

# Iranian Volleyball Premier League Finals: Ataei vows Foolad fightback after Shadab draws first blood

## Sports Desk

Foolad Sirjan head coach Behrouz Ataei said there would "definitely be a third game" in the Iranian volleyball Premier League Finals after his side fell to a 3-1 defeat against Shahdab Yazd in the first of the best-of-three series on Sunday.

Veteran opposite Amir Ghafour chipped in a game-high 29 points, including three aces, and middle-blocker Masoud Gholami had 10 points to help Shahdab come from behind to beat Foolad 24-26, 26-24, 25-21, and 25-17 in Tehran's Federation Hall.

Outside-hitter Amir Efsandiari topped the scoring chart for Foolad with 21 points, followed by international teammate Ali Hajipour and middle-blocker Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi, who finished on 15 and 11 points, respectively.

Shahdab will be looking to clinch the title when the two familiar foes are back in the same venue for Game 2 today.

This is the fourth final showpiece featuring Foolad and Shahdab over the past 12 months, with the former coming out on top in all three previous occasions.

Foolad beat Shahdab to the Iranian Premier League crown last April, and then went on to come out victorious in the AVC Asian Club Championship showdown in September, before Ataei's men lifted the Iranian Volleyball Cup trophy thanks to a straight-set triumph in February's final.

"We knew it was going to be a tough match. Shahab is a really



Shahdab Yazd's Amir Ghafour (R) hits a spike during Game 1 victory over Foolad Sirjan in the Iranian Volleyball Premier League Finals in Tehran, Iran, on April 6, 2025.  
● MASOUD AKBARI/volleyball.ir

strong and top-quality team and had already beaten us twice in the regular season," Ataei said after the game.

"My players thought they had the victory in their pocket before the contest and my coaching staff and I had warned them against underestimating their opponent. You have to fight for the victory on the court and we

did everything to make them understand the game isn't won before it's played," added the former Iranian national team boss.

"We got off to a strong start, but our players thought they would win the game under any circumstances, until they hit a brick wall in the second set and couldn't hold their ground.

"After that, they started play-

ing on edge and out of sync. We tried to keep their frustration in check and play with the same calm composure as Shahab, but instead, we were tense and rushed."

Ataei was still confident that his team would bounce back in Game 2.

"It's no big deal. It takes two wins to clinch the title and you

will defiantly see a third game in the series," Ataei said.

Asked how the head-to-head between two opposites Ghafour and Hajipour played a part in the final outcome, Ataei said: "They are both top-notch players and have crucial roles in their teams. Ghafour, with all his experience, did a great job to change the course of the game,

while Hajipour let the pressure get to him. He lost focus, and just couldn't bring his A-game today." Meanwhile, Ataei's opposite number Mahdi Mahdavi, who was only appointed to the role in February, was full of praise for Shahdab players for having "the right mindset."

"Our route in the playoffs was much tougher than Foolad's as we had to dig deep for victory against Paykan and Chadormalou. That's why we had nerves of steel in today's game," said the former Iranian setter.

"Foolad is the Asian champion and a world bronze medalist, with quality players and coaching staff, who truly deserve all their achievements over the past year. But credit to my players, they came in with the right mindset and held their own throughout the game.

"All of the players, even the substitutes, made a massive contribution to the victory. We were great in terms of collective defending as we registered 14 successful blocks.

"We are going to play with the same determination and hope to seal the title by the end of the second encounter."

Should Foolad level the series in Game 2, the two sides will meet in the decider on Thursday.

## FIBA Asia Cup 2025: Second-seed Iran to learn fate in main draw

### Sports Desk

The Iranian national basketball team will learn about its group opponents at the FIBA Asia Cup – starting August 5 in Saudi Arabia – when the draw for the flagship continental tournament takes place in Jeddah today.

Three-time champion Iran will be placed in Pot 2 of the draw – based on the latest FIBA World Rankings on March 28 – and

will avoid Lebanon, China, and the Philippines in the group phase of the 16-team event.

Host Saudi Arabia is in Pot 1 alongside two-time defending champion Australia, Japan, and New Zealand.

Pot 3 features Jordan, South Korea, and the Chinese Taipei, with India, Qatar, Guam, and Iraq in Pot 4. The 16 teams will be split into four groups, with the top teams of each pro-

gressing to the last eight, while the No. 2 and 3 teams will play in a Qualification round for to quarterfinals. Iran finished the qualifiers with a 5-1 record to win Group E – thanks to back-to-back wins over India and Kazakhstan under new Greek head coach Sotirios Manolopoulos in the final window in February.

Team Melli's lone defeat came against Qatar, and former Iran coach Hakan Demir, last November.

## Guardiola hits out at United fans' chant about Foden's mother

**THE GUARDIAN** – Pep Guardiola has said that the Manchester United fans who chanted abuse at Manchester City's Phil Foden about his mother during Sunday's goalless derby lacked "class".

The invective was directed at the winger during the first half when City attacked the Stretford End at Old Trafford. Guardiola was asked about the chant.

"[It was a] lack of class," City's manager said. "But it's not United, it's the people [supporters], you know? We are so exposed in football – managers, owners, and football players especially. Honestly, I don't understand the mind of the people involving the mum of Phil, it's a lack of integrity, class, and they should be ashamed."

It is understood that City were shocked and disgusted by the chants and the number of people involved. United's stance is that they condemn all abusive chants aimed towards players.

The draw leaves City in



Pep Guardiola (L) hugs Phil Foden after substituting the Manchester City forward during a goalless draw against Manchester United at Old Trafford, Manchester, Britain, on April 6, 2025.  
● GETTY IMAGES

fifth place on 52 points, a point behind Chelsea in fourth, with seven games left. Concerning the challenge for a Champions League place, Guardiola said, "Seven games, Crystal Palace [next], go for it. I'd prefer to have 10 more points or 12 more points but it is what it is. It's Old Trafford, it's always difficult. We fought and we were there. The players gave everything. We should attack with more fluidity.

"I'm not concerned about next season right now, I'm just concerned about recovery, Crystal Palace, Everton, Aston Villa and the FA Cup semi-finals [against Nottingham Forest]."

"It would have been better to win but Old Trafford is Old Trafford and United are a transition team. We wanted to make a good buildup and process and we defended really well. They are dangerous when we lose

balls in the position like we are not good."

United remain 13th in the table, and Ruben Amorim was asked how difficult it will be to turn the club's fortunes – and style of play – around. "I can say we want to be competitive in the short space of time but to be really dominant against that type of opponent is going to take a lot of time," United's head coach said.

