

# The weight of expectation: Can Qassempour finally conquer 86kg?

## Sports Desk

While some of the world's best freestyle wrestlers prepare to battle at the second UWW Ranking Series event of the season in Tirana this week, one of the most scrutinized figures in Iranian wrestling won't even be on the plane. Kamran Qassempour, the two-time world champion, is sitting this one out. And in his absence, a host of hungry contenders in the 86kg weight class are set to take the mat, reshaping the division Qassempour is desperate to call his own. The 86kg category has long been hallowed ground for Iranian wrestling, forever associated with the legendary Hassan Yazdani. But with Yazdani's permanent move to 97kg, the spotlight has shifted firmly onto Qassempour. His mission is clear: reclaim the weight class for Iran. However, his path is littered with obstacles, and his decision to skip the Muhamet Malo tournament in the Albanian capital raises pressing questions about his future.

## A history of instability

Qassempour's career has been defined by extraordi-

nary success, but also by a frustrating lack of stability. After years of waiting in the wings behind Yazdani at 86kg, he made the bold decision to move to 92kg. It paid off spectacularly. Qassempour conquered the division, capturing back-to-back world gold medals in 2021 and 2022. But the 92kg category carries a fatal flaw: it is not an Olympic weight. Forced to choose between his title and a shot at Olympic glory, Qassempour bulked up to 97kg. The move proved disastrous. Unable to adapt to the division's giants, he failed to secure a quota for the Paris 2024 Olympics, a bitter blow for an athlete of his caliber. Now, with Paris in the rearview mirror, Qassempour has returned to his roots at 86kg. But homecoming has not been kind. At the World Championships and the Islamic Solidarity Games last year, he could only manage bronze medals. For a wrestler of his pedigree, and for a nation with Iran's standards, bronze is not enough.

## Ghosts of Albania

The upcoming ranking series in Tirana will feature a murderer's row of talent at



Iranian freestyle wrestler Kamran Qassempour (blue) is seen in action during a training session in Tehran, Iran, on February 21, 2026.   
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86kg, many of whom could become Qassempour's biggest hurdles in 2026. The American challenge remains formidable. In Tirana, all eyes will be on Kyle Dake. A multiple-time world and Olympic medalist, Dake is stepping up from his traditional 74kg to test the waters at 86kg. His technical mastery makes him an im-

mediate threat.

Then there is the ghost of defeats past. Azerbaijan's Arsenii Dzhioev handed Qassempour a painful loss at the Islamic Solidarity Games last November. Dzhioev will be on the mat in Albania, looking to prove that victory was no fluke. Russian Ibragim Kadiev, another entrant, has already scouted the com-

petition firsthand, having recently dominated in the Iranian domestic league. Adding to the chaos are two more high-profile weight jumpers. Georgios Kougioumtsidis of Greece, the reigning world champion at 79kg, is moving up to a new class. Georgia's Vladimir Gamkrelidze, a former world silver medalist, is also

vacating his 79kg position for a shot at 86kg. While these contenders sharpen their skills in Albania, Qassempour will be watching from home, preparing for a different assignment.

## The road ahead

The Iranian coaching staff has mapped out a deliberate path for their star. With no competitive outings in 2026 so far, Qassempour is being held back for the Asian Championships in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in April. The plan is clear: a dominant performance there would stake his claim for a spot at the World Championships later this year.

But the strategy carries risk. While Qassempour waits, his rivals are building momentum and gaining invaluable competitive reps. The 86kg division is evolving rapidly, and the wrestlers who perform well in Albania will arrive at future tournaments with confidence and data.

There are also lingering questions about Qassempour's physique. Wrestling insiders have noted his muscular build, and competing at 86kg — a weight that requires significant cut-

ting — could place immense strain on his body over the long grind toward the next Olympic cycle.

## A season of redemption

For Qassempour, 2026 is a season of reckoning. The two bronze medals of last year are not befitting of his talent, and he knows it. He has proven he can win world titles — but that was at 92kg. Now, back in the weight class he once left behind, he must confront a new generation of hungry contenders.

The competition in Albania will not decide Qassempour's fate, but it will set the tone for the year ahead. By the time he steps on the mat in Bishkek, his rivals will already be battle-hardened. For Iranian wrestling fans, the hope is that Qassempour can finally break the bronze-medal streak, silence the doubters, and reclaim the 86kg throne. The tools are there. The question is whether he can put them all together when it matters most.

The season is just beginning, but for Qassempour, the weight of expectation has never been heavier.

## Italian Manicone leaves Iran coaching staff for Serie A strugglers Pisa

## Sports Desk

Italian Antonio Manicone has left his role as an assistant to Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee to join Serie A club Pisa, which is currently mired in a desperate fight to avoid relegation.

Manicone joined the Iranian coaching staff in June 2023 and was with the Asian powerhouse at AFC Asian Cup in 2024, where Iran reached the semifinals before bowing out to host Qatar, as well as a success-

ful qualification campaign for the 2026 World Cup.

According to Italian media reports, including Calcio Pisa, Manicone will serve as the No. 1 to young Swedish head coach, Oscar Hilje-mark. To finalize the move, Manicone had to terminate his contract with Team Melli, a process that concluded without any major official announcement from Iranian football authorities.

Manicone returns to a familiar environment. He began his playing

career at Inter and Udinese and later coached within Inter's youth system. He has also served on the staff of Vladimir Petkovic at Lazio and with the Swiss national team, in addition to a stint at Bordeaux in France.

His arrival at Pisa, which currently sits 19th in the Serie A table, is seen as a strategic move to bolster the coaching staff with experience. Italian outlet Sesta Porta notes that his extensive knowledge of Italian football and his international

background — including what it describes as one of the most sensitive periods of his career with Iran — are expected to provide a crucial balance to Hilje-mark's youthful energy as the club navigates its crisis. For Manicone, the move marks a return home after a period in the very different environment of Iranian football. For Pisa, his arrival is a bet on experience to steady a sinking ship, with every point now vital for survival in Italy's top flight.



● FFIRI

## Sepahan hold second place after win over Esteghlal Khuzestan

## Sports Desk

Sepahan secured a 3-1 home victory over Esteghlal Khuzestan and is currently in second place in the Iran Pro League, level on points with Esteghlal but behind on goal difference.

The Week 22 encounter was played at Naghsh-e Jahan Stadium, just days after Sepahan's elimination from the AFC Champions League Round of 16. Eager to respond, the hosts began the match with intensity and purpose.

Esteghlal Khuzestan struck first in the 8th minute, as Amirhossein Jalalvand found the net to give the visitors an early advantage under head coach Amir Khalifeh-Asl. The lead held until the closing moments of the first half, when Arash Rezaevand equalized for Sepahan just before the break, sending both teams into halftime level at 1-1, IRNA wrote.



● akharinkhabar.ir

Sepahan controlled possession and territory throughout the first half and maintained their dominance after the restart. Their pressure paid off in the 68th minute, when Kaveh Rezaei curled in a stunning free kick to put the hosts ahead.

Late drama followed in the final minutes. In the 88th minute, after a VAR review, referee Shobeir Behroozi awarded Sepahan a penalty, but Ricardo Alves saw his

spot kick saved by goalkeeper Mohammadjavad Kia to keep the score at 2-1. Moments later, Aria Yousefi was shown a straight red card for a heavy challenge, though the decision was overturned to a yellow after another VAR review. Deep into stoppage time, Esteghlal Khuzestan conceded a second penalty. Alves stepped up again and calmly converted to seal Sepahan's 3-1 victory.

## Shahdab, Sanatgaran Omid, Paykan win in Week 19 of volleyball league

## Sports Desk

In Week 19 of the Iranian Premier Volleyball League, Shahdab, Sanatgaran Omid, and Paykan secured victories over their respective opponents, maintaining strong positions in the standings. According to IRNA, the match between Pas Gorgan and Shahdab Yazd took place on February 23

in the late Mohammadreza Yazdani-Khorram Hall. Pas Gorgan, who had delivered impressive results in recent weeks, won the first set 25-19. However, Shahdab responded with a more cohesive performance, taking the second set 27-25 to level the match. Shahdab continued their momentum in the third and fourth sets, winning

25-22 and 25-23, respectively, to secure a 3-1 victory. The first-leg encounter between the teams had ended with the same 3-1 result in favor of Shahdab. With this win, Shahdab reached 39 points, retaining their second-place position in the league standings. Meanwhile, at the Tehran Volleyball House, Sanatgaran Omid faced Esteghlal Gonbad. Sanatgaran

emerged victorious 3-1, marking their tenth win of the season and reaching 30 points. With Urmia Municipality resting this week, the team moved up to sixth place in the league table.

Esteghlal Gonbad, who had beaten Sanatgaran 3-1 in the first-leg match, managed to win only the third set 26-25 in today's game but lost the first, second, and fourth sets 25-22, 25-15, and 25-17, respectively. This defeat marked their fifteenth loss of the season, keeping them at the bottom of the table.

In another match at Shahid Bezaei Hall in Eslamshahr, Paykan faced Mehrگان Noor. Paykan won decisively 3-0, registering their twelfth victory of the season and reaching 34 points. Mehrگان Noor lost all three sets 25-22, 25-20, and 25-23, marking their eleventh defeat of the season.



Paykan players celebrating an important moment on the field.   
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