

New Iran volleyball coach Piazza to follow in Velasco's footsteps

Sports Desk

New national team head coach Roberto Piazza said he aims to make the same impact in Iranian volleyball as former Argentine boss Julio Velasco did during his tenure.

Piazza, 57, signed a two-year contract with the Iranian Volleyball Federation in Tehran on Monday, with the option of a two-year extension, which could see the Italian remain in charge for the next Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

"I want to thank the head of the federation [Milad Taqavi] for giving me the opportunity to work in this country," Piazza said in a press conference, adding: "I believe we can build many things from the scratch and that is why I accepted this role."

"I want to do what Velasco did here, which is to transform the world's perception of Iranian volleyball," added the Italian.

Velasco was appointed to the Iranian job in 2011 and went on to orchestrate the country's breakthrough onto the global stage of the sport, introducing arguably the all-time finest generation of the national team players, including world-class setter Saeid Ma'roof, Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi, Farhad Qaemi, and Shahram Mahmoudi. During his three-year stint, Iran dethroned China, South Korea, and Japan as the continental powerhouse, winning a maiden Asian title in 2011 before repeating the success two years



later. Iran also qualified for the FIVB World League – rebranded as the Volleyball Nations League in 2018 – for the first time in 2013.

Iran will be looking for a fresh start under the Italian coach following a dire run of results over the past two years – during which it had dreadful campaigns in back-to-back Nations League events and failed to qualify for the Paris Olympics, while being outclassed by Japan on home

soil in the 2023 Asian Championship final.

A first major tournament for the team and Piazza will be the Nations League in June, starting with a Week 1 visit to Rio de Janeiro, where Iran will take on international heavyweights Brazil and USA, as well as Slovenia – VNL semifinalist last year – and Ukraine.

"Iran has had mixed results over the past couple of years, and my coaching staff and I will have to

find out where we need to improve," said the Italian, who will keep his job in the top-flight side Powervolley Milano in his home country.

"Our work will begin with a first training camp in May, where I will get to know the players at my disposal to see how I can get the best out of them. I'm sure my assistant Tomaso Totolo's knowledge of Iranian players will be a great help.

"There are some top players in

Iranian volleyball, who are currently playing in high-profile leagues all across Europe. There are also up-and-coming young talents, who are capable of reaching the highest level of the game in the near future," said the former coach of the Dutch national team.

Asked if his commitment with Milano would affect his preparation plans for the Iranian team, Piazza said: "All club competitions in Europe will be

Italian Roberto Piazza attends a press conference after being unveiled as the new head coach of the Iranian volleyball national team in Tehran, Iran, on January 20, 2025.

● FOROUGH TAHERKHANI/
VOLLEYBALL.IR

finished by late April, and that is when players in Italy, Poland, and Turkey will be released to join their national teams. We will have about three weeks to train and play friendly games before the Nations League starts in June, which is a decent amount of time for preparation. That is how I worked in the Netherlands, and I am sure there won't be any problem in that regard."

Iran will head to Belgrade to face Serbia in the VNL second week opener on June 25. Piazza's side will then play Argentina and Germany before the Italian reunites with 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 last August, either side of an all-Asian battle against China.

Iran will hope to be in contention for a top-eight place in the 16-team table, and a berth in the VNL Finals, when going head-to-head with Bulgaria in the final round of the preliminaries on July 20.

Australian Open:

Zverev raises his game to down Paul and reach semis again



REUTERS – Alexander Zverev played his best tennis when it mattered most to down Tommy Paul 7-6(1) 7-6(0) 2-6 6-1 on Tuesday and reach his third Australian Open semi-final in five years, keeping alive his dream of finally landing a Grand Slam title. The 27-year-old German was unable to find his peak level for much of a match played in the stifling afternoon heat on Rod Laver Arena but dominated his American opponent in tiebreaks to lock up the first two sets. Paul bagged the third set but second seed Zverev upped his intensity to whip through the fourth.

"To be honest, I should have been down two sets to love, he played better than me. I was not playing great," Zverev said after

reaching his ninth Grand Slam semi-final, the most among active players who have not won a major.

"(Somehow) I'm up two sets to love and all of a sudden, I need only one more set, and the fourth set was definitely the best that I've played.

"I'm obviously extremely happy to be back in the semi-finals." Paul, semi-finalist in 2023, had beaten Zverev in their two previous meetings and worked assiduously to gain the upper hand in the first two sets only for the German to raise his game to drag him back into a dog fight.

"He did what he always does," said the American. "He picks up his level at the big moments, and my level unfortunately

Alexander Zverev hits a serve during his Australian Open last-eight win against Tommy Paul in Melbourne, Australia, on January 21, 2025.
● JAIMI JOY/REUTERS

dropped in the big moments today."

Elsewhere, Paula Badosa advanced to her first Grand Slam semi-final at the third attempt after beating Coco Gauff on Tuesday but the Spaniard said that just reaching the final four did not give her license to play with more freedom.

"I'm never going to feel freedom until I win the tournament," said the former world number two after her 7-5 6-4 win over an error-prone third seed Gauff.

"I'm always like this. It's my personality, my character. Today, of course, maybe I had a little bit less expectations, but I still had pressure, because I wanted to win so badly.

"I'll step on the court in the semi-finals, I don't care against whom, and I'll want to win so badly. That's part of me. When I'm in the final round, my level rises and I just want to give my 100% there and leave it all on the court."

World number 12 Badosa had fallen out of the top 50 due to a series of injuries, including a chronic back problem that made her consider retirement.

Warriors thrashed in worst home defeat under Kerr



BBC – The Golden State Warriors suffered their heaviest home defeat under coach Steve Kerr as they were thrashed 125-85 by the Boston Celtics. Kerr, who won five NBA Championships as a player, has claimed a further four as head coach of the Warriors since taking charge in 2014. But the Warriors were outclassed by the defending champions, who showed no mercy in a 40-point victory that is the Warriors' biggest home defeat since a 45-point reverse against the Dallas Mavericks in 1985.

Leading by 15 points at half-time, the Celtics hit 43 points in the third quarter alone to underline their dominance.

Jayson Tatum top scored for the Celtics with 22 points, while Kristaps Porzingis and Jaylen Brown added 18 points and 17 points respectively.

"We've got to flush this one down the toilet and get ready for Sac," said Kerr, whose side face the Sacramento Kings in their next match.

"We've been very competitive all year. Our guys have fought, but we've had a handful of these where we get blown out.

Celtics center Kristaps Porzingis (8) shoots during an NBA victory over the Warriors in San Francisco, CA, US, on January 20, 2025.
● JED JACOBSON/AP

These are demoralising." The Warriors, who last won the Championship in 2022 by beating the Celtics in the finals, sit a place outside the play-off positions in the Western Conference in 11th spot. The Celtics are second in the Eastern Conference standings behind the Cleveland Cavaliers.