

Volleyball Nations League:

Slovenia setback sums up disappointing Week 1 for Iran



Slovenian captain Urnaut Tine (17) hits a spike during a 3-0 victory over Iran in Week 1 of the Volleyball Nations League in Nagoya, Japan, on June 11, 2023.

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Sports Desk

Iran fell to a straight-set defeat (25-19, 25-23, 25-23) against Slovenia on the final day of Week 1 of the Volleyball Nations League in Nagoya, Japan. Outside hitter Mozic Rok chipped in a game-high 25 points for the European side, with skipper Urnaut Tine adding 13 in a match that saw Slovenia register a remarkable 10 aces. Opposite spiker Ali Hajipour topped the scoring for Iran with 15 points, followed by Morteza Sharifi, who had sev-

en points, while Amirhossein Esfandiari and Amin Esmailnejad finished on a below-par six and five points respectively. Sunday's defeat was a third in four outings for Behrouz Ataei's men, who opened their campaign with a 3-0 loss to Japan and then surrendered a two-set lead to suffer a second setback against European heavyweight Poland, before coming from behind to beat China in four sets on Saturday. "We had a shaky start but managed to get back in the game, though we were still poor in reception in the first two sets. We

failed to capitalize on our lead in certain spells of the match," said Iranian head coach Ataei, whose men will have to deliver a much improved performance in the remainder of the preliminary round if they are to book a place in the VNL Finals for a second successive year. "Slovenia is among the decent teams at this year's event. They made fewer mistakes today and deserved the victory," added Ataei. Slovenia stunned Serbia and Tokyo Olympic gold medalist France in four sets either side

of a straight-set defeat against Bulgaria. Iran will resume action in Rotterdam for Week 2 of the competition with a game against Germany on June 20, before taking on Italy, USA, and the Netherlands. The Asian powerhouse will visit Anaheim, California, in the United States to play France, Bulgaria, Argentina, and Cuba in the final round of the preliminary-round fixtures. Top seven of the 16-team table will join host Poland in the Finals, starting July 19 in Gdansk.

Esteghlal begins quest for new manager

Sports Desk

Domestic and foreign faces have been lined up as Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal is searching for a new head coach ahead of the next Iranian club football season. Portuguese manager Ricardo Sa Pinto, who led the Blues to a third-spot finish in the Iranian top flight in May, parted ways with the Tehran-based giant following a 2-1 defeat against archrival Persepolis in the Hazfi Cup final less than a fortnight ago to join Cypriot club APOEL Nicosia, bringing an end to his one-year stint in the country. The passionate Portuguese's departure means Esteghlal will

have to name a ninth manager – including interims coaches – in seven years, and the club will be facing a race against time in the preseason as the rest of the league sides have already been involved in the summer transfer market. Esteghlal announced on Saturday that "four Iranians and a number of foreign coaches are under the club's radar and the technical committee will continue assessment of their CVs and plans

before coming up with the best choice for the start of next season." The club refused to name the domestic candidates but Iranian sports website Varzesh3 later reported that former Iranian international midfielder Javad Nekounam, who has been without a team since leaving Foolad Khuzestan in February, Alireza Mansourian, who replaced Nekounam in Foolad and was in charge of Esteghlal bench for 15 months before being sacked in 2017, as well as Havadar manager Saket Elhami and Mes Rafsanjan manager Mohammad Rabiee are being considered for the job. In a later statement on Saturday, Esteghlal said Spanish coach Juan Ramón López Caro is due to arrive in Tehran in the coming days to begin negotiations with the club.

An ex-player in La Liga club Real Betis, the 60-year-old Spaniard was the manager of several Spanish clubs in the 2000s, including Mallorca, Levante, and Celta Vigo. López Caro was in charge of Real Madrid's reserve team for four years before taking over as the caretaker manager of the first team in December 2005 following Brazilian Vanderlei Luxemburgo's dismissal. He also led his national team at the European Under-21 Championship in 2009, where their campaign finished in the group stage. The Spaniard succeeded Frank Rijkaard as the manager of Saudi Arabia in January 2013 but was shown the exit door less than two years later and took the Oman role in January 2016 before leaving the job by the end of his one-year contract. He won promotion to the Chinese top flight with Shenzhen FC after taking the helm in April 2018 but was sacked 15 months later, with his team second from bottom in the table following a 12-game run without a victory, being succeeded by Italian Roberto Donadoni.

Spanish coach Juan Ramón López Caro is to visit Tehran this week to begin negotiations with Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal over the managerial role.

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Manchester City players celebrate as skipper Ilkay Gundogan lifts the UEFA Champions League trophy after the 1-0 victory over Inter at Ataturk Olimpiyat Stadium, Istanbul, Turkey, on June 10, 2023.

GETTY IMAGES

Mission completed: Man City ends wait for first CL title

AP – Billions of dollars have been spent and many tears shed on Manchester City's journey to the summit of European soccer. The mission was completed in Istanbul's Ataturk Olimpiyat Stadium on Saturday as the Abu Dhabi-backed club won the Champions League title for the first time and perhaps heralded the start of a new era of dominance in the competition.

"It was written in the stars. It belongs to us," said Pep Guardiola after the 1-0 win against Inter Milan, as tears flowed again from the manager, his players and a sea of blue-shirted fans. On this occasion, the emotion was pure ecstasy after so many disappointments on this stage.

The victory, courtesy of Rodri's 68th minute goal, has been 15 years in the making since Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan transformed City into one of the richest teams in the world overnight. This was the final frontier for Guardiola's team, which also completed a rare treble of trophies after winning the Premier League title and FA Cup this season.

The Champions League had always been a step that seemed out of reach even for a team that has spent more than \$1.5 billion on the world's best players and hired probably the greatest coach of his generation in Guardiola.

With that psychological barrier broken and the spending power to further improve a team that has already proved too good for the rest, the potential is there to win European club soccer's biggest prize on multiple occasions. Guardiola joked about being "just 13 Champions Leagues away" from Real Madrid.

"If you sleep a little bit we will catch you," he said. "But I don't want after one Champions League to disappear, so work harder next season and be in there. There are teams that win the Champions League and after one or two seasons disappear. This is what you have to avoid. Knowing me this is not going to happen. But at the same time I have to admit it, it is a big relief for the club, for the institution, for everyone to have this trophy. Because now, finally, they don't have to ask me if we are going to win the Champions League or not."

This trophy will also strengthen the case to declare Guardiola the greatest coach ever as he collected his third Champions League title and 30th major piece of silverware.

It was his second treble of trophies, having emulated the feat he achieved with Barcelona in 2009. City became just the second English club to complete a sweep of the three biggest trophies after Manchester United did it in 1999.

There were questions about whether Guardiola could ever win the Champions League again without the aid of Lionel Messi, who was the inspiration of his Barcelona team that was twice crowned champions of Europe.

Those questions have now been answered, yet for all the talk of City's superiority leading up to the game, it was won by the finest of margins through Rodri's strike.

Even after that goal, Inter had great chances to force extra time. The best one fell to substitute Romelu Lukaku in the 89th minute, but he headed straight at Ederson from about four meters out.

Federico Dimarco hit the bar from close range almost immediately after Rodri's goal and then turned the rebound against the legs of Lukaku. "We didn't deserve to lose," said Inter coach Simone Inzaghi. "We played against a top team, but even Inter played a great final."

"Manchester City has deserved the Champions League considering what it has done in the past years. But tonight it played against a great Inter which cornered them." City found a way through on a night when it was far from its best and showed few examples of the flowing play that saw it blow away Bayern Munich and Real Madrid on the way to the final.

Sheikh Mansour was in attendance to see the crowning moment, watching his team in person for only the second time since buying the club in 2008.

"One of the main reasons why this club became what we are is because people from Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mansour, take over the club," Guardiola said. "Without that we would not be here. They are the most important people... They support me unconditionally in the defeats in this competition. At many clubs when that happens you are sacked."