

Volleyball Nations League: Short-handed Iran undone by Olympic champion France



Sports Desk

Iran's slender chances of progressing to the last-eight round of the Volleyball Nations League virtually ended after a straight-set loss (25-18, 25-22, 25-19) to France in Anaheim, California, on Tuesday.

A seventh defeat in nine outings – followed by the Netherlands' 3-1 win against Canada later in the day – means Iran will now have to win its remaining fixtures and hope other results go their way to qualify for VNL Finals, though it will more likely be a fight for reputation and consolation in the next three games for the Asian powerhouse, which made it to the quarterfinals last year.

Iran will take on Argentina and Bulgaria before concluding the preliminary round against Cuba on Sunday. It was always going to be a daunting task against the reigning Olympic champion for Iran, which stepped on the court at the Anaheim Convention Center without

head coach Behrouz Ataei as well as prolific opposite Amin Esmaeilnejad, starting setter Mohammad-Taher Vadi, and Arman Salehi after all four were denied an entry visa by the US Embassy in Ankara.

The controversial decision convinced the international governing body of the sport, the FIVB, to freeze Iran's points in the Men's World Ranking – which will play a decisive part in the qualification for next year's Paris Olympics – during Week 3. Iran's depleted side still managed to go toe-to-toe with the defending champion until the middle stages of every set but again some poor reception and individual errors, coupled with Frenchmen's fine serving, cost the Asian side a fourth consecutive defeat against the European heavyweight. With the French star man Earvin N'Gapeth ruled out of the final week with a knee injury, outside hitter Timothée Carle stole the show with a game-high 17 points – including three aces – while Boyer Stephen contributed 11.

Morteza Sharifi topped the scoring for Iran with eight points, with team captain Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi and Amirhossein Esfandiari chipping in seven apiece.

"We gave it our all to win the game but the France's high experience eventually prevailed," said Iranian Esfandiari, who also rued the absence of several members of the team and coaching staff.

"The team was under a lot of pressure throughout the game as we only had two coaches on the bench."

Iranian assistant coach Alireza Tolou-Kian echoed Esfandiari's words, saying: "It was really difficult to be without the head coach and the analyst today. It's literally impossible to play and coach with a naked eye in modern-day volleyball."

Elsewhere on the first day of the final week, Japan extended its winning streak to nine games after coming from behind twice to beat China in a five-set thriller (24-26, 25-23, 25-21, 25-23, 15-12) in Pasay, the Philippines, and stay atop the table.

Reigning world champion Italy also rallied to come out on top against Brazil in four sets (23-25, 25-20, 25-15, 25-21) for a sixth victory in the preliminary round, while Argentina bounced back from a five-set defeat against Japan to beat Serbia 3-1 (19-25, 25-16, 25-19, 25-18).

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



French outside hitter Timothée Carle (23) goes up for a spike during a straight-set victory over Iran in the Volleyball Nations League in Anaheim, CA, US, on July 4, 2023.

● FIVB

Alcaraz 'doesn't feel' best of his generation



BBC – Spain's world number one Carlos Alcaraz says he "does not feel the best player of his generation" after beginning his Wimbledon campaign with a victory.

US Open champion Alcaraz, 20, is aiming to become the third youngest player to win the men's singles title and beat veteran Jeremy Chardy 6-0 6-2 7-5.

"There are a lot of great players in my age there right now – we are going to share great moments," said Alcaraz.

His match was one of only a few to finish on a rain-affected day two.

There was no play on the outside courts from just after midday because of the poor weather, with only the matches on Centre Court and Court One – the two courts with roofs – completed on Tuesday.

Alcaraz impressed, dropping only seven games and needing less than two hours to defeat 36-year-old Frenchman Chardy, who was playing the last competitive singles match of his career.

As well as his US Open win, Alcaraz reached the semi-final of the French Open in May, losing to 23-time Grand Slam champion Novak Djokovic.

Asked if he felt he would be the successor to the Serb, Alcaraz highlighted 21-year-old Italian Jannik Sinner and 20-year-old Dane Holger Rune, ranked eighth and sixth in the world respectively, as other options.

"I don't feel I'm the best of my generation," said Alcaraz.

"Sinner is there. Rune, as well. They are playing a great level.

"It's 1-0 head-to-head against Rune, he's up on me right now and I've had great matches with Jannik."

Eight-time Wimbledon champion Roger Federer retired in September and was watching on from the Royal Box on Centre Court, with Alcaraz disappointed he did not see his match on Court One.

"I saw that Roger Federer was here and I was a little bit jealous," added Alcaraz. "Honestly, I want Roger Federer to watch one of my matches obviously."

"I wish to talk a little bit with him and for me it would be amazing so I hope to see him around more than once."



Carlos Alcaraz hits a serve during his Wimbledon first-round victory over Jeremy Chardy in London, Britain, on July 4, 2023.

● AFP

Arsenal, West Ham reach final agreement on £105m Rice deal

THE GUARDIAN – Arsenal have finalised terms over their £105m deal for West Ham's Declan Rice, with the guaranteed portion of the fee expected to be paid in three instalments over 24 months.

West Ham are selling the midfielder for £100m plus £5m in add-ons and the transfer is on the verge of completion. Arsenal wanted to spread the cost of the guaranteed payment over five years but have been forced to bring the number of instalments down in order to secure Mikel Arteta's top summer target.

Rice is expected to undergo a medical and join Arsenal this week.

Manchester City had targeted Rice after losing Ilkay Gundogan to Barcelona and had a £90m bid for the West Ham captain rejected last week. City decided to walk away after Arsenal, who had already seen two bids turned down, decided to go over £100m for the 24-year-old. The champions were unwilling to get into a bidding war with Arsenal and felt that West Ham's demands, particularly around the payment structure, were too high.

Arsenal are spending heavily as they prepare for another title challenge and have already bought the Germany attacker Kai Havertz from Chelsea for a fee rising to £65m. They are close to completing a deal for the Ajax defender Jurriën Timber for £40m and are expected to make space for Rice in midfield by selling Granit Xhaka and Thomas Partey.

Xhaka is likely to join Bayer Leverkusen while Partey has interest from Juventus and clubs in the Saudi Pro League. Arsenal could raise further funds by selling the USA striker Folarin Balogun and the Portuguese left-back Nuno Tavares.

While Rice was open to joining City, Arsenal were always his favoured choice. The England international admires Arteta's football and is believed to have agreed terms on a long-term deal already. Arteta has gone to great lengths to woo Rice and believes that his physicality and leadership will give Arsenal a better chance of ending City's dominance of the Premier League.

Arsenal could bring in another midfielder and are interested in Roméo Lavia, who is valued by Southampton at £45m. Chelsea, Liverpool and Manchester United are also interested in the 19-year-old.



● MARC ATKINS/GETTY IMAGES

Diniz appointed interim Brazil coach as Ancelotti pursuit continues

REUTERS – Fluminense coach Fernando Diniz has been appointed to lead Brazil on an interim basis while the national football federation (CBF) pursues Carlo Ancelotti.

The one-year contract starts at the 2026 World Cup qualifying matches in September, the CBF said. "It's a dream for anyone," Diniz said in video posted on the website of Brazilian

broadcaster Globo.

"It's an honour and a great pride to serve the national team. It was a call-up, especially the way it happened, in a joint effort between CBF and Fluminense.

"I'm convinced we have everything to take this forward and make it work."

The CBF are still pursuing Real Madrid manager Ancelotti to be their new coach in the long term, Globo said.

Globo, citing CBF President Ednaldo Rodrigues, reported the Italian would be in charge for the 2024 Copa America, which starts

on June 20 in the United States.

However, the details of Ancelotti's contract and start date are yet to be worked out, Globo added. The Italian coach has a contract with Madrid until 2024 and has said he would honour the final year.

The Brazil role has been vacant since the resignation of Tite following the team's

quarter-final exit at the 2022 World Cup.

The five-times world champions have been coached by under-20 manager Ramon Menezes in recent friendlies against African teams.

Diniz will continue his role at Fluminense while juggling national team duties, CBF said.



● MAILSON SANTANA/FLUMINENSE FC