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AVC Women's Volleyball Nations Cup:

Iran beats Philippines 3-2 to maintain winning streak

Sports Desk

Iran kept its perfect record at the AVC Women's Volleyball Nations Cup in Hanoi, Vietnam, thanks to a 3-2 (16-25, 25-21, 24-26, 25-23, 15-13) victory over the Philippines on Monday. Having come from behind twice to force the contest into the decider, Iranian girls again showed great fighting spirit in decider to overcome a 13-11 deficit and walk away with a third successive victory at the

rebranded continental showpiece.

Iran began its campaign with a comeback five-set win against Indonesia, before rallying past New Zealand 3-1 (23-25, 25-16, 25-12, 25-18) on Sunday. Outside-hitter Fatemeh Khalili contributed with a game-high 21 points – including double blocks – for Iran, followed by Masoumeh Qadami, who chipped in 16, two of which were serve points. The victory left Iran in the sec-

ond spot of the Pool B table with seven points – two adrift of Kazakhstan, which defeated Indonesia in straight sets (25-17, 25-12, 26-24) earlier in the day. Iran will face Kazakhstan on Wednesday before concluding the pool phase against Mongolia a day later.

The top two teams of the group will progress to the semifinals of the 11-team competition, with the final showdown set to be staged on Saturday.

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Iran's Greco-Roman head coach Hassan Rangraz will face a tough decision on three weight classes when naming his 10-man squad for September's Wrestling World Championships in Zagreb. While five wrestlers – including Olympic champions Saeid Esmaeili and Mohammad-Hadi Saravi – have already booked their Zagreb ticket, and the 82kg and 130kg slots will be decided at the International Takhti Cup in Shiraz this week, question marks swirl around the 55kg, 60kg, and 63kg classes after a run of poor results for the Iranians in recent international tournaments. World silver medalist Pouya Dadmarz and Armin Shamsipour, a gold medalist at last year's U17 Worlds, are the two frontrunners for the 55kg spot. However, both suffered comprehensive defeats against low-profile Armenian opponents at the Benur Pashayan Tournament in Yerevan last week, leaving Rangraz with a selection headache just over three months before the World Championships. The two wrestlers may now have to compete in July's Ranking Series event in Budapest before the Iranian coaching staff makes

a final decision, while the Takhti Cup gold medalist could also emerge as a new contender for the UWW Worlds spot. Ali Ahmadi Vafa's gold-winning campaigns at last year's World U23 and Junior Championships convinced Rangraz in March to select him for the showpiece in the Croatian capital, but his spot now hangs in the balance after a first-round fall defeat in Yerevan. The same applies to Mohammad-Madi Keshtkar in the 63kg class. The Iranian had secured a place in the world event thanks to double silver medals at the Zagreb Open and Asian Championships earlier this the year. However, Rangraz may reconsider his selection following Keshtkar's below-par performance at the Ulaanbaatar Open less than a fortnight ago. Having limped to the semifinals, Keshtkar fell to a 2-1 loss to South Korean Hanjae Chung before suffering a 6-1 defeat against Iranian-born Aref Mohammadi of Qatar in the third-place bout.

Shiraz showdowns

Iranian wrestling fans could be treated to some thrilling bouts in the 82kg and 130kg weight divisions when the Takhti Cup gets underway on Thursday.

Asian champion Mohammad Naqousi and Alireza Farrokhi – gold medalist in February's Zagreb Open – will go head-to-head in the 82kg contests, with the winner taking on world champion Mohammad-Ali Geraei for the national team spot. A single win will be enough for Geraei to punch his Zagreb ticket, while his opponent will have to come out victorious twice to be named in the squad. The same selection process will apply to the 130kg category, as Asian and world under-23 champion Fardin Hedayati and former world gold medalist Ali-Akbar Yousefi, who dominated the superheavyweight contests at the Zagreb Open, will lock horns in the morning session on Friday to decide who will face reigning world champion and Olympic bronze medalist Amin Mirzazadeh later in the day. Joining Esmaeili and Saravi in the Iranian Greco-Roman team are Asian gold medalist Danial Sohrabi (72kg), two-time world under-20 champion Alireza Abdevali (77kg), and Alireza Mohammadi (87kg), who will be chasing a first world gold medal in Zagreb, having grabbed impressive silvers at the 2023 UWW Worlds and Paris Olympics.

Iran Greco-Roman coach Rangraz facing selection dilemma in triple classes



● IAWFIR

Ravankhah named Iran U23 head coach

Sports Desk

Former Esteghlal midfielder Omidreza Ravankhah was appointed as the head coach of the Iranian under-23 national football team, the national governing body of the sport confirmed. An ex-manager at several lower-league clubs since 2017, Ravankhah, 39, was last in charge of Havadar, where he took over midway through the Persian Gulf Pro League season in December, but could not save his side from relegation to the second division despite a late surge in the campaign.

The Iranian under-23 role had been vacant since Reza Enayati parted ways with the Iranian federation following a last-eight 1-0 defeat against Hong Kong at the Asian Games in September 2023. Ravankhah will begin his reign with the AFC U23 Asian Cup qualifiers in September. Iran is pitted against Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates, and Guam in Group I of the qualifiers. Iran will face Hong Kong in the group opener in Abu Dhabi on Sept. 3, before taking on Guam (Sept. 6), and the UAE (Sept. 9). The top teams of the 11 groups will be joined by four best runner-up sides at the 2026 finals in Saudi Arabia.

● VARZESH3

Thunder beat Pacers to level NBA Finals

BBC – Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 34 points as the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Indiana Pacers 123-107 in game two of the NBA Finals to level the series at 1-1. The Pacers snatched victory in the final second of the opening game on Friday week, but on Sunday the Thunder dominated from start to finish. Gilgeous-Alexander's first bas-

ket at Paycom Center in Oklahoma took him to 3,000 points for the season, making him the 12th player in NBA history to reach the milestone. Game three of the best-of-seven series, external takes place at Gainbridge Fieldhouse at 01:30 BST on Thursday, the first time Indianapolis has hosted a finals game in 25 years.



● JULIO CORTEZ/AP

"They play a full 48 minutes and you can't just throw the first punch," said Gilgeous-Alexander. "You've got to try to throw all the punches all night. That's what we did. We threw enough punches tonight to get a 'W'." Gilgeous-Alexander, the NBA's Most Valuable Player, added five rebounds and eight assists. The Thunder's Jalen Williams scored 19 points, Aaron Wiggins had 18 and Chet Holmgren recovered from a disappointing six points in game one to score 15 points with six rebounds. The Pacers' Tyrese Haliburton was limited to 17 points, three rebounds and six assists. "It's still a race – first to four," he said. "We are going to our home court tied 1-1." Haliburton walked out of the post-game news conference with a slight limp. Seven Pacers players scored in double figures, including Myles Turner with 16 points and Pascal Siakam with 15.