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# Olympics: Russians Remain Wrestling Favorites in London

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A security guard walking past Olympic rings at the 2012 Olympic Park in Stratford, east London, on Tuesday. **Luke MacGregor**

The often-overlooked sport of wrestling did its best to grab the spotlight when the United States and Russia staged a highly publicized exhibition in New York's Times Square in June.

The Americans held serve on their home soil, beating their longtime rivals 4-3, but expect a different theme when the action moves to London.

Russia takes wrestling as seriously as any nation in the world and often dominates in the Olympics. The country won three freestyle gold medals in Athens and three more in Beijing, and it could match that haul again at the London Games.

"For Russian standards, this is probably a lower team than they've had. But make no mistake. They're very, very good," U.S. national freestyle coach Zeke Jones said.

Russia's main competition likely will come from Iran, which boasts a promising crop of young

wrestlers, along with Azerbaijan and the United States.

Iran's medal contenders include 2011 world champions Mehdi Taghavi Kermani at 66 kilograms and Reza Yazdani at 96 kg. Hassan Rahimi also could push for gold at 55 kg, especially now that Viktor Lebedev is uncertain for London after he was upset in the recent Russian Nationals.

Azerbaijan has a pair of freestyle gold contenders in Yabrail Hasanov and Sharif Sharifov, along with reigning Greco-Roman champion Ravshan Bayramov at 55 kg.

No country in the world qualified more wrestlers than the United States, which will compete for 17 of the 18 gold medals up for grabs at the ExCel Centre from Aug. 5-12.

But the Americans have just one favorite, Jordan Burroughs, and the United States could bring home only one wrestling gold medal for the third straight games.

Burroughs, who won two NCAA titles at Nebraska, made a smooth transition to freestyle wrestling last year and won the world championship in Istanbul.

The New Jersey native is the popular pick to win at 74 kg, which could see a world-championship rematch between Burroughs and Iran's Sadegh Goudarzi.

Former Iowa State star Jake Varner, heavyweight Tervel Dlagnev and Pennsylvania native Jake Herbert also are medal contenders, but none of them are expected to bring home the gold.

Jones said one of the strengths of the American team is it's much more experienced than it has been in recent years.

"I just think the expectations of the program are always high," he said. "We want to do well. Each guy is capable of winning a gold medal. We've really been able to do everything we need to [do] to be ready."

Former Michigan State star Franklin Gomez, now wrestling for Puerto Rico, is hoping to get another crack at Russian favorite Besik Kudukhov after losing to him in the gold-medal match in Istanbul.

Perhaps the most stunning result of the recent world championships was Cuban Mijain Lopez's loss to Turkey's Riza Kayaalp in the Greco-Roman heavyweight final.

Lopez won gold in Beijing and is about as big of a favorite as there will be in London. If he happens to run into Kayaalp again, it should be among the most compelling matches in London.

On the women's side, Japan figures to dominate much like it did in Athens and Beijing.

Two-time defending gold medalists Saori Yoshida (55 kg) and Kaori Icho (63 kg) are heavy favorites in their respective weight classes.

Yoshida would equal Russian great Aleksandr Karelin's 12 international titles if she wins in London, while Icho is hoping for a third gold to go along with a staggering seven world

championships.

Canadian Tonya Verbeek, who's spent much of her career in Yoshida's shadow, will again try to overtake the world's best at 55 kg.

Icho's main competition could be Hungary's Marianna Sastin, though the Americans are high on Russian-born Elena Pirozhkova, who grew up in Greenfield, Mass.

Japan might also take gold at 48 kg, with six-time world champion Hitomi Obara Sakamoto competing in her first Olympics.

None of the Russian female wrestlers are favored to win. But Russia is still expected to fly back from London with more wrestling medals than anyone else.

Medal Projections

| Weight Class | Gold | Silver | Bronze |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Men's Freestyle* | | | |
| 55 kg | Hassan Rahimi, Iran | Radoslav Vellikov Marinov, Bulgaria | Daulet Niyazbekow, Kazakhstan; Mihan Jaburyan, Armenia |
| 60 kg | Besik Kudukhov, Russia | Franklin Gomez, Puerto Rico | Dauren Zhumgaziev, Kazakhstan; Yowlys Bonne Rodriguez, Cuba |
| 66 kg | Mehdi Taghavi, Iran | Yabrail Hasanov, Azerbaijan | Ali Shabanov, Belarus; Sushil Kumar, India |
| 74 kg | Jordan Burroughs, United States | Davit Khutsishvili, Georgia | Ashraf Aliev, Azerbaijan; Sadegh Goudarzi, Iran |
| 84 kg | Sharif Sharifov, Azerbaijan | Ehsan Lashgari, Iran | Ibragim Aldatov, Ukraine; Dato Marsagishvili, Georgia |
| 96 kg | Reza Yazdani, Iran | Serhat Balci, Turkey | Khetag Gazumov, Azerbaijan; Jake Varner, United States |
| 120 kg | Beylal Makhov, Russia | Aleksey Shemarov, Belarus | Tervel Dlagnev, United States; Chuluunbat Jargalsaikhan, Mongolia |
| *Men's Greco-Roman* | | | |
| 55 kg | Ravshan Bayramov, Azerbaijan | Hamid Soryan, Iran | Gyu-Jin Choi, Korea; Elbek Tazhyiev, Belarus |
| 60 kg | Omid Noroozi, Iran | Almat Kebispayev, Kazakhstan | Zaur Kuramagomedov, Russia; Ivo Angelov, Bulgaria |
| 66 kg | Manuchar Tskhadia, Georgia | Saeid Mourad Abdvali, Iran | Justin Lester, United States; Steeve Guenot, France |
| 74 kg | Roman Vlasov, Russia | Selcuk Cebi, Turkey | Arsen Julfalakyan, Armenia; Neven Zugaj, Croatia |
| 84 kg | Damian Janikowski, Poland | Almin Selimov, Belarus | Alan Khugaev, Russia; Rami Hietaniemi, Finland |
| 96 kg | Amir Aliakbari, Iran | Cenk Ildem, Turkey | Jimmy Lidberg, Sweden; Mohamad Abd El Fatah, Egypt |
| 120 kg | Mijain Lopez, Cuba | Nurmakhan Tinaliev, Kazakhstan | Riza Kayaalp, Turkey; Dremiel Byers, United States |
| *Women's Freestyle* | | | |

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|---|---|---|---|
| 48 kg | Carol Huynh, Canada | Hitomi Obara Sakamoto, Japan | Clarissa Chun, United States; Maria Stadnyk, Azerbaijan |
| 55 kg | Saori Yoshida, Japan | Ida-Theres Nerell, Sweden | Tonya Verbeek, Canada; Kum-Ok Han, North Korea |
| 63 kg | Kaori Icho, Japan | Henna Johansson, Sweden | Elena Pirozhkova, United States; Marianna Sastin, Hungary |
| 72 kg | Stanka Zlateva Hristova, Bulgaria | Ekaterina Bukina, Russia | Vasilisa Marzaliuk, Belarus; Jiao Wang, China |

*— AP*

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