

Sports Desk

If there were to be a search for a marquee division at the 2026 UWW Wrestling World Championships in Astana, it would be hard to look past the freestyle 97kg category, where four of the biggest names in world wrestling will battle it out for the top prize.

Between them, American Kyle Snyder, Russia's Abdulrashid Sadulaev, Akhmed Tazhudinov of Bahrain and Iran's Hassan Yazdani hold five Olympic gold medals and 14 world titles. Over the past 11 years, every world title in this weight class has been won by either Snyder, Sadulaev or Tazhudinov.

Of these four champions, it is probably Yazdani, making his World Championships debut at this weight, who will find it hardest. Yazdani won his Olympic title at 74kg in 2016 before winning three world titles at 86kg and now moving up to 97kg.

A second Olympic gold has proved elusive for the Iranian sensation after successive final defeats against his familiar American foe David Taylor and Bulgaria's Magomed Ramazanov at Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024, respectively. With Los Angeles 2028 two years away, Yazdani has moved up two weight classes – after returning from an 18-month injury layoff last year – to compete in the Olympic 97kg category ahead of chasing the ultimate prize at the sporting extravaganza.

He secured his place at the World Championships by beating Olympic bronze medalist Amirali Azarpira twice in the national team trials. While that result shows he will be a threat, Yazdani's form will be tested in a division that has no shortage of challengers.

None are greater than Snyder and Sadulaev. For the better part of the last decade, the 97kg class has been synonymous with the rivalry between the two. The American, who



L-R: American Kyle Snyder, Iran's Hassan Yazdani, Russia's Abdulrashid Sadulaev, and Bahrain's Akhmed Tazhudinov will feature in the freestyle 97kg field at the Wrestling World Championships. ● UWW

Wrestling World Championships: All eyes on stacked 97kg field as Yazdani enters new territory

won his third world title in 2022, made a resurgence of sorts by winning world gold in 2025.

Sadulaev, who won his last world title at 97kg in 2021 before dropping to 92kg to claim his sixth world gold in 2024, had begun his return to the weight class impressively. He won the Muhamet Malo Ranking Series in February and later claimed gold at the European Championships. He will arrive in Astana with something to prove against his longtime rival.

Tazhudinov, the 2023 world and 2024 Olympic champion, has had a mixed run. He finished third at the 2025 World Championships and the 2026 Asian Championships. He bounced back to win the Buda-

pest Ranking Series in July.

But why assume that the 97kg division will be a four-way fight for gold? Over the past few months, Japan's Arash Yoshida has emerged as a genuine dark horse looking to upset the established order. The 22-year-old won the Asian Championships in April, beating Tazhudinov emphatically before defeating Azarpira 4-0 in the final, though he lost 4-3 to the Iranian in the semifinals of the Asian Games. He will be itching to put that result behind him.

Snyder, who has never locked horns with Yazdani throughout their illustrious careers, hopes the two wrestling greats will cross paths when the 97kg competition gets underway in the Kazakh capital on Thursday.

"I spoke with Yazdani maybe a month ago, and we both said it would be great to compete against each other at this tournament, so hopefully it happens," Snyder said at a press conference on Friday.

"I think that this is the deepest weight class that I've ever wrestled in in my life," Snyder said. "There are a lot of really tough guys in the weight class. That's what makes it exciting." It is not hard to see what has gotten the juices flowing for the 30-year-old two-time Olympic medalist.

As the top seed, Snyder faces a potential quarterfinal clash with longtime nemesis Sadulaev, who will be chasing a seventh world gold.

What remains unknown is whom Snyder will have to beat

first to reach the quarterfinals. And, as he pointed out at the press conference at Barys Arena, any one of a number of unseeded wrestlers is capable of taking down the reigning champion in the first round.

Topping that list is Yazdani. Snyder said he was impressed with Yazdani, adding that the Iranian appeared to have no difficulty making the transition in terms of power.

"When I watched him wrestle Azarpira, I didn't see any difference between the two. Both looked similar in regard to strength, and I think Azarpira is one of the strongest guys in the weight class," Snyder said.

"I wrestled Yazdani one time in practice, for about 20 minutes," Snyder said. "It was many years ago, so we haven't

wrestled in a while."

Still, he knows that Yazdani could not have accomplished what he has without possessing what Snyder called "the will of a champion."

"He's so determined, he's so resilient. I think about all the things that he has gone through and experienced in his career. All of the legends that he has defeated. There aren't many wrestlers who have had that level of experience."

"And then, of course, tactically, everyone knows he's going to underhook you, he's going to wrestle at a really high pace immediately when the match starts. He's a good scrambler, he has good leg attacks. So, being ready for all those different things. I think that he's a very worthy competitor."

AFC Champions League Elite:

Esteghlal, Tractor to face in-form Emirati opposition on matchday 3

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Persian Gulf Pro League clubs Tractor SC and Esteghlal will take on in-form Emirati opponents when they resume action in the AFC Champions League Elite this week.

Tractor will play away to Al Ain at Hazza bin Zayed Stadium on Monday, while Esteghlal will face Shabab Al Ahli at Dubai's Rashid Stadium the following day.

The two Iranian sides will enter matchday three on the back of contrasting fortunes so far in the continental club competition. While Esteghlal has enjoyed a perfect start to the league stage, defeating Qatari opponents Al Sadd (3-0) and Al Gharafa (2-1), Tractor is searching for its first victory after opening the campaign with a 1-0 loss to Shabab Al Ahli, followed by a goalless draw against Qatar's Al Shamal a fortnight ago at Muscat's Sultan Qaboos Sports



● AFC

Complex, which served as the Iranian side's home venue for the match. Tractor sits 12th in the expanded 16-team West Zone table.

Al Ain and Shabab Al Ahli have also made a clean sweep of victories in the tournament and are joined by Esteghlal and Saudi heavyweight Al Hilal as the only teams with six points in the standings.

Al Ain hammered Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr 4-0 at home in its opener before

comfortably beating Iraq's Air Force SC 4-1 in Basra to go top of the standings on goal difference.

Shabab Al Ahli, meanwhile, followed its victory over Tractor with an impressive 2-1 win over Saudi Pro League outfit Al Ittihad in Jeddah, thanks to a first-half double by Iranian international striker Sardar Azmoun.

Azmoun was again on target when his team defeated Al Ain 2-0 last week to move second in the UAE

Pro League table with 13 points, one behind Al Jazeera and level on points with Al Wasl and Al Ain after six rounds of matches.

Shabab Al Ahli again emerged victorious over Al Ain in the domestic President's Cup last Friday, with Iranian midfielder Saeid Ezzatollahi scoring twice from the spot in the first half before being sent off late in the game, as his side secured a 3-2 win after extra time.

Tractor head coach Javad Nekounam, who will have to do without injured goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand, will hope to see his side build on a comfortable 3-0 victory over San'at Naft Abadan in the domestic top flight as it pursues its first continental win of the campaign.

Unbeaten across all competitions this season, Esteghlal, meanwhile, will look to improve on Friday's 1-1 away draw against Chadormalou.

2026 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games:

Iran coach backs new-look team to challenge for women's kabaddi gold

Sports Desk

Iran's women's kabaddi team is targeting gold at the upcoming Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games despite having a largely inexperienced squad, head coach Mahrokh Danesh has said. The sixth edition of the multi-sport event will kick off on December 11 in Riyadh.

Around 80 percent of the players selected for the national team have never competed at an international event, but Danesh believes Iran has the quality to challenge for the title at the multi-sport event.

Speaking to Mehr News Agency, Danesh said that only four of the 16 players in the ongoing training camp competed at the Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games last month, where Iran settled for silver after a final setback against India, including two raiders and two defenders.

"The players are young on average, and around 80 percent of them will be

experiencing international competition for the first time," Danesh said.

"Given the limited time available, we have tried to select players who are in a better position in terms of physical fitness, technical and tactical ability, and match experience."

The draw for the Riyadh competition has yet to take place, leaving Iran uncertain about its opponents. Danesh said the draw was expected to be held after the current training camp or closer to the start of the Games.

India, one of the leading nations in kabaddi, is expected to be among the participants, according to the Iranian coach.

Danesh said Iran would prepare for every opponent rather than focus solely on a potential showdown with India, identifying Chinese Taipei, Thailand and South Korea as other teams capable of challenging for medals.

"We will do everything we can to achieve the best possible result, but we are

not thinking only about India. We have to take every team seriously," she said.

"Iran is also a strong team, and we have selected the best players so that, if we face India in the final, we can produce a good performance."

The squad will be trimmed before the competition, with seven players to be selected from the 16-member training group for the five-a-side event. Five players will be on the court, with two named as substitutes.

Two more training camps remain before the final squad is announced following the fifth camp.

Despite the squad's lack of international experience, Danesh remains confident in its potential.

"Our players have considerable potential in terms of physical fitness and technical ability, and I do not consider the championship beyond our reach," she said. "The players and I will do everything we can to win the title. That is the goal we are fighting for."