

# Gholamreza Takhti: A people's champion for the ages

## Sports Desk

Gholamreza Takhti may stand as one of the most decorated figures in the history of Iranian sports, yet the source of his legendary status among his compatriots—still enduring decades after his death—lies far beyond his achievements on the wrestling mat.

As Iranians marked the 58th anniversary of his premature and mysterious passing at the age of 37 on Wednesday, the following offers a brief look into the life and career of the former world and Olympic champion.

### A glittering sporting legacy

Takhti first rose to prominence at the 1951 World Championships in Helsinki, Finland, where, despite his lack of international experience, he won an impressive silver medal in the 79kg freestyle class at just 21 years of age—offering an early glimpse of his extraordinary talent.

He returned to the Finnish capital the following year for the 1952 Olympic Games, again settling for silver, this time behind Soviet wrestler David Tsimakuridze.

At the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, Takhti dominated all his opponents in the 87kg class to



become the first Iranian—alongside the late wrestler Emam-Ali Habibi—to win an Olympic gold medal.

His success continued with gold at the 1958 Asian Games in Tokyo, before he claimed the first of his two world titles in his hometown of Tehran a year later.

Takhti added a second Olympic silver in Rome in 1960, finishing

behind Turkish wrestler Ismet Athi, and then captured the 87kg gold at the 1961 World Championships, inspiring Iran to its first-ever team world title in Yokohama.

His participation at the 1962 World Championships in Toledo, USA, was a testament to his fortitude. Wrestling through a severe illness, he was controversially denied gold due to a mere

200-gram weight difference against his final opponent—Soviet great Aleksandr Medved—and had to settle for silver. Immediately after the final, he was rushed to hospital for emergency surgery.

Between 1962 and 1966, Takhti remained a mainstay of the national team despite his advancing age. At the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, he was unlucky to

miss out on the podium, finishing fourth. In 1966, at 36 and well past his prime, he accepted the call-up for the World Championships in Toledo. After an opening win, he was defeated by the legendary Medved and eventual silver medalist Ahmet Ayik, drawing the curtain on a glorious career.

### The people's champion

What truly distinguished Takhti was not merely his medals, but his humanity, humility, and profound connection to the people. Despite worldwide fame and sporting glory, he always lived among the people and for the people. He never remained indifferent to social suffering and, whenever needed, extended a helping hand to those in distress.

A shining example was his response to the devastating 1962 Buin Zahra earthquake. At the height of his fame, he traveled to the disaster zone and launched a nationwide public aid campaign in the streets of Tehran. The public's overwhelming response to his call was a testament to his unique stature. One particularly poignant moment saw an impoverished woman donate her only tent—a powerful symbol of the collective empathy that Takhti embodied.

Even after his retirement, Takhti remained a moral exemplar

in Iranian society. He never allowed fame to separate him from ordinary people, often using his own resources to help the poor. These qualities immortalized him not just as a wrestling champion, but as a national symbol of sacrifice, honesty, and humility.

### Mysterious death

Takhti's death in a hotel room in the Iranian capital on January 7, 1968, remains one of the greatest enigmas in Iranian sports history. Official reports at the time cited suicide due to personal and family issues, but persistent theories suggest that SAVAK—the intelligence service of the Pahlavi regime—was behind his death, as he was known to hold anti-establishment views.

To this day, the question remains unanswered: Was it suicide, or was it political murder? The truth has become part of Iran's enduring historical mysteries. What remains beyond doubt, however, is that Takhti's legacy lives on—not only as a wrestling champion, but as a complete human being and a moral ideal. Beyond his medals, he occupies a far greater place in the hearts of the Iranian people. His humanitarian deeds will never be forgotten, and his name will forever shine in the history of this land.

## Milano Cortina 2026:

### Iran confirms lineup for Winter Games

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Iran will be represented by four athletes in the men's and women's competition at the upcoming Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Games in Italy, the country's Skiing and Winter Sports Federation announced.

The 25th edition of the multi-sport event will take place from February 6 to 22 at sites across Lombardy and Northeast Italy.

Sadaf Saveh-Shemeshki will compete in the women's alpine skiing event, with Mohammad Kiadarbandsari taking part in the men's competition.

In cross-country skiing, Samaneh Beyrami Baher and Danial have secured their places in the women's and men's contests, respectively.

The Iranian coaching staff com-

prises Baeqer Kalhor (men's alpine), Mitra Kalhor (women's alpine), Seyyed Mostafa Mirhasemi (men's cross-country), and Azadeh Kiashemeshki (women's cross-country).

The Iranian chief de mission at the Olympics will be Bahram Saveh-Shemeshki, the chairman of the sport's national governing body.

Preparations for the Games are back on schedule, with snow making and infrastructure work progressing well across all venues, International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS) president Johan Eliasch said on Wednesday.

Speaking one month before the start of the event, Eliasch said recent cold temperatures had helped organizers address earlier concerns over snow farming and snow making at key

sites including Cortina d'Ampezzo, Livigno, Bormio and Val di Fiemme.

"Yes, it has," Eliasch said when asked whether his confidence had grown. "The preparations are advancing very well. We've had cold temperatures, which helps. And right now, it looks like there should be no issue to complete everything on time as planned. So that's very good news."

Italian authorities and organizers have faced mounting scrutiny over delays, funding gaps and climate-related risks ahead of the Games, particularly after a warm start to the winter raised doubts about snow reliability.

Eliasch said snow security remained partly dependent on weather conditions but stressed that organizers had the technical



Iran's Samaneh Beyrami Baher will compete in the women's cross-country competition at the Milano Cortina 2026 Winter Games.

capacity and resources in place to manage risks.

"We are in the hands of the gods

but you also need the resources for snow making, and the capabilities that are necessary here

are in place," Eliasch said. "So from that perspective ... it's all looking good."

## Esteghlal in advanced talks to sign ex-Lakers star Cook: Report



REX ARBOGAST/AP

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Iranian top-flight basketball club Esteghlal is closing in on a deal to sign former NBA point guard Quinn Cook, according to Iranian sports news website Varzesh3.

Should the deal go through, the 32-year-old American will be part of the Tehran Blues for the Iranian Basketball Super League playoffs. Esteghlal leads the 11-team table of the regular season with 11 wins from 14 games—level on 25 points with defending champion Shahrdari Gorgoan and third-placed Kaleh Amol.

Cook, who has been playing for Fujian Sturgeons in the Chinese

Basketball Association since last March, is a former player of several NBA franchises, including Dallas Mavericks, New Orleans Pelicans, Los Angeles Lakers, and Cleveland Cavaliers, winning the NBA title twice.

He was part of the Warriors' team that defeated the Cavaliers 4-0 in the 2018 NBA Finals, before repeating the success two years later with the Lakers—alongside LeBron James and Anthony Davis—thanks to a 4-2 victory over the Miami Heat.

"Cook is not just a deadly three-point marksman or a mere playmaker; he has a standout personality trait that is worth its weight

in gold for Esteghlal—a team full of young players waiting for a spark to push them beyond their limits. In basketball circles, Cook is known as someone who transforms the locker-room atmosphere and is famously dubbed a 'motivation bomb,' Varzesh3 wrote of the American. "He has previously shared the court with superstars such as LeBron James and Stephen Curry, and thanks to his distinctive character, he was considered a favorite teammate of theirs. Now, the presence of such a figure in Esteghlal's locker room could be truly inspiring for young players hungry for a spark and a role model, lifting the team's fighting spirit to its peak."