

Ataei to stay on as Iran volleyball head coach

Sports Desk

Behrouz Ataei will continue as the head coach of Iran national team despite a poor run at the ongoing Volleyball Nations League, said Mohammadreza Davarzani, the chairman of the sport's governing body in the country.

Iran ended up third from bottom in the 16-team table of the preliminary round – the lowest finish for the Asian powerhouse in the history of the competition – failing to book a place in the VNL Finals.

Sunday's five-set defeat against Cuba was a 10th loss in 12 outings for Ataei's men, who only managed to come out on top against China (3-1) and Germany (3-0).

An under-par campaign saw Iran being beaten in straight sets by Japan, Slovenia, Italy, USA, and France, while leaving the court with the minimum point in five-set losses to Poland, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, and Argentina in the buildup to Sunday's setback.

While some volleyball veterans and pundits have questioned Ataei's decision-makings in this year's event, the Iranian might

feel unlucky not to have a full-strength squad at his disposal throughout the three weeks.

Integral outside hitter and team captain Milad Ebadipour missed the tournament for family reasons, while prolific opposite Amin Esmailnejad and first-choice setter Mohammad-Taher Vadi – as well as Ataei himself – did not make the trip to Anaheim, California, for Week 3 after being denied US entry visas.

Asked in a televised interview if the federation is considering a change on the Iranian bench, Davarzani said: "I don't think it's a proper time for a change. There's no doubt the Iranian fans are not satisfied with the results but that doesn't necessarily mean the head coach is the only one to blame for that."

Davarzani still did not rule out making additions to Ataei's technical staff, saying: "We will be looking to bring in a world-class assistant to bolster the coaching team. That's the same model adopted by Japan."

The head of the federation, however, insisted that Ataei will have the final word on who will join his staff.



● FIVB

When Ataei – Iran's U21 coach during the 2019 world title-winning campaign – replaced Russian Vladimir Alekno after the Tokyo Olympics, he became the first domestic coach for the national team for more than a decade. The Iranian led the country

to the crown at the Asian Championships in 2021, before his young, new-look side made it to the VNL quarterfinals last year, only to suffer a 3-2 defeat against European powerhouse Poland.

Ataei then guided his team to the last 16 in the 2022 World

Championships before being knocked out by Brazil.

Major international events will come thick and fast in the coming months for Ataei and his men, who will host the Asian Championships in Urmia – starting August 19 – before heading to Hangzhou, China, for

September's Asian Games.

The hectic schedule will conclude with a visit to Rio de Janeiro in late September, where Iran will take on Germany, Ukraine, Qatar, the Czech Republic, Italy, Brazil, and Cuba in the Paris Olympic qualification event.

Iranian Qolizadeh seals Polish record move to Lech Poznan



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Iranian international winger Ali Qolizadeh joined Lech Poznan on a three-year deal worth €1.80 million – a record fee in the Poland Ekstraklasa league.

Qolizadeh, 27, spent four years in the Belgian Jupiler Pro League, where he scored 23 goals while

Iranian Ali Qolizadeh poses with the Lech Poznan shirt after signing a three-year contract with the club in Poznan, Poland, on July 11, 2023.

● lechpoznan.pl

registering 26 assists in 143 appearances for RSC Charleroi – either side of a loan spell at Turkish club Kasimpasa.

"I'm thrilled to be here and will fight for the team's success," the Iranian winger told the Polish club's official website after completing his medical on Tuesday.

"He is a top-notch player with a wealth of experience under his belt," Tomasz Rzas, the sporting director at Lech Poznan, said of the club's new signing.

"He has remarkable skills and is capable of dribbling past the opposition in

small spaces. He can also move behind the defenders and find his teammates with pinpoint passes," Rzas added.

An ex-Saipa player in the Iranian top-flight, Qolizadeh has also bagged six goals in 30 international caps and was part of Carlos Queiroz's team during last year's World Cup in Qatar.

Eight-time winner Lech Poznan finished third in the Polish league last season – 14 points behind champion Raków Częstochowa and five behind second-place Legia Warsaw – to secure a place in next season's UEFA Europa Conference League.

Djokovic relieved to survive Rublev dogfight in Wimbledon

REUTERS – Novak Djokovic's celebration after finishing off Andrey Rublev in a high-octane Wimbledon quarter-final said it all on Tuesday.

The scoreline may look comfortable enough after the 36-year-old fought back from losing the first set to win 4-6 6-1 6-4 6-3 – his 33rd successive victory at Wimbledon.

But the seven-time champion knew he had been in a battle against the inspired seventh seed.

"I think today he played terrific tennis," Djokovic said of an opponent he thrashed en route to winning the Australian Open at the start of the year.

"He was putting a lot of pressure, playing very quick, standing close to the line and trying to push me back. It was like a dogfight, to be honest.

"Some points in the match were so long and exhausting. Those games at the end of the third set where basically the match was decided. I felt huge relief when I won the third set."

Djokovic had looked in control but the 10th game of the second set, spanning 15 minutes and including some spellbinding rallies, saw him save three break points and need five set points before finally sealing the set.

Another feisty encounter

will be in store on Friday when Djokovic, bidding for a record-equalling eighth Wimbledon title and fifth in a row, faces Italian eighth seed Jannik Sinner.

Like Rublev, Sinner will go after the 36-year-old Djokovic with his aggressive game and the Serbian will need no reminding that he trailed Sinner by two sets in last year's quarter-finals before reeling him in.

"He (Sinner) likes to play on grass. He likes to play on quick surfaces because he likes to be aggressive and take control of the point," said Djokovic. "From both forehand and backhand,

he's smashing the ball really, really hard.

"He's a very complete player. Now he's first time in the semis of Wimbledon. I'm looking forward to that challenge. I'm sure that he's going to be very, very motivated to win.

"On the other hand, I am, too."

Novak Djokovic celebrates winning the third set during his Wimbledon last-eight victory over Andrey Rublev in London, Britain, on July 11, 2023.

● ANDREW COULDRIDGE/REUTERS



Fury to face MMA star Ngannou



● thefrontierpost.com

BBC – Heavyweight world champion Tyson Fury will face MMA fighter Francis Ngannou on 28 October in Saudi Arabia.

Former UFC heavyweight champion Ngannou, 36, has no professional record in boxing.

Team Fury say the fight is not an exhibition and will "take place under the official rules of professional boxing, with three judges ringside adopting the 10-point must system".

Fury will not be defending his WBC title in the Riyadh bout.

"This guy is supposed to be the hardest puncher in the world, but let's see how he reacts when he gets hit by the Big GK," Fury said, referring to his 'Gypsy King' nickname.

Ngannou said it was a dream come true to box Fury.

"I've been waiting to meet Tyson in the ring for the past three years," he said.

"All I will say to Tyson for now is he better dance in that ring because if I touch him, he's going to sleep."

The WBC said it would not be involved in the fight but had granted Fury "special permission" to compete in a non-title bout as he has no pending mandatory challenger in place.

Fury has gone with a left-field option after failing to agree terms with Oleksandr Usyk over an undisputed fight earlier this year.

Fury's co-promoter Frank Warren also suggested that fight is unlikely to happen in 2023 after Usyk signed with Saudi Arabia's Skill Challenge Promotions.

"They're saying that will be in February next year," Warren said of Team Usyk. "If everyone were to sit around waiting for them we'd have a problem. We're not sitting about, we're getting on with it."

Ukrainian Usyk is set to defend his titles against his WBA mandatory challenger Daniel Dubois in August and had hoped to fight Fury in December.

Fury has faced criticism for failing to reach terms with Usyk and his choice of opponent, but Warren said the 34-year-old was not avoiding any fighter.

"For anyone to talk about Tyson ducking anyone is absolutely beyond ridiculous," Warren said.

"Because he's the best heavyweight of his generation. None of them, and I represent interim champions and those fighting for world titles... Tyson is the best of his generation at this moment in time."

Ngannou held ambitions of being a boxer early in his career before focusing his full attention on MMA.

"This is my opportunity to make that dream come true and cement my position as the baddest man on the planet," he said.