Olympics: Russians Remain Wrestling Favorites in London

July 17, 2012

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			

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