

Asian Men's Club Volleyball Championship:

# Ataei's Foolad lifts second trophy after win in all-Iranian showdown

## Sports Desk

Foolad Sirjan won a second title in three years at the Asian Men's Club Volleyball Championship thanks to a straight-set victory (25-20, 25-18, 25-23) over fellow-Iranian side Shahdab Yazd.

The emphatic performance in a packed Shahediyeh Indoor Hall in Yazd rounded off a dominant tournament for Behrouz Ataei's men, who stepped into the showdown on the back of five successive wins, losing only two sets in the process against Jakarta Bhayangkara Presisi in the semi-finals.

Opposite-spiker Ali Hajipour contributed with 16 points for Foolad, with veteran middle-blocker Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi scoring 11, while Shahdab's Amir Ghafour chipped in a game-high 17 points.

The much-anticipated showpiece was a repeat of the Iranian Super League final in April, where Foolad had also come out on top in back-to-back five-set thrillers. Foolad's combination of physical power and tactical precision ultimately proved too much to deal with for Shahdab, as Ataei's men kept their composure throughout the game, much to the dismay of the home fans in Yazd, though they will still be thrilled to see their team join Foolad in representing the continent in December's FIVB Men's Club World Championship in India.

Earlier in the day, Jakarta Bhayangkara Presisi came out victorious in straight sets (25-15, 25-14, 25-19) against Pavlodar VC to add the bronze medal to last year's silver in Manama. Star player Earvin Ngapeth, who had only joined the Indonesian club days after winning the Olympic gold with France, was pleased with his second experience of visiting Iran.

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star Jean Patry received the Best Opposite award.

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and the fans are amazing," Ngapeth said, reflecting on his previous time in the country in 2022, when he helped Paykan win the Asian club title in its own backyard in Tehran.

### Relief for Ataei

A continental trophy was perhaps what Iranian Ataei needed to restore his reputation as a top volleyball coach.

When he took over the national team job from Russian Vladimir Alekno in the summer of 2021 – following a pool-phase exit at the Tokyo Olympics – he enjoyed a flying start to his reign.

A first homegrown coach on Iran's bench in more than a de-

cade, Ataei steered his rejuvenated side to the Asian title – at the expense of host Japan in the final – before Iran made it to the quarterfinals of the 2022 Volleyball Nations League.

The Iranian, however, was faced with the harsh reality of his job when his team finished third from bottom in the 16-team table of the VNL preliminary round a year later and was then outclassed by Japan in the Asian Championship final on home soil.

A gold medal in last year's Asian Games did little to protect Ataei against his critics as he felt unfairly treated for being made a scapegoat for his team's failures.

Ataei was eventually convinced to step down from his role midway through the Olympic qualifiers in Rio de Janeiro last October, though there was no change of fortunes for the national team in its quest for an Olympic berth in this year's Nations League.

When asked about future goals as a coach after Sunday's triumph, 54-year-old Ataei said: "I'll just keep doing what I know best and that is delivering top volleyball players."

"Iranian volleyball lacks exceptional and game-changing players. We have been missing the prime years of a fine generation of players in Shahram



Skipper Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi holds aloft the trophy as Foolad Sirjan players and coaching staff celebrate winning the title at the Asian Men's Club Volleyball Championship in Yazd, Iran, on September 15, 2024.

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Mahmoudi, Amir Ghafour, Mohammad Mousavi, and Saeid Ma'roof and it takes some time to replace them with the next group of young talents. I just hope the Iranian federation will devise the right plan to make sure the national team is back in its top level of seven or eight years ago."

## Iran aiming high in Asian Karate Championships



### Sports Desk

Iranian male and female karatekas left the country for China on Monday ahead of the 20th AKF Senior Championships – starting Thursday in Hangzhou.

Iran is eager to improve on last year's result in Malacca, Malaysia, where a haul of 12 medals – including three golds – saw the country finish behind Kazakhstan and Japan, which also bagged triple golds apiece.

Behnam Dehqanzadeh will head into the men's -55kg contests as the defending champion, while Pouria Aghdasi will be looking to add to his two Asian bronzes in the -60kg class. A four-time world team and individual champion, Bahman Askari is keen to grab a fifth Asian gold and make up for last year's setback in the -75kg final. Mahdi Khodabakhshi will be the Iranian representative in the

-84kg class, with Saleh Abazari going after a second +84kg gold after his 2018 triumph.

Askari, Khodabakhshi, and Abazari will be joined by Mahmoud Ne'mati, Morteza Ne'mati, Mahdi Ashouri, Alireza Heidari, and Mahdi Ganjzadeh in the men's kumite team event.

Ali Zand will be the Iranian in the men's individual kata contests and will team up with Abolfazl Shahrjerdi and Milad Farazmehr for the team competition.

In the women's draw, Atousa Golshadnejad will headline the Iranian squad as the reigning Asian -61kg champion. Sara Bahmanyar will chase a more colorful medal in the -50kg competitions, having settled for back-to-back bronzes in the previous two editions. Two-time gold medalist Taravat Khaksar will be after a fifth Asian medal on his return to the national team when par-

ticipating in the -55kg bouts. Mobina Heidari – silver medalist in 2021 – and Leila Borj-Ali, who were part of the Iranian silver-winning kumite team in Malacca, will take part in the -68kg and +68kg weight classes respectively.

Golshadnejad and Heidari will be part of the Iranian kumite team – also featuring Shima Al-e Sa'di, Mobina Kaviani, and Fatemeh Sa'adati.

A bronze winner last year, Fatemeh Sadeghi will again have a shot at glory in individual kata, with Sepideh Amini, Melika Ez-zati, and Zeinab Hosseini eyeing success in the team event.

Seyyed Shahram Heravi will be the head coach of the Iranian male karatekas, with Leila Bahrami in charge of the women's squad in this year's Asian Championships, which will serve as a crucial part of qualification for November's Karate World Cup in Pamplona, Spain.