

VNL 2023: Dutch defeat leaves Iran on the brink

Sports Desk

A five-set loss to the Netherlands in Rotterdam on Saturday summed up yet another disappointing week for Iran in the Volleyball Nations League. Inspired by prolific opposite and captain Nimir Abdel-Aziz, the home side came from behind twice to force a decider before winning the contest 16-25, 25-16, 21-25, 25-17, and 15-10.

A sixth defeat in eight games all but dashed Iran's hopes for a place in the VNL Finals.

Abdel-Aziz contributed a match-high 27 points – including six aces – with Dutch outside hitter Bennie Junior Tuinstra finishing on 20 points.

Amin Esmailnejad again topped the scoring for Iran with 21 points, while middle blockers Seyed Mohammad Mousavi and Mohammad Valizadeh chipped in 11 points apiece.

This was a third successive defeat in Rotterdam for Ataei's men, who came out 3-0 winners against Germany but suffered straight-set losses to reigning world champion Italy and USA in Week 2.

Iran will next head to Anaheim, California, for the third and final week of the preliminary round – starting with a game against Tokyo Olympic gold medalist France on July 4.

Ataei's side will then take on Bulgaria and Argentina before squaring off against Cuba in the final game in Anaheim.

The Iranian head coach, who led the team to the quarterfinals on his debut at the event last year, will



face an even tougher task in Week 3 as he will be without integral opposite Amin Esmailnejad, as well as Mohammad-Taher Vadi and Arman Salehi – after the US Embassy in Ankara refused to issue entry visas for the Iranian trio. However, the controversial decision has been met by criticism from the sport's international governing body, the FIVB, which said in a statement

after a Board of Administration meeting on Saturday that Iran's final-week results will not affect the team's spot in the World Rankings – a decisive factor in how the teams will qualify for next year's Olympic Games in Paris.

Japan flying high

Elsewhere on Saturday, Japan fended off Argentina's rally from two sets down to beat the South American


cans 3-2 (25-18, 25-22, 31-33, 22-25, 15-12) in Orléans, France – an eighth successive win for the Asian powerhouse, which finished Week 2 on top of the 16-team table.

USA marched to the victory in straight sets (25-22, 25-18, 25-19) against European giant Poland and moved up to second in the table, while Brazil ended Slovenia's five-game winning streak, beating this

year's surprise package 3-1 (23-25, 25-21, 26-24, 25-21).

China defeated Germany 3-1 (23-25, 25-18, 25-19, 25-21) while France eased past Canada 3-0 (25-17, 25-21, 25-21) – only a third victory for the defending champion.

Top seven of the table will join host Poland in the VNL Finals – starting with the last-eight round on July 19 in Gdansk.

 Dutch outside hitter Bennie Junior Tuinstra hits a spike during a 3-2 victory over Iran in Week 2 of the Volleyball Nations League in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, on June 24, 2023.

 FIVB

Iran's Azimi wins Yasar Dogu wrestling gold



Iran's Mohammad-Mobin Azimi (C) poses with the freestyle 92kg gold at the Yasar Dogu, Vehbi Emre & Hamit Kaplan wrestling tournament in Istanbul, Turkey, on June 24, 2023.

 iwfir

Sports Desk

Iranian wrestlers bagged a couple of medals – including one gold – on Day 2 of the freestyle contests at the Yasar Dogu, Vehbi Emre & Hamit Kaplan wrestling tournament in Istanbul, Turkey.

Three successive victories saw Mohammad-Mobin Azimi ease to the ultimate prize of the 92kg contests, which was held in a round-robin format.

Turkish wrestler Atilla Kaan Aydın settled for the silver, with his compatriot Yunus Emre Yıldız taking the bronze.

Elsewhere, Hossein Aqaei settled for a joint bronze in the 74kg weight class after suffering an 8-7 defeat against Romania's Iakup Shikhdzamalov in a thrilling semifinal.

The Romania went on to beat home-favorite Mevlüt Özdemir for the gold, while North Macedonian shared the third podium with Aqaei.

Iran had opened the freestyle campaign with double golds and a silver on the first day of the event.

Ebrahim Khari (57kg) and Mohammadreza Shakeri (65kg) walked away with the gold medals of their respective classes, while Ali Rezaei falling short against Azerbaijan's Magomed Bashir Khaniev in the 70kg final.

Iranian center-back Khalilzadeh joins Tractor



 IRNA

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Iranian international center-back Shoja Khalilzadeh joined Persian Gulf Pro League club Tractor. Former Persepolis defender makes a return to the Iranian top flight after spending the last three seasons with Qatar

Stars League clubs Al Rayyan and Al Ahli.

This will also be a second stint in Tractor for the 34-year-old, who played 22 games for the northwest Iranian team during a loan spell from Sepahan in the 2015-16 season.

Khalilzadeh was the third marquee signing for Tractor

on Saturday, after fullbacks Mehdi Shiri and Saeed Aqaei left Foolad Khuzestan to join the club.

The three defenders were part of the Persepolis team that beat Saudi club Al Nassr in the shootout to reach the AFC Champions League final in 2020.

Meanwhile, goalkeeper Hossein Pourhamidi, who registered a remarkable 17 clean sheets for Aluminium Arak last season, ended his loan deal with the club to rejoin Tractor.

An impressive run under Spanish manager Paco Jémez in the second half of the season saw Tractor overtake Mes Rafsanjan and Golgozar Sirjan for a fourth-spot finish in the Iran league last term and book a place in the upcoming AFC Champions League.

Tractor will begin its ACL campaign with a playoff game against Emirati club Sharjah or Bashundhara Kings of Bangladesh at home on August 22, with the winner securing a berth in group stage.

Comments on Kyrgios 'misinterpreted' as racist, Tsitsipas says

BBC – Stefanos Tsitsipas says comments he made towards Nick Kyrgios at Wimbledon in 2022 have been "misinterpreted" after they were perceived as racist on social media.

Greece's Tsitsipas said the Australian's approach to tennis was "uneducated" after he was knocked out in a fiery third-round clash.

He also said Kyrgios brought "that NBA basketball attitude" to tennis. His remarks were shown in the new series of Netflix's Break Point.

Tsitsipas, the current world number five, said there had been "an unfortunate misunderstanding that has a distorted picture of my intentions".

"It has come to my attention that some individuals have misinterpreted my comments regarding Nick Kyrgios... insinuating racism where none exists," Tsitsipas, 24, wrote on Facebook.

"I want to emphasise that I harbour no prejudice towards anyone based on their background, ethnicity, or interests. I deeply regret if my words were misinterpreted or caused offence, as that was never my intention."

He added: "My previous remarks regarding Nick Kyrgios were not



 HANNAH MCKAY/REUTERS

meant to undermine his intelligence or abilities. Instead, I simply intended to express my perspective on certain aspects of his playing style, drawing comparisons to the passion and intensity often associated with basketball.

"It was an attempt to highlight the dynamic and captivating nature of his approach to the game, not a criticism of his character or capabilities."

Tsitsipas said he "deeply regrets" any hurt he may have caused and would be "more mindful" of his

words and their impact in the future.

Kyrgios won the match 6-7 (2-7) 6-4 6-3 7-6 (9-7) en route to reaching his first Grand Slam final, which he lost to Novak Djokovic.

In an incident-packed encounter, Kyrgios called for Tsitsipas to be defaulted after he hit a ball into the crowd upon losing the second set, narrowly missing a spectator.

After the match, Tsitsipas called Kyrgios a "bully" with "an evil side" while Kyrgios said Tsitsipas had "serious issues".