

## 2025 Volleyball Nations League:

Iran to embark on new era  
against Brazil, USA

## Sports Desk

A new chapter will begin for Iranian volleyball when the men's national team takes on Brazil in their 2025 Volleyball Nations League opener on June 11 next year.

The annual tournament will be the first event for Italian head coach Roberto Piazza on Iran's bench, who signed a four-year contract in September to take over from Brazilian Mauricio Paes.

Paes was sacked midway through the VNL campaign in the summer after only seven games in charge, with his number two Payman Akbari serving as the interim coach for the remainder of the preliminary round as Iran finished second from bottom in the 16-team table.

A second outing for Iran in Rio de Janeiro will come against USA, followed by games against Slovenia – VNL semifinalist in June – and Ukraine in Week 1 of the preliminaries.

Iran will head to Belgrade, Serbia, for Week 2 of the competition, starting with an encounter against the host on June 25.

Piazza's side will then play Argentina and Germany before the Italian reunites with his former team, the Netherlands, in the Serbian capital on June 29.



The third and the final week of the preliminary phase in Gdańsk, Poland, will see Iran square off against European

powerhouses Poland (July 16) and France (July 19), who met in the Olympic final in August, either side of an all-Asian battle

against China. Iran will hope to be in contention for a place in the VNL Finals when going head-to-head with

Bulgaria in their final Week 3 game on July 20. The top eight teams of the preliminary-round table will prog-

ress to the VNL Finals – starting with the quarterfinals on July 30 – with the host city yet to be announced by the FIVB, the international governing body of the sport.

When Piazza was appointed to the role, the Italian said his primary objective would be “a constant place among the top eight teams in the world” for Iran, with his ultimate goal being “a successful run at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.”

Sitting 15th in the latest FIVB World Ranking, Iran spent the best part of the 2023 season in the top 10, with the previous stint in the top eight coming during the 2022 World Championship, where then-coach Behrouz Ataei's men made it to the last 16 before being knocked out by Brazil.

Iranian fans will hope the Italian will put a lid on the country's dire run of results over the past two years, including dreadful campaigns in back-to-back Nations League events, failure to secure an Olympic quota, and a comprehensive defeat against Japan on home soil in last year's Asian Championship final.

A second major event for Piazza will be September's World Championship in the Philippines, where Iran is drawn in Pool A – also featuring the host nation, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Azadi Stadium to reopen  
on Dec. 29, sports minister confirms

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The Azadi Stadium in Tehran will reopen with a friendly game featuring retired Iranian footballers on December 29, the country's sports minister, Ahmad Donyamali, confirmed on Wednesday.

The iconic stadium has been under renovation since June 20, when the venue last hosted the domestic cup final between Sepahan and Mes Rafsanjan.

“The first phase of the renovation project has concluded and the stadium's mechanical infrastructure and lighting system will be assessed and tested during a friendly game be-

tween the retired players on December 29,” the Iranian top official told reporters.

A first competitive game in 197 days on the Azadi pitch will be staged on January 3, with Esteghlal hosting Sepahan in the Persian Gulf Pro League, added the sports minister.

The news comes as a boost for Tehran archrivals Persepolis and Esteghlal, who have been forced to play their domestic and Asian home games in the 8,000-capacity Shahr-e Qods Stadium – on the outskirts of the Iranian capital – or other neutral venues since the start of the season in August.

The two sides will be looking to ben-

efit from a massive home support in what is already deemed as must-win home fixtures in the last two rounds of the AFC Champions League Elite group phase in February.

Sitting eighth in the west zone's 12-team table, Esteghlal will welcome bottom-side Al Shorta of Iraq on February 3, before visiting Qatar's Al Rayyan on Feb. 18.

Six-placed Persepolis, meanwhile, will return to Asian action with a visit to Riyadh on Feb. 4 to take on Al Hilal, and will then host Cristiano Ronaldo's Al Nassr on Feb. 17.

The top eight of the table will progress to the knockout stage.

Vinicius Jr named FIFA player of 2024,  
Bonmati takes women's award again

**REUTERS** – Brazil and Real Madrid forward Vinicius Jr was named FIFA men's player of the year in Doha on Tuesday, with Spain and Barcelona midfielder Aitana Bonmati winning the women's award for the second year in a row. Vinicius scored 24 goals in 39 appearances across all competitions to help Real Madrid clinch the LaLiga and Champions League double, and he also netted in their Champions League final win over Borussia Dortmund.

The Brazilian won the award ahead of Spain and Manchester City midfielder Rodri and his teammate at Real, England's Jude Bellingham. The 24-year-old, who narrowly missed out on the Ballon d'Or to Rodri in October, was in Doha to collect the award, with Real in Qatar for Wednesday's FIFA Intercontinental Cup final against Mexico's Pachuca.

“It seemed impossible when I played bare-

foot in the streets of Sao Goncalo and now I'm here,” Vinicius said.

Bonmati retained the FIFA women's player of the year award ahead of Zambia's Barbra Banda and Norway's Caroline Graham Hansen, having also won the women's Ballon d'Or for the second consecutive year in October.

The 26-year-old helped her club to a domestic treble last season in a campaign in which Barca also retained the Champions League, and Bonmati scored in the semi-final and final when Spain won the Nations League in February.

“I'm very grateful for this award, but I always say that this is a team effort, with a Barca that won everything and the national team,” Bonmati said.

Real Madrid's Carlo Ancelotti won the best men's coach award, after the Italian led his club to the league and Champions League double last season.

“I want to share this with the club, with my president and with my players, those of the best club in the world,” Ancelotti said.

Emma Hayes won the best women's coach award, after taking the U.S. to the gold medal at this year's Olympic Games having taken Chelsea to the WSL title last season, her fifth successive league win with the club.

Alejandro Garnacho won the Puskas Award, for best goal of the year for the Argentine winger's strike for Manchester United against Everton in the Premier League in November last year. Brazil's Marta won the inaugural Marta Award, for the best goal in women's football, taking the prize named in her honour for her goal against Jamaica in June of this year.

The best women's goalkeeper award went to American Alyssa Naeyer of the Chicago Red Stars while Emiliano Martinez of Argentina and Aston Villa took the men's award.