

Late drama sends Spain to first Women's World Cup final



AP
BBC – Spain beat Sweden to reach their first Women's World Cup final in a dramatic finish in Auckland. Captain Olga Carmona scored an 89th-minute winner to spark wild scenes of jubilation among their supporters at Eden Park.

Sweden – who have now lost back-to-back World Cup semi-finals – had equalised through Rebecka Blomqvist just 93 seconds earlier and it looked like the match would be going to extra time.

A game of few chances had sparked into life when substitute Salma Paralluelo, 19, gave Spain the lead with just 10 minutes remaining. They will face England or hosts Australia in the final in Sydney on Sunday.

While Spain's players celebrated wildly on the pitch at full-time, Sweden's dropped to the floor as their World Cup dream came to an end.

There was little evidence of what was to come during a tight and cagey opening 80 minutes.

Spain boss Jorge Vilda opted to recall two-time Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas, whose minutes on the pitch have been limited as she returns from a serious knee injury.

And it was Putellas who brought the biggest cheer of the opening half from the sell-out 43,217 crowd when she nutmegged Manchester City's Filippa Angeldahl.

It took until the 42nd minute for the first shot on target, Sweden's Fridolina Rolfö denied her third goal of the tournament by her Barcelona team-mate Cata Coll.

Spain dominated possession but Sweden's defence, which has been solid and resolute for the past month, frustrated their opponents for long periods, while the Swedes once again used a familiar weapon to try and find a breakthrough.

Seven of their 11 goals at this tournament before the semi-final had come from set-pieces but Coll, who had not started a senior game for Spain prior to the World Cup, stood up well to Sweden's inswinging corners, which had caused havoc in previous matches.

Then came the explosive finish. Paralluelo, who scored the winner in the quarter-final against the Netherlands, kept her composure to fire Spain ahead before substitute Blomqvist poked home the equaliser.

With extra time looming, Carmona sent Spain through with a shot which went in off the bar following a corner.

Asian Volleyball Championship: Iran eager to restore reputation on home soil



Iranian players are seen in a training session in Ghadir Arena, Urmia, Iran, on August 14, 2023.
● SALAR MALEKI/volleyball.ir



Sport Desk

Head coach Behrouz Ataei will hope the upcoming Asian Volleyball Championship in Urmia will bring an end to months of turmoil for the Iranian seniors' national team.

Ataei's men will head into the continent's flagship volleyball event in northwest Iran – starting Saturday – on the back of a disastrous run at the Volleyball Nations League in June and July.

Iran suffered 10 defeats in 12 outings to finish third from bottom in the 16-team table of the preliminary round, while Asian foe Ja-

pan took the event by storm to win 10 games, including victories over volleyball giants France and Brazil, before a triumph over reigning world champion Italy sealed a precious bronze medal for the Japanese – adding to the misery for the Iranian fans. When Ataei, who led the country to the world under-21 crown in 2019, took over from high-profile Russian Vladimir Alekno following a disappointing Olympic campaign two years ago, he embarked on a rebuild project, with his ultimate goal being a successful run at the 2024 Paris Games.

Ataei, a first domestic coach on Iran's bench in more than a decade, became an instant success by steering his young, rejuvenated side to a fourth Asian title with two months into his new job – thanks to a straight-set victory over host Japan in the final showpiece.

His team then recovered from a slow start to progress to the 2022 VNL Finals – before falling to a last-eight setback against Poland – promising an even better run in this year's Volleyball Nations League.

However, the recent VNL fiasco resulted in Ataei's descent from a hero to a

villain, with a considerable part of the Iranian pundits and former players questioning his coaching skills and man management, urging the chairman of the federation Mohammadreza Davarzani to replace him with a top-notch foreign coach if Iran is to book a place in next year's Olympics.

Ataei will be thrilled to welcome Milad Ebadipour back into the Iranian squad after the outside hitter missed the VNL campaign for family reasons.

The bad news for the Iranian coach, however, is that Philippe Blain, Ataei's

French opposite number on Japan's bench, has named a full-strength squad, including the formidable trio of Yuki Ishikawa, Ran Takahashi, and Yuji Nishida, for the visit to Urmia as the outcome of the tournament will contribute to the teams' status in the FIVB World Ranking – a decisive factor in the qualification process for Paris Games.

"Our main objective will be to secure a berth in Paris but first we will have to win the Asian title in emphatic fashion to keep up the momentum going into the Olympic qualifiers [in late September]," Ishikawa said

in a recent interview.

Iran will begin its title defense with a game against Hong Kong on Sunday before capping the Pool A fixtures against Iraq a day later, while Japan is pitted against Thailand and Uzbekistan in Pool B.

The Japanese, who came out on top against both Iran and China at the VNL, will surely be the favorites to lift the trophy in Urmia but Ataei and his men will hope the home support in the volleyball-mad Iranian city will help them reestablish their reputation as the dominant force of the sport in the continent.

Persian Gulf Pro League preview: Tractor looking to bounce back against champion

Sport Desk

Tractor will be chasing a first victory in the new season of the Persian Gulf Pro League when taking on defending champion Persepolis at home today. Having enjoyed an impressive run in the second half of the previous campaign under Spanish head coach Paco Jémez, the Tabriz-based club was among the busiest teams in the close-season transfer window, hoping to improve on last May's fourth-spot finish in the league.

Things, however, did not quite go planned in the season opener last Wednesday as Tractor suffered a 3-1 defeat against Sepahan, with all new signings failing to impress. Persepolis, meanwhile, began its quest for a seventh title in eight years with a narrow 1-0 victory over Iralco – courtesy of a



New Tractor fullback Mohammad Naderi (c) is in action during a 3-1 defeat against Sepahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League at Naqsh-e Jahan Stadium, Isfahan, Iran, on August 10, 2023.
● RASOUL SHOJAEI/IRNA

fullback Ali Nemat's first-half strike – at Tehran's Azadi Stadium – in a game that the Reds struggled to create clear-cut chances. Tractor will be without integral holding midfielder Safa Hadi for today's

encounter after the Iraqi player received his marching orders for a second bookable offense against Sepahan.

The eagerly-anticipated contest will also see some of ex-Persepolis players

in Shoja Khalilzadeh, Siamak Nemat, Saeed Aqaei, and Mehdi Shiri reunite with their former club. Elsewhere in the league, Sepahan will be looking to maintain the perfect start to the season against Zob

Ahan in the Isfahan derby. Newly-promoted Shams Azar will host a first top-flight fixture in history of the club in Qazvin against Havadar, while Nassaji Mazandaran plays away to Mes Rafsanjan.

Two southern Iranian clubs Foolad Khuzestan and San'at Naft Abadan, which left the game empty-handed against Golgozar Sirjan and Esteghlal respectively last time out, will go head-to-head in Ahvaz's Foolad Arena in Wednesday's late fixture. The final game of the second round of fixtures will see Esteghlal play Malavan FC at the Azadi Stadium on Thursday.

For all the preseason turmoil facing the Tehran Blues, Javad Nekounam led his team to massive 3-0 win at San'at Naft on his competitive debut on Esteghlal bench, but will still be desperate to see the club bolster his squad in the ongoing transfer window. New striker Mehrdad Mohammadi will be eyeing a first start for the Blues outfit after making a cameo appearance against San'at.