

# Iran eyeing decent start to VNL campaign

## Sports Desk

A long journey for Iran at the upcoming Volleyball Nations League will begin with a visit to Japan, where Behrouz Ataei's men will take on the host in Nagoya on Tuesday.

Fixtures will come thick and fast in Week 1 of the event as Iran will also play Poland and China, before facing Slovenia at the Nippon Gaishi Hall on June 11.

Ataei named 15 players ahead of the flight to Japan though outside hitter Meysam Salehi remains a doubt for first week games as he is yet to fully recover from a shoulder injury he sustained while on club duty with Shahdab Yazd.

Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi, Mehdi Jelveh, Mohammad Valizadeh, Mohammad-Taher Vadi, Javad Karimi, Amin Esmailnejad, Ali Hajipour, Mohammadreza Hazratpour, Arman Salehi, Amirhossein Esfandiari, Morteza Sharifi, Pouria Hossein Khanzadeh, Shahrouz Homayounfarmanesh, and Mohammad-Javad Ma'navinejad are the other players in the squad.

Veteran Mousavi is back in the team for the first time since the disappointing run at the Tokyo Olympics and will take the captaincy role in the absence of Milad Ebadipour, who will miss the event for family reasons and an exhausting season with Italian club Allianz Milano.

Mousavi will also fill in for Amirhossein Toukhteh in the middle-blocker position, after the young Iranian was handed a one-year ban in March due to a positive doping test result.

"The team is in a proper shape after 45 days of training. I just wish we had more friendly games before the tournament," said Ataei, whose team played Turkey twice in May and will face volleyball powerhouse France in Japan before the tournament gets underway.

The Iranian head coach said it will be important for his team to kick off its campaign on the front foot.

"Iran has often had a slow start in the previous editions of the tournament and we'll be looking to have a decent opening [to the VNL run] this time. The first game against Japan, though, will be a tough one.

They've had the best of preparation for the event, playing in nine friendly fixtures," added Ataei.

Iran will be facing Japan for the fourth time in less than two years.

The Japanese came out on top in five sets in the Olympics to end Iran's bid for a place in the knockout phase, but fell to a straight-set defeat at the final showpiece of the Asian Championships on their home soil months later as Ataei led his side to a fourth continental crown on his debut on Iran bench.

Japan then walked away with a victory in straight sets in week one of last year's Volleyball Nations League.

Ataei's side lost three of the first five games before a victory over USA in three sets sparked a run of five wins in seven outings to help Iran book a place in the VNL Finals. Next Thursday's encounter against European giant Poland will be a repeat of the two five-set thrillers last year, where Iran came out victorious in the preliminary round but suffered a heart-breaking defeat in the quarterfinals.



Iranian players are seen in a training session in Tehran, Iran, on May 29, 2023.   
 ● PAYAM SANI/volleyball.ir

Iran also faced China and Slovenia last year, winning on both occasions.

Week 2 fixtures, starting June 20, will see Iran square off against Ger-

many, Italy, USA, and the Netherlands in Rotterdam.

Iran will then fly to Anaheim, California, in the United States to face France, Bulgaria, and Argentina

before the final game against Cuba on July 9.

The top seven of the 16-team table will join host Poland in the VNL Finals in Gdansk on July 19.

## French Open: Wild shock for Medvedev, Djokovic accused of fanning political flames



Russian Daniil Medvedev hits a backhand shot during his first-round defeat against Brazil's Thiago Seyboth Wild at the French Open in Roland Garros, Paris, France, on May 30, 2023.   
 ● REUTERS

REUTERS - Daniil Medvedev became the highest-ranked player to exit the French Open after losing a marathon encounter against Brazilian qualifier Thiago Seyboth Wild on a windy Tuesday, while Novak Djokovic found himself at the centre of a political storm.

World number two Medvedev emerged as a surprise contender for the Paris title following his Rome triumph but the Russian blew his chance in gusty conditions on Court Philippe Chatrier as Wild sealed a 7-6(5) 6-7(6) 2-6 6-3 6-4 victory.

"I watched Daniil play since I was junior and beating him on such a court is a dream come true," world number 172 Wild said after the gruelling clash that lasted more than four hours. Medvedev later said he had no regrets about his clay court season ending prematurely.

"Today because of the wind and the dry court, I had my mouth full of clay since probably the third game and I don't like it," Medvedev said.

"I don't know if people like to eat clay, to have clay in their bags,

their shoes, white socks, you can throw them to the garbage after the clay season. Maybe some people like it. I don't."

Meanwhile, Kosovo's tennis federation said Djokovic risked aggravating an already tense situation after the world number three wrote on a camera lens that Kosovo was "the heart of Serbia" following his first-round win a day earlier.

Some 30 NATO peacekeeping soldiers were injured on Monday in clashes with Serbian protesters in the northern Kosovo town of Zvecan, where Djokovic's father grew up.

"The comments made by Djokovic at the end of his match against Aleksandar Kovacevic, his statements at the post-match conference and his Instagram post are regrettable," Kosovo tennis federation chief Jeton Hadergjonaj said.

"Despite a general message against violence, the statement 'Kosovo is the heart of Serbia' and further statements after the match made by such a public figure... directly result in raising the level of tension between the two

states, Serbia and Kosovo."

The French Tennis Federation, which organises the Roland Garros tournament, said in a statement: "The same rules apply to all four Grand Slams. The tournament referee and Grand Slam Supervisors ensure that these rules are complied with."

"Messages are passed on to the teams of any players concerned by such matters."

A source with knowledge of the matter told Reuters that the organisers did not see 22-times major champion Djokovic's action as "detrimental to the best interests of the tournament", as per the Grand Slam rulebook.

Last year's runner-up Casper Ruud advanced to the next round by thumping Swedish qualifier Elias Ymer 6-4 6-3 6-2 and he was joined by sixth seed Holger Rune who dug deep to get past Christopher Eubanks 6-4 3-6 7-6(2) 6-2. Alexander Zverev exited Roland Garros in agony last year after rolling his ankle during his semi-final against Rafa Nadal but the German celebrated a winning return by beating Lloyd Harris 7-6(6) 7-6(0) 6-1.

## Title-hungry Nuggets face odds-defying Heat in NBA Finals

AFP - A Denver Nuggets squad looking to prove its championship quality and an upstart Miami Heat lineup that made defying the odds a trademark are on an NBA Finals collision course.

Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic of Serbia leads the Western Conference top seed Nuggets against sharpshooter Jimmy Butler and the Heat, who needed a play-in victory just to grab an eighth seed in the Eastern Conference.

The best-of-seven championship series begins tonight at Denver. It's the Nuggets' first trip to the NBA Finals since making their league debut in 1976.

Denver has won hard-earned respect after 46 seasons of futility, this year as a playoff top seed for the first time.

"Seems like for years now, some dusty old cowtown in the Rocky Mountains, the little respect that we get. You can sit there and complain about it or you can just embrace who we are and what we have," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said.

"Until we win a championship, people are going to keep saying that about us. So that's what drives us. Getting to the finals doesn't do it. It's winning a championship."

Jokic, a 6-foot-11 (2.11m) center,

averaged 24.5 points, 11.8 rebounds and a career-high 9.8 assists a game this season and shot a career-best 63.2% from the floor.

Miami center Bam Adebayo says the key to slowing Jokic is "making him take tough shots" but added, "The biggest thing for us is try to limit his assists. Sound easier said than done. Biggest thing for us is watching film and figuring that out."

The Nuggets have talent and depth around Jokic, led by guard Jamal Murray, who missed the entire 2021-22 season due to a torn left knee ligament. He's averaging 27.7 points in the playoffs. Denver forwards Michael Porter Jr., Aaron Gordon and Bruce Brown and guard Kentavious Caldwell-Pope each average 10-15 points in the playoffs in supporting roles that have made the Nuggets formidable.

And there's more to come. "We've got four more wins to go," Murray said. "First Nuggets team to go all the way. We just want to make the most of the opportunity."

### Heat forged into steel

To do that, the Nuggets must defeat a giant-killer Heat team that became only the second eighth seed to reach the NBA Finals after the 1999 New York Knicks.

Miami, which lost two regular-season games against Denver, lost a play-in game to Atlanta then beat Chicago to grab the last East playoff spot.

The Heat stunned NBA wins-leader Milwaukee, beat New York and edged Boston in seven games in the East final after letting the Celtics pull level from an 0-3 hole.

"Things don't always go your way. The inevitable setbacks happen and it's how you deal with that collectively. It can sap your spirit. It can take a team down for whatever reason. With this group, it has steered us and made us closer and made us tougher," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said.

Butler has averaged 28.5 points, 7.0 rebounds and 5.7 assists a game in the playoffs but "Jimmy Buckets" says he isn't finished.

"Nobody is satisfied," he said. "We haven't done anything. We don't play just to win the Eastern Conference. We play to win the whole thing."

And being a huge underdog in the finals is just how Adebayo wants it. "When you go through what we went through this whole season, people writing us off, to be four games from a championship just speaks volume to, one, we never quit, and two, everybody rallied together," he said.



● SAM NAVARRO/USA TODAY SPORTS