

Wrestling World Championships: Esmaeili reigns supreme as Iran secures record Greco-Roman haul

Sports Desk

The Greco-Roman event at the Wrestling World Championships proved one for the ages for Iran after the country captured a record nine medals – including four golds – across 10 weight divisions to defend its team title in Astana, Kazakhstan. Reigning Olympic champion Saeid Esmaeili capped off a remarkable four days of action for the Iranian squad by cruising to gold in the 67kg class on Tuesday, while Saeid Mohmadi settled for silver in the 87kg category, as the country finished atop the standings with 192 points, claiming only its third team trophy since the World Championships were introduced in 1950. One of the most dominant team performances in modern World Championships history also saw head coach Hassan Rangraz's roster secure seven final spots in Astana, the highest number achieved by any country in either Greco-Roman or freestyle wrestling. Azerbaijan, with former Iran coach Mohammad Bana in charge, finished second with 104 points – courtesy of two golds and one silver medal – while Uzbekistan placed third with 80.

Esmaeili's territory

With the Los Angeles Olympics less than two years away, Esmaeili delivered a clear message to Uzbekistan's Aytjan Khalmakhanov and other 67kg contenders, as the 23-year-old sensa-

tion remains the man to beat for the top prize at the multi-sport extravaganza. Esmaeili rounded off his title defense in emphatic fashion, defeating Khalmakhanov – a world champion at 63kg last year – by fall in the final.

"This is the World Championships, which is different from other tournaments," Esmaeili said. "It gets tougher year after year. My opponents study and analyze me, making it very difficult to win medals consistently, especially in the 67kg weight class, which is one of the most competitive in the world," added the Iranian, who is arguably the best Greco-Roman wrestler, pound for pound, on the planet.

"Before a match, we face a lot of pressure because expectations have risen," Esmaeili said. "For many people, we are a primary source of joy. They rejoice in our victories and weep over our defeats. Hopefully, we can always keep them all happy."

The highly anticipated showdown turned into a one-sided affair, as Esmaeili shut down the 20-year-old Uzbek, who was coming off a victory at the recent Asian Games in Japan, from the outset. After an early stepout, Esmaeili added a two-point throw. He then got the first chance on top in par terre and made the most of it with a lift-and-dump for four points before securing the fall in 2:22.

It was Esmaeili's second win in two career meetings with Khalmakhanov, having previously notched a 9-0



victory in the semifinals at the Islamic Solidarity Games in November 2025. Esmaeili's victory in Astana also marked the latest triumph in a remarkable run of success that includes back-to-back Asian titles in 2024 and 2025. Esmaeili has now suffered just a single defeat since making his senior international debut in 2023 – a 9-7 semifinal loss to former Olympic and world champion Luis Orta at the 2024 Budapest Ranking

Series event.

Esmaeili said he stepped up his preparations for Astana, knowing the tough path to victory that awaited him.

"It gets harder every year," he said. "This time, we started our training earlier than last year and spent 10 months in a full-time residential training camp. Thankfully, our hard work paid off – nothing less than gold would have been a fitting reward, and truly, nothing else could make us

Iranian wrestler Saeid Esmaeili (red) lifts Uzbekistan's Aytjan Khalmakhanov during the Greco-Roman 67kg final at the World Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, on October 27, 2026.
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happy."

Looking ahead, Esmaeili pledged to put in the work needed to stay on top of the stacked weight class.

"There are about seven or eight contenders, world and Olympic champions, in this division, and the chal-

lenge grows greater for me with each passing year," Esmaeili said. "I hope to win the gold medal every year and bring joy to everyone."

Mohmadi undone again

Earlier in the day, Mohmadi – already a silver medalist at the Paris 2024 Olympics and two previous World Championships – was left longing for the first major gold medal of his career after suffering his fourth consecutive final defeat in as many years.

Bulgaria's Semen Novikov handed the 23-year-old Iranian his latest setback with a 4-0 victory in a repeat of the Paris Olympics final. After the first period ended with a lone passivity point for Novikov, the Bulgarian gained a step-out and a 2-0 lead when Mohmadi briefly lost his balance.

Novikov then clinched the victory with a spin-behind takedown, as the Iranian camp was left questioning the lack of a passivity call against the Bulgarian, which appeared warranted. "The Iranian guy is very, very strong and a good wrestler," Novikov said. "For four years in a row, he fought only in final matches and every year a silver medalist, but he's strong and very difficult to wrestle."

Following the Olympic final, Novikov and Mohmadi met again in February 2025 in the quarterfinals of the Tirana Ranking Series, where the Iranian came away with a 5-0 win. Tuesday's results followed Iran's medal-laden performances during the first

two days of the Greco-Roman competition, with Gholamreza Farrokhi, Daniaal Sohrabi and Fardin Hedayati triumphing in their respective weight classes.

After a series of below-par performances in the 87kg category on the continental stage in recent months, Farrokhi returned to his best in his familiar weight class, defending his 82kg world title with a 7-1 victory over Turkey's Yuksek Sariccek in the final on Day 2. Sohrabi defeated Hungary's Krisztian Vancza 4-0 in the 72kg final on Monday to add to the bronze he won at last year's edition in Zagreb, while superheavyweight sensation Hedayati was in a league of his own on his senior World Championships debut, wrapping up his 130kg campaign with a victory by technical superiority over Hungary's Darius Vitek just 42 seconds into the final.

Having beaten last year's world champion Amin Mirzazadeh in the national team trials to secure his place in Astana, Hedayati won four of his five matches by technical superiority, while the other ended in an injury default after just 11 seconds. He did not concede a single point throughout the tournament. His total time on the mat was 7:09, barely longer than a single match.

Elsewhere, young prodigies Payam Ahmadi and Ali Ahmadi-Vafa took silver in the 55kg and 60kg events, respectively, while Olympic champion Mohammad-Hadi Saravi (97kg) and Ali Oskou (77kg) added two bronzes to Iran's haul.

AFC Champions League Elite:

Esteghlal's perfect start ends with Shabab setback

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Premier League club Esteghlal had its perfect start to the new AFC Champions League Elite season ended after suffering a 2-0 loss to Shabab Al Ahli in Dubai on Tuesday. Iranian striker Sardar Azmoun made his mark with two sublime assists, with substitutes Matheus Lima and Juan Alvina on target late in the game, as the home side made it three wins in three matches to move into second place in the West Zone's 16-team league table with nine points, trailing fellow Emirati top-flight side Al Ain on goal difference. Having beaten Qatari clubs Al Sadd (3-0) and Al Gharafa (2-1) in their first two games, Esteghlal dropped to fourth, level on points with fifth-placed Saudi powerhouse Al Hilal, which was stunned away from home by Qatar's Al Shamal, losing 3-1 later in the day. Shabab had an early chance

when Wout Faes sent a through ball to Mohammad Juma at the top of the area in the 10th minute, but the forward was muscled off the ball by the Esteghlal defense.

Kauan Santos then almost exposed Esteghlal's backline in the 14th minute when he sent Azmoun through on goal, but Esteghlal goalkeeper Habib Far Abbasi stood his ground and denied his compatriot.

Esteghlal had its first sight of goal in the 17th minute when Saleh Hardani drilled his free kick into the palms of Shabab goalkeeper Matheus Donelli, before Breno failed to connect with Santos' curling delivery moments later.

Another chance went begging for Shabab in the 24th minute, with Santos again the orchestrator as his set piece picked out Saeid Ezzatollahi, who volleyed over the bar.

Esteghlal was almost punished for sloppy defending on the half-hour mark when Azmoun pounced on a stray

pass and set up Breno, but the forward pulled his effort agonizingly wide of the right post.

Shabab started the second half on the front foot, with Azmoun slipping a through ball to Breno in the 51st minute, but the forward's effort from inside the box was repelled by Far Abbasi. The breakthrough came in the 69th minute when Azmoun split the Esteghlal defense open with a deep, looping ball into the box for Lima, who volleyed home past a rooted Far Abbasi.

Esteghlal desperately pushed for an equalizer but was left exposed on the counterattack with seven minutes remaining, as Azmoun laid the ball off for Alvina to score from the edge of the six-yard box and round off the victory.

The third round of fixtures in the continental club competition proved one to forget for Iranian clubs, as Tractor remained in search of its first victory in the league stage, losing



Esteghlal fullback Saleh Hardani (left) is seen in action against Shabab Al Ahli captain Saeid Ezzatollahi during an AFC Champions League Elite match in Dubai, UAE, on October 27, 2026.
● AFC

2-0 away to Al Ain on Monday. Esteghlal will look to get back to winning ways when it takes on Al Shamal at Bas-

ra International Stadium – serving as the Tehran Blues' home venue – on November 3, while Tractor, 13th in

the table on one point, will square off against Uzbekistan's PFC Neftchi in Muscat, Oman, a day earlier.