

# Volleyball Nations League: Glimpse of the future as Iran faces Brazil in eagerly-awaited opener

## Sports Desk

Iranian fans will get a glimpse of what a new era for their men's national team might be like when the Asian heavyweight takes on global powerhouse Brazil in their Volleyball Nations League opener tonight in Rio de Janeiro.

The game at the predictably packed Maracanãzinho venue will mark Iran's first competitive match in 12 months, with a new head coach in Italian Roberto Piazza at the helm.

Having signed a two-year contract – with the option of extension for another two years – with the Iranian Volleyball Federation in January, the Italian will be looking to put a lid on a dire run of results over the past couple of years for Iranian volleyball – including two dreadful Nations League campaigns, and failure to qualify for the Paris Olympics – with his ultimate goal being a spot at the Los Angeles 2028 Games. Opposite-spiker Amin Esmailnejad, who had a prolific season with Skra Belchatow in the Polish PlusLiga, will be the man to watch in the rejuvenated Iranian squad, while setter and team captain Javad Karimi is also expected to play an essential role, though his starting could be under threat by 21-year-old Arshia Behnejad, who has been impressive in training under the



Italian coach.

Pouria Hosseinkhanzadeh and Morteza Sharifi will likely be Piazza's favorite duo for the outside-hitter position, while middle blockers Issa Naseri and Mohammad Valizadeh played

the best part of the two friendly games against Italy before leaving for Brazil.

Mohammadreza Hazratpour and Arman Salehi are the two experienced liberos in Iran's squad, with both having equal chances

to start tonight's game.

The match will be the 23rd meeting between the two teams – seventh in VNL history – with Iranian managing only three wins against the South American giant in the previous encounters

– all coming at the 2014 FIVB World League.

Iran and Brazil last met at the preliminary phase of the VNL 2024, with the latter coming out victorious in four sets in Fukuoka, Japan. Tonight's game will be followed



Iranian players are seen in a training session in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on June 8, 2025, ahead of the first week of the Volleyball Nations League.

● [volleyball.ir](http://volleyball.ir)

by another formidable test for Piazza's men on Thursday.

Iran will also play Slovenia – VNL semifinalist last year – and Ukraine before leaving for Belgrade for the second week of action in the preliminary round – starting with a game against Serbia on June 25.

Piazza's side will then face 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 preliminaries 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 year, 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 in the Chinese city of Ningbo.

## Basketball Champions League Asia:

# Tabiat to play Japan's Utsunomiya Brex in last eight

## Sports Desk

Tabiat will continue its debut campaign at the Basketball Champions League Asia today, when facing Japanese club Utsunomiya Brex in the quarterfinals at Dubai's Coca-Cola Arena.

The Iranian outfit claimed the top spot in Group A with a clean sweep of double victories, courtesy of a hard-fought 78-76 win against Ulaanbaatar Xac Broncos on Monday.

Having beaten China's Zhejiang Lions (99-85) in their opener, Mehran Shahintab's men had Stedmon Lemon to thank after the American chipped in 16 points to help the West Asia Super League runner-up overcome a nine-point deficit in the first period.

Lemon knocked down back-to-back threes and then hit a tough fadeaway jumper to trim the gap to a point, 20-19, and scored another layup moments later to end the quarter with the game tied at 22-all.

"I wanted to bring a lot of energy to get the rest of my team going. I think it worked. We had a pretty good second half, probably too many turnovers and missed a lot of open shots, but I think defense prevailed," said Lemon, who finished with a game-high 23 points, as well as three rebounds and assists apiece.

Croatian center Ivan Buva also played his part in the victory, pushing Tabiat's lead to its highest at 13 points, 45-32, following a perfect trip to the foul line with four minutes remaining in the second frame.

Buva finished with a double-double of 19 points and 13 rebounds, while Dee Bost chipped in 13 points, four rebounds and nine assists off the bench in the win. Arman Zangeneh added five points and 13 rebounds.

"If you check the statistics, we were not good in turnovers, some free throws, and in making the three. But the players did their job, especially through good defense," Shahintab said after the game.

American duo Ian Miller, who left the court with 3:02 remaining in the final quarter for incurring a pair of technical fouls, and Jordan Tolbert topped the scoring with 16 points apiece for the Mongolian club, which also progressed to the last eight, while Canadian Jordy Tshi-

manga registered 13 points and 12 rebounds.

Elsewhere on Monday, American guard DJ Newbill had 22 points, with Issac Fotu (18), Finn Delany (17), and Makoto Hiejima (17) also finishing in double figures as Utsunomiya defeated Shabab Al Ahli 105-99 to join the Emirati side and Meralco Bolts of the Philippines in securing a last-eight spot.

The winner of the today's game between the Iranian and Japanese clubs will face Meralco Bolts or Broncos in the semifinals on Thursday.

The other half of the knockout bracket will Shabab Al Ahli and Taoyuan Pauian Pilots of the Chinese Taipei go head-to-head, with winner facing Zhejiang Lions or back-to-back WASL champion Al Riyadi of Lebanon for a place in Friday's final showpiece.



Tabiat's Stedmon Lemon dunks the ball during a victory over Ulaanbaatar Xac Broncos at the Basketball Champions League Asia in Dubai, UAE, on June 9, 2025.

● [FIBA](http://FIBA)



● [MATTEO CIAMBELLI/REUTERS](http://MATTEO CIAMBELLI/REUTERS)

# Ranieri turns down Italy job to stay on as Roma advisor

**REUTERS** – Claudio Ranieri said on Tuesday he has turned down the vacant Italy manager's job, after the four-times world champions sacked Luciano Spalletti, and will stay on with AS Roma as their senior advisor. Former Napoli coach Spalletti, 66, announced his own dis-

missal on Sunday following Italy's 3-0 drubbing by Norway in their opening World Cup qualifier on Friday.

Ranieri, who recently retired for a second time after his spell at Roma last season, said he was honoured to have been offered the job by Italian Football Federation

President Gabriele Gravina. "I thank President Gravina for the opportunity, a great honour, but I have reflected and decided to remain available to Roma in my new position totally," he told Italian news agency ANSA.

"The Friedkins (Roma owners) gave me their full support and backing for whatever

decision I had made regarding the national team but the decision is mine alone."

Ranieri helped Roma finish fifth in Serie A last season to qualify for the Europa League. The 73-year-old Italian has been replaced by former Atalanta manager Gian Piero Gasperini at Roma.