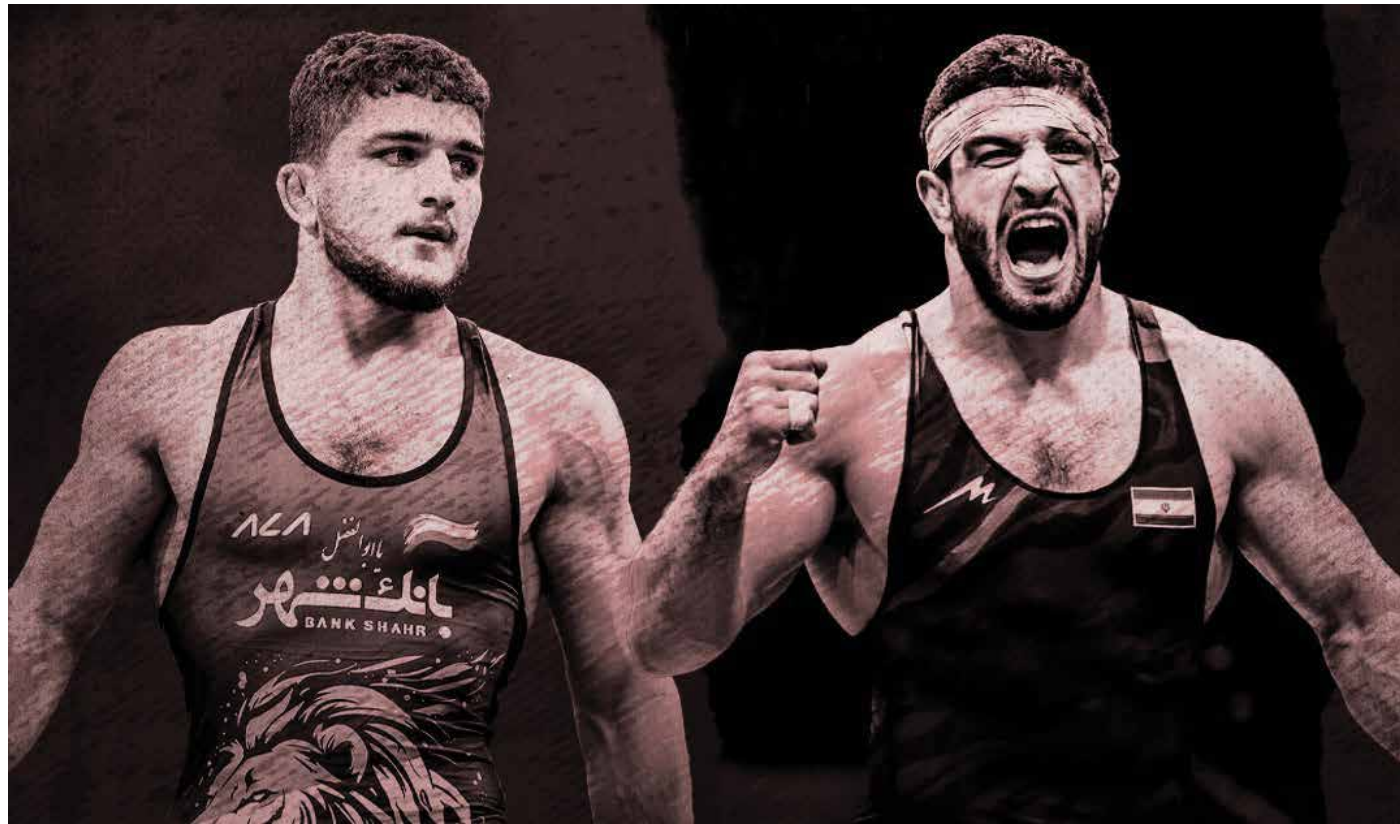


Prodigy vs. Veteran: Iran's 86kg world spot on the line in Tehran showdown

Sports Desk

The Iranian freestyle 86kg slot for September's Wrestling World Championships will be up for grabs today, as international superstar Kamran Qasempour and teenage prodigy Abolfazl Rahmani lock horns in a head-to-head showdown in Tehran. For two-time world 92kg champion Qasempour, today's bout marks the beginning of a long road toward the Los Angeles Olympics in three years, while Rahmani aims to build on his Asian title-winning campaign in March to secure his debut at the UWW Worlds in Zagreb. Qasempour, who missed out on a 97kg slot for the Paris Games last year, finishing behind Amir-Ali Azarpira in the pecking order, has again switched weight class in a bid to add the Olympic glory to his illustrious medal haul. A top-spot finish at the International Takhti Cup in May, which also served as part of the Iranian world trials, would have secured the 86kg spot for Qasempour, but a COVID-19 infection on the eve of the competition derailed his quest for a third world gold medal.

However, Iranian Wrestling Federation justified his absence, granting him a second chance to fight for his ticket to Zagreb. A world U20 bronze medalist last year, Rahmani made the most of Qasempour's absence by cruising to the 86kg gold in Isfahan to emerge as a contend-



● IAWF

er for a place in the Croatian capital.

Ulaanbaatar deciders

Meanwhile, Iranian head coach Pejman Dorostkar hopes the debate over four remaining weight classes is settled when his squad competes at the Ulaanbaatar Open – starting Thursday in the Mongolian capital. Mohammad-Ali Amouzad and

Ali-Akbar Fazli will be the Iranian 70kg contestants at the third UWW Ranking Series event of the season, where the wrestler with a better result will stay in the mix for the world spot alongside Asian bronze medalists Sina Khalili and Abbas Ebrahimzadeh, who have been ruled out of action with injuries. Two-time world silver medalist Amir-Mohammad Yazdani and

Younes Emami – a winner of two world bronzes, who fell to Yazdani in the Takhti Cup final – will be joined by former Asian bronze winner Hossein Abouzari in the 74kg contests, and the national team coaching staff will evaluate their results and performances to decide on the Iranian representative in Zagreb. Takhti Cup champion Fariborz Babaei will compete in the 79kg

event and a gold medal will keep him in contention for the world spot along with Asian champion Mahdi Yousefi – beaten by Babaei in Isfahan – and 2024 world bronze winner Mohammad Nokhodi, who was back in training last week following a knee surgery following last October. Ahmad Bazri, who won the 97kg gold at the Takhti Cup, will

hope to repeat the success in the Mongolian capital to earn a shot at the Zagreb ticket against Amir-Ali Azarpira.

Olympic bronze medalist Azarpira had also been sidelined for months with a torn ligament injury before making his long-awaited return to training last week.

Five freestyle wrestlers have already booked their places in the Iranian 10-man squad for September's world event.

Reigning world champion and Olympic silver medalist Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) and Ali Mo'meni (57kg) won the gold medal in their respective events at the Takhti Cup to secure the world spot.

Joining the duo are Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan, Rahman Amouzad, and Amirhossein Firouzpour. Mohammadnejad-Javan will be the Iranian 61kg wrestler, thanks to a gold-winning run at February's Zagreb Open, as well as an Asian bronze in March. Amouzad, an Olympic silver medalist last year, has been given a shot at a second world 65kg gold after domestic rivals Yassin Rezaei and Ali Khorramdel had below-par runs at the Ranking Series season-opener in the Croatian capital. Firouzpour's impressive run of results in recent months, which has seen him win the Asian and Zagreb Open titles, convinced the Iranian coaching staff to pick him for the world 92kg contests.

Iranian girls learn fate in AVC Nations Cup



● NAZANIN REZAADEH/volleyball.ir

Sports Desk

Iran was drawn in Pool B of the AVC Women's Volleyball Nations Cup – starting June 7 in Hanoi, Vietnam. The draw for the rebranded event took place at the Asian Volleyball Confederation headquarters in Bangkok on Sunday, where 11 teams were split into two groups. Joining Iran in Pool B are Kazakhstan, Indonesia, the Philippines, New Zealand, and Mongolia.

Vietnam, Australia, India, Hong Kong, and the Chinese Taipei complete the lineup in Pool A. The fixtures schedule of the competition is yet to be announced by the continental governing body of the sport. The top two of each group will progress to the semifinals, with the final showpiece set to be staged on June 14. The champion of the event will qualify for the Asian Women's Volleyball Championship next year.

Nourollahi at the double as Al Wahda secures ACL Elite spot

Sports Desk

Al Wahda skipper Ahmad Nourollahi scored twice to lead his team to a 3-1 away victory over Al Bataeh on the final day of the UAE ADNOC Pro League. The vital victory helped Al Wahda finish third in the Emirati top-flight table with 48 points – two clear of fourth-placed Al Wasl – and join top-two Shabab Al Ahli and Sharjah in securing a place in the league stage of the West region in next season's AFC Champions League Elite. The Iranian midfielder opened the scoring in the 11th minute with a stunning strike from the edge of the penalty area, before



● alwahda-sc.com

Syrian striker Omar Khribin doubled the lead from the spot

midway through the first half. Al Bataeh managed to pull one

back just four minutes later through Brazilian forward Álvaro de Oliveira, but Nourollahi restored the two-goal cushion from close range in the 43rd minute. Sunday's performance rounded off an impressive campaign for the Iranian midfielder, who bagged six goals and assists in 26 league appearances. Al Bataeh, meanwhile, finished the season in the 11th place of the 14-team table with 27 points – 11 clear the relegation zone. This could still be considered a decent outcome for Iranian head coach Farhad Majidi, whose team was in serious danger of relegation when he took charge in mid-January.

Nadal touched by presence of great rivals during French Open tribute

REUTERS – Rafa Nadal said the presence of his friends and rivals Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray during a celebration of his glorious career at the French Open made an emotional Sunday evening all the more special. Thousands of fans including defending men's and women's champions Carlos Alcaraz and Iga Swiatek wore brick-red 'Merci Rafa' shirts before 14-times Roland Garros champion Nadal was immortalised on Court Philippe Chatrier with a plaque. The loudest cheers, however, came when Federer, Djokovic and Murray stepped onto the hallowed clay court to share a few words and laughs with Nad-

al after the Spaniard had welled up watching a video of his greatest moments. "I didn't know, but I imagined they would come. The agendas of people sometimes are difficult. But of course, they knew that they were going to make the day very special," Nadal told a packed press conference. "Novak is playing here, so it's easier. But Andy and Roger coming meant a lot to me because they represent a very important part of my tennis career. In some ways we pushed each other to the limits. That's the truth. "We were four of the best rivals. In some way when you're only two, you can lose a bit the motivation because the other starts



● REUTERS

losing or gets injured. Here, you never had to imagine, because always one of the four was winning the tournament. "We achieved our dreams. And probably because of that kind

of rivalry we raised the numbers of the history of tennis to the next level. That helps to the next generation to try to improve them. I'm sure that's going to happen."