

# Iran's Zagreb triumph lays groundwork for glory in L.A. Olympics



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Years of hard work and precise planning by the Iranian Wrestling Federation paid off with a historic success at the World Championships in Zagreb, setting the stage for even more glory at future major events, most significantly the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

Olympic champion Saied Esmaeili claimed the Greco-Roman 67kg gold on Sunday, with Alireza Mohmadi (87kg) and Mohammad-Mahdi Keshtkar (63kg) bagging a silver and a bronze respectively, to cap off a medal-laden campaign for the country, as Iran secured a first-ever Greco-Roman and freestyle team title double in the Croatian capital – a feat previously achieved only by the Soviet Union and Russia.

Of the 20 Iranians competing across different weight classes in the two men's event, 15 managed to leave Zagreb with a medal – including a remarkable six gold winners.

The Iranian Greco-Roman 10-man squad excelled with four golds, two silvers and two bronzes, dominating the team standings with 180 points – nearly twice as much as runner-up Azerbaijan, which finished on 89 points.

Esmaeili was joined by fellow-Olympic champion Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg), defending world champion Amin Mirzazadeh (130kg), and debutant Gholamreza Farrokhi (82kg) in



Members of the Iranian Greco-Roman squad and coaching staff celebrate with the team trophy at the Wrestling World Championships in Zagreb, Croatia, on September 21, 2025.

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walking away with the ultimate prize in their respective events, while teenage sensation Payam Ahmadi was the other Iranian silver medalist in Zagreb, enjoying an impressive run to the 55kg final on his debut at the Wrestling Worlds.

Danial Sohrabi, meanwhile, was unfortunate to settle for bronze in the 77kg class, though it still helped the country end an 11-year wait for the team title.

Perhaps the medal haul would have been even more colorful, if

not for some controversial refereeing decisions that impacted the Iranians' results in the 77kg and 87kg categories.

The Greco-Roman glory came on the back of another drought-ending campaign for the country in the freestyle competitions.

While gold medalists Rahman Amouzad (65kg) and Amirhossein Zare' (125kg) were in a league of their own in the their divisions, Ahmad Mohammadnejad Javan (61kg) and Amirali Azarpira (97kg) finished with a silver, with Mo-

hammad Nokhodi (79kg), Kamran Qasempour (86kg), and Amirhossein Firouzpour (92kg) adding three bronzes, as Iran dethroned Team USA for its first team title in 12 years.

What adds to the sweet taste of glory in Zagreb is that only four members of the Iranian roster – Younes Emami, Qasempour, Saravi, and Mirzazadeh – were over 24 years old, with seven Iranians winning a medal on their World Championships debut – including Greco-Roman champions Es-

maeil and Farrokhi.

For all the somewhat unfair, non-sport-related criticism directed at him since taking the helm at the sport's national governing body in 2018, Alireza Dabir, also a former world and Olympic champion, truly deserves credit for masterminding the resurgence of Iranian wrestling, in recent years.

When he was elected to the job, Iran had just finished sixth in the freestyle table at the World Championships in Budapest with

three bronze medals, while ranking 11th in Greco-Roman, courtesy of Majid Aliyari's sole bronze medal in the 97kg class.

However, after the new federation took office, the primary goal was to restore Iranian wrestling to its former prominence on the global stage, and even beyond. To this end, a comprehensive eight-year master plan was developed, encompassing all critical areas – technical, infrastructural, cultural, and economic.

Emphasis was placed on youth age groups, strict and fair implementation of the selection process for the national teams, providing the necessary infrastructure for training, physical conditioning, nutrition, and accommodation, as well as improving the financial situation of national athletes, and training youth coaches.

The results of all the efforts culminated in title-winning runs at the world age-group competitions and, of course, last year's Paris Olympics, where, for the first time, Iranian teams won two golds, four silvers, and two bronzes.

With the country's young squads stealing the show in Zagreb, few would argue against the prospect of an even more glorious Olympic campaign for them in Los Angeles three years from now.

## Team Melli to play Mexico in friendly, Taj says



### Sports Desk

The Iranian men's national team will face Mexico in a friendly game in the near future, Mahdi Taj, the chairman of the Iranian Football Federation, said on Monday.

The exact date and the venue of the game, however, are yet to be confirmed by the two national governing bodies, Taj added.

The game will be part of the two teams' preparation for next year's FIFA World Cup, which Mexico will cohost alongside the United States and Canada from September 7, 2026.

The Iranian Federation has been struggling to arrange high-profile friendly fixtures for Team Melli since it secured a fourth successive World Cup qualification in June, thanks to a top-spot finish in Group A of the Asian qualifiers.

While Japan and South Korea, which will join Iran in representing Asia at the World Cup, played the United States and Mexico in September's international break, Iran had to take part at the CAFA Nations Cup, featuring five Central Asian teams, as well as India,

Oman, and Afghanistan.

Iran's next friendly game will come away to Russia in Volgograd on October 10. Meanwhile, Taj insisted that Amir Qalenoee would remain Iran's head coach for the World Cup finals, despite recent speculation about his future following a subpar CAFA campaign.

Some mediocre performances saw Iran beat Afghanistan (3-1) and India (3-0) before giving away a two-goal lead to share the spoils with another minnow opponent in Tajikistan in a 2-2 draw in Group B of the competition

to progress to the final.

Team Melli, reduced to 10 men just five minutes into the game, suffered a 1-0 loss to Uzbekistan in the final showpiece in Tashkent – courtesy of a Khojiakbar Alijonov's 120th-minute winner for the home side.

Asked if Iranian fans could expect a new manager on Iran's bench in next September's finals, Taj replied, "No. Qalenoee will definitely stay on as Iran coach for the World Cup, and even beyond, though there will likely be additions to his coaching staff."

## Iran's Safaei up by 98 spots in ITTF Women's World Ranking

### Sports Desk

Iranian table tennis player Shima Safaei enjoyed a massive jump in the recent ITTF World Rankings, released on Tuesday, climbing 98 spots to reach 185th place in the women's singles list.

Safaei won an impressive third-place trophy at the latest WTT Feeder Series event in Cappadocia, Türkiye last week – the country's first women's title in the history of the competition. Safaei defeated some prominent opponents en route to the semifi-

nals, before suffering a 3-0 loss (11-5, 11-4, 11-8) to Asuka Sasao of Japan. Safaei began her campaign with a straight-game victory over Uzbekistan's Markhabo Magdieva, and went on come out victorious against eighth-seed Brazilian Laura Watanabe by the same scoreline in the round of 32. Safaei continued with a 3-1 win against the host's Sibel Altinkaya, and then held off a fightback from second-seed Dian Meshref of Egypt in a five-game thriller (12-10, 12-10, 5-11, 9-11, 11-8) to advance to the last four.

Meanwhile, Mahshid Ashtari moved up by 89 places and Elina Rahimi jumped 116 spots to sit 263rd and 276th in the women's singles ranking, respectively. The two were also part of the women's draw in Cappadocia, with Ashtari suffering a 3-0 defeat against ultimate champion and top-seed top-seeded Hitomi Sato of Japan in the last 16, while Rahimi crashed out in the round of round of 32, courtesy of 3-2 setback against the host's Ece Harac.

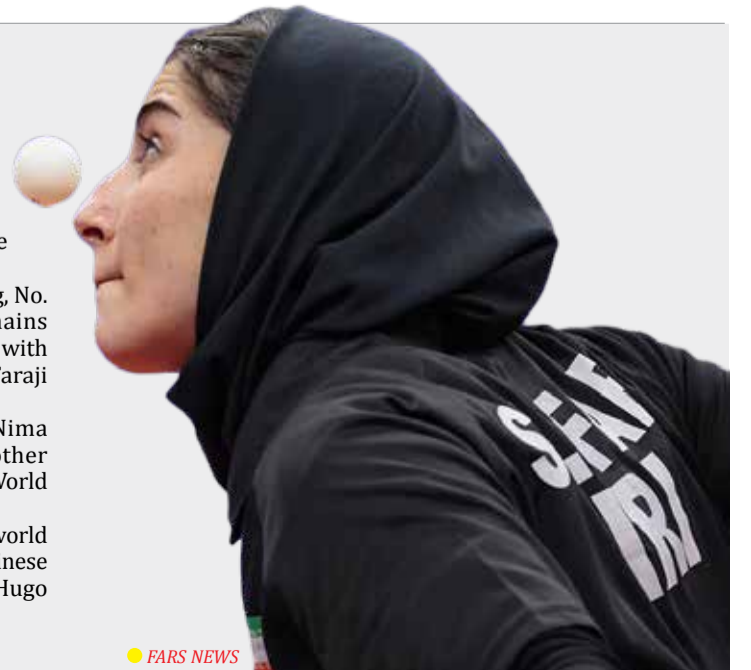
Sun Yingsha, Wang Manyu, and

Chen Xingtong complete an all-Chinese top three in the women's ranking.

In the men's singles ranking, No. 80 Noshad A'alamian remains the highest-ranked Iranian, with young prodigy Benyamin Faraji in the 135th place.

Navid Shams (160th) and Nima A'alamian (164th) are the other two Iranian players in the World Men's Ranking.

Wan Chuqin remained the world No. 1, followed by fellow-Chinese Lin Shidong and Brazilian Hugo Calderano.



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