

Esmaeili crowned Most Dominant Greco-Roman Wrestler of 2025



Iranian Greco-Roman wrestler Saeid Esmaeili (blue) lifts Uzbekistan's Aytjan Khalmakhanov during his 67kg gold-winning campaign at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 18, 2025.
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Sports Desk

Iran's Saeid Esmaeili was named the Most Dominant Greco-Roman Wrestler of the Year by United World Wrestling (UWW). The 22-year-old sensation fended off competition from fellow Iranian world champions Mohammad-Hadi Saravi, and Gholamreza Farrokhi, as well as Armenia's Malkhas Amoyan and Uzbekistan's Aytjan Khalmakhanov to claim the prestigious prize. A gold medalist at last year's Paris Olympics, the 67kg wrestler earned the recognition following an emphatic 12-month run in which he posted an 11-0 record across three major tournaments, claiming seven technical-fall victories in the process. Eight of his wins came without conceding a single point, including two 9-0 triumphs over Khalmakhanov — the 63kg gold medalist at September's World Championships — and Serbia's former world champion Sebastian Nadj. Ranked world number one in his weight class, Esmaeili began the international season with a gold-winning campaign at March's Asian Championships in Amman.

He then marked his World Championships debut in style by edging Azerbaijan's Hasrat Jafarov 2-1 in the final. The pair met again for gold at the Islamic Solidarity Games in Riyadh two months later, where Esmaeili came within two seconds of suffering only the second defeat of his senior international career — and his first since June 2024 — before producing a trademark four-point move to defeat Jafarov 8-3 in a thrilling showdown. Esmaeili's honor marked the third award for Iranian Greco-Roman wrestling at the season-ending UWW Awards. Farrokhi claimed the Breakout Performer of the Year prize after racking up a perfect 17-0 record, including 11 technical-superiority wins, across his international appearances. He made his senior international breakthrough at February's Ranking Series event in Zagreb, where he secured three commanding victories before defeating 2024 world silver medalist Erik Szilvassy of Hungary, 6-2, in the 82kg final. The Iranian picked up where he left off upon returning to the Croatian capital in September, accumulating 37

points across four bouts while conceding just one en route to the world title. Moving up to the 87kg category for the U23 World Championships in October, Farrokhi was in a league of his own in Novi Sad, Serbia, sweeping aside all five opponents by technical superiority — including Ukraine's Ivan Chmyr in the final — to claim the title. He capped off the season with yet another gold-winning campaign at the Islamic Solidarity Games, defeating Kazakhstan's Islam Yevloyev 6-0 in the final. Meanwhile, Iran was named the Top Greco-Roman Team of 2025. A prolific year saw the country complete a clean sweep of four world team titles across all age groups, with Iranian wrestlers medaling in 29 of the 40 possible weight categories, collecting 10 golds, six silvers, and 13 bronzes. The pinnacle of Iran's international season came at September's Senior World Championships in Zagreb, where a remarkable haul of four golds, along with two silvers and two bronzes, led the nation to only its second team title — and first since 2014 — in the history of the competition.

AFC Champions League Elite: Skocic challenges Tractor to aim higher after last-gasp winner secures knockout spot

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League champion Tractor may have secured progression to the AFC Champions League Elite last 16 with two matches to spare in the league phase, but head coach Dragan Skocic is demanding that his side aims for more in the competition. Prolific striker Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh netted a stoppage-time winner as Tractor came from behind to beat Qatar's Al Duhail 2-1 at home on Monday, moving up to second in the West Zone's 12-team table with 14 points — four adrift of Saudi heavyweight Al Hilal, which defeated host Sharjah FC 1-0 to maintain its perfect run in Asia's elite club competition.

The visitors broke the deadlock against the run of play in the 35th minute after Mohammad Naderi tripped Edmilson Junior in the box, with Benjamin Bourigeaud sending Tractor goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand the wrong way from the spot. Tractor's equalizer came six minutes into the second half as Tibor Halilovic's curling free-kick struck the upright, before captain Shoja Khalilzadeh calmly side-footed home the rebound. Just when it looked as though the match would end in a stalemate, Hosseinzadeh dribbled past a couple of Al Duhail players before his deflected effort from distance lobbed Argentine goalkeeper Bau-

tista Burke, sending the home crowd at Tabriz's Yadegar-e Imam Stadium into a frenzy. "I am very happy with today's game; we played very well," Skocic said after his team secured its fourth win in six Asian matches. "We gave the penalty away too easily in the first half, but otherwise we produced a good performance. "We created more scoring opportunities. We pressed the opponents well and closed them down with discipline. I like this way of playing, and today we played a little more with our minds. "We have a long season ahead of us. Our achievement has been satisfying, but we are looking to the future. No one in the lock-

er room is satisfied with merely advancing from the first stage, but what has been done is respectable," added the Croatian. Hosseinzadeh, meanwhile, praised the Tractor supporters "who came to the stadium to support their team despite the cold weather in Tabriz." "We conceded too cheaply, but we had chances to equalize in the first half. At halftime, we vowed to win this match, and that's what we managed to do in the end," added the 25-year-old Iranian international, who took his tally to 10 goals and five assists in 21 appearances across all competitions this season. Hosseinzadeh, who was the leading marksman in the Iranian top flight last sea-



Tractor striker Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh (2nd L) celebrates with teammates after scoring the winner in a 2-1 victory over Al Duhail in the AFC Champions League at the Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tabriz, Iran, on December 22, 2025.
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son, credited Skocic with helping him deliver "the best version of me over the past two years." "I am really pleased with my form for both club and

country. I would love to be part of the Iranian squad at the World Cup, though the final decision rests with the national team's coaching staff," he said.

Tractor will be back at the home venue to face Al Sadd on February 10, before playing away to another Qatari opposition in Al Gharafa seven days later.

Iran names roster for AFC U23 Asian Cup



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Sports Desk

Iran head coach Omid Ravankhah has named a 23-man squad for the upcoming AFC U23 Asian Cup, which kicks off on January 6 in Saudi Arabia. Iran has been drawn alongside Uzbekistan, South Korea, and Lebanon in Group C of the competition's seventh edition. Iran will face China in a friendly during a seven-day training camp in Dubai — starting Sunday — before departing for Riyadh for its opening match against 2020 champion South Korea at Al Shabab Club Stadium on January 7. Ravankhah's men will then take on Uzbekistan —

champion in 2018 and runners-up in the previous two editions — at the Prince Faisal bin Fahd Sports City Stadium on January 10, before wrapping up the group stage against Lebanon at the same venue three days later. The top two teams from each of the four groups will advance to the quarterfinals, with the final to be staged at Jeddah's Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City Stadium on January 24. Iran will return to the U23 Asian Cup finals for the first time since 2022 after finishing top of its qualification group — which also featured hosts the UAE, Hong Kong, and Guam — in

September. Iran defeated Hong Kong (4-0) and Guam (6-0) before completing a perfect qualification campaign with a 3-2 victory over the UAE. Ravankhah's team took part in the four-team Manas Cup in Kyrgyzstan in November, suffering back-to-back defeat against Russia (2-0) and the host (2-1), before beating Bahrain 1-0. The following is Iran's full squad for the 2026 AFC U23 Asian Cup:

Goalkeepers: Mohammad Khalifeh (Iralco), Amir-Mahdi Maqsoodi (Sepahan), Pouria Rafiei (Sepahan)
Defenders: Mohammad-Mahdi Zare' (Akhamat Grozny), Danial Eiri (Malavan

FC), Farzin Mo'amelegari (Shams Azar), Masoud Mohebbi (Khaybar FC), Bahram Goudarzi (Iralco), Arshia Vossouqifard (Fajr Sepasi), Seyyed Mahdi Mahdavi (Iralco), Erfan Jamshidi (Paykan)
Midfielders: Pouria Latififar (Golgozar Sirjan), Mahdi Goudarzi (Khaybar FC), Abbas Habibi (Malavan FC), Mahdi Ja'fari (Malavan FC), Amir-Mohammad Razaqinia (Esteghlal), Amir-Reza Sheikhirad (Nassaji Mazandaran), Mohammad-Javad Hosseinejad (Dynamo Makhachkala), Yadegar Rostami (Fajr Sepasi), Mohammad-Hossein Sadeqi (Persepolis), Hamidreza Zarouni (Khaybar FC)
Strikers: Mohammad Asgari (Sepahan), Reza Ghandipour (Al Wahda).