



U.S. Department of State

## Sports Initiatives with Iran Wrestling Diplomacy Finds a Common Voice

The State Department is currently supporting professional exchange programs for Iranians for the first time since 1979 in response to the President's call for expanded people-to-people exchanges with Iran. Through the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs sports diplomacy program, and on behalf of the U.S. government, twenty American athletes and coaches, representing the USA Wrestling Federation, competed in the Iranian wrestling tournament, the Takhti Cup, in Bandar Abbas, Iran, January 18-19, 2007.

Wrestling is Iran's most popular sport and Iranian fans are considered the most knowledgeable wrestling fans in the world. When the Americans arrived at the arena, which held 3,000 but had 5,000 additional fans outside trying to get in, they were greeted to a standing ovation. While the Americans did not win the tournament they were successful on an individual level winning one gold, one silver and two bronze medals.



The tournament, covered by 150 credentialed journalists, was of national interest in Iran. The Iranian athletes told USA Wrestling that it meant very much to them that the Americans participated in the Takhti Cup and in discussions between Rich Bender, Executive Director of USA Wrestling, and the president of the Iranian Wrestling Federation; they “discussed a long-term relationship in terms of exchanges” Rich said.

While in Bandar Abbas the Iranian Federation took the U.S. wrestlers on a sightseeing and shopping tour where Iranian children ran up to ask them for autographs and the Americans gave away Olympic pins. “People seemed to be curious about us, just as we were about them,” commented Van Stokes of USA Wrestling.

**“Their (the American wrestlers) visit to Iran promotes cultural exchanges between the two nations,” said Pedram Karimshahi, a 25 year old Iranian student from Bandar Abbas.**

