

Iran women, Tavassoli nominated for Futsalplanet Awards



● AFC

Sports Desk

Iran women's national team and international female keeper Farzaneh Tavassoli are among the nominees for the annual Futsalplanet Awards.

Iran will vie with Brazil, Hungary, Iraq, Italy, Paraguay, Portugal, Spain, Thailand, and Ukraine for the Best Women's National Team in the World prize.

Playing for Iranian club Nasr Fardis Karaj, Tavassoli is nominated in the Best Women's Goalkeeper – alongside Italian Ana Carolina, Portuguese duo Ana Catarina and Maria Rocha, Ukrainian Viktoriia Kyslova, Silvia Agüete Outón of Spain, Hungary's Lilla Torma, as well as Brazilian trio Bianca Castagnaro, Desirée da Silva, and Joziane de Oliveira.

The winners of the 23rd edition of the awards are expected to be announced in the early days of January.

Dolphins beat Cowboys to make NFL play-offs



● GETTY IMAGES

BBC – The Miami Dolphins got the big-game win their season needed as they booked their play-off spot with a dramatic late victory over the Dallas Cowboys on Christmas Eve in the NFL.

Jason Sanders kicked a field goal as time expired to give the Dolphins a 22-20 victory over the Cowboys.

Joining Miami in the play-offs are the Detroit Lions who claimed a divisional title for the first time in almost 30 years, while the Cleveland Browns are also nearly there after an impressive win over the Houston Texans.

The Seattle Seahawks and the Green Bay Packers came out on top in wild late finishes to keep their wildcard hopes alive, while the Tampa Bay Buccaneers are one of the form teams in the league after winning four in a row.

Iran in talks with Italian Lorenzetti for volleyball team job



● MICHELE BENDA/BENDA

Sports Desk

Vahid Moradi, the caretaker of the Iranian Volleyball Federation, is in negotiations with Italian coach Angelo Lorenzetti over the men's national team job.

The position has been vacant since October, after Behrouz Ataei stepped down from his role in the aftermath of a 3-1 defeat against the Czech Republic midway through the FIVB Olympic Qualifying Tournament in Rio de Janeiro. An ex-head coach of the Italian under-21 team, Lorenzetti, 59, has spent the best part of his managerial career with the clubs in his home country – including Modena, Verona, Piacenza, and Trentino Itas. The Italian steered Sir Sicoma Perugia to the Club World Champs crown earlier in December, thanks to a straight-set victory over Brazil's Itambe Minas in the final in Bangalore, India.

Lorenzetti is the latest name in the list of the candidates for the Iranian job, also featuring former national team skipper and world-class setter Saeed Ma'rouf, Russian Vladimir Alekno, who was in charge of Iran at the Tokyo Olympics, as well as Italian Gianlorenzo Blengini and high-profile Belgian Vital Heynen – world champion with Poland in 2018.

The Iranian volleyball governing body said on Sunday that Moradi, who took over from Mohammadreza Davarzani after his four-year reign came to an end in November, will also have online sessions with a couple of the other coaches – including Heynen – in the coming days as the new head coach is expected to be unveiled before mid-January.

The new coach, whoever he might be, will be facing a mammoth task to lead Iran to a place in next summer's Paris Olympics following a disappointing run in October's qualifiers, which saw the Asian powerhouse finish second from bottom in the seven-team table. With Germany, Brazil, Poland, Canada, USA, and Japan guaranteed an Olympic quota – courtesy of a top-two finish across the qualification pools – five remaining slots will be decided through the FIVB Men's World Ranking by the end of the Volleyball Nations League preliminary round – starting May 21. Egypt will likely take the African berth for the Games, with the other spots going to the four highest-ranked teams not qualified yet. As it stands, Italy (third), Argentina (sixth), Slovenia (seventh), and Serbia (ninth) are the favorites to qualify, with Iran lagging behind in the 15th place.

Iran will be back in Rio de Janeiro for the VNL Week 1, drawn in the same pool with the host and 2021 champion Brazil, Japan – which marched to last year's Finals before finishing third – Cuba, Germany, Serbia, Italy, and Argentina.

Week 2 of the preliminary phase puts Iran in the same pool with Japan, Brazil, newcomer Turkey, reigning champion Poland, Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Germany – starting June 4 in Japan, with the host city yet to be confirmed.

The third and the final week (June 18-25) will see Iran visit Manila in the Philippines, where massive showpieces against Japan, Canada, USA, the Netherlands, Brazil, Germany, and France could be on the cards for the Asian side.

Ratcliffe's investment signals fresh start in Man United's recovery plan

REUTERS – Jim Ratcliffe becoming a minority shareholder in Manchester United finally ended the drawn-out ownership saga and while the deal will not give supporters their desired clean break from the unpopular Glazer family, it signals a fresh start for the club.

The deal is far from the multi-billion dollar takeover initially expected but supporters will welcome his input as they look forward to their club regaining their position at the peak of English and European football.

The British billionaire and owner of petrochemicals giant INEOS bought a 25% stake for \$33 per share, United said on Sunday, following a bidding process that lasted more than 12 months.

The 71-year-old is also investing \$300 million intended to upgrade the club's ageing infrastructure that invariably has visiting fans, often soaked by water pouring through the holes in the roof, chanting "Old Trafford is falling down".

Ratcliffe's investment means he has been given the responsibility of running the sporting side of the business, which is welcome news for a club that stumbled to their worst start to a season since 1962 and have not won a league title since Alex Ferguson retired as manager in 2013.

The Glazers will remain in con-



● PETER BYRNE/PA IMAGES

trol, but how the dynamic between them and Ratcliffe will unfold is one of the great unanswered questions of the new arrangement.

Ratcliffe grew up in a council house in the Manchester area, where his fascination with industry reportedly grew from the factory smoke stacks he could see from his bedroom window.

Richest businessmen

After studying chemical engineering at Birmingham University he did an MBA at London Business School and went on to

become one of Britain's richest businessmen, founding INEOS in 1998.

He is the chemical company's chairman and chief executive officer with a two-thirds stake, and Forbes pegs his net worth at about \$19 billion.

Ratcliffe is well versed in sports ownership as INEOS owns French Ligue 1 club Nice, Swiss Super League side FC Lausanne-Sport, and works with Racing Club Abidjan in the Ivory Coast.

His attempt to buy Chelsea, when former owner Roman

Abramovich's assets were frozen following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, failed to work out.

He is also in control of the INEOS Grenadiers cycling team, who as Team Sky were one of the world's most successful teams. He is also a one-third shareholder of Mercedes-AMG Petronas Formula One team and competes with sailing crew INEOS Britannia in the America's Cup. United's American owners the Glazers had announced about a year ago that they would seek outside investment, to the delight of supporters. Fans have

been crying out for new owners for years as they blamed the Glazers for burdening the club with debt and their chants of "Glazers out" can be regularly heard at games.

Qatar's Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al Thani was also looking to buy the club but dropped out of the process, saying he would not be raising his \$6 billion offer. Adding to the misery is United's decline on the pitch since Ferguson's retirement. United appeared to be turning the tide after Erik Ten Hag guided them to their first trophy in six years when they captured the League Cup last season.

They went on to finish third in the Premier League, 14 points behind champions and cross-town rivals Manchester City, who have not only taken United's role as the country's most successful club, but also leapfrogged them in terms of spending power.

This season they got off to an abysmal start losing five of their first 10 league games, and have already been eliminated from the League Cup and Champions League, leaving Ten Hag looking vulnerable 16 months into the job.

But for a club that claims more than 650 million global fans and own a record 20 top flight English titles, Ratcliffe's arrival will at least give fans some hope that 2024 could see the start of the long-awaited turnaround.