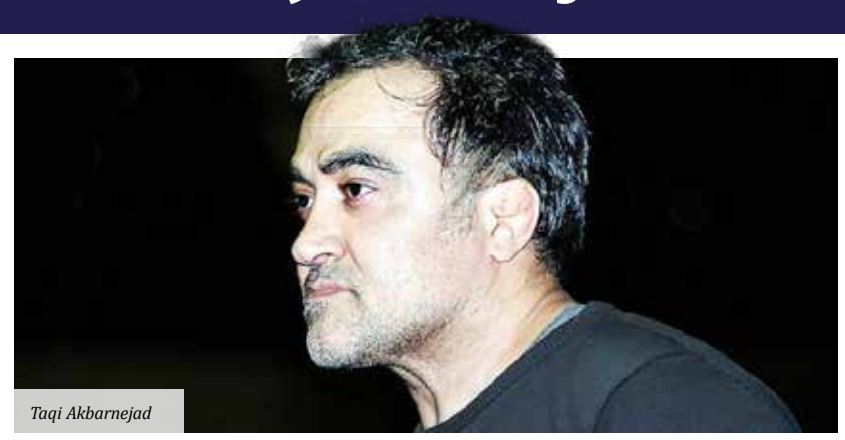
Iran must address technical shortcomings in freestyle wrestling, Akbarnejad says



By Sadeq Dehqan
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INTERVIEW

Iran's freestyle wrestling team finished third at the 2026 World Wrestling Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, claiming six medals – two gold, one silver and three bronze – and collecting 133 points.
The United States topped the standings with 194 points, followed by Russia on 185. Iran's result came in stark contrast to the country's impressive performance in Greco-Roman wrestling, where the team claimed a record nine medals and secured its second consecutive world title.
Although Iran's freestyle wrestlers returned with six medals, their campaign was marked by mixed performances, ranging from impressive displays by Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan and Amirhossein Zare to disappointing results from several established names and missed opportunities to win gold in multiple weight classes.
To assess Iran's performance, its technical and physical shortcomings, the coaching staff and the team's prospects ahead of the 2028 Olympics, I spoke to Taqi Akbarnejad, a former member of the national team, coach and wrestling analyst.



Taqi Akbarnejad

IRAN DAILY: How would you assess Iran's performance at the World Championships in Kazakhstan? Do you consider six medals and a third-place finish an acceptable result?

AKBARNEJAD: I believe the national team had plenty of ups and downs at the competition and could have performed better. We failed to achieve the results we expected in some weight classes, while our performances improved in others compared to previous competitions.

For instance, very few people would have expected Ahmad Mohammadnejad-Javan to produce such impressive performances and win gold in the 61kg category. He showed that he is making progress and could become one of the key figures in Iranian wrestling in the years ahead.

On the other hand, we could have seen Kamran Ghasempour in the 86kg final and even on top of the podium. In the 65kg category, Rahman Amouzad also had an excellent opportunity to win gold. Unfortunately, mistakes by both the wrestler and the coaching staff in the closing seconds cost him that opportunity.

Nevertheless, six medals at the World Championships represent an acceptable result overall.

We should also remember that Russia was absent from the main international wrestling circuit last year because of the circumstances surrounding its participation in international competitions. The team still does not appear to have returned to its usual level. I am certain the Russians will be much stronger by the next Olympics.

The United States, meanwhile, relied on talented young wrestlers in several weight classes, although it also fielded a few experienced, ageing competitors. Those youngsters made a name for themselves at this competition. I believe the Americans performed exceptionally well and demonstrated that they have a clear plan for the future and the Los Angeles Olympics.

Given Iran's Greco-Roman team won the world title at the same competition, why did the freestyle team fail to achieve a similar result? What do you see as the main difference between the two teams?

Competition in freestyle wrestling is more intense because the three major powers – the United States, Russia and Iran – are consistently the leading contenders.

Greco-Roman wrestling is somewhat different, with points distributed among a larger number of teams. Countries such as Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Russia and several other European nations have traditionally been major forces in Greco-Roman wrestling.

As I mentioned, Russia spent some time away from international competition and naturally needs time to return to its previous level. The team will certainly be stronger at the next Olympics.

As for the difference between Iran's two teams, I believe the Greco-Roman squad made the most of its potential and opportunities. In terms of physical fitness and conditioning, I also felt the Greco-Roman team was in better shape than the freestyle squad.

Hassan Rangraz and his wrestlers deserve tremendous credit for their performance and the outstanding result they achieved.

How do you assess the coaching staff's role in the freestyle team's results? Do you believe Pejman Dorostkar should remain in charge until the Olympics?

I have no doubt that Pejman Dorostkar should continue in his position until the Olympics. He has been working with this team for several years, and changing the head coach at this stage could harm the squad. A new coach would need time to get to know the wrestlers, establish coordination and settle into the team.

However, I believe the coaching staff needs to be strengthened. A closer analysis of the matches shows that we could have performed better in certain weight classes.

It would be unfair to suggest that the coaching staff has not made an effort. Dorostkar and his colleagues have done everything within their capabilities for the team. Alireza Dabir [the chairman of the federation] has also provided considerable support to both the freestyle and Greco-Roman national teams in terms of facilities and resources.

One issue that stood out at the competition was the difference in physical fitness and strength between some Iranian wrestlers and their foreign opponents, particularly the Americans. Do we need to reconsider our conditioning methods?

Yes, I believe there is considerable room for improvement in this area.

As I mentioned, the Greco-Roman team was in excellent physical condition and worked with Bahman Mirzaei, whom I consider one of the world's outstanding strength and conditioning coaches. The freestyle team would benefit from greater cooperation with specialists in this field and from drawing on their experience.

However, we should not attribute every decline in a wrestler's physical condition solely to strength and conditioning. Weight cutting is another major factor.

For example, we need to compare Mohammad Nokhodi's condition in the 86kg category at the Asian Games with his performance at 79kg at the World Championships and examine all the factors that affected his physical readiness.

We must identify what causes improvements or declines in wrestlers' physical capabilities. Nutrition, weight reduction, training schedules and other factors all play a role. We need a comprehensive assessment before taking steps to improve the situation.

Another issue with Iranian freestyle wrestling is the declining variety of techniques. In many matches, wrestlers seem more focused on pushing opponents out of bounds to score stepout points. Why has Iranian wrestling struggled to maintain its technical diversity?

I believe this is one of the fundamental problems in our wrestling. Technique is gradually disappearing from our game, with a large proportion of matches increasingly revolving around pushing opponents and forcing them out of bounds.

Wrestling, however, should feature a wide range of techniques, and wrestlers must be able to use different moves to overcome their opponents.

To address this problem, we need to draw on the expertise of more coaches and individuals across the country. We have many great champions and experienced coaches who can contribute to improving the technical level of our wrestlers.

We should not limit ourselves to a closed circle of people who share a narrow set of views and ideas.

We must allow capable individuals with different perspectives to join the setup and work alongside the coaching staff. This process should begin at the grassroots level, including youth and novice categories, and be expanded across cities and clubs. The next generation of wrestlers must receive proper instruction and develop a diverse technical repertoire from the outset.

Could bringing in foreign coaches and former champions help improve the technical level of Iranian wrestling? For example, could we work with Russian coaches or prominent world champions alongside Iranian coaches?

I believe we already have enough top-class coaches in the country, but we can also benefit from the expertise of great foreign champions. The important thing is to bring them in alongside Iranian coaches rather than hand complete control of our wrestling over to foreigners.

For example, the Americans make good use of their own great world and Olympic champions. Figures such as Adam Saitiev and other renowned wrestlers can help athletes alongside the coaching staff and domestic coaches.

They do not necessarily need to become head coaches or members of the national team's coaching staff. They can work at training camps, clubs and even in different cities, focusing on improving wrestlers' techniques.

At the World Club Championships, I saw one prominent coach working with his wrestler on a particular move for around an hour and a half, well before the competition. It showed how much attention they devote to technical details and the teaching of individual moves.

We should adopt similar methods. Great Russian champions, for instance, could work alongside Iranian coaches to raise the technical standard of our wrestlers. The objective should be to improve Iranian wrestling technically, not make ourselves dependent on foreign coaches.

The second part of the interview will be published in the next issue of Iran Daily.



Iran's Amir-Mohammad Yazdani (R) wrestles Slovakia's Tajmuraz Salkazanov in the freestyle 74kg third-place bout at the Wrestling World Championships in Astana, Kazakhstan, on November 1, 2026.
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