

Volleyball Nations League 2023: Iran coach Ataei rues 'schoolboy errors' against Japan, vows 'different display' in future games

Sports Desk

Iran head coach Behrouz Ataei slammed his team's "schoolboy errors" during a straight-set defeat against Japan on the opening day of the Volleyball Nations League but promised an improved performance by his men in the upcoming games.

Playing in front of a boisterous home crowd in Nagoya's Nippon Gaishi Hall, the Japanese breezed to a 25-16 win in the first set before the following 25-22 and 25-19 scorelines sealed the victory over their Asian foes.

Japanese captain and outside hitter Yuki Ishikawa tallied a match-high 20 points, with his cross-court teammate Ran Takahashi adding another 10, while Amin Esmailnejad topped the scoring for Iran with 11 points, followed by veteran middle blocker Seyed Mohammad Mousavi, who chipped in eight.

Perhaps the defining spell of the contest came in the second set, when Ataei's men gave away a 13-9 lead and failed to level the game at one set apiece.

"We made some schoolboy



Iranian setter Javad Karimi (24) is in action during a straight-set defeat against Japan in the Volleyball Nations League in Nagoya, Japan, on June 6, 2023. volleyballworld.com

errors in the second set. We were leading by four points and had to control the game, but we made a bad mistake in the arrangement [on a Japan's serve] and were even worse on a couple of following attacks," Ataei said after the match. "Japanese players had minimum mistakes while

making the most of our errors. They were outstanding with reception but not significantly exceptional in attack and serving, though you still can't afford to make too many mistakes against them and have to play with a lot of patience," added the Iranian, whose team suffered a defeat

against Japan on the opening week of the event for a second year running. "We had predicted a tough match as they were playing at home. We often get off to a shaky start in this tournament but nothing is over for us yet. We have to forget this one as there are at least 11 more matches

ahead of us and we need to be prepared for them," Ataei added. Next for Iran is a game against Poland today – a repeat of last year's double header, where Ataei's side came out on top in five sets in the preliminary round before being knocked out by the European power-

house in a five-set thriller in the quarterfinals.

"I'm sure you will see a different display from us in the future games. We won't let today's defeat get the better of us. The Nations League goes on," Ataei said. The game against Poland will be followed by another all-Asian contest against China – which stunned Bulgaria in a five-setter earlier on Tuesday – on Saturday. Iran will wrap up Week 1 with an encounter against Slovenia on Sunday, before heading to Rotterdam to take on Germany, Italy, USA, and the Netherlands in Pool 3.

The final week of the preliminary round will see Iran square off against France, Bulgaria, Argentina, and Cuba in Anaheim, California, in the United States.

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

Comprehensive insurance plan introduced for Iranian athletes

In line with Iranian Minister of Youth and Sports Hamid Sajjadi's provident decision-making, and with the aim of providing simultaneous services for policyholders in accident, life, death, and organ failure

insurances, as well as covering the Iranian athletes' medical expenses, the Support Fund for National Champions and Sports Veterans has succeeded in fulfilling the minister's promise for dignified

and unprecedented services to the country's sports community.

From now on, a minimum premium payment will allow all athletes and all sports-related persons to benefit from

reputable insurance services – direct access to over 6,000 medical centers all over the country, while being treated to medical care and provided with coverage for various insurance policies, namely ac-

cident, death, organ failure as well as other medical expenses, and even life and annuity insurances.

Visit sportinsurance.ir for more information and subscription.

Alcaraz crushes Tsitsipas to set up Djokovic clash in French Open

BBC – Top seed Carlos Alcaraz will face Novak Djokovic in the French Open semi-finals after crushing Stefanos Tsitsipas to set up the highly anticipated clash.

Spain's Alcaraz, 20, won 6-2 6-1 7-6 (7-5) against the Greek fifth seed.

Serbia's Djokovic survived a quarter-final scare from Karen Khachanov to keep his bid for a record 23rd men's Grand Slam singles title alive.

Djokovic, 36, was in danger of falling two sets behind against the Russian but prevailed 4-6 7-6 (7-0) 6-2 6-4.

The third seed could become the first man to win all four majors at least three times.

But if he is going to do that he must come through his toughest test yet when he meets US Open champion Alcaraz in the last four on Friday.

"This match is what everyone wants to watch and it will be a good one to play," said world number one Alcaraz.

"If you want to be the best you have to beat the best. Djokovic is one of the best in the world and



Carlos Alcaraz plays a shot during a quarter-final victory over Stefanos Tsitsipas at the French Open in Roland Garros, Paris, France, on June 6, 2023. AP

I'm looking forward to it." In the absence of the injured Rafael Nadal, Djokovic and Alcaraz have long been considered joint favourites to take the 14-time champion's crown – what they have showed so far in this tournament strongly suggests that remains the case. From the moment the French

Open draw was made almost a fortnight ago, eyes were drawn to the potential men's semi-final that many fans had dreamed of seeing.

The unpredictable nature of sport means things do not always pan out as expected, but the fine form of Alcaraz and Djokovic has ensured a blockbuster

semi-final in Paris. Djokovic, who has won five of the past seven majors he has played, and Alcaraz have been two of the standout players on the men's tour this season. However, duels between the pair – either head-to-head or even being present in the biggest tournaments – have been rare.

Alcaraz stylishly set up their first meeting at a major by demolishing Tsitsipas, who reached the Roland Garros final in 2021.

Djokovic had not dropped a set all tournament on the Paris clay but Khachanov provided the test he arguably needed to prepare him for Alcaraz in the last four.

He came into the match having won 29 successive sets in Grand Slams but Khachanov ended that streak in just under an hour on Court Philippe Chatrier.

Having faced seven break points – saving six of them – in losing the opening set, Djokovic tightened up his service game for the majority of the match thereon.

"I played the perfect tie-break and from that moment onwards I played a couple of levels higher than I did at the beginning," Djokovic said after three hours and 43 minutes on court.

"It was a big fight, it's what you expect in the quarter-finals of a Grand Slam. You are not going to have your victories handed to you and I'm glad to have overcome it today."

Saudi champions Al Ittihad sign 'global football icon' Benzema



French striker Karim Benzema poses with the Al Ittihad shirt after signing a three-year contract with the Saudi club in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on June 6, 2023. AL ITTHAD

REUTERS – Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema became the latest big-name player to head to Saudi Arabia as he joined Al Ittihad as a free agent, the club said on Tuesday, after the French striker's departure from Real Madrid.

Benzema, who ended a trophy-laden 14 years at Real this week, joins the Saudi Arabian champions on a three-year deal and will wear the number nine shirt.

"I am excited to experience a new football league in a different country. I have been fortunate to achieve amazing things in my career and achieve everything I can in Spain and Europe," Benzema said.

"It now feels the time is right for a new challenge and project ... I am looking forward to joining my new team mates and, together with them, help take this amazing club and the game in Saudi Arabia to new levels."

Benzema follows his former Real team mate Cristiano Ronaldo to the Middle East country after the Portugal forward signed a 2-1/2 year contract estimated by media to be worth more than 200 million euros (\$213.78 million) with Al Nassr in December.

Having joined Real in 2009 from Olympique Lyonnais, Benzema became the spearhead of the club's attack after Ronaldo left to Juventus in 2018, winning the Champions League five times and the LaLiga title four times.

He had his best season with Real in the 2021-22 campaign when he scored 44 goals in all competitions to lead the club to a record-extending 14th European title as well as the LaLiga crown.

The 35-year-old won the Ballon d'Or award for the best men's player in the world last year and he looked set to stay at the Spanish club for one more year, after a 2022-23 season in which he struggled with injuries and missed out on France's World Cup squad in Qatar.

However, an offer estimated by media to be worth more than 100 million euros from Saudi Arabia made him rethink his decision to stay in Spain for a final season, with the striker deciding to void the one-year extension clause he had in his contract.

Al-Ittihad last month clinched the Saudi Pro League title for the first time since 2009.

"Benzema's arrival is the most impactful transfer in the club's history to date," Al Ittihad said in a statement.

"It also marks another huge step in the Saudi Pro League's journey to become one of football's leading destinations for the world's very best after its biggest season to date."