

# Akbari urges Iranian volleyball to imitate Japanese pattern

## Sports Desk

Payman Akbari, the interim head coach of the Iranian volleyball national team, says the country needs to take inspiration from fellow-Asian heavyweight Japan to restore the good old days.

Akbari replaced Mauricio Motta Paes midway through the Volleyball Nations League in June after the Brazilian's reign was cut short by the Iranian federation after only seven games in charge. Akbari's appointment did little to change the fortunes for Iran, which hit new low in the annual event, finishing second from bottom in the 16-team table of the preliminary round despite a couple of victories over USA and the Netherlands.

The result also meant the end of Iran's last-ditch quest for a place in the upcoming Paris Olympics through the FIVB Men's Ranking. "Paes had little knowledge of the players at his disposal as he started his work with the team relatively late, not to mention he barely communicated with his Iranian staff during the matches, though I believe he is not the only one responsible for Iran's failure," Akbari said in an interview with the official website of the Iranian Volleyball Federation. "A team needs proper management and planning, as well as a fine group of players and coaching staff, to get results and I think the Iranian team had major problems regarding those factors," added Akbari.

"The Iranian federation showed a lot of courage to sack Paes in the middle of the tournament

and when I took over, I tried to restore the winning mentality within the squad. We put in decent performances against USA and the Netherlands in the final week despite playing three tough matches in the space of 60 hours. The players were really worn out against France."

The former national team player insists that the Iranian volleyball needs "a different approach and attitude" for the future.

"We have to change the structure of the Iranian volleyball as we can't afford to pin all our hopes on a single coach to come to our rescue," Akbari said.

"We need a different approach and attitude to succeed. We should adopt a right backup plan for the team. The Iranian teams have excelled in the youth-level competitions in recent years but struggled when it came to seniors' event. Take Italy, for instance. They only used their full-strength squad for the first two weeks to seal the Olympic berth and VNL Finals spot and then named a young set of players for the rest of the way," said the Iranian.

"We sent the same squad to four tournaments – the Nations League, the Asian Championships, the Asian Games, and the Olympic qualifiers – in the space of several months last year, which eventually led to players exhaustion and failure in qualifying for the Paris Games."

A Japanese pattern is what Akbari sees as the right prescription for the Iranian volleyball. Having already punched the Paris ticket, Japan went all the



● FIVB

way to the VNL Finals – defeating Iran in the process, in what was a fourth successive straight-set win against the Asian foe over the past two years – before falling to a 3-1 loss to reigning Olympic champion France in Sunday's final showpiece. The result in Lodz was yet another episode in Japan's rise to

a global powerhouse of the sport in recent years under French coach Philippe Blain, who has masterminded the introduction of a fine generation of Japanese players – headlined by the formidable trio of Yuji Nishida, Yuki Ishikawa, and Ran Takahashi. "The Japanese know to invest for the future. They hired Blain as an

assistant to a domestic head coach and he worked there for years just to learn about the Japanese players and culture," said Akbari. "They have now found such a high confidence that they can replace the whole of first team for a game and still get the result. We should follow in their footsteps."

"We have had seven different head coaches on the bench since 2015, while the number has been one or two for top teams like Brazil and France. It takes the right infrastructures for every coach to deliver results. We have to move on as we have four years to plan and prepare for the next Olympics."

## Iran retains men's team crown at Taekwondo World Cup

### Sports Desk

Iran defeated South Korea in its own backyard to win the men's title at the WT World Cup Team Championships Series on Monday.

Stepping into the final showdown in Chuncheon on the back of a straight-round win (175-30, 140-80) over Côte d'Ivoire, the Iranian four-man team came out victorious against the taekwondo powerhouse in two rounds (175-115, 140-70) to lift the trophy – a fourth successive men's title for the country in 12 series editions.

Mahdi Abedini, Mohammad-Hossein

Yazdani, Ali Khoshravesh, and Abolfazl Zandi were the members of the Iranian team as Arian Salimi and Mehran Barkhordari skipped the tournament to continue preparation for the upcoming Olympic Games – starting July 26 in Paris.

The competition continues with the women's event today, with the Iranian team – comprising Melika Mirhosseini, Yalda Valinejad, Mahla Mo'menzadeh, and Saghar Moradi – taking on defending champion South Korea for a place in the final.

India will face the winner of the battle between Morocco and Côte d'Ivoire for the other final berth.



● MNA

## After sweet taste of big time, Georgia want more

**REUTERS** – After their sensational big tournament debut, Euro 2024's lowest-ranked team Georgia were packing their bags with no regrets and only one thought in mind: how to do it all again. The Georgians were seen in advance by most football pundits as no-hopers making up the numbers in Germany. Yet guided by canny French coach Willy Sagnol and inspired by tricky-dribbling talisman Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, they shocked opponents with a simple formula of old-school defending and rampaging counter-attacks. "The Crusaders" even beat Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal en route to the knockouts. Then in a last-16 defeat to Spain, they gave the watching world a jaw-dropping moment, taking the lead with the only goal their illustrious opponents have let in at these Euros.

"Everyone will want only one thing: to come back," said a proud Sagnol, who had already declared his team the real "winners" of the tournament after the Portugal win.

"We will try our best to come back in a major competition. Playing against the best players, the best teams, in great stadiums, in great atmosphere, and to give the opportunity to a lot of Georgian fans to come here."

All of Georgia's games were thrillers. In their group opener, they were unlucky not to draw with Turkey, coming so close to an equaliser before succumbing to a last-gasp goal against the run of play in a 3-1 loss. And against the Czech Republic, Saba Lobjanidze should have won it at the death, blazing over to leave the score at 1-1. As well as on the pitch, Georgia won admiration for their legions of white-



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and-red clad fans, whose ubiquitous St. George's cross flag was sometimes confused with England's.

The team's magnificent performances brought thousands onto the streets of the capital Tbilisi and eclipsed bitter disputes between a Georgian government that has deepened ties to Russia, and a more pro-Western opposition. Usually at loggerheads, President Salome Zourabichvili and Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze even sat together at the stadium in Cologne for the Spain game.

"Sometimes losing is winning!" Zourabichvili said.

"This is history and means that Georgian football has taken one very big step forward," said Kobakhidze. Despite the hunger for more big game experience, Sagnol said it was premature to talk about the 2026 World Cup qualifiers with Georgia's team and 3.7

million people first entitled to sit back and drink in all that happened in Germany.

Georgians are quietly confident that Euro 2024 will prove no fluke. It followed a three-year project by Sagnol and careful cultivation of the game from grassroots to the national squad by the ambitious Georgian Football Federation.

Qualification for Germany actually came thanks to a stellar run in the 2022/23 UEFA Nations League, where Georgia won their group and have risen to League B.

And whereas in the past Georgia had barely a single starter in a major European league, they now have players dotted around Spain's La Liga, France's Ligue 1 and Italy's Serie A.

"Now it's the end of a journey," said Sagnol. "But I'm sure the next one will also be very exciting."

