



## Esfandiar's club form a boost for international duty

### Sports Desk

Amirhossein Esfandiar's recent form in the Chinese Volleyball League offers an integral role for the Iranian when the national team takes part in two major international tournaments in 2025.

The Iranian outside-hitter has chipped in 185 points for Tianjin Food Group this season, standing 15th in the league's top scorers' chart.

The pinnacle of Esfandiar's contribution, however, has come from the service line.

The 25-year-old, whose MVP performance inspired Iran to the world under-21 title in 2019, has registered a league-high 35 aces in the ongoing season – including five in Tianjin's

victory last time out.

Esfandiar scored 19 points to help the Chinese club beat Beijing BAIC Motor 3-1 in Group D of the Chinese league on Sunday.

Esfandiar's impressive stats is a major boost for Iran's new head coach Roberto Piazza.

The Italian coach will be looking to build on a combination between overseas players – including Esfandiar, skipper Milad Ebadipour, as well as prolific duo Amin Esmailnejad and Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh – to end the country's below-par international run over the past couple of years.

Having finished in the bottom three in the preliminary 16-team table of the past two editions, Iran will get its VNL cam-

paign underway against Brazil in Rio de Janeiro on June 11.

A second outing for Iran in Pool 2 will come against another volleyball powerhouse in USA, followed by encounters with Slovenia and Ukraine.

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 progress 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.

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

● volleyworld.com

## Urunov extends Persepolis deal until 2027

### Sports Desk

Uzbekistan international Oston Urunov signed a new two-year contract with Persepolis, extending his commitment to the Persian Gulf Pro League champion until June 2027.

"I am very happy to continue my path with you @persepolis," the 24-year-old wrote in an Instagram post on Tuesday.

"I had offers from numerous clubs but Persepolis has been like a home to me, and the fans have been great. That's why I decided to sign the extension," the wizard winger, who is best known for his exceptional dribbling skills, told

reporters after the club confirmed the contract through a #URUNOV2027 on the screen during a press conference in Tehran.

Having joined the club in February last year, Urunov played an integral part in the Tehran Reds' league campaign with six strikes in 13 matches, as Persepolis went on to lift a seventh top-flight trophy in eight years.

Urunov's contribution in the ongoing season, however, has been hampered by a couple of groin and hamstring injuries, which ruled him out of seven games in all competitions – including September's 1-0 win against Esteghlal in the Capital Derby, as well as AFC

Champions League Elite games against Qatari clubs Al Sadd and Al Rayyan in October and November. Persepolis supporters will be thrilled by the news after their club failed to find a proper replacement for the other prolific winger Mahdi Torabi, who left the Reds in the summer to join Tractor.

● Oston Urunov (L) poses with a Persepolis shirt alongside club CEO Reza Darvish after signing a two-year extension to his contract with the Persian Gulf Pro League champion in Tehran, Iran, on Dec. 31, 2024.

● fc-persepolis.com



## Liverpool reject Real Madrid move for Alexander-Arnold

**THE GUARDIAN** – Liverpool have rejected Real Madrid's attempt to sign Trent Alexander-Arnold in the January window. The 26-year-old defender will be out of contract in the

summer, and is free under regulations to sign a pre-contract deal for next season from New Year's Day.

Madrid have long been linked as his eventual destination but an attempt to pre-empt that process has fallen flat, with Liverpool rejecting the move.

Madrid's approach for Alexander-Arnold was rebuffed before any financial package for buying out the remainder of his contract could be offered.

Liverpool's executives continue to be in negotiation with Alexander-Arnold's advisers and family, with little indication, public or otherwise, that he would like to leave his boyhood club.

The Alexander-Arnold situation continues to be without

a long-term solution, while the club are also still to reach agreements to extend the contracts of Mohamed Salah and Virgil van Dijk. If Liverpool's desire is to keep all three, then finances, profitability and sustainability regulations and wage structure may be issues.

Last summer, Liverpool made only one senior addition to the squad Arne Slot inherited from Jürgen Klopp; the Italian Federico Chiesa, who has struggled with injuries. Selling Alexander-Arnold in January would release funds as it represents "pure profit" for a former youth-team player but that avenue has been rejected.

Madrid's intention is for the England international to be an immediate replacement for veteran right-back Dani Carvajal, 32, who is set to miss the rest of the season with a cruciate knee ligament injury.

## James, 40, makes more NBA history in Cavs defeat

**BBC** – LeBron James became the first person in NBA history to play as a teenager and past the age of 40 as the Los Angeles Lakers lost to the Cleveland Cavaliers.

James, who made his NBA debut as an 18-year-old in 2003, turned 40 on 30 December. He scored 23 points in the 122-110 defeat at the Crypto.com Arena in LA, but 27 from Jarrett Allen helped Cleveland to an eighth straight win. Widely regarded as one of the greatest basketball players of all time, James last year became the NBA's all-time leading points scorer. He has won four NBA Championships, been named Most Valuable Player four times and is in his 22nd season in the NBA, a record he shares with the now retired Vince Carter. The Cavs remain top of the

Eastern Conference and the Lakers are seventh in the West.

Elsewhere, Giannis Antetokounmpo finished with 30 points, 12 rebounds, five assists and two steals in the Milwaukee Bucks' comeback win over the Indiana Pacers.

The Bucks were 19 points adrift late in the third quarter but rallied to win 120-112 in Indianapolis. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the Oklahoma City Thunder to a 113-105 home victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves with 40 points, three rebounds, two assists and two steals.

It was a 12th straight win for the Thunder, who remain top of the Western Conference.



● GARY A. VASQUEZ/IMAGN IMAGES



● AFP