

Yazdani vs. Azarpira to headline Iran's freestyle trials for World Championships

Sports Desk

All eyes will be on a highly anticipated 97kg showdown when Hassan Yazdani and Amirali Azarpira face off in a best-of-three series for a place in Iran's freestyle squad for October's Wrestling World Championships in Astana.

With seven wrestlers having already secured their spots for the Kazakh capital, the remaining three places in the 74kg, 92kg and 97kg divisions will be decided at the national team trials, held on the sidelines of the International Takhti Cup in Kerman. Despite their combined international success, both Yazdani and Azarpira will enter the trials looking to bounce back from disappointing outings in their most recent major competitions. Sidelined for 18 months by a shoulder injury he sustained in his 86kg final defeat at the Paris 2024 Olympics, Yazdani - winner of a national-record 10 world and Olympic medals - marked his return to the mat with two emphatic victories on the final day

of the Iranian Wrestling Premier League last December.

However, the decorated Iranian received a harsh reality check at the Zagreb Open Ranking Series event in February, raising doubts over his pursuit of an elusive second Olympic gold medal at Los Angeles 2028.

Yazdani appeared to be back to his best in the Croatian capital, cruising to three technical-superiority victories in the morning session to reach the final. He looked in control early in the title bout, taking a 2-1 lead into the break against Stephen Buchanan, only for the American to storm back with a dominant second-period display and secure a shock 13-3 victory. The defeat marked the first technical-superiority loss of Yazdani's illustrious career.

Azarpira, meanwhile, enjoyed an impressive 2025 campaign, adding a world silver medal to his Paris Olympic bronze before claiming gold at the Islamic Sol-

idarity Games. However, April's Asian Championships proved one to forget for the 24-year-old, who settled for silver after a 4-0 defeat to Japan's Arash Yoshida in the final.

With Russian great Abdurashid Sadulaev, American world champion Kyle Snyder and Bahrain's Olympic gold medalist Akhmed

Tazhudinov all expected to feature in a star-studded 97kg field, whoever emerges victorious from Friday's trials will be looking to launch a statement campaign in Astana ahead of the Olympic Games two years from now.

The other two divisions being contested in the Iranian trials

also boast plenty of international pedigree, with all four wrestlers having won medals across various age groups and senior-level events in recent years.

In the 74kg division, Younes Emami and Amirmohammad Yazdani, who share eight senior world and Asian medals between them, will square off in a rematch of last year's trial at the Ulaanbaatar Open. Emami came out on top on that occasion to secure a place at the World Championships, though he ultimately fell short of the podium in Zagreb after losing the bronze-medal match.

Amirmohammad Yazdani also endured a disappointing Asian Championships campaign by Iranian standards, finishing with bronze after a quarter-final defeat to eventual champion Yoshinosuke Aoyagi of Japan.

The 92kg category, meanwhile, has developed into one of the country's most compelling domestic rivalries, featuring Amirhossein

Firouzpour and Mohammad-Mobin Azimi.

A winner of five age-group world titles since 2019, Firouzpour defeated Azimi to earn a place at the 2025 World Championships, where he marked his debut at the global showpiece with a bronze medal.

Azimi responded in impressive fashion, capturing the world under-23 title later that year before claiming gold medals at both the Zagreb Open and the Asian Championships during the 2026 season.

The winners of Friday's deciders will join reigning world champions Rahman Amouzad (65kg) and Amirhossein Zare' (125kg), alongside Milad Valizadeh (57kg), Ahmad Mohammadnejad Javan (61kg), Sina Khalili (70kg), Mohammad Nokhodi (79kg) and two-time world champion Kamran Qasempour (86kg) in Iran's 10-man squad for the World Championships. The defeated wrestlers, meanwhile, will have an opportunity to represent the country at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in September.



Freestyle wrestlers Hassan Yazdani (l) and Amirali Azarpira will go head-to-head for Iran's 97kg spot at October's World Championships.
● IAWFIR

Iran missed 'golden opportunity' against New Zealand, Jalali says

By Sadeq Dehqan
Staff writer

INTERVIEW

Iran squandered "a golden opportunity" to boost its chances of reaching the knockout stage of the 2026 FIFA World Cup after settling for a 2-2 draw against New Zealand, according to football expert and former coach Majid Jalali.

"The most important priority in the remaining group-stage matches against Belgium and Egypt should be avoiding goals and strengthening our defensive structure," Jalali told Iran Daily.

The veteran analyst praised the efforts of the Iranian players in their opening group-stage fixture, noting the difficult circumstances under which the team entered the tournament.

"If we want to be fair, we have to acknowledge that the players went into this match under tremendous pressure," he said.

"They had a difficult journey to get there, lacked a proper preparation camp and did not play enough quality friendly matches. Despite all that, they delivered a respectable performance and deserve appreciation. The conditions facing our national team were not comparable to those of many of the other teams in the tournament." Nevertheless, Jalali believes Iran should have secured all three points against New Zealand.

"Looking at New Zealand, I felt that even under these circumstances we had the ability to beat them," he said. "Iranian football has the necessary quality, provided that better decisions are made based on available data and analysis and that the team approaches the match with a different mindset."

Jalali questioned the starting lineup selected by the coaching staff, arguing that Iran should have adopted a more aggressive approach from the outset.

"Although four substitutions were made during the match, I believe the starting lineup could have been stronger and allowed us to put more pressure on the opponent from the beginning," he said. "We needed more technically gifted and creative players on the field. Players such as Mahdi Qayedi and other attack-minded footballers could have offered greater creativity and helped us take the initiative."

"It is a pity because we missed a very good opportunity to collect a full three points and significantly improve our chances



Iran's Mohammad Mohebbi scores their second goal past New Zealand's Max Crocombe during a FIFA World Cup match in Los Angeles Stadium, Inglewood, California, US on June 15, 2026.
● REUTERS

of progressing," the former Football Federation technical director said. "Some of the coaching staff's assumptions were understandable because New Zealand was a relatively unfamiliar opponent and there was limited information available. But if we were aiming to qualify from this group, this was clearly the match we needed to win."

Jalali also highlighted weaknesses in Iran's midfield balance, arguing that the team lacked sufficient defensive protection in front of the back line. "To win matches like this, you first need to make sure you do not concede," he said. "In midfield, only Saeid Ezzatollahi provided the defensive resilience required for such a

game, and that was not enough. We needed at least one more ball-winning midfielder alongside him. Players such as Roozbeh Cheshmi, Amirmohammad Razzaqinia or even Ehsan Hajisafi could have helped strengthen the middle of the pitch."

According to Jalali, Iran's defensive shortcomings were exposed whenever possession was lost.

"We already knew that the team had defensive issues," he said. "When the midfield is unable to win duels and intercept passes, those problems become even more obvious. Every time

contribute more defensively. In the remaining games, the main objective must be not conceding goals."

Jalali also commented on the inclusion of less-established players such as Shahriar Moghanlou and Arya Yousefi in the starting lineup.

"These players have not often been used in the starting eleven before, but there are always factors inside training camps that outsiders do not see," he said. "The coaching staff undoubtedly has more information than anyone else and understands the reasons behind those decisions."

Assessing the performances of Iran's key players, Jalali said midfielder Saman Qoddous fell short of expectations, while Ezzatollahi and striker Mahdi Taremi delivered relatively solid displays.

Despite his concerns, Jalali insisted Iran's hopes of advancing remain alive.

"We missed a golden opportunity against New Zealand, but football always leaves room for hope," he said. "We have players capable of improving the team's defensive stability if they are used properly. Against Belgium and Egypt, the most important thing is not conceding."

He added that the value of the point earned against New Zealand was limited given the strength of the remaining opposition.

"If we had earned this point against Belgium or Egypt, it would have been considered a very good result and our chances of qualification would have increased significantly," Jalali said. "The situation is different now because both Belgium and Egypt are capable of beating New Zealand. That makes it crucial for us to pick up points from the remaining two matches. Even two draws could potentially keep Iran in contention to advance as one of the best third-placed teams."

He was equally critical of the back line, describing Iran's defense as unbalanced. Looking ahead to fixtures against Belgium and Egypt, he warned that Iran could face greater difficulties against stronger opponents. "Imagine this defense facing teams such as Belgium and Egypt, who possess greater attacking quality," he said. "At this stage of the tournament, it is difficult to make major changes, but some of the problems can be addressed by strengthening the midfield and selecting wide players who

Iran eyes multiple taekwondo golds at Asian Games: Saei

Sports Desk

Iran will be targeting "not just one, but multiple gold medals" in taekwondo at the Aichi-Nagoya Asian Games in September, according to Iranian Taekwondo Federation president Hadi Saei.

The country's men's and women's national teams began preparations in Tehran on Tuesday, with Iran seeking its first taekwondo gold medals at the continental showpiece since the 2018 Asian Games in Jakarta, where Mirhashem Hosseini and Saeid Rajabi topped the podium in their respective men's weight classes.

"The Asian Games are our foremost target moving forward. It is an event of tremendous importance not only for us, but for the entire sporting community in the country," Saei said during the opening session of the men's training camp.

"The Ministry of Sport and the National Olympic Committee are counting heavily on taekwondo medals - particularly gold medals - and we share those expectations. We must win gold at these Games. In fact, our expectation is not just one gold medal, but multiple gold medals."

Saei, Iran's most decorated Olympian with two gold medals and one bronze, also reflected on the country's performance at the previous Asian Games.

"At the previous edition, we had three athletes reach the finals and felt we deserved to win gold medals. Unfortunately, a series of incidents and what we believed was flawed refereeing by the host nation prevented us from achieving that goal," he said.

Iran won three silver and two bronze medals in the men's competition at Hangzhou 2022, while the women's team collected two bronze medals in the kyorugi events and saw Marjan Salahshouri finish third

in the women's poomsae competition.

"Taekwondo medals will have a significant impact on Iran's position in the overall medal standings at the Asian Games," Saei said.

"In addition to South Korea, our main rivals include Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and several other countries competing with Iran in the medal table. That is why taekwondo gold medals carry added importance. Success in this sport could play a decisive role in improving Iran's final ranking at the Games."

With Payam Khanlarkhani at the helm as head coach, the Iranian men's squad features Olympic champion Arian Salimi and Olympic silver medalist Mehran Barkhordari, who won gold and silver respectively at the Paris Olympics, alongside reigning world and Asian champion Abolfazl Zandi.

The training camp also includes Mahdi Hajimousaei and Amirina Bakhtiari, who captured Asian titles last month, as well as Asian silver medalist Yassin Valizadeh, Asian bronze medalist Amirreza Sadeqian, Mohammadhossein Yazdani, Amirabbas Rahnama and Ali Najafi.

While Zandi (-58kg), Hajimousaei (-68kg) and Salimi (+80kg) have already secured their places at the Asian Games, the men's -80kg berth remains up for grabs in a four-way contest in the coming days.

Olympic silver medalist Nahid Kiani, fresh from winning Asian gold in May, headlines the Iranian women's squad, which also includes Asian bronze medalist Yalda Valinejad, Rozhan Goudarzi, Saina Karimi, Hasti Mohammadi, Saghar Moradi, Fereshteh Fathi, Baran Nemat, Fatemeh Amadi and reigning two-time world junior champion Hana Zarrinkamar. Iran's women's selection trials for the Asian Games will take place on Saturday.