

U17 Wrestling World Championships:

Iran FS coach hails future prospects despite missing out on team crown

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Sadeq Goudarzi blamed "individual errors" for his team's failure to win the freestyle team title at the U17 Wrestling World Championships in Baku last week, but highlighted several promising wrestlers he believes can go on to represent the senior national team.

A haul of three golds, one silver and two bronze medals across the 10 weight classes saw Iran finish runner-up with 145 points – just one point behind Russia, which was eligible for team points for the first time in five years.

Benjamin Ashofteh (51kg), Reza Shamsipour (71kg) and Amirali Ferasati (80kg) won gold in their respective categories, while Amirhossein Esmali settled for silver in the 110kg event, with Arman Elahi (55kg) and Sam Arshad (65kg) adding two bronzes. The impressive haul still proved insufficient for Iran to secure its first freestyle crown since 2023. Speaking to Mehr News Agency, Goudarzi said Iran faced a difficult draw from the outset but managed to overcome the challenges.

"Most of the Iranian wrestlers were drawn alongside Russian and American wrestlers in the same half of the bracket, but



Benjamin Ashofteh celebrates with the Iranian flag after winning the freestyle 51kg title at the U17 Wrestling World Championships in Baku, Azerbaijan, on August 2, 2026.

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gradually found their rhythm on the mat," Goudarzi said.

Goudarzi said most of the wrestlers performed according to plan but acknowledged that mistakes are common at the youth level.

"They followed the plan, but at this age group, there are always individual errors, and it is natural for the wrestlers to make mistakes. Unfortunately,

we made too many mistakes in some weight classes," he said.

"Instead of winning one or two bronze medals, we ended up with two fifth-place finishes and were eliminated in another weight class. These mistakes meant we lost the championship very easily."

Despite the disappointment, Goudarzi was pleased with his

niques on the mat.

The former world and Olympic silver medalist stressed that the team's objective went beyond winning medals, saying several wrestlers had emerged as potential future members of Iran's senior squad.

He singled out Ashofteh, Ferasati, Elahi and Arshad as promising prospects, while he was particularly impressed by Esmali, who he believes could eventually challenge for the superheavyweight spot in the senior national squad, currently occupied by world-class star Amirhossein Zare.

"We have introduced wrestlers who can certainly move closer to the senior national team once the current generation moves on and can even compete for a place in the national team," said Goudarzi.

"The level of competition, the atmosphere in the arena and the quality of the bouts were really high.

"In my opinion, this edition was no less impressive in terms of quality than the junior and even senior world championships. The arena was packed, and even the president of Azerbaijan was present during the 51kg final, with the fans passionately supporting their wrestlers."

Goudarzi recalled how Ashofteh

handled the pressure of wrestling an Azerbaijani opponent in front of a partisan crowd.

"I had been to so many competitions and thought to myself, 'How is this kid going to wrestle in this atmosphere?'" he said. "He was leading 1-0 at the end of the first period. During the 30-second break, I told him he needed to score a takedown and a gut wrench to win.

"Interestingly, he tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'That's exactly what I'll do.' And that is what happened."

Goudarzi, meanwhile, acknowledged the strength of the Russian team and the emergence of Azerbaijan as a serious contender.

"Russian wrestlers were in better shape than in previous years, and Azerbaijan is gradually becoming a serious contender as well," he said. "Despite all that, thankfully, we achieved a good result. It was really unfortunate that we lost the title in the final moments, but the world silver medal was the result of these kids' efforts."

Goudarzi insisted that developing young wrestlers must be an ongoing process, with athletes taught the fundamentals correctly before progressing to the junior and senior levels.

"Every year, we need to guide several U17 wrestlers toward the junior and then senior levels," he said. "They must learn the correct techniques from this age so that when they reach the junior and senior levels, they are fully prepared.

"Courage, confidence in executing techniques and all the basics are developed at the U17 level. At the junior and senior levels, the focus should then be on technical details and strategy."



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Nekounam set to replace Rabiei as Tractor head coach

Sports Desk

Former Iran international Javad Nekounam is set to be unveiled as the new head coach of Persian Gulf Pro League club Tractor following the shock departure of Mohammad Rabiei, according to Iranian media reports.

Following a lengthy meeting between Tractor CEO Hojjat Karimi and Rabiei on Saturday night, the two sides ultimately agreed to go their separate ways amid differences between the club hierarchy and the coach.

The decision, coming days before the start of the new top-flight season, brings an abrupt end to Rabiei's short spell on the Tractor bench. The former Khaybar and Zob Ahan coach replaced Croatian Dragan Skocic in February but was in charge for only three games.

Tractor defeated Golgozar 1-0 and drew 1-1 with Malavan, leaving the team second in the table before the Iranian league was suspended due to wartime circumstances in the country.

The Tabriz-based club then suffered a 3-0 defeat to UAE side Shabab Al Ahli in the AFC Champions League Elite round of 16 in April.

Nekounam, meanwhile, has reportedly entered advanced talks with Tractor over the role. He has been without a club since leaving Esteghlal in June 2024, after guiding the Tehran giants to a runner-up finish behind archrivals Persepolis in the domestic league.

Tractor, who will represent Iran in the upcoming AFC Champions League Elite, will begin their domestic campaign against Paykan at home on Friday.

Zarrinkamar spearheads Iran's Olympic taekwondo rankings

Sports Desk

Teenage prodigy Hana Zarrinkamar has emerged as the highest-ranked Iranian in the latest Olympic rankings released by World Taekwondo.

The 17-year-old sensation, who won a second successive world junior title in April before claiming an impressive gold medal at the Korea Open last month, sits second behind Russia's Anastasiia Kosmycheva in the women's +67kg category with 60 points.

Elsewhere in the women's rankings, Nahid Kiani, who won Iran's first women's Olympic silver medal in taekwondo at Paris 2024, is ranked 42nd in the -57kg



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class with 12 points. In the men's -58kg division, reigning world champion Abolfazl Zandi and Yasin Valizadeh, who claimed gold and silver, respectively, at May's Asian Championships, share 22nd place with 20

points each, while Mahdi Hajmousaei, also an Asian gold medalist, is 21st in the -68kg category, also with 20 points. Olympic gold medalist Arian Salimi shares 15th place in the men's +80kg division with fellow Iranian Moham-

mad Hossein Yazdani, with both athletes having 20 points.

World Taekwondo reset the Olympic rankings at the beginning of June, meaning the current standings are based solely on points earned since then.

Iranian athletes' relatively low positions are largely attributed to their absence from June's Grand Prix event in Rome due to the war in the country. Their only ranking points so far have come from the Korea Open.

Further appearances at ranking events are expected to improve the positions of Iran's representatives as they continue their qualification campaign for the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics.

Iranian Eckert at the double in Belgian top-flight opener

Sports Desk

Iranian international striker Dennis Eckert Dargahi opened his new club campaign in style, scoring twice as Standard Liège played to a 2-2 draw at home against Cercle Brugge on the opening day of the Belgian Pro League season.

Eckert headed home deep into first-half stoppage time to cancel out Lukas Mondelle's 41st-minute strike for the visitors, then lobbed goalkeeper Gaëtan Coucke three minutes after the break

to put his team in front.

Cercle Brugge still managed to salvage a point through Christiaan Ravych's equalizer with two minutes remaining of normal time.

Eckert, who received his first international call-up in March, was part of Iran's squad at the FIFA World Cup in North America but missed the 2-2 draw against New Zealand due to injury. He was then an unused substitute in the following stalemates against Belgium (0-0) and Egypt (1-1), as Team Melli finished third in Group G and

missed out on a place in the knockout stage.

The decision to name Eckert, who scored seven goals in 37 appearances across all competitions for the Belgian outfit last season, in the World Cup squad drew considerable criticism of Iran head coach Amir Qalenoee among fans and pundits in the country.

Qalenoee, however, attributed the former Germany U19 player's lack of contribution to an untimely injury he suffered during Iran's training camp in Turkey before the World Cup.



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