

AVC Men's Champions League: Foolad Sirjan labors to victory in opener

Sports Desk

Foolad Sirjan got off to a shaky start at the inaugural AVC Men's Champions League, edging out Thailand's Nakhon Ratchasima Qmin in a thrilling five-setter (25-17, 22-25, 25-17, 19-25, 15-11) at Osaka's Panasonic Arena in Japan on Sunday. Outside-hitter Amirhossein Esfandiar contributed with a game-high 25 points, including three aces and one block, while opposite-spiker Ali Hajipour chipped in 24 for the newly-crowned Iranian champion. Tamiraa Khangal led the scoring for the Thai club with 21 points. All eyes, however, were on French star Earvin Ngapeth – an MVP during the Olympic gold-winning campaign on home soil last year – who finished with 10 points. "It was the first game of the competition, so, very important to win. It was not easy due to the timing. Playing at 10am is not easy for us, but although we won in five sets, it's

still important. Our next match remains the same as we have to play at 10am again. However, we have to win," Ngapeth said after the match. Foolad showcased its depth and resilience in the opening set, with Ngapeth and Cuban middle-blocker Javier Concepción delivering an all-around masterclass. The Frenchman displayed his vast experience, leaving Nakhon Ratchasima flat-footed by his powerful spikes and delicate dropshots. The prolific Concepción, meanwhile, further bolstered the Iranian side with solid blocks and swift attacks, making the team look nearly uncatchable. Nakhon Ratchasima tried to fight back with intensity, as left-handed Amorntep Khonhan launched attacks from both the flank and backline, but the Iranian defense remained impenetrable. Nakhon Ratchasima improved significantly in a gritty second set, especially in floor coverage. Anurak Phanram was brought in



Foolad Sirjan's Mohammad Valizadeh (27) goes up for a spike during a 3-2 victory over Nakhon Ratchasima at the AVC Men's Champions League in Osaka, Japan, on May 11, 2025.
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Asian champion with sharp receptions and solid blocks. Lightning-fast attacks from Kissada Nilsawai and Azizbek, combined with powerful spikes from Khangal and Doni, proved to be key assets for the Thai side. Hajipour and Esfandiar launched aggressive attacks from both flanks to help Behrouz Ataei's side recover from a shaky start, but Nakhon Ratchasima maintained its momentum to force the contest into the decider. The fifth set saw both teams battle fiercely, with Foolad surging ahead, and despite Nakhon Ratchasima's determined efforts to close the gap, the comeback ultimately fell short. Foolad Sirjan will wrap up its Pool C campaign against the Chinese Taipei's Tai-chung Bank on Tuesday morning.

to reinforce the team. The Thais read the Iranian plays smartly, dug deep, and blocked relentlessly to break through with precise spikes. Foolad struggled to contain Khangal's powerful attacks

and the superb blocking of Uzbek Azizbek Kuchkorov and Indonesian Doni Haryono. Foolad still managed to mount a successful comeback in the third set, led by Esfandiar, Hajipour,

and Concepción, with the former unleashing a series of explosive spikes and effective blocks to disrupt the Thai defense. Though Khangal and Doni continued to lead Nakhon Ratchasima's offense with

strong performances, they ultimately found the Iranians too formidable to overcome. Nakhon Ratchasima delivered a well-structured performance in the fourth set, dominating the two-time

AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup: Iran shares the spoils with Vietnam, lands Chinese Taipei in last eight

Sports Desk

Iran and Vietnam played to a goalless draw on the final day of the group phase at the AFC Women's Futsal Asian Cup in Hohhot, China. The stalemate saw the two sides finish their group campaign with seven points, with Iran finishing

runner-up to Vietnam in the table on goal difference. Next for Iran, which had beaten Philippines (1-0) and Hong Kong (3-1) earlier in Hohhot, is a quarterfinal game against the Chinese Taipei, which finished second to the host in Group A. The result also ended Iran's remarkable winning streak

in the tournament, after the two-time champion had won every one of its 12 games over three editions. Iran saw plenty of the ball in the first half but never really troubled the opponent, apart from a Sara Shirbeigi effort that was well saved by Tran Thi Hai Yen. Iran took its foot off the

pedal after the break, but Vietnam could not take advantage. Tran Thi Thu Xuan came close with a strike from an impossible angle, which was deflected away by Iranian keeper Farzaneh Tavasoli. Then, with two minutes left, Bui Thi Trang dragged a low shot wide of the left post.



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Esteghlal eyeing Seedorf for sporting director role: Report

Sports Desk

Persian Gulf Pro League club Esteghlal is in talks with former Dutch international Clarence Seedorf regarding the sporting director job at the Iranian top-flight side, according to media reports in the country. Widely regarded as one of the finest midfielders in the recent history of the game, Seedorf, 49, won numerous major trophies during an illustrious club career, including four UEFA Champions

League titles with Ajax, Real Madrid, and Milan. However, the Dutchman has had little success as a coach following his retirement in 2014. His most recent job came with Cameroon during the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt, where the Indomitable Lions were knocked out by Nigeria in the round of 16.

Capped on 87 occasions by the Dutch national team, Seedorf currently serves on the supervisory board of the Oranje.

Should the deal – reportedly worth \$250,000 per year – go through, Seedorf will oversee all football operations at Esteghlal, including the appointment of a new head coach and player recruitment for the start of next season, which could mark a new era in the club's management. Lack of technical stability has cost Esteghlal dearly in a dreadful league campaign, with six different coaches in charge of the Blues bench during a nine-month period. A four-time champion since the introduction of the Iranian Pro League in 2001, Esteghlal is eighth in the 16-team top-flight table with one game to play – courtesy of seven wins and nine defeats in 29 outings. The Tehran Blues still aim to finish the season with silverware, as they will face second-tier club San'at Naft Abadan in the last-four round of the Hazfi Cup – the domestic cup competition – at home on May 24, with the winner taking on Golgozar Sirjan or Malavan in the final showpiece five days later.



● FABRIZIO CARABELLI/GETTY IMAGES

Asian Canoe Sprint Championships: Iran wins men's K2 500m gold, finishes with five medals

Sports Desk

Iran's Ali Aqamirzaei and Payman Qavidel teamed up for the men's K2 500m gold on the final day of the Asian Canoe Sprint Championships in Nanchang, China. The Iranian duo clocked 1:47.647 minutes to beat the Japanese pair to the ultimate prize on Saturday, with China's Bu Ting kai Wang Congkang,

who won the gold medal of the event at the Asian Games two years ago, settling for the bronze. This was Aqamirzaei's third medal in Nanchang. The Iranian had finished runner-up to the host's Zhang Dong – also a gold winner in the Asian Games – in the men's K1 1000m final on the preceding day, and then went on to win the bronze in the K1

500m contest. Represented by seven athletes, including three women, across the three-day event, the Iranian team finished its campaign. Mohammad-Nabi Mirzaei won a silver medal in the men's C1 1000m category after finishing the final race in 4:19.026 minutes, while Tania Kargarpour took the bronze in the women's K1 1000m final with a time of 4:29.992 minutes.



Iran's Ali Aqamirzaei (1.) and Payman Qavidel are pictured ahead of the men's K2 500m final at the Asian Canoe Sprint Championships in Nanchang, China, on May 10, 2025.
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