

Iran gearing up in last-ditch quest for place in Paris

Sports Desk

The volleyball contests of the Olympic Games in Paris might be some 10 weeks away but it is fair to say that Iran's adventure of the showdown with the best in the game is right around the corner.

As if the Asian powerhouse – yet to secure a place in Paris – needed more reasons to go all out for success in the upcoming Volleyball Nations League, the remaining tickets for the French capital will be on the line when the preliminary round of the annual event gets underway on May 21. With Germany, Brazil, Poland, Canada, USA, and Japan having already joined host France, and Egypt likely to take the African slot, only four Olympic quotas remain up for grabs, which will be decided through the FIVB Ranking by the end of the VNL preliminary round on June 23.

As it stands in the ranking, third-placed Italy, Argentina (sixth), Slovenia (seventh), and Serbia (ninth) are the favorites to head to Paris, with Iran lagging behind in the 15th place.

New Brazilian head coach Mauricio Motta Paes arrived in Tehran two weeks ago to embark on a new chapter for the Iranian national team, following a dreadful run under former coach Behrouz Ataei.

Ataei's side finished third from bottom in the VNL 16-team table last year and then failed to seal the Olympic berth in last October's qualification tournament in Rio de Janeiro, during which the Iranian stepped down from his role in the aftermath of a defeat against the Czech Republic.



Iranian players are seen in a training session in Tehran, Iran, on May 5, 2024. ● SEPIDEH ABDOLLAHI/volleyball.ir

Iran will be back in the Brazilian city for Week 1 of the Nations League, starting with an encounter against Serbia in what could already be a crunch opener for both teams in their quest for the Paris ticket.

Reigning world champion Italy – stunned by Germany and Cuba in the Olympic qualifiers – is

second on the fixtures list, with Cuba and Argentina also coming Iran's way in Brazil.

"The first week of action will be like a world war for Iran, as we will face two of our direct opponents for the Olympic quota," prolific outside hitter Milad Ebadi-pour, who is back in the Iranian squad after a reported feud with

the former coach and some of his teammates last year, said during a training session.

The Iranian captain still remains "confident" ahead of the VNL campaign despite "tough circumstances in a last-ditch effort to clinch the Olympic spot."

"Some of us did not have much time to train with the rest of the

squad but we're not looking for excuses. We're all here for one goal and that is to make our people happy and proud," said the Ural Ufa player, who was among the late additions to the squad due to his club commitment. Paes, meanwhile, has had to cope with the absence of some key players in the opening days

of his new job. Middle-blockers Ali-Asghar Mojarrad and Ali Shafiei have been ruled out of the Nations League with injuries, while integral duo Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi and Amir Ghafour decided to withdraw from international duty.

Paes, however, shrugged off the veteran pair's decision in his first press conference in Iran, saying: "I don't think the absence of star players would make much of a difference as the important thing will be to build a decent squad. Many of these players were part of the team over the past two years but the results were still not good enough."

"It is important for all members of the squad to play with their hearts and if a player does not buy into our project, he would better be away from the team," added Paes.

"Everyone knows that Iran has top-notch players, especially in the age-group levels. The mission ahead of us is surely a daunting one but I feel optimistic about steering the team toward that goal," Paes said.

The VNL fixtures will come thick and fast in the coming weeks, as Paes's men will visit Fukuoka to take on the Pool 3 host Japan on June 4, before matches against Brazil, Bulgaria, and the VNL debutant Turkey in Week 2.

The final week of the preliminary round – starting June 18 in Manila – will see Iran play USA, the Netherlands, France, and Germany.

The top seven in the table after three rounds of fixtures will be joined by the VNL Finals host Poland in the quarterfinals in Lodz on June 27.

Leverkusen deserve all the titles they can win, says Alonso



Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso (R) celebrates with his coaching staff after progressing to the Europa League final in BayArena, Leverkusen, Germany, on May 9, 2024. ● THILO SCHMUELGEN/REUTERS

REUTERS – Bayer Leverkusen coach Xabi Alonso says his team deserve all three titles available to them this season after they qualified for the Europa League final by overcoming AS Roma on Thursday.

Leverkusen, the Bundesliga champions who have also reached the May 25 German Cup final, played their 49th match without defeat in

all competitions, surpassing Benfica's long-standing European record set from 1963 to 1965.

They achieved the milestone after a late comeback from two goals down to secure a 2-2 draw at home to Roma, securing their spot in the May 22 final in Dublin by 4-2 on aggregate.

"We'll play two finals in a week as a result," Alonso said. "We showed

great character today after their second goal. I looked my players in the eye afterwards and saw that they wanted more.

"We still have the chance to win three titles. And my boys deserve all three titles."

Leverkusen had a slice of luck as Roma defender Gianluca Mancini deflected the ball into his own net in the 82nd minute.

Substitute Josip Staniscic then scored the equaliser just before the final whistle to send Leverkusen into the record books and said it was among the biggest moments of his career.

"Definitely one of them. We knew what was at stake, we really wanted to get to the final and I think you could see that over 90 minutes today," said Croatia international Staniscic.

"I don't think we would have cared in the end if we lost and still progressed because we really wanted to get to the final, but it's even nicer this way."

For Roma, the chance to make it into a second straight Europa League final after last season's defeat by Sevilla on penalties slipped away in the dying minutes of the match.

"When you manage to get it back from 2-0 down and go close to the miracle, knowing nobody has ever beaten them this season, it hurts to see us concede a goal like that. It hurts," Roma manager Daniele De Rossi told Sky Sports Italia.

Mitchell stars as Cavaliers level tie against Celtics



Cavaliers' Donovan Mitchell (45) goes up for a basket during a victory over the Celtics in the NBA Eastern Conference semi-final series in Boston, MA, US, on May 9, 2024. ● AFP

BBC – Donovan Mitchell scored a game-high 29 points as he helped the Cleveland Cavaliers level their NBA Eastern Conference semi-final series against the top-seeded Boston Celtics at one game apiece.

The Cavaliers fell behind in each of the first two quarters but Mitchell scored 23 points in the second half to lift the visiting Cavaliers to a 118-94 victory.

The shooting guard finished with eight assists and seven rebounds.

"Everybody did their job," Mitchell said. "We were extremely confident, even after game one. Understanding that we had some things we could adjust."

"Tonight we executed very well, but at the end of the day, it's one win. We'll continue to build upon it. Take care of business at home and protect home court."

Mitchell also scored a game-high 33 points in game one but Boston earned a 120-95 victory.

The Celtics, who are chasing a record 18th NBA championship, were led by Jayson Tatum, who had 25 points, seven rebounds and six assists.

Game three of the best-of-seven series moves to Cleveland tonight.

Elsewhere on Thursday, the Dallas Mavericks secured a 119-110 win against the Oklahoma City Thunder to even their Western Conference semi-final series at 1-1. Luka Doncic and PJ Washington scored 29 points apiece as the Mavericks hit 18 three-pointers, their highest total in the 2024 postseason.

Doncic, who was struggling with a knee injury, added 10 rebounds and seven assists. The Slovenian star limped through the fourth quarter after colliding with Oklahoma City's Cason Wallace.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 33 points with 12 rebounds and eight assists for the Thunder. The series heads to Dallas for game three tonight.