

Yazdani, Azarpira rivalry set to heat up Iran's Wrestling Worlds trials

Sports Desk

Iranian wrestling fans may well be treated to a compelling domestic rivalry featuring Hassan Yazdani and Amirali Azarpira once the selection process for next year's World Championships gets underway in the coming months.

Freestyle sensation Yazdani – a winner of a national-record 10 world and Olympic medals – made a statement return to action during the final day of the Iranian Wrestling Premier League on Friday, having been sidelined for 489 days after undergoing surgery on his injured shoulder, which cost him the 86kg final at last year's Paris Olympics.

Moving up to the 97kg class in a bid to win an elusive second Olympic gold at Los Angeles 2028, Yazdani began the day with a superiority win (10-0) over former U20 world champion Abolfazl Babloo during his team's 7-3 semifinal victory over Khaybar in the morning session. Yazdani then defeated 2021 world bronze medalist Mojtaba Goleij 4-0 in the penultimate bout of the final, though his Esteghlal Juybar team ultimately fell short against Bank Shahr. "Yazdani delivered a new version of himself," former Olympic bronze medalist Morad Mohammadi said of his compatriot, adding: "He has been an exception in Iranian wrestling and is



Freestyle wrestler Hassan Yazdani is pictured ahead of his victory over Abolfazl Babloo in the Iranian Premier League semifinal in Tehran, Iran, on December 12, 2025.

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capable of adapting to different circumstances.

"His performance truly surprised all wrestling experts. Honestly speaking, I thought he would struggle in a new weight class after being out of action for such a long time, but he proved to be the same old Hassan Yazdani we all knew."

At 30, Yazdani appeared to be back to his familiar ruthless form, but before thinking of chasing his fourth world title in a star-studded 97kg event – likely to feature Russian great Abdulrashid Sadulaev, reigning American world champion Kyle Snyder, and Olympic gold medalist Akhmed Tazhudinov – in



Iran's Amirali Azarpira is seen during his silver-winning campaign at the Wrestling World Championships in Zagreb, Croatia, on September 15, 2025.

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Manama next October, the Iranian will have to see off a domestic threat posed by 23-year-old Azarpira.

It has been less than two years since the young Iranian made his senior international breakthrough at the 2024 Ranking Series event in Zagreb, where he defeated Snyder in the final. The two-time U23 world cham-

pion marked his Olympic debut with a precious bronze medal in Paris, thanks to another victory over Snyder in the third-place bout, and then built on that success by winning a silver medal at September's World Championships in Zagreb. The pinnacle of Azarpira's campaign in the Croatian capital came in the semifinals, where he

defeated Tazhudinov 5-2, making up for his first-round setback against the Bahraini wrestler in Paris.

Azarpira was unlucky to miss out on the top podium after suffering a 4-2 defeat to Snyder, but captured his maiden senior gold in Riyadh a month later, defeating Kazakhstan's Rizabek Aitmukhan – a world champion at 92kg in 2023 – 5-0 in the final at the Islamic Solidarity Games. With both Yazdani and Azarpira fancying their chances of winning the ultimate prize in Manama, a thrilling rivalry appears to be on the cards between the two top-tier wrestlers.

"Azarpira has shown excellent progress in recent years, winning world and Olympic medals. A potential matchup between Yazdani and Azarpira would definitely be a thrilling one. I believe the winner of that battle would be the top contender for gold at the World Championships," said Mohammadi, who tipped Yazdani to build on "his vast experience" to prevail over his younger compatriot.

The two have been exempted from participating in next week's National Championships – which will serve as the opening phase of Iran's World Championships trials – meaning fans will have to wait until the start of the international season to see the two world-class wrestlers go head-to-head.

Persian Gulf Pro League: Sepahan extends winning streak to go top

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Sepahan claimed a massive 1-0 away victory over Foolad Khuzestan in Ahvaz on Monday to move back to the top of the Persian Gulf Pro League table.

In-form striker Mohammad Asgari gave Sepahan an early lead at the Foolad Arena, tapping home center-back Ali Nemati's misjudged headed clearance into the bottom corner nine minutes into the game. The visitors had a glorious chance to double their lead from the penalty spot on the half-hour mark, only to see veteran skipper Ehsan Hajsafi send his effort well over the crossbar.

Asgari's strike nevertheless proved enough for Sepahan to extend its winning streak in the Iranian top flight to seven games. The result helped Moharram Navidkia's side – having managed just one victory in their first six matches of the campaign – move atop of the table with 27 points, two clear of Persepolis, which has played a game more and defeated Iraco 1-0 at home on Saturday. A fifth defeat in 14 matches left Foolad languishing in 13th place with 13 points, just two above the relegation zone, compounding the pressure on under-fire head coach Yahya Golmohammadi, who saw sections of the home crowd chant against him after the final whistle.

Elsewhere, Esteghlal missed the opportunity to move into third place after being held to a 1-1 draw by Khaybar in Khorramabad.



Sepahan players celebrate their winner in the 1-0 victory over Foolad Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf Pro League in Ahvaz, Iran, on December 15, 2025.

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Albanian winger Jasir Asani gave the visiting Blues a flying start, scoring his sixth goal of the campaign from the penalty spot in the eighth minute, before Mehrdad Qanbari sent Spanish goalkeeper Antonio Adán the wrong way from the spot to level the scores in the 27th minute. Khaybar thought it had found a second goal in first-half stoppage time, but it was ruled out by VAR, which deemed Aref Qezel to have fouled an Esteghlal defender before heading home from close range. Esteghlal sits fourth in the table with 22 points, trailing third-placed Chadormalu by two points with a game in hand. Chadormalu, the surprise package of the season, continued its impressive run with a 3-1 home

victory over struggling Esteghlal Khuzestan. Ecuadorian summer signing Cristian Martinez was on target twice to give the host a two-goal lead by the 27th minute. Hamid Bouhamdan gave the Southern Blues a late lifeline by converting a penalty in the 83rd minute, but Chadormalu restored its two-goal cushion two minutes later when Reza Mahmoudabadi's deflected effort from the edge of the box found the back of the net. Esteghlal Khuzestan remained third from bottom in the table, level on points with city rival Foolad. The biggest upset of the day came at Sirous Qayeqran Stadium in Bandar Anzali, where Maziar Zare's Malavan suffered a 4-0 home defeat against new-

ly promoted Fajr Sepasi. Sasan Jafarikia, Yadegar Rostami (penalty), and Farshid Esmaeili scored within a 14-minute spell to give Pirouz Qorbani's Fajr a shock three-goal lead by halftime, before Meisam Moradi capped a well-worked counter-attack in the 68th minute to put the result beyond doubt. The victory lifted Fajr to eighth place with 18 points, leapfrogging Malavan on goal difference, although Zare's side has a game in hand. In Sirjan, Siavash Yazdani and Aliasghar Ashouri scored two late first-half goals as Golgozar secured a 2-0 home win over Mes Rafsanjan. Golgozar sits seventh with 20 points, while Mes remained bottom of the table with eight points.

Iran Women set to take part in friendly futsal tourney in Brazil

Sports Desk

Iran's women's national futsal team has been invited to take part in a four-team tournament in Brazil next April, also featuring the host, Morocco, and Canada, announced Elmira Saminipour, the team director.

The exact schedule and fixtures for the event are yet to be confirmed by the host country, Saminipour added.

All four teams competed in the recently concluded Futsal Women's World Cup in the Philippines. The two-time Asian champion Iran suffered defeats against Brazil (4-1) and Italy (3-1) either side of a 6-2 victory over Panama, finishing third in Group D in November and missing out on a quarterfinal place.

Brazil went on to lift the trophy at the inaugural event, beating Portugal 3-0 in the final.

Morocco, which won the Africa Cup of Nations title on home soil last April, finished runner-up to Argentina in Group A with six

points before suffering a 6-1 defeat against Spain in the quarterfinals. Canada, meanwhile, finished bottom of Group B after losses to Colombia (2-0), Thailand (6-3), and Spain (7-0).

"Lavoisier Freire, the director of Brazil's national futsal teams, was impressed by Iran's style of play, the players' determination, and the team's management on such a big stage when the two sides met at the World Cup," Saminipour said. "That convinced him to extend a direct invitation to the Iranian women's team right after the match."

She added: "Participation in this tournament could play a significant role in the future plans of our national team. Our goal is not merely to compete, but to use every international opportunity for growth, gaining experience, and better preparing the squad. We hope that through proper planning, we can make an effective impact in these competitions and once again serve as worthy representatives of Iranian futsal."



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