

# Saravi proud of ‘milestone’ AIPS Athlete of the Year nomination

## Sports Desk

Iranian wrestler Mohammad-Hadi Saravi described his inclusion on the shortlist for the AIPS Best Male Athlete of the Year award as a “great honor,” saying he hopes to build on the “milestone in my career” with further success in future competitions. The Greco-Roman standout was among 53 athletes nominated for the prestigious award, which was voted on by a record 836 members of the International Sports Press Association (AIPS) from 121 countries. Swedish pole vaulter Armand Duplantis, who shattered the world record four times over the past year, was the runaway winner of the poll. Nevertheless, Saravi said he was proud to see his name “on the same list as football stars such as Ousmane Dembélé, Kylian Mbappé, Mohamed Salah and Lamine Yamal, as well as other prominent champions from various sports.” “I am grateful to God that this important milestone came during my career. As a representative of Iranian wrestling and sport, I have been nominated for one of the world’s most prestigious in-

ternational sports awards – an honor decided by leading sports media from around the globe,” Saravi was quoted as saying on the official website of the Iranian Wrestling Federation. “On the path I began, I am thankful that it has been accompanied by world and Olympic titles, and today my name, as an Iranian and a representative of our country’s wrestling, stands among the greats of world sport. “I hope the successes I have achieved in recent years will continue, and that I can remain a worthy representative of the dear people of Iran on various sporting stages. I sincerely thank my fellow Iranians for their support regarding this nomination.” An Olympic gold medalist in Paris last year, Saravi proved to be the wrestler to beat in the 97kg category, posting a 10-0 record en route to gold medals at three major tournaments in 2025, including the world title in September. He opened the international season with a dominant run at the Asian Championships in March, claiming three superiority victories without conceding a single point to secure the third continental gold of his career.

Saravi then defeated Russia’s Artur Sargsian, competing as a neutral athlete, 3-1 in the final in Zagreb to claim his second world gold after his 2021 triumph, before rounding out the season with a 5-1 victory over Azerbaijan’s Murad Ahmadiyev in the final of the Islamic Solidarity Games in November. The gold-laden season earned Saravi a nomination for the UWW Most Dominant Greco-Roman Wrestler of 2025 award, though he ultimately lost out to fellow Iranian world and Olympic champion Saeid Esmaili. Behind Duplantis in the poll was Spanish tennis player Carlos Alcaraz, who captured a Tour-leading eight titles in 2025, including two Grand Slams at Roland Garros and the US Open, and finished the season as world No. 1 with a Tour-best 71 match wins. French forward Dembélé placed third after a fairytale 2024/25 campaign in which he won six major trophies with Paris Saint-Germain, including Ligue 1 and the UEFA Champions League, while also claiming the Ballon d’Or and The Best FIFA Men’s Player award. The AIPS Best Female Athlete of



Mohammad-Hadi Saravi celebrates with the Iranian flag after winning the Greco-Roman Wrestling World Championships in Zagreb, Croatia, on September 20, 2025.

97kg gold medal at the

the Year award went to Spanish footballer Aitana Bonmatí, fol-

lowed by Kenyan long-distance runner Beatrice Chebet and

Belarusian tennis star Aryna Sabalenka.

## AFC Champions League Two:

# Sepahan to face Al Ahli, Esteghlal given Al Hussein test in last 16



Sepahan players celebrate a goal during a 2-0 victory over Al Hussein in the AFC Champions League Two at the Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on November 25, 2025.

ARYA JAFARI/AFC

## Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League club Sepahan will face Qatar’s Al Ahli, while Esteghlal will take on Jordan’s Al Hussein in the round of 16 of the AFC Champions League Two. The draw for the knockout phase took place at the AFC headquarters in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, with the 16 remaining teams discovering their opponents in Asia’s second-tier club competition. Both Iranian sides will host the first leg of their two-legged ties on February 10-11, with the return matches scheduled for a week later. Sepahan secured second

place behind Al Hussein in Group C with a 2-0 home win over the Jordanian side in November. The group featured only three teams after Indian champion Mohun Bagan SG was expelled from the competition for refusing to travel to Isfahan, citing safety concerns. Al Ahli topped Group B with 10 points, recording two wins and four draws. Esteghlal, meanwhile, endured a dreadful start to its campaign, suffering back-to-back defeats – including a 7-1 humiliation at the hands of UAE side Al Wasl – but still managed to advance behind the Emirati club. The Tehran side sealed qualification with a

comprehensive 3-0 away victory over Bahrain’s Al Muharraq in a must-win game on the final day of the group stage last Wednesday. Fans in Iran could be treated to an all-Iranian clash in the quarterfinals should both Sepahan and Esteghlal progress. Elsewhere in the draw, Cristiano Ronaldo’s Al Nassr, which won Group D with a perfect record of six wins, was pitted against FC Arkadag. The Saudi heavyweight scored a tournament-high 22 goals and conceded just two, while Turkmenistan’s Arkadag netted five and conceded six in six group

matches. Unbeaten Al Wasl will face Iraq’s Al Zawraa SC, the runner-up in Group D. In the East region, Australia’s Macarthur FC will meet Thailand’s Bangkok United, while Japan’s Gamba Osaka will be confident of its chances against South Korea’s Pohang Steelers after advancing from Group F with a perfect record. Indonesia’s Persib Bandung will go head-to-head with Thailand’s Ratchaburi FC. The last-16 ties will be followed by the quarterfinals in March and the semifinals in April, with the tournament culminating in a single-leg West-meets-East final on May 16.

## Sports Desk

Mahdi Taj, president of the Iranian Football Federation, has warned that domestic matches “will be suspended or even abandoned under international rules” in response to insulting ethnic chants in Iranian stadiums. Taj made the remarks after Mohammadreza Zonouzi, owner of Tabriz-based club Tractor, had threatened to withdraw his team from the Persian Gulf Pro League and called on Taj to resign, citing the federation’s “silence and negligence” over repeated abuse of the club’s Turkish ethnic supporters during domestic matches. The most recent incident occurred in an away fixture against Shams Azar in Qazvin on Friday. Tractor has blamed Persepolis supporters for the chants, as tensions between the two clubs have intensified over the past two years following the departure of Persepolis stars Alireza

Beiranvand, Mahdi Torabi and Danial Esmailifar to Tractor ahead of last season – a move that helped the Tabriz side secure its first Iranian top-flight title in May. Tractor and Persepolis met in the Hazfi Cup at Tabriz’s Yadegar-e Imam Stadium on December 18 – a match Tractor won on penalties – during which members of the Capital Reds’ camp, most notably Iranian football legend and Tabriz-born Karim Baqeri – now a member of the club’s coaching staff – were subjected to slurs and insults from the home crowd throughout the game. “Regulations which were previously not enforced for various reasons will now be applied strictly and without leniency, including measures against ethnic, provocative and abusive chants that could lead to matches being suspended or even abandoned under international rules,” Taj said on the sidelines of a meeting between

Iranian Sports Minister Ahmad Donyamali and executives from the league’s so-called ‘Big Four’ – Persepolis, Esteghlal, Tractor and Sepahan. “Unfortunately, some clubs and their affiliates create situations that inflame the atmosphere inside stadiums, while fans attend matches to enjoy football,” he added. “The outcome of today’s meeting is that we expect to see a reduction in such behavior in the near future.” Taj further explained that a disciplinary committee meeting attended by all judicial bodies of the federation, as well as security officials, agreed that regulations previously left unenforced would now be implemented without exception. “This includes dealing with ethnic, inflammatory and insulting chants. In line with international regulations, if such behavior continues, referees are obliged to stop the match and may even abandon it,” he said.

## Football chief warns of ‘match abandonment’ over ethnic abuse



Tractor winger Mahdi Torabi (red) is seen in action against Persepolis fullback Yaqoub Barajeh during a Hazfi Cup game at the Yadegar-e Imam Stadium, Tabriz, Iran, on December 18, 2025.

IRNA