

Asian Wrestling Championships: Valizadeh ends 57kg curse as Iran bags three freestyle medals

Sports Desk

Milad Valizadeh headlined Iran's medal hunt on the penultimate day of the Asian Wrestling Championships by claiming the freestyle 57kg gold in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on Saturday.

A silver medalist at the competition last year, Valizadeh defeated Mongolia's Munkh Erdene Batkhuyag 14-3 to grab the first gold medal for the country in this weight class since Reza Atri's triumph in 2019.

Batkhuyag suffered an apparent rib injury while scoring a stepout midway through the first period, which cut Valizadeh's lead to 4-3. After the restart, Valizadeh shot in for a takedown, at which point Batkhuyag seemed to have stopped fighting.

But Valizadeh didn't, and flipped the lifeless Batkhuyag back and forth until he piled up enough points for a superiority



victory that ended the match at 1:47.

To be fair, the referee never blew the whistle, and Valizadeh was

under no obligation to stop. And after the initial boos, the crowd



Milad Valizadeh celebrates with the Iranian flag after winning the freestyle 57kg gold medal at the Asian Wrestling Championships in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on April 11, 2026.

● KEYVAN GHAREHDAGHI/UWW

actually applauded when he celebrated his victory with a gymnastics backflip.

There were further medals for the Iranians on Saturday, as Amir-Ali Azarpira settled for silver in the 97kg class after being stunned by Japan's Arash Yoshida in the final.

In a battle of world medalists, Yoshida outlasted Olympic bronze winner Azarpira, notching a second-period takedown for the key score in a 4-0 victory.

Yoshida's victory secured a second gold for Japan on Saturday, following Keyvan Gharehdaghi's 79kg crown – both won by wrestlers born and raised in Japan with Iranian fathers.

Neither wrestler could make inroads early on, as Yoshida received an activity point for the lone score of the first period.

In the second period, Azarpira launched an attack, but Yoshida sprawled and started to work his way behind. When Azarpira tried to get to his feet, Yoshida deftly lunged for an ankle and sent the Iranian to the mat for a takedown and a 3-0 lead. A penalty for hands to the face accounted for Yoshida's final point.

At last year's World Championships in Zagreb, Yoshida took a bronze medal after losing in the semifinals to American great Kyle Snyder, who then beat Azarpira for the gold.

Sina Khalili, meanwhile, took home his second straight 70kg bronze with a one-sided 11-0 win over Shakhzodbek Yarashev of Uzbekistan, which included a 4-point takedown in the second period, as Iran collected three medals across five weight classes. Elsewhere, Peyman Ne'mati suffered a first-round exit in the 65kg division following a 6-4 setback against the host's Rustamzhan Kakharov.

Mahdi Yousefi, who stepped into the 79kg competition as the defending champion, finished empty-handed in Bishkek, falling to a 5-2 defeat against Olympic champion Razambek Jamalov of Uzbekistan in the quarterfinals.

AFC Champions League Elite: Tractor to face uphill test in last 16

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League champion Tractor FC will face a daunting task when it resumes AFC Champions League Elite action against Emirati club Shabab Al Ahli in Jeddah on Tuesday.

The last-16 game at the Prince Abdullah Al Faisal Sports City will end weeks of speculation and uncertainty swirling around the Iranian top-flight side's future in the continent's elite club competition.

In late March, Iran's Sports Ministry prohibited the country's national and club teams from visiting "hostile countries, where the security of Iranian athletes cannot be guaranteed," amid a regional military conflict between Iran and a U.S.-Israeli coalition.

However, Tractor was later given the green light to travel to Jeddah after a two-week ceasefire went into effect in the early hours of last Wednesday.

Tractor has still endured a hampered preparation ahead



● AFC

of the knockout-stage clash. The Iranian side left the country by road on Saturday, having trained for two days in Iran with just 13 players, as the team's foreign recruits – along with Iranian internationals Amirhossein Hosseinzadeh and Shoja Khalilzadeh – were not present in Iran. The team arrived in Turkey on Saturday night before flying to Jeddah on Sunday. Ultimately, Tractor is set to hold a light, low-intensity

training session today to prepare for Tuesday's match. While Tractor has been out of action for over 40 days, Shabab Al Ahli, in contrast, has played several competitive matches during this period and is fully match-fit for the game, which will be a rematch of the 1-1 draw on the opening day of the league phase last September in Dubai.

Tractor has also lacked proper group training sessions, and the absence of foreign

players from those sessions has made head coach Mohammad Rabiei's job even harder.

However, the good news for the Iranian coach was that integral foreigners Regi Lushkja, Aleksandar Sedlar, Tibor Halilović, Odildzhon Khamrobekov, Tomislav Štrkalj, and Swedish goalkeeper Marko Johansson joined the Tractor camp in Turkey on Saturday and will be available to feature on Tuesday.

Tractor won five and lost one of eight games in the West zone's league stage, finishing third in the 12-team table with 17 points, while the Emirati champion stood sixth with 11 points.

Elsewhere in the rescheduled last-16 round, in a Saudi-Qatari double-header, Riyadh-based heavyweight Al Hilal will take on Al Sadd on Monday, with Al Ahli Saudi and Al Duhail squaring off earlier in the day.

Saudi Pro League champion Al Ittihad and the UAE's Al Wahda go head-to-head on Tuesday.

Iranian top flight unlikely to resume, volleyball chief says

Sports Desk

The Iranian Volleyball Premier League is unlikely to resume, Milad Taqavi, the chairman of the country's Volleyball Federation, announced on Sunday.

All domestic top-flight fixtures in the regular season have been halted following the U.S.-Israeli aggression on Iran on February 8. Although the federation had recently announced that matches would resume on April 4 in a centralized format, the ongoing circumstances have made it impossible to proceed, the head of the sport's national governing body said.

"Clubs have announced that they cannot continue their training sessions, and the situation remains unclear," Taqavi told ISNA. "As a result, I doubt the league



● VARZESH

will continue." When asked whether the champion would be declared based on the current standings, Taqavi responded: "We need to make decisions regarding the champion as well as relegation and promotion. Once the situation improves, we will try to hold a consultation meeting and make a decision on the mat-

ter." Defending champion Foolad Sirjan tops the league table with 16 wins from 18 games, followed by Shahdab Yazd and Paykan, who have won 15 and 13 games, respectively. Sepahan, Chadormalou, Shahr-dari Urmia, San'atgaran Omid, and Mehregan Noor complete the top eight in the 13-team table.

Iran eyeing strong performance at Asian Gymnastics Championships

Sports Desk

Iran's men's artistic gymnastics head coach, Reza Kheirkhah, has emphasized the importance of a strong performance at the AGU Asian Championships in June.

The 13th edition of the competition, which will kick off in Zunyi, China, on June 18, will also serve as a qualification path for the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games in September.

"Previously, all countries could participate in the

Asian Games without restrictions. However, a decision by the Asian Gymnastics Union now means only the top 10 teams on the continent will earn berths for the showpiece event in China," Kheirkhah told IRNA.

"The squad's first two training camps were held before the Persian New Year holidays (late March). The first camp lasted 14

days and featured 17 gymnasts, offering high-quality training.

"A selection round was then held, and several athletes were cut. The second camp took place in Japan – a change that has doubled the importance of precise planning and preparation for the event in China," Kheirkhah explained.

Referring to the country's recent difficult circumstances, Kheirkhah explained, "Due to the



● OCA

wartime conditions, many gyms were closed for a

while, and athletes were away from training for

about one to two months. That is why we decided to invite 14 gymnasts to the new camp in Gonbad, where the focus will be on regaining fitness rather than holding a selection round."

He continued, "Under such conditions, you cannot expect a selection performance from an athlete who has been away from training for some time. We will try to hold a selection round at the next camp and finalize the squad for the China competition. We

also plan to reduce the number of athletes to improve training quality and individual attention."

The latest national team camp began on Saturday, with Mahdi Ahmad Kohani, Mahdi Olfati, Mohammadreza Khosronejad, Abolfazl Nikkha, Ali-Asghar Asadi, Ali Asadi, Amirmohammad Qorbani, Siavash Siah, Arman Khodaei, Hooman Jafari, Amirmohammad Rahmani, Amirabbas Mojahed, and Mohammadreza Hamidi taking part in training.