and teams performed on the international stage over the past 12 months.*

*Iranian Greco-Roman wrestler Saeid Esmaili celebrates after winning a gold medal at the Paris Olympics on August 8, 2024.*  
● [olympic.ir](http://olympic.ir)

## Paris podiums

The peak of excitement for the Iranian sport came in Paris in July and August, where taekwondo practitioners and wrestlers, as expected, took credit for yielding Olympic success for the country's 40-athlete delegation. Eight members of the Iranian 11-man wrestling squads across the Greco-Roman and freestyle events finished their campaigns on the Olympic podium, while there was a clean sweep of four medals for the taekwondo team as Iran finished 21st in the overall standings of the sporting extravaganza – six places better off than the Tokyo Olympics three years ago, where Iran had collected seven medals despite sending 65 athletes to the Games.

The final outcome at the taekwondo competitions was definitely beyond the wildest dreams of any Iranian supporter, who had been longing for a medal in the event since Kimia Alizadeh's sole bronze medal in Rio 2016. Young prodigy Arian Sailmi rounded off a thrilling, action-packed four days for the Iranians at the Grand Palais by notching up the ultimate prize in the men's +80kg class – a first Olympic taekwondo gold for the country since Hadi Saei, now the chairman of the national governing body of the sport, bagged one in Beijing 2008. History was made in the wom-

en's competitions as Nahid Kiani became the first Iranian girl ever to reach an Olympic final, only to settle for the -57kg silver after a loss to South Korean Kim Yu-jin, while teenage sensation Mobina Ne'matzadeh picked up a precious bronze in the -49kg event to make sure this year's Games were the most prolific for Iranian female athletes.

Mehran Barkhordari also produced magnificent performances to end Iran's 12-year wait for a men's final spot, though he was ultimately beaten in the -80kg showdown.

The wrestling event, meanwhile, was packed with mixed emotions for the Iranian fans.

Some up-and-coming stars made their presence felt in style on the grandest stage of all, securing impressive victories over high-profile opponents. However, the country's quest for its first Olympic freestyle gold since Hassan Yazdani's triumph in Rio de Janeiro ended in vain.

Looking to dethrone Saei as Iran's most decorated Olympian, Yazdani was hit with a recurring shoulder injury in the untimeliest fashion – the early seconds of the 86kg final against Bulgaria's Magomed Ramazanov, which cost him a 7-1 defeat.

Amirhossein Zare' was the ultimate favorite for the super-heavyweight gold in Paris prior to the event but a crazy three minutes of action in the final saw the Iranian trail Geno Pe-

triashvili by nine points at the break and the second-period surge proved too little too late as it finished 10-9 in the Georgian's favor.

Rahman Amouzad hammered a couple of world champions in American Zain Retherford and Bulgaria's Ismail Musukaev to reach the final but was stunned 10-3 by low-profile Japanese Kotaro Kiyooka in the 65kg final. Young Iranian Amir-Ali Azarpira, meanwhile, did a great job to bounce back from a first-round setback against ultimate gold medalist Akhmed Tazhudinov to finish off his 97kg campaign with a bronze medal – courtesy of a win against American great Kyle Snyder.

Iranians had much more to revel in the Greco-Roman contests, after Saeid Esmaili (67kg) and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg) took the Games by storm to emerge as the surprise gold medalists of their respective weight classes. Alireza Mohammadi, 21, could have added a third Greco-Roman gold to Iran's medal haul, had it not been for a 7-0 loss to Bulgarian Semen Novikov in the 87kg final. Amin Mirzazadeh headed to Paris as the reigning world super-heavyweight champion, but an unfavorable draw condemned him to a second-round defeat against legendary Cuban Mijaín López – who went on to grab record fifth successive Olympic gold – before he beat Iranian-born Sabah Shariati,

representing Azerbaijan, for the 130kg bronze.

At the conclusion of the Games, Iran's 12-medal haul marked a second-best performance in 19 Olympic appearances, just shy of the record set at London 2012, where the nation claimed 13 medals, including seven golds.

The year also brought further glory in taekwondo and wrestling for the country. In October, the World Junior Taekwondo Championships served as a testament to Iran's rising prowess, as the team clinched seven gold medals, along with double silvers and bronzes, to beat South Korea to both the men's and women's team its home turf. Wrestling also saw continued success for Iran in age-group competitions. A double under-23 crown in Tirana in October took nation's tally to an impressive 14 team trophies in just five years across various youth-level World Championships.

## Record haul

Iran celebrated its most successful Paralympic campaign to date since making its debut in Seoul 1988, securing an impressive haul of 25 medals over 11 days of competition in Paris during August and September.

The Iranian men's sitting volleyball team claimed a magnificent eighth title, while shooting star Sareh Javanmardi claimed her third consecutive gold in the

women's 10m air pistol event. Further successes in powerlifting, athletics, archery, taekwondo, and judo contributed to a stellar tally of eight golds, 10 silvers, and seven bronzes.

However, the outcome could have been even more remarkable had Sadeq Beit Sayyah not been stripped of his javelin throw prize when his celebration with a religious flag was deemed a violation of the Games' code of conduct, costing Iran an additional gold.

## Highs and lows in football

There were mixed results and receptions for Iranian football – arguably the most popular and talked-about sport in the country – over the past 12 months. The Iranian national team is top of the group in World Cup qualifiers with 16 points – three clear of Uzbekistan and six above the United Arab Emirates – and with the top two winning direct qualification, Team Melli looks well placed to punch its tickets for the finals in North America in 15 months.

Indeed, Amir Qalenoee's men could secure a fourth consecutive appearance in the showpiece, when resuming action in the upcoming international break with back-to-back home games against the UAE (March 20) and Uzbekistan (March 25).

However, despite a run of five wins in six matches – including a 4-1 rout of Asian Cup champion

Qatar – Team Melli came under scrutiny from fans and pundits due to a series of unconvincing and inconsistent performances throughout the campaign.

The criticism peaked in November, when Qalenoee's side dominated the first half of the away games against North Korea and the Kyrgyz Republic but still had to survive a late fightback by the minnow oppositions to walk away with 3-2 victories.

The Iranian club football, meanwhile, was given a reality check in 1403, as the widening gulf between the top-flight sides in the country and their Middle East rivals became evident at the AFC Champions League Elite.

While Saudi Pro League heavyweights, blessed with a massive spending spree and world-class players, have been dominating the revamped competition, Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal had a campaign to forget. Persepolis – the dominant force of the Iranian top flight for nearly a decade – failed to progress to the knockout phase after finishing ninth in the west zone's 12-team table in the league stage, before Esteghlal's run came to an end in the round of 16 against Al Nassr.

Esteghlal's 3-0 defeat at Al Nassr in the return leg of their tie on Monday meant that two Iranian clubs managed a combined three victories across 18 games in the competition, suffering eight defeats in total.



*Iranian taekwondo girl Nahid Kiani (L) is seen in action against Laetitia Aoun of Lebanon in the -57kg semifinal at the Paris Olympics on August 8, 2024.*  
● [WORLD TAEKWONDO](http://WORLD.TAEKWONDO)



*Iranian players celebrate a goal during a 3-2 victory over North Korea in the World Cup Asian qualifiers in Vientiane, Laos, on November 14, 2024.*  
● [AFC](http://AFC)



*Persepolis defender Farshad Faraji reacts after his team concedes a goal during a 4-1 defeat against Al Hilal at the AFC Champions League Elite in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on February 5, 2025.*  
● [FFM](http://FFM)