

Weight-class doubts loom for Yazdani after 97kg setback in Zagreb

Sports Desk

Questions surrounding Hassan Yazdani's bid for an elusive second Olympic gold at Los Angeles 2028 have intensified in recent days after the Iranian wrestling great suffered a comprehensive defeat to an unheralded American opponent in the freestyle 97kg final at the Zagreb Open last week.

Making his first international appearance since his 86kg final loss at the Paris Olympics 18 months ago, Yazdani – winner of a national-record 10 world and Olympic medals – appeared to be back to his familiar best as he cruised to three technical-superiority victories in the morning session to reach the final in his new weight class.

Yazdani also looked in control early in the title bout, taking a 2-1 lead into the break against Stephen Buchanan. However, he was handed a harsh reality check in the second period as the American landed a four-point suplex before powering to a shock 13-3 win, handing Yazdani the first technical-superiority defeat of his illustrious career.

Returning from a second surgery on his injured shoulder, Yazdani opted to test himself two weight classes higher, stepping up from his familiar 86kg category to 97kg in a bid to redefine the next phase of his ca-



Iran's Hassan Yazdani (L) is seen in action against American Stephen Buchanan in the freestyle 97kg final at the Zagreb Open in Zagreb, Croatia, on February 5, 2026. ● IAWF

reer. However, his performance in the Croatian capital suggested the transition may require more time — or possibly a re-think.

The final defeat exposed clear physical and tactical challenges at the new weight, raising immediate questions over whether 97kg is the right long-term category for the Iranian star.

However, Hemmat Moslemi, Yazdani's long-time mentor and

formative coach, insisted the Zagreb outing was always intended as an experiment rather than a definitive judgment.

"After being away from competition for a year and a half, Hassan had to start somewhere," Moslemi told Varzesh3. "He only wrestled in two bouts in the domestic league beforehand, and league bouts are nothing like international tournaments. He needed to understand how his

body responds after moving up to 97kg."

Moslemi also pointed to logistical challenges that disrupted preparation, including uncertainty over travel arrangements and late visa approvals. According to the coach, Yazdani did not know until the final days whether he would even be able to compete in Zagreb.

From a tactical standpoint, Moslemi was particularly critical of

Yazdani's approach in the final. He revealed that he had advised the Iranian star not to attempt underneath attacks against a physically stronger opponent – an advice that ultimately went unheeded.

"The first three minutes were good," Moslemi said. "But in the second period, he went underneath four times and was punished each time. The American wasn't better than Hassan.

Hassan lost because of his own tactical mistakes."

Moslemi went further, suggesting Yazdani should not have wrestled the final at all, arguing that the tournament's ranking points and gold medal carried little value compared to the risk of injury or a loss of confidence. Despite the criticism, Moslemi dismissed the idea that Yazdani should overhaul his wrestling style to suit the higher weight. "With this style, Hassan has won 10 Olympic and world medals. At this stage of the career, you don't change who you are," he said, while acknowledging that adjustments are inevitable when moving between weight classes. Looking ahead, Moslemi believes a move to 92kg could offer Yazdani a more realistic path, at least until the year before the Olympic Games. He revealed that Yazdani had no difficulty making weight in Zagreb and was well under the limit prior to the weigh-in.

"The 97kg division is crowded with elite contenders like Kyle Snyder, Abdulrashid Sadulaev and Akhmed Tazhudinov," Moslemi said. "Hassan can beat anyone, but 92kg suits him better right now."

For Moslemi, Yazdani's greatest strength has always been his willingness to listen and adapt – a quality he believes must guide the next decision in a career-defining period.

Iranian fencer Moradi wins historic World Cup gold



Iran's Hesam Moradi (2nd L) poses with his cadet gold medal on the podium at the Sabre Coupe du Monde event in Dakar, Senegal, on February 12, 2026. ● irfnc.ir

Sports Desk

Young Iranian fencer Hesam Moradi claimed a historic men's gold medal in the cadet category at the Sabre Coupe du Monde event in Dakar, Senegal, on Thursday.

The 16-year-old prodigy capped his landmark campaign with a 15-12 victory over Ecuador's Jose Daniel Valencia Olmedo in the final, clinching Iran's first-ever Sabre World Cup gold medal at

the cadet level.

Moradi won four of his five bouts to finish fifth overall in the pool standings and advance to the round of 16, where he defeated Ishak Dali 15-4.

A 15-11 victory over Kenya's Kinoti Kiara then sent Moradi into the semifinals, before the Iranian edged Mexico's Nathan Mungia 15-13 to book his place in the final. Mungia and Tunisia's Mohamed Hedi El Ghanja shared the bronze medal.

Shahdab's Behnejad suspended 'until further notice' by Iranian federation

Sports Desk

Shahdab Yazd setter Arshia Behnejad has been suspended "until further notice," the League Organization of the Iranian Volleyball Federation announced late on Thursday. The suspension – pending a Disciplinary Committee hearing – was imposed over the 22-year-old's "behavioral misconduct, use of abusive language, and protests deemed excessive and outside accepted norms" during Shahdab's Iranian Volleyball Premier League clash against Razin Polymer on Thursday.

Shahdab withstood Razin's fight-back to secure a 3-2 victory (25-23, 23-25, 25-22, 21-25, 15-9) and remain second behind Foolad Sirjan in the top-flight standings, with 13 wins and 38 points from 15 regular-season matches.

The closing stages of the contest



Shahdab Yazd setter Arshia Behnejad is pictured in action during a 3-2 victory over Razin Polymer in the Iranian Volleyball Premier League in Tehran, Iran, on February 12, 2026. ● volleyball.ir

were marred by heated protests from players on both sides over officiating decisions, leading to chaotic scenes.

A world under-21 champion with Iran in 2023, Behnejad played an

integral role for the senior national team under Italian head coach Roberto Piazza during last year's Volleyball Nations League, where Iran finished eighth in the preliminary standings, as well as in

its quarterfinal run at the World Championship in the Philippines.

Elsewhere in the latest round of league fixtures, defending champion Foolad Sirjan cruised to a straight-sets victory (25-15, 25-13, 25-18) over Mes Rafsanjan to tighten its grip on top spot with 14 wins and 40 points.

Foolad Mobarakeh Sepahan defeated Shahrdari Urmia 3-0 (33-31, 25-16, 25-17) to climb to third place with 11 wins and 32 points, leapfrogging Chadormalou, which also has 11 victories but fell to a 3-1 defeat (25-22, 25-17, 28-30, 25-19) against sixth-placed Paykan.

San'atgaran Omid and Mehregan Noor, meanwhile, overcame Tabiat Eslamshahr and Esteghlal Gonbad in straight sets, respectively, to move into seventh and eighth in the standings and remain in contention for a place in the end-of-season playoffs.

Iran's Vafaei qualifies for 2026 World Open

Sports Desk

Iranian snooker player Hossein Vafaei secured a place at the 2026 World Open – which begins on March 16 in Yushan, China – after defeating China's Lan Yuhao in the qualifying round in Barnsley, England, on Thursday.

The 17-year-old Chinese compiled breaks of 121 and 117, but those were the only frames he claimed, as Vafaei sealed a 5-2 victory.

Vafaei's fellow Iranian Amir

Sarkhosh was also in qualifying action on Thursday but suffered a 5-4 defeat to China's He Guoqiang, missing out on a spot in next month's World Snooker Tour event.

The biggest upset of the qualifiers saw Chinese star Ding Junhui miss out on competing on home soil. The 2017 champion went down 5-2 to Hong Kong's Marco Fu, who made breaks of 86 and 91 before sealing victory with a 116.

Ding, who has now lost his last four matches on the cir-

cuit, will not play again until the World Championship in April and faces an anxious wait to see whether he retains a seeded place in the main draw at the Crucible Theatre. Fans in Yushan can look forward to a star-studded first round featuring defending champion John Higgins, world champion Zhao Xintong, world number one Judd Trump, seven-time world champion Ronnie O'Sullivan, and China's number two Xiao Guodong.

