

What next for Ataei and Iranian volleyball after yet another setback against Japan?



By Amirhadi
Arsalanpour
Staff writer

Saturday's final showpiece of the Asian Volleyball Championship against Japan was supposed to be an opportunity for Iran head coach Behrouz Ataei and his men – chasing a third successive crown on home soil – to bounce back from a dreadful Volleyball Nations League (VNL) campaign earlier in the summer, and reestablish themselves as the dominant force of the sport in the continent.

However, Iran capped a miserable 80 days with a second straight-set defeat against the Asian foe since early June, the first being in the VNL opener before 10 losses in 12 outings saw Ataei's side finish third from bottom in the 16-team table of the preliminary round, while it was even more painful for the Iranian fans to watch Japan go on to claim the bronze medal thanks to a victory over reigning world champion Italy.

As the Japanese players celebrated a record-extending 10th Asian crown in Urmia's jam-packed Ghadir Arena on Saturday, chants of protest could be heard among the home crowd, calling for Ataei to step down from his role, which indicated the razor thin margin between success and failure, admiration and disapproval, for the Iranian coach.



● PAYAM SANI/volleyball.ir

Having led the country to the world under-21 title in 2019, Ataei took over from high-profile Russian Vladimir Alekno after a group stage exit at the Tokyo Olympics to become the first domestic coach in charge of the Iranian senior team in more than a decade.

His rebuild project within the squad instantly paid off as he steered Iran to a fourth Asian trophy with just over a month into the job, courtesy of an emphatic win against host Japan. The Iranian received further praise nationwide when his team

– inspired by some new faces in Amin Esameilnejad, Amirhossein Esfandiari, Mehdi Jelveh, and Amirhossein Toukhteh – recovered from a slow start to progress to the VNL quarterfinals last year, defeating volleyball giants USA, Poland, and Serbia in doing so.

The last-16 defeat against Brazil in the World Championship later that year did little to raise doubts over Ataei's credentials, as Iran still seemed to be on the right track toward success at the 2024 Paris Olympics, which the Iranian coach had underlined as his ultimate

goal when he took the helm. Less than a year on, the VNL disappointment in July led to pundits and former players in the country urging the Iranian volleyball governing body to reinforce Ataei's coaching staff, before the latest setback against Japan drew questions over the future of the head coach himself.

The international events will come thick and fast and Mohammadreza Davarzani, the chairman of the federation, was quick to rule out Ataei's dismissal ahead of September's Asian Games and the Olympic qualifiers in Brazil.

"We intend to avoid making decisions under pressure as it could result in further blows," the Iranian volleyball chief said on Sunday. With only the top two from each of the three groups securing a berth in the Olympics, Iran will be facing a daunting task against Brazil, Italy, Cuba, Ukraine, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Qatar in Pool A of the qualification tournament. The teams will have a second chance to book the Paris ticket as the remaining slots will be filled by the top five nations not yet qualified in the FIVB World Rankings by the end of the preliminary phase of the 2024 Volleyball Nations League. On the long-term future of the national team's bench, Davarzani dropped a vague hint, saying: "We will surely come up with a more proper decision for next year's VNL and the Olympic Games."

World Athletics Championships: Javelin thrower Chopra 'proud' to win India's first world title



was my dream to win gold at the world championships.

"This has been a great championships for India and I am proud to bring another title to my country."

The only other Indian medal winner at a World Athletics Championships came in Paris in 2003 when Anju Bobby George took bronze in the women's long jump.

Chopra, who has 6.3 million followers on Instagram, qualified for the final with a season-best of 88.77m and felt he could have performed better in Sunday's final.

"I don't think I am the best thrower here. I wanted to throw more," Chopra said.

"I wanted to throw more than 90m but it needs all parts of the puzzle to be there. I couldn't put it all together this evening. Maybe next time."

India and Pakistan are fierce sporting rivals and another chapter in their long history unfolded in Budapest as Chopra and Nadeem went head to head for gold.

Nadeem was competing in his first event of the season following elbow and knee surgery. The Pakistani won gold at the 2022 Commonwealth Games but never registered an effort worthy of top spot in this final.

BBC – Neeraj Chopra became the first Indian to win a world athletics title by securing javelin gold in Budapest.

The Olympic champion threw 88.17m to beat Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem, who took silver with a season's best 87.82m. Chopra, 25, who had to settle for the silver medal at last year's championships, said: "It

Saudi Arabia name Mancini as new national team coach

REUTERS – Former Italy boss Roberto Mancini said he aims to make history after being named the new head coach of the Saudi Arabia national team by the country's football federation (SAFF) on Sunday.

The Italian media reported Mancini would sign a contract until 2027 worth 25 million euros (\$27 million) net per year. He will make his debut on the bench on Sept. 8 against Costa Rica.

"I made history in Europe, now is time to make history with Saudi," Mancini said in a video posted on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

Former Napoli coach Luciano Spalletti replaced Mancini as Italy boss after he resigned on Aug. 13, ending a five-year spell in charge of the national team in which they won the European Championship but missed out on qualification for the World Cup.

Frenchman Herve Renard stepped down as Saudi Arabia's coach in March. The team will attempt to win their fourth Asian Cup title at the continental championship to be held in Qatar early next year.

Saudi Arabia were knocked out in the group stage of the World Cup in Qatar last year but only after pulling off one of the biggest shocks in the tournament's history when they beat eventual champions Argentina in their first game.

The country is heavily investing in its top flight soccer league.

The Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) has announced a Sports Clubs Investment and Privatisation Project involving league champions Al-Ittihad, Al-Ahli, Al-Nassr and Al-Hilal, with a host of top players moving to the league.



● CIRO DE LUCA/REUTERS



Indian Neeraj Chopra is in action in the men's javelin throw final at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest, Hungary, on August 27, 2023.

● KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS